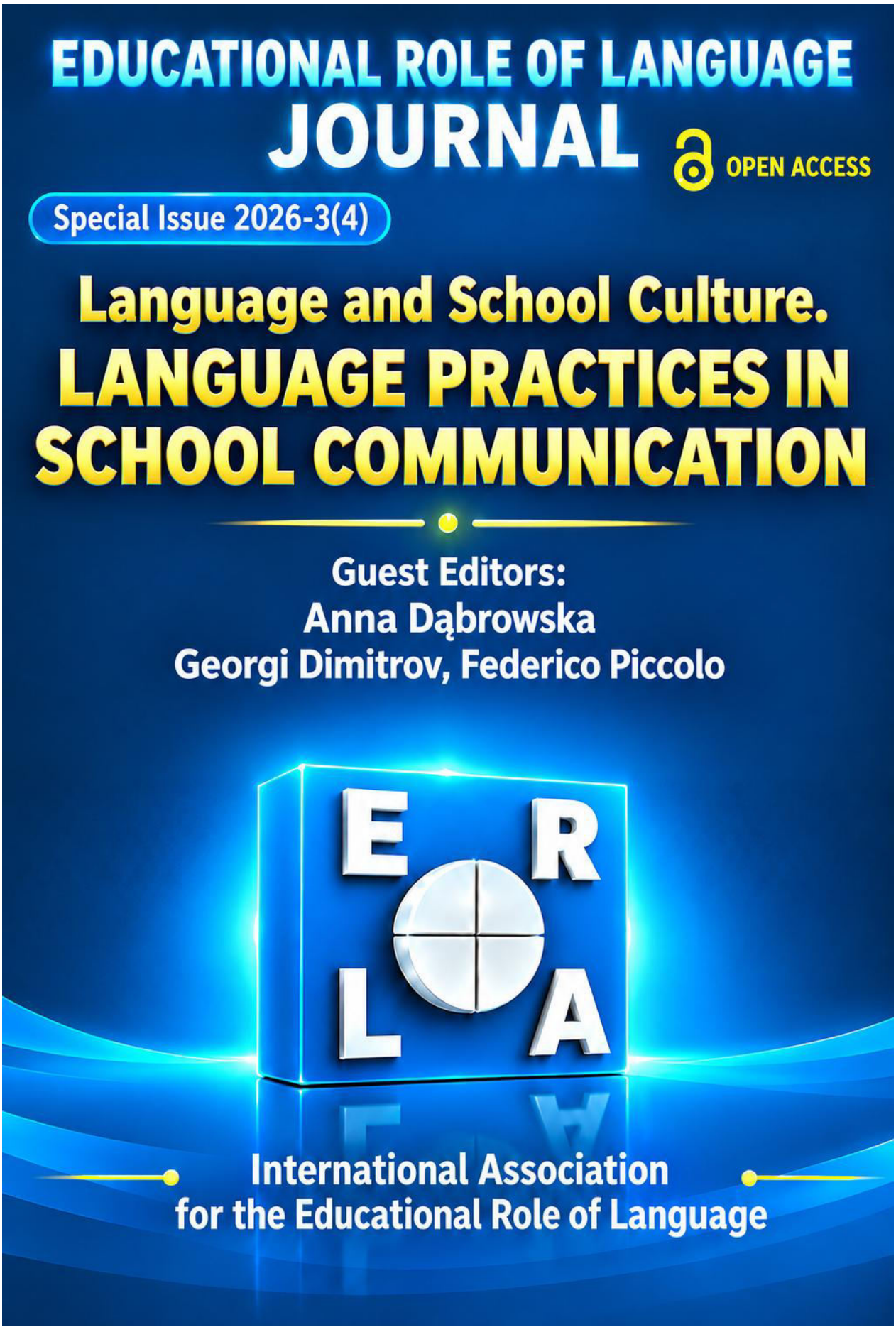

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Introduction

The Multidimensionality of School Language: Transformations and Challenges

We are pleased to present a special volume of the **"Educational Role of Language Journal"** dedicated to language in the school setting: **"Language and School Culture. Language Practices in School Communication."**

A language within the school environment is the subject to constant cultural influences and simultaneously actively shapes that institution's culture. It is conditioned by various contexts—social, cultural, and technological—and, at the same time, its use unfolds across different dimensions. A language can serve as the subject of instruction, a tool for (mis)communication, a marker of speakers' identities, and a vehicle for transmitting the customs prevailing within the school. All these processes play out through everyday dynamic communicative practices.

We are delighted that the multifaceted nature of a language in school communication is reflected in the diverse range of topics covered by the articles collected in this volume.

The texts presented here center on two themes frequently raised in current academic discourse regarding school-based language education: new technologies—including the development of artificial intelligence—and working within diverse linguistic and cultural environments.

Rapid technological advancement compels us to rethink existing models of language education in light of new conditions. A widespread access to artificial intelligence and modern online tools is transforming the landscape of teaching. We begin the first section of the volume, titled **"Language Education in the Face of Technological Changes,"** by questioning the role, significance, and even the purpose of literacy education in the age of artificial intelligence. We consider the opportunities, risks, and challenges that the development of generative artificial intelligence poses for language education in schools. Subsequently, we present modern methodological solutions that leverage new technological capabilities while remaining sensitive to the human dimension of classroom communication.

Language is not merely the subject of instruction; it is also a tool for creating, expressing, and transmitting culture, thereby playing a crucial role in shaping school culture. The second section of the volume, titled **"Teachers and Students Facing Diverse Linguistic Practices in School Culture,"** shifts the focus to the social and institutional dimensions of education. It examines the significance of specific linguistic practices employed by teachers and students within the school environment—the environment that is often multilingual and multicultural. The discussion begins with an analysis of the school's linguistic culture in the context of how teachers cope with occupational stress, followed by an investigation into the beliefs and practices of early-career teachers regarding the academic language of students learning English. This section also addresses issues related to the practical aspects of multilingualism in schools and the development of children's intercultural competence while respecting their native languages.

We hope that reading this volume will provide you with many interesting insights as well as scholarly and didactic inspiration.

On behalf of Editorial Team of the Special Volume

Anna Dąbrowska

Is teaching literacy necessary in the times of GenAI? Literacy and thinking – a review of research

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Abstract
The development of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has revolutionized the text creation process and altered the human role in generating written content. This article aims to present recent research (2026) regarding the relationship between literacy skills, GenAI-assisted text creation, and human thinking processes, as well as to identify optimal conditions for collaborating with GenAI when composing written texts. A narrative review was conducted based on a purposively selected sample of 13 research papers drawn from an initial pool of 2,650 articles. The analysis of the research data highlighted two key areas: the role of literacy as scaffolding for higher-order cognitive functions, and the phenomenon of cognitive offloading and its impact on human thinking. The cited studies unequivocally confirm that acquiring literacy skills remains crucial—even in the era of GenAI—and that these skills facilitate effective cooperation with the technology. Proposed educational models advocate for active, critical human involvement, wherein GenAI serves solely an advisory and supportive function rather than replacing the author.

Keywords*: literacy, writing skills, artificial intelligence, basic literacy, advanced literacy, Grand Literacy Theory, thinking, GenAI*

Introduction

The rapid development of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is fundamentally transforming the process of text creation on a mass scale, necessitating a redefinition of literacy. Traditionally, text creation was tied to a material object upon which specific content was recorded using symbols. It required a multi-stage preparation process and complex cognitive skills on the part of the author to produce a written statement that met the criteria of a written text. The digital era liberated any text from its physical carrier, while the development and widespread availability of GenAI have increasingly taken over the human role in the writing process. Increasingly sophisticated language models not only correct linguistic errors but also edit text, ensure logical flow and coherence, and ultimately take over the task from humans entirely. This situation raises questions: What are the cognitive costs of this phenomenon, if any? And is teaching literacy still necessary in the times of GenAI?

Theoretical background

The theoretical framework for the relationship between writing and human thinking is defined by the Grand Literacy Theory, which is a well-established way of thinking in the literature on the subject about the social, communicative and consciousness role of writing and determines the specific features of orality and literacy. According to the position represented by the Literacy Theory, the emergence of writing and its various uses led to a revolution not only in the sphere of communication, but also in the sphere of cognition. According to this theory, writing was not just a tool or technique with limited action, but it had a holistic impact on humanity and its culture. Writing gave birth to a textual form of expression, an autonomous, decontextualized discourse that encourages the formulation of thoughts in an abstract and conceptual way, regulated by formal logic, which constructs general categories and models (Godlewski,

2018). According to Literacy Theory, mastering the skill of writing completely transforms human thinking (Ong, 2011).

However, the acquisition of literacy can occur at different levels and to varying degrees. With this in mind, Olson (2010) distinguished and developed the concepts of basic and advanced literacy. According to him, exposure to writing, even at the level of basic literacy—which involves understanding the relationship between written signs and the phonological properties of speech—changes a person's way of thinking. These changes deepen with increasing experience with the written variety of language. According to Olson (2010), the basic ability to recognize symbols and transform letters into sounds or words into meaning is a consequence of literacy. It has an important, albeit limited, significance. Advanced literacy, on the other hand, understood as the ability to understand and use the intellectual resources accumulated over approximately three thousand years of diverse written traditions, can be of immense significance. According to Olson, it allows for the accumulation of treasures stored in texts, but it also requires diverse procedures for operating in language and thinking about it, ourselves, and the world (Olson, 2010: 57).

The invention of writing and the development of related writing practices left an indelible mark on cultural history, while learning how to deal with them has had a permanent impact on human cognition (Olson, 2010: 407). Learning writing allowed for a shift from thinking about objects to thinking about representations. According to Olson, the modern worldview can therefore be considered a result of the invention of the "world *on paper*". Practices requiring advanced levels and levels of exposure to writing shape a distinctive thinking style, which is reflected in the way texts are received, interpreted, and created. This style is developed through the acquisition and refinement of advanced writing skills and most often encompasses a specific area of knowledge. By developing in a given area through reading and creating texts, individuals simultaneously shape and enrich their general writing competencies, which they can then apply to other areas as needed. According to David Olson (2015: 41-42), mastery of advanced literacy is demonstrated by possessing universal competencies in writing, including analysis, paraphrasing, summarizing, recontextualizing, and drawing conclusions. The degree of mastery of these skills provides a reliable criterion for assessing individual writing skills.

Arguments highlighting the crucial role of acquiring advanced literacy skills have been presented within the framework of the Grand Theory of Literacy. These arguments remain relevant even in the new technological and socio-cultural context. While artificial intelligence can generate text, it cannot replace human thinking.

Although AI tools can bolster linguistic resources, expand access to scholarly texts, and redistribute forms of knowledge, they also pose a risk of diminishing text-creation skills (Hyland, 2026). Regular reliance on GenAI support can alter fundamental cognitive habits, shifting the effort from independent reasoning to a dependence on generated responses. Trusting such content can lead to superficial processing and the uncritical acceptance of system suggestions, thereby increasing the risk of cognitive dependency (Hyland, 2026).

GenAI is not a simple technological fix for the challenges associated with literacy education. In the era of GenAI, traditional writing instruction may seem overly demanding, time-consuming, or obsolete; however, the appropriate use of GenAI capabilities offers an opportunity to rethink the teaching of writing (Shanley, 2026). When approaching the use of technology in writing, one should avoid both outright bans and uncritical adoption (Hyland, 2026).

Metodology

The review was conducted based on a sample of 13 articles. The Google Scholar database was used, as it offers access to a wide range of peer-reviewed scholarly works. A search strategy appropriate for a narrative review was employed. Key search terms for selecting the articles were established based on an analysis of the relevant literature: GenAI, literacy, and thinking. To identify research material describing

the relationships between these concepts, the keywords were entered into Google Scholar using the 'and' operator, i.e., GenAI and literacy and thinking. The inclusion criteria focused on the most recent empirical studies (2026) in the social sciences that integrated knowledge regarding GenAI, literacy, and thinking. Works focusing exclusively on AI algorithms—without reference to human thinking and literacy—or those concentrating on only one of the mentioned aspects were excluded from the dataset. This process yielded 2,650 records. The selection of research material was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, duplicates and studies failing to meet the inclusion criteria were excluded based on an analysis of titles and abstracts. As a result, 2,624 items were rejected, while 26 studies were retained for a more detailed analysis aimed at determining the relationship between GenAI, literacy, and thinking. This constituted the second stage of the selection process. At this stage, 13 texts were excluded. Ultimately, 13 studies were included in the review.

The research problem addressed is interdisciplinary in nature. The analysis involved synthesizing data and identifying two main areas:

1. The role of literacy as scaffolding for higher-order cognitive functions in the times of GenAI. What are the conditions for the effective use of AI in writing? (GenAI as a partner)
2. The phenomenon of "cognitive offloading." What changes, if any, occur in human thinking when text generation is delegated to AI? (dependence on GenAI)

Results and discussion

The role of literacy as scaffolding for higher-order cognitive functions in the times of GenAI. What are the conditions for the effective use of GenAI in writing? (GenAI as a partner)

The rapid development of generative artificial intelligence tools for text creation has brought about a significant shift in societal expectations regarding the swift production of high-quality written content. In response, there is a growing body of research aimed at understanding the benefits, costs, and challenges associated with using GenAI in the writing process, as well as defining the conditions for effective human-technology collaboration. A key issue is determining the role of literacy skills in optimal leveraging of the capabilities GenAI offers for text creation.

Tian S. and Xiang (2026) investigated the individual factors determining the effective use of GenAI in academic writing by students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Their analysis, conducted with 342 participants, focused on the role of cognitive, motivational, technological, and linguistic resources. The results demonstrate that cognitive competencies—including self-regulation and critical thinking—combined with familiarity with artificial intelligence tools and advanced literacy skills, significantly influenced the quality of collaboration with GenAI, with self-regulation and critical thinking proving to be the most important factors. The researchers observed that stronger self-regulation fosters strategic management of the writing process, while stronger critical thinking aids in more effectively evaluating AI-generated outputs.

Furthermore, the study revealed that writing skills forecast critical thinking, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of collaboration with GenAI. Advanced language skills enable students to craft coherent, well-structured texts and effectively integrate them with AI-generated content. According to the authors, linguistic competence equips students with the internal resources necessary to utilize GenAI effectively in writing tasks (Tian S. & Xiang, 2026). It allows them to maintain a sense of agency and control over the text-creation process. This is a significant finding, as it highlights the importance of acquiring and refining literacy skills for the effective use of GenAI in writing.

Lin (2026) also highlights the importance of critical thinking. Drawing on research findings, the author concludes that critical thinking and creative self-efficacy positively influence AI proficiency; consequently, a co-creativity-based approach is identified as the most effective model for utilizing GenAI.

Similar conclusions are drawn from a longitudinal study involving two ESL students, which focused on the regularity and sustained use of GenAI and the significance of this engagement for the development of

the students' academic skills (Tan, 2026). An analysis of the data—collected through monthly interviews and surveys—revealed the socializing nature of interactions with GenAI; this interaction fosters the development of discipline-specific knowledge and, over time, leads students to adopt an increasingly critical, selective, and reflective approach to the technology. Throughout the study, the participants demonstrated responsibility for their own intellectual work and learning processes, and they also exhibited strong language proficiency (Tan, 2026). It can be inferred that high levels of language proficiency facilitate effective collaboration with GenAI. In other words, the more adept students are at writing without GenAI assistance, the more effectively they can utilize the tool when crafting their own texts, treating the technology as a partner rather than relying on it to do the work for them. According to Xiao (2026), the process of learning to use GenAI effectively should be viewed as an integral aspect of academic skill development in higher education.

The dynamics and strategy of interacting with artificial intelligence tools are also crucial for the efficiency of text creation using GenAI. Febriantoro et al. (2026) analysed 1,282 interaction logs from 32 students using a GenAI-based essay writing assistant (EWA) during a two-hour writing session, identifying specific behavioural patterns. Students who wrote the text themselves—treating the system primarily as a source of feedback—achieved better results. Poorer outcomes were observed among those who adopted a passive approach limited to asking questions. An effective approach to using GenAI, therefore, progresses from asking questions to independent writing supported by a technology-assisted revision and optimization process, positioning artificial intelligence intervention in the final stages of text creation rather than the initial ones.

Wang and Wang (2026) describe practical examples of effective cooperation with GenAI. They conducted a six-week pedagogical experiment involving 71 Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students (36 in the experimental group, 35 in the control group) to determine how multimodal teaching supported by GenAI affects their argumentative writing skills, creativity, and critical thinking. The study demonstrated that multimodal teaching supported by GenAI significantly enhances writing complexity, creativity, and critical thinking. Students in the experimental group perceived AI-generated materials as conceptually stimulating, broadening cognitive perspectives, enhancing analytical thinking, and supporting the structure of argumentation (Wang & Wang, 2026).

Similarly, other researchers are developing and investigating the impact and effectiveness of various models of collaboration with GenAI during the learning process. Chiu and Hwang (2026) proposed a digital storytelling model utilizing mind mapping based on their proprietary CIDI framework (Clarify, Ideate, Develop, Implement) to engage students and make a traditional art course more interactive. A quasi-experiment involving 45 university students in Taiwan demonstrated that applying this working model leads to improved learning outcomes, stimulates creativity, and enhances the efficiency of GenAI-supported English language learning—specifically regarding scriptwriting, video presentations, and narrative themes (Chiu & Hwang, 2026).

The transformation of the writing process necessitates a reformulation of methods for assessing academic work. Cong-Lem (2026) advocates for the introduction of teacher-student evaluative interviews as a key component of assessment. The requirement to personally explain and justify one’s compositional strategy—including the critical management of GenAI’s contribution—radically alters the role of technology: it shifts from being a mere execution tool (for task completion) to a partner in the reasoning process and leading to the final output in the form of a text. Consequently, students become actively involved in the successive stages of creation and gain greater control over the process; this boosts their confidence when discussing their work and fosters a greater sense of responsibility for the resulting text.

Research by Melchior and Farinosi (2026) has revealed an ambivalent attitude toward the use of GenAI in personal, social, and academic contexts. Responses were gathered from 1,347 students across 24 Italian universities. While the respondents value the efficiency and learning support provided by GenAI, they also express concerns regarding the risk of intellectual dependency, the erosion of critical thinking skills, and

threats to academic integrity. An analysis of the results may also reveal a need for a systemic approach to the use of GenAI in the academic sphere.

The phenomenon of "cognitive offloading." What changes, if any, occur in human thinking when text generation is delegated to GenAI? (dependence on GenAI)

The easy and widespread availability of GenAI, combined with the benefits of using it to generate text, creates a risk of total reliance on GenAI-generated content; this could lead to the near-complete abandonment of independent writing—or even attempts to write—and, ultimately, to cognitive disengagement.

Choudhuri et al. (2026) investigated the impact of regular GenAI usage on students' cognitive engagement. Their findings revealed that students who frequently used GenAI showed a statistically significant reduction in cognitive engagement—specifically, a decrease in deep thinking and reflection applied during coursework. In addition to this, greater reliance on GenAI exacerbated this lack of engagement resulting from the routine use of GenAI. Individuals characterized as "digital natives"—those with strong technophilic motivation, high computer self-efficacy, and a high tolerance for risk—were found to be significantly more susceptible to the lack of cognitive engagement related to GenAI (Choudhuri et al., 2026).

Tian J. and Zhang focused on examining and analysing the relationship between students' perception of GenAI and their critical thinking, specifically through immersion in tasks performed with the aid of GenAI. The results indicate that when students perceive AI systems as capable and reliable, they engage more deeply in AI-supported academic tasks; this engagement is typically associated with more reflective and analytically oriented processing rather than a general decline in thinking abilities. Focusing on the task while using GenAI is accompanied by heightened evaluative processing, rather than an automatic decline in critical thinking. According to the study findings, the benefits of collaborating with GenAI emerge when engagement remains focused on verification, whereas risks arise when immersion shifts into dependency (Tian J. & Zhang, 2026).

Jain et al. (2026) also highlight the risks associated with over-reliance on GenAI. The researchers analysed the impact of AI-assisted task performance on cognitive processes, focusing on how these tools alter critical thinking skills. Using a mixed-methods approach, they studied a group of 120 young adults, examining their interactions with large language models (LLMs) and comparing the outcomes of the AI-using group against a traditional control group. The results indicated that while artificial intelligence improves task accuracy and reduces mental effort, it also encourages "cognitive offloading." The researchers note, however, that the impact on critical thinking is not uniform; it depends on the user's approach—ranging from the mechanical and complete delegation of reasoning processes to the machine, to the strategic use of the technology as a "cognitive scaffold" while maintaining one's own analytical autonomy. The study concludes that AI must be skilfully integrated and utilized as an "augmented intelligence" tool within the educational system. Excessive reliance on GenAI can significantly hinder the development of independent human reasoning. Chan et al. (2026) point to a similar risk associated with using GenAI in literacy. They examined how Chinese secondary and tertiary students learning English as a second language (ESL) utilize generative artificial intelligence tools—such as ChatGPT, Claude, Doubao, and Pigai—not merely as writing aids but as co-authors in the academic writing process. Despite the many opportunities created by this collaboration, the authors note the risks of epistemic dependence and diminished critical thinking, as well as the need to solve ethical dilemmas regarding the authorship of the texts created as a result of this cooperation. It is very difficult to definitively determine the scope of which a person or GenAI is the author of a generated text (Chan et al., 2026). Awareness of these challenges should therefore lead to the development of a model for effective collaboration with artificial intelligence, by means of which the issues of authorship will be clarified and students will engage deeply in the educational process and they will gain the sense of control while creating a text in partnership with GenAI.

Beyond the cognitive costs identified by researchers regarding an over-reliance on GenAI for text generation, studies also highlight other significant aspects: the ethical dilemmas and associated emotional costs of using GenAI. Hass et al. (2026) drew attention to this issue while investigating the use of GenAI to create personal messages—such as well-wishes, greetings, and even love poems—typically exchanged between people in close relationships. They conducted five experiments covering various messaging contexts. The findings indicate that presenting AI-generated private content as one's own triggers feelings of guilt, as users perceive such actions as dishonest (Hass, Kirk & Givi, 2026). It appears that this emotional discomfort is linked with the recipient's awareness and the nature of the relationship. If a GenAI-generated message is not actually delivered to the recipient, or if the relationship between the people is not close, the sense of guilt diminishes—much like when greetings are pre-printed on a greetings card. In such cases, the recipient does not expect the sender to be the author of the message. Perceiving one's own behaviour as dishonest—specifically, as misleading the recipient regarding the message's authorship—is a key factor causing emotional discomfort for the sender during personal communication supported by GenAI.

Conclusion

The development of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has revolutionized the text-creation process. These changes necessitate a new perspective on literacy—specifically, a reconceptualization of literacy competencies—as well as the establishment of conditions for effective cooperation with GenAI, the evaluation of its outputs, and the resolution of ethical issues.

The research presented indicates that effective collaboration with GenAI requires substantial personal resources. Technology becomes an effective partner in the writing process only when the individual possesses a strong, autonomous cognitive "scaffold." High linguistic proficiency, independent writing skills, self-regulation, and critical thinking are crucial for successful leveraging GenAI's capabilities—ensuring a partnership rather than a scenario where the AI simply takes over the task. Active participation in the writing process stimulates creativity and critical thinking, thereby fostering human intellectual potential. It allows the individual to maintain control over the text-creation process and avoid ethical dilemmas. Excessive—and especially habitual—reliance on technology carries the risk of cognitive disengagement. It is easy to fall prey to the illusion that GenAI is doing all the work. The educational models proposed in the material emphasize the human writer's active, critical role; in this framework, GenAI offers guidance, corrects errors, and provides feedback, but does not replace the author. The conclusions drawn from the cited research provide a definitive answer to the question posed in the article's title: literacy education remains essential, even in the times of GenAI.

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Enhancing creativity education through AI: A study of divergent thinking skills among Moroccan university students

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Abstract
Creativity is a hallmark of what makes us human, and educators worldwide dedicate their efforts to nurturing their students' cognitive development. This empirical study aims to investigate the association between generative artificial intelligence (AI) and the creative thinking of Moroccan university students as they prepare and produce educational scenarios for real classroom implementation. Artificial Intelligence has been increasingly explored as a tool that may support certain aspects of learning and creative engagement, despite the fact that its impact on measurable creativity outcomes remains debated in the literature. As scholars have identified multiple dimensions of creativity, the present research focuses on divergent thinking. The study uses a mixed-methods approach integrating quantitative and qualitative data. The Reisman Diagnostic Creativity Assessment (RDCA) serves as a self-report tool, and to assess its efficacy, a quasi-experimental design is implemented. This design employs a one-group pre-test and post-test methodology, complemented by a paired-samples t-test for statistical analysis. Participants in the experiment are Moroccan undergraduate students (n = 56) enrolled in the English Department at the École Normale Supérieure in Fez, Morocco. Additional semi-structured interviews were conducted for qualitative data collection. During teaching practice, in designated schools, students are required to develop lesson plans that incorporate potential scenarios for teaching different subjects to young learners. They often use AI tools, like ChatGPT, to generate and tailor these scenarios to meet particular requirements. Although ChatGPT has evolved through several model versions, the present study focuses specifically on GPT-4o to address the following research questions: i) What are the students' attitudes toward using GPT-4o to generate educational scenarios that can be implemented in the classroom context? ii) What is the impact of using GPT-4o on the students' divergent thinking abilities, and to what extent can it help improve students' creativity? iii) To what extent do students perceive GPT-4o as a collaborative partner in their instructional design process? Findings from this study on the use of GPT-4o revealed minor improvement trends that did not reach statistical significance, suggesting that one semester of practical teaching is insufficient to produce measurable effects. Specifically, quantitative data indicated no statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$) across creativity-related constructs, including fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. However, qualitative findings revealed that students perceived AI tools as supportive for idea generation, organization of thoughts, and confidence building.

Keywords: *artificial intelligence, creativity, divergent thinking, teaching English, students.*

Introduction

For human beings, creativity is an essential determinant when accessing personal, academic, and professional development. In any given situation of their existence, individuals contribute meaningfully to society by innovating or collaborating to solve complex problems. In a specific context like education, fostering creativity is considered crucial when preparing future generations to navigate an increasingly complex and dynamic world. The significant importance of creativity in education lies not only in its direct

benefits for individual learners but also in its broader societal value, driving cultural and technological advancement. Ultimately, emerging pedagogical frameworks position nurturing creativity as a core objective, alongside traditional knowledge acquisition. This approach ensures that students develop essential skills for lifelong learning and adaptability (Li et al., 2025).

Among the various dimensions of creativity, divergent thinking holds a central position due to its emphasis on generating multiple, diverse, and novel ideas rather than converging on a single correct answer. Divergent thinking encompasses skills such as fluency (the ability to produce numerous ideas), flexibility (the capability to produce a variety of ideas across different categories), originality (idea novelty), and elaboration (the detail and development of ideas). The combination of these skills forms a crucial aspect of what Baltà-Salvador et al. (2025) refers to as creative cognition, empowering learners to tackle problems with a more open and innovative mindset. In today's fast-paced world, teachers play a vital role in fostering students' capacities and equipping them with the tools needed to enhance creative thinking across various learning contexts. With the rapid evolution of educational technologies, artificial intelligence tools—particularly large language models like GPT-4o—offer remarkable opportunities to boost creative thinking and support teachers in their instructional methods (Akhmadieva et al., 2024). GPT-4o is a ground-breaking technology that effectively generates coherent and contextually relevant text across various domains. Its capabilities extend to crafting instructional scenarios for classroom implementation, proposing lesson plans, and delivering personalized feedback. This makes GPT-4o an invaluable asset in education, particularly in enhancing creativity and fostering divergent thinking among students (Abdul Kadir & Rusyda, 2022; Coelho, 2024).

In this context, the current study investigates GPT-4o within the broader landscape of educational technologies that leverage AI to enhance learning and teaching experiences. It uses a mixed-methods approach with a quasi-experimental research design that targets Moroccan undergraduate students (n=56) from École Normale Supérieure in Fez. The Reisman Diagnostic Creativity Assessment (RDCA) serves to collect quantitative data, while qualitative data is collected by means of semi-structured interviews (Reisman et al., 2016). Importantly, this research does not aim to establish causal relationships between AI use and creativity outcomes. Rather, it adopts an exploratory perspective, examining students' self-reported creativity and perceptions following exposure to AI-supported activities.

Theoretical background on divergent thinking and creativity

In recent years, technology has taken on a pivotal role in nurturing creativity and encouraging divergent thinking. Artificial Intelligence, especially through intelligent assistants and generative models like GPT-4o, has shown remarkable promise in personalizing learning experiences, spurring ideation, and supporting the creative process. These AI tools can generate creative prompts, offer fresh perspectives, and help learners navigate various problem-solving approaches, ultimately boosting cognitive flexibility and originality (Baltà-Salvador et al., 2025). Additional digital tools, such as multimodal creative software and AI-powered content generators, can further enhance the manipulation of intricate creative thinking processes. This, in turn, empowers students to generate and elaborate on their ideas more effectively (Albakry et al., 2025).

Rooted in creativity research, divergent thinking refers to the cognitive process underlying the generation of multiple unique ideas or solutions to open-ended problems (Rawlings et al., 2025). Divergent thinking stands in contrast to convergent thinking, which tends to be linear and aims at identifying a single correct answer. Evaluating divergent thinking involves examining specific one ideas come from), originality (the uniqueness or rarity of the ideas), and elaboration (the level of detail added to each idea) (Xiang, 2024). These aspects highlight the importance of creative output within educational environments.

The Reisman Diagnostic Creativity Assessment (RDCA) is a robust self-report instrument explicitly designed to capture essential dimensions of creativity. It empowers learners to reflect deeply on their

creative behaviours and thought processes. This test effectively measures ten crucial constructs related to creativity: fluency, flexibility, originality, elaboration, tolerance of ambiguity, risk-taking, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, decision-making, and metacognitive awareness (Reisman et al., 2016). These tools are essential as they deliver both quantitative data for rigorous analysis and qualitative insights into students' self-perception of creativity. Their value in mixed methods research frameworks is undeniable (Baidoo-Anu & Owusu Ansah, 2023) Divergent thinking encompasses essential cognitive and metacognitive aspects that demand not only the generation of ideas but also critical reflection, evaluation, and iterative improvement. These processes are crucial for cultivating creativity in learners (Khotimah et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, as AI is continuously acquiring new capabilities, major challenges have emerged that require careful consideration. Khatri & Karki (2023) suggest that ethical and responsible use of AI tools must underpin pedagogical applications to mitigate risks related to privacy, bias, and academic integrity. The main growing risk fosters overreliance and results in potentially diminishing students' independent critical thinking and creative autonomy (Holmes & Porayska-Pomsta, 2022). In other words, AI-generated outputs may stifle originality or promote formulaic responses if not integrated within robust pedagogical frameworks that emphasize human agency and reflection.

Effective pedagogical integration of AI requires a clear theoretical and instructional grounding in theoretical frameworks that foster meaningful learning and engage students. From a sociocultural standpoint, knowledge construction is viewed as a mediated process, influenced by the use of semiotic tools and contextual interactions (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). At the same time, self-determination theory (SDT) offers valuable insights into the motivational aspects of learning, highlighting the necessity of autonomy, competence, and connection in maintaining engagement and encouraging creative efforts (Xiang, 2024). Within this theoretical context, it is essential to differentiate between creativity as a broad, multidimensional concept and divergent thinking, which serves as one of its measurable cognitive elements. For this study, we operationalize creativity through divergent thinking, evaluated using the RDCA dimensions of fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. This distinction clarifies the connection between AI-supported performance, self-reported creativity, and the actual outcomes of measured divergent thinking, which may not progress at the same rate. In this framework, AI—especially GPT-4o—is viewed not as a direct source of creativity but rather as a supportive cognitive tool that can help generate ideas, provide structure, and encourage reflective thinking in instructional design tasks. Thus, instructional design (or lesson planning) becomes the practical context where AI-enhanced cognitive processes can impact the students' perceived imaginative abilities and their actual creative performance.

AI technologies and their creative capabilities

Generative AI and Large Language Models (LLMs)

What has traditionally required human expertise is now easily handled by large language models (LLMs) that are capable of generating original content, reinterpreting ideas, and assessing creative outputs. Existing models are trained on extensive textual datasets and possess a built-in automated capability of enhancement in creative tasks, along with the ability to generate psychometric creative assessment items (Zhao et al., 2025). Therefore, existing computational models offer formalised representations of creative processes, simulating various aspects of creativity within artificial systems. Building on established typologies, Boden (2009) identifies three distinct types of creativity modelled by AI. The first, combinational creativity, involves algorithms that blend existing knowledge to generate new outputs. The second type, exploratory creativity, refers to the process where algorithms navigate through predefined conceptual spaces. Lastly, transformational creativity is characterized by the modification or expansion of these conceptual spaces.

As humans engage more with AI-generated content, recent research underscores the undeniable potential of AI to serve not just as automated creators, but as powerful co-creation partners that

significantly enhance human creativity (German et al., 2019). Frameworks like the human-AI co-creative segment model clearly outline how AI and human designers interact. As highlighted by Wu et al. (2021), these models pinpoint specific modes of interaction and cognitive behaviours that facilitate dynamic and iterative co-creation. They emphasize the active role of human agency in effectively leveraging AI's generative capabilities. Collaborations between AI systems and human designers exemplify co-evolution, where both parties adapt and evolve their practices in direct response to each other.

GPT-4o as a tool for generating educational scenarios

In classroom settings, AI-generated content is making a significant impact. It excels in areas like language teaching, STEM education, and creative design activities that demand ideation and reflection. Leveraging advanced natural language processing capabilities, GPT-4o can generate educational scenarios that produce diverse and contextually relevant content aligned with specific instructional objectives. These applications undoubtedly enhance learner engagement by delivering varied and dynamic learning experiences, fostering active participation, and promoting deeper cognitive involvement (Acosta-Enriquez et al., 2024). The integration of these scenarios is essential for fostering collaborative learning. It empowers students to collectively explore AI-generated content and engage in meaningful discussions. This dynamic process not only promotes social interaction but also enhances collective creativity (Baltà-Salvador et al., 2025). This suggests that GPT-4o may serve as an essential resource for lesson planning and fostering creativity in teaching. It provides powerful suggestions that can inspire educators and enhance traditional curricula (Elkhodr et al., 2023). The tool's versatility empowers educators and students to craft scenarios across a wide range of subject domains, effectively meeting diverse pedagogical objectives. It is designed to enhance critical thinking, encourage collaboration, and simulate real-world problem-solving with precision (Ködding et al., 2023).

While the benefits of AI-generated educational scenarios are significant, it is imperative to recognize their inherent limitations and challenges. These scenarios often fall short, being too generic, culturally biased, or inaccurate, which can lead to misunderstandings and perpetuate stereotypes when applied uncritically. AI excels at reproducing and recombining learned patterns, but it lacks the intentionality and flexible, self-driven evaluation that defines human creativity. This stark contrast underscores the urgent need for human oversight and the development of hybrid models to elevate the creative process (Cox et al., 2023). It is crucial for educators to carefully assess and contextualize AI-generated content to ensure it remains relevant and appropriate. Additionally, ethical concerns arise regarding our reliance on AI, as it can hinder creativity and raise issues surrounding academic integrity. This calls for transparent policies and teaching strategies that maintain a balance between the use of AI and the necessary human oversight (Coelho, 2024; Holmes & Porayska-Pomsta, 2022; Akhmadieva et al., 2024).

Context of the study

In Morocco, the École Normale Supérieure (ENS) serves as a prominent higher education institution and teacher training college dedicated to preparing future educators for careers in both public and private education sectors. With campuses located in several major cities, ENS offers a variety of specialized academic and pedagogical programs tailored for a broad spectrum of subjects, including Mathematics, Sciences, Arabic, French, Philosophy, and English, equipping aspiring teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to excel in their fields.

The English Department at ENS is dedicated to preparing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers by equipping them with essential skills in language proficiency, instructional design, classroom management, and educational technology. After undergoing a thorough selection process, students follow a well-structured curriculum that blends theoretical knowledge with hands-on teaching experience, including required internships at local schools. Through its comprehensive programs, ENS

plays a vital role in shaping the future of education in Morocco, ensuring that teaching methods align not only with national curriculum standards but also adapt to the evolving needs of today's classrooms.

This study was carried out with undergraduate university students enrolled in the English Department at the École Normale Supérieure (ENS) in Fez, Morocco. These students are part of a professional teacher-training program designed to prepare them for careers in primary and secondary education. In addition to their core coursework in English, which covers areas such as linguistics, literature, and pedagogy, they participate in a mandatory weekly teaching internship. During the initial stage of the internship, students primarily engage in administrative and technical support roles, including managing classrooms and assisting with logistics. However, as they gain more experience, they gradually take on more pedagogical responsibilities, specifically focusing on remedial teaching for students who face learning difficulties.

To execute the teaching assignments, student interns are required to come equipped with their lesson plans that detail learning objectives, teaching procedures, and creative activities aimed at engaging and supporting their target learners. This process requires an impressive capacity for creativity and divergent thinking, especially when it comes to adapting lessons for students with learning difficulties (Baltà-Salvador et al., 2025; Khotimah et al., 2024).

Gradually, many students started seeking suggestions from GPT-4o and incorporated them in their lesson planning processes. Drawing on its ability to generate ideas for content delivery, students used the AI tool as a form of pedagogical assistant, providing classroom activities. AI-supported interactions are essential tools that significantly expand instructional possibilities and enhance creative teaching methods for students. Research consistently demonstrates that users hold a positive perception of GPT-4o, emphasizing its user-friendly interface, engaging features, and capacity to deliver personalized learning support effectively (Akhmadieva et al., 2024; Elkhodr et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2021). Many students clearly recognize the tool's ability to deliver customized educational content and foster active engagement, significantly boosting motivation and satisfaction in their learning experiences (Acosta-Enriquez et al., 2024). The growing incorporation of generative AI in teacher preparation presents a crucial opportunity to examine the impact of GPT-4o on students' creative development, particularly in the areas of fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration (Abdul Kadir & Rusyda, 2022; Reisman et al., 2016).

Research methodology

The present study is definitively structured to investigate the pedagogical implications of integrating generative AI—specifically GPT-4o—into the instructional design practices of Moroccan undergraduate students pursuing English language teaching. Utilizing a rigorous convergent mixed-methods design, this research combines both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to deliver a comprehensive analysis of the effects of GPT-4o on the creativity and instructional planning practices of Moroccan university students (Flick, 2018). Central to the design is a quasi-experimental framework that utilizes a one-group pre-test/post-test method without a control group for quantitative data, as undergraduate students at ENS-Fez represent a singular cohort during the spring of 2025. This allows the researcher to measure changes in students' creativity over time, as a follow-up to a GPT-4o-supported AI-supported pedagogical integration that lasted twelve weeks and was embedded within a regular course module of lesson planning. Students took part in one AI-supported activity per week, each lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. Activities included brainstorming essay topics, generating alternative viewpoints, refining arguments, and reflecting on drafts using a generative AI tool. Students were encouraged to use GPT-4o as a supportive tool rather than a content replacement, with the instructor emphasizing critical evaluation, originality, and academic integrity. The instructor guided students on prompt formulation, reflection, and ethical use of AI outputs. It should be noted that while quantitative analysis provides insights into trends, the study does not claim statistically significant effects due to the limited sample size.

With regard to qualitative data, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain more insight from participants about the overall experience feedback of using GPT-4o to generate educational scenarios. The study seeks to address three guiding questions: (i) What are the students' attitudes toward using GPT-4o to generate educational scenarios that can be implemented in the classroom context? (ii) What is the impact of using GPT-4o on the students' divergent thinking abilities, and to what extent can it help improve their overall creativity? (iii) To what extent do students perceive GPT-4o as a collaborative partner in their instructional design process? In this study, creativity is explored through the lens of divergent thinking, which encompasses four key dimensions: fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. The analysis aims to identify whether there are statistically significant differences between pre-test and post-test scores in these areas after participants take part in AI-supported instructional activities. Rather than establishing causal relationships, the study design focuses on uncovering patterns of change that emerge from the data.

The researcher relied on convenience sampling techniques to reach a group of participants that consisted of 56 students from the English department at ENS-Fez. While this limits broader generalizability, it enhances the study's ecological validity by reflecting real classroom dynamics. To assess students' attitudes and usage behaviours toward AI in instructional design, participants voluntarily provide answers to a custom survey instrument in total respect of ethical guidelines regarding informed consent and anonymity. It included demographic information along with the Reisman Diagnostic Creativity Assessment (RDCA), which measures ten creativity-related constructs (fluency, flexibility, originality, elaboration, tolerance of ambiguity, risk-taking, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, decision-making, and metacognitive awareness). Data were collected to evaluate students' engagement levels with AI-supported instructional activities across various lesson planning tasks (e.g., setting objectives, designing activities, managing the classroom, implementing assessment), using a 5-point Likert scale. The survey has been administered both before and following engagement with AI-supported activities, enabling the researcher to conduct paired-samples t-tests and compare mean scores.

To gain further depth and validity of the findings, quantitative measures were complemented with qualitative data to enrich interpretation, given the small sample and lack of statistical significance. In this respect, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive subset of students to explore their lived experiences, perceptions of AI use, and reflections on creativity. Qualitative data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The interview transcripts were initially coded inductively to uncover recurring patterns related to students' views on AI usage, creativity, and instructional design. These codes were subsequently organized into broader themes. The adopted interview guide helped detect nuanced insights into how students perceived GPT-4o as a cognitive partner and resource for lesson planning. Participants were anonymized through the use of coded identifiers (S1–S9), with the number in parentheses indicating each participant's age (e.g., S2 (19) refers to Participant 2, aged 19). To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, a process of iterative coding and constant comparison was implemented, with representative excerpts chosen to exemplify each theme. Although the interview sample size (n = 9) limits the generalizability of the findings, it offers significant analytical depth. The study did not utilize inter-coder reliability; consequently, the results should be regarded as interpretive rather than fully generalizable.

Ultimately, a triangulation of methods—employing quantitative metrics, survey-based instructional usage data, and qualitative interviews contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the AI-supported pedagogical integration's effects, although it does not compensate for the absence of a control group.

Reliability test

To ensure that our research instrument accurately measures students' creativity and divergent thinking, we rigorously assessed Cronbach's Alpha across ten critical dimensions: fluency, flexibility,

originality, elaboration, tolerance of ambiguity, risk-taking, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, decision-making, and metacognitive awareness. The results demonstrate strong internal consistency for both the pre-test and post-test. The pre-test achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.820, confirming its reliability and the effectiveness of the items in measuring the intended constructs before the integration of AI-supported pedagogical material. Following this exposure to AI tools, the post-test reliability further improved, culminating in a Cronbach's alpha of 0.862. This outcome not only confirms the instrument's robust internal consistency but also highlights its enhancement. Based on George and Mallery's (2003) guidelines, values above 0.8 indicate good reliability, suggesting that the items within each test consistently measured the intended constructs. The increase in reliability from pre- to post-test may reflect a clearer understanding or more consistent engagement with the measured domains after the introduction of AI-pedagogical tools. These results confirm that the instrument demonstrated strong internal coherence across both measurement phases, reinforcing the dependability of the collected data for further statistical analysis.

Table 1: Reliability statistics pre-test/post-test

	Cronbach's Alpha	N of items
Pre-test reliability statistics	.820	10
Post-test reliability statistics	.862	10

Normality test

To verify the assumption of normality for conducting parametric tests, skewness and kurtosis statistics were analysed for both pre- and post-test scores (Table 2). Z-scores were calculated by dividing each value by its corresponding standard error. For the pre-test data, the skewness ($z = –0.472 / 0.319 ≈ –1.48$) $z = –1.48$ and kurtosis ($z = –0.540 / 0.628 ≈ –0.86$) $z = –0.86$; while for the post-test data, skewness ($z = –0.037 / 0.319 ≈ –0.12$) $z = –0.12$ and kurtosis ($z = –0.599 / 0.628 ≈ –0.95$) $z = –0.95$. All values fall within the conventional threshold of ±1.96, indicating no significant deviation from normality. These results suggest that both pre- and post-test distributions approximate a normal curve, justifying the use of paired-samples t-tests in subsequent analysis. This approach adheres to best practices in social science research, ensuring robust statistical validity.

Table 2: Normality test

Dataset	Skewness	Std. error	Kurtosis	Std. error
Pre-test data	-0.472	0.319	-0.540	0.628
Post-test_data	-0.037	0.319	-0.599	0.628

Results

The sample for this study consists of 56 participants (Table 3), all of whom provided complete responses for the demographic variables of gender and age. Data collected shows that approximately 27% are males, while 73% are females. The mean gender score is 1.73 (SD = 0.447), which also shows that the majority of participants were females. This distribution aligns with broader trends observed in teacher education programs where female enrolment typically surpasses that of males (UNESCO, 2023).

Table 3: Gender frequencies

		Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	1	15	26.8	26.8	26.8
	2	41	73.2	73.2	100.0
	Total	56	100.0	100.0	

Regarding age (Table 4*)*, the data collected shows that the majority of respondents are 18 years old (64%), followed by 19-year-olds (27%), and a smaller group aged 20 (9%). The sample is visibly skewed toward the younger end of this age range, as the mean value of ages has a score of 18.45 (SD = 0.658). Such a narrow age range indicates a fairly uniform group of undergraduate students, which is characteristic of pre-service teacher training programs. Their developmental stage likely means they are still forming professional identities and are more open to experimenting with new technologies such as AI. However, it may also mean they require more structured guidance in critical thinking and self-regulation, which reinforces the importance of explicitly teaching AI literacy and creative design thinking in the curriculum.

Table 4: Age frequencies

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18	36	64.3	64.3	64.3
	19	15	26.8	26.8	91.1
	20	5	8.9	8.9	100.0
	Total	56	100.0	100.0	

This demographic overview (Table 5) provides descriptive information on the gender distribution of participants and indicates that the study took place in a vibrant, predominantly female educational setting. Ultimately, this context provides a promising foundation for the early introduction of AI-supported pedagogical tools and the use of technology to enhance instruction.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics age & gender

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
1- Gender	56	1	2	1.73	.447
Age	56	18	20	18.45	.658
Valid N (listwise)	56				

The responses regarding students' use of AI tools to develop engaging activities (Figure 1*)* and select adequate instructional strategies (Figure 2) reflect moderate but uneven adoption across the sample. In the case of developing engaging activities, 41.1% of students selected “sometimes,” indicating a moderate level of integration. Meanwhile, 19.6% reported using AI “often” and only 5.4% chose “always.” On the lower end of the spectrum, 17.9% of participants indicated that they “never” use AI for this purpose, while 16.1% reported using it “rarely.” This suggests that although the majority are exploring AI in planning activities, a significant portion remains hesitant or disengaged.

The use of AI tools to select appropriate instructional strategies shows a clear trend among respondents. The largest group, comprising 33.9%, stated that they use AI “sometimes.” This is followed by 26.8% who indicate “rarely,” and 30.4% reporting “never.” It is evident that over half of the respondents seldom utilize AI to inform their strategic pedagogical choices. Only 8.9% reported using AI “often,” and notably, no students indicated that they “always” rely on AI for this purpose.

The findings clearly demonstrate that while some students recognize the value of AI in enhancing creativity and improving teaching effectiveness, its consistent use is still lacking. Research examining the impact of GPT-4o on divergent thinking and creative output underscores this point. AI is often perceived as an additional resource rather than a vital component of lesson planning. Consequently, improvements in creative performance are most pronounced among students who utilize AI more frequently. These trends highlight the urgent need for training programs that instill confidence and proficiency in using AI, which can enhance both student engagement and the quality of instructional planning.

Figure 1: AI tools to develop engaging activities

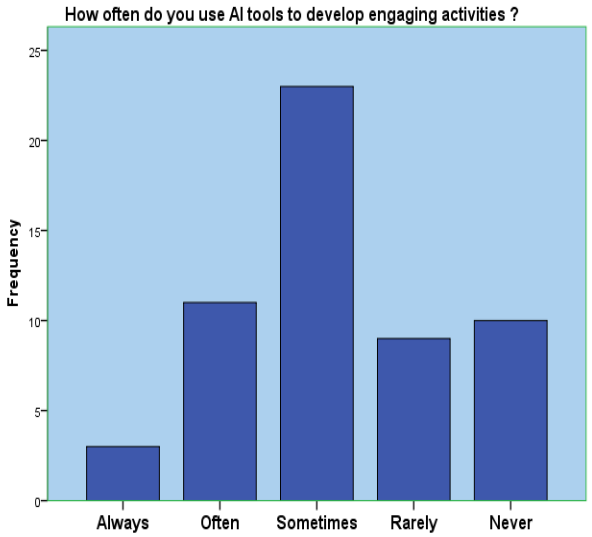
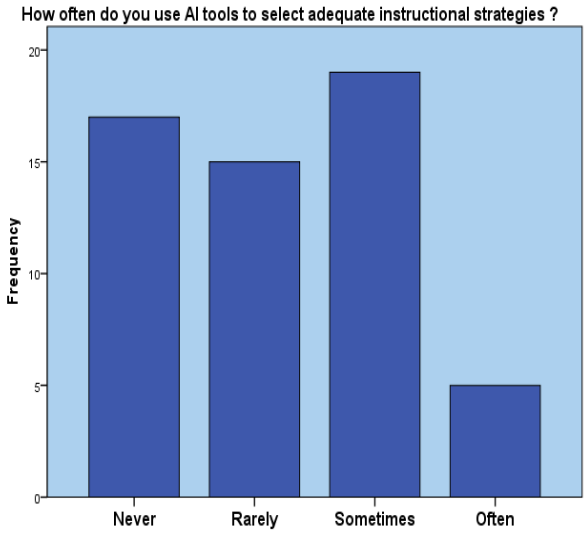


Figure 2: AI tools to select adequate instructional strategies



When asked about their use of AI tools to prepare teaching materials (Figure 3), responses varied across the frequency scale, with the majority of participants falling within the mid-to-low usage categories. Specifically, 32.1% (n=18) of students indicated they *never* use AI tools for this task, while 14.3% (n=8) reported doing so *rarely*. Another 30.4% (n=17) of students claimed to *sometimes* use AI for material preparation, showing a moderate level of engagement. Only 19.6% (n=11) said they *often* used AI in this way, and a mere 3.6% (n=2) *always* utilized AI tools. These numbers suggest a relatively cautious adoption of AI for preparing instructional content, with a strong lean toward minimal or occasional use. The relatively low engagement might reflect a lack of familiarity with the tools' capabilities, concerns over accuracy or relevance, or a continued preference for traditional methods. For a study focused on creativity and lesson design, these figures indicate that while students are exploring AI, they may still require more structured guidance or confidence to integrate these tools into core preparation tasks.

Regarding the use of AI tools to plan for multiple learning paces (Figure 4), the pattern is similar. 32.1% (n=18) of students said they *never* use AI for differentiated pacing strategies, while 25% (n=14) do so *rarely*. 26.8% (n=15) reported they *sometimes* apply AI in this context, and 12.5% (n=7) *often* do. Again, only 3.6% (n=2) reported *always* using AI to tailor lesson pacing. This trend points to a general underutilization of AI for accommodating student diversity in learning speeds and needs. In the context of instructional design and inclusive education, this represents a key area where students might not yet be fully leveraging AI's adaptive and assistive potential. Given that pacing is critical to managing classroom dynamics and supporting both struggling and advanced learners, these findings highlight the importance

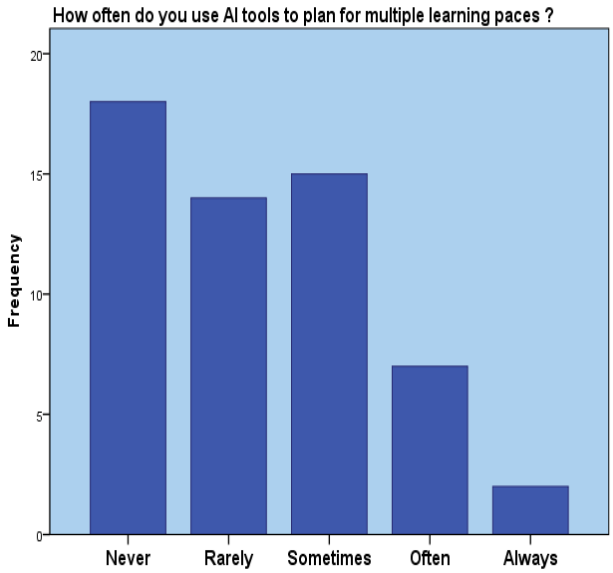
of training students not just in how to use AI, but in how to apply it meaningfully for differentiated instruction.

These insights highlight that, while ENS Fez students are becoming increasingly aware of and experimenting with AI in lesson planning, there is still limited integration, particularly when it comes to personalized pedagogy and material preparation. This points to a notable gap between the technological opportunities that AI presents and the teaching practices that students currently adopt. The AI-supported pedagogical integration and creativity-focused instructional training outlined in this study aims to bridge this gap.

Figure 3: AI tools to prepare your teaching materials



Figure 4: AI tools to plan for multiple learning paces



Based on the analysis of the frequency and descriptive statistics (Table 6), several patterns emerge regarding students' use of AI tools in lesson planning. The task with the highest reported usage is “Practicing lessons” (M = 2.98, SD = 1.213), followed closely by “Setting specific objectives” (M = 2.80, SD = 1.197) and “Developing engaging activities” (M = 2.79, SD = 1.124). These results suggest that students find AI tools particularly useful in supporting the instructional flow and creative engagement aspects of teaching preparation.

In contrast, the least utilized AI-supported task is “Seeking students’ feedback” (M = 2.18, SD = 1.223), indicating a possible hesitation or lack of awareness in using AI for reflective or formative assessment practices. This aligns with the frequency table, where 42.9% of respondents reported “never” using AI for this task. Other tasks with similarly low mean scores include “Selecting adequate instructional strategies” (M = 2.21), “Planning for multiple learning paces” (M = 2.30), and “Anticipating potential challenges” (M = 2.36), suggesting that higher-order instructional design tasks are less frequently supported with AI tools.

The frequency data also shows that most students “sometimes” use AI tools for foundational tasks like “Studying curriculum guidelines” (48.2%) and “Setting objectives” (46.4%), with only a small proportion reporting “often” or “always” usage across any category. This points to an emerging but still moderate level of AI integration in pedagogical planning among ENS students.

Overall, the findings suggest that while AI is beginning to be integrated into certain planning aspects—especially those involving idea generation and structuring lessons—it is less commonly applied to reflective practices or differentiated instruction. This underscores the need for further training and support to help future teachers leverage AI more broadly and effectively across all stages of lesson planning.

Table 6: AI frequency descriptive statistics

How often do you use AI tools to	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Study the curriculum guidelines	56	2.52	.972
Set specific objectives for the lesson	56	2.80	1.197
Assess the students' need	56	2.57	1.373
Select lesson topics	56	2.71	1.398
Plan the structure of the lesson	56	2.68	1.162
Develop engaging activities	56	2.79	1.124
Select adequate instructional strategies	56	2.21	.986
Prepare your teaching materials	56	2.48	1.236
Design assessments	56	2.41	1.218
Plan for multiple learning paces	56	2.30	1.159
Integrate technology	56	2.70	1.235
Practice your lessons	56	2.98	1.213
Plan your classroom management	56	2.39	1.231
Anticipate potential challenges	56	2.36	1.182
Seek students' feedback	56	2.18	1.223
Draw self-assessment elements	56	2.37	1.259
Valid N (listwise)	56		

The pre-test descriptive statistics (Table 7) offer a valuable baseline of students' cognitive and creative capacities before their exposure to AI tools for lesson planning. Overall, the data reveal relatively high mean scores across all ten measured domains, suggesting that participants already possessed moderately strong skills in divergent thinking, motivation, and decision-making. Notably, the highest mean was observed in Extrinsic Motivation (M = 5.21), followed closely by Meta-Cognitive Skills (M = 4.98), Flexibility (M = 4.96), Intrinsic Motivation (M = 4.83), and Decision-Making (M = 4.83). These results indicate a group that is already reflective, self-motivated, and responsive to external rewards—traits that support effective teaching and creativity.

Conversely, the lowest scores were recorded in Tolerance for Ambiguity (M = 4.17) and Risk-Taking (M = 4.63), suggesting some hesitation among students to embrace uncertainty or take creative risks, which are essential for innovation in education. Nevertheless, these scores remain above the midpoint, indicating a generally positive disposition. The standard deviations, ranging from approximately 0.62 to 0.86, reflect moderate variability in student responses. This pre-test profile sets a strong foundation for analysing post-test results and helps interpret the potential effects—whether modest or significant—of integrating AI tools into teacher training programs.

The post-test descriptive statistics (Table 8) reflect the students' self-perceived cognitive and creative thinking abilities after using AI tools for lesson planning. The mean scores across most domains remain relatively high, indicating that the participants continued to demonstrate strength in various components of divergent thinking and cognitive engagement. Decision-Making recorded the highest mean (M = 4.99),

closely followed by Meta-Cognitive Skills (M = 4.88), Fluency (M = 4.81), Intrinsic Motivation (M = 4.79), and Flexibility (M = 4.90). These results suggest a consistent ability among students to think reflectively, generate ideas, and adapt their thinking—key traits in creative lesson planning.

