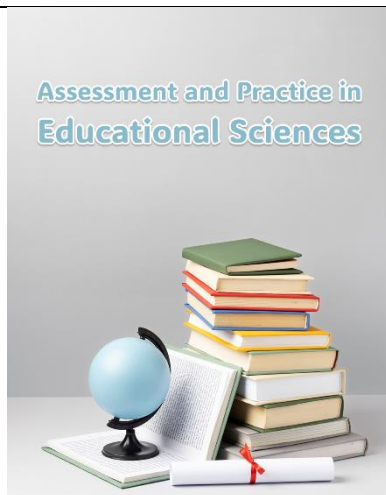




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Article type:
Original Research

Article history:
Received 20 June 2026
Revised 15 September 2026
Accepted 29 September 2026
Initial Publish 26 October 2026
Published online 01 May 2027

How to cite this article:
Nekoui, L., Rezvani, E., & Karimi, F. (2027). Perceived School Leadership and EFL Teacher Outcomes in Tehran: An Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods Study. *Assessment and Practice in Educational Sciences*, 5(3), 1-24.
<https://doi.org/10.61838/japes.327>

Perezhivanie and the Development of Inclusive Practice: Iranian Pre-Service EFL Teachers' Verbal Interactions, Challenges, and Management Efficacy

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates how Iranian pre-service EFL teachers develop inclusive classroom practices through an embedded, participatory action research intervention, with particular attention to their verbal interactions, identified challenges, and management efficacy. The study employs Vygotsky's concept of perezhivanie as a theoretical lens to understand how pre-service teachers experience and make meaning of inclusive practice development. A critical participatory action research (CPAR) framework guided the 14-week embedded education intervention involving 25 pre-service EFL teachers at Farhangian University and Maharatgostar Institute in Isfahan, Iran. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and reflective journals. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure. Three major themes emerged regarding verbal interactions: using inclusive and affirming language, strategic questioning and redirection, and balancing authority with empathy. Challenges identified included addressing student diversity and proficiency gaps, managing large class sizes with limited resources, and coping with student demotivation. The findings reveal dynamic, reciprocal relationships among challenges, verbal interactions, and management efficacy, demonstrating how pre-service teachers' perezhivanie of inclusive practice evolved through dramatic collisions between ideal and present forms of inclusive pedagogy. The study introduces the Zone of Refractive Practice (ZRP) as a theoretical framework explaining how pre-service teachers transform their inclusive practice through the dialectical process of experiencing, refracting, and reconstructing their professional understanding. Perezhivanie emerges as a powerful analytical tool for understanding the sociocultural genesis of inclusive teacher identity.

Keywords: Perezhivanie, inclusive education, EFL teacher education, verbal interactions, classroom management efficacy, critical participatory action research.s

Introduction

Preparing teachers for contemporary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms requires substantially more than developing linguistic knowledge and a repertoire of instructional techniques. Pre-service teachers are expected to enter increasingly heterogeneous educational environments in which learners differ in language proficiency, prior educational experience, motivation, cognitive and affective characteristics, cultural background, access to resources, and willingness to participate. Consequently, effective teacher preparation must address the interconnected cognitive, emotional, interpersonal,

technological, and reflective dimensions of professional practice. Research on EFL teacher education has consistently demonstrated that what prospective teachers eventually do in classrooms is shaped by the interaction among their prior beliefs, pedagogical knowledge, perceptions of professional competence, contextual experiences, and opportunities for systematic reflection. Reviews of pre-service teachers' beliefs about English language teaching, for example, indicate that beliefs about learners, instructional roles, language learning, and classroom practices may influence both receptiveness to teacher education and subsequent pedagogical decisions (1). Similarly, research examining the relationships among beliefs about language learning, pedagogical beliefs, and information and communication technology integration suggests that prospective teachers do not approach pedagogical innovation as neutral recipients; instead, new practices are interpreted through interconnected belief systems that have already begun to form before and during formal teacher education (2). This issue is particularly consequential in inclusive education, where teachers must continually interpret diversity, adjust expectations, communicate with learners in different ways, and manage participation without positioning variation as deficiency. The professional preparation of EFL teachers therefore needs to be conceptualized as a developmental process in which knowledge, beliefs, emotions, interactional practices, and experiences are progressively reorganized through engagement with authentic pedagogical situations.

A growing body of research has accordingly shifted attention from isolated teaching competencies toward the multidimensional character of pre-service teacher development. Professional competence in EFL teaching encompasses pedagogical expertise, language proficiency, assessment knowledge, reflective capacity, interpersonal sensitivity, technological competence, and the ability to make context-responsive decisions. Research conducted in the Iranian EFL context has highlighted the need for integrated models of professional competency that attend to multiple interacting dimensions of effective teaching rather than reducing competence to knowledge of subject matter or teaching methodology (3). One important component is assessment literacy. Evidence from Iranian public-school EFL education indicates a meaningful gap between teachers' assessment needs and the preparation provided through pre-service assessment curricula, suggesting that teacher education programs may not always equip future teachers adequately for the realities they encounter in schools (4). Pedagogical competence similarly involves the capacity to design instruction that elicits thinking rather than merely reproducing textbook content. Examination of pre-service EFL teachers' lesson plans and instructional practices has demonstrated the importance of developing classroom environments in which questioning, reasoning, interpretation, and participation are deliberately cultivated (5). In addition, critical reading and other higher-order academic competencies can be strengthened when teacher education integrates theoretical learning with scaffolded participation in authentic or simulated professional activity, as illustrated by blended learning based on cognitive apprenticeship (6). Collectively, these findings suggest that professional learning becomes most meaningful when prospective teachers are required to translate abstract principles into situated pedagogical judgments, particularly when classroom conditions are complex, unpredictable, and characterized by learner diversity.

The need for situated preparation becomes even more apparent when the affective demands of learning to teach are considered. Pre-service teachers frequently experience uncertainty, anxiety, vulnerability, and tension as they negotiate the movement from student to teacher and attempt to establish professional legitimacy in front of learners. Language-teaching anxiety has been associated with individual psychological characteristics among both pre-service and in-service EFL teachers, underscoring the importance of understanding the personal resources through which teachers respond to demanding instructional situations (7). Writing-related anxiety has likewise been documented among pre-service teachers in EFL contexts, demonstrating that prospective educators themselves may experience the kinds of linguistic and performance pressures they will later need to recognize and manage among their students (8). Research on Indonesian pre-service English teachers has

further shown that teacher development involves distinctive “emotional geographies,” including experiences of closeness, distance, vulnerability, support, and tension that are managed through different coping strategies (9). Such findings are significant because inclusion is not achieved through instructional differentiation alone; it also requires teachers to regulate their own emotional responses, interpret students’ behavior without premature judgment, and preserve constructive relationships under conditions of disruption or frustration. The quality of teacher-student relationships and communication can directly shape affective learning. Cross-cultural research with Iranian and Chinese EFL students has shown that instructor clarity and non-verbal immediacy contribute to students’ affective learning, with instructor understanding functioning as an important mediating mechanism (10). Thus, the relational and affective dimensions of teacher communication cannot be treated as peripheral to pedagogy; they constitute central mechanisms through which classrooms become either participatory and supportive or alienating and exclusionary.

Reflection represents one of the principal mechanisms through which complex classroom experiences can become resources for professional development. Reflective teacher education enables pre-service teachers to revisit practice, identify assumptions embedded in their decisions, consider alternative interpretations, and reconstruct future action. Studies of reflective practice during teaching practicum have demonstrated that strategies such as reflective journaling, discussion, observation, and structured evaluation can contribute to the professional development of pre-service English teachers by enabling them to transform classroom experience into pedagogical learning (11). Reflective journals are also important spaces for professional identity construction. Analysis of pre-service foreign-language teachers’ imagined professional identities has shown how reflective writing makes visible the evolving ways prospective teachers understand themselves, their desired professional selves, and their relationship to the occupation they are preparing to enter (12). Reflection becomes especially productive when it is anchored in critical incidents rather than detached description. Evidence from TESOL teacher education indicates that reflecting on critical incidents can contribute to professional identity development by encouraging pre-service teachers to reconsider prior assumptions and interpret difficult events as professionally meaningful experiences (13). Moreover, structured self-evaluation protocols may strengthen affective-reflective skills by helping prospective teachers examine both their actions and the feelings accompanying professional experience (14). Scenario-based reflection can similarly generate different levels of insight and empathy depending on how situations are presented and interpreted, illustrating that reflection is not merely recollection but an active process of perspective taking and meaning construction (15). These findings are particularly relevant to inclusive pedagogy because responding constructively to learner diversity often requires teachers to interrogate habitual interpretations of ability, disruption, motivation, and participation.

