

ILLUMINATING INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY IN THAI EFL CLASSROOMS: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BUARATTANA ATTACHOO
Language Institute
Thammasat University, Thailand

PARIWAT IMSA-ARD *
Faculty of Liberal Arts
Thammasat University, Thailand
pariwat.i@arts.tu.ac.th

ABSTRACT

Social diversity can be a prevalent feature in any classroom, where a mix of learners from varied backgrounds is now the norm. Such dynamics intricately shape a student's prospects for success or failure. In Thailand, as in educational settings worldwide, educators are contending with growing diversity among their students, encompassing the instruction of learners with special needs and diverse backgrounds. This qualitative study explored how eight EFL university instructors actively constructed their identities as inclusive practitioners while contending with the implementation of inclusive education policies. The data were sourced from individual semi-structured interviews. Through the lens of sociocultural and critical framing within identity theory, their identity construction was meticulously examined as both EFL educators and advocates for inclusive education. This study emphasises the pivotal roles of discourse, self-positioning, and social context as fundamental processes in forming teacher identity. The findings revealed that some EFL instructors suggested a uniform treatment of learners within the classroom, acting in different roles to navigate the complexities of inclusivity in EFL classrooms, and an emphasis on the importance of empathy, openness, and flexibility in fostering inclusive learning environments. This study highlights the crucial implications of fostering inclusive education in EFL classrooms by advocating for proactive communication, differentiated instruction, and ongoing support. These measures are essential for creating equitable learning environments, especially for students with special educational needs.

Keywords: EFL contexts; inclusive education; inclusive pedagogy; language education; teacher identities

INTRODUCTION

In the academic journey of university students with disabilities, akin to their non-disabled counterparts, they must engage in full-time inclusive classes and navigate all necessary academic aspects within a four-year curriculum. Success in their educational trajectory requires proficiency in foundation English courses and other subjects outlined in the curriculum. Each university in Thailand, for instance, establishes a Disabled Student Service Centre (DSS) to facilitate inclusive classrooms, with a specific focus on English language learning support. The DSS is responsible for providing learning materials, such as braille textbooks and reader software, along with collaborating with university faculties. Preparation sessions, encompassing academic guidance and insights into university life, including English language learning, are arranged for disabled students before each term. Moreover, the Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC) emphasises the obligation for universities to implement an English-standardised plan and revise their English learning and teaching provisions, with an emphasis on achieving specified goals (Talanogon, 2016). Moreover, this policy advocates for additional support in the form of extracurricular activities, teaching materials, aids, and conducive environments for English

language learning. In the pursuit of inclusive education, research is pivotal in developing and evaluating instructional practices, including adapted learning materials, specialised equipment, and technologies that promote equity for students with impairments in accessing lessons in inclusive classrooms. Differentiated instructions are advocated to cater to the diverse abilities and specific needs of students.

With this, teachers working with students with disabilities are advised to employ strategies supporting multi-sensory capabilities (e.g., visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic) within inclusive classrooms. Various English language teaching approaches are utilised to teach English and enhance vocabulary in inclusive settings. Specialised services, including tailored equipment and technology, are crucial to creating suitable instructional and learning materials that address individual needs. To foster inclusivity, it is imperative for teachers to be trained in the implementation of diverse strategies to facilitate students' assimilation into classrooms, schools, communities, and work settings (Bagum et al., 2024). This commitment is essential to prevent limited knowledge regarding inclusive practices. The relationship between education and instruction is intrinsic, with instruction serving as the process which enables learners to develop their ability and capacity to attain education (Kwangmuang et al., 2021). Instructors play a pivotal role as guides, aiding students on their journeys toward their educational goals. This encompasses classroom management, course evaluation, and the shaping of students' attitudes within the classroom environment. Positive actions, including support, approval, and constructive feedback, contribute to students feeling acknowledged, valued, and assisted. Particularly in English classes, students with disabilities often require more effort than their non-disabled peers. Conversely, negative beliefs and actions can demotivate students, potentially leading to academic failure. Thus, beyond teaching preparation, instructors' characteristics are integral to enhancing inclusivity in English language classrooms.

Despite the growing emphasis on inclusive education and the establishment of policies and services to support disabled students, little empirical research has been conducted on how these inclusive practices are implemented in Thai EFL classrooms, specifically in the context of English language learning. Furthermore, while differentiated instruction and multi-sensory strategies are advocated, there is limited evidence on how EFL instructors adapt these strategies in real classroom settings to meet the diverse needs of disabled students. To address this gap, this study employs critical and sociocultural identity framing, alongside discourse analysis theory (Gee, 2010), to examine the identity construction of Thai EFL university instructors practicing inclusive education. Through this theoretical lens, the study aims to investigate how these instructors navigate power disparities and social justice issues in their pedagogical practices within inclusive tertiary-level EFL classrooms. By illuminating EFL instructors' reflections on inclusive teaching practices, this study is hoped to contribute to the broader understanding of how inclusive pedagogy is enacted within Thai higher education or similar contexts, and offer practical insights into how instructors can challenge social structures and contribute to more equitable and socially just learning environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ELT IN THAILAND

The prominence of inclusive education development, particularly in less developed Asian countries like Thailand, reflects a commitment to fundamental rights and inclusive education policies (United Nations, 2022). International agreements such as the Salamanca and Dakar agreements, the Jomtien World Bank agreement, and the Sustainable Development Goals 2015–2030 highlight the global priority of inclusive education (United Nations, 2022; World Bank, 2017). However, the actual implementation of inclusive education varies due to local contexts and factors, including economic systems, cultures, and social aspects. These variations pose challenges in practical execution across countries, necessitating context-dependent research to elucidate the development of inclusive education in practical terms (Walton, 2016).