Table 7: Pre-test descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
Pre_Fluency	56	3.33	6.00	4.7577	.64637
Pre_Flexibility	56	3.40	6.00	4.9607	.61900
Pre_Originality	56	2.50	6.00	4.6810	.63494
Pre_Elaboration	56	2.75	6.00	4.7634	.65612
Pre_Tolerance	56	2.50	6.00	4.1652	.82610
Pre_Risk_Taking	56	2.67	6.00	4.6310	.85677
Pre_Intrinsi_Motivation	56	1.75	6.00	4.8348	.72657
Pre_Extrinsic_Motivation	56	3.00	6.00	5.2083	.79025
Pre_Decision_Making	56	2.50	6.00	4.8304	.76739
Pre_Meta_Cognitive	56	3.00	6.00	4.9821	.71962
Valid N (listwise)	56				

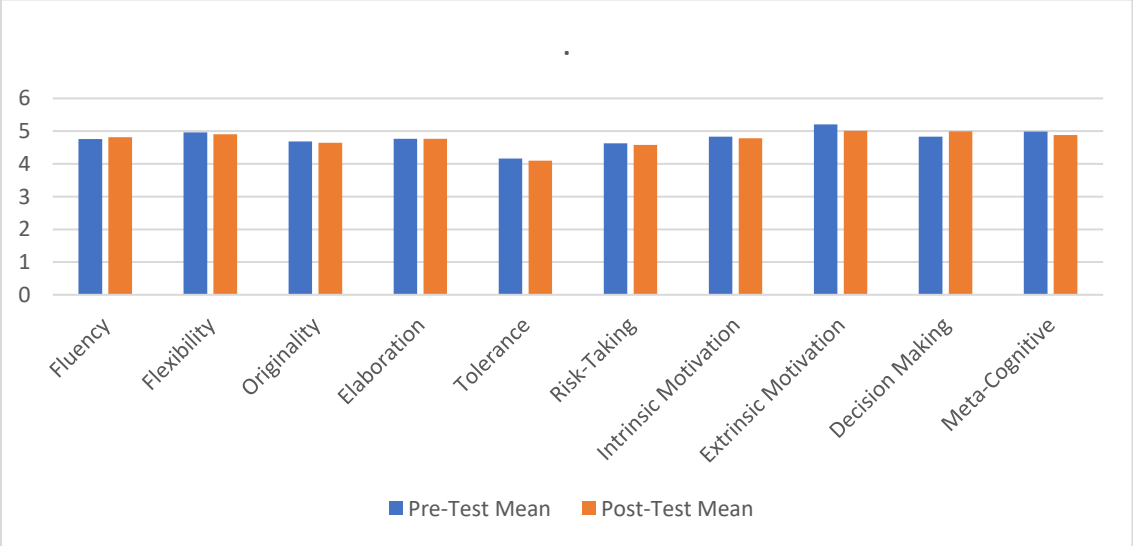
The lowest scores were again observed in Tolerance for Ambiguity (M = 4.10) and Risk-Taking (M = 4.58), mirroring trends from the pre-test and indicating ongoing challenges in embracing uncertainty and taking bold pedagogical steps. Extrinsic Motivation slightly declined (M = 5.01) yet remained strong, reflecting students' responsiveness to external incentives. The standard deviations, ranging from approximately 0.54 to 0.97, reveal moderate variability, with Meta-Cognitive Skills showing the greatest spread, perhaps reflecting differing levels of experience or comfort with reflective thinking post usage of AI. Overall, the post-test data suggest a stable profile, with only minor shifts, reinforcing the earlier interpretation that short-term exposure to AI tools had minimal impact on the measured creative capacities.

Table 8: Post-test descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
Post_Fluency	56	3.33	5.83	4.8125	.54593
Post_Flexibility	56	3.40	6.00	4.9036	.68542
Post_Originality	56	3.00	6.00	4.6399	.65964
Post_Elaboration	56	2.75	6.00	4.7634	.67153
Post_Tolerance	56	1.50	6.00	4.0982	.80999
Post_Risk_Taking	56	2.00	6.00	4.5774	.88418
Post_Intrinsic	56	2.50	6.00	4.7857	.71260
Post_Extrinsic	56	3.00	6.00	5.0119	.86214
Post_Decision_Making	56	3.50	6.00	4.9911	.76123
Post_Meta_Cognitive	56	2.50	6.00	4.8839	.97230
Valid N (listwise)	56				

The mean differences across most variables are quite small, suggesting a general stability in divergent thinking traits after the AI-based pedagogical integration (Figure 5). The largest numerical variation can be seen in Decision Making, which increased by +0.1607, indicating that students might have gained greater confidence or developed a more structured approach after using AI tools. On the other hand, the largest decrease is noted in Extrinsic Motivation, which dipped by −0.1964. This could point to a shift away from motivation driven by external rewards, leaning instead towards a more intrinsic or curiosity-based drive. Elaboration showed no change at all, indicating that the AI-based pedagogical integration had no measurable impact in this area. Furthermore, the standard deviations remained consistent between the pre- and post-tests, reinforcing the idea that response patterns were stable and that the usage of AI did not result in any significant variations.

Figure 5: Pre test/post test mean values



Subsequently, Paired Samples T-Test results were also conducted to assess whether there were visible changes in students' cognitive and creative thinking dimensions before and after the use of AI tools in lesson planning (*table 9*). The analysis compared pre-test and post-test scores for ten key variables: Fluency, Flexibility, Originality, Elaboration, Tolerance for Ambiguity, Risk-Taking, Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation, Decision-Making, and Meta-Cognitive Thinking. Specifically, changes in core divergent thinking components—fluency ($t(55) = -0.445$, $p = .658$), flexibility ($t(55) = 0.441$, $p = .661$), originality ($t(55) = 0.341$, $p = .735$), and elaboration ($t(55) = 0.000$, $p = 1.000$)—were minimal and not statistically significant. Similarly, no significant differences were found in tolerance ($t(55) = 0.504$, $p = .616$), risk-taking ($t(55) = 0.341$, $p = .734$), intrinsic motivation ($t(55) = 0.328$, $p = .744$), or metacognitive awareness ($t(55) = 0.543$, $p = .589$). While a marginally greater mean difference was noted for extrinsic motivation ($M = 0.196$, $t(55) = 1.229$, $p = .224$), a slight negative trend was observed in decision-making ($M = -0.161$, $t(55) = -1.203$, $p = .234$). However, neither of these findings achieved statistical significance. Additionally, the confidence intervals for each paired comparison encompassed zero, thereby reinforcing the conclusion that no statistically significant changes were observed between pre- and post-test scores. Collectively, these results indicate that the measurable outcomes pertaining to divergent thinking and related constructs exhibited stability throughout the study period.

Overall, the results revealed that no statistically significant differences were observed between pre- and post-test scores across the measured dimensions ($p > .05$). For example, the difference in Elaboration

was precisely zero, yielding a p-value of 1.000, while even the largest noticeable change—seen in Decision-Making (mean difference = +0.1607)—had a p-value of .234, which is not significant. Confidence intervals for all variables included zero, further supporting the conclusion that the changes observed may have occurred by chance.

These findings suggest that the short-term exposure to AI tools in a teacher training context did not significantly impact students' creative or cognitive abilities as measured by this assessment. Minor shifts in means—positive or negative—were not substantial enough to indicate meaningful gains or losses. Therefore, to effectively influence these domains, future AI integration may require a longer implementation period, targeted instructional design, or additional scaffolding to support creativity development. Decision-making displayed the largest numerical post-test increase by +0.1607, yet this change did not reach statistical significance, t(55) = −1.203, p = .234. These findings suggest that the AI-based support introduced in the lesson planning process had no statistically meaningful effect on students' self-reported creativity or cognitive processes during the time frame of this study.

Table 9: Inferential statistics

		Paired differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	95% Confidence interval of the difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pre_Fluency - Post_Fluency	-.05476	.92007	.12295	-.30116	.19163	-.445	55	.658
Pair 2	Pre_Flexibility - Post_Flexibility	.05714	.96913	.12951	-.20239	.31668	.441	55	.661
Pair 3	Pre_Originality - Post_Originality	.04107	.90225	.12057	-.20055	.28270	.341	55	.735
Pair 4	Pre_Elaboration - Post_Elaboration	.00000	1.05852	.14145	-.28347	.28347	.000	55	1.000
Pair 5	Pre_Tolerance - Post_Tolerance	.06696	.99372	.13279	-.19916	.33308	.504	55	.616
Pair 6	Pre_Risk_Taking - Post_Risk_Taking	.05357	1.17512	.15703	-.26113	.36827	.341	55	.734
Pair 7	Pre_Intrinsi_Motivation - Post_Intrinsic	.04911	1.11948	.14960	-.25069	.34890	.328	55	.744
Pair 8	Pre_Extrinsic_Motivation - Post_Extrinsic	.19643	1.19558	.15977	-.12375	.51661	1.229	55	.224
Pair 9	Pre_Decision_Making - Post_Decision_Making	-.16071	.99935	.13354	-.42834	.10691	-1.203	55	.234
Pair 10	Pre_Meta_Cognitive - Post_Meta_Cognitive	.09821	1.35318	.18083	-.26417	.46060	.543	55	.589

Discussion

This study investigated how Moroccan university students, from ENS-Fez, integrated GPT-4o into their lesson planning process and benefited from the AI support. The main goal was initially to evaluate its influence on enhancing students' creativity and divergent thinking skills, as well as their attitudes toward using the tool as either a collaborative partner or an autonomous assistant. By utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data, the research provides valuable insights into the effectiveness and reception of AI-driven instructional design in teacher training contexts. Descriptive statistics revealed a moderate level of engagement with AI tools for pedagogical tasks.

A key contribution of this study is the discrepancy identified between the quantitative and qualitative outcomes. Although the statistical analysis reveals no significant enhancement in measurable creativity metrics, the qualitative insights indicate that students experienced substantial advantages in areas such as idea generation, self-confidence, and engagement levels. This discrepancy emphasizes a crucial differentiation between assessed creativity and the perceived support for creativity. While AI tools may not immediately augment fundamental cognitive processes, they possess the potential to transform learners' methodologies for engaging in creative endeavours. This suggests a cautiously optimistic perspective on AI, as students capitalize on its functionalities for practical logistical planning while reserving evaluative and reflective judgment tasks for themselves rather than relying on the tool.

(i) Students' attitudes toward using GPT-4o to generate educational scenarios

Descriptive statistics indicate that students generally have a positive attitude toward using GPT-4o across various stages of lesson planning. Many respondents reported utilizing the tool for tasks like developing engaging activities, preparing teaching materials, and selecting instructional strategies, with a significant number indicating "sometimes" and "often" usage. S1 (20) explains that:

> *"… **AI can analyse the already-made lesson plan, and provide modifications for better understanding and engagement** … It is an ever-evolving field, and **the heavy reliance** on these tools **can strip** the teachers of **their uniqueness and creativity**, hindering their potential and growth..."*

At the same time, participants emphasized the importance of maintaining teacher agency. S2 (20) explains that:

> *"…Yes, AI tools help teachers save time **by automating tasks** and lesson planning, while **offering** resources to improve student learning."*

Similarly, S3 (21) highlighted the role of AI in idea generation and lesson structuring:

> *"…AI can give **you ideas you wouldn't think** of on your own and help you **structure your lesson** more **clearly.**"*

For example, 41.1% of students mentioned that they "sometimes" turn to GPT-4o for creating engaging activities, while another 19.6% said they do so "often." This suggests an increasing reliance on and experimentation with AI tools for practical teaching tasks.

When asked about their use of GPT-4o to select instructional strategies, 33.9% of respondents indicated they use it "sometimes," while 26.8% chose "rarely," and 30.4% answered "never." This suggests a cautious mindset when it comes to making complex pedagogical decisions, which may also reflect the students' limited experience in independently assessing instructional strategies. Overall, these findings indicate that although students tend to be curious and open-minded, they are still navigating their trust and familiarity with AI tools. S4 (18) testified that:

> *"…As **a new user** of AI tools and platforms, **I do not have comprehensive knowledge about the services they provide**; however, I believe **they are useful and effective for future EFL teachers when preparing lessons**, as a smart and quick way to add several useful, easy, and **perhaps fun things to learning**…"*

Students' testimonies have highlighted their concerns regarding the reliance on artificial intelligence and its impact on their creativity. Student S5 (19) articulates that:

> *"... we see AI **is taking over in all fields** and it **kills human** touch and that individual way of thinking, because if **all teachers** used AI lessons, going to **look alike** and there is **no creativity in this**, every teacher should **have his own unique lessons and way of preparing them**..."*

Interviews clearly demonstrate that students value the efficiency and innovative ideas that GPT-4o offers, especially when time is limited. However, they also express valid concerns regarding accuracy, ownership of creativity, and the relevance of context. This underlines the necessity for strong teacher guidance and critical engagement when incorporating AI into the learning process.

(ii) The impact of GPT-4o on students' divergent thinking abilities and creativity

Inferential statistics provide strong evidence regarding the impact of GPT-4o on students' creative thinking. To assess changes in creativity, paired-samples t-tests were conducted on ten constructs: fluency, flexibility, originality, elaboration, tolerance for ambiguity, risk-taking, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, decision-making, and meta-cognitive processing. Although some improvements in mean scores were observed—for example, fluency increased slightly from M = 4.76 (SD = 0.65) to M = 4.81 (SD = 0.55), and decision-making from M = 4.83 (SD = 0.77) to M = 4.99 (SD = 0.76)—none of the differences reached statistical significance. The t-test for fluency yielded t(55) = -0.445, p = 0.658, and for flexibility, t(55) = 0.441, p = 0.661. Similar patterns were observed across all other variables, with p-values ranging from .234 to 1.000, indicating no statistically significant differences before and after the integration of AI. We conducted a series of paired-samples t-tests to assess the effects of the AI-based AI-supported pedagogical integration on students' self-reported creative and cognitive skills. The results indicated that there were no statistically significant differences across the ten constructs we measured. Although we did observe slight fluctuations in the mean scores, none of the comparisons met the conventional significance threshold ($p < .05$). For instance:

- Fluency: $t(55) = -0.45$, $p = .658$, negligible effect size (d = .08);
- Flexibility: $t(55) = 0.44$, $p = .661$, negligible effect size (d = .07);
- Originality: $t(55) = 0.34$, $p = .735$, negligible effect size (d = .06);
- Risk-Taking: $t(55) = 0.34$, $p = .734$, negligible effect size (d = .06);
- Intrinsic Motivation: $t(55) = 0.33$, $p = .744$, negligible effect size (d = .06);
- Meta-Cognitive Thinking: $t(55) = 0.54$, $p = .589$, negligible effect size (d = .07).

The only slightly larger mean change was observed in Decision-Making ($t(55) = -1.20$, $p = .234$), but it too did not reach significance and reflected a small, negative shift. These findings suggest that the AI-based support introduced in the lesson planning process had no statistically meaningful effect on students' self-reported creativity or cognitive processes during the time frame of this study.

Furthermore, reliability tests confirm strong internal consistency of the RDCA instrument for both pre- ($\alpha = .820$) and post-test ($\alpha = .862$) administrations, reinforcing the validity of the findings. Consequently, the findings indicate that the use of GPT-4o in lesson planning does not influence Moroccan university students' overall creativity as measured through their divergent thinking skills. The lack of statistical

significance suggests that while AI tools like GPT-4o may support idea generation and provide structural assistance, they do not inherently trigger the deeper cognitive or creative processes necessary for substantial creative growth in a short timeframe.

(iii) Students' perception of GPT-4o as a collaborative or autonomous tool

The statistical impact on creativity may appear limited; however, the qualitative feedback and behavioural patterns show a compelling case for the benefits of AI tools like GPT-4o. These tools have undeniably fostered deeper metacognitive reflection and helped increase learner autonomy, suggesting potential longitudinal effects that extend beyond the study's time frame. The qualitative responses strongly indicate a nuanced perception of GPT-4o. Students consistently labeled the tool as an "assistant," highlighting a collaborative relationship. S6 (18), for instance, is glad that AI tools can support teachers with a delicate task, such as lesson planning, when he says that:

> *"…yes, I think that AI tools and platforms **are really useful for future English teachers** when preparing their lessons. First, because by using AI **we save a lot of time and effort** and this contributes to More production. Secondly, **artificial intelligence provides reliable information**, making it a future destination that helps others. Thirdly, **artificial intelligence keeps pace with and is compatible with current and future generations**, which increases their interest and curiosity regarding knowledge. …Finally, artificial intelligence **has become necessary in teaching languages** or other things, whether they are Education was private or public, systematic or free…"*

They also leaned on GPT-4o for idea generation and structural support while maintaining firm control over content adaptation and classroom appropriateness. This clearly aligns with established theories of hybrid creativity and co-agency, demonstrating that AI serves to augment rather than replace human input.

A subset of students unequivocally expressed concerns about overreliance on AI, particularly when GPT-4o generated fully developed content. They recognized that accepting AI-generated scenarios without critical evaluation could undermine their instructional autonomy and hinder their creative development, and they fear that it might fire back on the teacher, just like S7 (18) when she says that:

> *"….I believe that AI tools **can be helpful** in many aspects of teaching. **However**, I don't necessarily think that **teachers should use it for the purpose of generating or preparing their courses.** For me, teachers should prepare their lessons using **their own methods and ideas to ensure that their work** is uniquely engaging, something **AI tools may not necessarily provide**. **Not to mention**, every lesson will look and sound the same. **Even worse**, it **may weaken the teacher's ability to generate his/her own lessons**. Other than that, **AI may be very effective in certain aspects**, it can for example help teachers with time and energy consuming tasks like grading assignments, it can also be used to gather information, look for specific articles or videos, or even games and fun activities, which teachers can use as an inspiration to craft their lessons..."*

These insights underscore the urgent need to integrate digital literacy and critical thinking into teacher training curricula to effectively incorporate AI in education.

To sum up, the quantitative results suggest that AI-enhanced learning activities did not yield statistically significant improvements in the evaluated constructs of creativity. These results align with the exploratory nature of the study and the short duration of the AI tools' manipulation. Qualitative insights, however, suggest that students perceived AI as a valuable cognitive support tool, particularly during the

early stages of idea generation and organization. This divergence between quantitative and qualitative findings highlights the importance of integrating multiple data sources when examining complex constructs such as creativity. Rather than demonstrating measurable creativity gains, the findings suggest that AI may influence how students engage with creative tasks, supporting metacognitive awareness and lowering entry barriers to creative work. These outcomes are pedagogically relevant, even in the absence of statistically significant effects.

Conclusion

Overall, the combined descriptive and inferential findings do not provide statistically significant evidence that integrating GPT-4o into teaching practices enhances essential aspects of student creativity. While the tool appears to support creating educational content, minor descriptive variations were observed across certain constructs. Quantitative findings indicate no statistically significant effects, and therefore, the conclusions regarding AI impact are based on trends and qualitative observations rather than significant changes.

The findings indicate that measurable outcomes related to divergent thinking remained consistent throughout the study period. Although minor descriptive variations were noted across certain dimensions, these alterations did not achieve statistical significance. Therefore, the findings do not support the claim that AI had any influence on improving divergent thinking within the present sample. Several limitations must be acknowledged, including the absence of a control group, reliance on self-report measures, and limited duration of the intervention. Consequently, any observed changes cannot be confidently attributed solely to the AI-supported intervention, as alternative explanations—including maturation, prior experience, or contextual factors—remain plausible. Therefore, the findings should be regarded as exploratory rather than indicative of causal relationships.

Students' attitudes towards AI were generally positive but cautious, especially in its application within specific teaching tasks. Their insightful reflections emphasize the need for a balanced approach that not only embraces innovation but also upholds pedagogical integrity. Observed trends and qualitative insights suggest potential benefits, indicating that longer exposure or larger sample sizes may be needed to detect measurable effects. This reconciles the previous contradiction between results and conclusions. This discrepancy may suggest that artificial intelligence tools predominantly affect the affective and metacognitive aspects of learning, which are not readily quantified by standardized creativity assessments within a short-term evaluation period. In other words, students might experience a boost in creativity or feel more supported, even if their divergent thinking scores don’t show measurable improvement. This underscores the difference between self-reported creativity and assessed creativity, indicating that longer interventions may be necessary to achieve tangible cognitive changes.

Future research should implement experimental or quasi-experimental designs that include control groups. It is essential to incorporate performance-based assessments of creativity and to extend the duration of interventions in order to more effectively capture long-term effects. Additionally, the integration of systematic qualitative analysis procedures, along with larger sample sizes, would significantly enhance the robustness of the findings. Delving into this relationship may provide valuable insights into whether students who interact more actively with AI tools experience enhanced cognitive and creative benefits.

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The Algorithmic accent: investigating the homogenization of linguistic identity in AI-mediated classrooms

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Abstract
AI has become ubiquitous in schools, and personalised learning carries a cost that is rarely discussed: the flattening of student identity. This paper examines the algorithmic accent - the way Large Language Models (LLMs) often default to a standardized, Western-centric linguistic style that can overshadow diverse student voices. The technology is quick. But that speed comes with a quieter effect: it eliminates local dialects and cultural speaking style along the way. Most research so far asks only whether students achieve improved grades using AI; how this impacts a student's sense of self, and their ability to negotiate multiple cultures, remains an enormous gap. We report on a two-month, teacher-led observation of 15 university students (semesters 1-5) enrolled in an academic writing course at an academy in Pakistan, all of whom gave informed consent to participate. Drawing on translanguaging (Wei, 2018) and the concept of Global English standardisation (Agarwal et al., 2025), we suggest these tools function as a filter rather than a mirror. Students are led to exchange their own voice for the words of the algorithm-more fluent, perhaps, but missing the social texture that makes a language human. We recommend a pedagogical approach in which AI becomes a tool for exploring language, not a template for conforming to it.

Keywords*: algorithmic accent, linguistic identity, linguistic homogenization, translanguaging, ai-mediated classrooms*

Introduction

The red pen is mostly gone. Instead, there is a glowing fix button that the majority of the students press without giving a second thought. A student comes in with a brilliant idea, but very messy, ideas laden with local slang, something weird and beautiful, or a home sounding rhythm. They in turn submit a paper ten minutes later that resembles a corporate press release. It is grammatically flawless, but the human is omitted. This is the algorithmic accent. We discuss Large Language Models as though they are unbiased assistants when in fact, they have a massive Western bias - and that trade-off is exactly what this paper sets out to examine.

We are seeing the invisible prompt usurp in our classrooms. Students would keep on struggling with a sentence until it was right. They now let the machine determine what is right. This does not mean only spelling. It is a sociolinguistic crisis. Agarwal et al. (2025) show that AI suggestions push multilingual writers toward Western styles, which we refer to as a Global English narrowing. The software tends to erase the distinct traits that characterise a student with a multilingual background when he or she is using AI. It is not merely correcting a typo, but something to do with identity. This gives the illusion of proficiency wherein the student appears to be a master over the language yet has lost authority over the language. Bastani et al. (2025) found that students who relied on unrestricted GPT support performed better during practice but worse once it was removed, which suggests that the appearance of mastery can outrun real learning; in writing, the result can be syntactically correct but culturally empty text.

Linguistic identity is something that we cannot simply classify as a box. It is a process in which one breathes life. Wei (2018) revealed that high intelligence is manifested in translanguaging, which is the ability of individuals to incorporate their languages to communicate complex ideas. It is the way the brain really functions in a globalised world. We therefore adopt translanguaging as our theoretical lens: a student's mixed or hybrid language use is not treated as error here, but as evidence of active, cross-linguistic meaning-making. However, according to AI models, this is noise. They are socialised on a particular part of the internet that is largely Western and affluent. This training data is an agent of filtering. When the natural manner of thinking of a student does not correspond to that filter, the AI points to it as a mistake. With time, the student ceases to fight. They begin to write in a manner which the AI will not redline. This is the research gap with which we are most concerned. What does a student think when they are repeatedly informed via the machine that the dialect they use is incorrect due to being their heritage to begin with?

Digital hidden curriculum is something that we as educators can observe being created in real time. Giroux and Penna (1979) described the hidden curriculum as the unstated norms and values that schooling teaches beyond what is formally tested, and AI writing tools can be read as a digital extension of it. Holmes and Tuomi (2022) note that AI does not have the compassion and human imagination to be truly close to humans - and it is in the struggle of choosing words, not the speed of producing them, that learning occurs.

These models carry a problem in their very data: the majority are trained on high-resource, Western languages. Joshi et al. (2020) and Bender et al. (2021) both show that this reflects how data are collected and prioritised, a design choice, not a technical accident.

What remains with us is the long-term effect. A majority of studies will only focus on a single semester. Change does not happen in a period that short. Doshi and Hauser (2024) address a related problem: AI-assisted writing raises individual quality but makes outputs more alike across writers, so a tool that suits everyone tends to flatten what is distinctive. So, what will become of the sense of self in any person once they have three years of the algorithm refining every thought? This is the longitudinal gap which we are bridging. If the AI is the one constantly refining, who does the thinking? We are in danger of producing a generation of brilliant writers who all happen to have the same robotic, neutral accent. This echoes Fan et al. (2024), who warn that reliance on ChatGPT can foster technology dependence and "metacognitive laziness".

This study asks a simple question: how does sustained, AI-mediated writing support affect multilingual students' linguistic identity and their sense of authorial voice? Over two months, we observed 15 university students (semesters 1-5) in an academic writing course at an academy in Pakistan, recording the precise moments where a student had to choose between their own voice and the algorithmic ideal. We wanted the friction. We wanted the silences - the moment a student decides a local idiom simply is not good enough for the machine. This paper bridges the research gap identified above with an account of that sociolinguistic change, the kind that data points alone cannot capture.

Literature review

AI bias and the "global English" effect

There is already some alarm in present studies. Agarwal et al. (2025) show that AI writing suggestions pull writers toward a standardised, Western-leaning form of Global English - a business, refined form of the language which is no one's and everyone's simultaneously. When a student in a city such as Manila or Nairobi asks an AI to improve their work, the software tends to remove the local taste, polishing away the rhythms that make that student sound like themselves. Rosa and Flores (2017) argue that standards of correct language are shaped by power rather than being neutral, so this is not only a technological problem but also a power struggle over the authority to determine what counts as "correct" speech. Most existing studies remain at the level of describing Global English narrowing. We push further, into the space of individual ownership: does a student eventually stop attempting their own expressions, simply because

they know the machine will erase them anyway? That shift - from language pluralism to a kind of mute acquiescence - is what interests us here.

Translanguaging as a theoretical lens

Cenoz and Gorter (2021) argue that pedagogical translanguaging is crucial to successful learning, yet AI tends to interfere with this natural process. By flagging hybrid, code-switched phrasing as error, these tools implicitly teach students that their natural way of thinking is a bug in the system - even a tool given a bilingual dictionary would still lack an explanation for the code-switch itself. Fan et al. (2024) caution that reliance on generative AI can foster dependency and metacognitive laziness, which may weaken learners' engagement with their own linguistic judgement.

The proficiency illusion

The gap in question is hazardous when it comes to the so-called illusion of proficiency. Bastani et al. (2025) found that students with unrestricted AI support performed better while it was available but worse once it was removed: a gap between apparent and actual competence. In our setting this appears as text that is eloquent on paper but lacking in social flavour. This is because AI is not pragmatically nuanced - it is not aware when a word is too serious or too crude for a particular local culture. Bender and Koller (2020) argue that systems trained on linguistic form alone do not learn the communicative meaning behind it, which helps explain why AI can work as a dictionary but a poor cultural guide. We are concerned with the gap between technical fluency and authenticity: when a student speaks like a CEO but thinks like a child because the machine has done all the heavy work, the student has been failed rather than served. According to Holmes and Tuomi (2022), AI does not possess the human ability to empathise or create a true connection with others.

Decolonizing AI and data bias

The problem itself is in the data. Bender et al. (2021) note that training data that overrepresents dominant groups encodes their viewpoints into model output; the majority of models are trained on high-resource languages, leaving what Joshi et al. (2020) show to be a severe data gap for everyone else. This is not merely a technical bug but a design decision that reproduces existing structures of power. Birhane (2020) warns that technologies built in the Global North can reproduce colonial relations, which is why these tools need to be decolonized; personalization risks becoming a novel way of imposing old norms. Our response is to propose a Resistance Pedagogy, a culturally responsive approach in which the teacher becomes a mediator. Instead of letting the AI silently rewrite a student's text, we stop and ask: why did it change that word? Does the result still sound like you? This lines up with what Mohamed et al. (2020) call unrepresentativeness in the AI development pipeline.

Methodology

The approach to this inquiry is teacher-led rather than a formal experiment, using an autoethnographic approach combined with classroom observation. Fifteen university students across semesters 1 to 5 took part, all enrolled in an academic writing course at an academy in Pakistan. They came from classes the first author was already teaching, and joined on a voluntary basis. This is a useful way of addressing the research gap, since it captures the tension of lived experience between the student, the teacher, and the screen. This study uses a teacher-led observation approach over a two-month period. We are not looking at these students as distant researchers; we are watching them work in real time. This allows us to see the "micro-moments" of linguistic surrender that a one-off survey would miss. Most studies on AI in education are done in labs or through data mining; we instead intervene in the gap between the screen and the student's desk. As the class teacher delivering instruction, the first author's observations are centred on her own reflexive position in the room - the moments she, too, had to decide whether to

accept, question, or override an AI-generated correction to a student's work. That is what makes this autoethnography rather than a simple field study: the teacher-researcher's own evolving judgement counts as data, not just the students' writing. We recognise it also borrows from participant observation, and we treat the two as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Informed consent was obtained from every participating student before observation began.

We keep a "linguistic log" of our classroom, kept over two months, with roughly 40 entries recorded in total - some students came up repeatedly, others only once or twice. Every time a student shows us an AI-generated draft, we compare it to their natural speaking voice. This builds on the work of Fan et al. (2024) on how generative AI support changes the way learners work on tasks. We look for the "erasure" of local phrasing. We log an instance whenever the AI swaps out a culturally specific word, a code-mixed phrase, or a metaphor - a personification of nature, say, or a line drawn from a student's first language - for something semantically equivalent but culturally flat. When a student from a multilingual background turns in a "perfect" essay, we look for the missing translanguaging markers that Wei (2018) identifies as signs of deep thought.

Our data collection is simple and direct: we collect "before and after" samples. The "before" is the student's raw handwritten notes or initial brainstorm. The "after" is the final AI-polished submission. Over the two months we collected roughly 15 such pairs; ChatGPT was the AI writing assistant students used. By comparing these, we can see where the algorithm "corrected" a student's cultural framing, addressing the cultural bias concerns raised by Bender et al. (2021). We are not looking only for grammar fixes; we are looking for changes in tone, metaphor, and social rhythm.

We also focus on "intervention dialogues." When we see that an AI has changed a student's unique phrasing into a generic, corporate one, we discuss it with the student. These are not formal interviews but "pedagogical conversations" - well over 80 of these conversations took place over the two months - some students we spoke with more than once, others only briefly - each one written up in notes during or right after the exchange. We want to see whether the student even noticed the change; this helps us track the "proficiency illusion" that Bastani et al. (2025) point to. If a student believes the AI's version is "better" simply because it sounds more "Western," we treat this as a recorded moment of linguistic assimilation.

Our analysis uses the "decolonizing" framework suggested by Birhane (2020) and Mohamed et al. (2020): we examine whether the AI's suggestions consistently push students toward a high-resource language centre. The second author, Muhammad Zain ul Hassan, coded the bulk of the log and samples. The other two authors then cross-checked a subset independently, and where our coding disagreed, we talked it through until we agreed. This is a qualitative audit of the "algorithmic accent" in our own classroom; we are the primary instrument of research here, positioned as mediators between the student and the machine, able to locate the point where personalization stops helping and starts erasing.

This begins to address the gap in "long-term identity" that short-term studies such as Agarwal et al. (2025) leave open - though at two months, it is a first window, not a full longitudinal account. We come back to that limitation in the Conclusion. Even so, it is an honest look at what happens to the educational role of language when the teacher is the only one left fighting for the student's authentic voice.

Results

Our first major observation was the "passive delete." We watched students write a sentence rich with local metaphor, something that tied their heritage to the assignment. One example: a student writing about family responsibilities used the phrase "*meri maa ke haath ka khana*" (an Urdu language sentence meaning “food prepared by my mother's hands”) to describe the emotional importance of home; ChatGPT changed it to "home-cooked meals prepared by my mother." When we discussed the change with her, she explained that the original phrase felt more personal because it reflected a Pakistani understanding of care and family bonding. More broadly, when students ran their writing through a standard LLM, the AI would almost always flag such metaphors as "unclear" or "informal," and instead of arguing with the

machine, the students usually just clicked "accept." This matches the findings of Agarwal et al. (2025) about the narrowing of Global English. The AI isn't just suggesting a better word; it is acting as a gatekeeper for what counts as "academic." We saw that the more a student used the tool, the less they even tried to use their own idioms in the first place. They started "pre-filtering" their thoughts to please the algorithm.

In our intervention dialogues we attempted to interrupt this process. When a student presented us with a polished piece of paper that read like a corporate memo, we would go back to their original notes and ask why they had allowed the AI to modify a certain phrase. In the majority of cases, the student was not even aware that they had lost their voice. They were living in the illusion of proficiency suggested by Bastani et al. (2025): so pleased that the paper had a professional look that they did not notice it no longer sounded like them. This is a dangerous trade-off. It suggests that students are starting to perceive the machine's output as more neutral than their own lived experience. Rosa and Flores (2017) are right to read this as a power struggle: the software is currently winning, since it offers the path of least resistance.

We also followed the translanguaging silence. Wei (2018) claims that the ability to mix languages is an indication of a high-functioning brain, yet the AI we studied approached it as a broken system. The students who were most heavily corrected by the AI in our classroom were often the most fluent in dialect switching, which brought out a real level of frustration. The "*meri maa ke haath ka khana*" (Urdu language) example above is one such case: the phrase was not corrected but replaced outright, leaving no trace of the translanguaging move the student had made. This reinforces the fears of Fan et al. (2024) regarding dependence on AI: when a tool that is meant to assist you only ends up making you feel inferior, it is not really a tool anymore. It is an assimilation filter.

Among the most common discoveries was so-called idiom erasure. One clear case: in a writing task about climate change, a student described the flooding in her village by writing that "the river became angry and entered our homes." ChatGPT proposed "excessive rainfall caused severe flooding in residential areas." Though technically correct, this took away the geographic and cultural soul of the sentence - the personification of nature as an active force that is common in local communities. It is the standardisation of Global English which Agarwal et al. (2025) cautioned about: not necessarily a tutor, but a filter that eliminates anything that does not conform to a mid-Atlantic, corporate norm. Over the course of the observation, students had largely ceased even trying to use local metaphors; they started writing to the machine and hoping that the AI would approve them.

To push back, we began a resistance log, the practical core of what we call Resistance Pedagogy. We asked all 15 students to identify at least three AI suggestions per paper that they would deliberately reject, and to justify why their own phrasing was not an error; roughly half of the rejected suggestions were ultimately kept in the students' final drafts. This proved harder than we expected, given the pressure to sound standard. Birhane (2020) calls for decolonizing these tools, and we understood why it is such an emergency: without a teacher present to say it was okay to sound like that, the algorithm becomes a new form of colonial power - one that needs no whip, only a rephrase button. As our observations suggest, when students were granted the right to be imperfect, they appeared to engage more with the subject matter at hand, although this is an impression drawn from our classroom notes rather than a measured outcome. They had stopped playing to the machine and were writing again.

Discussion

Another gap that we explored was the empathy gap. With creative writing, the AI-polished pieces were technically flawless and emotionally one-dimensional; they lacked the grounding in communicative intent that Bender and Koller (2020) argue meaning requires. When read aloud in class, other students were not able to relate to them - they sounded as if written by a ghost. This confirms what Holmes and Tuomi (2022) argue: that AI does not have the heart to connect with people in an authentic sense.

Another issue, reported by Joshi et al. (2020) and confirmed in our own observations, is the problem of the data desert. Because the models are trained on Western datasets (Bender et al., 2021), the AI was considerably more accommodating toward students who already used a standard dialect, and functioned as an incessant critic for linguistically disadvantaged and marginalised students. This supports the point Doshi and Hauser (2024) make about homogenisation: in attempting to create a tool that everyone could use, developers have succeeded only in making everyone sound like a particular, privileged someone.

This brings out a greater moral debate. According to Birhane (2020) and Mohamed et al. (2020), there is a need to decolonize AI ethics. In our classroom, in the absence of teacher intervention, the AI functioned as a kind of digital colonial agent, imposing a "correct" way of speaking rooted in the Global North. We proposed Resistance Pedagogy to push back against this: students were encouraged to reject AI suggestions and defend their original wording. We found that students who justified their non-standard choices this way became more invested in their own writing - they were no longer simply producing text, but reasserting their authority over it.

At the end of this discussion, one conclusion stands out: the algorithmic accent is not a necessity, but a choice. When we leave the machine as the ultimate judge of good writing, we are agreeing to a homogenized linguistic future. But when we treat the machine as a mirror instead - a device that helps students recognise the gap between their own voice and the so-called standard one - this same tension can become an Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) lesson. As Bender and Koller (2020) imply, a system trained on form alone can supply the vocabulary, but only a human supplies the meaning. A student's "accent," literal or metaphorical, should not be refined away, the machine can never really imitate everything that it represents.

Conclusion

Over two months, we have been observing the smoothing of the jagged, beautiful lines of student identity by the redline of the algorithm. The question that started this study was simple: what happens to the human voice when the main editor is a machine? We have an indication that we are experiencing a silent, structural erosion. The algorithmic accent is not merely a technical anomaly; it is a pedagogical one. We found that students had swapped their cultural authority for digital speed, producing a proficiency illusion that conceals a deeper loss of voice. The AI presents the appearance of a standard, but in practice suppresses the translanguaging and local idioms that Wei (2018) and Agarwal et al. (2025) identify as markers of real cognitive and cultural richness. Two months is a first step, not a full longitudinal account, and we see what we found here as reason enough to follow it up over a longer stretch of time.

The research gap we outlined at the start of this paper remains the most pressing issue for educators. Most studies still quantify output and disregard outcome - they track how many words a student can produce, not how many of those words the student still feels are theirs. This gap is what our two-month observation begins to bridge, by pointing to the psychological and sociolinguistic cost of long-term AI reliance. According to Agarwal et al. (2025) and Doshi and Hauser (2024), the push of these models is toward a bland, Western-centric average - a new form of linguistic homogenisation. Unless we act, we risk raising a generation that understands their native tongue or local dialect only as something to be fixed with the press of a button.

We need a way out, which we call Resistance Pedagogy. It is neither realistic to prohibit these tools nor advisable to defer to them uncritically. Instead, following Birhane (2020) and Mohamed et al. (2020), we argue for actively decolonizing the way AI is used in the classroom. The teacher's role should shift from grammar-grader to voice-protector. Students should be encouraged to ask why the machine wants to turn their untidy metaphors into clean cliches. We should celebrate the fact that they write with an accent, rather than treat it as a 10-20% syntax error to be fixed. As O'Neil (2016) cautions, algorithms will not become equal-opportunity until we make deliberate choices to hold them to that standard.

After all, language is one of the clearest ways we demonstrate identity. When the algorithm makes the final decision about what is right, the pedagogical purpose of language teaching is lost. We should make sure that personalised education does not, in practice, lead to a world where everyone sounds alike. Our analysis suggests that the greatest skill we can teach in the age of AI is the willingness to be imperfect rather than polished. Education should not aim to produce a flawless product, but to help a student discover a voice that is unmistakably their own.

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Active learning in distance English language teaching

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Abstract
Distance education is often judged by its pandemic-era performance and by the initial passivity of students. This critical narrative review addresses three questions: what made emergency remote teaching passive; what contemporary studies use to build engagement in distance education; and what this implies for teacher preparation and course design in English language teaching. Using targeted Boolean searches, thirteen peer-reviewed studies published between 2021 and 2026 were purposively selected from the Scopus database. Each study's claims were critically appraised against its methodology, and the recommendations of the reviewed studies were ranked by practical usability and empirical strength. The evidence is more consistent with inadequate preparation and unadapted design than with the digital medium itself as the main source of passivity during emergency remote teaching. Contemporary tools such as text chat, virtual reality, and chatbots based on artificial intelligence help with active participation only when embedded in the structure of task sequencing, feedback, and teacher mediation. The evidence base remains uneven, often relying on small samples or self-reported data that combine compliance with genuine engagement. The findings shift attention from digital platforms to pedagogical design. To turn distance education into a setting for active language use without any passive access, the field should prioritise teacher preparation grounded in observed teaching practice, secure institutional support at the curriculum level and verify student engagement through more than satisfaction surveys alone.

Keywords*: active learning, distance education, emergency remote teaching, English as a foreign language, student engagement, teacher preparation*

Introduction

Distance education entered the pandemic with half a century of theory behind it. In its basic form, it combines teaching and learning in separate locations connected through technology, delivered asynchronously through self-study materials or synchronously through real-time online sessions (Turek, 2014; Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2022). Moore (1997) gave the field its central concept, transactional distance, a psychological and communication space between teacher and learner that widens or narrows with dialogue, programme structure, and learner autonomy, making distance a pedagogical condition managed through design. Holmberg (2003) argued that empathy and a teaching-learning conversation between student and institution promote motivation and learning, and Peters (2003) examined how digital media allow distant students to interact with adaptive programs and with one another. In all of these founding accounts, interaction is a design requirement embedded in distance education.

Two frameworks underpin this critical literature review. Garrison et al. (2000) proposed the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, in which a worthwhile educational experience arises from cognitive, social, and teaching presence. Bonwell and Eison (1991) defined active learning as instruction that involves students in doing tasks and thinking about what they are doing. Both frameworks predate the pandemic and assume time to plan.

The COVID-19 pandemic removed that assumption. The abrupt transfer of instruction to digital platforms in 2020 has been termed emergency remote teaching (ERT), a temporary shift caused by crisis

circumstances, distinguished from well-planned online education (Hodges et al., 2020). ERT lacked the design through which the theories above expect distance to be bridged. Reports on reduced participation during this period, examined in the first section of this review, raise a question the theory leaves open. Was the passivity caused by the online environment or by the missing preparation in a critical situation? Each answer points teacher preparation and course design in a different direction, yet pandemic-era research rarely separated the two explanations. This critical review examines that distinction. It asks three questions:

Q1: What made emergency remote teaching passive? Was it the online environment or the lack of preparation?

Q2: What do contemporary studies use to build engagement in distance education?

Q3: What does it imply for teacher preparation and course design?

Sources were retrieved from the Scopus database using three targeted Boolean search strings: (1) 'distance education' AND 'active learning' AND 'English language', (2) 'emergency remote teaching' AND 'English language', and (3) 'distance education' AND 'active learning'. The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published between 2021 and 2026. To ensure feasibility, the final corpus was selected based on explicit relevance to the three research questions and availability through institutional database subscriptions. Thirteen studies were retained, reaching from the emergency period to recent work on artificial intelligence (AI) in language teaching. Most concern English as a foreign language (EFL); three lie outside it, an online physical education course, a survey of general online learning, and a systematic review of higher education teaching, kept because they offer experimental, large-scale, and cross-disciplinary insight into active learning and engagement that previously stated EFL studies did not provide. Individual supplementary studies and one policy document were added during analysis where specific points required them and are identified in the text. In this paper, engagement is understood as active, observable participation or collaborative interaction. Many reviewed studies rely on perception data and small samples, and the review treats these findings critically.

Passivity during emergency remote teaching: online environment or the lack of preparation

Emergency remote teaching served as a response to a critical situation that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic (Isaee & Barjesteh, 2025), and its almost non-existent preparation for educators or students contributed to many difficulties (Castañeda-Trujillo & Jaime-Osorio, 2021). The reviewed evidence is more consistent with inadequate preparation, design, and support as major contributors to passivity than with technological modality alone. During this time, face-to-face routines moved online without any time for their proper adjustment to the online environment.

Algouzi and Hazaea (2023:5-6) provide the strongest evidence because they analysed recorded practice, while many studies mostly rely on self-reported questionnaires or interviews. In eleven Saudi EFL writing sessions, cameras and breakout rooms went unused, microphones stayed muted except at session openings, and interaction was mostly evident only in chat. Teaching most of the time consisted of lecturing in response to questions. Attendance was 15.15%, but it is important to add that attendance was not compulsory, so the figure reflects more institutional rules. Session reports describe attending students as active, but these come from the teaching team and warrant caution. Where recordings and self-reports conflict, the recording carries more weight.

Castañeda-Trujillo and Jaime-Osorio (2021: 703-708) also show the same pattern from both teachers and students. Teacher educators reported declining interaction, above all between students, because they participated so little when the teacher spoke. A lecture-based activity that the educators used the most frequently was read by students as a symptom of passivity. Participants blamed unstable connectivity, unequal device access, and exhaustion as more important issues than the online format itself. Participation rose when teachers decided to exchange the one-way delivery with collaborative tools and forums. Students described themselves as passive at first and active later. Redesign worked even

under emergency conditions. Even the educators, already familiar with technology, conceded that their knowledge "was not and is not enough" to keep students connected (Castañeda-Trujillo & Jaime-Osorio, 2021: 710).

Sum and Oancea (2022: 19-20) confirm this once again across higher education. Across their thirty-two reviewed studies, some teachers reacted by tightening control over who can speak, while others started engagement through polls, hand-raising functions, emojis, and chat. The same platforms supported both outcomes, which serves as evidence that readiness and institutional support changed the balance. The review is not language-specific, so its application here is an inference.

Isaee and Barjesteh (2025) seem to contradict this account. Their study about Iranian learners and teachers reported high satisfaction with ERT. For both groups, attractiveness scored highest and efficiency lowest (teachers 4.58 against 3.46; learners 4.52 against 3.77). Respondents liked ERT but doubted it worked. Individual tables contain contradictions, where teachers who were satisfied with accessibility (M=4.20) rated their own platform IT skills at 2.55. Teachers declared online classes boredom-free, yet about nine in ten learners reported the opposite. The instrument was self-developed, the samples small, and the survey followed nearly two years of ERT. Its recorded satisfaction reads as adaptation more than as evidence of engagement.

Ayar (2026) explains the teacher side of this gap: Her study with 179 Turkish EFL educators traced their online speaking anxiety mainly to a perceived lack of competence. She concludes that self-confidence without competence would be of almost no use in language teaching. Ministry of Education teachers reported more anxiety than university instructors, pointing to institutional support as a factor. Her youngest educators reported the lowest perceived competence. Familiarity with technology did not translate into readiness to teach through it.

The studies name different causes: structural readiness in Sum and Oancea, teacher anxiety in Ayar, and cautious pedagogy in Algouzi and Hazaea. Yet, every study began in the same way, with identifying the switch made "almost overnight" (Ayar, 2026), by educators who lacked preparation (Castañeda-Trujillo & Jaime-Osorio, 2021:706), into prioritising accessible format instead of adapted design (Isaee & Barjesteh, 2025). And whenever the studies track time, passivity recedes, tools are gradually adopted, passive students become active, and satisfaction grows. This suggests that the initial passivity was largely a consequence of the abrupt, unassisted transition and less of an inherent flaw in digital medium.

The distance environment contributed to loss of informal contact, human visual cues, spontaneous peer interaction, and personal contact with the educator. The recession of passivity was not only due to the passing of time or due to accepting the new reality. It followed the work of teachers who redesigned the teaching process, moving from face-to-face lessons simply transferred online to a collaborative environment. What such design achieves when it is planned is the subject of the next section.

Designing engagement in distance education

The ERT period showed that active participation responds to activity designs adjusted to digital environment. Contemporary studies begin from that premise and treat engagement as an outcome a course truly builds instead of only hoping of achieving. Gökoğlu et al. (2024) analysed 1,281 online learners using two established concepts: (1) transactional distance, the psychological gap that learners feel between themselves and their teacher in a distance course, and (2) community of inquiry, a framework describing how an online class becomes a learning community through social contact and shared thinking. Both factors depend on how a course is designed and run. This makes engagement a result of a design outcome. Consoli and Curle (2025:611) define the target more strictly: learners need to be in an active pursuit of knowledge, and teachers must distinguish actual engagement from "shallow engagement", in which students comply with tasks without further critical investment. The studies reviewed in this section proposed concrete activities toward this target. Table 1 presents them together with their

implementation and, because the supporting evidence varies considerably in strength, a critical evaluation of each source.

Table 1: Examples of engaging activities in distance education

Activity	Online implementation	Source	Critical evaluation
Online think-pair-share	Teacher poses a question via screen share function or whiteboard and gives students thinking time. Automatic assignment pairs students in breakout rooms to compare ideas. Pairs report back in the main room.	Rakha (2025)	Study of a single group of 23 students within one institution, with no comparison group: Reported gains cannot be separated from normal course progression or novelty.
Online jigsaw	Home groups of four or five students, each receives a subtopic. Expert groups form to prepare presentations, then home groups reconvene and each member teaches their topic. Students work synchronously in breakout rooms or asynchronously through the learning management system.	Rakha (2025)	
Three-step interview	The teacher gives question on the topic of the session. Students then move into breakout groups of three, where one student interviews another about their views while the third records the key points as note-taker. The roles rotate until each student has been interviewer, interviewee, and note-taker. Back in the main room, the note-takers report their group's main points.	Rakha (2025)	
Sequenced text-chat tasks	Pairs of students jointly reconstruct the story of a short video clip through text chat. Each partner receives half of a set of screenshots from the clip, so the story can only be assembled by exchanging descriptions in writing. Model phases and a pre-task vocabulary activity support the work. Across three weeks, the same task type returns in harder versions, with the number of pictures rising from ten to sixteen.	Korvesi and Michel (2022)	Fifteen adult learners in one class. Offers rare outcome evidence: chat practice produced gains in spoken accuracy comparable to face-to-face practice. The class itself met in person, so transfer to fully distance courses is assumed rather than shown.
Collaborative virtual reality escape room	Pairs of students solve language-based puzzles and clues in a virtual environment, guided by a game master.	Pazakou et al. (2025)	Twenty students; the authors state the sample is too small for definitive conclusions. Pairs scored better, but the difference in learning gains was not

			statistically significant. Equipment costs raise access questions, and the novelty effect of this task may have added to the engagement that students perceived.
AI chatbots in writing	Chatbots support idea generation and give initial feedback on drafts. Teachers mediate their use through guided scaffolding, staged introduction, and explicit teaching about AI. Students use an AI chatbot at set stages of a writing task, first to brainstorm and later to get feedback on their draft, which they revise before the teacher's feedback.	Al-Azzawi and Saeed (2026)	Reports teacher perceptions only, with no learner outcome data. The same teachers doubted the quality of AI feedback.
Emotionally infused task design	Educators firstly identify the emotions that drive their students. In this study, anxiety about assessment mattered more than how interesting a topic was. Educators then design around that emotion. They support this with visually engaging materials, pictures, and screen formats shared via videoconferencing platform.	Consoli and Curle (2025)	Based on five teachers and focused on observable participation, with little direct student evidence. It is important to add that the emotional design enhances learning outcomes only under medium-task-difficulty and fails to deliver under low- and high-task difficulty (Liu & Wang, 2025).

These studies educate through their weaknesses and their designs. The first problem is what they measure. Rakha (2025) claims gains in achievement and attitudes, not in engagement as such. Al-Azzawi and Saeed (2026) report what teachers believe, not what learners do. Gökoğlu et al. (2024) measure engagement directly, but their analysis shows association, not that any activity caused it. Engagement is inferred from participation, satisfaction, or achievement, although these are related and not interchangeable. The second problem is tension inside evidence. The teachers in Al-Azzawi and Saeed (2026) used chatbot feedback as a core tool while doubting its quality and responded by fencing it with scaffolding and staged instruction. The mechanism and the risk are the same feature. The warning of Consoli and Curle (2025) applies to the evidence base itself: if activity can be shallow, then survey-based engagement scores may capture the very compliance they warn about. Their own study is not exempt, resting on five teachers and mostly observable participation. The defensible conclusion is modest. None of these activities builds engagement by itself. Each worked, where it worked, inside a structure of pairing, sequencing, feedback, and teacher mediation, and each was demonstrated in one context. The question this raises is no longer which technologies to adopt but what knowledge and design judgment teachers need to use them responsibly (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2024). That is what we discuss in our following question.

Implications for teacher preparation and course design

The reviewed studies should not conclude at diagnosis. Each proposes a solution aimed at building active learning and reducing the passivity. To answer the question posed, the recommendations are ranked based on a two-fold rubric: their practical usability for classroom instructors, and the empirical strength of the supporting evidence within the reviewed corpus.

The strongest recommendation is (1) **practice-based preparation with observed outcomes**. Zhang et al. (2025) reviewed 38 studies and found a recurring gap between pre-service teachers' general digital skills and their ability to use those skills in teaching, which they link to limited authentic practice. Sándorová et al. (2026) show that observation of students adds to the picture. Their study is small, 22 Slovak pre-service teachers in one programme, and permits no generalisation. Still, participants who handled AI tools adequately left scaffolding, feedback, and language objective underdeveloped in observed micro-teaching. These are the design elements the previous question identifies as the engine of engagement, and confidence questionnaires do not see them. The demand behind this recommendation should be stated honestly: it asks curriculum makers to build observed practice into programmes, and it asks for sustained guidance for both trainees and the teachers who mentor them. It changes what programmes measure, not only what they offer.

The second is to (2) **design structure before selecting tools**. Gökoğlu et al. (2024) recommend reducing the felt distance between learners and teacher and strengthening the class as a community. Structure alone is not sufficient, however. Consoli and Curle (2025) found that task modes must be adjusted to the learners at hand, and that teachers first need to know which emotions drive their students. Knowing the course is not the same as knowing the class. One caution should be stated: designing around what is currently fashionable is not supported by the evidence, since the one study built on a novel environment could not separate engagement from novelty (Pazakou et al., 2025). Although, if the novelty factor is used knowingly, it can start the engagement but afterwards it is up to the teacher to sustain it. A teacher who rotates novel formats is spending a resource that decays and should plan for what follows.

The third is (3) **institutional support**, the only recommendation that spans the emergency and the contemporary studies (Sum & Oancea, 2022; Castañeda-Trujillo & Jaime-Osorio, 2021; Hu & Shen, 2024). The first question showed that teachers can make progress without it. It also showed the price: the work migrates into personal networks and unpaid hours. Hu and Shen (2024) conclude that personal effort cannot compensate for missing institutional policy support, and the anxiety gap between Ministry and university teachers reported earlier points in the same way. By writing digital pedagogy into curricula and policy, institutions will be required to turn previously voluntary effort into a requirement, and a requirement is harder to abandon. No study, however, specifies what this support should consist of.

The fourth is (4) **mediated use of AI with explicit AI literacy** (Al-Azzawi & Saeed, 2026; Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2024). The mediation practices stand in Table 1. Policy is beginning to follow. Slovakia, for example, has issued a plan for the responsible use of artificial intelligence in education for 2025 to 2027, which includes dedicated support for future teachers as established by the Ministry of Education, Research, Development, and Youth of the Slovak Republic [MŠVVaM SR] (2025), and comparable initiatives can be expected elsewhere. Two problems remain. Moorhouse and Kohnke (2024) report that teacher educators expected to develop AI literacy have limited confidence with the tools themselves. The tools change faster than literacy programmes can be designed, so any curriculum in this area aims at a moving target.

The fifth is to (5) **verify engagement** rather than assume it, through real-time assessment and learner feedback (Consoli & Curle, 2025). The recommendation carries a risk its authors do not explicitly address, and their own data reveal it. If assessment anxiety is a force acting on these learners, as their study found, then feedback given to the person who assigns the grades is compromised by the same anxiety. Anonymity reduces the pressure but removes the ability to respond to individual students, and even

anonymous answers may still aim to please the teacher. The habit is worth forming and its results should be read as one signal among several, not as a final measurement.

The sixth is (6) **written chat tasks**. Korvesi and Michel (2022) conclude from fifteen learners in one in-person class that teachers should not hesitate to use text chat. The channel earned its rank through convergence, since it carried the surviving interaction during emergency teaching. The evidence, however, comes from small groups. Nothing shows that the same strategy scales to large-enrolment courses, where following tens or even hundreds of parallel chats exceeds one teacher's attention.

The last, seventh, is (7) **peer networks and shared reflection among teachers**, worked in the emergency data precisely where institutions didn't deliver (Castañeda-Trujillo & Jaime-Osorio, 2021). It is honest but fragile. It asks teachers to supply what their employers do not, and it has no quality control: a network spreads whatever its members know, sound or not.

These rankings should be read with caution. Several rest on very small samples: five tutors in Consoli and Curle (2025), twenty learners in Pazakou et al. (2025), fifteen in Korvesi and Michel (2022). Isaee and Barjesteh (2025:594-596) advise only that "it sounds wise to incorporate digital training courses into curriculum for prospective emergencies", and conclude that teachers, learners, "and all teaching and learning communities in general should be trained in technology" with no word on what the training should contain. Ayar (2026) likewise endorses teacher training without specifying it. Among the studies calling for training, only Al-Azzawi and Saeed (2026) name its content, AI literacy and prompt engineering. A recommendation with no content and no measure of success cannot fail, and advice that cannot fail cannot guide. Although, caution is not a reason for inaction. Evaluated in this way, the recommendations give teachers something concrete to construct and to test. The decisive measure sits with the students, and with their responses to the teacher's relentless ritual of trial and error.

Conclusion

This review finds that passivity during emergency remote teaching was produced primarily by inadequate preparation and design, rather than by distance education itself. The pandemic moved face-to-face routines online before teachers could redesign tasks, build dialogue, or address unequal access. When educators introduced collaborative tools and feedback, participation improved. Contemporary evidence reaches the same conclusion: peer tasks, sequenced text chat, emotional design, and mediated AI use do not generate engagement automatically. Their value depends on task sequence, appropriate difficulty, facilitation, and feedback.

Active learning is indispensable in digital environments; it reduces transactional distance by turning physical separation into dialogue, feedback, and collaborative inquiry. The priority is teacher preparation that tests pedagogical decisions in observed practice, backed by institutional support instead of individual goodwill. Course teams should establish interaction and assessment structure before choosing technologies, use AI as a scaffolded tool, and verify engagement through more than satisfaction surveys.

This review is limited by its small, purposively selected corpus of thirteen studies, several of which use small samples or perception data, so its conclusions also cannot be generalised without caution. Future research should test these designs across larger, fully online EFL settings and measure learners' actual interaction and language development, not only through their perceived experiences. By shifting attention from platforms to pedagogical design, the field can make distance education a setting for active language use rather than passive access.

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Fostering oral fluency in EFL classrooms through task-based learning and online collaboration

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Abstract
This study reports an action research project on oral fluency development in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) with high school students in Florencia, Colombia. The aim was to analyze the contributions of the Task-Based Learning (TBL) approach, supported by online collaboration with students from India, to improve students' spoken performance. Thirty-four 11th graders participated in three task-based sessions designed around real-life and contextualized activities. Data were collected through questionnaires, field notes, and audio recordings. Results showed that students increased their participation, teamwork, and self-confidence, while reducing fillers and producing more complex sentences. In conclusion, the use of TBL and collaborative practices provided meaningful opportunities for communication, confirming their potential to foster oral fluency in secondary EFL classrooms.