The development of reflective competence is closely connected to professional identity, agency, and inquiry. Teacher education that positions pre-service teachers as knowledge producers rather than only recipients of established methods can foster more critical engagement with classroom realities. Collaborative action research has been shown to provide a valuable reflective mechanism for pre-service EFL teachers working toward inclusion, enabling them to investigate problems emerging from practice, collaborate with others, and reconsider their assumptions about inclusive pedagogy (16). Such inquiry-oriented preparation is important because prospective teachers’ understanding of research itself may be limited or uneven. Quantitative investigation of undergraduate pre-service EFL teachers’ conceptions of research has demonstrated the importance of developing clearer understandings of research purposes and processes as part of professional formation (17). When teachers learn to inquire systematically into their own classrooms, challenges can be reconceptualized as questions for collaborative investigation rather than merely as personal failures. This perspective is consistent with evidence emphasizing the significance of perseverance and self-regulation in language-related problem solving. Research examining verbal-linguistic intelligence and self-directed learning in EFL writing has highlighted the mediating influence of grit, pointing to the role of sustained effort and

autonomous engagement in responding to challenging learning tasks (18). Although such research focuses on learners, the underlying principle is also relevant to teacher development: professional growth requires prospective teachers to persist through uncertainty, test alternative responses, evaluate their effects, and gradually construct more adaptive ways of acting.

These processes become particularly salient in inclusive EFL classrooms, where communication itself constitutes both the medium of instruction and a major mechanism of classroom management. Unlike many other subject teachers, EFL teachers frequently manage classroom interaction through a language that students possess at markedly different levels of proficiency. Differences in vocabulary, comprehension, confidence, communicative willingness, and prior exposure may therefore affect not only academic achievement but also participation and behavior. Teachers must decide how to question learners, respond to incorrect answers, redirect off-task behavior, clarify instructions, invite quieter students into interaction, and maintain authority without undermining learner dignity. Preparation for such interactional complexity requires meaningful opportunities to encounter and analyze real pedagogical dilemmas. Research on EFL teacher education has documented the value of examining pre-service teachers' preparation in both English proficiency and pedagogy, while also indicating tensions between formal program expectations and the realities of becoming an effective classroom practitioner (19). Intercultural competence adds another layer to this preparation. Evidence concerning Iranian pre-service and in-service EFL teachers has revealed differences and possible inconsistencies between beliefs about intercultural communicative competence and its classroom enactment, reinforcing the need to connect conceptual endorsement with pedagogical practice (20). Inclusive communication also entails sensitivity to the cultural meanings embedded in educational materials. Analysis of gender and cultural representation in nationally endorsed EFL textbooks demonstrates that instructional texts can communicate particular social representations and therefore require teachers who are able to recognize, interpret, and critically mediate such content (21). Inclusive teaching is consequently both interactional and sociocultural: teachers mediate not only linguistic content but also identities, relationships, cultural meanings, and opportunities for participation.

Technology has further transformed the professional landscape for pre-service teachers, creating new possibilities for differentiation, access, participation, and teacher learning while simultaneously demanding new forms of pedagogical judgment. A systematic review of technology-supported teacher professional development in low- and middle-income countries suggests that technological tools can expand access to professional learning and facilitate communication, collaboration, resource sharing, and continuing development, although outcomes remain dependent on context, infrastructure, pedagogical design, and sustained support (22). At the classroom level, technology-related beliefs influence whether prospective teachers integrate digital tools meaningfully or merely acknowledge their potential theoretically (2). Research on digital game-based language learning similarly shows that pre-service EFL teachers' actual behaviors do not necessarily correspond neatly with their expressed beliefs regarding innovative digital approaches, illustrating the persistent gap between perceived value and enacted practice (23). Digital storytelling presents comparable opportunities and challenges. Narrative inquiry into pre-service EFL teachers' experiences of accessing information for the development of digital storytelling materials indicates that prospective teachers must navigate information selection, technological resources, and pedagogical purposes simultaneously (24). Beyond language education, research on lesson planning and post-lesson reflection involving virtual and augmented reality has shown that pre-service teachers' technological pedagogical and content knowledge becomes visible not simply through technology use itself but through how technological, pedagogical, and disciplinary considerations are integrated in planning and reflection (25). The broader implication is that professional competence develops through mediated encounters with tools and contexts rather than through decontextualized exposure to technological applications.

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence has intensified this need for reflective technological competence. Tools such as ChatGPT are increasingly entering language education and teacher preparation, raising questions about AI literacy,

pedagogical appropriateness, ethical judgment, learner autonomy, assessment integrity, and the changing role of teachers. Recent research on pre-service EFL teachers' AI literacy and competency suggests that the integration of ChatGPT into English-language teacher education is connected to prospective teachers' perceptions of their knowledge and readiness to employ artificial intelligence for professional purposes (26). Research specifically investigating predictors of pre-service EFL teachers' predisposition toward AI adoption likewise indicates that willingness to employ artificial intelligence in language teaching depends on a constellation of individual and educational factors rather than technological availability alone (27). These developments reinforce an established lesson from earlier waves of educational technology: acquiring technical skills does not automatically produce pedagogically responsive practice. Teachers need opportunities to experience technologies within meaningful teaching situations, reflect on their implications for learners with different needs, and determine when technological mediation contributes to rather than detracts from participation, interaction, and inclusion. For inclusive teacher education, the essential question therefore extends beyond whether prospective teachers can operate particular tools to whether they can make contextually appropriate decisions that preserve meaningful human interaction, respond to learner variability, and maintain a supportive classroom climate.

Although technological competence is increasingly prominent, the central developmental problem in teacher education remains the transformation of experience into professional understanding. Pre-service teachers enter programs with accumulated images of teaching derived from years of participation in classrooms, and these established understandings may be challenged when they encounter alternative pedagogical principles, authentic teaching responsibilities, and learners whose responses do not correspond to lesson-plan expectations. This tension is particularly visible when prospective teachers attempt to implement learner-centered or inclusive ideals in contexts marked by mixed proficiency, limited resources, large classes, disengagement, and disruptive behavior. The literature reviewed above has generated substantial knowledge about teachers' beliefs (1), assessment literacy (4), reflective practice (11), professional identity (13), affective experiences (9), professional competency (3), technological practice (23), and AI readiness (26, 27). However, these dimensions are frequently investigated separately. Less attention has been given to the developmental process through which concrete classroom challenges are experienced emotionally and cognitively, expressed through moment-to-moment verbal interactions, reflected upon collaboratively, and subsequently transformed into greater or lesser confidence in managing inclusive learning environments. Understanding this process requires a theoretical perspective capable of preserving the unity between the person and the social situation rather than treating context, cognition, emotion, and action as independent variables.

Vygotsky's concept of *perezhivanie* provides such a perspective because it focuses on how environmental circumstances acquire developmental significance through the manner in which they are experienced and interpreted by the individual. Applied to teacher education, *perezhivanie* directs analytical attention toward neither classroom conditions alone nor teachers' personal characteristics in isolation, but toward the lived unity through which prospective teachers encounter, interpret, emotionally experience, and respond to pedagogical events. A heterogeneous class, an unsuccessful activity, an openly resistant learner, an unexpectedly successful conversation, or a moment of uncertainty may therefore have different developmental consequences for different teachers because each event is refracted through prior beliefs, emotions, identities, perceived capabilities, and evolving professional meanings. This lens is especially productive in participatory and reflective teacher education, where challenging experiences are repeatedly revisited through observation, dialogue, action, and reconstruction. Existing studies demonstrate that reflective practice (14, 15), collaborative action research (16), critical-incident reflection (13), and authentic pedagogical preparation (19) can promote meaningful professional development, but an integrated explanation is still needed for how challenges, verbal responses, emotional experience, reflection, and emerging efficacy interact over time. In the Iranian EFL setting, where prospective teachers may face diverse proficiency levels, institutional constraints, culturally

shaped expectations concerning teacher authority, and rapidly changing technological demands, such an integrated developmental account is particularly important.