In Thailand, the commitment to inclusivity in education is evident through initiatives providing educational opportunities for students with disabilities (Bevan-Brown et al., 2014). Governmental efforts include laws such as the Empowerment for Persons with Disabilities Act (2007) and the Education for People with Disabilities Act (2008), which promote inclusive education initiatives and ensure equity in education. The National Education for People with Disabilities Committee oversees implementation, yet challenges persist, notably in terms of insufficient knowledge about inclusive concepts and practices. Developing a practical, inclusive model in Thailand requires thorough investigation across various domains, including accommodation, teacher training, education services, and curriculum development. Moreover, while there's a push to enhance inclusive education, the focus seems to favour social skill acquisition over academic achievements, posing a challenge in balancing both (Vorapanya & Dunlap, 2014). From a pedagogical perspective, applying effective teaching methods for students with disabilities remains a considerable challenge for EFL instructors.

Furthermore, as more university students with disabilities join full-time inclusive classes, language teachers are urged to use multi-sensory and different strategies in inclusive classrooms to teach English and improve students' language skills in inclusive settings. Also, specialised services, including customised equipment, are vital for developing appropriate instructional materials (Bagum et al., 2024). Thus, EFL instructors play a pivotal role in guiding students toward their educational goals, contributing to classroom management, and shaping student attitudes (Kwangmuang et al., 2021). Also, positive actions can contribute to students feeling acknowledged and valued, crucial for students with disabilities.

LANGUAGE TEACHER IDENTITY

Investigation into language teacher identity has undergone substantial research growth in recent decades, becoming a pivotal focus within contemporary literature. Despite an increasing examination of language teacher identity formation, a clear and concise conceptualisation of this identity remains elusive (Chan & Lo, 2017). Some perspectives advocate viewing teacher identities as a resource, extending beyond mere identity labels. This outlook emphasises recognising educators' lived experiences as pedagogical resources that surpass their language-teaching knowledge within inclusive classrooms. However, recent research (e.g., Moradkhani & Ebadijalal, 2024; Rushton et al., 2023) challenges this static view, proposing that educators' professional identities are interconnected and intimately tied to their personal experiences and beliefs and that the social contexts of workplaces and corresponding learning experiences

significantly shape and transform teachers' professional identities.

Identity formation is an ongoing process influenced by various internal and external factors (Aljuhaish et al., 2020; Coşgun & Savaş, 2023; Fairley, 2020), in which two critical components of this process include perception and reflection. The former refers to how individuals see themselves (self-perception) and how they believe they are seen by others (social perception) (Sedikides et al., 2021). For instance, an EFL instructor who perceives themselves as a facilitator of inclusive education may focus on creating equitable learning opportunities and addressing the diverse needs of students (Cook-Sather, 2022). The latter involves the critical examination of one's experiences, actions, and beliefs. With this, reflection allows instructors to internalise their experiences and integrate them into their understanding of who they are as educators (Gorski & Dalton, 2020). For example, an instructor reflecting on their classroom experiences might recognise the impact of specific inclusive strategies on student engagement and learning. This reflection can lead to a deeper commitment to inclusive practices and a stronger identification as an advocate for inclusive education. This perception is shaped by their experiences, feedback from students, and societal expectations (Flores, 2001). In summary, teachers' professional identities are in a constant state of evolution. Criticism is directed at traditional, techno-rational models of EFL undergraduate programs for overlooking the complex array of identities and beliefs students bring to classes. Many English language courses predominantly emphasise subject-specific knowledge, such as theories or language skills, with limited integration of topics related to diversity, inclusion, power disparity, and social justice.

THE PRESENT STUDY

This study employs critical and sociocultural identity framing and discourse analysis theory (Gee, 2010) to explore the identity construction of eight Thai EFL university instructors practising inclusive education. The aim is to explore how EFL university instructors navigate power disparities and social justice issues in their pedagogical practices within inclusive tertiary-level EFL classrooms. Specifically, this study seeks to understand their perceptions, strategies, and reflections concerning these challenges in order to foster more equitable and inclusive learning environments. A language teacher's subjectivity is seen as a construct influenced by various discourses in a sociocultural context. Therefore, teachers' professional identities must be understood within the realm of social practice. Teachers bring multiple identities to the classroom, including personal experiences, professional roles, worldviews, and political and cultural identities, making it impossible for a language teacher to be a 'neutral' participant. The study adopted Gee's (2010) definition of 'discourse' to understand how these instructors negotiate their professional identities, where discourse, self-positioning, and social context are central processes. A critical framing is adopted to examine identity negotiation within discourses, emphasising the development of knowledge and skills for inclusion as integral to developing one's identity as an inclusive practitioner and urging EFL instructors to challenge social structures for social justice enactment. This study aims to address the following question:

1. How do EFL instructors' identities reflect pedagogical practices in an inclusive classroom of tertiary-level EFL learners?
 - a. What are the perceptions of the EFL instructors towards English language teaching in the inclusive classroom?
 - b. What are the reflections of the EFL instructors towards their instructional practice in the inclusive classroom?