Keywords*: Online collaborative learning, language learning, language teaching, oral fluency, task-based learning*

Introduction

Improving students' communicative competence in English has become a priority in Colombian secondary education, where studies such as Buitrago (2016) have shown that traditional grammar-centered practices limit oral interaction, despite the growing role of English as a global lingua franca. Within this competence, oral fluency has gained special relevance, as it enables learners to express ideas naturally and confidently in diverse social, academic, and professional contexts (Romero & Pérez, 2021). However, in Colombian classrooms, oral skills have often been overshadowed by grammar-centered practices, limiting students' opportunities to engage in meaningful communication. As Kürüm (2016) establishes "speaking is considered to be the mostly sought skill for an individual to be accepted competent in a foreign language" (p. 264). Therefore, it becomes necessary to provide students with new alternatives that help them achieve greater proficiency in this skill.

One pedagogical alternative that addresses this challenge is the Task-Based Learning (TBL) approach, which integrates authentic, real-life tasks into the classroom (González & Arias, 2009; Ramírez & Artunduaga, 2018). According to Mojica (2007), the use of real-life tasks in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting connects students' learning to their realities. Moreover, Urrutia and Vega (2010) contend that the main purpose of speaking is to allow learners to interact naturally with each other. That means, EFL speaking tasks should be related to students' contexts and provide spaces for natural interaction.

Previous studies have also shown that TBL fosters participation in topics connected to learners' day-to-day lives, while collaborative tasks create an environment in which students feel more confident, motivated, and comfortable expressing themselves (Córdoba, 2016; Peña & Onatra, 2009; Urrutia & Vega, 2010). Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyse the contributions of implementing the TBL approach, supported by collaborative practices, to foster oral fluency in EFL among 11th graders at a

state-funded school in Florencia, Caquetá, Colombia. In line with this purpose, the research seeks to answer the following questions: *What are the contributions of implementing the TBL approach in online collaboration to foster oral fluency among Colombian high school students?*

Conceptual framework

Task-Based Learning (TBL)

Galvis (2011) argues that TBL is a process-oriented approach to language education that connects classroom practices with real-world contexts, highlighting the importance of "metacognition in learning, and the key role of learning by doing" (p. 200). Likewise, Moreno and Jiménez (2005) agree that "if students' sense that the task has a clear relation with their world, they are likely to discover easily the reasons to take part in the activity and, as a consequence, put forth their best effort to perform it" (p. 56). In sum, TBL provides learners with authentic opportunities to engage in meaningful communication (Ramírez & Artunduaga, 2018), bridging classroom instruction with real-life contexts and promoting both linguistic development and learner autonomy.

In addition to this, Peña and Onatra (2009) point out that "students are initially accompanied by the teacher on activities which are similar to the ones they are supposed to work on autonomously, and thus can see the logic involved in the final task" (p. 14). Moreover, TBL is conceived as an approach that enables students to comprehend and solve issues associated with their day-to-day context (Romero & Pérez, 2021). Therefore, the TBL approach needs to be seen as an opportunity to use the language in situations related to students' reality which increases students' autonomy and motivation and fosters their English performance.

The role of TBL in Online Collaborative Learning (OCL)

Harasim (2012) explains that Online Collaborative Learning (OCL) theory and pedagogy are designed to engage learners in the discourse practices of knowledge communities, enabling them to participate in the creation of knowledge and the refinement of ideas. TBL plays a significant role in enhancing OCL, particularly in language education and skill development. In online settings, where physical presence is absent, TBL encourages students to communicate effectively through digital platforms. The need to complete tasks collaboratively fosters frequent interaction, enhancing language skills, critical thinking, and teamwork (Aguilar-Cruz & Xiang, 2023). Students must negotiate meaning, share ideas, and provide feedback, which are essential components of both TBL and OCL.

Additionally, TBL in OCL requires students to take responsibility for their own learning. To this respect, Lee (2002) emphasizes that online exchanges using TBL create a dynamic space for Second Language Acquisition (SLA), where learners can engage in input and output processes through negotiation of meaning. This interaction is crucial in OCL, as it allows learners to actively participate in tasks that mirror real-life communication scenarios.

Along similar lines, Lopes and Castro (2022) remark that online interactions enabled by TBL not only facilitate task completion but also provide students with a platform to express their identities, share their life circumstances, and explore what it means to belong to their cultural and social contexts. Thus, TBL in OCL empowers students to collaboratively engage in real-world tasks, enhancing their ability to negotiate meanings and communicate effectively in diverse, authentic contexts.

Oral fluency in TBL

Oral Fluency is considered a key aspect concerning the ability to communicate in a target language. Febyanti and Sari (2022) claim that "fluency is a feature that gives a very natural quality of speech, including when students give a slight pause, rhythm, intonation, stress, speech rate, and such original use exclamations and interruptions" (p. 12). Besides, Peña and Onatra (2009) establish that "learners feel that they have to perform perfectly from the first time they try to speak partly because teachers sometimes

highlight accuracy rather than fluency, and thus errors are not considered part of their learning process" (p. 13). Hence, Oral Fluency assisted with the TBL approach is essential to create comfortable environments where learners will perform themselves with confidence and interest.

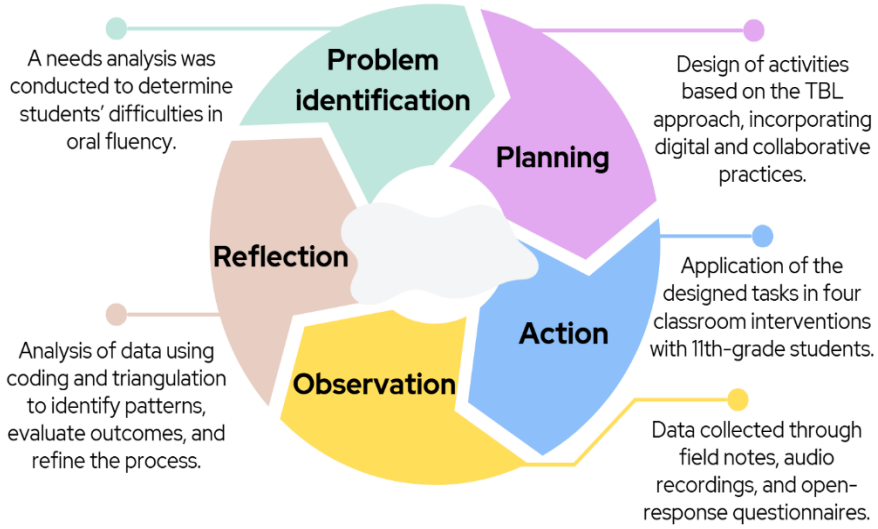
The mix of the TBL approach with Oral Fluency give authenticity to the tasks students are expected to develop and increase their reliance upon English language performance. To this respect, Córdoba *et al.* (2023), determine TBL helps to "develop learners' speaking fluency by offering them an experience in how to master fluency to maintain a conversation and interact with other language users" (p.146). Besides, the originality of such tasks improves students' self-confidence when performing oral use of the language in real situations.

Methodology

Research design

The methodological design selected for this research process was qualitative action research, since it allowed the researchers to identify a pedagogical problem in the classroom, implement an intervention, and reflect on its outcomes (Burns, 2009). Action research is particularly suitable in educational contexts because it is cyclical and participatory, enabling teachers and students to collaboratively address challenges and generate practical solutions (Kumar, 2011). Hence, our research was developed in 5 phases, as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Research phases based on action-research.



Source: Own elaboration.

This action-research design not only facilitated the systematic observation and analysis of students' progress but also provided a reflective framework to analyze the impact of the TBL approach on fostering oral fluency in the EFL classroom.

Data collection instruments

To gather information to analyse the contributions of using the TBL approach through online collaborative practices on students' oral fluency, three data collection instruments were used: questionnaires, field notes, and audio recordings.

Questionnaires

Creswell (2014) claims that questionnaires are implemented to obtain participants' insights about a certain topic. Similarly, Brown (2009) establishes that these questionnaires "provide a way to find out, in an unstructured manner, what people are thinking about a particular topic or issue" (p. 201). Hence, this instrument allowed us to get information from the target population regarding their perceptions about the implementation.

The questionnaire used in our study consisted of five main questions, including one Likert-scale item that required to be justified in the following sub-question, and four open-ended questions. The Likert-scale item was designed to check students' comfort to express their ideas in the TBL activities, ranking it from very uncomfortable to very comfortable. The follow-up sub-question asked students to justify their choice and mention the factors that contributed to their comfort or discomfort. The remaining questions were open-ended that aimed to gather students' conceptions and beliefs towards their motivation, the effectiveness of the tasks, and the challenges faced during the implementation of the intervention process and the impact of collaborative work. The questionnaire was applied at the end of each of the three intervention sessions and completed anonymously by the 34 students.

Teachers' field notes

Hood conceive field notes as careful narratives of the setting, individuals involved, and occurrences during that time. In addition to this, Hood (2009) state that field notes need to be thorough and provide extensive, context-driven details from the setting to avoid making broad generalizations and provide a more accurate representation of the phenomenon being observed. Hence, this instrument provided us with a deeper understanding of the problem as it allowed us to get immersed in the natural setting where the implementation process took place.

In our study, the teachers' field notes were written by two teachers during each intervention. These notes were focused on writing information about the students' interaction, language use, and engagement. Additionally, after the data was collected, it was reviewed and coded using grounded theory (open, axial, and selective coding) to ensure consistency throughout the process.

Audio recordings

Hopkins (2008) claims that audio recordings "are excellent for those situations where teachers require a very specific and accurate record of a limited aspect of their teaching, or of a particular interaction, say between a specific teacher and child or between two children" (p. 105). Considering the above, audio recordings were selected because they provided an accurate record of students' speech, enabling the analysis of their oral fluency without the limitations of relying on memory or recall. From the total group of 34 participants, a subset of 12 students was randomly selected to be recorded during the sessions.

It is important to note that the audio recordings were transcribed word by word, and then were transcribed. These recordings were used for the analysis of students' oral production. Therefore, the same coding procedure used for the other instruments was used to assess these transcriptions. Hence, we selected passages that accurately represented the key trends found in the data in order to keep the consistency in the analysis.

Setting and participants

The participants enrolled in our study were 34 11^{th}-grade students from the state-funded school Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, which is located in the urban area of Florencia, Caquetá, Colombia. The participants' ages are between 15 and 17 years old, with 16 years old being the most common age among students. Most of the population belongs to social strata 0 and 1, which correspond to the lowest social strata in Colombia. Just a few people from the participants belonged to stratum 2. Regarding ethical considerations, informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, assent was obtained from

students, and institutional permission was granted by the school. Table 1 further describes students' demographic information.

Table 1: Students' demographic information

Basic information	Options	Number	Percentage
Gender	Female	23	67.6 %
	Male	11	32.4 %
Age	15 years old	7	20.6 %
	16 years old	25	73.5 %
	17 years old	2	5.9 %
Social stratum	Stratum 0	8	23.5 %
	Stratum 1	17	50.0 %
	Stratum 2	6	17.6 %
	Stratum 3	3	8.8 %

We implemented three sessions (90 minutes each) focused on the Sustainable Development Goal #11 (SDG), which is sustainable cities and communities, during the online collaboration process with 23 students from Delhi, India. Colombian and Indian students were organized into groups that were balanced as equitably as possible. During the intragroup collaboration process, students met independently and communicated through social media or WhatsApp groups to plan their activities. Although Indian students participated in the collaborative activities, they were not included as participants in the study data collection. For the plenary sessions, the teachers organized Zoom meetings, which students from both countries joined during their respective class times. These sessions were held every week, so students had the time to organize what they needed for the meeting (See Table 2).

Table 2: Design of task-based sessions

Session	Objective	Tasks	Collaboration format
1	To learn about some main cities in a foreign country.	✓ Students design a poster showing the main characteristics of one of the main cities of their country such as cultural aspects, infrastructure, population, and biodiversity richness.	Intragroup collaboration
		✓ Two students per group present the poster of the corresponding city.	Plenary sharing
		✓ Each group identified five aspects that some of the cities had in common and wrote them on a Google Form. The teacher then read the responses aloud to the whole class.	Intragroup collaboration and plenary sharing
2	To discover the main characteristics of sustainable cities.	✓ Each group designs a presentation of a vision board for each city, incorporating real-world facts and data regarding the transportation system, waste management, water management, economy, and renewable sources.	Intragroup collaboration
		✓ Based on the previous phase, students identify an issue from each city and look for information, aiming to create a strategy to overcome it.	Intragroup collaboration with guided research

		✓ Students discuss their ideas and create a possible strategy to be presented to the class.	Intragroup collaboration
3	To propose strategies for creating a sustainable city.	✓ In groups, students reflect on the possible strategy to overcome the sustainability issue, getting to the most accurate one to create a presentation with this strategy.	Intragroup collaboration
		✓ Two students present their corresponding issue and the strategy they created using slides and reliable data.	Plenary sharing
		✓ Students reflect on the entire process by writing down 2 or 3 key insights acquired from the strategies for solving the issue and then discuss how their understanding of the issue evolved through the diverse perspectives shared.	Intragroup collaboration and plenary sharing.

Table 2 presents the design of the three task-based sessions implemented during the online collaboration process. Each session was structured around a specific objective and included a sequence of tasks that integrated both intragroup and plenary collaboration. In Session 1, students worked in groups to design posters about the main cities of their country, presented them to the whole class, and then identified common aspects across the cities using a Google Form, which the teacher read aloud to facilitate plenary discussion. Session 2 focused on the characteristics of sustainable cities, where groups created vision boards, researched issues related to urban sustainability, and proposed strategies through collaborative work. Finally, Session 3 emphasized solution-oriented thinking, with students reflecting on sustainability issues, presenting their strategies using slides and data, and concluding with both individual reflections and plenary sharing of insights. This design highlights the balance between group collaboration, teacher mediation, and whole-class interaction to promote engagement and oral fluency.

Data analysis procedures

Data analysis was carried out through grounded theory following Creswell's (2014) procedures using ATLAS.ti 25 software. First, we examined all details of information in qualitative data through open coding. Then, we implemented axial coding to find strong connections among the codes identified in the open coding process. Lastly, to have clearer and solid results, when getting to the core categories of the study, we carried out a selective coding process. Through the implementation of this comprehensive data analysis process, we analyzed the primary data and converted it into meaningful and well-founded conclusions. Consequently, this process enhanced the depth and reliability of the research, ensuring that the qualitative findings were both meaningful and reliable.

Data triangulation

Data triangulation involves using multiple data sources to minimize bias and strengthen the credibility of research. In this regard, Bans-Akutey and Tiimub (2021) highlight that utilizing multiple data sources minimizes biases in sampling, procedures, and researcher perspectives, thereby enhancing the foundation and credibility of the study. Data triangulation was implemented in our study to systematically establish patterns and look for intertwined information in the data collected from the three instruments implemented. In this way, by having the patterns established, we organized the information into research categories, developing categories and subcategories correspondingly for presenting the findings of the research study.

Results and discussion

Table 3 shows the categories and subcategories that emerged from coding the data by open, axial, and selective coding, identifying patterns across the three instruments. As previously mentioned, the coding process was conducted by the researcher's using ATLAS.ti 25 software following open, axial and selective coding procedures. All data collected was reviewed several times to ensure the accuracy of the found codes. Subsequently, the codes were compared across data sources and grouped into categories and subcategories based on their frequency and relevance to the research question.

Based on the patterns that appeared from the data analysis, two main categories were established. These categories provided the framework for interpreting the findings and allowed for a clearer organization of the results (see Table 3).

Table 3: Research categories

Research questions	Category	Subcategory
What are the contributions of implementing the TBL approach in online collaboration to foster oral fluency among Colombian high school students?	Real-life tasks foster participation and teamwork.	The development of tasks related to students' reality increases their participation. Contextualized activities allow students to work collaboratively.
	Continuous interaction strengthens oral language use and self-confidence.	Ongoing interaction reduces the use of fillers. More complex sentences are promoted through interactivity

Real-life tasks foster participation and teamwork

This category highlights the promotion of students' participation and teamwork when they participate in real-life tasks since the tasks require students to get involved in the activities and work collaboratively with their classmates. In this line, Arias *et al.* (2014) assert that "TBL involves collaborative work as part of its process. This is a way to share knowledge and enrich the academic processes" (p. 199). According to the above, collaborative work is implicit in the development of the TBL, which leads to students' involvement and teamwork while carrying out the activities. Therefore, two key subcategories appeared (1) the development of tasks related to students' reality increases their participation, and (2) contextualized activities allow students to work collaboratively.

The development of tasks related to students' reality increases their participation. This subcategory shows that students' participation increased when the tasks were connected to their real-life experiences. Based on the data collected, students were more willing to engage in the activities when they felt familiar with the topics, as this reduced their hesitation and helped them feel more confident when expressing their ideas. In the questionnaire responses, several students associated their participation with feeling comfortable and having prior knowledge about the topics. This can be seen in the following fragment:

> **ST-1:** *"I felt comfortable expressing my ideas during the activities, and I already knew some vocabulary and was somewhat familiar with the topic. Working in a team was also enjoyable"* **(Questionnaire)**

This response suggests that familiarity with the content allowed the student to rely on known vocabulary and ideas, which made participation easier and more natural. In this sense, students did not

need to start from zero, but instead built on what they already knew, which encouraged them to take part more actively.

A similar pattern was observed in the audio recordings. During the interactions, students continued participating even when they did not have precise or complete information. Instead of avoiding the conversation, they used their general knowledge and supported each other to keep the interaction going. This can be observed in the following exchange:

> **Indian student:** A really good job. Your English was very good, so great job on that. Do you know what companies are causing the deforestation in Colombia?
>
> **ST-11**: Ex…Exactly, we don't know, but we suppose that many companies like farming and, I don't know, for example, for… for…
>
> **ST-12:** Illegal mining.
>
> **ST-11:** Yeah, for illegal mining.
>
> **ST-12**: We know the activities that cause the harm, but not the names exactly."
>
> **(Transcript of audio recording - Session 3).**

In this interaction, students acknowledge their lack of specific information, but still attempt to answer by building on each other's ideas. This shows that they remained engaged and focused on communication rather than accuracy, which reflects increased confidence and willingness to participate. In addition, teacher field notes also support these findings. It was observed that students were more active and engaged during the sessions, especially when interacting with their international peers. As recorded in the following extract:

Students' Engagement: "*All students showed enthusiasm for developing the activities and exchanging their personal information with the international students*"

Group interaction: "*Students were actively interacting and asking different questions to their international peers, seeking to learn most about themselves and their culture.*"

(Teacher A Field Notes - Session 1).

These observations suggest that the tasks created a comfortable and motivating environment, which encouraged students to participate more and interact more freely.

Overall, the data indicate that tasks connected to students' real-life experiences foster greater participation by increasing familiarity, reducing fear of making mistakes, and allowing learners to use their prior knowledge. These findings are supported by previous studies, which highlight that familiarity with content facilitates understanding and encourages participation, while meaningful and relatable topics increase motivation in language learning contexts (Ubaidila et al., 2024; Winstead, 2013; Masuram & Sripada, 2020; Diep et al., 2022; Maharani & Marhamah, 2024). In this sense, designing tasks that reflect students' realities plays an important role in promoting active participation in the EFL classroom.

Contextualized activities allow students to work collaboratively. This subcategory highlights that designing activities or tasks around students' familiar contexts fosters teamwork as it encourages students to consider different perspectives or complement their classmates' ideas. The familiarization between the content of the tasks and students' realities makes a stronger bond and increases the synergies among learners. Our results showed an increment in students' ability to work as a team, supporting their classmates when needed, as can be evidenced in the following excerpt:

> **ST-6**: *"We help each other if we have any difficulty with the pronunciation or reading of unfamiliar words."* **(Q)**.
>
> **ST-11:** *"When I did not understand certain topics or ideas, I asked my classmates and teachers to explain the intended meaning so that I could later contribute to the discussion"* **(Questionnaire)**.

As expressed by the students, when they found trouble within the process, they relied on their classmates to overcome the possible difficulties. Thereby, a sense of cooperation among the students grew, creating a greater environment to work in, as can be evidenced in the following excerpt:

Indian student: Do you guys see a lot of pollution where you live?
ST-7: Yes.
Indian student: What kinds of pollution do you see?
ST-8: Air... It's... It's not... Air pollution, a little bit, but, for example, the rivers, it's a lot of rivers with pollution.
ST-7: And... buses and private vehicles, like, we have a lot of cars and motorcycles, and that contributes to pollution.
Indian student: Do you guys have a lot of electric vehicles out there, or not so much?
ST-7: Not so much. They are, like, new in our city.
Indian student: Very good. Very good information.
ST-8: Here, the people start to use electric motorcycles, but cars is... is... strange. It's really strange. See there, see here.
Indian student: Very good, guys. Great job.
(Transcript of audio recording - Session 3)

In the extract, it is observed a clear sense of cooperation among students, which was developed throughout the sessions. Students supported each other by completing ideas, paraphrasing, and clarifying points to make their communication and the ideas more effective and understandable. Such collaborative environments encourage learners to negotiate meaning and engage in real communications fostering not only the production of the language but also interpersonal growth as they recognize the value of peer interaction, teamwork and respect of the ideas in language learning. Lastly, activities related to students' lives promoted cognitive, emotional and social growth as demonstrated in the following excerpt from the field notes:

Use of target language: *"Students tried to provide as much information as possible to demonstrate they knew the topic, which led them to speak faster but present some grammatical mistakes. When students did not know how to express themselves, their group peers tried to complement the ideas*"
(Teacher B Field Notes- Session 3)

The excerpt suggests that students made a consistent effort to provide as much information as possible, aiming to demonstrate their understanding of the topic. This willingness to contribute often led them to speak at a faster pace, which, while showing enthusiasm and engagement, occasionally resulted in grammatical mistakes. Despite these errors, students remained focused on communicating their ideas effectively. When some learners struggled to express themselves or lacked specific vocabulary, their peers supported them by complementing or reformulating their ideas.

Overall, the data indicate that contextualized tasks promoted a collaborative learning environment where students actively supported one another. Working with familiar topics allowed them to share knowledge, negotiate meaning, and build ideas together, which strengthened both their communication and teamwork skills. These findings are consistent with previous studies that highlight the role of peer interaction in fostering collaboration and language development (Sato, 2015; Córdoba, 2016; Rojanacheewinsupond, 2015). In this sense, designing activities connected to students' realities not only supports language use but also encourages meaningful collaboration in the EFL classroom.

Continuous interaction strengthens oral language use and self-confidence

This category emphasizes the improvement in students' oral language use and self-confidence as the result of continuous interaction during TBL activities. The tasks required students to constantly engage in communication, encouraging them to express their ideas, ask questions, and respond using the target language. According to Zondag (2024) the ongoing use of English in meaningful contexts helps students become more fluent and less dependent on memorized structures, allowing more spontaneous language use. Furthermore, repeated interaction with foreign peers online helped create a supportive atmosphere, where students felt more comfortable speaking and making mistakes without fear of judgment. This

contributed to greater self-confidence and a more natural use of language during class. Consequently, two key subcategories appeared: (1) ongoing interaction reduces the use of fillers, and (2) more complex sentences are promoted through interactivity.

Ongoing interaction reduces the use of fillers. This subcategory highlights how continuous interaction among peers plays a significant role in reducing students' use of fillers during oral activities. As students engage in regular dialogues, they start the habit of expressing their ideas fluently, relying less on pauses or verbal tag lines such as "uh," "um," or "eh." This can be observed in the following excerpts from the transcripts:

> **ST-10:** Okay, continue with the… presentation. Am…, in mede, Medellín is a slightly more advanced city in the country, and this city ahhh… is the only city in Colombia that has a subway. And finally, amm… in Medellín, as in the entire country, the city has a great diversity of flora and fauna. **(Transcript of audio recording - Session 1)**
>
> **ST-10:** Okay, now cities, ok now cities where we can find this problem. The images show the level of of plastic pollution in the oceans, with China leading the way with 38.7%, followed by Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam. These five countries generate more than 76% of total plastic pollution, ehh... highlighting the urgent need for global action to reduce this, this problem and impact on the city. **(Transcript of audio recording - Session 3)**

These examples show how students gradually become more confident and fluent as they participate in continuous speaking activities. Although they still hesitate at times or use filler words, they are able to express complete ideas with increasing clarity. In session 1, for example, S-10 talks about Medellin and, despite some pauses, provides clear and relevant information. By session 3, the same student speaks about plastic pollution in a more organized and detailed way, showing noticeable improvement. The progression suggests that regular participation in speaking tasks helped the student organize ideas more effectively and reduce their reliance on fillers.

A similar pattern is reflected in the teacher field notes, which provide additional evidence of improvement in students' fluency. As recorded:

> "*Students showed pauses and hesitations, but it was less often than previous classes. They showed improvement regarding this matter*". **(Teacher B Field Notes - Session 3)**
>
> "*Students hesitated less and presented fewer fillers*". **(Teacher A Field Notes - Session 3)**

These observations indicate that, although hesitation was still present, it decreased over time, suggesting that students became more confident and fluent as they engaged in continuous interaction.

Further evidence can be found in the questionnaire responses, where students reflected on their speaking performance during the tasks. For instance, one student stated:

> **ST-4:** *"I felt confident speaking in English during the tasks because, while doing the activities, I think in English and can later express it in English"* **(Questionnaire)**.

This response suggests that regular practice allowed students to process their ideas in the target language, which contributed to reducing hesitation and improving fluency. Overall, the data indicate that continuous interaction through Task-Based Learning activities supported students in reducing their use of fillers by providing frequent opportunities to practice speaking, organize their ideas, and gain confidence. As students engaged in meaningful communication, they became more comfortable expressing themselves and relied less on pauses to maintain conversation.

These findings can be understood in relation to previous research, which highlights the importance of continuous interaction and practice in improving oral fluency. As Huang and Gráf (2020) suggest, speaking activities help reduce students' tendency to pause, while Córdoba et al. (2023) explain that repeated peer interaction allows learners to gradually minimize their use of fillers and produce more structured speech. Similarly, Rangga and Noor (2025) note that regular speaking opportunities help students feel more comfortable and rely less on fillers over time. In line with this, Shrestha (2012)

emphasizes that exposure and practice play a key role in reducing hesitation, reinforcing the value of continuous interaction in EFL contexts.

To sum up, the continuous interaction provided by TBL activities played an important role in helping students reduce their use of fillers and improve their fluency. Students became more confident and learned to organize their ideas more clearly before expressing them since they were speaking regularly in the online class. In general, these findings show how consistent practice through interaction leads to more spontaneous speech and contributes to the development of more effective communication in the EFL classroom.

More complex sentences are promoted through interactivity. This subcategory highlights how peer interaction during TBL activities encourages students to produce more complex sentences. As students engaged in collaborative dialogues, they were required to explain their ideas more clearly, which pushed them to move beyond simple sentences and use more elaborate structures. This can be observed in the teacher field notes, which provide initial evidence of this development:

> *"Students used a more complex structure and advanced lexicon than they are used to in order to demonstrate they had improved their speaking".* **(Teacher A Field Notes - Session 3)**
>
> *"Students presented well-structured sentences with more complexity*". **(Teacher B Fieled Notes - Session 3)**

These observations suggest that, by Session 3, students were not only participating more but also improving the way they structured their ideas. Both teachers noted that students were using a wider range of vocabulary and moving beyond basic sentence patterns, which indicates progress in their ability to express themselves more clearly and in greater detail. Moreover, a similar pattern can be observed in the audio recordings, where students demonstrate the use of more complex and organized speech:

> **ST-12:** Impact. Deforestation affects people's health by increasing air pollution and spreading diseases. In daily life, it causes extreme heat and water shortage. Businesses like farming and tourism lose money because of damaged land and fewer natu, natural resources. It also affects transport as roads can be blocked by floods or landslides caused by forest loss. **(Transcript of audio recording – Session 3)**
>
> **ST-11:** And a solution or strategy is to promote reforestation and sustainability farming, planting trees and teaching farmers how to grow crops without cutting more forests. This helps the environment by restoring lost trees and helps cities by improving air quality, and, and protect rich water sources. Thank you. That's all. **(Transcript of audio recording – Session 3)**

These examples show how students began to organize their ideas more effectively and use more complete and detailed sentences. Instead of giving short responses, they explained the impact of deforestation across different areas such as health, business, and the environment, which reflects a higher level of language use. Even though their speech still includes some pauses or repetitions, it is evident that they are making an effort to express their ideas in a more logical and structured way. Further evidence can be found in the questionnaire responses, where students reflect on their performance during the tasks. For instance, one student stated:

> **ST-10** *"Through the presentation or vision board, I made an effort to practice my vocabulary and fluency in order to present in a clear and precise way".* **(Questionnaire)**

This response suggests that tasks such as presentations encouraged students to prepare their ideas in advance and focus on using more precise language, which contributed to the development of more complex sentences. It also indicates that the personal and meaningful nature of the task increased students' motivation to improve their performance.

Overall, the data show that peer interaction through TBL activities supported students in producing more complex sentences by encouraging them to explain their ideas in greater detail, organize their thoughts more carefully, and use a wider range of vocabulary. As students participated in meaningful

communication, they became more confident and willing to take risks with the language, which contributed to clearer and more effective expression.

These findings can be understood in relation to previous research, which highlights the role of interaction in developing more sophisticated language use. As Ahmadian and Tavakoli (2011) suggest, interactivity helps learners produce more complex language than they might independently. Similarly, Varlamova et al. (2016) and Omar et al. (2020) emphasize that peer interaction and consistent practice support the development of structured thinking and more elaborate expression. In addition, Tabassum and Naveed (2024) highlight that active interaction increases confidence and encourages clearer communication, while Masuram and Sripada (2020) and Lăpădat and Lăpădat (2023) stress the importance of meaningful and motivating tasks in enhancing students' language outcomes.

To sum up, TBL activities helped students go beyond simple sentence structures and express their ideas in a more detailed and organized way. As they interacted with their peers and engaged in meaningful tasks, they became more confident and better prepared to communicate their ideas. This suggests that providing opportunities for interaction and meaningful communication can promote the development of more complex and effective language use in EFL contexts.

Conclusion

The implementation of the TBL approach, supported by online collaborative practices, demonstrated a positive impact on fostering oral fluency among 11th-grade students at Institución Educativa Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. The findings highlight that real-life and contextualized tasks promoted active participation, teamwork, and meaningful interaction, enabling students to connect language learning with their everyday experiences. This connection increased their motivation, self-confidence, and willingness to engage in oral communication.

Furthermore, continuous interaction through TBL activities reduced students' reliance on fillers, encouraged the use of more complex sentence structures, and enhanced their ability to express ideas with greater clarity and spontaneity. The collaborative environment fostered by the tasks also strengthened peer support, negotiation of meaning, and intercultural exchanges, contributing to both linguistic and social development.

Overall, the study confirms that TBL, combined with digital collaboration, is an effective pedagogical strategy to promote oral fluency in EFL classrooms. It not only improves students' linguistic performance but also creates opportunities for autonomy, motivation, and authentic communication. These results emphasize the need to incorporate TBL and technology-mediated practices more systematically in Colombian secondary education, as they provide learners with the tools to develop communicative competence in real-world and intercultural contexts.

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Enhancing English vocabulary acquisition through a flipped classroom model supported by USA learns: a quasi-experimental study with Colombian EFL learners

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Abstract
Vocabulary acquisition constitutes a fundamental component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, as it directly influences learners' communicative competence and academic performance. Despite its importance, many secondary school students experience difficulties in developing an adequate lexical repertoire, particularly in contexts where exposure to English is limited. This study aimed to determine the effect of a Flipped Classroom model supported by the USA Learns platform on English vocabulary acquisition among Colombian secondary school students. A quantitative approach framed within the positivist paradigm was adopted. The study employed a quasi-experimental design with non-equivalent groups, including an experimental group exposed to the Flipped Classroom intervention and a control group receiving traditional instruction. Vocabulary acquisition was measured through pre-test and post-test assessments designed to evaluate students' lexical knowledge across multiple thematic categories aligned with Pre-A1, A1, and A2 proficiency levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The findings revealed that students who participated in the Flipped Classroom intervention demonstrated a greater mean vocabulary gain (+2.5 points) than those in the control group (+0.5 points). Category-level results were mixed (see Table 2): the largest gains for the experimental group were observed in greetings, presentations and farewells (+5.27) and classroom vocabulary (+4.27), with small gains in personal information and numbers (+0.14) and cardinal and ordinal numbers (+0.55), while means decreased in the categories of verb To be, calendar, parts of the day, and daily routine and time. The results suggest that combining flipped learning principles with a technology-supported environment promotes learner autonomy, increases exposure to lexical content, and enhances opportunities for meaningful language practice. The study contributes empirical evidence supporting the pedagogical value of Flipped Classroom models in EFL contexts and highlights the potential of free digital learning platforms such as USA Learns for vocabulary instruction. These findings may inform English language teaching practices and encourage the integration of technology-enhanced methodologies to foster vocabulary development in secondary education settings.

Keywords: *Flipped classroom, vocabulary acquisition, English as a Foreign Language, USA learners, technology-enhanced learning, secondary education, EFL learners, digital language learning*

Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge is widely recognized as one of the most fundamental components of second and foreign language acquisition. A solid lexical repertoire enables learners to comprehend oral and written messages, participate in communicative interactions, and develop higher-order language skills such as reading comprehension, writing, and oral production. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, vocabulary acquisition has become a critical educational objective because lexical competence directly influences learners' communicative performance and academic achievement. Despite its importance, many secondary school students continue to exhibit limited vocabulary knowledge, which

restricts their ability to interact effectively in English and negatively affects their performance in standardized assessments.

The challenge of vocabulary acquisition is particularly evident in Latin American educational settings, where English is commonly taught as a foreign language and opportunities for authentic language exposure remain limited. In Colombia, national educational policies have emphasized the development of bilingual competencies and communicative abilities; however, English proficiency levels among secondary school students continue to present significant challenges: in the participating institution, mean Saber 11 English scores were 46 in 2021 and 47 in 2022 and 2023, below the national mean of 50-52 in the same period (ICFES, 2023). Limited lexical knowledge often becomes a barrier to the development of communicative competence, reducing students' confidence and participation in language learning activities. Consequently, educational institutions are increasingly seeking innovative pedagogical strategies capable of improving vocabulary learning outcomes while promoting learner autonomy and engagement.

Recent advances in educational technology have created new opportunities for language instruction. Digital platforms provide learners with access to interactive resources, personalized learning experiences, immediate feedback, and opportunities for self-paced study. Within the field of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), technological tools have demonstrated considerable potential for supporting vocabulary acquisition by increasing exposure to lexical items and facilitating meaningful language practice. The integration of digital technologies into language education has therefore become an important area of research, particularly in contexts where traditional classroom instruction alone may be insufficient to address learners' diverse needs.

Among the pedagogical approaches that have gained increasing attention in recent years, the Flipped Classroom model has emerged as a promising alternative to conventional teacher-centered instruction. This model reverses the traditional sequence of teaching by allowing students to engage with instructional content before classroom sessions and dedicating face-to-face instructional time to collaborative learning, problem-solving activities, and guided practice. By shifting direct instruction outside the classroom, flipped learning promotes active participation, learner autonomy, and more effective use of classroom interactions. Previous studies, for example Alnuhayt (2018), Arévalo Piña (2023), and Retnaningsih et al. (2022), have reported positive effects of flipped learning on student motivation, engagement, academic performance, and language development across different educational contexts.

In language education, the Flipped Classroom model offers particular advantages for vocabulary learning. Pre-class exposure to instructional materials enables students to familiarize themselves with new lexical items at their own pace, while classroom activities provide opportunities to apply and reinforce vocabulary knowledge through communicative tasks and collaborative exercises. Furthermore, digital learning environments can support repeated exposure to vocabulary, an essential factor in long-term lexical retention. Nevertheless, although the effectiveness of flipped learning has been documented in several international contexts, empirical evidence regarding its impact on English vocabulary acquisition among Colombian secondary school learners remains limited.

To address this gap, the present study examines the effect of a Flipped Classroom model supported by the USA Learns platform on English vocabulary acquisition among Colombian secondary school students. Using a quasi-experimental design with an experimental group and a control group, the study seeks to determine whether technology-enhanced flipped learning can contribute to improved vocabulary outcomes in an EFL context. The findings are expected to provide empirical evidence regarding the pedagogical value of flipped learning for vocabulary instruction and offer practical implications for English language teachers seeking innovative strategies to enhance lexical development in secondary education.

Theoretical background

Vocabulary acquisition in EFL contexts

Vocabulary acquisition is widely recognized as a fundamental component of second and foreign language learning because lexical knowledge directly influences learners' ability to understand and produce language effectively. According to Nation (2013), vocabulary constitutes the foundation upon which communicative competence is built, enabling learners to engage in listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities. Similarly, Schmitt (2010) argues that vocabulary knowledge extends beyond the recognition of isolated lexical items and includes understanding their meanings, forms, collocations, grammatical functions, and contextual uses.

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, vocabulary learning represents a particularly significant challenge due to the limited opportunities learners often have to interact with the target language outside the classroom. As a result, many students experience difficulties in developing sufficient lexical repertoires to communicate effectively and comprehend authentic language input. Research has consistently demonstrated that vocabulary size is strongly associated with language proficiency and academic performance, highlighting the need for instructional approaches that promote meaningful and sustained lexical development (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2010).

Contemporary perspectives on vocabulary instruction emphasize the importance of contextualized learning experiences. Rather than relying exclusively on memorization, learners should be exposed to authentic communicative situations that facilitate repeated encounters with lexical items and encourage meaningful language use. This communicative perspective aligns with current approaches to language teaching, which prioritize the development of learners' ability to use vocabulary appropriately in real-world contexts. Consequently, vocabulary acquisition is increasingly viewed as an active and dynamic process involving interaction, practice, and meaningful engagement with language.

Given these challenges, educational researchers have explored innovative pedagogical strategies capable of increasing learners' exposure to vocabulary and promoting greater autonomy in language learning. Technology-enhanced instructional environments have emerged as promising alternatives because they provide flexible access to learning resources and facilitate individualized learning experiences. Such environments can support vocabulary acquisition by allowing learners to review content repeatedly and engage with language materials at their own pace.

Flipped classroom and language learning

The Flipped Classroom model has gained considerable attention in recent years as an innovative instructional approach that seeks to maximize student engagement and active participation. Bergmann and Sams (2012), widely regarded as pioneers of the model, define flipped learning as an educational approach in which direct instruction occurs outside the classroom through digital resources, while classroom time is dedicated to collaborative learning activities, problem-solving, and guided practice. This pedagogical shift transforms the traditional role of the teacher from information provider to learning facilitator.

The theoretical foundations of the Flipped Classroom are rooted in constructivist learning theories, which emphasize the active role of learners in constructing knowledge through interaction and reflection. From this perspective, students become responsible for preparing instructional content independently before class, thereby allowing face-to-face sessions to focus on higher-order cognitive processes. Aguilera-Ruiz et al. (2017) argue that flipped learning promotes student-centred instruction by creating opportunities for personalized support, collaborative learning, and active engagement with educational content.

Within language education, the Flipped Classroom has demonstrated considerable potential for enhancing language learning outcomes. Bishop and Verleger (2013) explain that the model combines computer-based individual instruction with interactive classroom activities, creating an environment that

supports both autonomous learning and collaborative practice. In EFL contexts, this structure allows students to familiarize themselves with vocabulary and language structures before class and subsequently apply their knowledge through communicative activities under teacher guidance.

Several studies have reported positive effects of flipped learning on learners' motivation, participation, academic achievement, and language performance. Specifically, Alnuhayt (2018) found that flipped instruction contributed positively to vocabulary learning among EFL students by increasing opportunities for lexical exposure and practice. Likewise, recent systematic reviews have highlighted the growing effectiveness of flipped learning approaches in English language education, particularly when supported by digital technologies that facilitate autonomous study and continuous interaction with instructional materials (Arévalo Piña, 2023).

Technology-assisted vocabulary learning and USA learns

The integration of digital technologies into language education has significantly transformed instructional practices and learning experiences. Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has emerged as a prominent field of research focused on understanding how technological tools can support language acquisition processes. According to Beatty (2013), technology-mediated learning environments provide learners with opportunities for individualized instruction, immediate feedback, and increased interaction with linguistic content, all of which contribute to language development.

One of the primary advantages of technology-assisted vocabulary learning is the possibility of repeated exposure to lexical items through multimedia resources. Research suggests, consistent with Nation (2013) and Schmitt (2010), that vocabulary acquisition is enhanced when learners encounter words multiple times in varied contexts and modalities. Digital platforms facilitate this process by integrating audiovisual materials, interactive exercises, self-assessment tools, and adaptive learning pathways that accommodate individual learning needs.

Within this technological landscape, online language learning platforms have become increasingly important resources for supporting EFL instruction. Such platforms allow students to access learning materials beyond classroom boundaries, promoting learner autonomy and extending opportunities for language practice. Moreover, digital learning environments enable teachers to monitor student progress and provide targeted support based on individual performance data.

USA Learns represents a particularly valuable platform for language learning because it combines structured instructional content, multimedia resources, interactive activities, and progress monitoring features within a freely accessible environment. The platform offers learning modules designed to support the development of English language skills through contextualized instruction and guided practice. These characteristics make USA Learns especially suitable for implementation within a Flipped Classroom framework, where students engage with instructional content before classroom sessions and subsequently apply their learning through collaborative and communicative activities.

The combination of Flipped Classroom principles and technology-assisted learning environments provides a promising framework for addressing vocabulary acquisition challenges in EFL settings. By increasing learners' exposure to lexical content, promoting autonomous learning, and maximizing opportunities for meaningful classroom interaction, this pedagogical approach has the potential to enhance vocabulary development and improve overall language learning outcomes among secondary school students.

Methodology

Research design

This study adopted a quantitative approach within the positivist paradigm and employed a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design with non-equivalent groups. This design was selected to determine the effect of a Flipped Classroom model supported by the USA Learns platform on English vocabulary

acquisition among secondary school EFL learners. Since participants belonged to pre-existing classroom groups, random assignment was not feasible; therefore, a quasi-experimental approach was considered the most appropriate methodological option (Bryman, 2016; Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2022).

The following hypotheses, stated in the original thesis (Santacruz Andrade, 2025), guided the study. Null hypothesis (H0): The implementation of the Flipped Classroom model does not generate significant improvements in English vocabulary learning in the intervened students. Alternative hypothesis (H1): The implementation of the Flipped Classroom model generates significant improvements in English vocabulary learning in the intervened students. No inferential test of the between-group difference in gains is reported in this article; the hypotheses are therefore addressed descriptively through the comparison of gains and category-level means, and the correlation analysis described below does not by itself test H1.

Participants and sampling

The study was conducted with 41 eleventh-grade students enrolled at the Isaías Gamboa Educational Institution, Aguacatal campus, in Santiago de Cali, Colombia. Participants were distributed into an experimental group (n = 21), which received the Flipped Classroom intervention supported by the USA Learns platform, and a control group (n = 20), which continued receiving conventional English instruction. Regarding gender distribution, the experimental group consisted of 12 female students (57%) and 9 male students (43%), whereas the control group included 18 female students (90%) and 2 male students (10%). Although differences in gender composition existed between groups, all participants belonged to the same educational level and institutional context.

A non-probability convenience sampling procedure was employed. This type of sampling is frequently used in educational research when researchers work with naturally occurring groups and encounter practical limitations for obtaining representative samples (Bryman, 2016).

Data collection procedure

The study followed six sequential stages: (1) research design and definition of variables; (2) design of the 35-item test and expert validation; (3) pilot study with 24 tenth-grade students and revision of three ambiguous items; (4) pretest administration to both groups; (5) five-week intervention (Flipped Classroom supported by USA Learns for the experimental group; traditional instruction for the control group); and (6) posttest administration and statistical analysis. Data were collected through a closed-ended objective test administered via Google Forms. This procedure ensured standardized administration conditions, facilitated student access, and enabled automatic collection and organization of responses.

The instrument included multiple-choice, single-answer, and matching items designed to evaluate everyday English vocabulary corresponding to the Pre-A1, A1, and A2 proficiency levels established by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020).

Instrument

Vocabulary acquisition was assessed using a 35-item test specifically designed for this study. The instrument evaluated functional English vocabulary in eight categories used consistently throughout this article: (1) affirmations with the verb To Be; (2) calendar; (3) personal information and numbers; (4) cardinal and ordinal numbers; (5) parts of the day; (6) daily routine and time; (7) greetings, presentations and farewells; and (8) classroom vocabulary. Each item assessed lexical comprehension, semantic association, and contextual vocabulary recognition.

The test was administered through Google Forms, which facilitated standardized implementation and systematic data collection for both the experimental and control groups.

Validity and reliability

Content validity was established through expert judgment. Experienced English language teachers with expertise in secondary education and familiarity with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages reviewed the instrument. The evaluation focused on linguistic relevance, clarity, educational appropriateness, and alignment with the learning objectives.

To strengthen reliability, a pilot study was conducted with 24 tenth-grade students from the same educational institution who shared characteristics similar to those of the target population. The pilot study identified three ambiguous items, which were subsequently revised to improve precision and comprehension.

In addition, a feedback session (conversatorio) was conducted with the 24 pilot-group students, not with the study sample, to gather observations regarding content, instructions, and difficulty level. Although a statistical reliability coefficient such as Cronbach's alpha was not calculated, the pilot testing process, expert validation, and consistency observed between pretest and posttest administrations provided evidence of acceptable instrument stability and measurement precision.

Data analysis

Data obtained from the pretest and posttest were analysed using descriptive procedures. Vocabulary performance was examined through means, standard deviations, and mean gains by group and by vocabulary category (Tables 1 and 2). Excel was used to tabulate scores. Pearson and Spearman coefficients were calculated in SPSS and cross-checked in R-Studio; both programs produced identical values (Pearson r = 0.531; Spearman rho = 0.537). The coefficients correlate pretest scores with posttest scores within the experimental group only (n = 21), as a measure of consistency of scores over time. They do not measure the effect of the intervention, because group membership is a categorical variable. The intervention effect is assessed by comparing the mean gains and category-level means of the experimental and control groups. A note on total scores: the thesis from which this article is drawn reports the mean total gains (+2.5 experimental, +0.5 control) and the full means and standard deviations by category (Table 2), but it does not disaggregate the total pretest and posttest means and standard deviations for the 35-item test. Total means and standard deviations are therefore not reported here, to avoid reconstructing values that were not in the source dataset; comparability at baseline should be judged from the category-level pretest means in Table 2.

Ethical considerations

This study adhered to the ethical principles of respect, autonomy, beneficence, and justice governing educational research involving human participants. Institutional authorization was obtained from the administration of the Isaías Gamboa Educational Institution before data collection began.

Written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians during a face-to-face meeting in which the objectives, procedures, benefits, and ethical conditions of the study were clearly explained. Students also received age-appropriate information regarding the study and retained the right to participate voluntarily or withdraw at any stage of the research process.

To ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned an anonymous identification code. Personal information remained accessible only to the researcher and was stored securely under restricted access conditions. Results were reported exclusively in aggregate form and used solely for academic and research purposes.

Results and discussion

The results obtained from the pretest and posttest assessments indicate that the implementation of the Flipped Classroom model supported by the USA Learns platform positively influenced English vocabulary acquisition among eleventh-grade EFL learners. Although both groups demonstrated

improvements during the intervention period, students in the experimental group achieved substantially greater gains than those in the control group, suggesting that the instructional strategy contributed significantly to vocabulary development.

The study involved a total of 41 students distributed into two naturally occurring groups. The experimental group consisted of 21 students who participated in the Flipped Classroom intervention, while the control group consisted of 20 students who continued receiving conventional English instruction. Vocabulary acquisition was measured through a 35-item test specifically designed to assess lexical knowledge corresponding to the Pre-A1, A1, and A2 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020).

The comparison between pretest and posttest results revealed a difference in learning outcomes between groups. Students in the experimental group achieved an average total vocabulary gain of 2.5 points, whereas students in the control group obtained an average gain of 0.5 points (Table 1, maximum possible score = 35). As noted in the Methodology, total pretest and posttest means and standard deviations are not reported because the source thesis reports only the total gains and the category-level means and standard deviations. Table 2 therefore reports the pretest and posttest means and standard deviations for each of the eight vocabulary categories.

Table 1: Summary of vocabulary acquisition outcomes

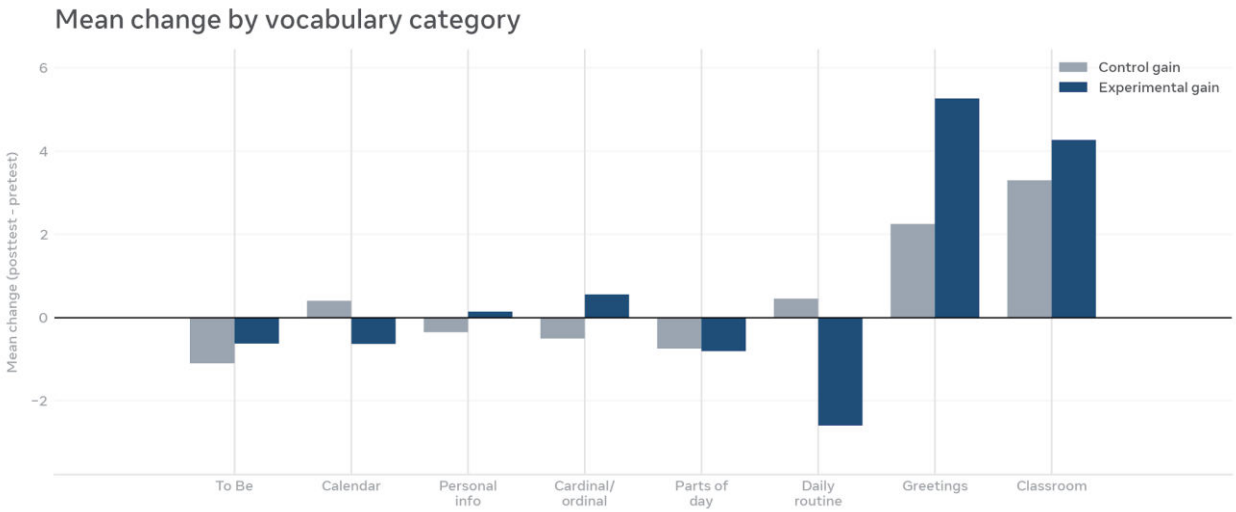
Variable	Control group	Experimental group
Participants	20	21
Female students	18 (90%)	12 (57%)
Male students	2 (10%)	9 (43%)
Mean vocabulary gain	+0.5	+2.5
Pearson correlation	—	0.531
Spearman correlation	—	0.537

Note. Maximum possible total score = 35. Total pretest/posttest means and SDs are not reported for the reason explained in the Methodology and in the note to Table 2.

Within the experimental group, Pearson's correlation coefficient (r = 0.531) and Spearman's correlation coefficient (rho = 0.537) between pretest and posttest scores indicated a moderate positive association between the two measurement occasions. This result describes score consistency within the experimental group; it does not test the alternative hypothesis (H1) and does not by itself establish an intervention effect.

The differences between groups are illustrated in Figure 1. As shown, the experimental group achieved vocabulary gains that were considerably greater than those obtained by the control group, demonstrating the effectiveness of the intervention.

Figure 1: Mean vocabulary gains in the experimental and control groups



Source: thesis Tables 13-20.

No systematic observation protocol was used in this quantitative study, and no observation data were collected. Therefore, no claims are made here about observed motivation, engagement, or learner autonomy. No systematic observation protocol was used in this quantitative study, and no observation data were collected. Therefore, no claims are made here about observed motivation, engagement, or learner autonomy. These observations suggest that the Flipped Classroom model not only enhanced vocabulary acquisition but also promoted learner autonomy and active participation, two characteristics frequently associated with successful language learning environments.

The findings are consistent with the theoretical principles of flipped learning proposed by Bergmann and Sams (2012), who argue that transferring direct instruction outside the classroom allows students to engage more actively with content during face-to-face sessions. In the present study, students interacted with vocabulary materials independently through USA Learns and subsequently reinforced their learning through collaborative and communicative classroom activities. This instructional sequence appears to have facilitated deeper vocabulary processing and retention.

The results also support the conceptualization of the Flipped Classroom described by Bishop and Verleger (2013), who define flipped learning as a combination of individual computer-based instruction and interactive classroom learning. The integration of USA Learns enabled students to access multimedia resources, vocabulary exercises, and self-paced learning opportunities prior to classroom instruction. Consequently, classroom time could be devoted to activities requiring vocabulary use in meaningful communicative contexts.

Furthermore, the findings align with previous empirical research examining flipped learning in language education. Alnuhayt (2018) reported that flipped instruction positively influences vocabulary acquisition by increasing students' exposure to language input and encouraging active engagement with learning materials. Similarly, Retnaningsih et al. (2022) found that flipped learning environments support vocabulary development through repeated interaction with lexical items and enhanced learner participation. The substantial vocabulary gains observed in the experimental group provide additional evidence supporting these conclusions.

The results can also be interpreted through the lens of vocabulary acquisition theory. According to Nation (2013), vocabulary learning requires repeated encounters with lexical items across multiple contexts and opportunities for meaningful use. The Flipped Classroom model implemented in this study

provided students with multiple exposures to target vocabulary through digital materials, online exercises, and classroom interactions. This combination of independent study and communicative practice likely contributed to the observed improvements in lexical knowledge.

From a constructivist perspective, the findings support Aguilera-Ruiz et al. (2017), who argue that flipped learning promotes active knowledge construction by placing learners at the center of the educational process. Students in the experimental group assumed greater responsibility for their learning, engaged with instructional materials before class, and participated actively in collaborative activities during classroom sessions. These experiences may be related to the vocabulary gains reported in Tables 1 and 2. Motivation and autonomy were not measured in this study and are not claimed as outcomes.

Another relevant finding concerns the educational potential of USA Learns as a complementary learning tool. The platform provided structured instructional content, immediate feedback, and opportunities for repeated practice, all of which are recognized as important factors in successful vocabulary learning. These characteristics are consistent with the principles of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), which emphasize the role of technology in expanding learning opportunities and increasing access to language input (Beatty, 2013).

Overall, the findings provide descriptive evidence regarding the use of Flipped Classroom methodologies in EFL contexts. The larger vocabulary gain in the experimental group, together with the category-level pattern in Table 2, suggests that technology-supported flipped learning may serve as a useful pedagogical alternative for vocabulary instruction in secondary education. The results therefore contribute to the growing body of research advocating the integration of learner-centered and technology-enhanced approaches in foreign language education.

Table 2: Pretest and posttest means (M) and standard deviations (SD) by vocabulary category. Source: thesis Tables 13-20

Table 2: Pretest and posttest means (M) and standard deviations (SD) by vocabulary category
Source: thesis Tables 13-20

Category	Group	Pretest M (SD)	Posttest M (SD)	Gain
To Be (max 5)	Control	4.50 (0.87)	3.40 (0.92)	-1.10
To Be (max 5)	Experimental	4.27 (1.14)	3.64 (0.98)	-0.63
Calendar (max 15)	Control	11.65 (3.07)	12.05 (2.31)	+0.40
Calendar (max 15)	Experimental	10.50 (1.70)	9.86 (2.83)	-0.64
Personal info & numbers (max 8)	Control	6.70 (1.73)	6.35 (1.93)	-0.35
Personal info & numbers (max 8)	Experimental	7.43 (1.07)	7.57 (0.65)	+0.14
Cardinal / ordinal (max 14)	Control	12.80 (3.43)	12.30 (4.19)	-0.50
Cardinal / ordinal (max 14)	Experimental	12.95 (2.01)	13.50 (1.87)	+0.55
Parts of day (max 13)	Control	10.85 (1.95)	10.10 (3.14)	-0.75
Parts of day (max 13)	Experimental	10.00 (3.33)	9.19 (3.12)	-0.81
Daily routine & time (max 18)	Control	11.85 (6.27)	12.30 (6.45)	+0.45
Daily routine & time (max 18)	Experimental	13.09 (4.40)	10.50 (4.88)	-2.59
Greetings (max 35)	Control	17.10 (7.54)	19.35 (9.60)	+2.25
Greetings (max 35)	Experimental	16.82 (6.02)	22.09 (7.23)	+5.27
Classroom vocab (max 13)	Control	8.05 (2.53)	11.35 (2.27)	+3.30
Classroom vocab (max 13)	Experimental	7.00 (1.82)	11.27 (2.17)	+4.27

Pedagogical implications

The findings of this study have important implications for English language teaching in secondary education. First, they demonstrate that vocabulary acquisition can be strengthened through the integration of technology-enhanced learning environments that extend learning opportunities beyond classroom hours. Second, the results highlight the potential of flipped learning to promote learner autonomy, self-regulation, and active engagement with language content. Third, the successful implementation of USA Learns suggests that freely available digital resources can provide cost-effective alternatives for schools seeking to improve English language instruction without substantial financial investment.

For teachers, the study supports the redesign of classroom practices in which direct instruction occurs before class through digital resources, allowing classroom time to focus on communicative interaction, collaborative learning, and problem-solving activities. For educational institutions, the findings emphasize the importance of teacher training, technological infrastructure, and policies that facilitate equitable access to digital learning resources.

Limitations

This study presents several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the research was conducted within a single public educational institution and involved a relatively small convenience sample of 41 eleventh-grade students. Consequently, the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts may be limited. Second, the gender distribution was unequal between groups (90% female in the control group vs. 57% female in the experimental group), which may have influenced performance. Third, although content validity was established through expert judgment and pilot testing, no statistical reliability coefficient, such as Cronbach's alpha, was calculated. Fourth, no inferential test of the between-group difference in gains is reported, so conclusions remain descriptive. Finally, access to technological resources varied among participants.

Future research

Future studies could examine the long-term effects of flipped learning on vocabulary retention and explore its impact on other language skills, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Research involving larger samples, multiple educational institutions, and diverse sociocultural contexts would contribute to strengthening the empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of technology-enhanced flipped learning environments in EFL education.

Conclusion

This study investigated the effect of a Flipped Classroom model supported by the USA Learns platform on English vocabulary acquisition among secondary school EFL learners. The findings demonstrated that students who participated in the technology-enhanced flipped learning intervention achieved greater vocabulary gains than those who received traditional instruction. The results provide evidence that combining autonomous learning opportunities with interactive classroom activities can significantly contribute to lexical development in foreign language learning contexts.