Accordingly, examining inclusion through actual verbal interaction offers an important way to connect abstract pedagogical commitments with observable professional practice. Inclusive beliefs become consequential when teachers decide whether to label or encourage struggling learners, reprimand or redirect disruptive students, privilege confident speakers or invite quieter voices, impose authority unilaterally or formulate expectations collaboratively, and interpret difficulty as evidence of deficiency or as a pedagogical problem requiring adaptation. Verbal practice is therefore a point at which cognition, emotion, identity, management efficacy, and social context converge. It is also through repeated communicative successes and failures that prospective teachers can revise their beliefs about what they are capable of accomplishing in the classroom. Despite substantial scholarship addressing individual components of pre-service EFL teacher development, including pedagogical thinking (5), critical academic preparation (6), emotional challenges (7, 8), intercultural practice (20), research conceptions (17), self-directed problem solving (18), digital learning environments (24, 25), and teacher-student relational processes (10), limited research has examined how these developmental forces become integrated through prospective teachers' lived experience of inclusive classroom practice and the communicative decisions they make when actual difficulties arise. Such an investigation can contribute to a more process-oriented understanding of teacher learning in which professional growth is viewed not simply as the accumulation of competencies but as the ongoing reconstruction of practice through socially situated, emotionally meaningful, and reflectively mediated experience.

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to investigate, through the lens of *perezhivanie*, how Iranian pre-service EFL teachers develop inclusive classroom practice within an embedded critical participatory action research intervention by examining their verbal interactions in response to classroom disruptions, the challenges they experience in cultivating inclusive EFL classrooms, and the reciprocal relationships among these challenges, verbal practices, and classroom-management efficacy.

Methods and Materials

Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design situated within a CPAR framework. The design was specifically chosen to align with the participatory ethos of CPAR, which prioritises collaborative inquiry and the co-construction of knowledge between researchers and participants (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014). The qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for exploring the complex, contextualised processes through which pre-service teachers develop inclusive practices and for capturing the richness of their lived experiences as refracted through *perezhivanie*.

The participants were 25 Iranian pre-service EFL teachers enrolled at Farhangian University in Isfahan, Iran. Farhangian University is the primary state-sponsored institution dedicated exclusively to the preparation of teachers for the Iranian public education system. A convenience sampling method was employed to recruit volunteers from available cohorts in their second or third year of the four-year teacher education programme, consistent with the participatory ethos of CPAR, which prioritises willingness and commitment over random selection (Fine et al., 2021).

The demographic profile of participants revealed a predominantly female cohort (68% female, 32% male), reflecting the broader demographic reality of the EFL teaching profession in Iran. The majority of participants (84%) fell within the 20-25 year age range, and 72% reported having no formal teaching experience outside their university-required practicum. This characteristic is methodologically significant because it establishes that the sample largely consisted of novice teachers whose

professional beliefs and efficacy had not been substantially shaped by extensive independent classroom experience, thereby positioning the intervention as a primary influence on their developmental trajectories.

The educational intervention was conducted at the Maharatgostar Institute in Isfahan, an accredited teacher training centre recognised by the Iranian Ministry of Education. The embedded education course was facilitated by two mentor-teachers who were recruited specifically for this project. Both mentors hold PhDs in ELT, have a minimum of ten years of experience in EFL teacher education, and received a two-day orientation session on the principles of CPAR and inclusive pedagogy prior to the commencement of the intervention.

Instruments and Data Collection

The study employed four qualitative instruments aligned with the participatory ethos of CPAR: semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, non-participant classroom observations, and reflective journals.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted pre- and post-intervention with each participant. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was conducted in Persian to ensure comfort and authentic expression. The initial interview protocol contained 10 open-ended questions exploring participants' pre-existing beliefs about inclusive education, their prior experiences with diverse learners, their perceived challenges in classroom management, and their expectations for the embedded education course. The final interview protocol contained 12 open-ended questions designed to capture participants' perceptions of change, the specific experiences they identified as influential, and their reflections on the CPAR process.

Focus group discussions were conducted at the conclusion of each complete CPAR cycle (three sessions total). Each session lasted between 90 and 120 minutes and included all 25 participants. Focus groups were selected specifically because they align with the collaborative, dialogic ethos of CPAR, enabling participants to hear, challenge, support, and build upon one another's perspectives. The protocols were semi-structured and evolved across the three sessions, focusing initially on initial implementation and challenges, then on peer feedback and collective problem-solving, and finally on synthesising lessons learned.

Classroom observations were conducted during the "Act" stage of each CPAR cycle. Each participant was observed twice per cycle (for a total of six observations per participant across the three cycles), with each observation lasting a full 90-minute lesson session. The observation protocol was a structured instrument comprising three sections documenting classroom context, verbal interaction patterns (including questioning types, feedback approaches, directives, and inclusive language use), and management strategies.

Reflective journals were maintained by each participant throughout the 14-week intervention. Journals were provided as A5-sized notebooks with prompts encouraging participants to write about one moment when they felt confident in managing their classroom, one moment when they felt challenged, and one thing they learned about inclusive teaching each week.

The Embedded Education Intervention

The embedded education intervention was implemented over 14 weeks, with the course meeting twice per week for three-hour sessions. The intervention was grounded in Situated Learning Theory and the concept of Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which argue that meaningful professional learning occurs through active participation in authentic social contexts. Complementing this pedagogical approach was the CPAR framework, which positions participants as co-researchers engaged in iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and critically reflecting (Kemmis et al., 2014).

The intervention comprised three complete CPAR cycles. Cycle 1 (Weeks 3-6) focused on foundational inclusive strategies and basic disruption management. Cycle 2 (Weeks 7-10) focused on differentiation and de-escalation techniques. Cycle 3

(Weeks 11-14) focused on collaborative problem-solving and sustaining inclusive practices. Each cycle followed a structured sequence: Plan (designing lesson plans incorporating inclusive strategies), Act (teaching 90-minute lessons with observation), Observe (self-reflection and peer observation), and Reflect (focus group discussions and journaling).

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis employed thematic analysis following the six-phase procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was selected because it provides a flexible yet rigorous approach to identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data, and it aligns with the critical, interpretive orientation of CPAR.

The analysis proceeded through six phases: (1) familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes; (2) generating initial codes through systematic coding of meaningful segments related to the research questions; (3) searching for themes by grouping related codes; (4) reviewing themes to ensure internal coherence and external distinctiveness; (5) defining and naming themes with detailed definitions and illustrative quotations; and (6) producing the report by weaving together theme descriptions, participant quotations, and interpretive commentary.

Trustworthiness was established through four criteria: credibility (prolonged engagement, persistent observation, member checking), transferability (thick description of context and procedures), dependability (audit trail of all raw data and analysis records), and confirmability (reflexive journaling and peer debriefing). A peer debriefer independently coded 20% of the dataset, with inter-coder agreement calculated at 84%.

The analysis addressed the research questions as follows: RQ1 was answered by analysing classroom observation field notes and focus group discussions for descriptions and observed instances of verbal interaction strategies. RQ2 was answered by analysing all qualitative data sources for explicit statements about barriers or difficulties encountered. RQ3 was answered through cross-thematic analysis that mapped how participants explicitly or implicitly linked challenges, verbal interactions, and management efficacy in their accounts, with particular attention to manifestations of *perezhivanie* as refracted experience.

Findings and Results

The thematic analysis of qualitative data yielded three primary themes capturing participants' verbal interaction practices when confronting disruptions and cultivating inclusive EFL classrooms. Table 1 presents the themes, subthemes, and frequencies of occurrence across the dataset.