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

In qualitative research methodologies, researchers gain the unique opportunity to immerse themselves in “up-close information” directly from the perspective of the subjects grappling with the research issues. Qualitative methodologies further enable researchers to engage with participants, collecting data directly through research instruments, thereby reducing participants' anxiety during data collection due to the method's inherent flexibility (Saldaña, 2016). Consequently, this qualitative study explored the viewpoints of eight Thai EFL instructors actively cultivating their identities as practitioners of inclusive education, illuminating their perspectives on inclusivity and the feasibility of integrating inclusive practices into their teaching within the context of Thai higher education.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

Data collection involved purposive-convenience sampling of eight participants in Thailand, adhering to specific criteria. The demographics of the eight participants can be found in Table 1. The participants were EFL university instructors representing four distinct regions: Northern Thailand, Northeastern Thailand, Central Thailand, and Southern Thailand. Participants were selected based on criteria requiring them to 1) be Thai citizens, 2) possess experience in instructing inclusive English classrooms, and 3) have a minimum of five years of teaching experience. To elaborate, participants had to be Thai citizens to ensure they were familiar with the local educational context and policies. Also, they needed to have experience teaching in inclusive EFL classrooms, specifically those that included students with special educational needs (SEN), since this experience was crucial for understanding the challenges and strategies related to inclusive pedagogy. In addition, this criterion on minimum teaching experience was set to ensure that the instructors had substantial practical knowledge and experience in the field of EFL education and were able to provide deep insights into their pedagogical practices. Finally, to capture a broad range of perspectives and practices, instructors from different regions of Thailand were included, which helped in understanding how regional differences might influence inclusive education practices. Purposive-convenience sampling (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) was employed to ensure the inclusion of lecturers with substantial experience in diversity and inclusivity. While this approach enhanced study quality, it may have inadvertently excluded valuable perspectives, acknowledged as a potential methodological constraint.

TABLE 1. Participants' demographic background

Pseudonyms	Highest Educational Qualifications	Teaching experiences (years)	Approximate number of students in one class	Examples of courses taught	Interview time (minutes)
T1	PhD in English Language Studies	17	23 - 25	Academic Writing	38.43
T2	MA in English	5	50	Phonetics/ Reading for foundation courses	43.06
T3	PhD in English Language Teaching	14	25/30/70	Fundamental English Reading	39.12
T4	PhD in English as an International Language	15	35	Academic Writing/ Fundamental English	37.26
T5	PhD in Linguistics	7	12 - 40	Linguistics/ Fundamental English Courses	58.50
T6	PhD in Linguistics	15	50	Fundamental English Courses	34.49
T7	M.A. in Teaching English as an International Language	13	40	Business English/ Fundamental English Courses	44.46
T8	PhD in Educational Science and Learning Management	10	40	Fundamental English Courses	49.37

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In the 2023 academic year, interviews were conducted with Thai EFL lecturers to explore their approaches to addressing learner diversity in recent lessons. The goal was to understand their decision-making and strategies for promoting inclusivity. Requests for interviews were sent to eight targeted participants' universities, followed by confirmation of willingness to participate. Participants signed consent forms prior to the interviews, which were conducted in Thai and recorded for review, transcription, and translation. Confidentiality was maintained through data coding, and participants were assured that their involvement wouldn't affect their careers. Anchored by the following issues, the discourse analysis of the interview data was guided within 1) construction and implementation of teachers' role/identity as a practitioner promoting inclusive education; 2) teaching strategies promoting inclusion; 3) challenges faced in navigating the role as both an EFL and inclusive education practitioner; and 4) potential solutions to problems and challenges arisen.

Before data collection, the interview questions underwent expert validation involving professionals with over five years of experience in language and inclusive education. Following revisions based on expert feedback, the refined questions were piloted with participants possessing similar characteristics to ensure reliability. Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the authors' university prior to commencement. Upon receiving approval, participants were contacted either by phone or institutional email and briefed

on the study's objectives. They were explicitly informed of the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw at any point. Furthermore, participants were assured of the confidentiality of all information collected during the study.

The interviews underwent verbatim transcription and were subjected to discursive data analysis, aiming to elucidate instructors' perceptions of inclusive education and their roles as inclusive education practitioners in EFL classrooms. Using Gee's (2010) discourse analytical framework, the analysis focused on identifying key terms foregrounded and backgrounded in the discursive data, exploring how instructors constructed beliefs and negotiated their identities as practitioners of inclusive education through textual expressions. Drawing on social theories, the study investigated how instructors discursively constructed representations of SEN and NTS students and the concept of 'inclusion' itself. This exploration involved examining language use, including labels and discourses invoked when discussing the implementation of inclusive practices within specific school contexts. Analysing discursive data in the field of inclusive education is important due to its role in comprehending the underlying rationale behind instructors' perspectives and practices in the university setting.