The comparison of pretest and posttest outcomes revealed a larger mean total gain in the experimental group (+2.5) than in the control group (+0.5). Category-level results were mixed: the experimental group showed the largest gains in greetings, presentations and farewells (+5.27) and classroom vocabulary (+4.27), small gains in personal information and numbers (+0.14) and cardinal and ordinal numbers (+0.55), and decreases in verb To Be (-0.63), calendar (-0.64), parts of the day (-0.81), and daily routine and time (-2.59) (Table 2). The moderate within-group pretest-posttest correlations (Pearson r = 0.531; Spearman rho = 0.537) describe score consistency in the experimental group and do not test the intervention effect.

The study also confirms the pedagogical value of the Flipped Classroom model as a learner-centred approach that promotes active participation, learner autonomy, and meaningful engagement with language content. By allowing students to access instructional materials before classroom sessions, the model created additional opportunities for vocabulary exposure and enabled classroom time to be used more effectively for communicative practice and collaborative learning. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the benefits of flipped learning environments for language education and support the integration of digital technologies into EFL instruction.

An important contribution of this study lies in the use of USA Learns as a freely accessible educational platform. The platform facilitated independent learning, provided continuous access to instructional resources, and supported the implementation of the flipped learning approach in a public-school context. Consequently, the findings suggest that free digital learning environments can serve as effective tools for promoting vocabulary acquisition, particularly in educational settings where access to commercial technological resources may be limited.

The study was conducted within a specific educational context and involved a non-probability sample, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Full limitations are reported in the Limitations section and are not repeated here. In conclusion, the findings of this study provide descriptive support for the Flipped Classroom model supported by USA Learns as an instructional strategy for enhancing English vocabulary acquisition in this context.

In conclusion, this study supports the effectiveness of the Flipped Classroom model supported by USA Learns as an innovative instructional strategy for enhancing English vocabulary acquisition. The results demonstrate that technology-enhanced, learner-centered approaches can create meaningful learning experiences and contribute significantly to the development of lexical competence among secondary school EFL learners.

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Understanding linguistic and interactional patterns in classrooms through the lens of spatial semiotics

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Abstract
The classroom spaces do not furnish learning in a neutral vessel but instead act as a semiotic space which shapes learning in terms of how communication occurs. This paper focuses on investigating the role of classroom spatiality in the development of language and interaction pattern during normal instruction processes. Although spoken language, teacher-student communication, and discourse practices have always been the subject of the traditional approach toward educational linguistics, little consideration has been paid to the spatial organisation of the classroom as a mode of communication. The understanding of classroom space has changed, as classrooms are no longer viewed as passive containers, but they are seen as dynamic, as an active materiality that mediates power. The paper employs spatial semiotics and analysis of multimodal interaction to investigate how the seating set-up, spatial closeness and teacher placement serve as meaning bearing signs that influence communicative behaviour. The study is a qualitative, naturalistic observation of one Access Microscholarship English-language class in northern Punjab, Pakistan (25 students aged 13 to 19), drawing on 15 three-hour lessons observed between 1 November and 21 December 2025, five each in rows, clusters and semicircular seating, with the researcher as class teacher. The analysis indicates that spatial formations implicitly guide who speaks, the flow of interaction, and which learners become visible or invisible in interaction. Students' seating position and body orientation are also shown to carry semiotic meaning in terms of visibility, engagement and avoidance. This research suggests that spatiality is an effective communicative resource that works silently but can be effectively employed to understand how the physical surroundings can influence the language behaviour and interaction processes in classrooms in schools.

Keywords*: classroom spatiality, spatial semiotics, multimodal interaction, classroom discourse, educational linguistics, proxemics, classroom communication, spatial organisation*

Introduction

Classrooms have long been known to be complicated communicative spaces where language and interaction and social meaning interact. Although classic studies within the educational linguistics field have concentrated on oral dialogues, pedagogical questioning, and student engagement (Mercer, 2019; Walsh, 2011), more recent approaches to the matter have made it a point to focus on communication as a multimodal and material experience, which goes beyond verbal interactions (Jewitt, 2016). In this growing perspective, classroom spatiality, physical organisation, allocation and orientation of bodies and objects, is an important but frequently ignored factor in influencing everyday communicative practice. Spatiality is not just an instructional background; it is a dynamic type of semiotics with an inherent meaning and a motivating way of interacting (van Leeuwen, 2021). Conceptualizing the way space speaks would thus be major in conceptualizing the way language is practiced and negotiated in school classrooms.

Remarkably, semiotics, which is loosely referred to as the study of signs and meaning-making processes, can offer a strong tool to examine classroom spatiality. Peirce (1955) and Saussure (1959) were

the classical semiotic theorists who theorised about signs, which are anything that represent something to someone, and this can be applied intuitively to the layout of desks, positioning of the teacher desk or how far apart the students are. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) say that in a modern social semiotics, these various modes of meaning realisation, such as spatial configuration, gaze, gesture, and material layout, interact to make up the way interaction is realised, and that the interaction between these various modes is what contributes to constituting the interaction. In this regard, furniture placement is not an organisational choice that is neutral but a resource that carries a meaning and affects communicative possibilities of the learners.

The accumulating literature on multimodal studies has suggested that classroom designs can shape the visibility, access to participation, and interaction patterns (Bezemer and Jewitt, 2018; Lim et al., 2012). As an illustration, the traditional rows of desks have been linked to teacher-focused communication, a more restrictive turn-taking, and less communication with peers (Byers et al., 2018). Conversely, circular or grouped designs have been determined to help students interact in a collaborative dialogue and enhance the linguistic agency of students (Abbot et al., 2014). Such results resonate with the idea of interactional territories by Goffman (1963) which argues that the spatial organisation determines who was placed to talk, to listen or not to talk. Spatial cues are semiotically functioning: they indicate authority, rights of participation, and expectations of relations even prior to the utterance of any words.

Although it has a solid theoretical basis, there is still a major gap in the research. A large part of the current literature has investigated spatial arrangement as a pedagogical or ergonomic variable but failed to consider spatiality through the prism of a semiotic perspective that previews the act of meaning-making. Research is more inclined to report on what occurs in various layouts as compared to explaining why such communicative patterns arise or what semiotic messages spatial arrangement may convey to learners. Also, the study of classroom discourse continues to give disproportionate attention to spoken language and, in most cases, space is viewed as a peripheral issue as opposed to a communicative tool (Walsh, 2011). Consequently, semiotic meanings that are entrenched in classroom spatiality have gone under-theorised and under-examined.

Semiotic approach has a potential to redefine classroom space as a linguistic space, a space where physical location serves as a non-verbal means of communication. To illustrate, when the teacher is moving around the classroom, it could be seen by students as a sign of their permission to interact or as a sign of surveillance or a sign of authority depending on the space distance and the direction the learner is facing the centre. In the same way, the location of students in seating arrangements can also be viewed as an indicator of comfort, confidence, resistance or disengagement. These interpretations are similar to the theory of proxemics created by Hall (1966), who assumed that the social relationships were conveyed by distances between bodies. In the classroom setting, proxemic selections can mutually control the right to be a participant in communication.

In addition to the physical setup, the classroom experience is an ongoing process of semiotic that is construed by the learners. Fast (2010) assumes that students are active readers of signs, as they interpret the appearance of the teacher, actions, and relative space in the room. This meaning makes the difference in terms of the classroom being viewed as a hierarchical or the thinking environment in which an egalitarian thinking should occur. These are the non-verbal cues that teachers need to comprehend in order to create an environment of mutual linguistic agency. The study of the spatiality as a language also corresponds to the larger change of multimodal views on education. Multimodal learning spaces acknowledge communication as dispersed through both verbal and non-verbal means such as spatial, visual and embodied (Jewitt, 2016). Through the study of spatial semiotics, scholars are able to reveal how classroom settings influence language possibilities that learners have. This is especially applicable in multilingual classrooms, where spatial configurations can have an impact on not only speaking people but also speaking languages, to whom, and how (Creese & Blackledge, 2015).

The observational character of the study gives the possibility to perform the fine-grained analysis of the classroom behaviour in natural events, keeping the authenticity of interactional patterns in their natural form. The spatial mapping and systematic observation will offer information about the adaptive communicative changes of learners in various classroom set-ups and the mediating role of the spatial presence of the teacher. The method recognises that as a dynamic semiotic space, the space of the classroom is constantly influenced by spatial cues, material configurations, and embodied practices to guide the course of the discourse. Space is not a fixed variable but is instead an interactive phenomenon of the classroom life.

The current study is a contribution to the broader picture of the knowledge about school communication in the intersection of the relatively uncharted area of spatiality, semiotics, and linguistic behaviour. It broadens the field of educational linguistics in that classroom space, itself, speaks, organizing what is done, cueing expectations, and facilitating or inhibiting interaction. The foregrounding of spatial semiotics also paves the way to the development of a more holistic perspective on the classroom communication whereby physical space and linguistic action are construed as reciprocally constructive.

Literature review

The anthropology and environmental psychology produced early research on space and communication, as opposed to educational linguistics. The initial theory of proxemics by Hall defined interpersonal distance as a communicative code that is culturally controlled and which indicates the closeness, the social hierarchy, and the position that a person occupies (Hall, 1966). Though it clearly showed that space is a communicative aspect as evident by the work of Hall, he concentrated on broad social interactions and architecture, but not classroom settings. Furthermore, proxemics was much more concerned with the proximity of individuals, rather than with the spatial semiotics of furnishings or material design. Therefore, although there is a conceptual basis to think about the meaning of space in this tradition, it does not directly explain how the layouts in classrooms impact on micro-patterns of interaction.

The more explicitly semiotic orientation was created as a result of the progress of social semiotics and multimodal discourse theory. Kress and van Leeuwen's influential book *Reading Images* held that spatial and visual spaces possess a grammar which is analogous to that of language (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). Their contribution justified the belief that layout, framing and positioning can encode the relation of institutions and power. Nonetheless, due to the fact that their framework was not conceived specifically as classroom research, a number of educational studies mention Kress and van Leeuwen in concept but nevertheless focus more on verbal discourse and less on spatial analysis. Spatiality is considered significant yet hardly analysed as a key way of communication in the classroom interaction. According to Marojević (2024), the physical architecture of schools, like the classical corridor-shaped organisation, is a semiotic process that strengthens the relationships of power-over and forms the identity of students. This corresponds to the view that students do not passively receive information around them; on the contrary, they actively process semiotic cues. According to Fast (2010), students base their meaning on the physical location and outlook of the teacher as signs which indicate either the egalitarianism or hierarchical nature of the thinking environment.

Jewitt (2005) developed this point of view with the notion that the classroom is a multimodal space where the walls, displays, seating arrangements, and material objects are incorporated to create a semiotic landscape (Jewitt, 2005). This contribution was a big change over regarding classroom space as neutral to seeing it as historically stratified with pedagogic sense. However, Jewitt continued to do little analysis in her early work, as she concentrated more on defining resources, and no longer on analysing how particular spatial set-ups influence turn-taking in real-time, linguistic visibility or participation.

Since the 2010s, multimodal researchers have developed empirical instruments to study the interaction of modes, including speech, gesture, gaze, and materiality, in education (Bezemer & Jewitt,

2010, 2018; Jewitt, 2016; Lim et al., 2012). These contributions made it a legitimate issue to include spatiality in multimodal classroom discourse analysis. Most multimodal research, however, remains focused on spoken communication, space is viewed as a contextual background in contrast to it being an analytic centre of interest. In more elaborate videos of classroom action, floor plans and seating arrangements are frequently referred to informally as opposed to being systematically mapped onto communicative behaviour. It means that multimodality has brought the possibility of the spatial analysis but was not able to completely fulfil the promise of spatial semiotics in classroom research.

Parallel to multimodal research, another set of studies has investigated seating arrangement in a different study; pedagogically or psychologically. Similarly, Fernandes et al. (2011) demonstrated a difference in seating arrangement to the level of participation, on task behaviour and perceived engagement (Fernandes et al., 2011). On the same note, Wheldall and Bradd (2010) established that rows and group tables do have an impact on behavioural performance and attention (Wheldall and Bradd, 2010). These studies are very effective in showing that layout is important, however, they conceptualise space as a behavioural variable and not as a semiotic system. They gauge outcomes (e.g., the participation levels) but not the analysis of meanings that are coded in spatial decisions or the interpretation of the meanings in the process of interaction by students. These studies, therefore, respond to the question, What happens in this layout? but not What does this layout say?

The physical layout of furniture is the physical environment created directly by the flow of participation, turn-taking. Abbot et al. (2014) represent the classroom mapping to reveal that the traditional rows are prone to discouraging the active participation, and the collaborative clusters would promote the varied patterns of interaction. These observations are consistent with Odum et al. (2021), who reported student-to-student engagement 8% higher in a mobile-table classroom than in a mobile-desk classroom (p. 27), although the difference was not statistically significant. This implies that the semiotic definition of a desk arrangement is entwisted with the linguistic agency that will be given to the students. Another important dimension of the importance of space to semiotics concerns the area of space, which is known as the spatial pedagogy; teacher mobility is considered to be a kind of intersemiotic resource that collaborates with a language and gesture. Lim et al. (2012) demonstrate using spatial mapping as the main meaning-making tool that can either initiate or inhibit student engagement by a teacher based on the teacher trajectory. This corporeal closeness or proxemics possesses intense affective and cognitive repercussions. Păstae (2025) demonstrates that lessening the actual distance between the teacher and the student can serve as an indication of being allowed to interact, which contributes to emotional connexion and knowledge retention to a great extent. The naturalistic observations conducted in the classroom and spatial mapping are used to record the impact of various layouts on turn-taking, participation, peer collaboration and verbal and nonverbal communication patterns.

Newer research about the flexible learning space has focused on innovative classrooms that include movable furniture and open spaces. Byers, Imms, and others discovered that flexible spaces are associated with a change in student movement, the patterns of collaboration, and teaching quality perceptions (Byers et al., 2018). The studies are a move towards understanding the pedagogical significance of space. However, they usually use perception polls, self-reflection assessments, or performance statistics as opposed to interaction analysis. Consequently, they uncover the correlations of space and outcomes and fail to demonstrate how linguistic behaviour is determined by spatial cues on the micro-level. The research on flexible space thus accentuates the significance of space yet often lacks the analytical profundity to comprehend space as a form of communication.

This gap was also affirmed by a recent systematic review of studies in multimodal classrooms. The review carried out with the help of a Systemic Functional-Multimodal Discourse Analysis framework has discovered that attention to a gesture, gaze, and visual artefacts is much more attentive, but the physical environment remains a rather stable context instead of an active semiotic resource (Wan et al., 2025). The authors have specifically requested the need to conduct additional research that incorporates

spatiality in the classroom meaning-making. This suggests that, even within well-developed multimodal and semiotic frameworks, spatial analysis specifically remains under-theorised, a gap this study addresses directly (Wan et al., 2025).

Within this wide range of literature, three problematic constraints come to mind. First, the initial semiotic and proxemic theories not only recognize the existence of space meaning but are too general and not classroom-specific (Hall, 1966; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). Second, empirical research on seating arrangements works well to establish that layout influences behaviour although it considers space as a technical or ergonomic aspect but not as a sign system (Fernandes et al., 2011; Wheldall and Bradd, 2010). Third, the idea of multimodal and flexible-space studies presents robust conceptual and pedagogical models but does not often make use of fine-grained spatial-linguistic analysis in live classroom interaction (Bezemer and Jewitt, 2018; Byers et al., 2018). Consequently, a small number of linguistic and interactional patterns of the classroom, e.g. turn planning, teacher presence, students-students interaction, or the semiotic meaning that students convey through seating arrangements and direction, have been systematically mapped against classroom spatial arrangements.

To counter such shortfalls, this study has the classroom spatiality squarely presented as a semiotic mode and analyses how it impacts on linguistic and interactive behaviour in regular classroom lessons. The study does not assess the classroom designs as being effective or not but perceives spatial planning as communicative messages that are read, negotiated and acted by the learners in reality. The research seeks to solve the empirical gap of fine-grained studies of space, language, and interaction in classroom through a combination of spatial mapping with the naturalistic observation.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical construct of this paper is based on the spatial semiotics, proxemic theory, and multimodal interaction analysis. Combined, these attitudes will conceive the classroom as a semiotic space where the spatial arrangements actually produce communicative behaviour. Spatial semiotics, which is based on the social semiotic theory, places space as a resource of meaning-making. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) adopt the view that spatial arrangements have a grammar that captures a social relation, authority and interaction patterns via their encoding in terms of placement, alignment and orientation. In this perspective, spatial arrangement of desks, physical nearness of learners and location of the teacher is considered to serve as cues to control and govern communicative possibilities. The classroom layouts are thus considered as semiotic options that contain and permit the participation.

In addition to this view is the theory of proxemics by Hall (Hall, 1966) which underlines that the spatial distance, territoriality and motion are culturally coded communicative messages. Proxemics offers a lexis of understanding the way teacher movement, or spatial nearness or distance among students can be used as a marker of engagement or authority or avoidance. Although proxemic principles have been originally formulated in wider social settings, they are very relevant to the classroom, where the spatial location of a learner determines their inclination to be invited to speak, checked or excluded.

Multimodal interaction analysis is the third element of the framework as it considers communication as being distributed among speech, gesture, gaze, embodiment, and material arrangement (Bezemer and Jewitt, 2010; Jewitt, 2016). The concept of multimodality has the effect of emphasizing that the interaction in classroom can be influenced not only by language but by a coordination of modes that also involve spatial placement and the physical space. Even though gesture or verbal interaction is widely focused in the multimodal studies, this study takes a step further by making the spatiality centre of examination. The inclusion of spatial semiotics, proxemics, and multimodal theory assists the conceptualization of the classroom space as a means of communication and helps to interpret the means of layout and positioning in shaping linguistic behaviour and interactional resource in a detailed way.

To move from these three perspectives to a systematic analytical framework, each was operationalised into a specific set of observable categories applied consistently across the data. Spatial semiotics (Kress &

van Leeuwen, 2006) was operationalised by coding chair placement, alignment, and orientation into discrete zones (e.g., front-centre, periphery, cluster interior), each treated as a semiotic unit with an associated visibility and access value. Proxemic theory (Hall, 1966) was operationalised by tracking the teacher's relative distance to each zone at 30-minute intervals during observation, so that shifts in proximity could be logged as discrete events rather than treated as impressionistic background. Multimodal interaction analysis (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2010; Jewitt, 2016) was operationalised by pairing each coded spatial event with a parallel record of accompanying embodied resources (gaze direction, body orientation, gesture) and verbal behaviour (turn initiation, response frequency, silence). This three-layer coding procedure, spatial zone, proxemic distance, and multimodal co-occurrence, allowed the three theoretical strands to be applied as a repeatable analytic instrument rather than as a general interpretive lens.

Methodology

The research design followed is a qualitative naturalistic observation design based on spatial semiotic and multimodal principles. This design is aimed at investigating whether classroom spatiality influences linguistic and interactional patterns in routine lessons without providing any external interventions, or gathering any personal information on the participants. Naturalistic approach retains the originality of the classroom setting and lets communication be studied as it occurs in relation to spatial information.

This study specifically addresses the following research questions: (1) How do different classroom spatial arrangements (rows, clusters, and semicircular seating) shape patterns of linguistic participation and turn-taking? (2) In what ways does teacher movement redistribute communicative opportunity across different spatial zones of the classroom? (3) How do students' seating position and body orientation index communicative engagement, authority, or avoidance within a spatial-semiotic framework?

The observed classroom was an Access Microscholarship class in northern Punjab, Pakistan. The Access Microscholarship Program is a U.S. Department of State English-language programme for teenage students. The class comprised 25 students aged 13 to 19. Fifteen lessons, each lasting three hours, were observed between 1 November and 21 December 2025, all on Saturdays and Sundays: five lessons in rows (1, 2, 8, 15 and 16 November), five in clusters (22, 23, 29 and 30 November and 6 December), and five in a semicircular layout (7, 13, 14, 20 and 21 December), as summarised in Table 1. The researcher was also the class teacher, and the three spatial arrangements compared, rows, clusters, and a semicircular layout, were not introduced specifically for this study; they were configurations already in regular pedagogical use in this classroom as part of normal teaching practice.

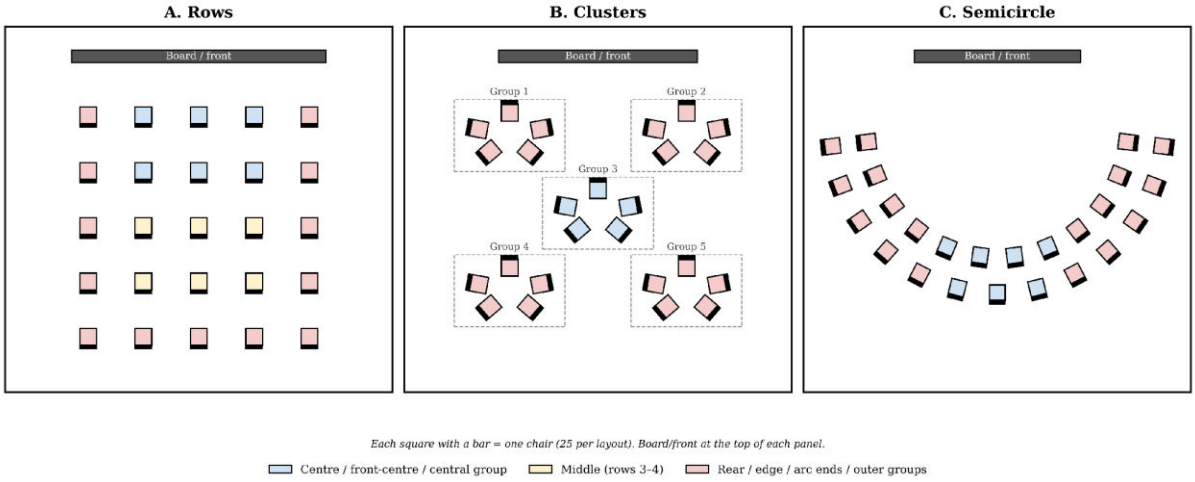
Table 1: Observation schedule by layout (2025)

Layout	Lessons	Dates observed	Lesson length	Observed time
Rows	5	1, 2, 8, 15, 16 Nov	3 h	15 h
Clusters	5	22, 23, 29, 30 Nov; 6 Dec	3 h	15 h
Semicircle	5	7, 13, 14, 20, 21 Dec	3 h	15 h
Total	**15**	**1 Nov – 21 Dec**		**45 h**

The study environment is a single classroom, which is observed during various lessons and with varying spatial layouts such as rows, clusters or semicircular seating. Such naturally existing or instructor-modulated configurations allow the comparative study of the effect of different configurations on participation and interaction. Detailed spatial maps had been created to record the positioning of chairs, the position of the teacher, circulation paths and relative visibility of various areas of the classroom, in each layout observed. These mapped layouts will be used as the major data on determining the semiotic meanings entrenched in the physical environment.

To make the analytical procedure transparent, each classroom layout was documented through a corresponding spatial map (see Figure 1). Structured field notes recorded, for each zone, the observed frequency of verbal turns, the direction of address, and any non-verbal cues (gaze, body orientation) accompanying participation. Brief informal notes were taken at approximately 15-minute intervals during each lesson, and a structured log of teacher position and zone-level participation was completed at 30-minute intervals. Per-lesson counts of whole-class turns (a student speaking to the teacher or the whole class), side-talk (quiet talk to a neighbour not set by the teacher) and peer exchanges (student-to-student exchanges) were entered in an observation log and are reported in Table 2. In rows, the zones were front-centre (the central chairs of the first two rows), middle (the central chairs of rows three and four) and rear/periphery (the last row and the side chairs along the walls); in the semicircle, the centre of the arc (the middle chairs) and the arc ends; in clusters, the cluster interior (the central group of five chairs) and the cluster edge (the four outer groups, 20 chairs).

Figure 1: Spatial maps of the three layouts: rows, clusters, semicircle



Note. Each square with a bar is one chair (25 per layout); the board is at the top of each panel. Shading marks the zones used in the analysis: blue = centre (in clusters, the central group), yellow = middle, pink = rear/edge (in clusters, the four outer groups).

Alongside spatial mapping, systematic classroom observations were conducted to capture communicative behaviour associated with each layout. Observational focus included the distribution of verbal participation across zones, peer-to-peer exchanges, body orientation, gesture, instances of silence, and patterns of teacher movement. Field notes were recorded in a structured manner to identify recurring patterns, shifts in interaction, and episodes where spatial cues appeared to influence communicative choices. No student was approached, recorded, or asked to provide information; the observations focused exclusively on publicly visible behaviour within the classroom.

The analysis proceeded in four integrated stages, reported in the Analysis section. First, each spatial configuration was interpreted using principles from spatial semiotics and proxemics to identify the communicative meanings suggested by layout and positioning. Second, observed interactional patterns were mapped onto the spatial templates to examine how participation corresponded to specific zones, proximities, or lines of sight. Third, spatial cues were associated with linguistic selectivity and participation structures, that is, with who took turns, who engaged in side-talk and who stayed silent. Fourth, insights from spatial interpretation, interactional mapping and this association were synthesised through a multimodal lens to generate a holistic understanding of how classroom spatiality functions as a communicative mode. The study consisted of observation of the researcher's own routine teaching

practice, and the layouts and teaching methods observed were already in regular use in the class. A formal permission letter was obtained from the programme coordinator, who knew that the observations were for research purposes. The students were informed about the research before the observation began, and their parents were informed through the class WhatsApp group. Because only existing pedagogy was observed and no personal data were collected, written parental consent was not taken. No student was approached, recorded or asked for information, and no names or identifying details were collected. All observations were limited to surface-level classroom behaviour occurring in publicly observable learning spaces.

As the researcher was also the class teacher, and the three spatial layouts examined were part of the teacher's routine, already-established classroom practice rather than arrangements introduced for the purposes of this study, no additional institutional ethics review was sought beyond the programme coordinator's formal permission letter. No students were individually approached, named, photographed, or recorded; all data were limited to anonymised, aggregate descriptions of publicly visible classroom behaviour, and no information capable of identifying an individual student was retained at any stage of data collection or analysis.

Analysis

The comparison is based on the ways in which classroom space arrangements relate to observable linguistic and interactional patterns in a spatial-semiotic and multimodal perspective. The information gathered through spatial mapping and naturalistic observation was analysed in a circular format which alternated between the physical landscape, the interactional behaviour and the interpretive schemes given by the spatial semiotics and proxemics. Since every classroom arrangement conveys specific meanings, i.e. in respect of visibility, authority, access and participation, the analysis views spatiality as an expressive structure that has a bearing on the way classroom conversation occurs.

1. Explaining the Semiotic Configurations of Spatial Layouts.

Every classroom formation was initially read as a semiotic set-up whose material form had connoting meanings as to intended communicative relations. The emphasis of this step was on determining how the arrangement of chairs, circulation patterns and the positioning of teachers established the creation of various "zones of interaction" which formed a verbal participation opportunity. The use of spatial grammar as conceived by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) was sparsely used, and only in cases where it was helpful to the task of interpretation, the interpretations were not abstract, but rather treated as a hypothesis with observable behaviour to be studied.

2. Mapping Interactional Patterns between Spatial Zones.

Interactional patterns were overlaid onto the spatial template once the semiotic meanings of each layout had been determined. The step included recording the focus of participation, the lack of it, and the flow of interaction throughout the room. Themes including responding to questions in the front centre more often, less often in the peripheral areas, or more often in the peer talk in the clustered school seat replicated themselves time and again. Such patterns were perceived as communicative reactions to spatial signals instead of being treated as behavioural preferences. To illustrate, the reduced verbal communication of the back row was not discussed as not being interested but rather due to its semiotic position being a low-visibility, low-access space (Hall, 1966).

Movement of teachers was also very instrumental in changing these patterns of interaction. In cases where the teacher circulated, the participation was spread more equally in the zones; in other cases where the teacher stood, the interaction was found around highly visible zones. The analysis thus did not look at positioning of teachers as simply the physical presence but as a semiotic message that redistributed the communicative opportunity.

3. Association of Spatial Cues and Linguistic Selectivity and Participation Structures.

The third analytical strand was concerned with the correlation of observable linguistic behaviour, i.e. turn-taking, frequency of responding, and peer-to-peer interactions to the spatial indicators incorporated in each layout. This necessitated a detailed observation of body orientation, eye movement and positioning and use of language. Those who were closer to the teacher or towards the centre made more turn initiations and those who were facing their bodies away of the focal point initiated more side-talk or stayed silent. In other words, students in rear and peripheral seats, and those turned away from the focal point, contributed fewer whole-class turns but more side-talk, as reported in the Findings (Table 2). Instead of providing a purely personal interpretation of these behaviours, the analysis placed them in a semiotic space of the classroom. The use of multimodal views bolsters this explanation by acknowledging the fact that communication is organised on spatial and embodied modalities, and not just through speech (Bezemer and Jewitt, 2010).

The quality of linguistic interaction was also associated with spatial cues. The clustered layouts produced spontaneous peer-to-peer interactions more often, which indicated that the proximity in the space supported small-group micro-dialogues. Conversely, linear configurations made communication flow mostly through the teacher and formed more vertical discourse pattern. These results support the view that spatiality is closely bound up with not only who speaks but how speaking comes to be socially and materially organised.

4. Integrating Spatial, Semiotic and Interactional Understandings.

The last analysis phase was a synthesis of spatial and interactional knowledge to an integrated description of classroom communication. Instead, the evidence suggested that spatiality is one of the most eloquent yet silent communicative resources: it guides the attention lines, defines the participation rights, and affects the discourse movement. A semicircular design, such as expressed openness and collective orientation, generated more horizontal interactional designs. On the other hand, a fixed front and back layout expressed hierarchical relationships and generated more teacher centred turn taking patterns. Such findings are echoed by the multimodal research that material arrangements can redistribute communicative agency (Jewitt, 2016), but the current study has gone further and demonstrated how exactly such redistribution takes place in various spatial arrangements.

Findings

The discussion of the spatiality of the classroom in various layouts identified three interdependent results that provide a depiction of how physical set-ups are semiotic resources shaping linguistic behaviour and interactional tendencies. These results show that classroom space is not neutral, in fact, it silently organizes communication by providing notifications of expectations and redistribution of participation opportunities.

The initial important discovery is related to the development of high and low visibility participation areas. In the layouts that were well oriented towards the front-back, the participation typically centred in the frontal area where the students could see the teacher directly. Students in the rear corners or on the periphery contributed far fewer whole-class turns (27 across the five rows lessons, against 96 from the front-centre zone and 58 from the middle zone; Table 2), but they engaged in more side-talk (82 episodes, against 27 in the front-centre zone). Participation therefore did not disappear from low-visibility seats; it appeared to move from the public floor to talk with neighbours. In each of the five rows lessons the front-centre zone produced more whole-class turns than the rear/periphery, and the observation notes do not suggest that this was simply a matter of individual students' ability or motivation, although neither was measured. Because the zones differ in size (6, 6 and 13 chairs), the per-chair picture is also given: the front-centre zone produced about 3.2 whole-class turns per chair per lesson, the middle zone 1.9 and the rear/periphery 0.4, while side-talk per chair was highest in the middle zone (1.7), followed by the rear/periphery (1.3) and the front-centre (0.9). Rather, they mirrored the semiotic resources of the spatial

organisation: the centrality positions became a marker of legitimacy and immediacy, and the peripheral spaces were low-participation zones (Hall, 1966).

Table 2: Whole-class turns, side-talk and peer exchanges by layout and zone (totals across five lessons per layout; mean per lesson in brackets)

Layout	Zone	Chairs	Whole-class turns	Side-talk episodes	Peer exchanges
Rows	Front-centre	6	96 (19.2)	27 (5.4)	
Rows	Middle	6	58 (11.6)	50 (10.0)	
Rows	Rear/periphery	13	27 (5.4)	82 (16.4)	
Rows	**All zones**	**25**	**181 (36.2)**	**159 (31.8)**	**46 (9.2)**
Clusters	Cluster interior	5	65 (13.0)	50 (10.0)	
Clusters	Cluster edge	20	70 (14.0)	60 (12.0)	
Clusters	**All zones**	**25**	**135 (27.0)**	**110 (22.0)**	**120 (24.0)**
Semicircle	Centre of arc	7	82 (16.4)	26 (5.2)	
Semicircle	Arc ends	18	79 (15.8)	29 (5.8)	
Semicircle	**All zones**	**25**	**161 (32.2)**	**55 (11.0)**	**75 (15.0)**

Note. Counts are from the researcher's observation log. Chairs = number of chairs in the zone. Zones differ in size, so per-chair rates are given in the text; peer exchanges were recorded for the whole room.

The second discovery is associated with the redistribution involving teacher movement. The teacher would go around the classroom and interaction became less centralised and broad. The involvement in once silent areas rose, peer-to-peer interactions became decentralised. In comparison, in situations where the teacher stood still (especially at the front) social exchange was directed towards the students who were nearest to this stationary centre. Teacher movement then acted as a semiotic signal and indicated the changing centres of attention and the change in the willingness of students to take turns. This trend emphasises the application of spatial mobility, which can lead to decentralisation of classroom talk, and more equal interaction despite the lack of verbal stimulation. In the two rows lessons in which the teacher mostly circulated, turns from the rear/periphery averaged 7.5 per lesson, against 4.0 in the three lessons in which the teacher stayed mostly at the front, and peer exchanges averaged 10.5 against 8.3 (Table 3). The differences were smaller in clusters and the semicircle, and with so few lessons in each condition these comparisons are suggestive only.

Table 3: Mean rear/periphery (or arc-end) turns and mean peer exchanges per lesson, by layout and teacher movement

Layout	Teacher mostly	Lessons	Rear/edge turns (mean)	Peer exchanges (mean)
Rows	At the front	3	4.0	8.3
Rows	Circulating	2	7.5	10.5
Clusters	At the front	2	12.5	25.0
Clusters	Circulating	3	15.0	23.3
Semicircle	At the front	3	15.3	14.7
Semicircle	Circulating	2	16.5	15.5

The third conclusion deals with the communicative capabilities of clustered and linear seating. The layouts of the cluster enabled greater spontaneous peer communication and interaction coupled with the short, collaborative communication, and the layouts of the linear rows solely led to a teacher-controlled discourse. Peer exchanges totalled 120 across the five cluster lessons (24 per lesson), against 46 in rows (9 per lesson) and 75 in the semicircle (15 per lesson) (Table 2). In the central group (the cluster interior), students produced about 2.6 whole-class turns per chair per lesson, against 0.7 in the four outer groups, and more side-talk per chair (2.0 against 0.6); because this is a single group of five chairs, it may reflect

who sat there as much as where. In cluster placements, the student bodies were oriented towards others thereby forming micro-communication networks that facilitated peer-scaffold, collaborative problem solutions, and low-stakes questions. Conversely, the linear rows directed the attention to the teacher, which supported a vertical mode of interaction. Instead of understanding this contrast as an easy pedagogical choice, the data indicate that each design conveys varying expectations regarding the direction in which two people should be, with whom, and who is to speak to whom, and in which direction. These results are in line with multimodal approaches that claim that spatial orientation and material configuration affect communicative agency (Bezemer and Jewitt, 2010), but here the trends emerged from routine classroom practice rather than a controlled design experiment.

The semicircular layout showed a different pattern. Whole-class turns were spread almost evenly between the middle of the arc and its ends (82 and 79 across the five lessons), and side-talk was the lowest of the three layouts (55 episodes, against 159 in rows and 110 in clusters). The researcher's impression was that students seated in the middle of the arc were the most engaged and initiated conversation most often, and the counts agree once chair numbers are considered: the seven central chairs produced about 2.3 whole-class turns per chair per lesson, against 0.9 for the eighteen chairs at the arc ends. Peer exchanges (15 per lesson) fell between rows and clusters. Together these observations suggest that an open, shared orientation balanced visibility across the room without the dense peer exchange of clusters.

Representative notes from the observation log illustrate these patterns. In a rows lesson with the teacher at the front: "Turns concentrated towards the front; side-talk more frequent in the rear." (Lesson 1, 1 November). In a rows lesson with the teacher circulating: "During circulation, rear-zone turns increased and participation broadened." (Lesson 4, 15 November). In clusters: "Students oriented towards one another and sustained group discussion." (Lesson 7, 23 November). In the semicircle: "Participation was distributed across the arc during teacher movement." (Lesson 12, 13 December).

All these findings indicate that classroom spatiality is a communicative resource that organises interaction, by establishing spaces of visibility, indicating transitional relations dynamics through the movement of teacher and determining whether discourse circulates vertically or horizontally.

Discussion

The results depict that the classroom spatiality is a dynamics semiotic system that promotes linguistic and interactional behaviour in delicate and effective ways. This disputes orthodox ideas of seating arrangement as a way of arranging bodies in a pedagogical convenience. Rather, the findings indicate that the presence of spatial cues conveys anticipations on how to participate, to be seen, and to be positioned in relation to others, which lend support to the social semiotic view that meaning is made not only through words, but also through space (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006).

The definition of high- and low-visibility zones adds significant detail to the existing knowledge on the participation structures. Earlier studies tend to explain variation in participation by patterns of teacher questioning (Mercer, 2019; Walsh, 2011). The present results suggest, however, that spatial position was strongly associated with participation in this class, although this study did not test position against teacher questioning. The students who sat in semiotically marginal areas, those with less visibility or indirect orientation to the teacher, participated less in whole-class discourse, but their greater side-talk suggests that they were not simply disengaged; the pattern appears to reflect the visibility and access that their positions afforded.

Teacher mobility appeared to decentralise interaction that suggests that movement itself can function as a form of embodied semiotic signalling. Teacher movement reallocated communicative opportunity (although there was no variation in the instructional strategy) by manipulating proximity, gaze lines and focal points. This observation is concordant with proxemic principles stating that the spatial proximity indicates availability, and relational position (Hall, 1966), but it goes beyond it showing how mobility may

act proactively to restructure participation across regions. It indicates that the spatial presence of teachers is consequential to the interactional equity as their verbal facilitation strategies.

The comparison between cluster and linear layouts enhances the existing discussions on classroom design in that spatiality does not only correlate with some communicative behaviours, it appears to shape them. The arrangement of clusters symbolically allows lateral interaction, and the arrangement of rows encourages vertical discourse dominated by the teacher. This is in response to naive suggestions that flexible layouts are by default better at engaging. Instead, it is possible to note that the findings suggest that each layout has its own communicative script; clusters and rows promote peer networks and authoritative structures respectively. These differences resonate with the results of multimodal studies that indicate that spatial configurations mediate communicative agency (Jewitt, 2016), but this paper provides new evidence that illustrates the way these processes appear to take place in real-life classroom interactions. The semicircle, finally, produced the lowest side-talk of the three layouts, and its central chairs generated the most turns per chair, which suggests that an open, shared orientation made the middle of the arc a high-visibility position without the dense peer exchange of clusters.

On a larger scale, the results make spatiality a key aspect of the communicative ecology of the classroom. When the concept of classroom is seen as a multimodal space, the space cues can never be marginal; they are part of the way learners comprehend the rights of participation, the proximities between parties, and speech channels. The research is therefore an extension of the field of educational linguistics in that it places space as a significant communicative tool as opposed to a setting. This opinion challenges the views of educators and researchers to rethink the role of linguistic behaviour created through semiotic messages that are established in the classroom design and the spatial organisation.

These findings also speak directly to a gap identified in the most recent methodological literature. Wan et al.'s (2025) systematic review of twenty-five multimodal classroom discourse studies published between 2016 and 2024 found that, although gesture, gaze, and digital resources are now well represented in classroom discourse research, spatial arrangement itself remains comparatively under-analysed as a primary semiotic resource rather than a background variable. The present findings help to narrow this gap by demonstrating, through sustained naturalistic observation of one class across three layouts, that spatial organisation was systematically associated with who speaks, when, and to whom.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. It is a single-class case study, and the researcher was also the class teacher, so teaching and observation were carried out by the same person, which may have shaped both what was noticed and how students behaved. The three layouts were used in blocks (rows from 1 to 16 November, clusters from 22 November to 6 December, and the semicircle from 7 to 21 December 2025), so differences between layouts are confounded with time and with the students' growing familiarity with one another and with the teacher. No audio or video was recorded; brief informal notes were made at about 15-minute intervals and a structured log was completed at 30-minute intervals, so the counts are best treated as approximate and descriptive, and no statistical tests were applied. Per-chair rates assume that every chair was occupied in every lesson, because attendance was not recorded, and they ignore who sat where. Posture was not systematically recorded, and the students' own views about where they sat were not collected. The findings are therefore indicative and not generalisable, and should be tested with larger samples, recorded data and designs that vary layout independently of time.

Conclusion

The results of this paper indicate that classroom spatiality is an important semiotic resource that shapes linguistic behaviour, participation patterns and interactional courses in the daily lessons. Spatial arrangement does not represent a neutral feature of organisations but expresses implicit assumptions of visibility, power and entry to participation. The constant appearance of the high-visibility and low-visibility

areas emphasize the communicative implications of the space proximity and orientation beyond the agenda of the pedagogical goals. These tendencies reinforce the social semiotic perspective in general, which holds that spatial configurations are meaning-making systems that dictate the distribution of communicative functions (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006).

Movement among teachers was revealed to be a key part in the redistribution of communicative agency, which implies that spatial mobility has the potential of alleviating the hierarchical tendencies that are commonly supported through fixed formations. This is in line with the proxemic principles, which postulates that relational stance is communicated by spatial distance (Hall, 1966), but in the current study, the findings suggest that mobility between zones can actively influence the willingness of students to engage. The observation that rear-zone participation was somewhat higher in lessons in which the teacher circulated suggests that movement alone, without additional verbal facilitation, may help to redistribute the ownership of participation, although this needs to be tested with more lessons.

The difference between cluster and linear layouts also serves to emphasise the fact that the various spatial arrangements encode different communicative scripts. Clusters encouraged lateral interaction by means of bodily orientation and common physical foci, and linear rows directed discourse to the teacher, which created more vertical turn-taking designs. These tendencies can be related to multimodal scholarship, which recognises material arrangements as part and parcel of meaning-making conditions (Bezemer and Jewitt, 2010), but the present study adds new evidence by tracing the development of such dynamics using naturalistic classroom behaviour instead of artificial design experiments.

In general, the results redefine the concept of classroom space as a communicative practice and not simply a background. Spatial cues (visibility, orientation, proximity and openness) shape how students position themselves linguistically and socially in classroom interaction. This extends educational linguistics by incorporating the physical design of the classroom into the analysis of discourse and interaction. The study can be conceptually and empirically expanded to the current debate on classroom communication because it shows that the possibility of speaking is not only formed by space but also by how and where.

The practical and theoretical implications are both effective. In practice, the concept of spatiality as communication promotes more deliberate movement practices and design, whereby teachers can redistribute the participation without changing the content in the curriculum. Theoretically, the paper highlights that future research should have a more central role of the spatial analysis in multimodal and discourse-based studies of classroom life. Although classroom talk is critical to the study of linguistics, this research suggests that space organisation of both bodies and objects in the learning room is also a vital part of enacting, negotiating, and constraining meaning-making.

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Teachers' work-related stress during the transition to Estonian-language education: stressors and ways to manage them

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Abstract
In the context of increasing migration and the transition to Estonian-language education starting in the fall of 2024, more and more children whose mother tongue differs from the language of instruction in schools and whose linguistic repertoires include multiple languages are studying in Estonian general education schools. This has highlighted the need to adapt teaching practices and places new demands on teachers working in Estonia. The aim of this study was to examine the factors that basic school teachers perceive as sources of work-related stress and to identify possible solutions for supporting teachers' mental well-being and reducing stress. The study used semi-structured interviews with Estonian basic school teachers as the research method. The findings revealed that teachers' increased levels of work-related stress in recent years are predominantly related to work overload, which may be connected to the shortage of teachers. In addition, the study identified several other temporary and persistent sources of stress experienced by teachers.

Keywords: *basic school teachers, burnout, Estonia, multilingual education, stress management, teaching profession, work-related stress*

Introduction

Teacher work-related stress and burnout have become significant challenges affecting the attractiveness and sustainability of the teaching profession. A survey of 1,700 teachers conducted by the Estonian Education Personnel Union in 2022 found that 92% had experienced burnout at work, while 23% reported feeling constantly exhausted (Estonian Education Personnel Union, 2022). Previous research has also demonstrated that higher levels of work-related stress increase the likelihood of burnout, which may result not only in teachers leaving the profession but also in serious health problems among those working in education (Mugu, 2011; National Audit Office of Estonia, 2020). Given that Estonia is already facing a shortage of teachers (Haugas and Varblane, 2022), reducing teachers' work-related stress and preventing burnout are important factors in both attracting new teachers to schools and retaining experienced teachers. This issue is further emphasised by the aging of the teaching workforce and the large number of teachers expected to retire in the coming years (National Audit Office of Estonia, 2020).

In the Estonian school context, these challenges are further shaped by increasing linguistic diversity and changes in language policy in education. The topic of multilingualism has become particularly relevant due to the increasing number of students with a migrant background, as well as the transition to Estonian-language education. More and more students whose mother tongue differs from the language of instruction and whose linguistic repertoire includes multiple languages are studying in Estonian general education schools. Consequently, teachers are increasingly required to take into account learners' different mother tongues, language proficiency levels and cultural backgrounds. This places new demands on teaching practices and raises questions about which approaches and strategies best support the development of multilingual learners in general education schools.

One aspect that has added emotional tension to a part of the Estonian teaching community in recent years (see e.g. Niitmäe and Solomina, 2025) is the amendment to the Basic and Upper Secondary Schools Act adopted by the Parliament of the Republic of Estonia (Riigikogu, 2022). According to this amendment, the transition to Estonian as the language of instruction in schools previously using Russian as the language of instruction (new term: transition schools) began in the 2024/2025 academic year in preschool institutions and in grades 1 and 4 in schools. The transition to Estonian-language education is planned to be completed in Estonia by 2030 (ibid.).

Few qualitative studies have examined work-related stress from the perspective of Estonian teachers. Gurt (2020) studied students' views on the factors contributing to teachers' work-related stress, so teachers' own accounts were outside the scope of that study. The present study therefore uses a qualitative approach to examine the stressors experienced by teachers in basic schools and the strategies they themselves identify for managing stress.

Work-related stress and burnout among teachers continue to be a widespread issue across Estonia (National Audit Office of Estonia, 2020). To solve this, implementation of prevention and mitigation measures at national level, coordinated by the Republic of Estonia Ministry of Education and Research, may prove appropriate, changing the organization of teachers' work so that the impact of stressors is reduced or so that teachers have at their disposal better ways to cope with stress. From the aforementioned stems the research problem of the study on which the article is based: namely, the factors that influence teachers' work-related stress should be studied in more detail, arriving at possible solutions on how to stop teacher burnout. Considering the topicality of the subject matter, this topic is currently still relatively under-researched.

Consequently, the objectives of the article are to ascertain what basic school teachers believe causes stress in their teaching work (including the context of the transition to Estonian-language education), and to find solutions based on teachers' opinions to support teachers' mental well-being and reduce stress. Based on the objective of the paper, two research questions were posed:

1. What are the factors that basic school teachers believe cause work-related stress in teachers?
2. What can teachers themselves, educational institutions, and the state do to support teachers' mental well-being and reduce teachers' work-related stress levels?

The qualitative study underlying this article is based on semi-structured individual interviews conducted with Estonian basic school teachers working in rural and urban schools located in different parts of Estonia.

Stress in the teaching profession

Based on a variety of studies, it has been found that long-term work-related stress and higher stress levels can lead to burnout (Mugu, 2011; National Audit Office of Estonia, 2020), which is accompanied by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, i.e. loss of real interest in work results, and reduced performance (see also Salvagioni et al., 2017). Emotional exhaustion is, in terms of symptoms, most similar to experiencing stress as both typically manifest as headaches, chronic fatigue, high blood pressure, sleep disorders, and frequent viral illnesses (Maslach and Leiter, 2016). If other signs of burnout appear, the risk of developing very serious physical and mental health problems increases (see e.g. Salvagioni et al., 2017). Given the growing challenges related to teachers' work-related stress and burnout, further research is needed to examine the factors contributing to occupational stress and to identify effective strategies at different levels for preventing burnout.

Prilleltensky and colleagues (2016) argue that individual-level stressors are related to teachers' personal characteristics and their ability to cope with stressful situations. Being unsure of their professional competence can be exceedingly stressful for teachers (Wieczorek, 2016). Professional failures, such as the perception that they are unable to cope with students with behavioural issues, for example, have a negative impact on teacher self-efficacy (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2017). This, in turn, is

likely to increase stress levels if teachers feel they are unable to cope with what is transpiring in the classroom (ibid.). It is clear that social-emotional competence is of great importance in teaching work as it helps build better relationships with students and establish a better learning environment in the classroom (Collie et al., 2012).

A lack of resources can also be considered as an individual stressor for teachers, as explained by Bakker and colleagues' (2004) model of job demands-resources. Teachers experience high levels of stress when they do not have enough time to tackle current work tasks, such as preparing lessons, creating new learning materials and reviewing student work, or when teachers have little free time due to the burden of these tasks (Feltoe et al., 2016). Shortages of resources can also include, for example, inadequate support services for students with special educational needs and inappropriate teaching materials which increase the teacher's workload (Richards, 2012; International Labour Organization, 2016).

Empirical studies conducted in both Estonia and the USA confirm the great significance of high workload and lack of resources as stress factors for teachers. According to a study conducted among teachers in schools in Estonia, in Tartu city, high workload is the most common stressor, and lack of time is the third most common stressor (Ruus, 2014). In the USA, it has been observed that high workload has led to sleep deprivation for many teachers as extended periods of time spent completing tasks result in less than six hours of sleep per day (Farley and Chamberlain 2021, p. 305).

Interpersonal factors are also a significant source of stress for teachers, as their work involves ample communication and they are exposed to different people who have varied expectations of the teacher. Teachers may experience conflicts with students, parents, and school administrators if they foster different views on teaching and school related issues. (Prilleltensky et al., 2016) Coworkers can be supportive and reduce stress levels; yet, they can also cause social pressure for the teacher, leading to even higher stress levels (Wieczorek, 2016). Stress from parents can be related to the high demands placed on teachers as well as excessive parental interference in teachers' work. Parents sometimes blame teachers without grounds for students' poor academic performance and various school-related problematic issues (Gurt, 2020). However, earlier studies conducted in Estonia indicate that student behaviour is one of the most important stressors for teachers (see e.g. Gurt, 2020; Ruus, 2014). In addition, if teachers discern that their remuneration is low and there is a risk of losing their job, this can lead to significantly higher stress levels among teachers (Wieczorek, 2016). Organisational culture certainly also affects employees' stress levels.

Among organization-level stressors, educational reforms and changes in the organization and nature of teaching work have been discussed in scientific sources quite predominantly (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021; Shaw, 2016; Travers, 2017). Studies confirm that, in general, educational reforms have increased the demands on teachers' work and their responsibility, and teachers' performance is now assessed more based on formal criteria (see, for example, Putwain and Von der Embse, 2019; Travers, 2017). Furthermore, teachers' performance has begun to be assessed based on student results, which increases the teachers' feeling that they are fully responsible for their students' progress (Shaw, 2016). Today, as compared to earlier times, an increased number of different parties are making demands as regarding teachers' work: teachers are under pressure from school management, parents, and society to improve students' academic performance (Herman et al., 2018). The result can be a situation where teachers devote a lot of time and energy to teaching students preparing for exams, rendering the pre-exam periods exceedingly stressful for teachers (Feltoe et al., 2016). Based on her research, Travers (2017) has found that there has been a trend towards greater regulation and institutional control in the organization of teaching work, on account of which it can be assumed that a certain number of teachers perceive a decrease in their autonomy as teachers.

In the Estonian context, the transition to Estonian-language education in schools adds challenges for some teachers (Niitmäe, Solomina 2025). On the one hand, teachers must consider that teaching must take place by content and language integrated learning (CLIL) when there are students with a mother

tongue other than Estonian in the classroom. This means that teachers must create teaching strategies that support language development, focusing on ensuring that students are able to acquire both subject-specific knowledge and the necessary academic language (Ruiz de Zarobe, 2025). Such strategies are not only important in language learning, but in all subjects (ibid.). All this requires teachers to consciously consider linguistic diversity in their teaching practice.

On the other hand, teachers must simultaneously find a balance between the goals of integration and the development of Estonian as the state language of Estonia (Bower, 2020). Namely, in recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on valuing the mother tongue of all learners and treating multilingualism as a resource (OECD, 2019). International recommendations, including European Union and OECD documents, have also influenced the Estonian education discourse, highlighting the need to support multilingual learners systematically and based on research (ibid.).

It should not be forgotten that cooperation skills between school management, parents and teachers are also very important (see also Bower, 2020), and certainly also with a view to the formation of students' identity and cultural orientation. In practice, this means that schools must find a balance between teaching the state language and maintaining the learners' mother tongue and linguistic identity. It can be stated that this places quite high expectations on teachers from society, parents, school administrations, and actually the students themselves.

However, the impact of changes in the organisation of education on teachers' stress levels may also depend on how teachers and other stakeholders interpret the pressures associated with these changes and what strategies they develop to cope with them.

Supporting teachers' mental well-being to reduce stress

Teachers can use rational adaptation strategies or implement avoidant adaptation to reduce stress (Foley and Murphy, 2015). In the first case, teachers consciously try to find a solution to stressful situations, in the second case, they distance themselves from these situations and therefore from teaching work in general, focusing on substitute activities that can sometimes be based on self-harming behavioural patterns (ibid.). Empirically, it has been confirmed that teachers who apply rational adaptation, e.g. approach problems positively and try to find solutions to complex situations, are better able to reduce stress levels (Antoniou et al., 2013). In contrast, avoidant behaviour results in continuous high stress levels in the long term, which can lead to burnout (ibid.).

Teachers' higher levels of mental or psychological well-being help to prevent stress. If teachers are generally satisfied with their work and life, and if they feel that they can do their job at least on a satisfactory level, it can be assumed that this should help them cope better with stressors (Bradley et al., 2018). Therefore, implementation of measures that support teachers' psychological well-being have the potential to reduce stress among teachers.

In conclusion, the level of stress in teachers can be prevented and reduced by both teachers themselves and school management and at a beyond-the-school (local government, state) level. Korotkov (2020) is of the opinion that in addition to the employer, teachers themselves should take responsibility and initiative for reducing their own work-related stress.

Measures implemented by teachers and schools

Empirically, it has been confirmed that one of the most common stress-reduction measures used by teachers is physical activity (Feltoe et al., 2016). Teachers also use other leisure and hobby activities to reduce stress, such as listening to music, attending cultural events, fishing, etc. (Arismunandar et al., 2022). Various creative activities, reading self-help literature, talking about school related issues with a support person, and a healthy lifestyle help in reducing stress (Reddy and Anuradha 2013). However, some researchers have found that some teachers respond to stress by practicing unhealthy lifestyles, such as emotional eating and alcohol consumption (Klassen and Durksen, 2014).

Schools should create an environment that supports teachers' mental well-being more broadly, rather than focusing solely on reducing work-related stress (Tikkanen et al., 2020). Strategies to support teachers' mental well-being should be proactive and make use of the resources available to the school. Strategies enforced should foster peer support, trust, and knowledge and workload sharing. Bradley and colleagues (2018) emphasize the need to create an empathetic and emotionally positive classroom environment – one in which both teachers and students feel safe at school.

Based on the linguistic aspect in the school context, it has also been emphasized that students must develop a sense of confidence so that they do not feel shy about speaking in the target language when communicating, primarily due to possible language errors (Genesee, 2005). It can be assumed that in a safe learning environment created by the teacher, it is easier for students to acquire language and subject knowledge, because the general atmosphere is calmer (ibid.).

Mugu (2011) notes that the first step in schools to reduce teachers' work-related stress should be to raise awareness of the issue, which is a prerequisite for schools to start planning anti-stress interventions. Schools should not approach teachers' issues presumptively, but instead should communicate with teachers and inquire as to what they think is preventing them from coping with their jobs well (Fitchett et al. 2018). Schools should also ensure that when teachers' work requires new skills, teachers are provided with appropriate training (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021).

Schools should provide social support to new teachers in particular: mentoring and onboarding schemes are suitable tools here; for example, schools can assign mentors to new teachers from among more experienced teachers (Fitchett et al., 2018). In addition, schools should allow teachers to have a greater say in decision-making so that they feel more involved in decision-making processes affecting school life (Collie et al., 2012; Richards, 2012).

In connection with the implementation of the principle of inclusive education in Estonia, students with special educational needs are now included in mainstream schools, and teachers can be assisted in this situation by training that instructs them on how to manage such students in the classroom (for example, students with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorders) (Von der Embse et al., 2019). In addition, teachers need skills to handle occasional disruptive behaviour among mainstream students (Bottiani et al., 2019). Classroom management training has been shown to be successful in reducing teachers' stress levels, and it is recommended that such interventions last for approximately 8-10 weeks and take place at least once a week for best results (Von der Embse et al., 2019). In conclusion, Ruus (2014) has recommended that every school develop a functioning system for resolving students' behavioural issues.

Measures beyond school

At national level, it is important to conduct regular studies on teachers' work-related stress: this will explain the causes of work-related stress and provide information on how it can be reduced (Ruus, 2014). Since the widespread prevalence of work-related stress among teachers is related to certain changes in the organization of teaching and the role of teachers, it is important to study how educational reforms are related to teachers' work-related stress (Farley and Chamberlain 2021). When planning innovations, the state should also develop measures to reduce the stressful impact of such innovations (Maphalala, 2014). If innovations require more work and effort from teachers, support measures to be offered to teachers should be considered (ibid.).

As regarding measures concerning the organization of education, teachers' stress can be reduced by reducing teachers' workload and class size (McCarthy et al. 2016). Teachers' perceived workload is naturally linked to national curricula. If the scope of the national curriculum is extensive or the requirements for learning outcomes are strict, teachers may discern great difficulties in achieving curricular objectives, which in turn intensifies work-related stress (Ramatlapana and Makonye, 2012).

Similarly to the school level, involvement of teachers is also important at the level beyond school. Educational reforms have been characterized by application of a top-down approach which allows for

faster and more resource-efficient implementation of the reforms, yet, at the same time, leaves teachers somewhat out of the decision-making process (Tikkanen et al., 2020). In connection with educational reforms and curriculum changes, teachers often perceive that they have no say in the innovations, being left out of educational policy decisions (see also Farley and Chamberlain 2021). Therefore, supporting teachers' mental well-being during educational reforms requires both top-down measures at the policy and institutional levels and bottom-up approaches that consider teachers' own experiences, needs and suggestions for reducing stress (see also Tikkanen et al., 2020).