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes Related to Verbal Interactions

Theme	Subtheme	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1. Using Inclusive and Affirming Language	a) Avoiding deficit-based labeling	21	84%
	b) Valuing diverse contributions	19	76%
2. Strategic Questioning and Redirection	a) Using open-ended questions to engage	20	80%
	b) Redirecting through questioning rather than reprimand	18	72%
3. Balancing Authority with Empathy	a) Maintaining calm and respectful tone	22	88%
	b) Using collaborative and inclusive phrasing	17	68%

Theme 1: Using Inclusive and Affirming Language

This theme captured participants' deliberate efforts to use language that created a welcoming and supportive classroom environment. Participants described becoming more conscious of how their words positioned students, conveyed expectations, and either included or excluded learners. This heightened awareness was reflected in two specific practices: avoiding deficit-based labeling and valuing diverse contributions.

Participants reported becoming more attentive to the language they used to describe students and their abilities. Rather than using labels that emphasised deficits or limitations, participants consciously chose language that focused on strengths, potential, and the possibility of growth. This shift was described as reflecting a fundamental change in how participants conceptualised student difficulties, seeing them as challenges to be addressed through teaching rather than as inherent limitations of the learners. Classroom observations confirmed that participants consistently used growth-oriented language when referring to student performance and progress.

- *I used to say things like ‘he’s weak in English’ or ‘she can’t do this.’ Now I try to say ‘he’s still developing this skill’ or ‘she needs more practice with this concept.’ It seems like a small change, but it changed how I think about the students. When I say ‘still developing,’ I’m implying that growth is possible. (Female participant, Focus Group Discussion)*
- *In my reflective journal, I noticed that I kept writing about ‘problem students.’ When I read it back, I realized that I was labeling the students rather than describing the behavior. I started saying ‘students who are struggling with this particular task’ instead. It made me focus on the teaching rather than blaming the student. (Male participant, Focus Group Discussion)*

Classroom observation field notes confirmed that these verbal practices were not merely espoused but were enacted in participants’ actual teaching. Observers documented numerous instances where participants used growth-oriented language when referring to student performance and progress. For example, during a lesson observation, one participant was recorded saying to a struggling student: “You haven’t mastered this yet, but you’re making progress. Let’s try another example together.” Another participant was observed reframing a student’s incorrect answer by saying: “That’s an interesting way to think about it. Let’s explore that idea further and see where it leads us.” These observed instances provided concrete evidence that the inclusive language practices discussed in focus groups were being translated into actual classroom discourse.

Participants also described making intentional efforts to acknowledge and validate the contributions of all students, particularly those who might be marginalised or overlooked. This included using language that explicitly valued diverse perspectives, acknowledging the validity of different responses, and creating a classroom culture where all voices were heard and respected. Classroom observation field notes documented instances where participants explicitly praised student efforts, acknowledged varied responses, and created space for multiple perspectives to be shared.

- *I made a rule for myself to call on different students, not just the ones who always raise their hands. I also made sure to acknowledge every response positively, even if it wasn’t completely correct. I would say things like ‘that’s an interesting way to think about it’ or ‘I can see why you would say that.’ (Female participant, Focus Group Discussion)*
- *Before, I would only praise students who gave the ‘right’ answer. Now I try to validate any attempt to participate. I say things like ‘thank you for sharing’ or ‘that’s a good try.’ I want all my students to feel that their contributions matter, not just the ones who are already good at English. (Male participant, Focus Group Discussion)*

Classroom observation field notes documented instances where participants explicitly praised student efforts, acknowledged varied responses, and created space for multiple perspectives to be shared. One observer noted: “The teacher deliberately paused after posing a question and scanned the room, inviting responses from students who did not have their hands raised. When a typically quiet student offered a hesitant answer, the teacher responded with ‘Thank you for that contribution, that’s a really thoughtful perspective,’ and then built on the student’s idea in the subsequent discussion.” Such observed practices provided evidence of the inclusive verbal strategies participants described in their reflections.

Theme 2: Strategic Questioning and Redirection

This theme captured participants' use of questioning as a tool for both engagement and behaviour management. Rather than using direct commands or reprimands to address off-task behavior, participants described using strategic questioning to redirect attention, re-engage students, and promote active participation. This approach was described as more effective and more consistent with inclusive values than punitive or authoritarian responses.

Participants reported using open-ended questions as a primary strategy for maintaining engagement and preventing disruptions. These questions were designed to invite thinking, encourage participation, and make learning more interactive. Participants observed that when students were actively engaged through thoughtful questioning, disruptions were less likely to occur. This practice represented a proactive rather than reactive approach to classroom management.

- *I found that if I asked questions that required thinking rather than just remembering, the students were more engaged. Questions like 'why do you think the author used this word?' or 'what would you do in this situation?' got them thinking and participating. When they were thinking, they weren't disrupting.* (Female participant, Focus Group Discussion)
- *I used to ask a lot of yes/no questions or questions with obvious answers. Now I try to ask 'what if' questions or 'how' questions. The students seem more interested, and there's less off-task behavior because they're actually thinking about the content.* (Male participant, Focus Group Discussion)

Classroom observation field notes confirmed that participants consistently used open-ended questions that required higher-order thinking rather than simple recall. One observer noted: "During the 90-minute lesson, the teacher posed 23 questions, of which 17 were open-ended (e.g., 'What do you think would happen if...?', 'How would you explain this to a friend?', 'Why do you think the character made that choice?'). Students responded with extended utterances rather than one-word answers, and the teacher consistently probed further with follow-up questions such as 'Can you tell me more about that?' and 'What makes you say that?'" This observation provided evidence that participants were not merely describing ideal practices but were actually enacting them in their classroom discourse.

Participants also described using questioning as a means of redirecting off-task behavior without resorting to reprimands or punishment. Rather than telling a student to stop a behavior or threatening consequences, participants would ask a question that redirected attention to the task, invited participation, or prompted reflection. This approach was described as more respectful, more effective, and more consistent with inclusive values than traditional disciplinary responses.

- *Instead of saying 'stop talking,' I would ask the student a question about the lesson. 'What do you think about this point?' or 'Can you give me an example?' It redirects their attention without embarrassing them or making them defensive.* (Male participant, Focus Group Discussion)
- *When a student was off-task, I used to get angry and tell them to pay attention. Now I ask them something like 'what did you understand from the last point?' or 'can you help me explain this?' It brings them back to the lesson without confrontation.* (Female participant, Focus Group Discussion)

Classroom observation field notes documented instances where participants successfully used questioning to redirect off-task students without confrontation. One observer recorded the following episode: "A student in the back row began chatting with a neighbor during a whole-class discussion. Rather than calling out the behavior, the teacher walked toward the student while continuing to speak and then asked, 'Sara, what do you think about what we've been discussing? How does this connect to what you were just saying?' The student looked up, paused, and then offered a relevant response. The teacher nodded and said, 'That's a great connection, thank you for sharing that.' The off-task behavior was redirected without any public reprimand

or disruption to the lesson flow.” Such observed episodes provided concrete evidence of the redirection strategies participants described in focus groups.

Theme 3: Balancing Authority with Empathy

This theme captured participants’ efforts to maintain authority and establish clear expectations while simultaneously demonstrating empathy, respect, and care for their students. Participants described this as a delicate balance that required conscious attention to their tone, word choice, and overall communicative stance. This balance was seen as essential for creating an inclusive classroom environment where students felt both supported and accountable.

Participants emphasised the importance of maintaining a calm, respectful tone even in challenging situations. They reported that their tone of voice and choice of words significantly influenced how students responded to management interventions. A calm tone was described as de-escalating potentially volatile situations, while a harsh or angry tone was seen as likely to escalate problems. Participants consciously worked to regulate their emotional expression through their verbal delivery.

- *I learned that how I say something is just as important as what I say. If I say ‘please sit down’ in a calm voice, students respond differently than if I yell it. I practice keeping my voice calm even when I’m frustrated inside. It makes a huge difference. (Female participant, Focus Group Discussion)*
- *When I’m calm, the students stay calm. When I get loud and angry, the situation gets worse. I’ve learned to take a breath before I respond and to use a calm, firm tone rather than an angry one. It’s not easy, but it works much better. (Male participant, Focus Group Discussion)*

Classroom observation field notes documented that participants who maintained a calm tone were more successful in managing disruptions without escalation. One observer noted: “When a student loudly challenged the teacher’s instruction, the teacher paused, took a visible breath, and responded in a measured, quiet voice: ‘I understand you’re frustrated, and I want to hear your concern. Can we talk about this after class so we don’t lose our learning time?’ The student’s posture relaxed, and the lesson continued without further disruption. The teacher’s calm, respectful tone de-escalated what could have become a power struggle.” Another observer recorded: “Even when a student repeatedly interrupted, the teacher maintained a steady, calm voice, saying ‘I need everyone’s attention so we can finish this activity together.’ The teacher never raised their voice or resorted to sarcasm or threats.” These observations provided evidence that the calm tone participants described in focus groups was enacted in actual classroom interactions.