FINDINGS

This section analyses data from eight participants to investigate their implementation of inclusive education in EFL classrooms, exploring EFL teachers' perceptions, strategies, self-positioning, and attitudes towards diversity. Four main themes emerged: (1) inclusive strategies, (2) self-perceived roles, (3) challenges in implementation, and (4) attitudes towards inclusivity.

INSTRUCTORS' INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES IN LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

A prominent theme emerged among instructors regarding the significant focus on addressing learner diversity in the classroom. Most instructors addressed diversity primarily concerning mainstream or non-special students, while some instructors in Extract 1 provide insightful explanations of the inclusive strategies they utilise in their teaching practice.

Extract 1

Interviewer: How do you address 'inclusivity' in your classrooms?

- T7: I don't think it is necessary to treat SEN students differently from others, as they might feel they do not fit in the classroom. Instead, I would expand the session for Q&A to allow every student to have more time to ask questions they might not understand, and this would automatically include the SEN students.
- T8: Initially, I did not know that there was a student with visual impairment attending my classes, and I taught as usual. Once I was informed, I became aware of this and started to adjust my teaching. However, I decided not to treat this SEN student differently from the non-SEN students during instruction. I don't think we should teach this group of students differently. Sometimes, the student with visual impairment performed very well and could be a group leader, and I let him be. The adjustment was merely for accommodations in teaching, not how I treat the SEN.

T7 and T8 articulate a unique perspective on inclusion, portraying it as a pedagogical practice characterised by equitable treatment of all learners in the classroom. They emphasise applying uniform treatment to both SEN and non-SEN students. T7's discourse reflects a commitment to eliminating disparities, aiming to address diverse academic levels effectively and

facilitating optimal participation of SEN learners. Meanwhile, T8 underscores the instructors' crucial role in understanding learners, positioning them as essential agents in fostering inclusive environments. By prioritising equitable consideration of learner diversity, both T7 and T8 advocate for instructional frameworks beyond normative approaches. Their emphasis on instructors' understanding emerges as a fundamental and effective strategy to enhance student engagement in learning activities.

SELF-PERCEIVED IDENTITIES IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

In the thematic exploration of instructors' self-perceived identities in inclusive classrooms, various identities emerged, including observers, consultants or caretakers, balancers, and collaborators. This illustrates the multifaceted ways EFL instructors navigate inclusivity in the classrooms. One notable role is that of observers, articulated by several instructors. By recognising learners' diverse needs and individualities, instructors adopt keen observation to discern and respond to nuances within student groups. This proactive approach emphasises the necessity for instructors to remain aware of diverse learner profiles, allowing for adjustments to pedagogical practices.

Acknowledging diversity within the classroom is crucial for aligning instructional strategies with varied learning styles, which are not always explicitly informed by institutional frameworks. Particularly important is the observance of student behaviours, which may reveal underlying needs such as autism. In inclusive classrooms, nuanced observation of student behaviour is vital for creating environments conducive to holistic learner development. Extract 2, featuring perspectives from T1 and T3, provides valuable insights into their roles as observers within inclusive classrooms.

Extract 2

T1: We need to observe the characteristics of the SEN and the non-SENs at the same time to adjust the overall atmosphere in the classroom, including when assigning group tasks. Fortunately, students in the group I was teaching were willing to cooperate and take good care of the SEN.

T3: In some cases, if I was informed after I had already started teaching, I might accidentally notice and acknowledge the SEN's behaviours. For example, the SEN was sitting quietly at the beginning but then suddenly shouted something out in the middle of the session. I would have to observe more of the SEN's behaviours and be prepared to handle them in the following classes.

In addition to assuming the role of observers, some instructors also identified themselves as consultants or caretakers. This multifaceted role involves fostering familiarity and rapport with students, building trust, enhancing academic engagement and participation, revisiting core topics, and, notably, alleviating student anxiety. This concerted effort aims to enhance both academic learning and students' overall well-being.

The designation of consultants or caretakers highlights a pedagogical approach focused on relationality and support, akin to a caregiver. By cultivating trust and intimacy, instructors aim to create a conducive learning environment where students feel valued and supported. This approach is particularly pertinent in addressing the diverse needs of SEN students, reflecting a commitment to equitable educational outcomes.

Moreover, some instructors expressed a familial sentiment towards their students, treating them as their own children. This emphasis on nurturing and prioritising the well-being of students, especially SEN learners, highlights a pedagogical ethos grounded in empathy and compassion. Extract 3, featuring perspectives from T2 and T6, provides valuable insights into their roles as consultants or caretakers.

Extract 3

- T2: [...] I tried to talk about the SEN learner's matters, such as asking how your family member is or if there are any problems. Feel free to let me know anytime.
- T6: I don't think only the general qualifications of being a teacher are enough; we should also be like caretakers. I believe that the SEN students need special attention. [...] This way, the SEN students will think we are approachable. [...]