However, another important aspect has been highlighted regarding prevention of work-related stress among teachers. McCarthy and colleagues (2016) are of the opinion that teachers could be helped in coping with stress if their relevant skills were developed at an early stage as part of teacher training curricula. Ramberg and colleagues (2020) share a similar view. Teacher training has been known to traditionally focus on developing teachers' professional knowledge and skills and knowledge and skills related to teaching methodology as well as on shaping teachers' professional values (McCarthy et al., 2016). However, as coping with stressors in the working environment is generally especially difficult for new teachers, stress management training should be included in teacher training, prior to new teachers starting work (ibid.). Teacher training, curricula, and school culture influence the values and attitudes a teacher adopts (Poom-Valickis and Löfström, 2014).

However, Prilleltensky and colleagues (2016) emphasize the notion that the responsibility for supporting the development of teachers' skills should not lie solely with schools. The authors of this article presume that since the nature of teachers' work-related stress and the principles of class management are largely universal, it may be appropriate to develop common educational materials for schools across the country.

Research methodology

In the study on which the article is based, semi-structured individual interviews were used for data collection, as this allows for a more open examination of the topic and supports understanding of the perspective being studied (see e.g. Esterberg, 2002). The use of this research method for data collection is justified by the objective of the study and the research questions. Since the objective of the study was to identify different stressors and find solutions for reducing stress and supporting mental well-being among basic school teachers, it has probably been possible to learn about a larger number of different stressors and solutions by asking each interviewee for their views separately.

The use of a semi-structured interview is justified because the interview topics are generally known; however, the study does not recommend setting restrictions on stressors and stress relief measures (Esterberg (2002). On the contrary, the study hopes to potentially discover stressors related to teaching work that have not been previously identified in studies. Therefore, the aim of this study has been to find novel ways to alleviate teachers' work-related stress and support their mental well-being, if possible.

Sampling principles

The study sample is, on the one hand, purposeful (see Õunapuu, 2014). Namely, the condition for inclusion in the sample was that the informants must be working as a basic school teacher in Estonia at the time of the study. Another criterion that was considered involved the formation of a sample that would include teachers employed in different cities and rural areas in Estonia. Teachers participated in the study from both Eastern and Western Estonia as well as from Estonia's largest cities Tallinn and Tartu. Teachers were included from both schools with Estonian as their language of instruction and transition schools (in Estonia, the latter were previously called *schools with Russian as their language of instruction*). On the other hand, the study sample was also compiled following the principle of convenience sampling (see also Etikan et al., 2016), examining individuals who, meeting the sampling criteria, were most

available for recruitment for the study (teachers known to the researchers and, in turn, the teachers' own friend network).

The sample comprised nine basic school teachers from rural and urban schools located in different parts of Estonia. The participants represented diverse school contexts, regions and subject areas, which enabled the study to capture a range of perspectives on teachers' experiences of work-related stress and possible ways of reducing it. Given the exploratory qualitative nature of the study, the aim was not to achieve statistical representativeness but to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' personal experiences and perceptions.

The study used purposive convenience sampling. Participants were recruited through the researchers' professional contacts and personal networks, which facilitated access to teachers with relevant experience. However, this sampling strategy may limit the transferability of the findings, and the results should therefore be interpreted in light of the specific characteristics of the participants and the study context.

A description of the teachers included in the sample is presented in Table 1. To ensure anonymity, the names of the teachers included in the sample are not disclosed in the paper and pseudonyms are used instead. Participants in the study were informed in advance as regarding the objectives of the study, participation was voluntary, and the interviewees could discontinue the interview and withdraw from the study at any time.

Table 1: Information of teachers that participated in the study

Respondent	Sex	Seniority	City/rural municipality	Homeroom teacher	Subject (field of study)
Maya	W	15 y	Narva	Yes	English Language
Yulika	W	7 y	Narva-Jõesuu	Yes	Natural Sciences
Mati	M	25 y	Pärnu	No	Estonian Language
Robert	M	30 y	Kohtla-Järve	No	Technology
Kristina	W	5 y	Tartu	No	Estonian Language
Kati	W	8 y	Sillamäe	Yes	Homeroom Teacher
Volodja	M	36 y	Tallinn	No	History, Civics and Citizenship Education
Daniela	W	5 y	Toila	Yes	Homeroom Teacher /After School Care
Erika	W	21 y	Tallinn	Yes	Estonian Language

Conducting the study and analysis methods

To conduct the interviews, teachers were contacted in advance by telephone or e-mail in 2024, requesting their consent to being interviewed and recorded on a voice recorder. If the response was "yes", the organizational aspects of the interview were agreed on, e.g. whether the interview would take place face-to-face or online in the Zoom environment. For practical reasons, conducting a face-to-face interview did not always prove to be the optimal solution, i.e. due to lack of time; some of the teachers, due to lack of time, agreed to participate in interviews only under the condition that it would take place online. The interviews were conducted, taking into account the interviewees' preferences, in either Estonian or Russian.

A mobile phone recorder was used to record the interviews, the informants were aware of this and agreed to the recording of the interviews. After the interviews were conducted, transcripts of the interviews were prepared by listening to the recordings. Full transcription was used as with partial

transcription some of the interviewees' responses would have been omitted (Bullock 2016). As the research questions were aimed at finding novel stressors and mitigation measures as regarding work-related stress, it was decided that it was not justified to omit some of the text from the interviewees' responses before analysis.

An inductive approach and open coding were used to analyse the interviews. In this methodology, no pre-defined categories were defined and coding was based on the content of the interviews, rather than on previous theoretical assumptions (Liu 2016). This approach is justified because the goal was to obtain new information about teachers' work-related stress, rather than to seek confirmation of existing information.

The coding process was conducted manually. The interview transcripts were read several times to identify meaningful units related to teachers' experiences of work-related stress, stressors and stress management strategies. Initial codes were assigned to relevant parts of the transcripts, and these codes were subsequently compared and grouped into broader categories reflecting recurring patterns in the data. The final categories were developed based on the frequency and relevance of the topics emerging from the interviews and in relation to the research questions.

The coding process was conducted manually by both authors. The first author analysed the interview data related specifically to the transition to Estonian-language education, including teachers' experiences and challenges connected with this process. The second author focused on other sources of work-related stress and the solutions suggested by teachers for reducing stress and supporting mental well-being. The separately coded data were subsequently compared and discussed by the authors, and the final categories and themes were developed based on the combined analysis of both perspectives.

During the coding process, the following thematic codes were formed based on the generalization of the interviewees' responses: *working conditions, health* and *problematic issues*; *attitude, recognition* and *workload*; *privileges, training* and *class occupancy.* The results of the study are illustrated with sample quotes from the interviews, selected to represent the main findings related to the research questions.

Results

Most common causes of stress among basic school teachers

The results are presented according to the two research questions of the study. First, the main sources of teachers' work-related stress are described, including workload-related, organisational, interpersonal and language-related challenges. Second, the strategies and measures suggested by teachers for reducing work-related stress and supporting mental well-being are presented.

Information obtained from the interviews indicates that all interviewed teachers described their workload as high, and several reported teaching more than 24 teaching hours per week during the academic year. Such high workloads may be related to the shortage of teachers in different parts of Estonia. A few of the interviewed teachers work both in the morning and evening shifts. In addition, one teacher supervises an after-school group unrelated to on-site classes and instructs a preschoolers' group. Teachers list conflict situations with parents, noise in school hallways and classrooms, and long work hours that extend into the evening as stressors for teachers. It should be noted here that one interviewee reported not to experience stress at work because they see a psychologist that is not a school psychologist, but a private psychologist.

Lack of free time during the workweek was also mentioned as a stressor as teachers are responsible for checking students' written assignments, preparing for lessons, and working with documents that have deadlines. Four teachers admitted that they prefer paperwork and filling out e-school because this is checked by the administration; however, when preparing for classes, they occasionally rely only on their own experiences and improvisation due to the lack of time.

Interview excerpt 1

Yulika: *I often have lots of ideas for diversifying lessons. But documentation takes a lot of time and, after classes, there is only one hour left until the end of the working day, which is usually spent either on student consultations or filling out e-school.*

Interview excerpt 2

Kristina: *Preparing individual curricula, for example, for students with special needs, is problematic for me. You have to consider all of the possible characteristics of the student and the curriculum has to be created from scratch. It takes a lot of time and I don't really understand why the subject teacher does this and not the coordinator.*

Substitutions also affect the condition of a language teacher when teaching an entire class; explaining a subject in a foreign language also requires more effort.

Interview excerpt 3

Erika: *It is very difficult when you teach a subject in a foreign language and there are 30 kids in the classroom. Among them, there are always those that hinder it and do not allow the others to learn. As for substitutions, these are isolated cases that I could tolerate, but if the class is not divided into groups, it becomes very difficult. As a teacher, I felt lost in this situation and, for objective reasons, I did not manage to achieve my goals by the end of the year.*

In addition, teaching based on an individual program for students from Ukraine that start from scratch, yet study with other students in the general class population, was mentioned during the interviews as an additional burden.

All of the interviewees noted that they had not observed any differences between male and female teachers in the discernment of stress. However, one informant added during the interview that male teachers generally “let out steam” less, i.e. do not share concerns with other colleagues as often. It was also emphasized that teachers with more work experience are noticed to be more resilient.

Techniques for preventing and managing work-related stress

To prevent work-related stress, Estonian teachers that participated in the study use various options, including weekend activities such as massage, fishing, reading books, and other recreational activities, and some simply prefer to sleep in. Regrettably, there were also those that admitted that they do not have free time to relax and that their whole life consists of work. This was especially noticeable among teachers whose obligations include the duties of a homeroom teacher.

Interview excerpt 4

Maya: *The job of a Homeroom Teacher is an actual nightmare for me because there are 33 kids in my class and they all have parents who find it imperative to be interested in homework and to argue every single time. Seeing as there is no time for this during the school day because I have to teach classes as well, I have to deal with issues related to my homeroom class after school, in the evenings, or even on the weekends. If for some reason I do not answer the phone or reply to an e-mail, they immediately call the administration or contact Tallinn Education Department. In my opinion, a subject teacher works 7-8 hours a day, while a Homeroom Teacher works 24 hours a day. I like my job as a subject teacher, but being a Homeroom Teacher has caused my mental health to deteriorate significantly.*

As Schneiderman and colleagues have emphasized that stress is negatively correlated to a person's psychosocial well-being, meaning that people that experience higher levels of stress are less happy and less satisfied with their lives (Schneiderman et al. 2005). The last interview excerpt also shows that in that particular case, the duties of Homeroom Teacher reduce the level of well-being at school. Dissatisfaction can eventually extend beyond work.

Interview excerpt 5

Yulika: *I am currently a Homeroom Teacher in two classes where the students are problematic in one way or another. I spend a lot of time and energy on this, forgetting my subject classes. Of course, the pay for this is very low, so no one wants to be a homeroom teacher. It would be great if schools employed the system that is used in state high schools where each student has their own so-called mentor.*

One teacher that participated in the interview mentioned stepping outside for fresh air during recess and "relaxing to the fullest" during that time as a way to prevent stress.

It was also revealed that two young teachers are taking special courses related to psychology and reading books on psychology that help find answers to questions regarding how to manage or prevent work-related stress.

Desire to work as a teacher

One interview revealed that a Russian-speaking teacher is concerned the most about switching to Estonian as the language of instruction as, at the time of this study, the B2 average level of Estonian proficiency was still required from History and Civics and Citizenship Education teachers, yet this requirement will change. Due to reform of the transition to Estonian-language education both teachers and school support specialists had to acquire C1-level Estonian language skills by August 1, 2024 at the latest (see e.g. Niitmäe, Solomina 2025). Relevant informant has already had problems with passing the advanced level of Estonian proficiency exam (C1 exam) in the past (he has had several failed attempts).

Interview excerpt 6

Volodja: *Losing a job is a rather stressful situation for someone who considers their profession a calling. Although I am not sure that even after passing the advanced state exam in Estonian, many subject teachers who have previously worked in Russian would automatically be ready to teach the subject in Estonian as, first of all, the teacher must learn the required Estonian terminology for the subject. When the press writes or the Teachers' Council says that we must obtain C1 level in a short period of time and prepare for the transition to Estonian-language teaching, the teachers' thoughts turn to saving their job, in this case, to in-depth studies of the Estonian language after work or on the weekends.*

The interviewee believes that fear of what will happen in the future is one of the reasons why many teachers are stressed, and in his opinion, this can also affect students' learning outcomes during the current transition period. However, he says he is doing everything he can to achieve high-level Estonian language skills by the required deadline.

On the other hand, the satisfaction of some teachers working in Estonian-language schools is affected by the arrival of refugees from Ukraine that do not speak Estonian at all when they arrive in Estonia and, at the same time, have to study in the same class with children whose first language is Estonian. According to informants, the greater the number of Ukrainian children in the class, the slower and more stressful the work is for the teacher.

Interview excerpt 7

Mati: *I asked the administration for assistance so as to open a separate group for Ukrainian children, where they would study Estonian in depth after school, but no such assistance was given and some of the*

extra work was left to me. Added to this is the fact that the Ukrainian children arrived at school in different weeks, one started learning Estonian in September, the next in October, the third had been at school since April, and at some point I immediately started preparing a sample of the 4th or 5th test for children with different language skills. It certainly took away my strength, time, and desire to work at a school.

Interview excerpt 8

Erika: *Due to the arrival of a large number of refugees, I've had to learn how to approach them. In this regard, I've had to communicate a lot with children and parents. In my opinion, it would be easier to draw up a unified program for those who have arrived from abroad, which the subject teacher could rely on. In my case, I took the initiative, realizing that their presence could last a long time. /../ In this situation, I naturally expected support from the state, the Education Department or the school management, but I was left alone with new challenges and this did not add any motivation to work at a school. Quite the opposite, I even thought about opening my own private language courses and working for myself.*

As Madigan and Kim (2021) have also argued based on their research results, employee burnout leads to them quitting their jobs, which increases staff turnover and emergence of the need to replace the staff that left with new employees. This in turn leads to increased recruitment and training costs for the organization.

Language-related challenges and relationships with students and parents during the transition to Estonian-language education

Some teachers described communication with parents as a challenge, particularly in situations where a common language between teachers and parents could not be established. Translation programmes were considered helpful for written communication; however, for oral communication, such as development discussions, additional support from other school staff was sometimes needed. According to the interviewees, these situations occurred mainly when some Russian-speaking parents did not have sufficient knowledge of Estonian and some teachers did not actively speak Russian. At the same time, most participants reported communicating with parents in the language preferred by the parents, and no significant language-related difficulties were mentioned.

Teachers also discussed how their language practices influenced their relationships with students in multilingual classrooms. One interviewee highlighted that his relationship with some Russian-speaking students improved after he became more flexible regarding the use of Russian during group work in his Estonian-language class. He also reported occasionally using Russian with some Russian-speaking students during breaks.

Interview excerpt 9

Mati: *In the past, my language choices at school were based on one person – one language, but during breaks, especially when I feel that I am starting to get tired of the school day, I switch to Russian more easily with the students. But I always use Russian with Russian-speaking students when a quick response and immediate order on my part are of paramount importance. By the way, in group work I now let Russian-speaking students speak Russian, I used to have zero tolerance for this because I wanted Russian-speaking children to acquire Estonian as quickly as possible. Later I gave up trying and allowed them to speak Russian during work. And interestingly, my relationships with these students improved after that. I also translate the most important terms that will come up in the lesson into Russian at the beginning of the lesson, about half of my study groups are Russian-speaking.*

However, multilingual communication was also associated with challenges. Some teachers experienced difficulties when communicating with parents due to differences in language proficiency.

These situations were described as emotionally demanding and contributed to teachers' overall work-related stress.

Teachers' perceptions of professional recognition and suggestions for reducing work-related stress

In addition to language-related challenges, teachers described difficulties related to relationships with students and parents. One interviewee mentioned long-term anxiety caused by the feeling that "more and more children and parents do not value the work of teachers" and that some students prefer teachers who "demand little" and "undervalue those who really impart knowledge."

Interview excerpt 10

Daniela: *I really want my subject to be useful for the kids, because maybe it is me that the children associate their future profession with, but most of the time I encounter aggressiveness from parents, which makes me wonder whether I should teach the kids at all or if, nowadays, the child is a client/customer. Of course, this affects my well-being and I would like to leave the teaching profession and engage in research instead.*

Interview excerpt 11

Kati: *Nowadays, there are many cases where students are like customers and teachers like service staff. Parents can dictate their terms and if the teacher does not agree with them, there is a big conflict in the making. This is very unfortunate. A teacher should have their own autonomy that would help make the work more creative. But now there is an imposed arrangement instead where you are alone and have to withstand every whim. I have had two cases where I wrote a resignation letter simply because the parents sent me emails that read "You are nobody here!" or "Are you crazy?".*

The participants also suggested several ways to reduce teachers' work-related stress and support mental well-being. The proposed solutions included opportunities for teachers to take a sabbatical year, support for professional exchange and international study visits, and full compensation during sick leave. Teachers also emphasised the importance of valuing the teaching profession through appropriate salaries, as "often for a teacher, their work is their calling". One participant suggested that documentation-related tasks should be assigned to other school staff members who are not directly involved in teaching.

Based on the participants' suggestions, the proposed measures for reducing work-related stress can be grouped into three categories:

1) Supporting teachers' mental well-being and reducing work-related stress:

- creating a personal framework that clearly defines the activities to be completed during the working day and the tasks that fall outside working hours;
- actively seeking solutions to problems and contacting colleagues or mentors for support.

2) Management actions to ensure that teachers have a better working environment at school:

- distributing tasks among teachers to ensure a more balanced workload;
- creating opportunities for teachers to exercise professional autonomy.

3) State-level measures to reduce work-related stress among teachers:

- providing support measures related to teachers' well-being, such as discounts for massage or spa services;
- establishing, at the legislative level, a maximum class size of 18 students;
- creating online tutoring opportunities to expand teachers' professional skills.

Discussion and summary

Based on the results of this article, teachers' lack of time and insufficient free time can be considered to constitute stressors at a personal level, which, according to Wieczorek (2016), is a sign of a lack of

resources that induces stress. The lack of time as a resource is indicated by the teachers' responses, in which they describe the fact that they do not have enough time to prepare lessons, which is why such preparation is sometimes superficial. In the context of content and language learning, it can be expected that lesson preparation may take more time if teachers occasionally have to create teaching materials and visuals with adapted language. The lack of time is also indicated by the teachers' high workload, as the teachers participating in the study work with a workload that is higher than the norm. The analysis did not reveal clear differences between rural and urban school contexts in teachers' descriptions of work-related stressors. However, class size appeared to influence teachers' experiences, particularly their emotional state. One stressor mentioned involved working in the evening, as some of the teachers work in the evening shift, leading to less opportunities to spend quality time with their family. In addition, it was revealed that since teachers are responsible for checking students' work, preparing for classes, and working with documents, some of the teachers that participated in the study and work in day shifts have little free time outside of work to recover from the work day or week. However, the lack of time can also be associated with the organization level, as teachers' heavy workload results from the school's organization of work.

Although the teachers were not asked in this study why they work with such a high workload, it is possible that this is related to the shortage of teachers in Estonia. Since the teachers mentioned high workload repeatedly in this study and in connection with various circumstances (number of lessons, after-school group, preschool group, additional tasks, individual tuition of refugees from Ukraine, transition to Estonian-language education), it can be assumed that this is a very significant stressor for teachers. The results of this study are relatively consistent with the study conducted by E. Ruus (2014) among teachers in Tartu city schools, according to which high workload is the most frequent stressor for teachers, while lack of time places third among the stressors.

Interpersonal stressors in this study included conflicts between teachers and students and parents, which have also been highlighted as work-related stressors for teachers by Prilleltensky and colleagues (Prilleltensky et al., 2016). Teachers' feelings that students and parents do not value them enough can also be understood as an interpersonal stressor. The findings indicate that teachers' well-being is influenced not only by workload and administrative demands but also by the extent to which they feel recognised and supported in their professional role. This finding can be interpreted through the Effort–Reward Imbalance Model, which explains work-related stress as a result of situations where the effort invested in work is not balanced by received rewards. Importantly, rewards in this model include not only financial compensation but also recognition and social status associated with the profession (Siegrist, 1996). This finding is in line with Maphalala's (2014) view that teachers' perceived lack of respect from students and parents may also cause stress in teachers.

Similarly to previous studies (Shaw, 2016; Travers, 2017), the results of this article also indicate that teachers are stressed by the changes taking place in education, to which they have to adapt. Among them, the transition to Estonian-language education, which began in the fall of 2024, was highlighted separately. Based on interview results, it can be argued that said changes cause additional workload and uncertainty for teachers and make them feel incompetent at times. Indirectly, the results of this paper also indicate that the changes taking place in education increase the number of tasks to be handled by teachers.

While one of the changes causing work-related stress in teachers is paperwork and bureaucratic tasks, which have also been emphasized by Putwain and Von der Embse (2019), based on this paper, two changes causing work-related stress that are specific to current Estonian school life can be highlighted. First, a large number of Ukrainian refugee students have arrived in Estonian schools, requiring an individual approach, which causes additional expenditure of time for teachers. Another change specific to Estonia is the transition to Estonian-language teaching in transition schools, which causes stress for Russian-speaking teachers who have taught their subjects in Russian until now. The latter change may make teachers doubt their own competence and create fear that they may lose their job. Thus, such

changes may reduce teachers' self-efficacy, which, according to Bottiani and colleagues (2019), leads to a higher level of work-related stress for teachers. The stressful impact of switching to Estonian as the language of instruction can be explained by the Transactional Model (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), according to which a person evaluates the impact of a perceived event as a potential threat. In this case, the Russian-speaking teacher informant in this study assessed the situation as possibly not being able to cope with teaching in Estonian, which in turn caused him stress.

Study results indicate that teachers implement several measures previously mentioned in specialist literature to reduce stress, such as fishing and other hobby activities (Arismunandar et al., 2022). The teachers that participated in the study also read self-help books regarding what helps to reduce stress (cf. Bhowmick, 2019) and participate in stress-related training (cf. Reddy and Anuradha 2013). Sufficient sleep is also important for stress management (see Reddy and Anuradha 2013), and this current study as well mentioned sufficient rest as a stress reduction measure. Based on the results of this study, it can be considered positive that it did not emerge that teachers use unhealthy activities to manage stress, such as emotional eating and alcohol consumption, as mentioned by Klassen and Durksen (2014). On the contrary, this study revealed that teachers value healthy lifestyles. As compared to what is mentioned in relevant literature, this study revealed that teachers also visit a psychologist as a stress management measure, which indicates an informed approach to stress.

The informants also suggested that schools could consider reducing teachers' workload in such a way that the management could delegate some of the bureaucratic tasks assigned to them to others, e.g. support staff. According to the study participants, schools should also allow teachers one longer break during the day (e.g. in the form of a longer lunch break); another suggestion was to be granted greater flexibility in preparing class schedules. This desire is in line with the opinion of Herman and co-researchers (2018) that schools should approach the task of reducing teachers' stress in a systematic manner. Teachers' mental well-being could also be increased by providing them with greater autonomy. Teachers want their work to be more flexible in terms of time so that they would have more decision-making power over their working hours. Thus, these suggestions are in line with Ramatlapana and Makonye's (2012) claim that if teachers are given more freedom of choice and decision-making power, they will perceive themselves as more autonomous, which can manage teachers' work-related stress.

As a measure beyond the school, the teachers surveyed suggested that class sizes be reduced by amending legislation. This measure could potentially, in addition to reducing teachers' work-related stress, also have a positive impact on students' academic performance, especially in the process of transition to Estonian-language education. In rural schools, the possibilities of implementing the aforementioned idea would probably be much greater, while the probability of being able to reduce class sizes to such a large extent in urban schools are doubtful, as this would mean that more parallel grades would have to be formed as compared to the current situation, which, in turn, would require more teachers.

In the context of measures beyond the school, several solutions were proposed within the framework of this study that have not been mentioned in relevant scientific literature. For example, teachers found that sick pay should be paid at 100% of relevant individual's salary. Such a measure would likely reduce the number of teachers working while sick. Another novel proposal was the provision of discount coupons by the school management for health treatments (massage, spa visits) requested by teachers.

A surprising proposal for a measure beyond the school was to provide teachers with a sabbatical year. This would be analogous to the free semester for university lecturers, meaning that teachers would retain their salaries during this period, but they would not be required to teach subjects. This would enable teachers to improve their professional skills, but they would undoubtedly be able to use this period also for relaxation, as this time would be less intensive and probably less stressful for them as compared to the regular academic year. A separate question is how to finance such a sabbatical year, as its implementation would likely significantly increase teachers' labour costs. In addition, implementing this

measure would require finding additional teachers to replace teachers that are on a so-called sabbatical year.

This study revealed that teachers would like opportunities to exchange experiences, undertake professional trips abroad, and self-improve online, all of which could develop their knowledge and skills. Teachers hope they would be able to cope with stressors at least somewhat better by applying techniques learned in in-service training, that also in the context of the transition to teaching in Estonian.

The findings also indicate that some teachers had adapted their language practices by allowing students to use different languages depending on the situation and communicative purpose. Such practices correspond to the principles of translanguaging, according to which multilingual speakers use their full linguistic repertoire flexibly in communication (García & Wei, 2014). In educational contexts, translanguaging has been associated with increased learner confidence, motivation and active participation, as well as with the recognition of learners' linguistic backgrounds (García & Wei, 2014). In the context of this study, flexible language practices appeared to facilitate communication in multilingual classrooms and support teachers in managing language-related challenges. It can also contribute to the development of learners' identities by recognizing and valuing their linguistic backgrounds (Cenoz, 2013). However, effective implementation of translanguaging requires teachers' awareness and pedagogical competence (Cenoz, 2013). The findings of this study further suggest that while multilingual communication practices can support teacher–student interaction, teachers may still experience challenges in communication with parents when a shared language cannot be established.

However, it can be argued that the increase in multilingualism in schools has also raised the question of teachers' readiness to work in linguistically diverse classes. Research in the Estonian educational context has shown that teachers feel the need for greater methodological support and in-service training to effectively support the development of multilingual learners (see e.g. Niitmäe, Solomina, 2025).

This study contributes to a better understanding of the work-related stressors experienced by basic school teachers in Estonia during the transition to Estonian-language education. The findings show that teachers' stress is related not only to workload and administrative demands but also to educational changes, multilingual classroom situations, and the extent to which teachers feel supported and recognised in their professional role. The study also highlights teachers' own suggestions for reducing work-related stress, including organisational changes at the school level and greater support for professional development.

The main limitation of the study is the small qualitative sample consisting of nine teachers; therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to all teachers in Estonia. However, the study provides an in-depth view of teachers' experiences and identifies issues that require further attention in the context of educational change.

The findings have practical implications for school leaders and education policymakers. Reducing excessive workload, providing methodological support for multilingual classrooms, and strengthening opportunities for professional development may contribute to teachers' well-being and retention in the profession. Future research could further examine effective support measures for teachers during the transition to Estonian-language education, including the role of teaching methods, learning materials, and artificial intelligence-based solutions in supporting both teachers and students.

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Exploring early career teachers' beliefs and instructional practices about academic language for English learner students

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Abstract
This study explored U.S. early career teachers' beliefs about academic language and their relationships to reported instructional practices with English learner (EL) students. Of particular interest was whether limitations of EL students' mastery of academic language is a significant factor impacting their school-learning, since these students consistently underperform academically compared with native English-speaking peers. Academic language — the specialized vocabulary, syntax, and discourse required for school success — is a key factor in student achievement. Two research questions were addressed: (1) What beliefs do early career teachers hold about academic language, and (2) what do they report about implementing academic language-related instruction for EL students. Seven early career teachers participated in semi-structured interviews and completed a background questionnaire. Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 (Lumivero, 2023). Findings revealed teachers' beliefs about academic language were varied, fragmented, with a general awareness of the importance but limited conceptual clarity. Teachers strongly believed academic language should be intentionally taught but reported underprepared to do so. Reported instructional practices were emergent, intuitive, and inconsistent, emphasizing vocabulary instruction with a lack of comprehensive academic language instruction. The findings suggest the need for systemic investment in teacher preparation and sustained professional learning supporting EL students' academic language development.

Keywords*: academic language, English learner students, teachers' beliefs, instructional practices*

Introduction

This study explored early career teachers' beliefs about academic language and their role in reported instructional practices for EL students (English learner students). EL students are those for whom English is not their first or preferred language and who are learning English at the same time they are attempting to master the academic requirements of U.S. schooling. The focus on academic language is central, as a large body of research has clearly established that mastery of academic content depends upon, indeed is mediated by, the language of instruction employed in classrooms (Bailey & Wilkinson, 2022).

Teachers' beliefs determine to a significant extent how they conduct their classrooms (both instructional practices as well as curricular decisions, e.g., Adams et al., 2023; Anders & Evans, 2019; Haukås, 2016; Skott, 2015; Rizzuto, 2017). Teachers' beliefs play a pivotal role in shaping their specific instructional decisions and classroom practices, such as how, when, and where to integrate academic language, particularly for those working with linguistically diverse students, EL students (Borg, 2003; Fives & Buehl, 2012). Research suggests that while some educators believe in the value of supporting EL students, they often hold misconceptions about language development such as assuming oral fluency equates to academic language proficiency (de Jong & Harper, 2005). Furthermore, ample research findings suggest the acceptability for teachers to conduct educational practices for EL students with a less

rigorous curriculum, incorporating a diminishing demand for academic language utilization (e.g. Torff & Murphy, 2020).

Background and literature review

The focus of this study was teachers' beliefs about academic language and the relationship to their reported instructional practices with EL students.

Academic language

Academic language refers to the specialized vocabulary, grammar, and discourse structures required for success in school-based tasks, particularly in reading, writing, and disciplinary learning (Zwiers, 2008; Schleppegrell, 2004). This conceptualization extends beyond social or conversational language and is deeply embedded in the practices of school disciplines such as science, history, and mathematics (Nagy & Townsend, 2012; Bailey & Wilkinson, 2022). For EL students in particular, academic language serves as a critical gatekeeper to educational achievement and access to content knowledge (Cummins, 2000; Scarcella, 2003; García & Ozturk, 2019). Research has shown consistently that students' ability to comprehend and use academic language is a strong predictor of their success on standardized assessments and classroom performance (Snow & Uccelli, 2009; Uccelli et al., 2015).

Our view of academic language fully aligns with Nagy and Townsend's, (2012, p. 92) as "the specialized language, both oral and written, of academic settings that facilitates communication and thinking about disciplinary content." Without full mastery of academic language, students are most likely to experience increased difficulties in fully engaging in and constructing their own understandings of disciplinary knowledge. Nagy and Townsend (2012) emphasize both oral and written language. That is, academic language encompasses how students speak in classroom discussions as well as reading and writing. Academic language is different from the social, informal conversational language used with friends and family. Academic language is what students encounter in textbooks and from interacting with teachers, exceeding the vocabulary and typical grammatical framing in those settings. Academic language can be considered as a set of tools for doing academic work. Consequently, learning academic language is not limited to learning new and different words, but learning to accomplish new actions with language and acquiring new tools for these purposes. The lexical-syntactic interface is central: The set of new and different words must be learned and used with the language structures within which they appear.

Academic language is not a neutral construct as it is deeply tied to power, access, and identity in schools (Paris & Alim, 2017). Sociocultural theories of language learning emphasize that students construct meaning through interaction and that language practices are shaped by cultural and community contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Gutiérrez, 2008). From this perspective, academic language instruction must be not only rigorous but also responsive and inclusive of students' home cultures and literacies. Teachers' beliefs about what constitutes "appropriate" or "correct" language can either support or hinder EL, multilingual learners. When teachers value and build on students' linguistic repertoires, including translanguaging practices, they are more likely to foster equitable access to content and participation (Garcia & Wei, 2014). Conversely, deficit-based views that frame EL students' language differences as problems can limit their opportunities to demonstrate understanding and growth.

Despite the significance of academic language in student academic achievement, focused instruction is often underemphasized in both curriculum materials and teacher preparation programs (Bailey & Heritage, 2008; García & Ozturk, 2019). Teachers may recognize the importance of supporting EL students, but they often lack explicit preparation on how to scaffold academic language across disciplines (Bunch, 2013; Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010). The complexity of academic language, including its abstract vocabulary, nominalizations, and complex syntax, requires deliberate and sustained instructional strategies that many educators feel unprepared to implement (Schleppegrell, 2004).

Teacher beliefs

The central focus of this study is whether and to what extent teacher beliefs about academic language impact their instructional practices, particularly with their EL students. Teachers' beliefs play a pivotal role in shaping instructional decisions and classroom practices, particularly when working with linguistically diverse students (Borg, 2003; Fives & Buehl, 2012). Beliefs about language, learning, and student capacity influence whether and how teachers engage with academic language instruction (Buehl & Beck, 2015). A central contribution to our understanding of this work is offered by Buehl and Beck's (2015) model of the articulation of the internal and external factors that can serve to either support or hinder the translation of teacher beliefs into instructional practices. Their model emphasizes both internal and external mediators of beliefs to practices. In the case of this study, the internal factors focus on how teachers' knowledge about language and EL students, as well as their experiences with both (including with various curricular materials), impacts how teachers act on their beliefs in their instructional practices.

The corpus of extant research on this topic suggests that many educators believe in the value of supporting EL students but often hold misconceptions about language development, such as assuming oral fluency equates to academic proficiency (de Jong & Harper, 2005). Ample research has documented those beliefs can negatively impact optimal instruction and maximized learning opportunities for linguistically diverse students. In the case of EL students, Murphy & Torff (2019) investigated to what extent teachers underestimated EL students' capacity to do rigorous academic work. Torff and colleagues conducted an extended examination of teachers' beliefs about academic rigor in teaching EL students and how these beliefs might contribute to the achievement gap in comparison with English-speaking students. In a series of published papers, taken together, they argued that teachers held beliefs that implied/stated EL students would benefit from less rigorous classroom work (Torff, 2005; Torff, 2011; Torff & Murphy, 2020; Murphy & Torff, 2023). These findings suggest the acceptability for teachers to conduct educational practices for EL students with a less rigorous curriculum, incorporating a diminishing demand for academic language utilization.

Early career teachers, in particular, have stated high levels of commitment to equity and inclusion, but often struggle to translate these beliefs into effective practice due to limited preparation (Lucas & Villegas, 2011; Valdés et al., 2014). Furthermore, their understandings of academic language may be intuitive rather than research-informed, potentially resulting in vague or generalized instructional approaches. For example, Bunch (2013) found that even well-intentioned teachers frequently conflated academic language with vocabulary lists or simply "sounding smart," rather than seeing it as a social and disciplinary construct embedded in meaning-making. The transition from belief to practice is mediated by teachers' preparation and their sense of efficacy in supporting EL students. Studies on teacher self-efficacy underscore that educators' confidence in their ability to implement effective instruction influences both the rigor and consistency of their practice (Rizzuto, 2017; Delcourt, et al., 2024).

Research questions

Consequently, two research questions were addressed by this study:

1) What beliefs do early career teachers hold regarding the role of academic language in their K-12 classrooms?
2) What do early career teachers report regarding the implementation of academic language instruction and support for EL students' acquiring mastery?

Methodology

Overview

A semi-structured interview protocol and background questionnaire were employed to explore how seven early career teachers defined academic language, perceived its importance, and described their instructional practices for academic language, with a particular interest in EL students and the language

challenges faced. Additional information was collected on participants' educational backgrounds, as well as reports of professional development and collaborative collegial activities regarding academic language and EL students.

Participants

The target participant population for this study was early career teachers, defined as individuals with zero to five years of teaching experience, who were enrolled in a teacher certification or graduate-level program focused on education. One requirement was that participants were teaching in a literacy or language-focused area or working with linguistically diverse student populations, such as English as a New Language (ENL) or language arts. Participants were recruited through a letter of invitation to students enrolled in a graduate teacher education program at a major, Northeastern, U.S. research university. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of [Syracuse University (Approval Number 24-363). Participants' confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

The seven participants were employed as classroom teachers in central New York public school districts, and they represented a cross-section of U.S. early career educators working within linguistically diverse educational contexts. Their shared institutional background, combined with variation in certification pathways, placements, and student populations, provided a robust basis for understanding the complexities of academic language instruction in the early stages of a teaching career. The participants were within their first three years of teaching and represented a range of grade levels (K-12) and subject areas, including English Language Arts (ELA), Literacy, and Special Education. All participants had direct experience working with EL students in inclusive classroom settings. The participants included all self-identified female educators, with six identifying as White and one as Hispanic/Latino. The majority were in the 18-24 age range, except for two participants who fell in the 24-34 age range. Their teaching experiences spanned urban, suburban, and mixed community settings. The linguistic backgrounds of their students varied widely, including Arabic, Somali, Spanish, Ukrainian, Russian, Swahili, and French.

Data collection

The semi-structured interview protocol, with 13 questions with follow-up probes, was designed to elicit in-depth reflections on participants' beliefs, practices, and experiences related to Academic Language instruction. Interview questions were organized around three thematic domains: (1) Academic language (e.g., understanding, instructional strategies, student needs); (2) professional preparation and beliefs (e.g., coursework, readiness, challenges); (3) collaboration and support (e.g., training, mentorship, co-teaching experiences). The use of these domains allowed for consistent exploration across participants while preserving flexibility for open-ended responses and emergent themes.

Data analysis

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed for accuracy. Transcripts were imported into NVivo 14 (Lumivero, 2023, https://lumivero.com/products/nvivo/2023) for the coding and analysis process (after Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020). Coding was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework and was supported with the use of NVivo 14 (Lumivero, 2023) software. After transcription, all interview transcripts were read and re-read to ensure familiarity with the data. During the initial phase, observations and analytic notes were recorded through memos within NVivo 14. These memos represented an attempt to capture early impressions, recurring language, and noteworthy patterns that informed subsequent analysis. This phase aimed to gain a holistic understanding of participants' experiences while allowing space for unanticipated patterns or anomalies to surface. Listening to the audio recordings again also

assisted with the capture of vocal nuances, pauses, and emphasis, which added context to the transcribed text and informed memoing. To ensure the reliability of the data coding, an external coder, an individual who did not participate in the original coding, was identified and selected; that individual was provided with the definitions and examples of coding and the coding of a data set with which to compare the coding of the data set by the first author. The text of one interview was selected at random for a total of nine pages, representing approximately 15 percent of the entire interview sample that participants produced. The first author and the external coder separately checked the selected sample for agreement, using the NVivo 14 program. The measure of the percentage of agreement between the first author and the external coder exceeded 80% agreement. Miles et al. (2014) reference the percentage of inter-coder agreement for qualitative data as a sound indicator of the reliability of the coding process. Eighty percent is considered an acceptable level of agreement in social sciences (Creswell, 2014).

Findings

Overview

Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview data of seven early career teachers yielded nine salient themes reflecting the perspectives and lived experiences of these participants, as they navigated the complexities of academic language instruction in linguistically diverse classrooms.

Understanding of Academic Language, Beliefs About the Importance of Academic Language, Instructional Practices for Academic Language, Student Challenges in Mastery of Academic Language, Teacher Challenges in Academic Language Instruction, Teacher Preparation for Instruction in Academic Language Instruction, Assessment and Academic Language; Cultural Competence and Inclusion, and Collaboration and Support Systems. These themes illuminated the cognitive, pedagogical, and systemic challenges teachers encountered and the strategies they employed to support EL students. The analysis foregrounds the tensions between teachers' conceptual understanding, beliefs, and the realities of classroom practice.

Table 1: Summary of key themes

(1) Teachers' general understanding of academic language

- Varied and fragmented understanding of academic language
- Limited conceptual clarity of academic language
- General awareness of the importance of academic language for students' school success, but also functionality
- Academic language was often equated solely with vocabulary knowledge

(2) Teachers' beliefs about academic language in the classroom

- Mastery of academic language was seen as foundational for school success in the U.S.
- Academic language as the "gatekeeper" was seen as especially challenging for EL students, whose home language/heritage language/preferred language is not the language of instruction
- Academic language must be "intentionally taught' with specific, and effective pedagogical practices based on peer-reviewed research findings.
- Academic language was not seen solely as a linguistic (namely language structural) phenomenon; but also, how language is used in classrooms (pragmatics) to define and include members of that learning community (social and cultural phenomena as well)
- Prior to their employment as full-time teachers in K-12 schools, participants experienced a lack of sufficient preparation to both understand and teach academic language.

- All participants believed that this under-preparedness---a deficit in their education---impacted their ability to provide optimal instruction in academic language for all students, especially EL students.
- Standardized testing was seen as improperly functioning as an assessment of students' mastery of the academic language of the disciplines, and not deep conceptual understandings of these disciplines. Thus, participants regarded EL students as "penalized" by taking standardized assessments that were not, essentially, a valid measure of "what they knew."

(3) Teachers' reported instructional practices for academic language

- Participants reported using a range of instructional approaches with the aim of scaffolding academic language learning for all students, including sentence stems, visual aids, word walls, modelling, think-alouds, and structured peer interactions.
- Participants reported that their implementation of these strategies was described as emergent, intuitive, and/or inconsistent, rather than grounded in a coherent pedagogical framework and research based.
- The lack of explicit, systematic instruction in academic language suggests that teachers rely heavily on experiential knowledge rather than research-based approaches.

Detailed qualitative findings

(1a) General understanding of academic language

One of the central themes to emerge across participants' interviews was the varied and often fragmented understanding of what constitutes academic language. While all participants were able to describe classroom interactions and language-related challenges faced by their EL, multilingual learners, few demonstrated a cohesive or theoretically grounded definition of academic language at the outset of the interview. Their responses revealed a general awareness of the concept's importance, but their interpretation reflected inconsistencies in scope, terminology, and application.

Participants consistently reported that the term academic language was either underemphasized or absent in their teacher preparation coursework. Several noted that they had not encountered the term formally until graduate school, and even then, the instruction lacked depth or was framed narrowly within literacy methods.

"I didn't really hear about Academic Language until grad school, and even then, it was more about vocabulary than, like, sentence structure or discourse." (Participant 7)

"In undergrad, we learned about teaching reading and writing, but no one really said what Academic Language is." (Participant 2)

The absence of explicit, conceptual instruction seemed to impact participants' ability to name or define the features of academic language (e.g., syntactic complexity, genre structures, or linguistic registers), though they were able to describe classroom practices that implicitly targeted such skills.

(1b) General vocabulary and content knowledge

Several participants initially equated academic language with content-specific vocabulary or technical terms, rather than recognizing it as a broader set of linguistic competencies that enable students to engage in school-based discourse across disciplines. This narrow view limited their ability to see academic language as embedded not only in subject areas, but also in instructions, assessments, and classroom routines.

"I think of Academic Language as the words they need to know for the science test...things like 'hypothesis' or 'conclusion,'" (Participant 5)

This definition, while not incorrect, reflects a limited understanding of the layered nature of academic language, which includes not only discipline-specific vocabulary but also functional language for reasoning, comparing, analysing, and arguing.

(1c) Emergent and evolving understandings

Despite initial uncertainty, participants often articulated more nuanced understandings as the interview progressed. Through reflective dialogue, many began to connect their experiences with EL students to the idea of language demands embedded in content tasks. For example, Participant 3 initially described academic language as "school words" but later added, *"I guess it's also how students put their ideas together, not just the words, but how they explain things in a formal way."* These evolving definitions suggest that while explicit knowledge of academic language terminology may be limited, early career teachers are developing an intuitive understanding based on their experiences with student challenges. The interview appeared to facilitate the articulation of a deeper conceptual awareness that they had verbalized earlier in the data collection process.

This conceptual ambiguity has important implications for practice. Several participants expressed uncertainty about whether they were "doing it right" when supporting EL students, including a need for clearer frameworks and language scaffolds in their preparation. One participant explained:

"*I know I do things to help my students talk and write better in class, but I wouldn't know how to label it or if it counts as teaching Academic Language."* (Participant 1)

The uncertainty may contribute to missed opportunities for intentional, targeted instruction that supports EL students in acquiring the complex linguistic tools needed for academic success.

(2a) Beliefs about the importance of academic language

Across interviews, participants expressed strong beliefs about the critical role of academic language in student success. Although most acknowledged gaps in their formal training, they consistently emphasized that academic language is foundational, not optional, for EL students to participate meaningfully in classroom activities, access grade-level content, and demonstrate learning on assessments. Their responses reflected a deeply held recognition of linguistic equity as a central concern, even when their conceptual vocabulary was limited.

(2b) Academic language as a gatekeeper

Despite variability in definitional clarity, participants unanimously identified academic language as essential to EL students' academic success. Participants framed academic language as a foundational tool for accessing content, participating in classroom discourse, and performing on high-stakes assessments. Their responses suggested an intuitive understanding of the role of language in mediating learning and achievement. Participant 5 described academic language as a "gatekeeper", stating:

"Without Academic Language, they can't even understand the instruction on the test. It's not about what they know – it's about what they can read and write." (Participant 5)

Similarly, Participant 2 linked language proficiency to classroom participation:

"They're quiet not because they don't know the answer, but because they don't have the right words to say it the way school wants." (Participant 2)

These findings align with sociocultural theories that position language as a primary tool for learning. Teachers' beliefs reflect an emerging awareness of linguistic equity and the structural barriers faced by EL students, even if their reported instructional responses to these beliefs apparently were not comprehensive. Participants consistently expressed concern that EL students are often misjudged or underestimated due to linguistic hurdles rather than a lack of content understanding.

"If students don't know how to speak or write in academic ways, they kind of disappear in the classroom. They know things, but they can't show it." (Participant 3)

"It really makes the difference between passing and failing – especially for EL students." (Participant 6).
Several participants articulated a belief that academic language is not only linguistic but also cultural and social. They viewed its mastery as tied to students' ability to perform classroom roles and meet implicit behavioural and discourse expectations.
"It's not just knowing big words, it's knowing how to be a student, like how to talk in a way that sounds smart or respectful or whatever the teacher wants." (Participant 4)
These responses suggest that participants understood academic language as a socially situated practice, one that affects how students are perceived, how they participate, and how they are assessed within school contexts.

(2c) Beliefs in the need for intentional instruction

Participants shared the belief that academic language development requires explicit teaching and cannot be assumed to develop incidentally. This belief extended beyond EL students to include other linguistically diverse students. However, participants emphasized that the consequences for EL students were most immediate and pronounced.
"They're expected to just know how to explain their thinking or write a paragraph the right way, but no one teaches them the sentence frames or how to say it." (Participant 5)
"I think we assume students will get it if we give them enough vocabulary, but really they need to be shown how to use that vocabulary in academic ways." (Participant 2)

(3a) Instructional practices and efficacy

Participants described a range of instructional approaches intended to scaffold academic language development. These included sentence stems, visual aids, word walls, modelling, think-alouds, and structured peer interactions. However, the participants' reported implementation of these strategies was often described as emergent, intuitive, or inconsistent, rather than grounded in a coherent pedagogical framework.
"I use sentence starters like 'I agree because…' to help them speak up. It gives them a way into the conversation." (Participant 6)
Participant 4 emphasized multimodal scaffolds:
"I use pictures, videos, anything that helps. Sometimes I'll act it out. Especially with newcomers, visuals are key." (Participant 4)
While such practices reflect a general awareness of the linguistic demands placed on EL students, the lack of explicit, systematic instruction in academic language suggests that teachers rely heavily on experiential knowledge rather than research-based approaches.

(3b) Student challenges: instruction

Participants identified significant challenges faced by EL students in acquiring and using academic language. These challenges extended beyond a limited vocabulary to include comprehension of syntactic structures, test-taking language, and culturally unfamiliar content. Participants reported that many EL students experienced affective barriers such as anxiety, fear of public error, and low confidence, and these factors impacted the efficacy of their instruction.
Participant 1 explained:
"They'll say 'I don't know' even when they do—they just don't know how to say it. I can see they're thinking, but they're stuck." (Participant 1)
This observation resonates with Cummins' (2000) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), where students may appear fluent in social contexts while lacking the academic language required for success at school-based tasks. The

participants also noted that linguistic challenges often masked students' cognitive competence, leading to inaccurate assessments of ability.

(3c) Teacher challenges: instruction

A prominent theme throughout the data set was the pervasive sense of unpreparedness and pedagogical uncertainty. Participants reported that their teacher preparation programs provided limited coursework or field experience focused on academic language instruction or linguistically responsive teaching. As a result, they frequently described feeling overwhelmed, isolated, or forced to "figure it out" on their own, how best to provide instruction for their EL students.

"I felt like I was just guessing. There wasn't a lot of guidance on what to do for EL students." (Participant 7)

In addition to gaps in preparation, structural barriers such as limited planning time, lack of curriculum adaptations, and inadequate collaboration with specialists further compounded instructional challenges. This theme suggests that early career teachers may be operating with a high degree of instructional improvisation, despite a strong commitment to student success.

(3d) Assessment and academic language: linked to instruction

Participants expressed widespread concern that standardized assessments—and even classroom-based tests—disproportionately penalized EL students due to their reliance on complex academic language. The participants described situations in which students understood the content but were unable to demonstrate their knowledge due to linguistic inaccessibility. It was not clear to these participants how to address via their instructional processes.

"One of my students understood everything we did in science—she could talk to me about it—but when it came to the test, she failed. The language just shut her down." (Participant 5)

While some participants attempted to modify classroom assessments, many felt constrained by school policies or lacked the tools to make meaningful accommodations. This finding illustrates how assessment practices can serve as gatekeepers for academic advancement, reinforcing the need for more linguistically responsive assessment design.

(3e) Cultural competence and inclusion: instruction

Although all participants expressed a desire to create inclusive environments, their approaches to cultural responsiveness varied widely. Some made intentional efforts to integrate students' languages, cultural backgrounds, and lived experiences into instruction, while others acknowledged a lack of confidence or strategies for doing so.

"I let them speak their language when they work together. I want them to feel like their identity matters in this space." (Participant 4)

Conversely, Participant 6 reflected:

"I know I could do more. The curriculum doesn't always reflect who they are, and I'm not sure how to fix that." (Participant 6)

These responses suggest that while these early career teachers may possess a disposition toward inclusion, they required more targeted support to enact culturally sustaining pedagogies. The findings may suggest constraints, such as standardized curricula, that may limit teachers' capacity for culturally responsive adaptation.

(3f) Teacher preparation

Closely related to instructional and cultural challenges was the theme of teacher preparation. Most participants reported minimal coursework or practical training related to academic language or multilingual learners in their certification programs that would enable them to offer optimal instruction.

Those who had enrolled in graduate-level literacy or ENL coursework expressed slightly more confidence but still emphasized the disconnection between theory and classroom application.

"We learned about BICS and CALP and the importance of language, but I didn't get to see how it looks in a real classroom." (Participant 1)

This gap between conceptual understanding and practice echoes broader critiques in the research literature about the inadequacy of teacher preparation programs in equipping candidates to teach in multilingual contexts. The responses suggest that early career teachers often enter the profession without a clear instructional guidance for language development.

(3g) Collaboration and support systems for optimal instruction

Participants emphasized the importance of collaboration in navigating the complexities of instruction for EL students. The participants who had access to mentors, ENL (English as a New Language) co-teachers, or instructional coaches reported greater confidence and efficacy with their instruction of EL students. Others, however, described limited collaboration opportunities and inconsistent feedback from support personnel.

"My coach helped me break down the standards and figure out how to teach vocabulary. That made a huge difference." (Participant 3)

Participant 6 offered a contrasting view:

"I barely talk to the ENL teacher. We're on different schedules, and I'm not sure what support they're giving the kids." (Participant 6)

These findings indicate that while collaborative structures can enhance instructional capacity, their implementation remains uneven across school contexts. In the absence of formal support, these early career teachers relied on digital resources, peer networks, and informal trial-and-error approaches.

Unexpected findings

While the primary goal of the present study was to examine early career teachers' beliefs and reported instructional practices about academic language for EL students, several unexpected findings emerged during the data collection and interview process. One of the most unanticipated patterns was the emotional intensity with which many participants approached the subject of academic language. Rather than offering solely technical or instructional descriptions, participants frequently expressed feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and frustration when reflecting on their preparedness to support their EL, multilingual learners. These affective responses were not elicited through direct questioning but arose spontaneously, suggesting that academic language instruction is not only a cognitive or pedagogical challenge but also an emotional and ethical concern for early career teachers. In particular, participants often spoke of a goal to do more for their EL students, accompanied by a sense that they lack the training, tools, or instructional support to do so effectively. This emotional vulnerability highlighted how the challenges of academic language instruction intersect with professional identity formation and teacher self-efficacy in the early stages of teaching.

An additional unanticipated insight emerged around the conceptual clarity of academic language. Several participants initially struggled to define academic language in precise terms. It became evident during the interviews that several had not previously reflected on the construct in any formal way. Often, they associated academic language with vocabulary lists or writing conventions. As the interviews progressed, participants were encouraged to articulate examples and explain how they thought EL students' needs and understandings changed over time. For some, the interview itself became a reflective exercise, prompting new insights about the relationship between language and learning. One participant remarked that the conversation helped for the realization of how much instruction assumed language proficiency that students did not yet possess. This emergent conceptualization suggests that interviews

may serve not only as a method of data collection but also as a formative space for professional learning, particularly for educators still in the process of developing their pedagogical language awareness.

Discussion

This study reveals these seven early career teachers understood the importance of academic language and expressed a strong commitment to supporting EL students. However, they faced systemic challenges in translating their commitment into their instructional practice. Inadequate preparation, lack of explicit instructional models, and limited collaboration time apparently hindered the consistent implementation of academic language instruction. The participants' reliance on vocabulary-focused strategies reflects a gap in preparation around syntax and discourse. Participants demonstrated evolving understandings of academic language, often initiating with surface-level definitions and expanding toward a more functional view as interviews progressed. While few had formal training focused specifically on academic language, all identified it as essential to EL students' success, describing it as a "gatekeeper" to assessments, participation, and achievement. This aligns with prior research that highlighted gaps in teacher preparation on disciplinary language (Zwiers, 2008; Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010). Despite strong beliefs in the importance of supporting EL students, most participants reported feeling unprepared to do so effectively. Across both bachelor's and master's certification pathways, teachers noted limited exposure to strategies for academic language development or linguistically responsive instruction. Most of the participants described systemic constraints, such as rigid pacing calendars, standardized testing, and curriculum limitations, that made it difficult to apply their beliefs in practice. Access to collaboration also varied. Some participants benefited from co-teaching models and interdisciplinary planning with ENL specialists, while others lacked structured support. These findings underscore the importance of embedding academic language pedagogy within teacher preparation programs and ensuring that early career teachers receive sustained professional learning and mentoring within their school contexts. These insights highlight the ongoing need for systemic support to bridge the gap between beliefs and instructional practice in serving multilingual learners.

Conclusion

This study examined early career teachers' beliefs and their reported instructional practices regarding academic language in relation to EL students. The findings suggest that participants recognized academic language as foundational to students' academic success and viewed it as essential for meaningful participation in classroom discourse, content learning, and assessment performance. At the same time, participants' conceptualizations of academic language were frequently fragmented, inconsistent, and primarily associated with vocabulary acquisition rather than with the broader linguistic, syntactic, discourse, and sociocultural dimensions that characterize disciplinary language use in academic settings. These findings indicate that although early career teachers acknowledge the importance of academic language, many lack a sufficiently developed theoretical and pedagogical understanding of how language functions as a medium for disciplinary thinking and knowledge construction.

The findings further reveal a significant disconnect between teachers' beliefs and their reported instructional preparedness. Participants consistently expressed strong commitments to supporting EL students and emphasized the necessity of intentionally teaching academic language. However, they also described relying largely on intuitive, emergent, and experience-based instructional strategies rather than systematically implemented, research-informed pedagogical approaches. Participants frequently attributed this reliance to insufficient preparation within teacher education programs, limited opportunities for sustained professional learning, and systemic constraints embedded within school contexts, including standardized assessment pressures, restrictive curricular pacing, and inadequate collaborative support structures. Consequently, instructional practices related to academic language

often appeared inconsistent and underdeveloped, even though the participants' demonstrated a commitment to equitable instruction.

Broader implications emerging from this study highlight the relationship between academic language and issues of educational equity, access, and inclusion. Participants recognized that academic language functions as a gatekeeping mechanism within U.S. schools, shaping EL students' opportunities for rigorous academic participation and influencing how their abilities are perceived and assessed. Teachers frequently acknowledged that EL students' linguistic challenges were often misinterpreted as limitations in academic ability, restricting opportunities to demonstrate conceptual understanding and engage fully in disciplinary learning. These findings reinforce sociocultural perspectives that position language as central to participation, identity formation, and academic achievement, while highlighting the need for more coherent and practice-centred preparation in linguistically responsive pedagogy and academic language instruction.

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The 'good' Aranese teacher: socially constructed notions of (il)legitimate language use among teachers

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Abstract
The Aran Valley is a small region in Catalonia, Spain, where three languages hold official status: Castilian Spanish, Catalan and Aranese, the latter a variant of Occitan. Its official language-in-education policy is that Aranese be the medium of instruction in its primary schools, alongside teaching in and through Catalan, Spanish, French and English. Given the multilingual and complex (with two minoritized languages rather than one) nature of the region's language education project, the Aranese government requires that teachers acquire linguistic competence certifications to work in their schools. We first outline the specific context and preconditions under which primary school teachers either have or must acquire competencies in Aranese and/or Catalan. This article then moves on to ground understanding of these official requirements with an analysis of teachers' everyday practices and policy decisions in relation to constructions of the "good Aranese teacher". Using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of legitimate language as a theoretical framework for analysis, we draw upon data collected from Aranese school observations as well as meetings with teacher trainers and policymakers to argue that certain kinds of pedagogic and linguistic practices are socially constructed as legitimate for teachers in Aran while others are not. These constructions of (il)legitimacy build upon educators' own linguistic trajectories and ideologies and ultimately shape Aranese schools' culture around language use. Small linguistic territories such as Aran rely mainly on schools for new speaker acquisition, so understanding the responsibilities set upon teachers and the impact of their feelings of (il)legitimacy and teaching practices is essential to create conditions for minority-language school cultures that empower speakers.