Participants also described using language that framed expectations and management interventions as collaborative rather than authoritarian. This included using inclusive language (“we” rather than “you”), framing expectations in terms of shared goals, and using phrasing that positioned the teacher and students as partners in the learning process. This language was described as more respectful and more likely to elicit cooperation than commands or threats.

- *Instead of saying ‘you should be paying attention,’ I say ‘I need us all to be focused so we can finish this activity.’ It makes it sound like we’re working together toward a common goal rather than me telling them what to do. (Female participant, Focus Group Discussion)*
- *I try to use language that shows I’m on their side. I say ‘let’s try to stay on track’ rather than ‘stop talking.’ It makes them feel like we’re partners in the learning process rather than me being the boss and them being the subordinates. (Male participant, Focus Group Discussion)*

Classroom observation field notes documented that participants who used collaborative phrasing experienced greater student cooperation and fewer instances of resistance. One observer noted: “The teacher consistently used ‘we’ and ‘let’s’ language when managing transitions and behavior. For example, when the class became noisy during a group activity, the teacher said, ‘Let’s bring our voices down so everyone can focus, we’re almost finished and I want to hear your great ideas.’ Students

responded quickly to this collaborative framing, with minimal need for repeated reminders.” Another observer recorded: “When a student refused to participate, the teacher said, ‘I need your help here, we can’t do this without you. What would make this work for you?’ The student eventually joined the activity, and the teacher acknowledged the contribution with a quiet ‘thank you for helping us.’” These observations provided evidence that the collaborative phrasing participants described was not merely an aspiration but a practice they were developing and enacting in their classrooms.

Challenges in Cultivating Inclusive EFL Classrooms

The thematic analysis yielded three primary themes capturing the challenges participants identified in their efforts to cultivate inclusive and well-managed EFL classrooms. Table 2 presents the themes, subthemes, and frequencies of occurrence across the dataset.

Table 2. Themes and Subthemes Related to Challenges

Theme	Subtheme	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1. Addressing Student Diversity and Proficiency Gaps	a) Accommodating varied proficiency levels	23	92%
	b) Responding to diverse learning needs	20	80%
2. Managing Large Class Sizes and Limited Resources	a) Insufficient space and materials for inclusive activities	19	76%
	b) Difficulty providing individual attention	17	68%
3. Coping with Student Demotivation and Disengagement	a) Overcoming apathy toward English learning	21	84%
	b) Addressing behavioral resistance	18	72%

Theme 1: Addressing Student Diversity and Proficiency Gaps

This theme was the most frequently cited challenge, appearing in the accounts of 92% of participants. Participants consistently identified the diversity of their students’ English proficiency levels and learning needs as a significant challenge to implementing inclusive practices. The heterogeneity of the classroom, with students ranging from beginners to advanced learners, made it difficult to design and deliver instruction that was accessible and engaging for all students simultaneously.

- *My class had students who could barely introduce themselves and students who could hold conversations about complex topics. How do you teach a class like that? When I tried to teach to the middle, the advanced students were bored and the beginners were lost. Both groups started acting out.* (Male participant, Final Interview)
- *The proficiency gap is the biggest challenge. If I give a task that’s too hard, the weaker students give up and start talking or doing other things. If it’s too easy, the stronger students finish quickly and then get bored and disruptive. I feel like I can never win.* (Female participant, Focus Group Discussion)

Beyond proficiency differences, participants described the challenge of responding to students with diverse learning needs, including students with learning difficulties, attention issues, and specific language learning challenges. Participants reported feeling unprepared to identify and address these diverse needs, particularly in the context of limited support from special education professionals.

- *I had a student who clearly had some kind of learning difficulty. He struggled with reading and writing and got frustrated easily. But I didn’t know how to help him. I didn’t have any training in special education, and there was no one to ask. I felt like I was failing him.* (Female participant, Final Interview)
- *Some students need more time, some need things repeated, some need visual support, some need extra practice. It’s hard to meet all these needs at the same time, especially when you have forty students and no*

support. *I try to do what I can, but I often feel like it's not enough.* (Male participant, Focus Group Discussion)

Theme 2: Managing Large Class Sizes and Limited Resources

This theme was identified by 76% of participants and captured the structural challenges posed by large class sizes and inadequate resources. Participants consistently cited the physical and logistical constraints of teaching large classes as a major barrier to implementing inclusive practices and managing disruptions effectively.

- *I wanted to do more group work and pair work, but the classroom was so crowded that students could barely move. There wasn't space for groups to work without disturbing each other. I had to stick to individual work most of the time, which was less engaging.* (Female participant, Final Interview)
- *We don't have enough materials. I can't give every student a worksheet because there aren't enough copies. I can't show videos because there's no projector. It's hard to be creative and inclusive when you don't have the resources you need.* (Male participant, Focus Group Discussion)

Participants also described the challenge of providing meaningful individual attention to students in large classes. With class sizes often exceeding forty students, participants felt that they could not give sufficient time and attention to students who were struggling or who required additional support.

- *With forty-five students in the class, I can't give each student the attention they need. The students who are struggling get lost in the crowd. I know they need extra help, but there's only one of me and forty-five of them.* (Male participant, Final Interview)
- *I feel guilty because I can't help everyone. There are students who need me to sit with them and explain things, but I have to keep the whole class moving. The students who need the most help often get the least attention because I'm busy managing the group.* (Female participant, Focus Group Discussion)

Theme 3: Coping with Student Demotivation and Disengagement

This theme was identified by 84% of participants and captured the challenge of student apathy and resistance to English learning. Participants described dealing with students who were uninterested in English, who saw it as irrelevant to their lives, or who actively resisted participation. This demotivation and disengagement was seen as both a source of disruptions and a barrier to inclusive practice.

- *Many of my students don't see the point of learning English. They say 'I'm never going to use this' or 'why do I need to learn this?' It's hard to motivate students who don't see any value in what you're teaching.* (Female participant, Final Interview)
- *The students just don't care. They come to class because they have to, but they're not really there. They do the minimum to get by and then they're done. It's hard to have an inclusive classroom when the students don't want to be there.* (Male participant, Focus Group Discussion)

Beyond passive disengagement, participants described dealing with active behavioral resistance, including students who were openly defiant, disruptive, or disrespectful. This resistance was sometimes driven by boredom or frustration, but it also reflected broader issues of power and authority in the classroom.

- *Some students seem to enjoy disrupting the class. They make jokes, talk loudly, challenge my authority. I tried to use the inclusive strategies from the intervention, but sometimes nothing worked. It's hard to be inclusive when students are actively working against you.* (Male participant, Final Interview)

- *I had a student who would openly refuse to do any work. He would say ‘I’m not doing this’ and just sit there. I tried talking to him, offering choices, trying to find something that interested him, but nothing worked. It’s frustrating when you try everything and still can’t reach a student.* (Female participant, Focus Group Discussion)

Relationships among Challenges, Verbal Interactions, and Management Efficacy

The cross-thematic analysis revealed three primary themes capturing the relationships among challenges, verbal interactions, and management efficacy, with particular attention to manifestations of *perezhivanie*. This analysis was necessarily integrative, drawing on all qualitative data sources, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observation field notes, and reflective journals, to map how participants explicitly or implicitly linked these constructs in their accounts and enacted practices. Table 3 presents the themes, subthemes, and frequencies of occurrence across the dataset.