In addition to roles as observers, consultants, or caretakers, some instructors identified themselves as balancers. This role involves maintaining a harmonious pace of teaching and learning, ensuring equitable engagement for all students while avoiding overburdening non-special learners. By adjusting the instructional tempo, instructors aim to promote inclusivity and engagement, accommodate individual student needs, create a positive classroom environment to prevent bullying and discrimination and foster mutual respect and acceptance among students. Effective communication and education on inclusivity and diversity are emphasised to mitigate discrimination and promote empathy, with instructors sensitising non-SEN students to the challenges faced by their SEN peers. Extract 4, featuring perspectives from T3 and T5, provides insights into their roles as balancers.

Extract 4

- T3: Well, it is our responsibility to communicate with other non-SEN students to create a positive atmosphere. [...] I would [communicate] to the non-SEN learners that there [would be] the SEN peer with us, so we shouldn't bully or laugh at them [...]to ensure that all the students felt included without losing their feelings.
- T5: To ensure that students with SEN understand the assignment, I would walk to them and ask if they understood the given task. [...]

Significantly, EFL instructors' self-perceived roles extend beyond the inclusive classroom, with some adopting the identity of "collaborators" in their interaction with Disability Support Services (DSS) centres, involving an ongoing partnership to update information about SEN learners and access necessary support for their academic success. By actively engaging with DSS centres, instructors demonstrate a commitment to promoting equitable educational opportunities and ensuring the full inclusion of SEN learners. The role of collaborator reflects a strategic approach to inclusive pedagogy, where instructors gather essential information and resources from support services to effectively accommodate diverse student needs. This collaborative effort enhances understanding of individual student requirements and facilitates targeted interventions within inclusive classroom settings. T4 offers valuable insights into the significance of this role.

Extract 5

- T4: Every year, the DSS centre will conduct training for lecturers who teach students with SEN. [...] During teaching and learning, coordination with the DSS centre is important to keep up with the SEN learners' learning procedures.

In short, this discursive analysis emphasises EFL instructors' pivotal roles as observers, consultants or caretakers, balancers, and collaborators in fostering inclusive EFL pedagogy. These roles extend beyond academic facilitation to include the creation of a supportive and inclusive learning environment. By partnering with support services, instructors help create an environment where all students, regardless of their diverse needs, can succeed academically and reach their full potential. These roles contribute to promoting equitable educational outcomes and nurturing a culture of respect, empathy, and understanding among students.

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

In their efforts within inclusive classrooms, EFL instructors face several challenges in implementing inclusive teaching practices. Through qualitative interviews, four primary challenges emerged: collaboration with DSS, readiness, anxiety, and impatience.

One significant challenge is the delay in material preparation, which hampers the instructors' ability to tailor lessons and teaching materials to meet the diverse needs of SEN and non-SEN students. This delay undermines lesson planning efficacy and impedes appropriate support for SEN students, as discussed by T1 in Extract 6.

Extract 6

T1: If we have to turn the entire book into a braille version, it will be difficult, so we need to select the content first by focusing on the important parts. Well, the centre will fully cooperate. However, we need to know the conditions of the SEN, and when we coordinate with the responsible department, there may be delays.

Another significant challenge relates to readiness, encompassing both material availability and university policy. Instructors lament the lack of suitable materials and equipment, hindering their ability to effectively assess student progress and align grading procedures with course objectives. Additionally, a lack of knowledge regarding material modification poses challenges, particularly in tasks such as providing picture descriptions. Furthermore, discrepancies between university policies and the practical implementation of inclusive practices contribute to student disengagement and frustration. Despite efforts to provide support through administrative channels, such as reassigning students with specific needs to specialised classes, such measures may not fully align with the principles of inclusivity and diversity within language classrooms, as outlined in Extract 7 by T2, T5, and T8.

Extract 7

T2: I thought that the SEN might not keep up with the lessons in the class, so I decided to provide additional teaching for the SEN student after the class. [...] Well, I think if the university is not yet ready in terms of accommodation, it may be better if the SEN studies in a specialised institution equipped with tools. [...]

T5: SEN students with hearing impairments had very weak English language proficiency. They only learned at the word or letter level during their school period. I think it would be beneficial to develop a curriculum specifically for this group of students. [...]

T8: Studying inclusively allows SEN learners to practice their English with their peers. However, [...] with more students, it would be beneficial for them to practice in a special group [...].

Additionally, anxiety poses a significant challenge to the effective implementation of inclusive teaching practices within EFL classrooms. Qualitative data indicate widespread concern among EFL instructors about SEN students' ability to engage with lesson content, disrupting class dynamics. This anxiety arises from uncertainties about delivering content tailored to diverse student conditions, potentially hindering student learning outcomes. Instructors also grapple with teaching students with diverse needs, particularly those with conditions like autism, and seek effective engagement strategies. They actively seek assistance from peers and colleagues to address these challenges, reflecting a proactive approach to fostering inclusive classroom environments. Extract 8, featuring concerns from T2, T3, and T7, further illustrates these anxieties.

Extract 8

- T2: I always walked around the room to see if the SEN was listening to what I had taught, [...] as I was worried that they could not keep up.
- T3: In some cases, [...] the parents did not want to inform the university of their child, so there was no information. When in the classroom, it was obvious that this SEN student did not pay attention at all [...]. Then I started feeling that teaching this student was difficult because I was not sure how to communicate with the SEN learner to open up his mind. [...]
- T7: In one class, there were two students with a hearing impairment. Before the class started, two staff members of the DSS centre introduced themselves as sign language interpreters for SEN students. I felt quite shocked because I was worried that they would not understand what I was teaching. [...] I wasn't sure that they could accurately convey content to the learners. [...] I also asked if there was anything they wanted me to adjust because, as a teacher, I was quite concerned that they might be too shy to ask.