Keywords*: legitimate language, school culture, language revitalization, medium of instruction, teachers*

Introduction

A key aspect of studies of educational language policy addressing the interplay between language and school culture revolves around the question of "what should be done"? With an understanding of the current conditions of a given sociolinguistic context, policymakers can then determine what should change, and what policy measures should be put in place to engender that change. In the case of minoritized language revitalization projects, the policies enacted often involve teaching and the public education sphere. The decisions around "what should be done" impact the members of school communities, and educators are no exception.

In this article we examine the official policy decisions and everyday language policy realities in Aranese primary schools to investigate the relationship between what is required of teachers in terms of language practices and competences, and how they construct notions of the "good Aranese teacher". As we will demonstrate in our analysis, ideologies around (il)legitimate language in the Aranese school context set limits to what a good Aranese teacher should speak and sound like, be able to do, and beyond that, how

they should be. Such judgments reproduce ideas (pl) of (il)legitimate language in the overall school culture which in turn shape (pl) teachers' language practices even beyond the educational domain.

Exploring the salience of ideologies around legitimate language, and how they enact the construction of "good" language teacher identities, is pressing because schools are discursively framed as spaces where minoritized language can be saved or doomed (challenges to this framing can be found in Baker, 2000, 2011; Dunmore, 2018; Giollagáin et al., 2020; Peace-Hughes, 2022; Smith-Christmas and Armstrong, 2014), and "remain central sites for the definition and reproduction of standard and legitimate language" (Costa, 2015, p. 134). Teachers are assigned with an astounding amount of responsibility for the "survival" of languages, either through the cultivation of new speakers, or the provision of a space where children who speak Aranese at home can further develop their competences. An appraisal of an educator's language or pedagogical competence or the quality of their teaching in the context of minoritized language promotion such as we find in Aran, then is not just a judgment of their pedagogical skills but indeed of their value in the overall project for language revitalization.

Although the characterization of a "competent" and a "good" teacher are not necessarily interchangeable, in this paper's analysis we will take both constructions as they are made manifest through official requirements of teachers and teachers' social play in the school to explore how these two qualifications coalesce around notions of (il)legitimate language. The relationship between constructions of competence and value-judgments of goodness and how they become part of Aranese school culture are further explored in the discussion section of this paper.

The Aran Valley, a small region in the Pyrenees Mountains of Spain, is the context for this study. It is located within the autonomous community of Catalonia and on the border with France. It is officially trilingual among Aranese (a variant of Occitan), its autochthonous language spoken by around 8,000 people (EULP 2023); Catalan; and Castilian Spanish. Historically, the region has been geographically and linguistically isolated, though in the last decades its standing as a premier ski destination in the region has changed this fact. Years of incoming labour migration and seasonal visitors have transformed it into a place with a high concentration of linguistic and cultural diversity. In some ways, a part of the challenge for Aranese language policymakers is to continue to attract tourists to the valley (who, for the most part, are Spanish speakers) while also promoting Aranese, which is decreasing in its number of speakers and its rates of usage.

This paper will first establish the background for this study, the Aran Valley, particularly as it pertains to its official language-in-education policy. It will then go on to review Pierre Bourdieu's concept of legitimate language, as well as to contextualize this study in the body of literature discussing teachers' roles and agency in language-in-education policy. The third part will detail the methodology used by the authors in their respective data productions, while the following section will analyse excerpts from Camille's data to demonstrate how official competence requirements of teachers, as well as teachers' constructions of the "good Aranese teacher", reproduce ideas of legitimate language. In the discussion and conclusion, we further explore these findings as well as present potential consequences of legitimate language ideologies and their reproduction in school culture.

Language-in-education policy and teaching in Aran

In this section we examine the language policy framework in Aran to contextualize language practices in the community's school culture and how they are positioned as (il)legitimate. We include the (il-) prefix here to underline the fact that there can be no legitimization of a language form, practice or speaker without the delegitimization of the other. As we will see in the analysis, these policies create the parameters in which educators can enforce, resist or manage the language norms in their teaching and beyond.

Much of the discourse about language and school culture in Aran revolves around the concept of Aranese as their *lengua veïcularа* (vehicular language, or medium of instruction). Aranese is a variant of

Occitan and is one of the five official languages of Spain. In terms of the historical development of the official language policy of Aran, Aranese has been an object of special protection and included in teaching since 1979 (Estatut d'Autonomia de Catalunya, Ley Orgánica 4/1979). The *Lei de Normalizacion Linguistica* (1983) proclaimed Aranese as *lengua pròpria*, roughly translating to 'language of the territory', of Aran four years later. In 1990, Aranese became the official *lengua pròpria* of Aran (Lei de regim especiau dera Val d'Aran 1990), which gave the Conselh Generau, its local government body, the authority to make language policy in the public sphere, including in education. From 2023, "Aran's educational centres' *Projecte Lingüístic de Centre* (center's linguistic project) must grant the learning and regular curricular and educational use of Aranese as the territory's own and vehicular language" (Law 8/2022; our translation from the original Catalan). Since then, the Aranese school system is officially trilingual (Aranese, Catalan and Spanish), as Law 8/2022 applies to all schools in the Aran Valley.

According to official policy, Aranese is the medium of instruction during pre-school and primary education, with Catalan and Spanish as taught languages. In practice, it is up to each school to determine how to interpret and manage this policy. In secondary and high school, Catalan is the official medium of instruction, with Spanish and Aranese used freely depending on individual teachers' choices and language competence. In practice, this "represents a smaller presence of Occitan in favour of the other two languages" (Suïls & Torres, forthcoming). In terms of accountability and governance of language-in-education policy, there is no specific inspection for the Aranese territory (*ibid.*) and consequently no evaluation of the pedagogical distribution of the three languages.

In relation to teacher training and certification, primary school teachers are predominantly trained at the University of Lleida, and sometimes at universities in Barcelona. As a subject, studies of the Aranese/Occitan language are absent from the curriculum of the Primary Teacher Education Degree. It is instead offered as an elective in Lleida, alongside theoretical background courses such as Linguistic Planning and Management of Multilingualism (Suïls, Eva's personal communication). Teaching at the secondary level requires specialized master's degrees, such as history, biology, philology; practitioners are trained all over Catalonia and Spain. To the best of our knowledge, the only MA in Occitan is offered at the University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès, France (Duran Eppler, 2025).

School leavers from one of the educational centres in Val d'Aran have prior knowledge of Aranese through participating in the trilingual school system when they take up a teaching position in Aran (approx. B2 according to a community consultant, Eva's personal communication). In primary education, a large proportion of staff members are of Aranese origin. Most Aranese teachers in secondary education are not of Aranese descent and did not go to school in Aran. Knowledge of Aranese is a merit (not a requirement) for accessing a position as a secondary school teacher in Aran. In practice, however, practitioners' knowledge of Aranese is usually minimal, "equivalent to that of languages for which a practical application to teaching is not envisaged" (Suïls, Eva's personal communication 12/03/25). Because the pool of subject-specific secondary teachers is smaller than that of primary school teachers, their professional mobility tends to be much higher. In addition, junior teacher candidates with lower seniority or fewer educational qualifications are frequently appointed to schools in Aran. Rather than declining an assigned position there, which incurs a professional penalty, they often accept the position temporarily but move on when an opportunity arises (see also section 1, Suïls & Torres, forthcoming). Conversely, even those who wish to remain may be forced to leave if reassigned elsewhere. Ultimately, these systemic dynamics present considerable bureaucratic hurdles for teachers attempting to acquire and maintain the linguistic competence required to teach in Aranese.

A specific administrative hurdle to becoming an Aranese teacher is that a certificate of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) level C1 or C2 of the language is required—even if candidates have sufficient knowledge of Aranese. CEFR C1 in Aranese is not automatically awarded upon graduation from high school in Aran with a Catalan Batxillerat / A-level (unlike CEFR C1 in Catalan). The C1 Aranese language courses run by the Conselh Generau d'Aran that lead up to this certificate are frequently

oversubscribed, and often with a limited schedule. According to some student sources, people willing to learn Aranese are faced with too many hurdles in the obtention of a place in the CEFR courses and exams. A spokesperson of the Conselh Generau d'Aran (Eva's personal communication) stated that they were willing to provide more learning opportunities but are confronted with a shortage of qualified Aranese tutors to teach the Aranese CEFR courses.

According to the coordinator of the *Conselh Consultatiu der Occitan Aranés*, an advisory body to the *Conselh Generau d'Aran* on issues of language policy, however, teacher provision in Aran is "sufficient". The same source contextualizes this statement by emphasizing that teacher provision in Aran "at least isn't lower than in other places [in Catalonia]" where "the public school system…suffers from a structural shortage of teachers". Nevertheless, attracting teachers to positions in remote rural areas such as Aran poses difficulties for teacher provision.

All consulted sources agree that there is a dichotomy between practitioners who see a teaching position in Aran as a long-term job and those who do not. The former tends to come from nearby areas, have prior knowledge of Aranese and prefer pre-school and primary level; the latter, including substitute teachers and temps, tend to be less invested in the Occitan language and culture and frequently move out of the region within a year or less. Jordi Suïls (Eva's personal communication, 12/03/25) summarized teacher provision in Aran with "so, yes, there are enough teachers but no, they don't respond to the needs in terms of minority language".

Studies on the Aranese case of language policy have, for the most part, centered on describing *de jure* policy or carrying out measurements of language competences among students (e.g. Arenas e Sampera, 2001; Suïls and Furness, 1999; Suïls and Huguet, 2001; Suïls and Huguet, 2003; Suïls, 2011). The first ethnographic study on Aranese language education policy in practice (Marvin, 2019), established that teachers and students constructed their own language policies centered on ideologies of mutual communication, sometimes in incoherence with the official policy that upholds Occitan as the *lengua veïcularа*. Marvin (2019, p. 107) concluded, "these findings also impart a clearer image of the challenges that face language revitalization efforts, and the (in-)effectiveness of language education policy as a means of surpassing minoritized status for speaker communities."

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of legitimate language

In this paper we draw upon Pierre Bourdieu's theorization of legitimate language to analyze the emic constructions of "good Aranese teacher" subjects among educators. Because Bourdieu highlights language as a "powerbroker" in school pedagogy, his concepts serve as a worthwhile means of investigating the conscious and unconscious value-making and devaluing practices that teachers enact around language (Flynn, 2015, p. 20). Bourdieu theorizes that legitimate language is the language imbued with authority, through its utterance via the correct speaker, in an appropriate situation, and in the accepted legitimate grammatical form. The contextual construction of legitimate language functions as a code in the regulation and governance of linguistic practices (1977, p. 650; 1991). Public education systems reproduce legitimate language, "which has to be sustained by a permanent effort of correction, a task which falls both to institutions specially designed for this purpose and to individual speakers" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 60). The performance of legitimate language, spoken by the dominant class, simultaneously defines illegitimate language, and consequently reproduces inequality of capital in the linguistic market (*ibid*.; Bourdieu, 1977). The concept of legitimate language is interconnected with the concept of language ideologies, which is defined by Kathryn Woolard (1998, cited in Woolard, 2016, p. 7) as:

> socially, politically, and morally loaded cultural assumptions about the way that language works in social life and about the role of particular linguistic forms in a given society.

Ideologies of language legitimize power hierarchies (Bourdieu 1979, 1982, cited in Martin-Jones and Heller, 1996, p. 129) and uphold the idea that there can only be one legitimate way of using language (Jaffe, 2007). The language repertoires and practices that fall outside the bounds of legitimacy, as defined by individuals' and groups' language ideologies, become what we know as patois, dialects, and accents, which index lower social capital (Lane et al., 2017). The context-specific norms that make up (il)legitimate language also create (il)legitimate producers of language, and determine who can claim linguistic expertise, authority, and belonging to a linguistic community (Costa, 2015). Legitimate language, then is a dynamic phenomenon in that its power is not given but rather created through interlocutors' consistent and collective acceptance, enforcement and performance.

The school represents an institution where children are socialized into the norms of (il)legitimate language usage (Bergroth and Palviainen, 2017). Though Bourdieu perhaps underestimated individuals' agency in their engagements with language norms and policy (see Saxena and Martin-Jones, 2013), children indeed receive information around language and its correct use in a way that can result in their unconscious acceptance and reproduction of these norms (Grant and Wong, 2008). In the following section, we will survey current scholarship that explores how teachers' implementation and creation of language policies play a central role in the linguistic socialization of children and the making of a sociolinguistic school culture.

Teachers' role in language revitalization

Teachers are the central agents in the interpretation, negotiation and implementation of language policy (Chang-Bacon, 2022; Ricento and Hornberger, 1996; Skilton-Sylvester, 2003). Scholars have even gone on to demonstrate that teachers create their own language policies in their educational spaces, within the governance of official policy discourse (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017; Menken and García, 2010; Marvin, 2025). It is essential that policymakers recognize the importance of teachers in this work and not just treat them as intermediaries for delivering "effective" policy: such framings result in the epistemic consideration of teachers as mere factors of policy rather than agentic knowledge-creators of their teaching practice (Biesta, 2023; Kincheloe, 2003; Priestley and Philippou, 2018).

In this article, we explore the competencies and competence-acquiring processes required of teachers in Aran and how these connect to constructions of the "good Aranese teacher" and finally show that the expectations set on teachers go beyond their pedagogy and purely linguistic competences to make judgments on their value in the Aranese speaker community. Drawing on Gert Biesta (2015, p. 3), who explains that the term "competence" in teaching encompasses not only what a teacher should know and do, but also what or how they should be, we note how this characterization persists in policymaking to strictly define who is authorized to enact language-in-education policy. Because curricula are often designed for the "ideal" student and teacher, constructions around good and competent teachers can reveal much about the underlying language ideologies in each schooling system (Veliz et al., 2025).

The ideology of native-speakerism is rampant in policies and discourses around language education policy and who makes a "competent" and "good" language teacher. This is because minoritized language revitalization projects are not immune to the mechanization of hegemonic language ideologies in internal language policing (Kaveh, 2023), despite such projects frequently being motivated by issues of linguistic justice. The erroneous insistence that native-speaker teachers are better at teaching their language neglects the positive qualities of non-native speaking teachers, such as their "multilingual proficiency" (Brutt-Griffler, 2020). These ideologies determine what counts as legitimate language and therefore what kinds of language practices outside the accepted bounds of legitimacy must be policed (Creese et al., 2014). The persistence of these ideologies within minority-language promotion is not uncommon and indeed tied to the ambiguous nature of language policy (Hawkey and Horner, 2022) and daily "frictions" between official policy and practice (Jaspers, 2015, p. 112; Redinger, 2010).

Some of these frictions are baked into official language-in-education policy, which often claims to promote multilingualism, while simultaneously expecting teachers to teach and assign value to monolingual and standardized models of language and language use (Jaspers, 2022). What are teachers meant to do with these contradictions? Should we be surprised that they make judgments against their own teaching and language practices given difficult and paradoxical tasks set before them? Elena Shohamy (2006, p. 80) claims that educators' policing of illegitimate language in their language teaching is partly due to a lack of training in theories of applied linguistics and language acquisition. Rather than transferring sociolinguistic awareness and taking a descriptive approach to language use, teachers often impart prescriptive norms associated with the languages' standard varieties (*ibid*., p. 80).

Teachers' positioning of themselves with relation to the identity construct of the "good Aranese teacher" and how they may use language, given teachers' fundamental role in the reproduction of language ideologies and norms, contributes to the overall school culture of a given educational centre. This relationship is not unidirectional, however: Aranese school culture and discourse simultaneously shape teachers' enacted language ideologies and practices (Hongboontri and Keawkhong, 2014). Addressing how it functions in the context of education, Frederick Erickson (1987, p. 19) writes that culture is ontological, and "defines what is in the world, what exists and what does not". This holds true as it relates to legitimate language: the legitimate form and use of language take up space in pedagogy, while what is illegitimate must be corrected and erased. This of course applies to teachers' own language policy processes, which we can investigate as a social practice of power: they determine what is real, govern behaviour and sometimes determine the allocation of resources in a school community (Levinson et al., 2009). Educators' training, linguistic trajectories and individual ideologies all play a part in their impact on everyday classroom dynamics, including in the amplification of inequalities among groups of students (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017). This kind of shaping of school culture also happens in more 'informal' language practices, such as the social interactions that occur between teachers, students, administrators and families outside of official curricula (Dołowy, 2023).

Methodology

This article draws upon data produced separately by the two authors, in their respective research projects. Eva's data comes from meetings with policymakers (representatives of the Conselh Generau d'Aran), academic advisors to the Conselh Generau d'Aran, curriculum designers for Aranese teachers, and trainers and examiners of Aranese teachers in the context of the Horizon Europe Project RISE UP as well as several of their students. Her methodology consisted of a literature survey, fieldnotes taken during informal meetings and interviews as well as email exchanges with the above-named stakeholders, many of whom hold two or more of the mentioned roles.

Camille's data was produced during an on-site ethnography of an academic year in the primary schools of the Aran Valley in the context of her doctoral research. By now, ethnography is well-established as a valid and reliable methodology to investigate processes and practices of language policy. Its focus on participant observation, in particular,

> …enables us to see the practice that goes into creating and sustaining the sedimented common sense of policy. It also enables us to see the practice of policy appropriation, for which local interests and meanings…provide the basis (Levinson et al., 2009, p. 788).

Therefore, it is a worthwhile method to explore how teachers' internalized ideas of (il)legitimate language shape school culture. Monica Heller, also drawing upon Bourdieusian theory, claims that interrogations of language use in social interactions can illuminate the relationships between "different dimensions of legitimate language" (1996, p. 140).

Camille's methodology consisted of participant observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, school administrators and policymakers, as well as textual analysis of official policy documents and artefacts. In the scope of this article, we will draw solely upon her fieldnotes from classroom observations and excerpts from her interviews with teachers and administrators. Most of these observations and interviews took place at one central primary school (the major site for her fieldwork), but others came from neighbouring smaller primary schools in Aran. In the hours (distributed over 94 days recorded in her field journal) Camille spent in the classroom, she interacted with the students and was very involved in the everyday school goings-on, including spending a lot of time alongside the teachers.

After spending several weeks participating and observing in each classroom, Camille then conducted follow-up semi-structured interviews with the respective teachers. There were also interviews conducted with school administrators, to make a total of eleven audio-recorded and transcribed interviews that served as the data corpus for this paper, in addition to the recorded fieldnotes during observations. All the names of participants (adults and children alike) in the observations and interviews have been changed to pseudonyms, in addition to occasional gender changes to better protect their anonymity.

The "good" Aranese teacher

The theme of the "good Aranese teacher" emerged throughout the analysis of the ethnographic data produced in Aran's primary schools and most often in conjunction with emic evaluations of (il)legitimate language practices. During an interview with Arturo, a principal of a primary school, Camille asked whether administrators and teachers ever heard criticisms regarding their implementation of Aranese language-in-education policy. The following is an excerpt from his answer:

interview excerpt 1

ARTURO: …ehm, ei cert qu'era situacion der aranés actualment ei complicada. sí? e ei molt facil per part des politics dider qu'era escòla ei era responsable. Era faena que an hèt es mèstres...non digui ara eh? De hèr més de 30 e 40 ans, eth trabalh qu'an hèt damb er aranés. Se non auesse estat per aguest trabalh, aué en dia ena Val d'Aran no se parlarie er aranés. Ei gràcies ara escòla que se mantén er aranés.

ARTURO: …ehm, it's true that the situation for Aranese is complicated right now. yes? and it's very easy for politicians to say that the school is responsible. the work that teachers have done…I'm not saying now, eh? going on more than thirty and forty years, the work that they have done with Aranese. if it wasn't for this work, today Aranese wouldn't be spoken in the Aran Valley. it's thanks to the school that Aranese is still spoken.

Arturo's response begins with an introductory phrase that was ubiquitous in conversations with policy stakeholders in Aran: an acknowledgement that the status of Aranese, with regards to its usage, is problematic. This diagnosis usually varied from something like Arturo's claim of the situation being "complicated" to more alarmist discourse around the "disaster" or "crisis" of Aranese. The culture surrounding the decisions and practices of Aranese language-in-education policy, then is one of mitigating and treating the universally acknowledged precarious situation for Aranese. This, according to Arturo, contributes to a framing in which politicians place both the responsibility for and the blame of the current situation on teachers, thus also assigning them with the burden of working to improve Aranese's status. Arturo claims that it is thanks to the past decades of teachers' contributions alone that Aranese is still spoken in the valley. This perspective stands in contrast to scholars' work that demonstrate that school education cannot act alone in reversing language shift efforts (see Baker, 2000, 2011; Dunmore, 2018; Giollagáin et al., 2020; Peace-Hughes 2022; Smith-Christmas and Armstrong, 2014; Jones, 2025). Arturo's

statements underline, however, the perceived heaviness of the responsibility that teachers carry in the Aranese revitalization movement. This burden is made to be particularly significant for teachers in Aran when considering that at any given point in the school year there will be substitute or otherwise temporary teachers that come from other parts of Catalonia and therefore do not speak Aranese. In Aran there are simply not enough teachers certified to teach Aranese to fill all positions, so those that cannot and are brought in from other places are exempt from the responsibility to promote Aranese. A "good" Aranese teacher is therefore constructed as a teacher that assumes this responsibility and pushes the language forward with her actions and teaching (Dołowy, 2023). What 'pushing the language forward' consists of, as we will further see in this analysis, has a lot to do with community members' held ideologies around (il)legitimate language.

Although educational centers in Aran take differing approaches to the official policy of Aranese as the medium of instruction, during Camille's fieldwork, the division of school subjects and languages always followed a monolingual model, even with a school's inclusion of multiple languages in its curriculum. Students' mixing of different linguistic repertoires in their languaging was delegitimized and was mostly prevented by the pedagogical structure of the classes, which never assigned more than one language to a class subject. In any case, translanguaging was discouraged and sometimes even admonished by teachers. The teachers at the observed primary schools would also demand the same monolingual practices of themselves as they did of their students in their teaching. More than once, Camille recorded that, when teachers spoke in Aranese during a class that was not meant to be taught through Aranese, they would catch themselves and correct what they had said to the target language. At times they would even apologize to the class for not adhering to the official medium of instruction, as Camille recorded in one of her field notes:

> *vignette 1*
>
> Later on, at the start of math class, Teresa started speaking to the class in Aranese, then said *"perdón, este es en castellano"* (SPANISH: sorry, this is in Spanish), then switched to Spanish.

Because of the first author's presence in the classroom, it is impossible to know whether the teachers also made these kinds of corrections when she was not there. What we analyze here as educators' self-policing to perform as the good Aranese teacher — whose language habits do not stray from the monolingual norm set by the school schedule — needs to account for the ethnographer's positionality in the interactions, who despite her intentions may represent external linguistic authority and surveillance.

The teachers in the primary schools also made judgments toward themselves concerning the contradictions that emerged between their linguistic practices and their constructed subjectivities of Aranese identity. These contradictions took shape around ideologies of authenticity (Gal and Woolard, 2001, cited in Woolard, 2016), according to which Aranese is the most authentic expression of the essence of Aran as a place and the Aranese people as a community. To be a legitimate and authentic member of the Aranese speaker community is therefore to express oneself in the authentic language. Pilar, a second-grade teacher at one of the larger Aranese primary schools, for example, explained to the first author that her family often complained about the fact that she and her partner, who were both born and raised in Aran, spoke to each other in Spanish, and that people in her family *"s'enfaden"* (ARANESE: get angry). Among Aranese couples this was not a unique phenomenon. Another teacher in the same school, Luisa, who was also born to an Aranese-speaking family, also spoke to her partner in Spanish.

Yet another teacher at the same school, Sandra, first justified her and her husband's marital linguistic practices during our interview before she confessed that her personal habits of language use perhaps conflict with the linguistic expectations, she places on others who have grown up in Aran:

interview excerpt 2

S: e jo damb eth mèn òme parlam en castelhan perque mos coneishérem en castelhan. jo sò era prumèra culpable
CM: [laughing] no no, culpable no
S: mès jo damb es mainatges parli en aranés. e eth mainatge gran a còps parla per telefon e me digui, 'però perqué vos parlatz en castelhan?' digues, 'se vos podetz'–'ja mama però ei que'… alavetz l'ac digui, 'pues dilhèu cambies entà parlar en aranés'. ac saben de parlar. conèishen era lengua. [xxx] mès non sai. m'imagini qu'eth ei pues un shinhau coma asociau o…[trails off]
CM: ja. ja, ja. ei açò que campi també. sí és–encara que è coneishut adolescents que son diguessim es més militants pera lengua aranesa qu'en aquest ah projècte–
S: mès ua causa ei era militància. que hèm de [xxx]-
CM: òc
S: –e dempús i a auta causa qu'ei era practica que hèm.

S: and I with my husband we speak in Spanish because we met each other in Spanish. I am the first to be guilty
CM: ((laughing)) no no, not guilty
S: but I speak with [my] kids in Aranese. and my oldest kid sometimes speaks on the phone and I say to myself, 'but why do you speak to each other in Spanish?' You say, 'if you all can'—'yeah mom but it's that'…so I say it, 'well maybe switch to speaking in Aranese'. they know how to speak it. they know the language. ((xxx)) but I don't know. I imagine that he's well a little like asocial or…((trails off))
CM: yeah. yeah, yeah. That's what I see too. It is–even though I've met teenagers who are let's say more militant for the Aranese language than in this project–
S: but one thing is militancy. that we have to ((xxx))–
CM: yes
S: –and then there's another thing which is the practices we do.

Sandra assigned blame and culpability to herself. The ideology of authenticity tying Aranese usage and Aranese identity together delegitimizes language habits that conflict with the image of the authentic Aranese speaker. In Aran, this contradiction is especially marked when it comes to the use of Spanish, and carries a value-judgment, as noted by Jordi Suïls and Helena Torres (forthcoming):

> Identifying with Spanish as one's own language is often associated with an expression of indifference and even rejection towards Aranese; this is based on the argument that Aranese is a dispensable language in terms of socio-professional advancement.

It is noteworthy that Sandra attempted to qualify this contradiction and distance herself from any kind of identification with Spanish as 'her' language by mentioning her decision to speak to her children in Aranese, as well as her insistence that they implement linguistic practices that promote a future for the language. She claimed that there was a clear distinction between militancy — a positive and public discursive stance toward Aranese and its promotion — or language activism and "our practices", the actual enactment of this stance in day-to-day life. This border drawn between the purported language activists and rejectors of the revitalization project emerged often in the authors' data and was often characterized by participants as a binary between two mutually exclusive extremes (something along the lines of 'you're either with us or against us'), with not much room for ambivalences. Within this ideological binary, a teacher in Aran whose habitual language practices are heterogeneous between Aranese and

other languages (6.6% of the Aranese population, as of 2023; EULP 2023) is not a legitimate militant and is therefore 'holding back' rather than 'pushing forward' (Dołowy, 2023) Aranese. The judgment Sandra enacts toward herself was also echoed in her narration of interactions with her son: she seemed to rationalize the strangeness between his knowledge of and competences in Aranese and his choice to not speak it as "asociality". According to Sandra, a lack of language or social competence would be the only legitimate 'excuse' to not speak Aranese. Furthermore, this framing dictates that legitimate belonging to the Aranese speaker community and investment in its future consists of a coherent and consistent use of the language with no room for heterogeneity, fluidity, or in-betweenness.

As the ethnographer producing data at Aranese primary schools, Camille was also enmeshed within the processes of creating subjectivities of legitimate Aranese teachers. The following ethnographic vignette records a private conversation between her and Pilar, a second-grade teacher.

vignette 2

> Pilar told me that she and the other teachers talk about me sometimes because I am one of the "*bones*" (ARANESE: the good ones). Upon seeing my look of confusion, Pilar elaborated that I was one of the adults in the school that actually speak Aranese. She then said "*entre tu e jo, aciu i an profes que non ac parlen*" (ARANESE: between you and me, there are teachers here who don't speak it). She then elaborated that when she speaks in Aranese very few of her colleagues respond in the language. When I asked her if she felt comfortable talking about responsibilities of speaking Aranese with her colleagues, she hesitated before replying that everyone does as they see fit and she's not going to look for "*mal rollo*" (SPANISH: conflict) with her friends.

Camille's background as an "outsider" (born in the United States) in Aran and someone that learned Aranese as a foreign language, in adulthood, enacted a notion of willingness and motivation (referred to as *'volontat'* in Aranese) around her language practices. Indeed, as argued by James Costa (2015), the concept of a "new speaker" of a minoritized language is impossible to separate from the opinions and evaluations that others have for the new language user. This, combined with her everyday participation in classes, almost always in Aranese, and teachers' insistence that their students address her in Aranese resulted in the construction of a researcher-subject with a value-judgment of "goodness". Even when she was not physically with the teachers, Camille's "spectre" (Deumert, 2022) as a "good" language user still created boundaries between them—those who personified 'volontat' and made the effort to speak in Aranese (supposedly like Camille), and those who did not. When Pilar divulged her guarded secret that some of her colleagues do not make a practice of speaking in Aranese, her utterance of "*entre tu e jo*…" (between you and I) separated Camille and her as two subjects joined together in their willingness to speak Aranese. According to Pilar, such willingness should be made self-evident through her colleagues' linguistic practices and should not require an explicit conversation or request, especially to avoid potential conflict.

In the final ethnographic event for analysis, Camille attended an end-of-course department meeting at one of the bigger primary schools in Aran.

vignette 3

> I went to the meeting of the *segòn cicle* (grades 4-6) teachers. Marcela, the coordinator, spoke in Catalan. They created a Google document together as a department to take notes, which they projected onto the screen. Marcela typed:
>
> 4A no funciona

> Laia, one of the teachers present, said out loud *"falta eth 'n' finau"* (CATALAN & ARANESE: it's missing the final 'n') on "no" to make it "non", and therefore be written in Aranese.
>
> 4A non funciona[1]
>
> For the following several minutes of the meeting, Laia dictated what would be written in the document spelled correctly in Aranese even though the teachers were speaking in Catalan and Spanish. Some of them eventually switched their speaking to Aranese.

It is probable that Camille's positionality as an observer and potential "linguistic police" (despite her best intentions) had real effects in the events of the interaction and revealed what were the expected norms for their work and communication among themselves. The conversations between teachers, even when carried out mostly in Aranese, almost always featured heterogeneous production of the other two official languages of Aran. In this instance, the teachers were having their discussion in a mix of Catalan and Spanish, yet Laia's understanding that I was observing the meeting led her to instruct that the dictation of notes be done according to the norms for legitimate language as teachers in an Aranese school—in other words, in correctly-written Aranese. The policy expectations set on the educators, to maintain and enforce Aranese as the *lengua veïculara* of the school, often conflicted with their linguistic reality of playing with the language repertoires in their environment, especially when students were not present. This conflict between legitimate language practices for Aranese teachers and their day-to-day lives transformed into self-judgments, and like in this vignette, a change in their linguistic behavior.

Discussion

In the case of Aran, public schools are discursively framed as the main site for Aranese language promotion. The official language-in-education policy in Aran is strategically ambiguous (Marvin, 2025; Hawkey and Horner, 2022) to allow for administrators and teachers to have significant autonomy in implementing the trilingual (Aranese, Catalan, Castilian/Spanish) language policy to meet the context and needs of their school communities. When the stakes are so high (the future of the Aranese language) and so much responsibility rests on the educational sector, every aspect of teachers' work is imbued with responsibility toward the language revitalization project and serves as a potential source for blame and judgment. Throughout the analysis, and in conjunction with the official requirements of teachers in Aran, many contradictions emerged. Primary-school teachers must obtain and prove an advanced level of Aranese competence so that they can maintain the *lengua veïculara* policy (see introduction), yet the Aranese government is challenged to recruit instructors for the course that qualifies teachers to teach in educational centres in Val d'Aran (the CEFR C1 and C2 courses), and depends on temporary teachers from other parts in Catalonia who do not speak Aranese. Teachers in Aran live multilingual lives (after all, the valley is officially trilingual) and teach a highly linguistically and culturally diverse student body who may hear Latin-American Spanish, Romanian, Arabic, and Bulgarian, among other languages, at home. Notwithstanding, policy demands that only Aranese be the official medium of instruction in primary schools. We do not say this to criticize the expectations set on teachers, but rather to point out that these discrepancies exist, and it is the educators that must manage them, sometimes resulting in self-judgment.

The findings show that teachers enacted notions of (il)legitimate language, and that it is difficult to disentangle these from notions of (il)legitimacy of a teacher's role in a language revitalization movement. These phenomena reinforce each other: ideas of (il)legitimate language influence the construction of the (il)legitimate language teacher while the construction of legitimate language depends on the legitimacy

[1] In Aranese the correctly written phrase should read: *4A non funcione*

and authority of the persons that speak it within the school context and outside. The legitimate language which holds value in the communication and culture of Aranese schools is Aranese, which is indexed as the language of "authenticity" in the territory (Woolard, 2016). Legitimate Aranese is monolingual and standard, with little to no influence from Spanish or Catalan. It must be used in all parts of school culture, including at times when no students are present. Moreover, legitimate language must be performed especially when observation is happening, as we have seen in vignette 3. To hold legitimacy and authority as someone advancing the status of Aranese involves more than using legitimate language, however. In addition to the ability to speak Aranese and in the "legitimate" way, a teacher must be perceived as a language activist (see 'militant' interview excerpt 1). This means that she uses and promotes Aranese in all aspects of her life, beyond teaching, with no exception and no room for ambivalences. Furthermore, she must exhibit *volontat* (see vignette 2), a willingness to learn or speak the language. It is noteworthy that in comparison to a new speaker like Camille, who has *volontat* attributed to her actions by her mere presence as an outsider who learned and uses Aranese, teachers must do more to prove this willingness. Teachers' having learned Aranese at a young age or so that they could work in Aran does not lend the same degree of *volontat*. Teachers enact these judgments on their own language habits, trajectories, willingness and commitment to the language revitalization project to construct themselves as (il)legitimate language users and community members.

What does this mean for the culture that develops in Aranese schools? The official language policy of Aran, with teachers' communication practices and enacted ideologies around (il)legitimacy, contribute to a school culture that distinguishes between the 'competent' Aranese teacher and the 'good' Aranese teacher. The competent Aranese teacher has overcome bureaucratic hurdles to obtain the language certifications that are required of her and is able to express herself and teach in Aranese. The competent teacher also follows the rules set by the school's linguistic project to maintain Aranese as the medium of instruction (Law 8/2022, see introduction). The "good Aranese teacher" construction differs from that of the competent teacher in that it also carries a value-judgment. The good teacher must be competent, of course, but must also hold legitimacy in her role in the Aranese speaker community, which is inseparable from her demonstrable commitment to the promotion of Aranese. This commitment is performed through a pervasive use of Aranese in all parts of the teacher's life but also by the activism, militancy and motivation that she is perceived to have. The construction of the good Aranese teacher is created through the ideological work and judgments the teacher enacts on herself and on others. To be a good Aranese educator, then, says more than just your competences or the quality of your teaching. It also speaks about who you are in a community and school culture centered around the promotion of Aranese.

Conclusion

This paper examined the interplay between language education (policy) and school culture in the context of the Aran Valley. In Aran, the official language policy is trilingual (Aranese, Catalan, and Castilian Spanish), with Aranese designated as the main medium of instruction in primary schools. The policy and associated curricula are flexible enough to allow administrators and teachers significant autonomy to adapt implementation to the needs of their school cultures and communities.

Within this context, public schools are discursively framed as the primary site for the creation of new speakers and the promotion of Aranese. This framing generates socially constructed ideologies around (il)legitimate language use. These ideologies drew on educators' own linguistic trajectories and beliefs, shaping perceptions of what constitutes a "competent" and "good" Aranese teacher and ultimately influenced school culture around language use. A good Aranese teacher thus not only uses the Aranese language across professional and social contexts but also commits to Aranese language maintenance and revitalization. Being a good Aranese teacher therefore involves more than linguistics and pedagogical

competence; it also reflects one's identity and role within a community and school culture centered on promoting the language.

Although this study focuses on a specific context, its insights can inform other minoritized language education settings. Understanding the expectations and responsibilities placed on teachers, as well as the impact of their feelings of (il)legitimacy of language use on their teaching practices, is essential for developing minoritized-language school cultures that empower speakers. One key lesson is that language policies are often designed for ideal speakers and situations, yet their implementation ultimately depends on how language users interpret them. And while this paper focused on teachers' communicative practices, students should also be central to these discussions, as they are the first impacted by language-in-education policy and it is their linguistic behavior that is under negotiation and control. Future research on the educational role of language should therefore examine students' communicative practices and their perspectives on language-in-education policy and school culture.

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Communicative competence in multilingual contexts: Code-switching, translanguaging, and EMI in Naama, Algeria

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Abstract
This study examines self-perceived linguistic and communicative competence and attitudes toward code-switching in the multilingual academic community of Naama, Algeria, addressing the problem that knowledge of grammatical structures alone does not ensure effective communication. In Naama, speakers navigate Arabic varieties, Tamazight forms, and French, with English serving as a global lingua franca. To explore this, the study used a mixed-methods questionnaire administered via Google Forms to 55 participants (49 students and 6 teachers; 45 in English language studies and 10 in scientific disciplines). Closed-ended items measured self-assessed competence, reasons for code-switching, and attitudes, while open-ended questions explored when code-switching helps, communication challenges, and perceived differences between scientific and English students. Code-switching was reported as a conscious, functional strategy: 36 participants (65.5%) said they switch deliberately to achieve a communicative goal, and "it helps me explain better" was the most frequent reason (65.5%). Most participants rated themselves positively on vocabulary (89.1%) and interaction (72.7%), but only 56.4% could often or always explain complex ideas clearly, and limited vocabulary and fear of mistakes were the challenges mentioned most. Attitudes were favourable but cautious: 70.9% agreed that code-switching improves understanding, and no participant rejected the idea that excessive use may reduce exposure to English. The study suggests that purposeful code-switching can support communication and learning in this setting, while the small and unbalanced sample and the reliance on self-report limit generalisation.

Keywords: *linguistic competence, communicative competence, multilingualism, sociolinguistic norms, code-switching, translanguaging, English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI)*

Introduction

Multilingual societies often exhibit complex patterns of language use in both spoken and digital communication, among which code-switching—the alternation between two or more languages within a communicative event (Poplack, 1980)—occupies a central role (Jeghan et al., 2025; Nair, 2025; Shavkatovna, 2025). Traditionally viewed as a spontaneous outcome of language contact, code-switching has increasingly been understood as a deliberate communicative strategy that indexes identity, facilitates meaning negotiation, and responds to social and contextual demands (Gumperz, 1982; Myers-Scotton, 1993; Silverstein, 1976). Recent research across sociolinguistics and digital discourse indicates that code-switching is not simply a by-product of linguistic competence but a strategic resource actively deployed by speakers, especially in online and media-rich environments (Daulay et al., 2024; Haya, 2025; Jofita & Haryanto, 2025). Code-switching is also documented in written multilingual texts and their translations (Alzain, 2024).

In Algeria, a historically and socially multilingual country, speakers habitually alternate between Algerian Arabic (Darja), Modern Standard Arabic, French, and English in both face-to-face and mediated interactions. These practices reflect the layered sociolinguistic ecology of the nation, shaped by colonial histories, educational policies, and globalization dynamics. Although several studies have examined code-switching within Algerian internet and social media contexts (e.g. Facebook, Instagram; Belaidouni & Kherbache, 2024; Hamzaoui & Zerrouk, 2022; Zitouni & Saaid, 2019) as part of broader digital language practices, the relationship between code-switching, linguistic competence, and communicative competence remains comparatively underexplored.

With the rapid proliferation of social media platforms and digital advertising, language practices in these spaces have taken on new sociocultural significance. Code-switching in social media captions, live sales, and influencer discourse has been shown to serve not only expressive and referential functions but also identity performance, audience engagement, and persuasive impact in digital communication (Belaidouni & Kherbache, 2024; Daulay et al., 2024; Haya, 2025; Jofita & Haryanto, 2025). Sociocontextual factors have also been shown to influence code-switching among university students (Prosper, 2025). Within this evolving landscape, understanding how speakers gauge their own competence and negotiate communicative effectiveness through code-switching becomes crucial for sociolinguistic inquiry and educational policy.

The present study addresses these gaps by examining code-switching practices and their relationship to linguistic and communicative competence within the speech community of Naama, Algeria. Using a mixed-methods questionnaire administered via Google Forms, the research investigates patterns of code-switching, self-perceived competence, communicative effectiveness, and attitudes toward multilingual practices. By integrating structural and sociolinguistic perspectives, the study offers a context-sensitive account of how multilingual speakers in Naama report using their repertoires in academic communication, thereby contributing empirically grounded insight to debates on multilingual competence in Algerian higher education.

Theoretical background

This study is grounded in sociolinguistic theories of multilingualism, particularly translanguaging theory and research on English-Medium Instruction (EMI) in Algerian higher education. Algerian universities operate in a complex linguistic ecology, where Arabic, French, and English coexist within academic spaces. Understanding language use in such contexts requires moving beyond monolingual frameworks and recognizing the strategic mobilization of multiple linguistic resources in teaching and learning.

Within this multilingual environment, linguistic competence and communicative competence function as complementary dimensions of academic interaction. Linguistic competence provides knowledge of grammatical and lexical structures, forming the foundation for communicative competence, which enables participants to negotiate meaning, manage discourse, and perform academic identities across languages. In EMI classrooms, effective communication is rarely achieved through English alone; rather, it emerges from the strategic coordination of available linguistic resources in response to contextual demands, pedagogical objectives, and interlocutors' needs.

Strategic code-switching constitutes a key mechanism through which linguistic and communicative competences are jointly realized. In Algerian EMI settings, instructors and students frequently shift between English, Arabic, and French to clarify concepts, scaffold understanding, maintain interactional flow, and ensure disciplinary precision (García & Li, 2014; Jiang & Zhang, 2023). These practices are indicative of sophisticated multilingual communicative competence, rather than insufficient English proficiency.

Integrating translanguaging and code-switching within a unified theoretical framework conceptualizes EMI classroom discourse as a site where linguistic competence, communicative competence, and multilingual practices converge to support meaning-making. This perspective challenges English-only

ideologies and highlights the pedagogical value of strategic multilingualism in Algerian higher education (García & Li, 2014).

Multilingualism as social practice

Recent sociolinguistic scholarship conceptualizes multilingualism as socially situated practice rather than the coexistence of discrete, bounded languages. Language is dynamic, fluid, and interactionally achieved, embedded within broader social, cultural, historical, and institutional contexts. Multilingual speakers actively select, combine, and adapt linguistic resources to achieve communicative goals, reflecting purposeful, context-sensitive language use (García & Li, 2014).

Multilingual competence is holistic and flexible, enabling speakers to draw on multiple resources in complementary ways. In educational contexts, meaning-making and knowledge construction rely on this strategic coordination of languages, highlighting the limitations of monolingual policies that ignore multilingual realities. Empirical studies show that students and teachers routinely employ multiple languages to negotiate meaning, scaffold learning, and manage classroom interaction, practices that are central to academic communication (García & Li, 2014; Jiang & Zhang, 2023).

Translanguaging theory

Translanguaging theory frames communication as an integrated process in which speakers flexibly deploy their full linguistic repertoires to meet interactional, cognitive, and contextual demands. This perspective challenges monolingual ideologies and positions multilingualism as a legitimate, productive, and constitutive dimension of meaning-making (García & Li, 2014).

In educational research, translanguaging has been shown to enhance comprehension, foster participation, and support engagement with academic content by allowing learners to draw on familiar languages alongside the medium of instruction. Translanguaging spaces enable complex concepts to be negotiated effectively and support critical thinking, problem-solving, and metalinguistic awareness (García & Li, 2014; Jiang & Zhang, 2023). Translanguaging also highlights power dynamics and language hierarchies, revealing how dominant languages, particularly English, may marginalize local languages and how speakers navigate or resist monolingual norms to achieve learning goals (García & Li, 2014; Irvine & Gal, 2000).

English-Medium Instruction (EMI)

EMI involves teaching academic subjects in English in contexts where English is not the first language for most participants. Globally, EMI has expanded due to internationalization policies and English's status as the lingua franca of academia. While EMI can enhance access to global scholarship and employability, English-only policies may impede comprehension, restrict interaction, and exacerbate inequalities, especially when students' English proficiency varies.

Research consistently highlights the importance of multilingual practices within EMI classrooms: instructors and students frequently deploy additional languages to clarify concepts, scaffold learning, and manage discourse, indicating that EMI is rarely strictly monolingual in practice (Jiang & Zhang, 2023).

Integrating translanguaging and EMI

Integrating translanguaging theory with EMI research provides a nuanced understanding of language use in higher education. Rather than viewing EMI as English-only, a translanguaging-informed perspective recognizes it as inherently multilingual, shaped by participants' repertoires, institutional norms, and sociopolitical context. This approach emphasizes actual language practice and highlights the dynamic, context-sensitive nature of academic communication (García & Li, 2014; Jiang & Zhang, 2023).

In Algeria, Arabic, French, and English coexist in higher education, and despite policies designating English as the medium of instruction, multiple languages remain in use to facilitate comprehension,

manage interaction, and scaffold learning. By examining these practices in the Naama speech community, the present study addresses the scarcity of empirical research on EMI through a translanguaging lens in North Africa and links this broader framework to concrete self-reported patterns of code-switching, competence, and attitudes.

Research questions

Based on the theoretical framework and prior research on code-switching, linguistic competence, and multilingual practices, the present study is guided by the following research questions:

1. For what reasons, and in which classroom situations, do participants report code-switching?
2. How do participants perceive their linguistic and communicative competence in relation to code-switching?
3. What are participants' attitudes toward code-switching in academic settings?

The following section presents the methodology employed to address these research questions, including participants, instruments, data collection, and analysis procedures.

Methodology

To investigate code-switching practices and their relationship to linguistic and communicative competence within the Naama speech community, this study adopted a systematic methodological framework grounded in sociolinguistic research principles. The following subsections present the research design, participant profile, data collection tools, and analytical procedures, all of which were explicitly aligned with the research questions to ensure validity and transparency.

Research design

The design of the questionnaire, the selection of participants, and the data analysis procedures were all derived from the study's research questions to ensure that each stage directly addressed the intended objectives. Given the exploratory nature of the study, no formal hypotheses were formulated. The research questions directly guided the design of the questionnaire, data collection procedures, and analysis. A mixed-methods research design was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine code-switching practices and their relationship to linguistic and communicative competence in the Naama speech community. This choice reflected the complex and multidimensional nature of code-switching, which involves both observable linguistic patterns and speakers' subjective perceptions, attitudes, and communicative intentions.

The quantitative component aimed to identify general tendencies in participants' self-assessed competence, reasons for code-switching, and attitudes toward it. These data provided an overview of dominant patterns within the sample.

Complementing this, the qualitative component sought to capture interpretive and experiential dimensions of code-switching that cannot be adequately represented through numerical data alone. Open-ended questionnaire items invited participants to elaborate on their language choices, explain the motivations underlying their code-switching practices, and reflect on how multilingual resources contribute to effective communication in different contexts. This qualitative insight enriched the analysis by foregrounding participants' voices and contextualizing statistical trends within lived communicative experiences.

By integrating quantitative breadth with qualitative depth, the mixed-methods design enabled a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of code-switching as both a linguistic phenomenon and a communicative strategy. This approach aligns with sociolinguistic research traditions that emphasize the interplay between language structure, social meaning, and speaker agency, making it particularly suitable for examining multilingual practices in an Algerian context.

Research context

The study was conducted in Naama, a province in western Algeria, characterized by sustained multilingualism and language contact. At the national level, Algeria displays a complex linguistic ecology in which Algerian Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), Tamazight, French, and increasingly English coexist across social, educational, and institutional domains. While MSA holds official status, Algerian Arabic dominates everyday interaction, French remains influential in education and professional communication, and English has gained prominence through higher education, digital media, and globalized discourse.

Within this broader context, Naama constitutes a dynamic multilingual speech community where speakers routinely navigate multiple linguistic resources. Language choice is shaped by context, audience, and communicative purpose, which is reflected in the code-switching practices reported in this study. This environment provides a relevant and empirically rich setting for examining code-switching practices and their relationship to linguistic and communicative competence in contemporary Algerian society.

Participants

The study included 55 participants aged 19–52 (M = 24.9), recruited through convenience sampling, who reported regular engagement in multilingual communication. The sample consisted of 49 students (89.1%) and 6 university teachers (10.9%) from Naama. In terms of field, 45 participants (81.8%) were in English language studies and 10 (18.2%) in scientific disciplines (the 6 teachers and 4 students). Of the 55 participants, 33 (60.0%) were female and 22 (40.0%) male. The student participants were mostly at undergraduate level (L3: 39), with 7 at Master's and 3 at Doctorate level. This composition provided exposure to diverse academic backgrounds and levels of linguistic competence relevant to code-switching practices.

Research instrument

Data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire designed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative information on participants' code-switching practices and perceptions of linguistic and communicative competence. The questionnaire was administered online via Google Forms and was written in English, reflecting its relevance as an academic and professional language within higher education contexts.

The instrument consisted of four parts. The first gathered demographic information: age, gender, status (student or teacher), field of study or teaching, university, and academic level. The second asked participants to rate their general level in English (excellent, good, or average) and to respond to seven self-assessment statements on vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, confidence in expressing academic ideas, explaining complex ideas, compensation strategies, adapting language to the situation, and comfort in academic interaction, using agreement or frequency scales. The third addressed code-switching through a multiple-choice question on the main reasons for switching, a statement on conscious switching, and five attitude items (understanding in academic discussions, teachers' use in lectures, usefulness for students who struggle with English, possible reduction of exposure to English, and overall positive or negative impact). The final part comprised four open-ended questions on when code-switching is most helpful, the challenges of communicating in English in academic settings, how teachers can help, and whether scientific and English students have different reasons for code-switching.

Participants were approached in person prior to data collection and were invited to take part in the study.

Data collection procedure

The questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms, allowing participants to complete it at their convenience and ensuring efficient data collection.

Data analysis

Related questionnaire items were first grouped into broader analytical categories (self-assessed competence, reasons for code-switching, and attitudes) to facilitate quantitative analysis. The study then employed mixed-methods data analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of code-switching practices and their relationship to linguistic and communicative competence.

For the quantitative data, frequencies and percentages were calculated for each closed-ended item (N = 55). Responses to the self-assessment items were grouped into three categories: positive (strongly agree or agree, always or often, yes), intermediate (neutral, sometimes, partly, not always), and negative (disagree, rarely or never, no). One response to one item was invalid and was excluded from that item. Results are also reported separately for students and teachers and for participants in English language studies and in scientific disciplines where this is informative; because the groups are small and unequal, these comparisons are descriptive only.

The qualitative data were analysed using a systematic thematic analysis. First, all open-ended responses were read several times to gain familiarity and to identify initial ideas related to code-switching functions, perceived competence, and attitudes. Second, segments of text were coded inductively and deductively, using labels such as “clarifying concepts”, “compensating for vocabulary gaps”, “group work”, “anxiety and confidence”, “field-specific terminology”, and “practice and feedback”, which were informed by the research questions and the theoretical framework. Third, related codes were clustered into broader themes corresponding to the research questions (reasons and situations for code-switching, perceived competence and challenges, and attitudes and pedagogical suggestions). These themes were iteratively refined to ensure that they captured recurring patterns in participants’ perspectives and experiences with code-switching.

Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings enhanced the validity and richness of the analysis. Quantitative results identified overall trends in self-assessed competence, reasons for code-switching, and attitudes, while qualitative themes provided interpretive depth by illustrating how participants themselves explained and evaluated these practices in academic settings. This combined approach allowed for a nuanced account of multilingual practices in Naama and their links to linguistic and communicative competence.

Methodological rigor and alignment

To ensure that the study’s instruments and analyses were rigorously aligned with the research objectives, each questionnaire item was explicitly designed to correspond to one or more research questions. Demographic items contextualized participants’ linguistic repertoires, closed-ended items captured measurable patterns of code-switching and self-rated competence, and open-ended items explored participants’ perceptions and experiences. This careful alignment ensured that data collection directly addressed the study’s aims.

The study employed methodological triangulation, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative analysis provided an overview of trends and distributions in code-switching practices and competence ratings, while qualitative analysis added interpretive depth by revealing participants’ motivations, attitudes, and contextualized experiences. Triangulating these data sources enhanced the validity and comprehensiveness of the findings.

Coding and analysis procedures were conducted transparently and systematically. For qualitative data, open-ended responses were coded thematically following recognized procedures, with codes iteratively refined to reflect emerging patterns. To ensure reliability, inter-coder agreement was checked by having an independent researcher review a sample of coded data, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved collaboratively. This combination of systematic coding, triangulation, and explicit alignment with research objectives strengthened the methodological rigor and credibility of the study.

Ethical considerations

Ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw at any stage without any negative consequences. Before accessing the questionnaire, participants were given an information statement outlining the purpose of the study, its academic nature, the procedures, and the expected time required for completion. Informed consent was obtained verbally during the initial in-person contact and was confirmed electronically when participants submitted their responses after reading the information statement. Anonymity was ensured by not collecting any personally identifying information, all responses were treated confidentially, and access to the data was restricted to the researchers. All data were used exclusively for academic research purposes, in accordance with standard ethical practices in sociolinguistic and educational research.

Results

This section presents the findings in relation to the research questions. Quantitative results from the closed-ended items (N = 55) are reported first, followed by qualitative insights from the open-ended responses. Differences between students (n = 49) and teachers (n = 6), and between participants in English language studies (n = 45) and in scientific disciplines (n = 10), are reported only where the data allow.

Reasons and situations for code-switching (RQ1)

The analysis identified three main themes: deliberate and goal-oriented code-switching, explanation and comprehension as the dominant reason, and group work as the most frequently mentioned situation. Quantitatively, 36 participants (65.5%) said that they consciously switch languages to achieve a communicative goal such as clarifying, explaining, or simplifying, and the other 19 (34.5%) said that they do so sometimes. As Table 1 shows, the most frequent reason was that code-switching helps participants explain better (65.5%), followed by making communication easier (27.3%), lacking vocabulary in English (20.0%), and saving time (18.2%). Participants could select more than one reason, and 22 (40.0%) chose “It helps me explain better” as their only reason. Code-switching was also seen as common among teachers: 49 participants (89.1%) reported that teachers in their department use it at least sometimes during lectures (sometimes 27, often 16, always 6), while 6 (10.9%) said rarely.

Table 1: Reasons for code-switching (N = 55; multiple answers allowed)

Reason	n	%
It helps me explain better	36	65.5
It makes communication easier	15	27.3
I lack vocabulary in English	11	20.0
It saves time	10	18.2

Qualitative responses showed when code-switching was seen as most useful. Twenty-four of the 55 respondents mentioned group work or teamwork, and 23 referred to clarifying, explaining, or understanding difficult ideas or words. Typical comments were: “It helps most when clarifying difficult ideas and ensuring everyone understands” and “Code-switching is helpful when students lack vocabulary or confidence, as it helps them continue communication”. These accounts point to comprehension and keeping communication going as the main functions.

Taken together, these findings address RQ1 by indicating that code-switching is reported mainly as a purposeful strategy for explanation and comprehension, particularly in collaborative work, rather than as a random habit; vocabulary gaps were cited by a minority (20.0%).

Perceptions of linguistic competence (RQ2)

Analysis of self-ratings and open-ended responses revealed two main themes: a generally positive self-evaluation of English, and persistent difficulties with vocabulary and confidence.

Quantitatively, 3 participants (5.5%) rated their general level in English as excellent, 39 (70.9%) as good, and 13 (23.6%) as average. As Table 2 shows, 49 (89.1%) agreed or strongly agreed that they understand most of the vocabulary used in their field, 37 (67.3%) said they often or always produce grammatically correct sentences, and 35 (63.6%) felt confident expressing academic ideas, while 18 (32.7%) felt so only partly.

Qualitative comments about challenges confirmed this picture. Limited vocabulary was mentioned in 33 of the 55 responses, and fear of mistakes, anxiety, or low confidence in 17. Pronunciation or accent (7 responses) and grammar (5) were mentioned less often, and two teachers in scientific disciplines referred to the difficulty of respecting scientific terminology. One student wrote that the main challenges were "limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, understanding academic terms, and expressing ideas clearly and confidently".

These findings address RQ2 by indicating that participants mostly evaluate their English positively but see vocabulary and confidence as the main obstacles, and that code-switching is one of the ways they cope with these gaps.

Communicative competence (RQ2)

Self-assessed communicative competence was also generally positive, though less so for explaining complex ideas. Forty participants (72.7%) said they feel comfortable interacting with classmates or colleagues in English during academic tasks, 38 of 54 valid responses (70.4%) said they can use another expression when they cannot find the right word, and 34 (61.8%) said they can adapt their language to the situation. Only 31 (56.4%) said they can often or always explain complex ideas clearly, and 4 (7.3%) said rarely or never.

Table 2: Self-assessed linguistic and communicative competence (N = 55)

Statement	Positive n (%)	Intermediate n (%)	Negative n (%)
I can understand most of the vocabulary used in my field	49 (89.1)	5 (9.1)	1 (1.8)
I can produce grammatically correct sentences	37 (67.3)	18 (32.7)	0 (0.0)
I feel confident expressing academic ideas	35 (63.6)	18 (32.7)	2 (3.6)
I can explain complex ideas clearly when speaking	31 (56.4)	20 (36.4)	4 (7.3)
I can use another expression when I lack the right word (N = 54)	38 (70.4)	14 (25.9)	2 (3.7)
I can adapt my language to the situation	34 (61.8)	19 (34.5)	2 (3.6)
I feel comfortable interacting in English in academic tasks	40 (72.7)	14 (25.5)	1 (1.8)

Note. Positive = strongly agree/agree, always/often, or yes; intermediate = neutral, sometimes, partly, or not always; negative = disagree, rarely/never, or no. Percentages are of 55 participants, except the compensation item (N = 54; one invalid response).

Qualitative comments linked communicative competence to practice and feedback. When asked how teachers can help, 17 respondents mentioned practice and 14 mentioned feedback, and others suggested interactive activities such as debates, discussions, and group work. Two respondents asked for less code-switching: one suggested "gradually reducing reliance on code-switching" and another "not switching language a lot".

Taken together, these findings suggest that participants feel competent in everyday academic interaction and use strategies such as paraphrasing and code-switching to sustain it, while clarity in complex explanations remains a weaker area, which addresses RQ2.

Attitudes toward code-switching (RQ3)

Analysis of RQ3 revealed two main attitudinal themes: general acceptance of code-switching as helpful for understanding, and caution about excessive use.