Table 3. Themes and Subthemes Related to Relationships among Challenges, Verbal Interactions, and Efficacy

Theme	Subtheme	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1. Challenges as Catalysts for Verbal Strategy Development	a) Responding to proficiency gaps through language adaptation	22	88%
	b) Using verbal engagement to address demotivation	19	76%
2. Verbal Interactions as a Bridge Between Challenges and Efficacy	a) Successful verbal interventions building confidence	21	84%
	b) Adapting language to overcome structural constraints	17	68%
3. The Reciprocal Relationship Between Efficacy and Verbal Practice	a) Enhanced efficacy enabling more sophisticated verbal strategies	20	80%
	b) Verbal successes reinforcing efficacy beliefs	19	76%

Theme 1: Challenges as Catalysts for Verbal Strategy Development

This theme captured how the challenges participants faced served as catalysts for the development of more sophisticated verbal strategies. The theme was derived from all four data sources: participants described this process in interviews and focus groups, reflected on it in journals, and observers documented evidence of adaptive verbal strategies in classroom practice. Rather than simply being obstacles, the challenges of diverse proficiency levels, student demotivation, and large classes pushed participants to find creative verbal solutions. The difficulties they encountered forced them to move beyond their habitual ways of speaking and to develop more inclusive, effective verbal practices.

- *Because my students had such different levels, I had to learn to say things in multiple ways. I would explain something simply for the beginners, then give a more complex example for the advanced students. It was hard at first, but it made me a better communicator.* (Female participant, Final Interview)
- *I realized that my instructions needed to be very clear and explicit because not all the students could understand complex language. I started using simpler sentences, giving examples, and checking that everyone understood before moving on. The proficiency gap forced me to be more careful with my words.* (Male participant, Focus Group Discussion)
- *I wrote in my journal this week about how the challenge of mixed levels actually pushed me to be more creative with my language. I found myself using more gestures, more examples, more repetition. I never would have developed these strategies if I had a homogeneous class. The difficulty forced me to grow.* (Female participant, Reflective Journal)

Classroom observation field notes documented evidence of participants adapting their language in response to proficiency gaps. One observer noted: “The teacher consistently used multiple modes of explanation, verbal explanation, written examples on the board, and physical gestures, to convey key concepts. When introducing a new vocabulary word, the teacher provided a simple definition, used it in a familiar context, gave a synonym, and then asked a student to provide an example. This layered approach appeared to be a deliberate response to the range of proficiency levels in the room.” Another observer recorded: “The teacher checked for understanding frequently, using simple questions like ‘Does that make sense?’ and ‘Can you tell me what you understood?’ before moving on. When several students looked confused, the teacher rephrased the explanation in simpler language without appearing frustrated.” These observations provided evidence that participants were developing adaptive verbal strategies in response to the challenges they faced.

Participants also described how the challenge of student demotivation led them to develop verbal strategies designed to increase engagement and motivation. This included using enthusiastic and encouraging language, making connections to students’ interests and lives, and using humor and personal anecdotes to create a more engaging atmosphere.

- *When I saw that students were bored and disengaged, I started using more enthusiastic language and trying to connect the lesson to their lives. I would say things like ‘this is useful for when you want to watch movies’ or ‘this is what you need to know to understand your favorite songs.’ It helped a little. (Female participant, Final Interview)*
- *The students who didn’t care about English were the hardest to reach. I tried to use humor and make the class more fun. I would tell jokes, use funny examples, and try to make the atmosphere more relaxed. It wasn’t always successful, but it helped some students become more engaged. (Male participant, Focus Group Discussion)*
- *I wrote about how I started telling personal stories in class to try to connect with the students. I told them about a time I struggled to learn something and how I overcame it. I think it helped them see me as a person, not just a teacher. Some of them started opening up after that. (Female participant, Reflective Journal)*

Theme 2: Verbal Interactions as a Bridge between Challenges and Efficacy

This theme captured how verbal interactions served as the mechanism through which participants navigated challenges and built their sense of efficacy. Successful verbal interventions, instances where participants used language effectively to address a challenge, were described as pivotal experiences that built confidence. Conversely, experiences of verbal failure were described as temporary setbacks that motivated further development.

- *There was a student who was always disruptive, and I had tried everything. One day, I decided to try a different approach. I spoke to him quietly and calmly, acknowledged that he might be frustrated, and asked what I could do to help. He actually responded positively. That moment made me believe that I could handle these situations. (Female participant, Final Interview)*
- *I had a student who had given up and wouldn’t participate. I used a lot of encouraging language, told her I believed in her, and gave her a task I knew she could succeed at. When she did it and I praised her, she started participating more. That experience made me feel like I could make a difference. (Male participant, Focus Group Discussion)*
- *I wrote in my journal about a breakthrough moment with a difficult student. I had tried everything, rewards, consequences, talking to him privately. Nothing worked. Then one day I just asked him, ‘What’s going on?’*

How can I help you?’ He opened up about problems at home. I didn’t solve everything, but that conversation changed our relationship. I felt like I had found a key. (Male participant, Reflective Journal)

Classroom observation field notes documented instances of successful verbal interventions that appeared to build teacher confidence. One observer noted: “When a student became visibly frustrated and refused to participate, the teacher approached quietly, knelt beside the desk, and said in a low voice, ‘I can see this is hard. Let’s try something different. What would help you right now?’ The student paused, then pointed to a simpler task. The teacher nodded and provided the alternative. The student completed the task and later volunteered an answer. The teacher’s calm, flexible verbal response appeared to de-escalate the situation and preserve the student’s dignity.” Another observer recorded: “After successfully redirecting a disruptive student through a quiet, respectful conversation, the teacher visibly relaxed and continued the lesson with renewed energy.” These observations provided evidence that successful verbal interventions were not merely reported in retrospect but were observable in real-time classroom interactions.

Participants also described how they used verbal strategies to overcome some of the structural challenges they faced, such as large class sizes and limited resources. When they could not provide individual attention or use visual materials, they relied more heavily on verbal communication to engage students, check comprehension, and manage behavior.

- *Because I couldn’t give each student individual attention, I started using more whole-class questioning to check understanding. I would ask questions and have everyone respond with thumbs up or down, or I would call on different students. It wasn’t perfect, but it helped me get a sense of what the class understood. (Female participant, Final Interview)*
- *We don’t have a projector or any technology, so I have to use my voice and words to create interest. I use more stories, more examples, more questions. I have to be more creative with my language because I don’t have other resources to rely on. (Male participant, Focus Group Discussion)*

Classroom observation field notes documented how participants compensated for resource limitations through strategic verbal communication. One observer noted: “With no projector or audio equipment available, the teacher relied entirely on voice modulation, storytelling, and vivid verbal descriptions to maintain student interest. The teacher used character voices, dramatic pauses, and rhetorical questions to bring the content to life. Students appeared engaged despite the absence of multimedia resources.” Another observer recorded: “The teacher used a ‘think-pair-share’ format that required no materials beyond the students’ own voices. Even in the crowded classroom, this simple verbal structure provided opportunities for all students to participate.” These observations provided evidence that participants were developing verbal strategies as a response to structural constraints.

Theme 3: The Reciprocal Relationship between Efficacy and Verbal Practice

This theme captured the dynamic, reciprocal relationship between participants’ developing efficacy and their verbal practices. As participants became more confident in their ability to manage classrooms, they were more willing to experiment with new verbal strategies. Conversely, successful verbal strategies further reinforced efficacy beliefs. This reciprocal relationship created a positive feedback loop in which growing confidence and improving verbal practice reinforced each other.

- *At the beginning, I was so nervous that I would just say the first thing that came to mind. When I started feeling more confident, I could think before I spoke. I could choose my words more carefully and try different approaches. Confidence gave me the space to be more strategic with my language. (Female participant, Final Interview)*

- *When I was less confident, I used very direct, authoritarian language because I was afraid of losing control. As I became more confident, I was able to use more open, collaborative language. I wasn't afraid that being nice would make me lose authority anymore.* (Male participant, Focus Group Discussion)
- *I wrote in my journal about how my language changed as I became more confident. In the beginning, I was just trying to survive each lesson. Now I feel like I can actually teach. I can play with language, use humor, be creative. I'm not just getting through the lesson, I'm actually enjoying it.* (Female participant, Reflective Journal)

Participants also described how successful verbal interactions reinforced their efficacy beliefs. When a particular verbal strategy worked, when it calmed a disruptive student, engaged a demotivated one, or clarified a confusing concept, this success was interpreted as evidence of capability, further strengthening efficacy.