Finally, impatience presents a significant challenge in implementing inclusive practices within EFL classrooms. Stemming from pervasive anxiety about teaching effectiveness, impatience hinders the accommodation of slow learners. EFL instructors report frustration when teaching slow learners, reflecting tension between instruction pace and diverse student needs. This analysis emphasises instructors' need to cultivate patience and empathy in navigating diverse learning trajectories. This also highlights the importance of providing professional development and support structures to equip instructors with skills to address challenges posed by impatience in inclusive teaching practices.

Extract 9

- T6: Well, [...] English language teachers should have [...] both understanding and patience. I do not think I have that much patience. I have to tell myself to be more patient and understanding.
- T8: When the SEN students decide to attend universities, they already face a certain level of difficulty, so we should definitely have empathy and understanding towards them regarding their physical or mental conditions.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

EFL instructors' attitudes towards implementing inclusive practices within EFL classrooms constitute another critical theme, revealing nuanced perspectives. The qualitative analysis unveils a range of attitudes characterised by acknowledgement of the importance of understanding diverse abilities, fostering empathy, and embracing diversity. EFL instructors commonly recognise the significance of comprehending diverse abilities and physical limitations, especially among SEN students, to facilitate accommodation and foster an equitable learning environment where all students are treated with dignity and respect. These attitudes demonstrate a commitment to promoting inclusivity and equity. Additionally, instructors stress the importance of maintaining an open-minded approach to embrace diverse class dynamics, cultivating awareness of diversity and preventing negative atmospheres to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Embracing diversity and advocating for adjustments to optimise student learning outcomes become imperative.

Extract 10

- T1: We must be aware of the needs of SEN students, how they will learn, and their individuality. We should also care about [their] feelings [...].
- T4: Generally, the awareness of inclusive teaching principles includes modification, accommodation, and adaptation, which requires us to understand the uniqueness of the SEN learners, but we cannot significantly lower standards, especially in higher education. However, [...] we must adjust activities or assessments from written exams to verbal ones or from verbal to written. [...]
- T7: In the case of students with hearing impairments, I would consult the staff from the DSS or the sign language interpreter for assignments that involve speaking skills. We discussed the learning objectives and the expected learning outcomes of the task [to suit] people with hearing impairments.

EFL instructors advocate for an attitude characterised by reduced expectations and a gradual building of trust. By fostering patience and empathy, they aim to alleviate tension in the classroom and embrace student diversity. This emphasises instructors' multifaceted attitudes towards inclusive pedagogy, emphasising the significance of empathy, openness, and flexibility in fostering inclusive learning environments within EFL classrooms.

DISCUSSION

The research question explores the intricate relationship between EFL instructors' identities and pedagogical practices in inclusive tertiary-level classrooms, focusing on their perceptions and reflections on teaching. Firstly, there was a strong emphasis on the importance of the 'uniform' treatment of all learners, aiming to eliminate disparities regardless of ability. This aligns with previous research (e.g., Andriana et al., 2022), highlighting the significance of equitable treatment in language classrooms. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the potential drawbacks of such uniformity, as it may not adequately cater to students with special needs or limited abilities. For instance, implementing an inclusive policy at the tertiary level could risk overlooking students' individual needs without appropriate support mechanisms. Wray and Houghton (2019, p. 552) concur with this as they indicate that there is a risk that students will not get the additional support they need without the label of 'SEN students.' Furthermore, implementing a uniform approach could overlook the diverse backgrounds and abilities of learners, posing challenges to achieving true equity and inclusivity (Tatham-Fashanu, 2023). This highlights the necessity for a deeper comprehension of inclusive pedagogy that incorporates diverse perspectives and values the unique knowledge that each learner contributes to the classroom. Additionally, the findings suggest the importance of creating a "safe distance" in the classroom, as proposed by Sauntson (2019, p. 335), wherein students can explore diversity without feeling pressured to disclose their personal information. Moreover, the results suggested that fostering inclusive environments should play a pivotal role for EFL instructors, whereby proactive efforts are needed to ensure that all students feel valued, respected, and supported, regardless of backgrounds, abilities, or identities. This aligns with Orozco and Moriña's (2023) suggestion to create a warm and safe learning environment, emphasising the critical role of fostering empathy and respect for diversity while recognising and accommodating individual differences.