Quantitatively, 39 participants (70.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that code-switching improves understanding in scientific or academic discussions, 12 (21.8%) were neutral, and 4 (7.3%) disagreed (Table 3). Asked about its overall impact, 31 (56.4%) said it has both positive and negative effects, 20 (36.4%) said positive, 3 (5.5%) negative, and 1 (1.8%) no impact. No participant rejected the idea that excessive code-switching can reduce exposure to English: 24 (43.6%) said yes and 31 (56.4%) said partly. Twenty-eight (50.9%) said code-switching is a useful strategy for students who struggle with English, and the other 27 (49.1%) said maybe.

Table 3: Attitudes toward code-switching (N = 55)

Statement	Yes / agree n (%)	Neutral / partly / maybe n (%)	No / disagree n (%)
Code-switching helps improve understanding in scientific or academic discussions	39 (70.9)	12 (21.8)	4 (7.3)
Code-switching is a useful strategy for students who struggle with English	28 (50.9)	27 (49.1)	0 (0.0)
Excessive code-switching can reduce students' exposure to English	24 (43.6)	31 (56.4)	0 (0.0)

Group comparisons are descriptive because the groups are small and unequal. Agreement that code-switching improves understanding was 31 of 45 (68.9%) among participants in English language studies and 8 of 10 (80.0%) in scientific disciplines, and 34 of 49 students (69.4%) and 5 of 6 teachers (83.3%). Lack of English vocabulary was chosen as a reason by 8 of 45 (17.8%) participants in English language studies and 3 of 10 (30.0%) in scientific disciplines. When asked whether scientific and English students have different reasons for code-switching, 36 respondents answered yes and 8 answered no. Typical explanations were that scientific students switch mainly to deal with technical terms, while English students switch to practise the language and express ideas: "Scientific students code-switch mainly to clarify technical terms, while English students do it to practice language and express ideas more fluently".

These findings address RQ3 by indicating favourable but cautious attitudes: participants value code-switching for comprehension, yet recognise the risk of reduced exposure to English.

Discussion

The purpose of this section is to interpret the study's findings and relate them to existing research on code-switching, translanguaging, and communicative competence. The discussion follows the structure of the research questions, integrating quantitative trends with qualitative insights to explain how multilingual practices function within the Naama speech community and what they reveal about language use in EMI and everyday academic communication.

RQ1: Reasons and situations for code-switching

The findings indicate that code-switching is reported as a deliberate and mainly functional practice: every participant said they switch consciously at least sometimes, and the leading reasons were to explain better and to make communication easier. This is consistent with the view that code-switching is a strategic resource rather than a by-product of limited competence (Gumperz, 1982; Myers-Scotton, 1993). Only 20.0% cited a lack of vocabulary, which suggests that for most participants switching serves communicative purposes beyond filling gaps.

The open-ended answers point the same way: participants most often linked code-switching to group work and to clarifying difficult ideas. Such reports can be interpreted as translanguaging practices in which learners draw on their full repertoire to make meaning (García & Li, 2014; Jiang & Zhang, 2023). The questionnaire did not ask about frequency by context, language combinations, or online use, so the study cannot show how code-switching differs between informal, digital, and academic settings.

RQ2: Perceptions of linguistic and communicative competence

Participants generally evaluated their English positively, especially their understanding of field vocabulary and their ease of interaction, but were less sure about explaining complex ideas clearly and about confidence in expressing academic ideas. Open-ended responses highlighted vocabulary gaps and fear of mistakes as the main obstacles.

These results are consistent with repertoire-based models of linguistic competence (García & Li, 2014), in which multilingual ability is an integrated resource rather than fragmented proficiency: participants who report difficulty with English vocabulary also report ways of keeping communication going, including code-switching. The data are self-reports and should be read as perceived rather than measured competence.

RQ3: Attitudes toward multilingual practices in EMI and everyday communication

The study also revealed generally favourable but cautious attitudes. Most participants agreed that code-switching improves understanding, and most saw its effects as positive or mixed. Open-ended responses suggested that it helps clarify ideas and sustain group work, while some respondents recommended gradually reducing reliance on it. Agreement was somewhat higher among participants in scientific disciplines and among teachers, but these groups are small and the differences should not be generalised.

These findings are in line with Gumperz's (1982) view of code-switching as a meaningful rather than deficient practice, although the questionnaire did not capture interactional detail. They indicate that participants see multilingual practices as functional and pedagogically useful while recognising the risk of reduced exposure to English. This has implications for EMI-related teaching in Algeria: acknowledging learners' repertoires may promote comprehension and participation, provided that sufficient English input is maintained and institutional expectations for assessment are respected.

Integration and theoretical implications

Across the three research questions, the study indicates that code-switching among these participants is reported as purposeful and functional, and is linked to a generally positive but uneven self-assessment

of competence. Conceptually, the results are consistent with repertoire-based and translanguaging perspectives in an under-researched Algerian province. The study thus extends earlier work on multilingual practices in education (Jiang & Zhang, 2023) by documenting how learners and teachers in Naama perceive them.

Importantly, the findings suggest that strictly monolingual-oriented EMI policies deserve reconsideration. Instead of viewing code-switching as a barrier, educators and policy-makers can adopt pedagogical strategies that integrate translanguaging practices, such as allowing judicious use of L1 or French in explanations, scaffolding comprehension, and encouraging students to draw on their full repertoires in preparatory discussions and collaborative work. Such an approach aligns with the practices reported by participants in Naama and fosters positive attitudes toward multilingual competence, which may support long-term academic success in EMI contexts while maintaining appropriate expectations for formal assessment.

Practical implications for EMI classrooms

The findings suggest several practical implications for EMI classrooms in Algeria.

- Recognize code-switching as an asset: Teachers should acknowledge and validate students' use of multiple languages as a legitimate communicative tool that can support understanding and participation.
- Integrate translanguaging strategies: Instruction can strategically allow or scaffold the use of L1 and French to support comprehension of complex English content, especially in conceptually demanding courses.
- Promote student agency: Encouraging students to alternate languages purposefully can enhance engagement and support the development of both linguistic and communicative competence.
- Develop teacher awareness: Professional development should include training on the pedagogical benefits and practical management of multilingual practices in EMI contexts, helping teachers to balance institutional requirements with students' communicative needs.

Conclusion

This study suggests that, among the 55 participants from Naama, code-switching is a deliberate and mainly functional strategy used to explain, clarify, and sustain communication, especially in group work. Participants evaluated their English positively but reported weaker confidence in explaining complex ideas and persistent vocabulary gaps. Their attitudes were favourable but cautious, since none rejected the idea that excessive code-switching can reduce exposure to English. These findings are consistent with repertoire-based, context-sensitive models of linguistic and communicative competence.

Conceptually, the study supports a view of communicative competence as enacted through the coordinated use of several languages. From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that multilingual practices can be useful in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) settings when they are acknowledged and guided rather than suppressed, while keeping sufficient exposure to English.

Moving beyond rigid English-only approaches and incorporating translanguaging-informed strategies can foster inclusion, comprehension, and engagement in ways that better reflect students' natural communicative behaviour and local linguistic ecologies. Recognizing code-switching as a legitimate and potentially productive resource allows educators to design more realistic, effective, and culturally responsive teaching and, where appropriate, assessment practices that align classroom instruction with learners' lived multilingual experiences.

The study has several limitations. The sample is small, recruited by convenience, and unbalanced: 49 students and 6 teachers, and 45 participants in English language studies and 10 in scientific disciplines, so group comparisons are descriptive only. The data are self-reported and may not capture spontaneous language use. The questionnaire did not measure how often participants code-switch in different

contexts, which languages they combine, or their proficiency in Arabic and French. Future research could address these limitations through larger and more balanced samples, classroom observation, and longitudinal designs.

Overall, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of the educational role of language by situating multilingual practices, translanguaging, and code-switching at the centre of academic communication in Algeria and comparable multilingual societies. By documenting how learners and instructors report navigating multiple languages, the study underscores the importance of valuing linguistic diversity as an asset in higher education, with implications for sociolinguistic theory, classroom pedagogy, and language policy.

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Habla Arte: bilingual arts practices that legitimize multilingual voices in school

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Abstract
In multilingual school contexts, language operates not only as a medium of instruction but as a cultural practice through which norms of belonging and linguistic legitimacy are constructed. Grounded in sociocultural theory and critical perspectives on language ideology, this study examines how English-only school practices are associated with students' language beliefs and communicative confidence. We investigate whether inclusive bilingual programming can reshape communication norms in school spaces. The overall program was conducted in Southern California with 45 students (M age = 7.76; range = 5–10) who participated in Habla Arte, a year-long bilingual arts and public speaking program. Using a pre–post design drawing on student surveys and teacher reports, supplemented by student artifacts, testimonies and instructor reflective notes, we analysed shifts in students' perceptions of Spanish as a legitimate academic language and in their communicative confidence following participation in the program. Prior to the program, 78% of students (n = 35) reported uncertainty or discomfort using Spanish in school settings, and 80% (n = 36) reported low confidence in artistic expression and public speaking. Following participation, 80% (n = 36) reported greater comfort using Spanish and learning bilingually in school, 91% (n=41) demonstrated increased communicative confidence, and 80% of teachers observed improved academic engagement. Findings suggest that inclusive, arts-based bilingual practices may function as culture-producing mechanisms that modify communicative norms and legitimize multilingual voices. The study contributes to research on bilingual education by conceptualizing inclusive bilingual programming as a structural intervention in school culture rather than solely a linguistic accommodation.

Keywords: *bilingual education, bilingualism, translanguaging, bilingual experience, arts-integrated instruction, multimodal pedagogy*

Linguistic diversity and educational contexts in the United States

Linguistic diversity is now a defining feature of U.S. schooling. As of 2024, emergent bilingual students comprise approximately 10.6% of public-school enrolment, representing more than 5.3 million students nationwide (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2024). Similar demographic patterns appear in early childhood populations, where dual language learners constitute nearly one-third of young children in the United States (Choi et al., 2024). These shifts reflect structural transformation in the linguistic composition of schooling rather than a marginal demographic change. Despite this growth, bilingual educational provision has not expanded proportionally. Nationwide, 3,649 Dual Language and Immersion programs operate across 44 states, a limited number relative to the size of the multilingual student population (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition [NCELA], 2025). California provides a particularly illustrative case. Although approximately 19% of K–12 students are classified as English Learners and nearly 40% speak a language other than English at home (California Department of Education, 2025), only about 10% of English Learners were enrolled in bilingual education programs

(García Mathewson, 2024). This demographic–programmatic misalignment reflects continuing structural and ideological constraints rather than a lack of empirical support for bilingual education.

This demographic–programmatic tension is not unique to the United States. Analogous structural tensions between population-level multilingualism and monoglossic schooling norms characterize educational systems across many highly developed economies. In the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Australia, growing immigration-based linguistic diversity has repeatedly exposed the gap between students' home language practices and the language ideologies institutionalized in school systems (Conteh & Meier, 2014; Cummins, 2000). In these contexts, as in the United States, minority home languages are systematically treated as deficits rather than resources, and students face pressures to abandon heritage languages as a condition of academic belonging. Comparable structural tensions are also evident in postcolonial educational systems across Sub-Saharan Africa, where the lingering presence of former colonial languages, typically English or French, as the sole medium of instruction from as early as Grade 1 or Grade 3 renders Indigenous home languages academically invisible and contributes to persistent underachievement among multilingual learners (Benson, 2004; Chibaka, 2018). Scholars have argued that these postcolonial language hierarchies constitute a form of epistemic injustice that mirrors the marginalization experienced by Spanish-speaking students in U.S. dual language contexts (Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010; Namboodiripad et al., 2026). The present study, though grounded in a Southern California context, thus speaks to a broadly shared structural problem: when schooling systematically devalues the linguistic repertoires students bring from home, the consequences for communicative confidence and identity are far-reaching and require targeted programmatic responses.

Policy and ideology

The constrained expansion of bilingual education is rooted in the historical development of assimilation-oriented language policy. The 1968 Bilingual Education Act marked the first formal federal recognition of language minority students, yet while its stated goal was to support English language development, its implementation largely positioned bilingualism as transitional rather than sustaining (García & Sung, 2018). Subsequent policy shifts intensified this orientation. The No Child Left Behind Act redefined success for English Learners in terms of rapid acquisition of English language proficiency based on standardized assessment outcomes (Abedi, 2004), while state-level initiatives such as California's Proposition 227 institutionalized structured English immersion for nearly two decades (Linton, 2007).

These policies did not simply regulate instructional models; they normalized monolingualism as the benchmark of academic legitimacy. Within such a framework, languages are treated as bounded and hierarchically ordered systems, with standardized academic English positioned as the sole legitimate medium of instruction. Bilingualism becomes transitional, valuable only insofar as it accelerates English acquisition. In contrast, heteroglossic orientations conceptualize multilingual repertoires as dynamic, socially embedded resources. Rather than enforcing rigid language separation, heteroglossic frameworks recognize that learning and identity formation are mediated through flexible language practices. The tension between these orientations continues to shape how bilingual programs are implemented and experienced within schools.

The internalization of monoglossic norms by students themselves is an underexamined but consequential outcome of these policy environments. Research on Spanish-speaking Latino/a students in the U.S. consistently documents that English-dominant schooling leads to linguistic insecurity, reduced confidence in using Spanish in academic contexts, and the perception of the home language as appropriate only for domestic or informal domains rather than academic ones (Guardado, 2009; Namboodiripad et al., 2026; Potowski, 2007; Valdés, 2001). Cummins (2000) argued that such language subtractive processes are fundamentally tied to coercive institutional relations of power, which position minority students as deficient and their home languages as impediments to academic achievement. These sociolinguistic dynamics are directly relevant to the present study, which examines these processes within

a population of bilingual children who, despite enrolment in a dual language program, demonstrated widespread internalization of English-dominant norms as baseline.

Bilingual models and outcomes

Instructional models differ in structure but often reflect underlying ideological assumptions. English Immersion programs position English as the exclusive academic language. Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) incorporates the home language temporarily before transitioning students into English-dominant classrooms. In this model, instruction begins primarily in the additional language (e.g., Spanish, Mandarin-Chinese) in the early grades and shifts progressively towards English, so that by fourth grade, students have typically transitioned entirely into English-only instruction (Slavin et al., 2011). Two-way Dual Language Immersion (DLI) programs (typically using a 50/50 or 90/10 model) integrate English learners with other English speakers in shared classrooms, with instructions delivered in both languages. Development Bilingual Education (DBE), sometimes referred to as maintenance or late-exit bilingual education, similarly aims to develop and sustain literacy in the home language while building English proficiency, maintaining native language instruction well beyond the early grades. When grounded in heteroglossic principles, both DLI and DBE programs treat students' linguistic repertoires as assets rather than scaffolds.

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that well-implemented dual language immersion programs produce academic outcomes that are equal to or superior to those of English-only instructional models. For example, using randomized admission lotteries in Portland Public Schools, Steele et al. (2017) followed seven cohorts of students from kindergarten through middle school and analysed standardized state assessments in English reading, mathematics, and science. Students randomly assigned to dual language immersion programs demonstrated significant gains in English reading, with no negative effects in mathematics or science achievement. Longitudinal analyses have yielded similar conclusions. For example, Valentino and Reardon (2015) examined English learner (EL) students across four instructional models in a large California district—English immersion, transitional bilingual, developmental bilingual, and dual language immersion—and found that students in DLI programs demonstrated strong long-term academic growth through middle school, with mathematics outcomes generally comparable across models. Similarly, Umansky and Reardon (2014) analysed reclassification trajectories, the process by which students are formally assessed and redesignated as proficient in English, enabling transition out of English Learner classification, among Latino EL students in San Francisco and reported that, although students in two-way immersion programs were reclassified at slower rates in the early grades, they attained higher cumulative reclassification rates by secondary school, indicating that English proficiency gains were sustained through upper grades. In addition to evidence from California (Valentino & Reardon, 2015; Umansky & Reardon, 2014) and Oregon (Steele et al., 2017), findings from other state contexts converge on these findings. In Utah, quasi-experimental and matched comparison studies employing propensity score matching documented stronger mathematics growth among DLI students relative to non-immersion peers, particularly between Grades 3 and 4 (Watzinger-Tharp et al., 2018). District-level analyses have further shown that both minority- and majority-language students in two-way immersion programs perform as well as or better than their peers in monolingual settings on standardized assessments (Marian et al., 2013). Finally, large-scale longitudinal analyses in North Carolina districts suggest that immersion participation is associated with reductions in racial achievement gaps among native English speakers (Collier & Thomas, 2017), although these findings are correlational in nature.

The aforementioned findings challenge assumptions that bilingual education compromises English development and instead support additive models of bilingualism. However, most research has focused on standardized achievement and reclassification outcomes, leaving comparatively less attention to the mechanisms through which dual language programming reshapes classroom norms and students' perceptions of linguistic legitimacy. Although broader research on dual language learners suggests

potential advantages in behaviour regulation and interpersonal competence when home languages are supported in educational settings (Halle et al., 2014), direct evidence within K-12 dual immersion models remains limited. In contrast to outcome-centred evaluations, the present study examines these processes at a micro-level by analysing how participation in bilingual arts programming shifts students' beliefs about the academic legitimacy of Spanish and their communicative confidence in school spaces.

Arts, capital, and translanguaging

Arts-integrated bilingual instruction represents one potential context in which communicative legitimacy may be redistributed. Although arts education is formally recognized within federal policy frameworks, it is rarely designed to explicitly support multilingual learners. Yet interdisciplinary research suggests that arts integration supports narrative competence, cognitive flexibility, oral language development, and emotional regulation, domains central to emergent bilingual students' academic success (Catterall, 2009; Deasy, 2002). For multilingual learners, arts-based instruction provides multimodal avenues for demonstrating understanding. Visual representation, storytelling, and performance allow students to externalize complex ideas without relying exclusively on standardized English production. In this way, arts integration can decentralize monolingual verbal fluency as the sole marker of competence.

Research specific to multilingual learners shows that drama arts instruction for English learners increases those students' use of complex academic language relative to conventional instruction, encouraging greater discourse and linguistic risk-taking (Anderson & Loughlin, 2014). Large-scale experimental evidence also reveals that sustained performing-arts participation can improve young English learners' oral language outcomes (Greenfader et al., 2014). More recent case-study research further demonstrates that integrating Spanish into drama-based instruction can increase multilingual students' richness and flexibility of oral expression without diminishing overall participation, suggesting that arts-integrated spaces can legitimize students' full communicative repertoires (Bernstein et al., 2026). Similarly, visual arts integration has been shown to enhance vocabulary acquisition and retention when bilingual learners pair image-making with oral and written explanation (Albers & Harste, 2007). Research in dual language bilingual education further indicates that arts-based projects such as collaborative murals, storytelling performances, or even multimodal bookmaking create spaces where students can strengthen and learn to appreciate both languages (Gort & Sembiante, 2014; Johnson et al., 2019).

The Community Cultural Wealth framework offers a lens for analysing this positioning. Rather than framing multilingual students through deficit narratives, this framework recognizes multiple forms of capital, including linguistic, familial, social, aspirational, navigational, and resistant capital, that schools often overlook (Yosso, 2005). Linguistic capital refers to the intellectual and communicative skills developed through multilingualism, including storytelling practices, code-switching, and flexibility in expressions. Within an arts-integrated bilingual program, linguistic capital may be activated when students design visual artworks using personal or cultural themes, then present them bilingually. A student might describe their painting of a family celebration in a mix of Spanish and English, drawing on culturally specific vocabulary (e.g., *quinceañera*, *abuelita*) that would not typically appear in standardized curricula. Familial capital encompasses cultural knowledge and memory transmitted through kinship networks, and home knowledge becomes academic content. For example, a visual arts lesson on portraiture may invite students to create a mixed-media representation of a family member with cultural symbols, and to present that artwork with an oral narrative about a skill or value learned from that person. Social capital is the support and connections students gain through relationships with others. An example would be a structured arts collaboration, such as a group art showcase or peer critique circles that allow students to construct meaning together and build on each other's language use. Translanguaging pedagogy extends these opportunities by encouraging students to draw on their full linguistic resources as they learn, collaborate, and communicate. In doing so, it creates space for the linguistic, familial, and

social capital identified within the Community Cultural Wealth framework to function as assets in classroom learning (Yosso, 2005). Conceptualizing multilingual repertoires as integrated meaning-making systems (García & Wei, 2014), translanguaging allows students to draw on their full linguistic resources during comprehension, collaboration, and production.

In arts-based contexts, students may conceptualize ideas in their home language, develop them visually or performatively, and present their work bilingually or in their second language. For example, students may brainstorm ideas in Spanish, discuss them with peers using a combination of Spanish and English, and ultimately present their artistic work in either language depending on communicative goals and audience needs. Such practices situate language development within culturally meaningful expression and reframe bilingualism as additive and dynamic. By integrating arts-based pedagogy with translanguaging practices, bilingual education can move beyond simply allocating instructional time across languages toward creating learning environments in which students' linguistic and cultural resources are recognized as assets for academic participation. This study builds on that premise by examining bilingual programming not only as an instructional model but as a cultural intervention that may reshape participation norms, expand opportunities for multilingual expression, and strengthen students' perceptions that their home language is valued within academic spaces.

Although dual language immersion programs demonstrate strong academic outcomes, existing research has largely centred on standardized achievement and reclassification rates. Far less attention has been given to how bilingual programming shapes students' communicative confidence, language attitudes, and perceptions of belonging within classroom interaction. In particular, few studies have examined whether arts-integrated bilingual programs function as culture-producing spaces that influence how students perceive the value of their languages and identities in school. Addressing this gap requires empirical attention to students' experiences of bilingual education as both an instructional and social environment.

The current study

Research has documented the cognitive and socioemotional benefits of arts education and the pedagogical value of translanguaging in bilingual contexts, but few empirical studies examine how an arts-integrated bilingual program operationalizes these frameworks simultaneously within elementary school dual-language settings. The present study addresses this gap by examining the implementation and outcomes of *Habla Arte*, a year-long bilingual arts program designed to cultivate linguistic confidence, cultural identity affirmation, and academic participation among Spanish–English bilingual children in Southern California. Specifically, this study investigates whether participation in the program is associated with shifts in students' beliefs about bilingualism, comfort using Spanish in academic settings, and communicative confidence in both artistic and public speaking contexts.

Method

Participants

Participants included 45 Spanish–English bilingual children (23 girls; *M* age = 7.76; range = 5–10) selected from a larger cohort of 135 students participating in a multi-year arts-integrated bilingual project. Students were enrolled in kindergarten through fourth grade and attended two schools and affiliated after-school programs in Southern California. Ten classrooms (20 teachers) participated across sites. Instruction occurred within a dual-language immersion model in which Spanish was the primary instructional language in early grades, with English exposure gradually increasing across grade levels.

Inclusion criteria required enrolment in kindergarten through fourth grade and ongoing exposure to both Spanish and English through school, home, or community contexts. Students represented varied linguistic backgrounds, with some receiving primary Spanish exposure at home and others primarily within school-based programming. Data were collected during the 2023–2024 and 2024–2025 academic years.

Participation was voluntary and uncompensated. The Institutional Review Board of the University of California, Irvine, approved this study. Written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians prior to participation. Children received an age-appropriate explanation of the study and its procedures, and verbal assent was obtained from all children before participating in any study activities.

Table 1: Participant age by grade

Group	M(SD)
Overall Age (*n* = 45)	7.76 (1.35)
Kindergarten (*n* = 5)	5.40 (.55)
Grade 1 (*n* = 6)	6.33 (.52)
Grade 2 (*n* = 10)	7.40 (.52)
Grade 3 (*n* = 13)	8.31 (.48)
Grade 4 (*n* = 11)	9.27 (.47)

Program description

Habla Arte was developed by a program team of two faculty researchers in collaboration with a bilingual arts specialist in early childhood bilingual instruction and a professional visual arts educator. This program team designed the curriculum, trained instructors, and oversaw implementation. The instructional team, distinct from the program team, consisted of the 20 classroom teachers and after-school instructors drawn from the two participating school sites who delivered the weekly sessions directly to the students. All instructors received orientation training from the program team prior to implementation and participated in monthly check-ins throughout the academic year. The curriculum was informed by translanguaging pedagogy (García & Wei, 2014; Gort & Sembiante, 2014) and the Community Cultural Wealth framework (Yosso, 2005).

Instructors delivered visual arts instruction primarily in Spanish and adopted a translanguaging orientation that encouraged—but did not require—Spanish use while permitting fluid movement between Spanish, English, or combinations of both at the student's discretion.

The curriculum was organized around themes grounded in students' lived experiences and community histories, including conceptions of home, cultural icons, family and community, migration, resilience, identity, ancestry, and origin. Rather than treating these as "cultural" in contrast to a presumed non-cultural mainstream, the program positioned all students' backgrounds and traditions as legitimate intellectual and aesthetic resources. Instructors incorporated relevant visual references and facilitated discussions that treated students' home experiences as primary sources of artistic and communicative meaning. Curriculum units were adapted across grade levels (kindergarten through Grade 4) to account for developmental differences in fine motor skill, narrative capacity, and public speaking readiness, while maintaining common thematic threads. Over the course of the year, teachers systematically introduced and reinforced technical skills such as observation, proportion, shading, composition, and perspective. As students progressed, they developed increasingly individualized artistic projects centred on intentional design and personal narrative.

The instructional team dedicated approximately half of each session to structured oral communication practice. Early lessons emphasized foundational presentation skills, including posture, vocal projection, and clarity of explanation. As the program advanced, teachers supported students in elaborating on their

ideas, justifying artistic choices, and responding to audience questions. By the conclusion of the program, students publicly presented original artworks using bilingual modes of communication.

In-person instruction was complemented by Speak Art, a bilingual digital program developed by the program team to extend arts-integrated learning beyond the classroom. On entering the platform, students selected Spanish or English as their language of navigation and then progressed through three thematic modules, each comprising three sequenced lessons that integrated visual arts, creative writing and publish speaking. After each lesson, students uploaded their work and received individualised feedback, in their selected language, from trained volunteer mentors. The platform's structure and the student work submitted through it are described in greater detail in the Results section.

Measures

Pre- and post-program surveys consisting of 10 items each were administered to students and teachers (see Appendix A). The instrument was developed by the research team and reviewed for content validity and clarity by three scholars with expertise in bilingual education. Survey design was informed by established bilingual assessment guidelines. The surveys assessed students' beliefs about bilingualism in academic contexts, communicative confidence in artistic and oral expression, and comfort engaging in bilingual learning environments. Teacher-report items captured observational data related to student engagement, participation, and classroom confidence.

Both student and teacher surveys used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), consistent with the response anchors presented in Appendix A. Internal consistency was assessed separately for the pre- and post- survey administrations using Cronbach's alpha (a) for subscales containing three or more items. For two-item subscales, we evaluated reliability using the Spearman-Brown coefficient. Single-item measures were excluded from internal consistency analysis (See Tables 2 & 3).

Additional data sources

Four additional data sources were collected to contextualize and corroborate the survey findings: student artifacts, informal testimonies, instructor reflective notes and student work submitted through the Speak Art platform. These sources were analysed descriptively and were not included in the statistical analyses.

Student artifacts. Artifacts consisted of the visual artworks (e.g., drawings, paintings, and mixed-media pieces) that students produced during weekly sessions, together with the brief oral and written explanations that accompanied them. Approximately 620+ artifacts were collected from the 45 participants over the academic year. Artifacts were photographed and grouped by points in the year (early, midyear, and late). The research team compared these groups on compositional complexity, background development, range of colour use, narrative elements, and personal or cultural symbolism, and examined how students' accompanying explanations changed over time.

Testimonies. Teacher, staff, student, and parent testimonies were gathered informally rather than through structural interviews. Teachers and school staff responded to brief open-ended written prompts (e.g., fill-in-the-blank items) and shared reflections in conversation with the program team. Student testimonies consist of comments that students made during sessions and presentations, as recorded by instructors. Parent testimony was anecdotal, shared informally with instructors, and limited to a small number of responses. It was not systematically recorded and is reported only as illustrative context.

Instructor reflective notes. As described in the Procedures, instructors kept weekly reflective notes on participation patterns, engagement with Spanish, use of sentence frames, and peer dynamics. These notes were reviewed alongside the artifacts to trace changes in students' oral explanations and independence during presentations.

Speak Art platform. Student artifacts, accompanying written explanations, and mentor feedback uploaded to the Speak Art platform were reviewed to examine the development of students' written and oral expression across modules.

Procedures

Following parental consent and child assent, researchers collected demographic information regarding students' language exposure. Students completed surveys prior to program implementation and again at the end of the academic year. The surveys included Likert-type and categorical items assessing perceptions of bilingualism, communicative confidence, artistic expression, and comfort with bilingual participation. Teachers completed surveys providing observational data on student engagement and classroom participation. All surveys were administered anonymously, with unique, nonidentifying identification codes used to match each student's pre- and post-survey responses while maintaining participant anonymity.

Habla Arte is a year-long, weekly, arts-integrated bilingual intervention, with sessions lasting approximately 60–75 minutes. Each session began with a 10–15-minute opening circle conducted in Spanish, during which students participated in a community-building activity introducing the lesson's thematic focus. Instructors introduced relevant academic Spanish vocabulary to support participation in artistic production and public speaking. They then provided visual arts instruction aligned with a thematically grounded unit and a targeted artistic skill, modelling academic Spanish while encouraging students to articulate their artistic choices. Instruction and demonstrations were delivered primarily in Spanish, and students could participate in Spanish, English, or fluid combinations of both languages according to their comfort level. During the subsequent 20–30 minutes, students created individual artworks while engaging in peer discussion in either language.

During the final 15–20 minutes, students volunteered to deliver a 3–7-minute presentation explaining their artwork. They introduced themselves in either language and responded to a thematic prompt (e.g., describing their artistic choices or challenges encountered), applying the public speaking skills emphasized in the lesson. Instructors initially provided sentence frames and gradually withdrew this support over time. Peers were invited to ask follow-up questions. Instruction began with approximately 90% Spanish and 10% English. As students advanced in grade level (K–4), instructors gradually increased English use; however, Spanish remained the primary language of instruction in kindergarten through second grade. Instructors maintained weekly reflective notes documenting participation patterns, engagement with Spanish, and peer dynamics. They used these reflections to refine lesson structure, reduce public-speaking anxiety, and sustain engagement through interactive vocabulary activities and opportunities for individual interpretation.

Results

The study examined whether participation in Habla Arte was associated with shifts in students' language legitimacy beliefs, bilingual comfort, artistic expression, communication confidence, and identity. Data sources included student surveys, teacher surveys, qualitative analysis of student artifacts, teacher, parent and student testimonies, instructor reflective notes, and a review of student work submitted through the Speak Art digital platform.

Student survey findings

Overall survey responses were averaged across the 10 items. Before participation in the year-long arts program, students' average scores were 2.378 on a 5-point Likert scale, falling between "disagree" and "not sure," and indicating considerable uncertainty regarding the academic legitimacy of Spanish and lower levels of communicative confidence and self-expression. After participating in the program, students' average scores were 4.169, a significant gain $t(44) = 12.558$, $p < .001$, indicating broad

agreement with positive statements about bilingualism, communicative confidence, artistic expression, and participation. Student survey data for the four subsections of the survey are displayed in Table 2. Internal consistency estimates were generally acceptable to excellent for the multi-item student subscales, except for Art and Creativity at post-test. A repeated measures ANOVA to evaluate the subscores indicated a main effect for time, $F(1,44) = 164.199$, $p < .001$. Pairwise comparisons indicate consistent increases across the board, all significant.

Table 2: Student pre-post responses

	Pre-test	Post-test	p-value	Pre-reliability	Post-reliability
Language learning	2.39	4.20	< .001	.90	.78
Art & Creativity	2.34	4.22	< .001	.88	.18
Speaking & Confidence	2.35	4.07	< .001	.92	.83
Identity & Participation	2.47	4.22	< .001	—	—

Note. Reliability estimates represent Cronbach's α for subscales with three or more items and Spearman-Brown coefficients for two-item subscales. Reliability was not estimated for the single-item Identity and Participation measure.

Student survey data indicated substantial positive shifts across all four subsections. For *Language and Learning*, which assessed perceptions of Spanish as an academically legitimate and valued language (e.g., comfort speaking Spanish at school, valuing bilingual learning, and feeling respected when using Spanish), students demonstrated significant gains from pre- to post-test. At baseline, 78% of students (n= 35) average 3 or below on these items, indicating uncertainty or discomfort using Spanish in school, whereas at post-test, 80% of students (n = 36) reached the 4-5 range on these items. Similar improvements were observed for *Art and Creativity*, which assessed pride in artwork and the ability to use art to communicate ideas, and for *Speaking and Confidence,* which measured public-speaking comfort, clarity of expression, and bravery in sharing ideas in English or Spanish. On Combined artistic and communicative confidence items (Items 5-9), 80% of students (n = 36) fell within the 1-3 range at baseline, whereas 91% (n = 41) reached the 4-5 range at post-test, indicating increased artistic and communicative confidence. Additionally, 100% (n = 45) of students reported sharing their artwork with an audience. Finally, *Identity and Participation*, anchored by the item "I see myself as an artist and a speaker," also demonstrated significant growth.

Teacher survey findings

Teacher survey data converged with student-reported findings (see Table 3). A paired-samples t-test demonstrated significant increases from pre-test to post-test, $t(19) = 22.438$, $p < .001$, suggesting that students became more engaged participants, more confident communicators, more comfortable using Spanish within academic contexts, and more capable of using art as a vehicle for expression and learning. We examined the four factors of the survey using repeated measures ANOVA. Results indicate a significant effect over time, $F(1, 19) = 512.876$, $p < .001$. Pairwise comparisons indicate significant increases for all four factors at the < .001 level of significance. Teacher survey subscales demonstrated generally low or negative internal consistency.

Table 3: Teacher survey results by subsection

	Pre-test	Post-test	p-value	Pre-reliability	Post-reliability
Student Engagement & Participation	2.87	4.10	< .001	.33	–.39
Communication & Confidence	2.95	4.07	< .001	–.35	–.23
Bilingual Learning Environment	2.98	4.05	< .001	.24	—
Artistic Expression & Academic Growth	2.90	4.03	< .001	–.12	0.6

Note. Reliability estimates represent Cronbach's α for subscales with three or more items and Spearman-Brown coefficients for two-item subscales. Post-test reliability for the Bilingual Learning Environment could not be estimated because one item had no response variability.

For *Student Engagement and Participation* (e.g., active engagement, willingness to participate, sustained focus), gains were significant. Similarly, *Communication and Confidence* (e.g., clarity of expression, presentation confidence, willingness to share work publicly) improved significantly, with teachers noting increased clarity, confidence, and participation. Improvements were also observed in the *Bilingual Learning Environment* factor (e.g., comfort using Spanish in academic settings; bilingual instruction supporting understanding). Teachers reported greater comfort using Spanish beyond the Habla Arte classroom. Finally, *Artistic Expression & Academic Growth* (e.g., using visual art to communicate ideas; improved academic engagement) demonstrated significant gains. On the item "Students' academic engagement has improved over time," 80% of teachers (n= 16 of 20) agreed or strongly agreed at post-test.

Qualitative corroboration and artifact progression

Teacher, parent, and participant testimonies

Qualitative testimonies corroborated the survey findings, particularly regarding growth in confidence and expressive identity. Teachers consistently described a shift from hesitation to self-assured participation. One instructor reflected that at the beginning of the school year, students were "a little bit more shy and scared to show their different artworks," particularly when their drawings differed from peers. Over time, she observed that students became more confident and recognized that "everyone draws differently." Another instructor emphasized the role of bilingual instruction, noting that speaking to students in both Spanish and English "builds confidence."

School leadership similarly highlighted the program's value. An academic program specialist described the opportunity for Spanish enrichment through art as especially beneficial, explaining that access to creative content in Spanish "is a treat for our school and students." Parents and students echoed these observations. One parent shared that her child frequently returned home excited to display his artwork and demonstrated improved fine motor coordination over time. Students' reflections frequently centered on pride and joy. For example, one student stated, "I like Habla Arte because I get to show my mom and dad the drawings that I did," while another explained that presenting artwork made him feel "like a real grownup." These statements suggest that students not only developed technical skills but also internalized a stronger sense of expressive identity and self-efficacy.

Students' perspectives on bilingualism also evolved noticeably throughout the year. Early conversations revealed hesitation; several students initially described Spanish as something used "at home" rather than for "schoolwork." Over time, this boundary was softened as one student who had rarely volunteered in Spanish began presenting fully in Spanish, stating, "Now I know Spanish is for big ideas too." By spring, students no longer treated Spanish as an accessory but as a tool to enhance communication and for deeper analysis, storytelling, and audience connection.

Artifact development

Analysis of student artifacts revealed a clear developmental progression across the academic year. Early artworks primarily reflected guided drawing exercises, simple compositional structures, limited variation in colour choice, and brief, teacher-supported explanations. Students' oral descriptions tended to be short and reliant on prompting. As the year progressed, artifacts demonstrated increased compositional complexity, more intentional colour selection, expanded narrative elements, and stronger evidence of personal symbolism. Oral explanations similarly evolved, with students providing more elaborate descriptions, justifying artistic choices, and independently responding to audience questions. Together, these qualitative patterns align with the quantitative findings and provide converging evidence of growth in artistic confidence, communicative competence, and expressive identity.

Figure 1: Progression of student artwork from early to midyear



Note. Early-year artifacts featured guided drawing exercises and shape-based replication (e.g., a watermelon, pumpkin, house, butterfly, and ladybugs), characterized by centred compositions and minimal or absent backgrounds. Midyear artifacts incorporated backgrounds, personalized details, and greater variation in colour and design.

By late spring, student artifacts demonstrated increased originality, clearer representations of identity and family, and more cohesive narrative development. During presentations, students more consistently articulated their artistic choices, explaining colour selection, character backstories, and how their work connected to the thematic focus. Instructor memos documented reduced reliance on sentence frames and greater spontaneous elaboration, indicating growing independence in oral expression.

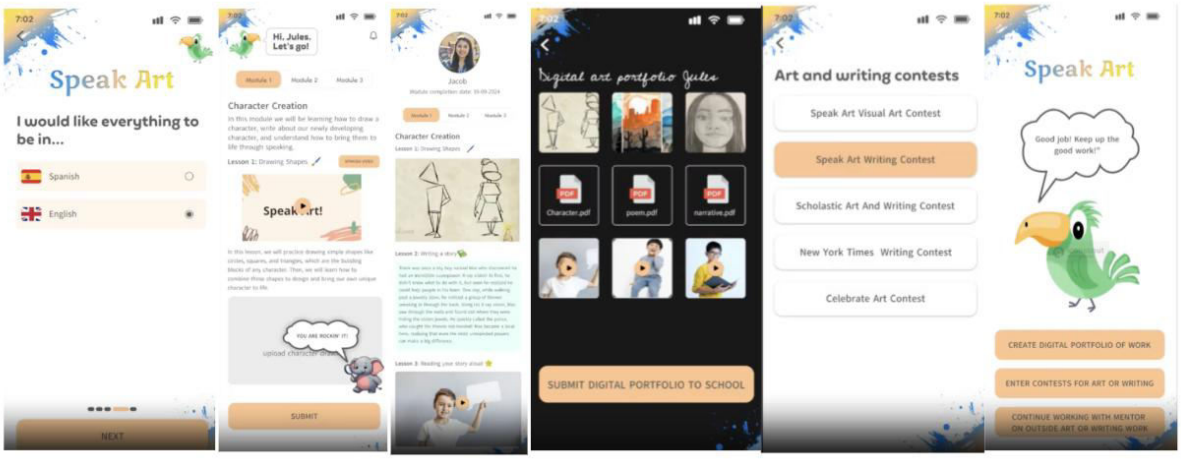
Figure 2: Late-year student self-portrait artifacts illustrate more originality and richer expressive detail.



Digital infrastructure: the Speak Art platform

Habla Arte was supported by a bilingual digital platform, Speak Art, designed to extend arts-integrated bilingual learning beyond the classroom and increase equitable access to structured arts instruction, particularly in contexts where bilingual arts curricula are limited. Upon entering the platform, students selected their preferred instructional language (Spanish or English), positioning both languages as academically legitimate. The platform guided students through three thematic modules, each consisting of three sequenced lessons integrating visual arts, creative writing, and public speaking. For example, in Module 1, students constructed a character using foundational shape-based drawing techniques supported by tutorial videos. They then developed a written narrative about the character and ultimately delivered an oral presentation incorporating narrative elements. This structured progression reinforced the integration of artistic production, written expression, and oral communication within a bilingual framework.

Figure 3: Overview of the Speak Art digital platform



Note. Screenshots illustrate language selection, sequenced multimodal modules, digital portfolio creation, and mentor-supported artifact submission. The names and photographs displayed are placeholders and do not depict study participants.

Upon completing all modules, students could (a) submit a digital portfolio of their work to their school, (b) participate in visual arts and writing competitions, and (c) continue working with a mentor on additional art and writing projects if they chose to pursue further development. Early artifacts submitted through the platform reflected shape-based replication and brief explanations consistent with introductory Module 1 tasks. In contrast, late-year submissions demonstrated greater originality, more developed narrative structure, and increased elaboration in both written and oral components. Students provided longer written explanations and more detailed narrative framing of their artistic choices. The platform's embedded mentor feedback system further supported student development. After each lesson, students uploaded artifacts and received individualized feedback in their selected language from trained volunteer mentors. This iterative feedback loop created a low-stakes digital environment that appeared to reduce anxiety around seeking assistance while promoting revision and refinement. The structured opportunities for feedback and revision may have contributed to observed gains in presentation skills and artistic confidence.

Discussion

This study examined whether a year-long art-integrated bilingual intervention could influence students' perceptions of language legitimacy, communicative confidence, and expressive identity. By integrating visual arts, structured public speaking, translanguaging pedagogy, and a bilingual digital infrastructure, *Habla Arte* positioned Spanish not as ancillary support but as a language of academic production. The findings indicate that participation was associated with substantial shifts across multiple constructs, including perceptions of Spanish as appropriate for classroom use, artistic confidence, public speaking skills, and affirmation of identity. The nearly two-point increase in composite means suggests not only incremental skill development but a broader transformation in how students understood their linguistic authority within academic spaces. More broadly, the findings suggest that language legitimacy is not simply a structural feature of bilingual program designation, but an enacted classroom practice produced through repeated opportunities for multilingual expression, public participation, and social affirmation.

Producing language legitimacy through enacted practice

Students entered the program with evidence of internalized monolingual schooling norms. Baseline survey results showed that 78% (n = 35) of students reported uncertainty or discomfort using Spanish in school contexts, despite enrolment in bilingual settings. This pattern aligns with a substantial body of scholarship documenting how English-dominant institutional norms can persist even within formally designated dual language programs (Gort & Sembiante, 2014; Johnson, García, & Seltzer, 2019; Potowski, 2007). As established in the policy literature above, formal program enrolment is insufficient to shift students' internalized language hierarchies. Lee (2006) found that Latino students in bilingual programs simultaneously valued bilingual education while preferring English-dominant settings. Our base data, showing that 78% of enrolled bilingual students reported discomfort using Spanish in school, replicate this pattern at the elementary level.

The post-program shifts further support this interpretation. Repeated opportunities to create, present, and receive feedback in Spanish appear to have transformed Spanish from a permitted language into an authoritative one. In this sense, *Habla Arte* functioned as a counter structure to English-dominant expectations, affirming that Spanish could serve as a language of instruction, intellectual production, and public expression. These findings extend prior research on dual language immersion, which has primarily emphasized academic achievement (Umansky & Reardon, 2014; Valentino & Reardon, 2015), by demonstrating how arts-integrated bilingual programming may operate as a culture-producing intervention that reshapes everyday participation norms and redefines belonging.

Multimodal arts as a bridge between thought, speech, and identity

The arts-integrated structure provides a plausible mechanism for these shifts. Multimodal production allowed students to externalize ideas visually before articulating them orally, reducing the linguistic vulnerability often associated with academic speech. The progression of artifacts, from early technical replication to later personalization and narrative complexity, suggests that visual composition functioned as a scaffold for increasingly elaborated oral language. Early-year artifacts (e.g., houses, simple animals such as butterflies and ladybugs, and pumpkins for *calabaza en tacha* during Day of the Dead) reflected guided drawing exercises and shape-based replication. Compositions were typically centred, backgrounds were absent or minimally developed, and colour use was limited to one to three colours. Written or oral explanations were brief and descriptive, often limited to naming the object and identifying a single feature the student enjoyed drawing. These artifacts suggest that students were operating within technical instruction and basic representational goals.

By mid-year, artifacts such as ballet folklórico skirts, Central American flags connected to students' heritage, holiday scenes, and traditional foods demonstrated greater narrative framing and cultural symbolism. Students incorporated more detail, for example, layered ruffles and decorative patterns in *folklórico* skirts, a wider range of colours, and more precise linework beyond simple shape replication. Drawings of family meals included environmental elements such as tables, decorations, and surrounding figures, signalling a shift toward storytelling. Students also showed greater awareness of composition across the page rather than concentrating images at the centre. Orally, they began explaining the reasoning behind their choices and what the imagery represented to them.

Late-year portrait artifacts revealed the most substantial transformation. Students incorporated proportion, elements of shading, and backgrounds tied to their identity and community. Several end-of-year portraits showcased decorative framing patterns and colour schemes reflective of their neighbourhoods and cultural traditions. Rather than depicting isolated objects or generic figures, students represented themselves within meaningful cultural and narrative contexts. During presentations, they more frequently referenced family traditions, heritage, and community, speaking in Spanish or fluidly combining Spanish and English.

Rather than substituting for verbal competence, artistic production appeared to support it. Over time, students relied less on sentence frames and demonstrated greater independence and elaboration during presentations, suggesting that visual arts production buttressed linguistic expansion. This pattern aligns with research on visual thinking strategies in Spanish as a foreign language, which has shown that sustained engagement with artwork can lead to increased lexical diversity, more complex interpretative language, and greater confidence in oral expression (López Cuenca, 2021). By enabling students to construct meaning visually before expressing it verbally, the program created a bridge between thought and speech, shifting the burden away from demonstrating competence exclusively through English-dominant discourse norms.

Legitimacy as socially and structurally reinforced

Qualitative evidence indicates that these shifts were socially reinforced rather than individually isolated. Teachers observed movement from hesitancy to confident participation, noting that students who were initially "shy and scared" to present later embraced diverse forms of expression. Program leadership emphasized that the intervention provided a "safe sense of speaking in their native language," fostering creativity and confidence. Such accounts underscore that legitimacy is enacted through peer response, audience validation, and emotional safety, not solely through the formal availability of bilingual programming (Cabrera-Pérez et al., 2023). Parent testimony describing students' excitement in bringing artwork home suggests that affirmation extended beyond the classroom, reinforcing engagement within family spaces, although this evidence is anecdotal and drawn from a small number of informal accounts.

These patterns align with the Community Cultural Wealth framework (Yosso, 2005). Gains in Spanish legitimacy reflect strengthened linguistic capital, while artwork drawing from ancestral narratives and cultural histories illustrates the activation of familial and aspirational capital within academic settings. *Habla Arte* did not compartmentalize home language and identity from schooling; it positioned them as central intellectual resources. The program's translanguaging orientation further institutionalized this legitimacy. By permitting fluid movement between Spanish and English during creation and presentation, and by extending bilingual feedback through the Speak Art digital platform, the intervention embedded cultural affirmation into routine instructional practice. Confidence gains may therefore reflect not isolated encouragement but a sustained restructuring of linguistic norms across both classroom and digital spaces.

Habla Arte's translanguaging orientation provides a structural explanation for how legitimacy shifts were sustained. Within the program, students were permitted to use Spanish, English, or fluid combinations of both languages during learning and presentation, consistent with translanguaging as an integrated meaning-making system (García & Wei, 2014). The Speak Art platform extended this structure beyond direct instruction by allowing students to select their language of navigation, progress through sequenced multimodal modules, and receive individualized bilingual feedback from mentors. This iterative feedback loop may help explain why confidence gains appeared durable: cultural affirmation was embedded into routine instructional design rather than delivered sporadically.

Taken together, the findings suggest that arts-integrated bilingual programming may function not merely as enrichment but as a mechanism for renegotiating linguistic hierarchies and participation norms in elementary classrooms. While dual language research has largely emphasized academic outcomes, this study highlights the importance of examining how bilingual environments shape perceptions of legitimacy, belonging, and expressive authority. Future research should investigate the durability of these shifts and explore how similar models operate across diverse institutional and sociolinguistic contexts, including minority-serving schools in Europe and Australia, and postcolonial multilingual settings in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the devaluation of home languages in schooling takes structurally comparable forms (Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010; Chibaka, 2018).

Limitations

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the study relied on a relatively small sample (n = 45), which constrains the breadth of representation and limits the extent to which findings can be generalized to other bilingual or multilingual contexts. Replication with larger and more diverse samples would strengthen confidence in the patterns observed here. Second, the survey instruments were researcher-developed and designed specifically to capture constructs such as language legitimacy, artistic confidence, and expressive identity within the context of this intervention. While several student subscales demonstrated adequate internal consistency, lower reliability estimates for the teacher subscales and the student Art and Creativity subscale at post-test warrant caution when interpreting composite scores. Although triangulation with teacher survey data, artifact analysis, and parent testimony supports the coherence of the findings, future research should further refine and validate these measures across settings to enhance reliability and comparability and should consider formal validation studies. Third, the study relied primarily on self-reported perceptions and qualitative testimony alongside artifact progression. While these sources provide meaningful insight into students' experiences, future work would benefit from incorporating additional observational and discourse-based measures. For example, systematic coding of classroom language use, frequency of Spanish participation in academic talk, or analysis of how newly introduced vocabulary is integrated into public speaking tasks could offer more granular evidence of communicative change. Finally, the study captures shifts within a single academic year. Longitudinal follow-up would allow researchers to examine whether changes in communicative confidence and linguistic legitimacy persist over time and how early expressive growth may relate to later academic development, including literacy outcomes and broader measures of school engagement.

Conclusion

The findings from the *Habla Arte* program suggest that an arts-integrated bilingual environment can meaningfully reshape how students experience language, expression, and belonging within academic spaces. By positioning Spanish at the centre of instruction and creative production, the program repositioned bilingualism from a background characteristic to an intellectual and communicative resource. Students did not simply practice language; they used it to produce, present, and publicly claim ideas. Importantly, shifts were evident not only in students' self-perceptions but also in classroom participation patterns, artistic development, and adult observations across school and home contexts. Together, these patterns indicate that linguistic legitimacy is not guaranteed by bilingual program designation alone. Rather, it is constructed through repeated opportunities for multimodal expression, public affirmation, and structurally supported translanguaging practices.

More broadly, this study challenges a narrow framing of impact in bilingual education research. While standardized academic achievement remains central, communicative norms, expressive authority, and perceptions of legitimacy are equally foundational to equitable schooling. Educational environments that validate students' linguistic and cultural repertoires may shape not only what students learn, but also how they understand their place within institutions of learning. Arts-integrated bilingual programming offers one model for reconsidering how multilingualism is enacted in schools, not as accommodation, but as authorship. As multilingual student populations continue to expand globally, educational systems must move beyond viewing home languages as transitional supports and instead recognize them as legitimate resources for intellectual participation, identity development, and public expression. Expanding the metrics by which bilingual education is evaluated bilingual education to include legitimacy, belonging, and expressive agency may provide a more comprehensive account of what meaningful educational equity entails.

Appendix A

Pre- and Post-Surveys Administered to Teachers and Students (Likert-Scale Measures)

These surveys were designed to measure shifts in language beliefs, bilingual comfort, artistic expression, and communicative confidence.

Likert-scale (1-5)

1= strongly disagree

2= disagree

3= not sure

4= agree

5= strongly agree

Student Pre/Post Survey

Demographics

- Age
- Gender

Grade

- Language spoken at home: English, Spanish, both

Language & Learning

1. I feel okay speaking Spanish at school.
2. I like learning in English and Spanish.
3. Using Spanish helps me learn new things.
4. My teacher and classmates respect me when I speak Spanish.

Art & Creativity

5. I feel proud of my artwork.
6. I can use art to show my ideas or tell a story.

Speaking & Confidence

7. I feel okay talking in front of the class.
8. I can share my ideas, so others understand me.
9. I feel brave sharing my ideas in English or Spanish.

Identity & Participation

10. I see myself as an artist and a speaker.

Post only:

11. Did you share your artwork with an audience?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Teacher Pre/Post Survey

Student Engagement & Participation

1. Students are actively engaged during lessons.
2. Students participate willingly in class discussions and activities.
3. Students demonstrate sustained focus during learning activities.

Communication & Confidence

4. Students express their ideas clearly when speaking.
5. Students show confidence when presenting to peers.
6. Students are willing to share their work publicly.

Bilingual Learning Environment

7. Students feel comfortable using Spanish in academic settings.
8. Bilingual instruction supports students' understanding and participation.

Artistic Expression & Academic Growth

9. Students use visual art to meaningfully communicate ideas.
10. Students' academic engagement has improved over time.

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Investigating cultural openness and empathy among English teacher trainees at a Hungarian university

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Abstract
Multicultural socio-educational contexts require future teachers to foster inclusive teaching practices and demonstrate high openness and empathy toward diverse learner populations. This quantitative study investigates English teacher trainees' (N=62) cultural openness and empathy using the Revised Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy. Criterion sampling was employed to recruit multilingual participants with advanced English proficiency levels at a Hungarian university. Descriptive statistics indicated high levels of cultural openness and empathy, especially among female and older respondents. However, a statistically significant gender difference emerged only in empathy. Spearman correlations examined how cultural openness and empathy correlated with other variables, including awareness of racism, resentment, and anxiety. Finally, two parsimonious linear regression models with negligible variance inflation factors were tested. Standardized beta coefficients indicated that empathy was positively associated with cultural openness, whereas resentment was negatively associated with it. Cultural openness and awareness of racism were both positively associated with empathy.

Keywords: *cultural openness, empathy, ethnocultural empathy, teacher education, inclusive education, intercultural competence, multicultural teacher competence*

Introduction

For decades, higher education institutions worldwide have hosted an ever-increasing body of culturally and linguistically diverse students alongside local students. To use English as a lingua franca (ELF) successfully in multicultural classrooms for learning and intercultural communication (Wagner & Byram, 2017) purposes, mere proficiency in English is insufficient. Successful ELF communication requires intercultural (Deardorff, 2006) and multicultural competencies (Mallinckrodt et al., 2014), including cultural openness and empathy. Therefore, cultural openness and empathy have been widely researched in multicultural contexts.

Multilingualism, however, is a transformative experience not only linguistically but also emotionally, psychologically, and culturally (Kramsch, 2009). Both the neurologist Damasio (1994) and the psychologist Csíkszentmihályi (1993) highlighted that language learning is embodied. Damasio emphasized brain-body interactions that generate emotions associated with language learning, while Csíkszentmihályi described the flow experience, which is integral to intrinsic motivation in second language acquisition (SLA). Combining large-scale survey data with interviews, Pavlenko (2005) scrutinized the relationship between emotions and multilingualism. Qualitative case studies revealed that multilingualism generates powerful emotional responses in learners while serving as an expression of various identities (Fekete, 2020; Fodor & Lugossy, 2025; Kramsch, 2009; Norton, 2013; Williams, 2024). Multilingualism is also linked to higher enjoyment and motivation and slightly lower anxiety in the language classroom (Fekete, 2023; Dewaele et al., 2024). Concerning emotional competence, Koch and his colleagues (2024) confirmed a cyclic

relationship between emotional competence and multilingualism and introduced the concept of 'emotional advantage of multilingualism'.

Studies have revealed contradictory findings regarding the link between empathy and multilingualism. While Dewaele and Li (2012) pointed out that the frequent use of multiple languages is conducive to higher cognitive empathy, Ward and Ragosko (2025) found that multilingual experiences did not lead to increased empathy. However, empathy and emotional intelligence scores were significantly higher when information was processed in the participants' mother tongue (L1). Regarding openness, studies have found a positive association with multilingualism. For example, Wang (2023) shed light on a positive correlation between multilingualism and open-mindedness up to three languages. Another study (Dewaele & Stavans, 2014) confirmed that the frequent and proficient use of multiple languages is linked to both higher cultural openness and empathy. Furthermore, multilingualism has been linked to a higher acceptance of immigrants through intergroup contact (Garcia-Vazquez et al., 2022).

Multicultural competence, empathy, and intercultural communicative competence (ICC), the cornerstones of multicultural teacher competence, are the most frequently researched topics in language education research (Peña Acuña, 2024) because they are strongly linked to inclusive education. Nevertheless, fostering intercultural competence or empathy through a pedagogy of multiliteracies receives less research attention (Fernández-García & Sánchez-Vizcaíno, 2023). In the Hungarian context, cultural openness and empathy, which are key components of multicultural teacher competence, remain under-researched. The few existing studies either investigated the intercultural competencies and intercultural sensitivity of medical students (Lucza et al., 2023; Németh et al., 2022) or involved general populations in cross-cultural investigations (Genkova et al., 2022). In the context of teacher education, research addressed the development of English majors' intercultural communicative competence (Menyhei, 2013; Talbi, 2020), the development of an identity-based model of teaching intercultural communication (Fekete, 2022), or teacher trainees' beliefs about integrating the development of intercultural communicative competence in language teaching (Lázár, 2011). Therefore, the present study is the first investigation into English teacher trainees' cultural openness and empathy in Hungary using the Revised Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (RSEE) (Finck et al., 2021). Since empathy and cultural openness are integral to inclusive education and teacher competencies, the study examines these two constructs, explores gender differences, and identifies associations between these two and the other variables assessed by RSEE in a moderate sample of Hungarian English teacher trainees. The results are expected to inform teachers, educators, and policymakers about pedagogical practices that may favourably impact English teacher trainees' cultural openness and empathy levels, which, in turn, can help them foster inclusive teaching practices in their local contexts.

Theoretical background

Multilingualism

Bilingualism usually refers to the competent use of two languages, while multilingualism denotes the use of three or more languages. Dewaele and Stavans (2014) developed two measures of multilingualism. The former refers to individuals who speak more languages while functioning in a monolingual and monocultural environment. The latter describes multilingual speakers who use their languages actively in a multicultural and multilingual environment. The participants of the study belong to the first category of multilingual speakers: they learned English (and other foreign languages) in school, use English daily in their university studies, but live and function in a dominantly monolingual and monocultural context in Hungary.