- *The more I used the verbal strategies and saw them work, the more I believed that I was a good teacher. Every time I was able to talk a student through a problem or redirect behavior without confrontation, I felt more confident. It was like each success gave me permission to believe in myself.* (Female participant, Focus Group Discussion)
- *When a student responded positively to something I said, it gave me a boost. It made me think 'okay, I can do this, I know what I'm doing.' Those small successes added up over time. By the end of the program, I felt like a completely different teacher.* (Male participant, Final Interview)

I wrote about how each small success built on the last one. In the beginning, I celebrated every tiny victory, a student who stopped talking when I asked, a quiet student who volunteered an answer. By the end, these things felt normal. I had to remind myself how far I had come. (Female participant, Reflective Journal)

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study demonstrate that Iranian pre-service EFL teachers' development of inclusive classroom practice was closely connected to the ways in which they used language, interpreted classroom difficulties, and gradually reconstructed their sense of classroom-management efficacy. Three interrelated patterns were particularly evident. First, participants increasingly relied on inclusive and affirming language, strategic questioning and redirection, and a communicative balance between authority and empathy. Second, their attempts to cultivate inclusive classrooms were constrained by heterogeneous proficiency levels and learning needs, large classes and limited resources, and learner demotivation and disengagement. Third, these challenges were not experienced merely as external obstacles; rather, they became catalysts for developing new verbal strategies, while successful verbal interventions strengthened participants' perceived efficacy and greater efficacy in turn encouraged more flexible and sophisticated communication. Taken together, the findings suggest that inclusive teacher development is neither a simple acquisition of pedagogical techniques nor a linear progression from limited to advanced competence. It is better understood as a recursive developmental process in which classroom experience, emotional interpretation, verbal action, reflection, and professional confidence continually influence one another. This interpretation is consistent with research emphasizing the multidimensionality of EFL teacher competence and the need to move beyond narrow conceptions of professional preparation based only on subject knowledge or prescribed teaching methods (3).

The first major finding concerned participants' growing use of inclusive and affirming language. Pre-service teachers reported becoming more attentive to how their words positioned learners and increasingly replaced deficit-oriented expressions with language emphasizing growth, possibility, and participation. This finding is important because it indicates that inclusive practice was manifested not only in lesson planning or activity selection but also in the micro-level discourse through which

students were acknowledged and evaluated. Such a shift is compatible with literature showing that pre-service teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning shape their classroom decisions and can either support or constrain learner-centered practice (1). It also resonates with findings that professional development requires prospective teachers to become aware of implicit beliefs and reconsider them through experience and reflection (2). When participants changed the language through which they described struggling students, they were simultaneously modifying the interpretive frames through which those students were understood. This process can therefore be seen as both linguistic and cognitive. The result also aligns with work on professional identity showing that reflective engagement with critical incidents can reshape how pre-service teachers understand themselves and their responsibilities toward learners (13). From this perspective, the move from labeling students to describing learning needs represented not simply a change in wording but a broader reconstruction of professional identity toward a more inclusive and responsive orientation.

The development of strategic questioning and redirection constituted a second prominent aspect of participants' verbal practice. Rather than responding to off-task behavior primarily through direct reprimands, participants increasingly used open-ended questions, invitations to participate, and instructional redirection. This result is consistent with research showing the importance of creating thinking-oriented classrooms in which teacher questioning encourages interpretation, reasoning, and active engagement rather than passive reproduction (5). The present findings extend this line of research by suggesting that questioning may serve a dual pedagogical function: it can stimulate cognitive participation while simultaneously operating as a management strategy. When a disruptive learner is redirected through a meaningful instructional question, management and learning cease to be separate processes. This interpretation is also compatible with evidence that teacher clarity and relational immediacy contribute to students' affective learning and that students' perceptions of being understood can mediate those effects (10). Although the present study focused on pre-service teachers rather than student outcomes, participants' use of respectful, engagement-oriented questioning appears to reflect the same general principle that effective instruction is strengthened when communication combines pedagogical clarity with interpersonal responsiveness.

The third verbal-interaction finding, balancing authority with empathy, further illustrates the relational character of inclusive classroom management. Participants described learning to maintain expectations and behavioral boundaries while avoiding unnecessarily confrontational, humiliating, or authoritarian communication. They reported greater reliance on calm tone, respectful phrasing, collaborative expressions, and inclusive pronouns such as "we" and "let us." This finding is consistent with research on the emotional dimensions of teacher development, particularly evidence that pre-service teachers experience complex emotional geographies and must develop strategies for navigating interpersonal tension, vulnerability, and professional responsibility (9). It also corresponds with findings concerning language-teaching anxiety, which suggest that teachers' psychological characteristics influence how they experience and respond to demanding pedagogical situations (7). The ability to remain calm in moments of disruption can therefore be interpreted not only as a management skill but also as a form of emotional regulation. Pre-service teachers who can regulate anxiety and frustration are more likely to choose deliberate verbal responses rather than impulsive reactions. Relatedly, research on writing anxiety among EFL pre-service teachers indicates that prospective teachers themselves may experience performance pressures associated with language use (8); such experiences may heighten awareness of students' vulnerability when participating in a foreign language and help explain the value participants increasingly attached to respectful and supportive discourse.

The findings regarding classroom challenges reveal that inclusive pedagogy was experienced against a background of substantial contextual difficulty. The most frequently reported challenge involved accommodating differences in English proficiency and broader learning needs. Participants struggled to design tasks that could remain meaningful for both weaker and stronger learners, and they also expressed uncertainty about how to respond to students requiring additional support. This

finding corresponds with research indicating that pre-service preparation does not always fully match the complex competencies required in actual educational settings. For example, research in the Iranian context has documented gaps between EFL teachers' assessment literacy needs and the assessment preparation provided during pre-service education (4). Although assessment literacy differs from inclusive classroom management, both bodies of evidence point to a broader theory-practice problem: formal preparation may not always provide sufficient experience with the variability, ambiguity, and simultaneous demands of real classrooms. Hadi's examination of EFL teacher education similarly highlights tensions in preparing prospective teachers across both language proficiency and pedagogy (19). The present findings add that inclusive competence requires pre-service teachers to move beyond generalized methodological knowledge and develop adaptive strategies responsive to individual learner differences.

Large class sizes and limited resources represented another major challenge. Participants described difficulty providing individual attention, arranging inclusive activities, and using varied instructional resources under constrained physical and material conditions. These results are consistent with broader evidence indicating that technological and pedagogical innovations are strongly shaped by contextual access and implementation conditions. Hennessy and colleagues, for example, showed that technology-supported teacher professional development in lower-resource contexts depends not merely on availability of tools but also on infrastructure, institutional support, and the design of professional learning (22). Research on digital game-based learning likewise demonstrates that positive beliefs about technology do not necessarily translate automatically into classroom use (23). Similar discrepancies have been identified in studies of pre-service teachers' use of digital storytelling, where access to and selection of information form part of the challenge of developing meaningful learning media (24). These studies support the present finding that inclusive teaching cannot be understood independently of the conditions in which teachers are expected to enact it. Even teachers who value participation and differentiation may find their practice constrained by classroom density, time, materials, or limited technological support.

The challenge of learner demotivation and disengagement adds a further affective dimension to inclusive practice. Participants described learners who questioned the relevance of English, showed minimal engagement, or resisted participation behaviorally. This result suggests that inclusion must involve more than accommodating cognitive or proficiency differences; it must also address differences in motivation, willingness to participate, and perceptions of the value of learning. Mujiono's work on self-directed learning, verbal-linguistic intelligence, and grit in EFL problem solving underscores the importance of persistence and autonomous engagement in language-related tasks (18). Although that research focuses on learners' writing problem solving, it provides a useful parallel for understanding the difficulties participants reported when students lacked persistence or investment. The current findings further suggest that pre-service teachers attempted to compensate for demotivation by using encouragement, humor, personal examples, and more relevant verbal framing. These practices indicate an effort to transform classroom communication into a motivational resource rather than treating disengagement solely as misconduct.