Another emerging finding concerns EFL instructors' self-perceived identities in inclusive classrooms. The results revealed that instructors perceived themselves in various roles, such as observers, consultants, balancers, and collaborators. This underscores the multifaceted nature of the instructor's role in facilitating inclusive learning environments. For instance, the role of

observers necessitates instructors to remain cognizant of learner diversities, enabling them to adjust pedagogical practices accordingly. Furthermore, the conscientious observation of students' behaviours, which may serve as indicators of underlying needs or characteristics such as autism, could lead EFL instructors to create an environment conducive to the holistic development of all learners. This is a very important issue, as incognizant exclusion by instructors could impact students' academic experiences and their choices regarding the continuation or pursuit of their education, both professionally and academically (Lee et al., 2023). Significantly, being 'cognizant' or 'aware' might not be enough, whereas active implementation plays a key role in promoting diversity and inclusivity. Significantly, EFL instructors need not only to be aware of diversity or inclusivity but also to exercise their agency in creating a quality and equal space of learning for their diverse students. Similarly, adopting the role of consultant entails fostering rapport with students to enhance academic engagement and well-being, consistent with UNESCO's (2016, p. 9) stance on higher education's role in ensuring human well-being, in which higher education is "a critical factor in addressing environmental and sustainability issues and ensuring human well-being". This concerted effort serves not only to bolster academic learning but also to safeguard students' overall well-being. Moreover, Walker et al. (2022) indicate that well-being must be a basic condition for any evaluation of outcomes and concerns regarding what the necessary material inputs are for students in higher education. With this, instructors seek to create a conducive learning environment wherein students feel valued and supported in their academic endeavours. Moreover, as balancers, instructors orchestrate a harmonious balance in teaching pace, ensuring equitable engagement for all students while mitigating the risk of overburdening non-special learners and aligning with the inclusive classroom principles of encouraging collaborative learning and differentiated instruction. This supports Foreman and Arthur-Kelly (2017), who suggest that an inclusive classroom space should encourage learners to learn together rather than apart. Moreover, the learning pace should be differentiated for students with SEN who could be given more time; thus, EFL instructors can vary that, or they can move on to something else while still allowing SEN students time to complete activities and tasks. This is similar to the findings of Tiernan et al. (2020), who indicate that differentiated instruction involves adapting teaching and content to meet the learning needs of students with SEN. However, caution is advised regarding the risks involving lowered teacher expectations in differentiated instruction, including the oversimplification of material and consequent avoidance of more demanding academic tasks or engagement in a narrowed curriculum for students with SEN. Finally, acting as collaborators involves ongoing partnerships with DSS centres to ensure the full inclusion of SEN learners within the academic context, highlighting the importance of collaborative efforts in promoting equitable educational opportunities and supporting students' individual requirements (Shaw, 2021). This highlights the necessity for staff expertise and readiness in facilitating successful collaboration between EFL instructors and DSS staff to ensure a conducive learning environment for all students.

In the pursuit of inclusive pedagogy within EFL classrooms, it is imperative to acknowledge and address the multifaceted challenges that EFL instructors encounter. The findings of this study highlight four significant hurdles faced by EFL instructors, each of which warrants careful consideration and strategic intervention to foster an inclusive learning environment. Firstly, the issue of delays in material preparation emerges as a prominent concern impacting lesson planning efficacy. Language courses often necessitate specialised materials to maximise learning outcomes, particularly in areas such as phonetic notation. However, the accessibility of instructional materials for learners with diverse needs, including those with sensory impairments, remains a pressing challenge. This finding corresponds with Medina González and Hardison

(2022), emphasising the pivotal role of collaborative efforts between EFL instructors and DSS centres in facilitating material accessibility. Effective collaboration not only ensures the provision of inclusive learning resources but also mitigates potential barriers hindering the language acquisition process for learners with SEN. Secondly, the concept of readiness encompasses both material availability and institutional policies, constituting another noteworthy challenge. The study highlights a gap between idealistic aspirations for inclusive education within university policies and the practical implementation thereof. Such misalignment emphasises the need for comprehensive support mechanisms, including orientation programs and workshops, to equip EFL instructors with the requisite tools and strategies for inclusive pedagogy. Moreover, proactive engagement of policymakers and stakeholders is essential in fostering an enabling environment conducive to the effective implementation of inclusive practices. Thirdly, the prevalence of anxiety among EFL instructors during the implementation of inclusive teaching practices emphasises the complex interplay between perceived academic standards and pedagogical inclusivity. This finding highlights the importance of addressing educators' concerns regarding student performance and curriculum adherence within the framework of inclusive pedagogy. Proactive measures to enhance educators' confidence and preparedness, coupled with ongoing support mechanisms, are imperative in fostering a culture of inclusivity within EFL classrooms. Finally, the phenomenon of impatience among instructors draws attention to the inherent tensions between the pace of pedagogical innovation and the exigencies of educational practice. As EFL instructors strive to navigate the complexities of inclusive pedagogy in language classrooms, the need for patience and perseverance in overcoming challenges cannot be overstated. Rather than viewing obstacles as insurmountable barriers, EFL instructors must embrace a growth mindset and adopt iterative approaches to pedagogical refinement.