Measuring intercultural competence and ethnocultural empathy

There have been several efforts in the past decades to define and measure intercultural competence (IC). Byram (1997) introduced the theoretical model of intercultural communicative competence, which inspired the development of the intercultural communicative competence questionnaire (Arasaratnam, 2009; Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006), as well as the intercultural sensitivity scale (Chen & Starosta, 2000). In addition to IC, cultural adaptation is a key issue in multicultural settings. The universal-diverse orientation (UDO) instrument (Miville et al., 1999) measures factors impacting cultural attitudes that can facilitate cultural adaptation. UDO consists of three subscales, including diversity of contact, relativistic appreciation, and comfort with differences. Similarly, the multicultural personality questionnaire (Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002) was designed to measure which personality traits promote cross-cultural adaptation. The instrument consists of five sub-scales: cultural empathy, open-mindedness, emotional stability, flexibility, and social initiative.

Empathy as a personality trait has also received much research attention. One of the first measures of empathy was the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis, 1983), consisting of four subscales, including perspective-taking as the cognitive dimension, as well as empathic concern, personal distress, and fantasy, constituting the affective dimension of the scale. Another conceptualization of empathy was related to emotional intelligence (EQ). Goleman (1995) theorized EQ as a multidimensional intelligence construct consisting of five components, including self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy, and social skills. The first three denote the intrapersonal, and the last two describe the interpersonal dimensions of EQ. However, no validated instrument exists that measures Goleman's five EQ dimensions.

The original ethnocultural empathy scale (EES) (Wang et al., 2003) included four factors: 1) empathic feeling and expression, 2) empathic perspective taking, 3) acceptance of cultural differences, and 4) empathic awareness. When two models of EES were tested through multi-group confirmatory factor analysis, it was pointed out that ethnocultural empathy may be "'a more general' intercultural sensitivity or multicultural competence, i.e., a set of abilities (affective, cognitive, and communicative) needed to perform effectively when interacting with culturally diverse others" (Albiero & Matricardi, 2013: 654).

An adaptation of EES, validated for English speakers, is the Everyday Multicultural Competencies/Revised Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (EMC/RSEE) (Mallinckrodt et al., 2014), including six subscales: 1) cultural openness and desire to learn; 2) resentment and cultural dominance; 3) anxiety and lack of multicultural self-efficacy; 4) empathic perspective-taking; 5) awareness of contemporary racism and privilege; and 6) empathic feeling and acting as an ally. An adaptation of the EMC/RSEE scale, validated for Spanish-speaking audiences with some modifications, resulted in a five-factor measure called the Revised Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (RSEE) (Finck et al., 2021). This instrument was employed to collect data for the research.

Cultural openness

Openness is usually examined in relation to the Big Five Personality Model (Costa & McCrae, 1992). A study investigating which personality dimensions predict tolerance to human diversity found that openness, agreeableness in the beliefs dimension, rather than related to speech or acts, as well as dispositional empathy, were predictors of tolerance (Butrus & Witenberg, 2013). However, the emphatic concern dimension of empathy had a stronger impact on tolerance than the other personality factors. Openness to experience was also investigated in relation to UDO (Miville et al., 1999). Openness was linked to UDO in the dimensions of appreciating cultural diversity, such as art and beauty, curiosity about cultural differences, and the flexibility to reevaluate one's cultural beliefs (Han & Pistole, 2017). Another study (Yakunina et al., 2012) examining how the five dimensions of the multicultural personality (Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002) impacted international students' openness to diversity and adjustment in the USA found that open-mindedness and flexibility were associated with openness to diversity, which facilitated adjustment. The authors (Yakunina et al., 2012: 538) pointed out that "openness to diversity

may be a multicultural attitude that may be more amenable to development or modification", for example, via education and training. Since cultural engagement is linked to academic success in multicultural educational contexts, cultural openness was found to be a prerequisite for cultural engagement (Rogers & Woznick, 2015). Furthermore, openness and agreeableness as personality traits were associated with more positive attitudes towards immigration (Dinesen et al., 2016). Regarding gender, a Turkish study (Polat, 2018) investigating teacher trainees' multicultural personality traits found that males scored higher on the openness subdimension, while females scored higher on the flexibility subdimension. Having a social media account also contributed to flexibility, and openness was associated with strong materialistic, liberty, generosity, and romantic values.

Empathy

Regarding personality traits, agreeableness is associated with both general and ethnocultural empathy, and empathy is strongly correlated with all UDO components (Han & Pistole, 2017). When cultural empathy was examined as a personality trait in a Turkish study (Polat, 2018), it was associated with social, intellectual, liberty, and generosity values. Research involving Chinese international students in the USA found that students who showed little appreciation for similarities and differences between the home and host environment experienced higher acculturative stress, which negatively impacted their ethnocultural empathy (Liu & Wei, 2020). Another study involving international students confirmed that empathy has a significant effect on attitudes towards other cultures (Nadeem et al., 2020).

A Norwegian study (Solhaug & Osler, 2018) involving 1006 secondary school students investigated the antecedents of ethnocultural empathy using EES (Wang et al., 2003). School activities such as learning about ethnocultural empathy, being motivated to learn, and getting good grades were moderately correlated with ethnocultural empathy. Teacher support, adapting teaching to students' needs, and considering their well-being seemed to have only a limited impact on ethnocultural empathy. Although school activities may be important, other factors had a stronger impact. While school diversity contributed to ethnocultural empathy, students from diverse cultural backgrounds exhibited higher empathy. Regarding family background factors, the language spoken in the family had a strong impact, while other factors, such as parents' educational level, were moderately associated with ethnocultural empathy. As for gender, female students showed higher levels of ethnocultural empathy than male learners.

A Turkish study (Kapıkıran, 2023) examining teacher trainees' ethnocultural empathy found a strong association between ethnocultural empathy and ethnicity, religion, political views, prosocial behavior, threat perception, and positive-negative affection towards outgroups, explaining 92.4% of the variance in scores. The qualitative component of a mixed-methods study (Egitim & Akaliyski, 2024: 7) involving Japanese teachers working with refugee-seeking children put forth that long-term intercultural exposure and regular meaningful interactions "may be needed for majority-group members to develop ethnocultural empathy" towards minority group members, as understanding immigrants' adversities may trigger an empathetic response in them. The follow-up quantitative analysis corroborated the relationship between intercultural experience and ethnocultural empathy and concluded that it is possible to maintain one's own culture while adopting another one. The research explained the key role schools may play in encouraging participation in the cultural practices of diverse student populations.

Developing cultural openness and empathy in teacher education

As the Hungarian educational context becomes more multicultural, cultural openness and empathy have become essential teacher competencies when catering to linguistically and culturally diverse students. Previous research has corroborated that empathy is associated with both teacher competencies and inclusive education. A Chinese study (Lin & Chung, 2024) involving 445 pre-service and in-service kindergarten and pre-school teachers revealed that empathy can transform teachers' beliefs in favour of multiculturalism, promoting their multicultural teacher competence. Similarly, teachers' emotional

efficacy, which denotes teachers' ability to regulate and express negative and positive emotions (Bandura et al., 2003), is linked to empathy and teachers' self-efficacy (Goroshit & Hen, 2014). Furthermore, several studies have confirmed a link between empathy and fostering inclusive education. A quantitative study (Graziano et al., 2024) examining the relationship between teachers' empathy and inclusive education found that higher empathy levels fostered inclusive education, especially in female teachers with higher emotional self-efficacy. Similarly, qualitative studies highlighted the fundamental role of empathy in promoting inclusive education when teachers work with students with disabilities (Klerk & de Klerk, 2018), special needs (Muñoz Martínez et al., 2024), or gifted students (Gómez-Arizaga et al., 2016).

A Hungarian qualitative pre-post-test study (Fekete, 2022) examined multilingual students' stereotypes about and perceptions of each other's cultural backgrounds in a multicultural classroom, using an identity-aware cultural intervention over the course of a semester. The intervention resulted in quantifiable, favourable changes in students' perceptions of cultural diversity, prejudice, and stereotypes. Regarding ethnocultural empathy, a mixed-methods pre-post-test study (Fernández-Corbacho et al., 2024) involving 48 pre-service language teachers in Spain measured the participants' ethnocultural empathy using RSEE before and after an educational intervention. The study found slight improvement in all constructs but cultural openness following the intervention. Statistically significant differences were detected in the two groups' post-intervention results in empathy and anxiety, and female students displayed significantly higher empathy levels than male participants. The findings highlighted that different types of cultural interventions affect ethnocultural empathy in different ways. In the Hungarian context, Fekete (2026) examined 100 English majors' cultural openness and empathy using RSEE and found that the participants showed significantly higher cultural openness than empathy, indicating that the cognitive dimension of ethnocultural empathy is more readily available to students than the affective and action-oriented dimensions. Although cultural openness and empathy were not significantly associated with gender, degree programs, language socialization contexts or English proficiency levels, descriptive statistics showed that female and international students reported higher levels of both cultural openness and empathy than male and Hungarian students and students with lower English proficiency levels exhibited higher empathy than those with higher English proficiency levels. Correlation analyses revealed positive relationships among cultural openness, empathy, and awareness of racism, whereas cultural openness and empathy were negatively associated with resentment and anxiety. The reviewed empirical research underscores the central role of empathy in education and highlights that female teachers generally exhibit higher levels of empathy. This is a noteworthy finding given that female teachers greatly outnumber male teachers at all levels of Hungarian education.

The reviewed literature suggests that cultural openness and empathy can be conceptualized as interrelated components of intercultural competence, mediated and shaped by cognitive, affective and sociocultural factors such as multilingualism (Ávila-López & Vaquero-Ibarra, 2025). Within this framework, multilingualism contributes to the development of emotional and intercultural capacities while empathy and related affective dimensions (e.g., awareness of racism, resentment, and anxiety) represent key mechanisms through which individuals engage with cultural diversity. In the present study, these constructs are examined within a unified model using the RSEE, with a particular focus on the associations between cultural openness, empathy and other ethnocultural empathy dimensions.

Since empathy and openness are integral to both teacher competencies and inclusive education, and both constructs may be developed through educational interventions, the study has three goals: 1) to examine the participants' cultural openness and empathy levels, 2) to explore gender and age-related differences, and 3) to identify which subscales of RSEE (Finck et al., 2021) show strong associations with the two constructs under study. The findings are expected to help educators develop educational practices that are more likely to positively impact teacher trainees' cultural openness and empathy in teacher education.

Methodology

Research aims and context

A total of 62 participants were involved in the study who were English teacher trainees at the University of Pécs (UP). Involving only multilingual teacher trainees in the research is a key aspect of the study, as multilingualism is linked to both empathy and openness, which are integral to inclusive education. Furthermore, cultural norms agreed upon by a speech community are encoded in language (Kramsch, 1998); thus, language and culture are intertwined in SLA and connected at different levels (Risager, 2005). From a socio-educational perspective, teaching culturally diverse learners and promoting empathy and openness in the classroom hinges on teacher education. Finally, another incentive for conducting this study is that teacher trainees' cultural openness and empathy have not been examined in Hungary to date.

Research questions

The research answers the following six research questions (RQs).

RQ1: What are the levels of cultural openness and empathy among the Hungarian English teacher trainees in the study?

RQ2: Are there statistically significant differences in cultural openness and empathy across the three subgroups within the sample?

RQ3: Are there gender-based differences in cultural openness and empathy?

RQ4: How are cultural openness and empathy each correlated with the other four factors of the scale?

RQ5: Which variables (empathy, awareness of racism, resentment, and anxiety) are significantly associated with cultural openness in the regression model?

RQ6: Which variables (cultural openness, awareness of racism, resentment, and anxiety) are significantly associated with empathy in the regression model?

Participants

Hungarian English teacher trainees are in a unique linguistic and academic situation. They have a measured C1 level of English language proficiency because they must pass an internally organized, mandatory C1-level English proficiency exam. However, despite their high language proficiency, they interact with Hungarian classmates and teachers in English, since they study separately from international students. While Hungarian teacher trainees study in a 5-year, undivided MA program in teacher education, international students are enrolled in 3+2-year non-teaching BA and MA degree programs. Therefore, English teacher trainees have little or no contact with international students enrolled in English-taught BA and MA programs at UP.

Criterion sampling was employed to create a homogeneous sample in terms of nationality, English language proficiency, and major. The participants were Hungarian; they were English teacher trainees, and they all had a measured C1 level proficiency in English. Nevertheless, three subgroups were identified within the sample. Some of the data came from a large international sample collected by the *Multiliteracies for Adult At-Risk Learners of Additional Languages (MultiLits)* project using RSEE in 2023. The Hungarian subsample consisted of 52 students from two universities in Hungary. However, to comply with criterion sampling, international students and non-teacher trainees were removed from the sample, resulting in a group of 22 full-time English teacher trainees (FT2023) from UP. Additional data were collected in the spring semester of the academic year 2024/25 in three seminars called *Teaching Culture and Intercultural Communication*, taught by the author to English teacher trainees at UP. Two of the courses were for full-time students, resulting in the second group of 27 full-time English teacher trainees (FT2025), and one course was for working adults enrolled in the one-year part-time teacher training program, resulting in a group of 13 part-time English teacher trainees (PT2025). The average age of this

group was higher because the students were working adults and already in-service teachers of another subject. Table 1 displays demographic information about the participants. The respondents' other majors included Hungarian, History, Communication and Media, PE, Russian, French, German, Ethics, Mathematics, Physics, IT, Biology, Library Studies, and Music. Students in group PT2025 did not major in a second subject.

Table 1: Demographic information about the participants

		Mean	Frequency	Percentage
Age	FT2023:	23.4	-	-
	FT2025:	22.7	-	-
	PT2025:	41.4	-	-
	N62:	26.9	-	-
Gender (N62)*	Female	-	46	74
	Male	-	15	24
Nationality	Hungarian	-	62	100
Mother tongue	Hungarian	-	62	100
English proficiency	C1 level	-	62	100
English teacher trainee	Yes	-	62	100
Major 1	English	-	62	100

*One participant did not indicate their gender.

Instrument

Responses to RSEE (Finck et al., 2021) were based on a 1-6 point Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree, to 6=strongly agree. The scale consists of five subscales: 1) "Cultural Openness and Desire to Learn" (hereinafter "cultural openness"), 2) "Awareness of Contemporary Racism" (hereinafter "awareness of racism"), 3), Empathy (hereinafter "empathy") 4), Resentment and Cultural Dominance (hereinafter "resentment") and 5) "Anxiety and Lack of Multicultural Self-Efficacy" (hereafter "anxiety").

However, for this study, only two subscales, cultural openness and empathy, are examined. Items measuring cultural openness address the importance of being educated about other cultures and developing intercultural competence, showing interest in other countries, cultures and cultural programs on campus, and exhibiting openness to interact with culturally diverse individuals. The items assessing empathy address one's ability to understand, emotionally respond to, and act on the experiences of people from different racial or ethnic backgrounds. The validated items used to assess the two focal constructs are presented in the Appendix.

The internal consistency of the RSEE subscales in the sample was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega (Table 2).

Table 2: Internal consistency of RSEE subscales

Subscale	Cronbach's α	McDonald's ω
Cultural openness	0.776	0.805
Empathy	0.739	0.748
Awareness of racism	0.800	0.806
Resentment	0.819	0.831
Anxiety	0.567	0.595

Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.57 (anxiety) to 0.82 (resentment), and McDonald's omega ranged from 0.60 (anxiety) to 0.83 (resentment). Four subscales demonstrated acceptable-to-good reliability, whereas the anxiety subscale showed lower reliability. As a result, findings involving this subscale should be interpreted with caution. Although anxiety is included in the broader RSEE framework and reported for completeness in correlational analyses, it is not treated as a focal variable in this study, nor is it included in regression models owing to its lower internal consistency and the study's primary focus on cultural openness and empathy.

Data collection

In both data collection phases (2023 and 2025), *Google Forms* were used to collect quantitative data anonymously, composed of two parts: the RSEE items and demographic questions. Demographic questions collected information on respondents' age, gender, nationality, majors, mother tongue, and English language proficiency level. In both phases, students completed the same questionnaire in English, given their measured C1 proficiency level.

Data analysis

The quantitative data gathered via RSEE (Finck et al., 2021) were analysed using RStudio (version 2024.09.0, Build 375), an integrated development environment for R. The following analyses were conducted to answer the research questions (RQ).

RQ1: Descriptive statistics were computed for cultural openness and empathy.

RQ2: A One-Way ANOVA was conducted to compare the means of the three subgroups on both cultural openness and empathy, followed by the calculation of effect sizes (η^2), Cohen's f, and ANOVA's post-hoc power.

RQ3: An Independent-samples t-test was performed to compare mean scores between male and female participants on cultural openness and empathy. After normality was confirmed using the Shapiro–Wilk test, Hedge's g and post-hoc power were computed to identify the t-test's ability to detect small changes in the sample.

RQ4: Since two of the five variables were not normally distributed, Spearman correlation was utilized to examine how cultural openness and empathy each correlated with the other four variables of the scale.

RQ5: Different models were tested to examine which variables were significantly associated with cultural openness; however, due to the limited sample size, a parsimonious linear regression model was retained for presentation in the study. Anxiety was excluded as a predictor in the regression analyses owing to its low internal consistency.

RQ6: From the tested models examining which variables were significantly associated with empathy, a parsimonious linear model was retained for presentation.

Residuals were inspected, and the final cleaned models are reported for both RQ5 and RQ6. Variance inflation factors and standardized beta coefficients were also calculated for both models.

Results

To answer RQ1, descriptive statistics for cultural openness and empathy were computed. After raw scores were calculated, standardized scores (Mean=0) were also computed to enable comparisons with a Spanish pre-post-test study that also examined RSEE among language teacher trainees following an educational intervention. Table 3 presents mean scores, SD, and minimum and maximum scores for the two variables.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics

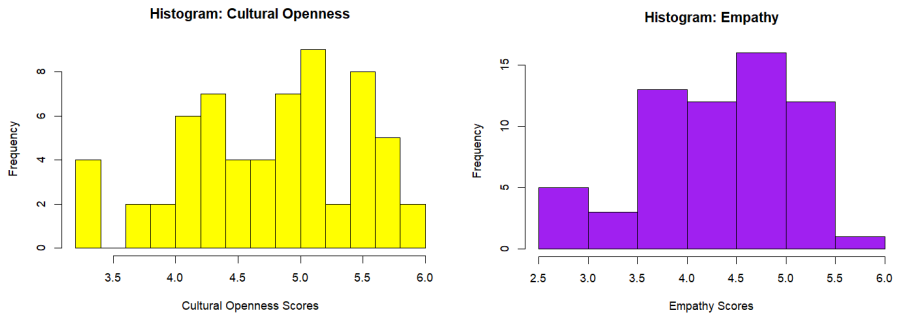
		Cultural openness	Empathy
Raw scores	Mean	4.81	4.32
	Min	3.20	2.73
	Max	5.90	5.91
	SD	0.70	0.73
Standardized scores	Min	-2.290818	-2.169571
	Max	1.559412	2.161587
Standardized scores: pre-test*	Min	−3.71379	−2.64050
	Max	1.09919	1.20254
Standardized scores: post-test*	Min	−2.87672	−2.46930
	Max	1.06808	1.34661

*Scores adopted from Fernández-Corbacho et al., 2024: 9

The obtained raw scores in the Hungarian sample are relatively high for both cultural openness and empathy. This observation is supported by the comparison of standardized scores across the two studies. In particular, the standardized pre-test scores in the Spanish study showed the lowest values for both variables, while the standardized scores in the Hungarian study were the highest. This suggests that participants in the Hungarian sample generally exhibited greater cultural openness and empathy compared to the pre-intervention groups in the Spanish study. Nonetheless, the participants in the Hungarian study showed higher cultural openness than empathy.

Next, a Shapiro-Wilk test, along with a histogram (Figure 1), was used to assess the normality of score distribution for the two variables. Both indicated that the data for cultural openness (W = 0.96, p = .052) and empathy (W = 0.97, p = .209) were normally distributed.

Figure 1: Histogram of cultural openness and empathy



Regarding RQ2, descriptive statistics were calculated for cultural openness and empathy across the three subgroups (Table 4).

Table 4: Descriptive statistics across three groups

Variable	Group	Mean	SD	Median	Min	Max
	FT2023	4.72	0.81	5.00	3.20	5.80

Cultural openness	FT2025	4.78	0.65	4.80	3.20	5.80
	PT2025	5.02	0.60	4.90	4.20	5.90
Empathy	FT2023	4.17	0.69	4.23	2.91	5.18
	FT2025	4.26	0.70	4.36	2.73	5.91
	PT2025	4.70	0.79	4.82	2.73	5.45

While the mean values for both variables in groups FT2023 and FT2025 were similar, the highest values were measured in group PT2025. A One-Way ANOVA was employed to assess whether there were significant differences in cultural openness and empathy scores across the three groups. The results indicated that there were no significant differences in cultural openness ($F(2, 59) = 0.77$, $p = .469$) and empathy ($F(2, 59) = 2.38$, $p = .101$) across the three groups, as the p-values in both cases were higher than 0.05. However, nonsignificant p-values do not necessarily imply the absence of meaningful differences; therefore, effect sizes (η^2), Cohen's f, and post-hoc power analyses were computed. For cultural openness, $\eta^2 = 0.025$, Cohen's f = 0.161 (small effect), with post-hoc power = 0.48, indicated that the study was underpowered to reliably detect small differences. For empathy, $\eta^2 = 0.075$, Cohen's f = 0.284 (medium effect), with post-hoc power = 0.94, suggested that the ANOVA had sufficient power to detect medium-sized differences (Cohen, 2013).

For RQ3, descriptive statistics were computed, using both raw and standardized scores for cultural openness and empathy across genders (Table 5).

Table 5: Descriptive statistics across genders

		Females	**Males**
Cultural openness Raw scores	Mean	4.86	4.57
	Min	3.20	3.20
	Max	5.90	5.70
	SD	0.67	0.75
Empathy Raw scores	Mean	4.47	3.85
	Min	2.91	2.73
	Max	5.91	5.09
	SD	0.66	0.79
Cultural openness Standardized scores	Min	-2,477128348	-1,836443568
	Max	1,549826375	1,506596907
Empathy Standardized scores	Min	-2,358656874	-1,425327709
	Max	2,162102134	1,563262649

Descriptive statistics across genders indicate that females scored higher on both the cultural openness and empathy subscales. Normality was assessed using the Shapiro–Wilk test for both variables across genders. Results showed no significant deviations from normality for cultural openness (males: p = .71; females: p = .12) or empathy (males: p = .44; females: p = .53), supporting the assumption of normal distribution. An independent-samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in empathy between males and females: $t(20.83) = 2.74$, $p = .012$, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.15 to 1.09. The standardized mean difference was large (Hedges' g = 0.88, 95% CI [0.27, 1.49]), which is a bias-corrected estimate of Cohen's d suitable for small or unequal sample sizes. Post hoc power analysis indicated that the t-test had sufficient power to detect an effect of this size ($1 - \beta = 0.83$). In the case of cultural openness, no statistically significant difference was detected between males and females:

t(21.84) = 1.33, *p* = .199, 95%. The standardized mean difference was small, Hedges' g = 0.41, 95% CI [–0.18, 1.00], indicating that the true effect could range from a slight male advantage to a large female advantage. Post hoc power analysis revealed that the study was underpowered to detect an effect of this size (1 – β = 0.28); therefore, a small true difference might not be reliably detected with the current sample.

Table 6: Correlation matrix

	Cultural openness	**Empathy**	**Awareness of racism**	**Resentment**	**Anxiety**
Cultural openness	-	0.45	0.39	-0.51	-0.33
Empathy	0.45	-	0.49	-0.39	-0.15

To answer RQ4, a Spearman correlation matrix (Table 6) was used to examine how cultural openness and empathy each correlated with the other four factors of the scale, since normality was violated for two variables (resentment: W= 0.94, p= 0.005; anxiety: W= 0.94, p= 0.004). A moderate positive correlation was found between cultural openness and both empathy (r = .45, p = 0.00026) and awareness of racism (r = .39, p = 0.0015). Cultural openness also showed a strong negative correlation with resentment (r = –.51, p = 0.000025) and a moderate negative correlation with anxiety (r = –.33, p = 0.0086). Similarly, empathy was moderately positively correlated with awareness of racism (r = .49, p = 0.000049) and moderately negatively correlated with resentment (r = –.39, p = 0.0015). A weak negative correlation was observed between empathy and anxiety (r = –.15, p = 0.2316). The p-values indicate that all correlations except between empathy and anxiety are statistically significant.

To address RQ5 and RQ6, several linear regression models were tested to identify the predictors of cultural openness and empathy, informed by the observed moderate and strong correlations. Following each analysis, the residuals were examined for normality, and Cook's distance was calculated to detect outliers. When the outliers (N=3-4) were removed from the data, no significant distortions were introduced, as their number remained below 10% of the sample (N = 62) and the normality of the residuals was confirmed. Therefore, the clean models were retained for presentation. Variance inflation factors and standardized beta coefficients were also calculated to identify the level of multicollinearity and compare the relative importance of different predictor variables in the two models. Given the small sample size, parsimonious models with only two predictors are presented in the study.

To examine the associations between cultural openness and other variables, a model including empathy and resentment as independent variables is presented (Table 7).

Table 7: Predictors of cultural openness: Model 1*

Predictor	**B**	**SE**	**T**	**p (significance)**
Intercept	4.63	0.56	8.33	< .001
Empathy (E)	0.31	0.10	3.21	.002
Resentment (RE)	- 0.49	0.10	-5.11	< .001

***Model statistics: R^2 = .54, Adjusted R^2 = .52, $F(2, 56) = 32.60$, $p < .001$
Residual standard error = 0.47 (df = 56)
Normality of residuals (Shapiro–Wilk test): p = 0.89

In Model 1, both empathy and resentment were statistically significant predictors, with resentment showing a stronger association with cultural openness. The two variables explain 52.1% of the variance in cultural openness scores. Model 1 was statistically significant and found to be a good fit. Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) were calculated for both empathy (VIF = 1.267) and resentment (VIF = 1.267), indicating low multicollinearity. This suggests that the regression coefficients are not distorted by overlapping predictors. Finally, standardized βs were also calculated to show the relative strength of the associations between cultural openness, empathy, and resentment (Table 8).

Table 8: Standardized β for empathy and resentment

Predictor	Estimate (B)	Std. Beta (β)	Std. Error	t	p
Intercept	4.6287	–	0.5555	8.333	< .001
Empathy	0.3109	0.3282	0.0969	3.210	0.0022
Resentment	-0.4877	-0.5223	0.0955	-5.109	0.000004

The p-values and standardized β values indicate that empathy is a significant and resentment is a highly significant predictor of cultural openness. In other words, higher empathy is associated with greater cultural openness, whereas higher resentment is associated with lower cultural openness, with resentment having the stronger effect.

To address RQ6, a parsimonious regression model including cultural openness and awareness of racism as independent variables was tested to examine their associations with empathy (Table 9). The normality of the residuals in the original Model 2 was observed, which is especially important in a small sample. However, after removing the outliers, the residuals in the cleaned model violated normality assumptions (p = 0.006); therefore, robust regression was applied on the cleaned data as supplementary information (Table 10).

Table 9: Predictors of empathy: Original Model 2*

Predictor	B	SE	T	p (significance)
Intercept	0.87	0.62	1.40	.168
Cultural Openness (CO)	0.31	0.12	2.61	.012
Awareness of Racism (RA)	0.41	0.11	3.69	< .001

*Model statistics: R^2 = .35, Adjusted R^2 = .33, F(2, 59) = 16.10, p < .001
Residual standard error = 0.60 (df = 59)
Normality of residuals (Shapiro–Wilk test): p = 0.22

Table 10: Predictors of empathy (Model 2): Robust regression*

Predictor	B	SE	T
Intercept	0.17	0.53	0.31
Cultural Openness	0.50	0.11	4.56
Awareness of Racism	0.36	0.10	3.55

*Model statistics: Residual standard error = 0.54 (df = 55)

In the original Model 2 (Table 9), explaining 33% of the variance in empathy scores, awareness of racism was a more significant predictor of empathy, while in the cleaned robust regression model (Table 10), cultural openness emerged as more significant. In the case of robust regression, no direct R^2 is available. R^2 on cleaned data was 0.48, explaining approximately 48% of the variance. Next, the variance inflation factor was calculated for cultural openness (VIF = 1.269) and awareness of racism (VIF = 1.269) using the original model, because VIF depends on correlations among predictors, not on the outcome or residuals. Low multicollinearity suggests that the regression coefficients are not distorted by overlapping predictors. Since robust regression models do not standardize scores, standardized scores were computed to calculate standardized betas (Table 11).

Table 11: Standardized β for cultural openness and awareness of racism

Predictor	Estimate (β)	Std. Error	t-value
Intercept	0.043	0.092	0.462
Cultural openness	0.479	0.105	4.561
Awareness of racism	0.373	0.105	3.550

*95% CIs for standardised beta coefficients

Results indicated that cultural openness was a significant positive predictor of empathy (β = 0.48, SE = 0.11, t = 4.56, 95% CI [0.27, 0.69]), and awareness of racism was also a significant positive predictor (β = 0.37, SE = 0.10, t = 3.55, 95% CI [0.17, 0.57]). The intercept was near zero (β = 0.04, SE = 0.09, t = 0.46). These results suggest that higher levels of cultural openness and awareness of racism are associated with higher empathy scores.

Discussion

English teacher trainees at UP exhibited higher levels of cultural openness than empathy. A cross-country comparison with a similar sample size indicated higher values for both variables among English teacher trainees in Hungary than among English teacher trainees in Spain (Fernández-Corbacho et al., 2024). This is a surprising finding given that Hungarian English teacher trainees study separately from international students in a different degree program and function in a predominantly monolingual and monocultural context. In contrast, students in the Spanish sample were more culturally diverse and functioned in a multicultural context in Spain outside the university. Therefore, the cultural context does not explain this difference. Hence, other factors might be responsible for the difference. The fact that all Hungarian participants had a measured C1 level of English proficiency, compared with the perceived English proficiency levels of Spanish students, which ranged from B1 to C2, may have had an impact. Higher proficiency in English may result in more frequent and more confident use of the language both in and outside the classroom, which may be responsible for higher empathy and openness scores, as explained by previous research (Dewaele & Stavans, 2014; Dewaele & Wei, 2012; Wang, 2023). However, the impact of English proficiency was not tested due to the homogeneity of the sample. Furthermore, Hungarian English teacher trainees' English studies or perhaps their online and offline interactions, activities, or hobbies may also play a role. However, these factors were not included in the research.

Regarding subgroup differences, although the ANOVA was underpowered to detect small changes, cultural openness and empathy scores were the highest in the PT2025 group. Being in-service teachers, the respondents in this group were significantly older than the students in the other two groups. Their increased life and teaching experience associated with their age may have slightly skewed the scores towards higher values in the combined Hungarian sample.

As for gender differences, the independent-samples t-test had sufficient power to confirm that female students exhibited significantly higher empathy than male participants, which is aligned with the findings of other studies (Fernández-Corbacho et al., 2024; Solhaug & Osler, 2018). While a Turkish study (Polat, 2018) found higher openness scores among male Turkish teacher trainees, the results of this study suggested that female English teacher trainees scored descriptively higher on cultural openness than males. However, this difference was not statistically significant, and the t-test was underpowered to detect small differences.

Spearman correlations indicated moderate positive relationships between cultural openness and both empathy and awareness of racism. Cultural openness also showed a strong negative correlation with resentment and a moderate negative correlation with anxiety. Empathy was moderately positively correlated with awareness of racism and moderately negatively correlated with resentment. A weak negative correlation was found between empathy and anxiety. These associations were also observed in Fekete's (2026) study involving non-teacher trainee English majors but with different strengths.

To identify the predictors of cultural openness (RQ5) and empathy (RQ6), several models were tested using linear regression analysis and drawing on the selected variables of the RSEE, but only two parsimonious models are presented for discussion. Model 1 included empathy and resentment as independent variables. Both were significantly associated with cultural openness, with low multicollinearity, and together explained 52% of the variance in cultural openness scores. Standardized beta coefficients indicate that the absence of resentment has a stronger impact on cultural openness than the presence of empathy in this Hungarian sample. In other words, higher levels of empathy and lower levels of resentment toward culturally diverse individuals were associated with greater openness toward cultural diversity.

To examine the associations between empathy and selected RSEE variables, a parsimonious model (Model 2) including cultural openness and awareness of racism as independent variables was tested. While the original Model 2 only explained 33% of the variance in empathy scores, after removing outliers and applying robust regression, the variance explained increased to approximately 48% with low multicollinearity. The standardized beta coefficients indicated that while awareness of racism is associated with empathy, the presence of cultural openness has a greater impact.

Both Model 1 and Model 2 explained approximately 50% of the variance in cultural openness and empathy scores, indicating a large effect size with negligible multicollinearity. The use of criterion sampling resulted in a homogeneous sample of Hungarian English teacher trainees with advanced (C1-level) English proficiency. As the study targeted a specific educational and linguistic group, it did not intend to produce results generalizable to other student populations or native English-speaking cohorts, which are already widely represented in the literature. In this Hungarian sample, the regression analyses revealed that cultural openness is linked to resentment and empathy, and empathy is associated with awareness of racism and cultural openness. These four variables were closely connected in the sample, both in correlations and in regression analyses, highlighting four key areas that could be addressed in teacher education to enhance teacher trainees' teacher competencies and encourage them to foster inclusive education in their future practice. These results are in line with the findings of pre-post-test studies measuring the impact of educational interventions (Fekete, 2022; Fernández-Corbacho et al., 2024) that tackle issues such as discrimination, racism, cultural preconceptions, and stereotypes (awareness of racism and resentment), learning about the difficulties of culturally diverse individuals (empathy), and learning about, or engaging in interactions with people from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds (cultural openness).

Conclusions

The regression analyses revealed that cultural openness and empathy are closely linked. Additionally, increased awareness of racism and decreased resentment contribute to higher openness and empathy

toward diversity. Openness to diversity can be viewed as a multicultural attitude and empathy as a dispositional trait or a component of EQ, both of which, according to the growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), may be developed through conscious effort. Therefore, educational programs and interventions may play a crucial role in fostering these propensities. Programs that raise awareness of contemporary racism and social inequities can enhance both cognitive and affective empathy, as well as openness to cultural diversity.

Implementing such interventions in tertiary education may strengthen teacher trainees' cultural openness and empathy, enabling them to cultivate these values in their future classrooms. Creating inclusive, safe, and non-judgmental learning environments that respect diverse psychological, learning, and cultural needs is fundamental to promoting social inclusivity. Therefore, context-appropriate educational programs should be designed and implemented to effectively promote openness and empathy toward cultural diversity within the local context. The discussion of the regression analyses can offer insights into topics and practices that can promote English teacher trainees' cultural openness, empathy, and beliefs about multiculturalism. These factors are integral to both teacher competencies and inclusive education.

Limitations and future directions

One limitation of this study is the small sample size. Consequently, larger-scale research is needed to better understand why English teacher trainees exhibited higher cultural openness and empathy despite their monolingual and monocultural context, compared with future language teachers in a culturally diverse Spanish setting. Moreover, a larger sample could help to confirm the relationship between FL proficiency levels and both cultural openness and empathy. While greater age and increased life, professional, and sojourn experience may be associated with higher cultural openness and empathy among language teachers, this finding may not be generalizable to other teaching contexts or broader populations; thus, further investigation is warranted. Additionally, a larger sample might clarify the role of anxiety, considering that this subscale showed low reliability in this sample. Since the two regression models explained approximately 50% of the variance in the key variables, future research should also consider including other potential factors, such as measured proficiency in multiple languages, family/cultural backgrounds, real-life and online social interactions, sojourn experiences, hobbies, leisure activities, and the impact of university studies.

Furthermore, the homogeneity of the sample limits the generalizability of the results. Future research directions might include larger and more diverse samples and the use of structural equation modelling to test reciprocal effects. Finally, the exclusive reliance on self-reports only provides cross-sectional results that preclude strong causal inference; therefore, the inclusion of behavioural or observational measures of intercultural competence could provide a more holistic picture.

Acknowledgment

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Appendix

Items included the two subscales of the RSEE examined in the study.

Cultural openness

1. I think it is important to be educated about cultures and countries other than my own.
2. I welcome the possibility that getting to know another culture might have a deep positive influence on me.
3. I admire the beauty in other cultures.
4. I would like to work in an organization where I get to work with individuals from diverse backgrounds.
5. I would like to have dinner at someone's house who is from a different culture.
6. I am interested in participating in various cultural activities on campus.
7. Most people in my country would be better off if they knew more about the cultures of other countries.
8. A truly good education requires knowing how to communicate with someone from another culture.
9. I welcome being strongly influenced by my contact with people from other cultures.
10. I believe my country is enhanced by other cultures.

Empathy

1. It is easy for me to understand what it would feel like to be a person of another racial or ethnic background other than my own.
2. It is difficult for me to put myself in the shoes of someone who is racially and/or ethnically different from me.
3. I get disturbed when other people experience misfortunes due to their racial or ethnic background.
4. It is difficult for me to relate to stories in which people talk about racial or ethnic discrimination they experience in their day to day lives.
5. I am touched by movies or books about discrimination issues faced by racial or ethnic groups other than my own.
6. I can relate to the frustration that some people feel about having fewer opportunities due to their racial or ethnic backgrounds.
7. I share the anger of people who are victims of hate crimes (e.g. intentional violence because of race or ethnicity).
8. I rarely think about the impact of a racist or ethnic joke on the feelings of people who are targeted.
9. When I hear people make racist jokes, I tell them I am offended even though they are not referring to my racial or ethnic group.
10. When I see people who come from a different racial or ethnic background succeed in the public arena, I share their pride.
11. When I know my friends are treated unfairly because of their racial or ethnic backgrounds, I speak up for them.

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Programme *Adventures of the Other*: developing children's intercultural competences in the context of mother tongues

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Abstract
The aim of this article is to present the "Adventures of the Other" programme in the context of educational challenges arising from socio-cultural transformations reflected in Polish kindergartens and schools, with particular attention to the implementation of compulsory education for students from Ukraine after 2022. Against the background of theories, concepts, and research on otherness, cultural diversity, and child development, the article outlines the programme's rationale, theoretical foundations, and methodology. The programme supports the development of children's intercultural competences through the use of intercultural fairy tales and the integration of mother tongues into educational activities. This approach fosters linguistic awareness, mutual understanding, peer relationships, and identity formation. The article also discusses the key stages of the programme's development over a 16-year period, from its initial pilot implementation in Podlasie in 2010 to its third edition conducted by IBE in 2024. The paper is structured into five parts: programme history, socio-scientific context, target groups, content and methods of implementation, and concluding remarks.

Keywords: *intercultural competences, mother tongues, pedagogical innovation, linguistic diversity, Ukrainian migration, fairy-tale-based learning, art therapy, children's stereotypes*

Introduction

This article adopts an analytical-descriptive approach, combining an examination of contemporary socio-cultural challenges with an account of the pedagogical programme "Adventures of the Other," initially developed and piloted in 2010. It does not present findings from a fully designed empirical study but rather focuses on the programme's theoretical assumptions, educational structure, and pedagogical potential.

The analysis is situated within broader socio-cultural transformations, particularly those related to migration processes and the arrival of Ukrainian children in Polish schools after 2022. It draws on selected theoretical perspectives, including Nikitorowicz's concept of encountering the Other, Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, key developmental theories (Piaget, 1952, Vygotsky, 1978, Erikson, 1963), and established models of intercultural competence (Barrett, 2018a, Barrett, 2018b, Magala, 2011; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development is used to discuss how support for the mother tongue may facilitate learning and adaptation in new linguistic environments.

The article further explores the programme's capacity to create pedagogical space for the inclusion of children's mother tongues in the development of intercultural competences. It also refers to earlier pilot implementations and recognitions, including the OMEP 2012 award. The programme is presented as the outcome of a 16-year developmental process, from initial pilots in the Podlasie region to its 2024 implementation by the Educational Research Institute (IBE). It incorporates experiential methods such as intercultural storytelling and arts-based activities aimed at supporting peer relations, emotional resilience, and identity development in preschool and early school-aged children.

The article is structured into five parts: programme history, socio-scientific context, target group, content, and implementation methods.

Programme history

The "Adventures of the Other" programme has a 16-year developmental history. It was initially designed in 2010 as a pedagogical innovation. From its inception, an interdisciplinary and international team of researchers and practitioners contributed to the development of its theoretical foundations, as well as to the design of intercultural tales, lesson scenarios, and supporting educational activities. This team included pedagogues, psychologists, philologists, cultural experts, teachers, students, and representatives of non-governmental organisations.

This collaborative framework enabled the implementation of pilot versions of the programme in kindergartens and schools in the Podlasie region, followed by its introduction in other educational institutions across Poland. The pilot phase was preceded by diagnostic studies on children's perceptions of Otherness (in the first stage) and attitudes towards individuals with migrant backgrounds (in the second stage). It was also accompanied by evaluation activities addressed both to educators implementing the programme and to participating children. The pilot implementations were conducted by teachers and students of the University of Białystok, who were prepared for programme delivery through cyclical training sessions. Following the completion of the pilot phase, further training cycles were organised in 2011 and 2015 for teaching staff and students intending to implement an updated version of the programme in their respective institutions.

The outcomes of the pilot phase include two scientific and methodological monographs: *Adventures of the Other. Tales in Intercultural Education* (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska, Potoniec, Szostak-Król, 2011) and *Adventures of the Other*. *Intercultural Tales to Integrate Foreign Students* (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska, Potoniec, Szostak-Król, 2015), as well as the instructional film Adventures of the Other II. The programme gained recognition at both regional and international levels. In 2011, it received first place in the Podlasie Voivode's competition "Social Initiative of the Year," followed by first place in the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) competition in 2012. Through OMEP, the programme was translated into English and made available via the Polish Committee of OMEP website. Between 2012 and 2016, the programme was implemented by teachers and volunteers in England, Bulgaria, and Germany. It has continued to attract interest from educational practitioners and researchers, and has been presented as an example of research-informed intercultural education initiatives, including during meetings of the European Commission's Working Group on Promoting Common Values and Inclusive Education and Training (2019), under the theme Inclusion of Young Refugees and Migrants through Education: Access, Transitions and Values. In 2023, it was also referenced on the European Commission's website as a project supporting the development of key competences.

As part of the "School Accessible to All" project, implemented by the Educational Research Institute in cooperation with the Ministry of National Education and UNICEF, a third edition of the programme was developed. An integral component of this edition is the volume Adventures of the Other. Intercultural Fairy Tales with Elements of Art Therapy in the Process of Developing Children's Intercultural Competences (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska, Szostak-Król, 2024), published by the Educational Research Institute.

Social and theoretical background of the programme

The programme constitutes an educational response to contemporary socio-cultural transformations that increasingly shape school environments across Europe. In particular, it addresses challenges related to migration, linguistic diversity, and the need to develop intercultural competences among children in inclusive educational settings. It is grounded in the assumption that intercultural education should not only promote openness towards cultural diversity, but also create pedagogical spaces in which children's linguistic and cultural identities are recognized and valued. Within this framework, participants' mother

tongues function not as the central object of instruction, but as a mediating and supportive resource that may foster communication, empathy, and mutual understanding.

Research in multilingual and intercultural education has widely emphasized the role of the mother tongue in children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. The mother tongue (L1) is understood not only as the first language acquired by a child, but also as a key medium of identity formation, emotional security, and meaning-making. Cummins (2000) argues that strong proficiency in the first language provides a cognitive and linguistic foundation for subsequent second-language acquisition and academic achievement. This perspective is supported by UNESCO (2014), which emphasizes the importance of maintaining learners' home languages in order to ensure equitable multilingual education, social inclusion, and the preservation of cultural identity. Contemporary research in multilingual education further indicates that recognizing students' linguistic repertoires contributes positively to their well-being, participation, and sense of belonging within school communities (García & Wei, 2014; Norton, 2013).

These assumptions became particularly visible in the Polish educational context after 24 February 2022, when Russia's aggression against Ukraine led to a rapid influx of Ukrainian refugee children into Polish schools. Many children entered educational institutions shortly after experiencing forced migration, separation, trauma, and prolonged uncertainty. In addition to adapting to a new educational system, they often faced linguistic barriers, disrupted peer relations, and emotional distress related to war experiences and displacement (Tędziagolska, et al., 2022). In such contexts, schools become important spaces for rebuilding a sense of safety, agency, and social belonging. The inclusion of children's mother tongues in educational interactions may therefore serve not only linguistic functions, but also psychosocial and relational ones, potentially reducing exclusion, strengthening peer relationships, and supporting identity continuity.

The programme is theoretically embedded in intercultural education and social constructivist approaches to learning and identity formation. A key point of reference is Jerzy Nikitorowicz's (2005) concept of encountering and understanding the Other, which emphasizes dialogue, openness, and the ethical dimension of intercultural relations. Edward T. Hall's (1984) iceberg model of culture further conceptualizes visible cultural manifestations as only a small part of deeper systems of values, beliefs, communication patterns, and identity structures. This perspective is complemented by Geert Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), which describes culture as a form of collective mental programming that shapes perceptions, behaviours, and social relations. Together, these frameworks support the assumption that intercultural learning requires moving beyond surface-level representations of cultural difference towards deeper understanding and reflective engagement.

Developmental and socio-cultural theories of learning further inform the programme's conceptual framework. Piaget's (1975) constructivist approach highlights the active role of children in constructing knowledge through interaction with their environment, while Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory emphasizes the importance of language, social interaction, and mediation in cognitive development. In particular, Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development provides a useful framework for understanding how the use of children's mother tongues may support learning, participation, and adaptation in new linguistic environments. Erikson's (1997) theory of psychosocial development further underscores the importance of identity formation and social recognition during childhood and adolescence, especially in contexts of cultural transition and displacement.

Research on stereotypes, prejudice, and social categorization in childhood also informs the programme (Davidson et al., 1995). Contemporary societies are increasingly characterized by diversity related to language, ethnicity, religion, migration histories, and social identities. Such differences may become sources of exclusion, symbolic boundaries, and "us–them" distinctions (Bauman, 1996; Grzybowski, 2008; Nikitorowicz, 2005). Language plays a particularly significant role in these processes, as it functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a visible marker of belonging, identity, and cultural recognition.

Consequently, creating opportunities for positive intercultural and interlinguistic encounters in early childhood education may be important for reducing prejudice and fostering inclusive attitudes.

Within this framework, intercultural competences are understood as a combination of knowledge, attitudes, skills, and critical awareness that enable individuals to communicate and interact effectively and appropriately in culturally diverse situations (Deardorff, 2006; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Barrett, 2018a, Barrett, 2018b). Byram (1997) further emphasizes that linguistic competence constitutes an inseparable dimension of intercultural competence, as language mediates cultural meanings, perspectives, and relationships. The Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Barrett, 2018a) similarly highlights empathy, openness, respect for diversity, and multilingual awareness as key competences for democratic and inclusive societies.

Within this conceptual framework, the programme assumes that intercultural competences should be developed through children's everyday experiences and relational environments, including their linguistic practices and identity resources. Magala's (2011, 40) metaphor of intercultural competences as a "backpack of tools" for navigating diverse cultural realities captures their practical and dynamic character. By engaging children in playful interactions involving different languages and cultural expressions, the programme seeks to foster empathy, curiosity, inclusion, and reflective engagement with diversity. Rather than treating multilingualism as an educational obstacle, it conceptualizes linguistic diversity as a pedagogical resource that may support intercultural dialogue and inclusive peer relationships.

Programme recipients and content

The programme "Adventures of the Other" is intended for children aged 6–10. The need to develop intercultural competences from early childhood is widely supported by research as well as pedagogical practice. Existing studies suggest that, in the absence of educational interventions addressing equality and fostering positive attitudes towards the Stranger and the Other, children's perceptions of difference may take simplified or negative forms. Empirical findings indicate that even very young children tend to hold stereotypical representations of social groups, including age-related biases (Davidson et al., 1995; cf. Shutts et al., 2013). Similarly, children aged 7–13 may exhibit stereotypical and essentialist thinking regarding various social categories, including ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups (Powlishta, Serbin, Doyle, & White, 1994; Benitez et al., 2022).

The programme is implemented in both kindergarten and primary school settings. It provides a pedagogical framework for addressing content related to intercultural education, as outlined in the national core curriculum for preschool and general education (Regulation of the Minister of National Education, 2026). A key component of the initiative is the inclusion of languages spoken by children within a given group or class, which may support identity affirmation and foster awareness of linguistic diversity as a meaningful dimension of intercultural interaction.

The initiative aims to create conditions for the development of intercultural competences grounded in respect for diversity, emotional openness towards interpersonal encounters with Others, and adherence to principles of equal treatment. Its relevance is further reinforced by ongoing processes of social diversification and increasing mobility, which contribute to more frequent contact between individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

The structure of the programme's fairy tales reflects a gradual progression of human differences, ranging from those closest to the child (biological and developmental), through socio-economic conditions, to cultural and identity-related diversity. In this way, the narratives address themes such as disability, developmental differences, and ethnic, national, or religious diversity, highlighting varied needs and forms of social exclusion. Each story includes a 12-year-old boy named Inny (the Other), presented as a puppet character who recounts observed or experienced situations. The character is designed to foster positive associations with difference and to model inclusive attitudes. Rather than functioning as an

authority figure in a strict sense, Inny serves as a narrative mediator who encourages reflection, empathy, and pro-social responses towards individuals perceived as different from the majority group.

Methods and forms of work

The implementation of the programme is based on a structured sequence of educational activities comprising two main stages: (1) classes centred on intercultural fairy tales, enriched with activating didactic methods; and (2) reinforcing classes designed to consolidate the knowledge and skills acquired during the initial sessions and to extend them with related content. This cyclical structure supports both the introduction and reinforcement of intercultural learning outcomes.

Intercultural fairy tales form part of the broader tradition of psychoeducational storytelling and are situated within the framework of educational and developmental bibliotherapy. They are designed to sensitise children to the diversity embedded in social reality across biological, economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Rather than presenting difference as exceptional, these narratives aim to normalise heterogeneity and encourage children to recognise diversity as a valuable aspect of human experience. They also seek to foster curiosity about the world and openness towards encounters with the Stranger and the Other, understood as individuals who may differ in terms of appearance, health, socio-economic status, religion, language, or cultural background.

Given that such encounters may be challenging for young children, intercultural fairy tales may function as preparatory tools that support the development of positive attitudes and adaptive behavioural patterns. At the same time, they contribute to identity formation by strengthening children's understanding of their own cultural belonging and social identity (Potoniec, 2011). Engagement with these narratives may therefore enhance awareness of the multidimensional nature of diversity and stimulate cognitive curiosity as well as openness to interaction with others. The didactic strategies applied in the programme (e.g., evaluative, practical, and exploratory methods) are designed to engage cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor domains of learning. They also create opportunities for verbal, artistic, and physical expression, encouraging active participation, independent thinking, and the integration of personal experiences and observations. Importantly, classroom activities incorporate elements of the languages spoken by children from minority and migrant backgrounds, thereby promoting linguistic inclusion.

In the third edition of the programme, particular emphasis is placed on intercultural art-based techniques inspired by elements of art therapy. These methods support active learning and the development of intercultural competences while also fostering emotional and social development. Creative activities involving movement, visual expression, and other forms of artistic engagement enable children not only to acquire knowledge about diversity but also to develop strategies for coping with difference and to cultivate open attitudes. Such practices may positively influence children's psycho-emotional well-being by supporting a sense of safety, emotional expression, and constructive group interaction. They also encourage collaboration, peer integration, and the sharing of personal experiences within a supportive educational environment.

An important component of the programme consists of supplementary encounters with individuals representing diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These meetings provide opportunities for authentic interpersonal and intercultural interaction, enabling children to ask questions, experience linguistic diversity, and engage with perspectives different from their own. Such encounters may also contribute to reducing anxiety related to difference and to challenging existing stereotypes and prejudices. A key element of these sessions involves exposure to various languages spoken by participants' peers or invited guests, allowing children to develop awareness of the multilingual environment in which they live. Optional excursions may further extend these real-world intercultural experiences.

The programme also includes introductory and concluding sessions designed to support pedagogical reflection and to observe children's perceptions of diversity and intercultural relations. The initial phase

involves a preliminary diagnostic process conducted through guided discussions, associative tasks, and reflective activities addressing themes such as diversity, otherness, language, and peer relations. These activities allow educators to gain insight into participants' initial attitudes, stereotypes, and levels of openness towards cultural and linguistic difference.

The concluding phase functions as a reflective stage aimed at identifying potential changes in participants' perceptions and attitudes following engagement in the programme. Through comparative discussion, narrative exercises, and group reflection, it becomes possible to observe possible shifts in children's understanding of diversity, empathy, inclusion, and intercultural communication.

Although the programme is primarily educational in nature rather than experimental, its design provides a framework for qualitative pedagogical inquiry. It offers opportunities for observational analysis and reflective interpretation concerning the development of intercultural competences, multilingual awareness, peer integration, and attitudes towards diversity. As such, the activities may also serve as a basis for future empirical research in educational contexts.

Table 1: Leveraging Mother Tongues to Develop Intercultural Competences in the "Adventures of the Other" Programme.

Method/Activity	Mother tongue (L1) integration	Impact on intercultural competences
Intercultural fairy tales	Incorporates linguistic elements of minority, migrant, and refugee backgrounds into texts and dialogues	Builds empathy through familiarisation with different languages, strengthens identity, and fosters curiosity about the Other
Meetings with Strangers/Others	Children are exposed to native speakers (e.g., Ukrainian) and are encouraged to ask questions	Reduces perceived language barriers and develops awareness of linguistic diversity as a value
Art therapy (3rd edition)	Creative expression involving L1 in movement- and arts-based activities	Supports peer integration, psychological safety, and openness
Initial/final diagnostics	Discussions on diversity with reference to children's linguistic repertoires	Enables observation of potential changes in attitudes towards linguistic difference as an identity marker

Source: Own elaboration based on the three editions of the programme.

Conclusion

Preparing societies for constructive encounters with people perceived as Strangers and Others requires educational initiatives targeting learners across different age groups, beginning in early childhood education. Such initiatives benefit from cyclical and sustained implementation and can address multiple dimensions of human functioning, including cognitive, emotional, and behavioural domains, with particular attention to linguistic diversity. In this context, the recognition and inclusion of participants' first languages (L1) may support identity affirmation and foster awareness of linguistic and cultural plurality.

The Intercultural Competence Development Programme "Adventures of the Other" represents a pedagogical initiative designed to support these processes by engaging children in activities that integrate minority and migrant languages within narrative-based and play-oriented contexts. This approach creates opportunities for educational practice and reflection on attitudes towards Otherness. In particular, practical activities incorporating phrases in children's first languages (L1) are intended to recognise and valorise their linguistic and cultural resources, while encouraging openness to linguistic and cultural diversity.

By foregrounding linguistic and cultural plurality, the programme seeks to create opportunities for developing more positive perceptions of the Other, associated with curiosity, creativity, and appreciation of difference. It also aims to foster the conditions for peer relationships grounded in mutual recognition, respect, and openness to diversity. As this paper presents the design and pedagogical assumptions of the programme rather than an empirical evaluation of its outcomes, its potential contribution to changes in children's perceptions and attitudes requires further systematic empirical investigation.

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ERL Journal – Scope Major

Key premise. **The educational role of language, reaching far beyond school(ing), is determined by multiple aspects relating to culture, methodology and/or personality**. To be suitably comprehensive, studies blending educational with linguistic studies need to comprise all these aspects.



General rationale. Language lies at the heart of schooling, culture, (learning and teaching) methods, andpersonality – thus underlying education on the individual and on the social level. Its social existence determines its experiencing by an individual person and vice versa. Both these levels matter when it comes to learning and teaching methods as well as schooling as a whole. Socially determined and individually experienced, language shapes culture and education, and, from an individual perspective, it defines a person's place in the world and defines the world in which a person is placed.

Specific issues. Accordingly, ERL Journal welcomes papers addressing issues such as: language of schooling, bilingual education, language identity, intercultural competence, discourse analysis, children narratives, personal constructs, language in special education, transversal skills, language mediation, academic language, elicitation, plurilingual teaching, CLIL, functions of language, etc.

Expected outcome. Systematization of knowledge concerning the educational position of language;aggregation of empirical findings pertaining to social and cultural determinants of how language serves education; development of interdisciplinary educational and linguistic studies; recognition of problems calling for research and discussion of ways of putting language theories into practice.

ERL Journal – Scope Minor

Key premise. **A person's education is determined by how language operates on four levels – beliefs, activity, affect and thinking**. To be maximally educational, the experiencing of language by a person comprises these four dimensions, which implies a need for their comprehensive studies.



General rationale. How language affects a person's education depends on multiple axiological, psychomotor, affective, and cognitive factors. For instance, what a person thinks of language (e.g. on whether it is worth speaking or not) and how much a person speaks determines that person's mental faculties. Conversely, how a person understands a given issue (as well as how s/he feels about it) impacts on how interesting utterances s/he produces. Hence, there exist relationships between language and all the aforementioned educational domains.

Specific issues. Accordingly, ERL Journal welcomes papers concerning issues falling within one or more of the four domains, such as: status of language in school curricula, language of textbooks, language activity of children or grown-ups, stages of language fossilization, argumentative skills, language learningstyles, verbalization of knowledge, approaches to oracy, personal experiencing of language skills, language image of the world, cognitive discourse functions, language reflectivity, etc.

Expected outcome. Collection of theoretical proposals and empirical data supporting learner-oriented educational practice; exploration of the relationship between language and four educational domains; detection of factors determining learners' language identity/personality; accumulation of data providing assistance in construction of language-grounded educational systems.

ERL Journal *is designated for papers on cross-disciplinary, educational and linguistic, issues. It is meant to address (I) the position of language and how it is put into practice across different schools, cultures, methods and personalities, and (II) the experiencing of language by learners in terms of their language beliefs, activity, affect and cognition. ERL Journal includes theoretical and empirical papers, presenting qualitative and quantitative approaches. Resting on the overarching premise of language shaping our reality and education (assignment of meanings to the world and subject matter learnt), it ultimately aims to unravel this process and to boost the position of language in education.*

ERL Journal is international, interdisciplinary, peer-reviewed, and double-blinded.

It is open access and follows free-of-charge policy for authors.

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