One of the most important findings of the study was that challenges often functioned as catalysts for the development of more sophisticated verbal strategies. Participants described adapting explanations, simplifying or elaborating language for different proficiency levels, checking understanding more systematically, and becoming more creative in the absence of materials. This developmental pattern aligns with models of professional learning that emphasize learning through participation in authentic and demanding activity. Diab's use of cognitive apprenticeship in EFL teacher education, for instance, supports the value of scaffolded engagement with complex academic and pedagogical tasks rather than reliance on decontextualized instruction (6). Similarly, collaborative action research has been identified as a productive reflective mechanism through which pre-service EFL teachers can investigate inclusion-related challenges and develop more responsive practices (16). The present

findings provide further evidence that difficult classroom encounters can become professionally productive when teachers are given opportunities to observe, reflect, receive feedback, and try revised approaches. The critical issue is therefore not whether pre-service teachers encounter difficulty, but whether teacher education provides a developmental structure through which difficulty can be interpreted and transformed.

This interpretation is reinforced by the findings on reflective practice. Participants' development occurred within a context in which classroom experiences were revisited through journals, observation, dialogue, and collective reflection. This corresponds closely with research showing that reflective strategies during practicum can support pre-service English teachers' professional development (11). Reflective writing has also been shown to reveal and contribute to the development of imagined professional identities among prospective foreign-language teachers (12). In the present study, reflection appeared to allow participants to identify patterns in their own language, reconsider unsuccessful responses, and recognize progress that might otherwise have remained unnoticed. This finding is further supported by Woolcott and colleagues, who demonstrated that structured self-evaluation can influence affective-reflective skills among pre-service teachers (14), and by Mead, whose work suggests that different forms of scenario-based reflection can elicit varying degrees of insight and empathy (15). Together, these studies reinforce the interpretation that reflection is not an optional supplement to practice; it is one of the processes through which experience becomes professionally meaningful.

The reciprocal relationship between verbal success and management efficacy was another central finding. Participants reported that successful communication with disruptive, discouraged, or struggling learners increased their confidence, while growing confidence enabled them to experiment with less authoritarian and more collaborative verbal approaches. This bidirectional pattern suggests that efficacy develops through interpreted experiences of success rather than through reassurance alone. When a participant used calm language to de-escalate a difficult interaction and then observed a constructive learner response, the event became evidence of professional capability. Repeated experiences of this kind appeared to create a reinforcing cycle between efficacy and practice. This interpretation is compatible with research on reflective professional identity development, where critical incidents become meaningful partly through how teachers interpret their own responses and emerging capabilities (13). It also connects with research emphasizing affective-reflective competence (14), because perceived success depends not only on what occurred but on how the teacher evaluates the event emotionally and cognitively.

The study's use of *perezhivanie* provides a coherent framework for integrating these findings. Participants experienced similar structural challenges, such as mixed proficiency, resource constraints, and disengagement, but these conditions did not produce identical developmental outcomes. Rather, challenges were filtered through individual beliefs, prior experiences, emotions, and emerging professional identities. This explains why the same disruption could be experienced as a threat by one teacher and as a problem-solving opportunity by another. The findings on professional identity, emotional geographies, and reflective practice in previous research support this interpretation (9, 11, 13). *Perezhivanie* therefore helps explain why teacher development cannot be reduced either to external conditions or to personal characteristics: development emerges through the relation between the two. The participatory and reflective environment of the intervention appears to have created opportunities for participants to reinterpret difficult experiences, experiment with alternative verbal strategies, and integrate those experiences into changing understandings of themselves as teachers.

The findings also have implications for understanding technological development in teacher education. Contemporary pre-service teachers are increasingly expected to incorporate digital tools, virtual environments, and generative artificial intelligence into teaching. Research on technological pedagogical and content knowledge indicates that meaningful technology integration becomes visible in how prospective teachers connect technology, pedagogy, disciplinary content, planning, and reflection (25). Likewise, studies of ChatGPT integration and AI adoption suggest that pre-service EFL teachers' readiness for

artificial intelligence depends on perceived AI literacy, competence, and broader predispositions toward adoption (26, 27). The present study did not focus specifically on AI; however, its findings suggest that technology should not be treated as a substitute for the relational and reflective competencies required for inclusive practice. Instead, digital and AI tools need to be integrated into teacher education in ways that support adaptive judgment, differentiated instruction, and meaningful interaction. This interpretation is also compatible with earlier evidence that beliefs about ICT integration are interconnected with broader pedagogical beliefs (2). Technological competence is therefore most useful when embedded within a wider professional capacity to respond to learner differences and contextual constraints.

Finally, the findings support a broad understanding of inclusion that includes cultural and communicative sensitivity as well as instructional accessibility. Research on Iranian pre-service and in-service teachers' beliefs and practices regarding intercultural communicative competence has shown that endorsement of intercultural goals does not always ensure consistent classroom enactment (20). Similarly, analysis of cultural and gender representation in EFL textbooks demonstrates that teaching materials themselves may encode particular social meanings that require critical mediation by teachers (21). The present participants' increasing sensitivity to language, participation, and the positioning of learners suggests that inclusive practice can provide a foundation for this broader critical awareness. Inclusive teaching is not simply the provision of differentiated tasks; it involves continual attention to whose voices are heard, how difference is represented, how authority is communicated, and whether classroom discourse expands or restricts opportunities to participate. Seen in this way, the study's proposed developmental space of refractive practice captures an important process through which authentic challenges, structured reflection, and repeated communicative experimentation can contribute to the emergence of more inclusive professional identities.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The study involved a relatively small group of 25 Iranian pre-service EFL teachers drawn from a specific institutional and geographical context, which limits the transferability of the results to other teacher-education settings, regions, educational systems, or cultural contexts. The intervention also occurred within a structured 14-week program, and the observed changes may partly reflect the intensity of mentoring, observation, reflective journaling, and collaborative discussion that characterized this particular intervention rather than development that would occur under ordinary teacher-education conditions. In addition, part of the dataset was based on participants' interviews, focus-group contributions, and reflective journals, which may have been influenced by social desirability, retrospective reconstruction, or participants' awareness of the objectives of the intervention. Although classroom observations provided an important source of behavioral evidence, the presence of observers may also have influenced participants' verbal behavior. Finally, the study concentrated primarily on pre-service teachers' perspectives and practices and did not systematically examine students' perceptions of the teachers' inclusive communication or measure longer-term changes in learner participation, achievement, motivation, or classroom climate.

Future studies should examine whether the developmental patterns identified in this study are replicated across larger and more diverse samples of pre-service EFL teachers, including participants from different universities, regions, school types, and sociocultural contexts. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable for determining whether changes in inclusive language, management efficacy, and reflective practice persist after graduation and transition into full-time teaching. Future research could also adopt mixed-method designs combining observations and qualitative reflections with validated measures of teacher efficacy, inclusive teaching competence, interactional behavior, and student engagement. Including students' perspectives would allow researchers to compare teachers' perceptions of inclusive verbal practices with learners' experiences of belonging, fairness, support, and participation. Comparative research could examine whether similar processes occur among novice and experienced teachers or across EFL and other subject areas. Researchers may also investigate how digital

technologies, generative artificial intelligence, or technology-supported reflection influence the development of inclusive verbal practice. Finally, the proposed Zone of Refractive Practice should be examined empirically in different teacher-education contexts to clarify its dimensions, developmental mechanisms, and potential boundaries.

Teacher-education programs should provide sustained opportunities for pre-service teachers to practice inclusive communication in authentic or closely simulated classroom settings rather than addressing inclusion only at a theoretical level. Training should explicitly focus on growth-oriented language, open-ended questioning, respectful redirection, de-escalation, collaborative phrasing, and the management of authority without humiliation or unnecessary confrontation. Practicum courses should incorporate repeated cycles of teaching, observation, feedback, reflective journaling, peer discussion, and revision so that difficult classroom experiences become structured opportunities for professional learning. Teacher educators should also prepare prospective teachers for mixed-proficiency classes, learner demotivation, large-group instruction, and resource limitations through realistic scenarios and problem-solving activities. Mentoring should attend not only to lesson planning and methodological accuracy but also to teachers' emotional responses, confidence, and developing professional identities. Finally, inclusive pedagogy, classroom management, intercultural awareness, and digital competence should be treated as interconnected dimensions of teacher preparation so that future EFL teachers learn to make context-sensitive decisions that promote participation, dignity, and meaningful learning for diverse students.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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