Finally, the attitudes of EFL instructors towards the implementation of inclusive practices constitute a pivotal aspect of pedagogical discourse, reflecting broader considerations surrounding diversity, empathy, and individuality within the EFL classroom context. The findings of this study highlight a collective emphasis among EFL instructors on the significance of empathy and the recognition of learner diversity, emphasising the imperative of responsiveness in fostering inclusive learning environments. Central to this discussion is the notion of empathy, which serves as a cornerstone in cultivating meaningful teacher-student relationships and fostering a supportive learning atmosphere. The alignment of EFL instructors' attitudes with the promotion of empathy resonates with existing literature (e.g., Zhang, 2022), highlighting its positive impact on student engagement and enjoyment within educational settings. Moreover, the recognition of learner individuality and the avoidance of labelling practices are pivotal in mitigating potential barriers to inclusive education. By maintaining an open-minded approach and refraining from preconceived notions about learners' abilities, EFL instructors can create a conducive learning environment wherein every student feels valued and empowered to achieve their full potential. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of language learning and the diverse needs of learners highlight the importance of EFL instructors exhibiting flexibility and open-mindedness in their teaching method. Embracing a growth mindset entails a willingness to experiment with novel strategies and adapt teaching methodologies to meet the evolving needs of students. This sentiment is echoed in the work of Losberg and Zwozdiak-Myers (2021), which advocates for the exploration of innovative approaches that promote inclusion while catering to individual learning styles and preferences. In essence, the discussion surrounding EFL instructors' attitudes towards inclusive practices highlights the pivotal role of empathy, flexibility, and open-mindedness in fostering inclusive learning environments. By embracing these core principles, instructors can not only enrich the

educational experiences of their students but also contribute to the broader ethos of inclusivity within the realm of EFL pedagogy. Moving forward, continued efforts to promote a culture of empathy and responsiveness among educators are imperative in realising the full potential of inclusive pedagogical practices in Thai higher education.

Overall, the EFL instructors in this study fervently articulated their commitment to supporting students with SEN in the EFL classroom, aligning their beliefs and perspectives with broader discourses on inclusive education. However, they faced challenges in translating these beliefs and perspectives into concrete classroom practices due to limited support and guidance from universities. As a result, their inclusive practices evolved gradually through ‘reflection in action’ and ‘reflection on action.’ Despite frustrations with the lack of support and readiness, some instructors persisted in their pursuit of inclusion, illustrating the symbiotic relationship between beliefs, practices, and identity formation. Their pedagogical approaches can be viewed as integral to the formation of their identities as inclusive practitioners, reflecting a continuous and dialogic process. This process of identity formation is deeply intertwined with experiential learning within the classroom environment, echoing Flores’ (2001) assertion that workplace conditions and experiences profoundly shape identity. Within the framework of critical pedagogy, interrogating identity is foundational as it informs knowledge construction and pedagogical approaches. Therefore, critical reflection is essential to challenge entrenched assumptions about EFL ideology and practice, recognising that EFL teaching transcends mere technique. In this study, the intricate connection between EFL instructors’ identity formation and the lived experiences of their learners highlights the inseparability of identity and pedagogy in EFL instruction.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Taken together, the findings of this study have significant implications for preparing EFL instructors and implementing inclusive teaching practices. Effective teaching preparation requires robust communication with DSS centres to develop tailored materials for students, particularly those with SEN. Faculty-level meetings play a pivotal role in enhancing coordination and understanding of inclusive practices among instructors. Additionally, adopting differentiated teaching approaches can effectively address the needs of both SEN and non-SEN students. Clear communication between instructors and SEN students is crucial for understanding their circumstances and providing necessary support.

During classroom instruction, instructors must acknowledge SEN students’ limitations and make appropriate accommodations, such as considering mobility restrictions and ensuring alignment of class placement. Maintaining appropriate teaching paces and ensuring clarity in lesson delivery is paramount, with regular checks on student comprehension aiding in creating inclusive learning environments. Regarding assessment, adjustments in grading weight and formats may be necessary to ensure equity for SEN students. Increased feedback frequency can aid student learning and performance, with supplementary sessions tailored to recapitulate inclusive class content, further supporting SEN students’ academic success.

In summary, proactive communication, differentiated instruction, and ongoing support mechanisms are vital for fostering inclusive pedagogy within EFL classrooms and promoting equitable learning outcomes. By implementing these strategies, EFL instructors can effectively address the diverse needs of students and ensure a conducive learning environment for all.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights both promising and challenging pedagogical practices in inclusive EFL classrooms. EFL instructors advocate for uniform treatment of learners, assuming roles like *observers, caretakers, balancers, collaborators, or consultants*. They also emphasise empathy, openness, and flexibility in creating inclusive environments. However, challenges include ineffective teaching material preparation, inadequate readiness, anxiety, and impatience. The study addresses gaps in understanding inclusive pedagogy in Thai EFL higher education, advocating for a nuanced understanding of inclusivity that embraces learner diversity. It highlights the need for proactive efforts to create inclusive learning environments where all students feel valued and supported. Integrating diverse perspectives and fostering empathy can advance inclusive pedagogy in higher education, aiming to enhance equitable learning opportunities.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study relies solely on qualitative interviews, suggesting the incorporation of additional methodologies like classroom observations for a comprehensive understanding. The small sample size limits generalizability, yet findings can be transferrable to similar contexts. However, this study serves as a preliminary exploration into the feasibility of inquiry and learning with EFL instructors in inclusive education contexts. The insights gleaned from professional conversations with EFL instructors have provided valuable reflections on how to enhance EFL teacher education courses and better support instructors in negotiating their roles as EFL educators and inclusive education practitioners. Moving forward, fostering professional inquiry and knowledge exchange opportunities can contribute to the development of a sustainable community of practice. Such initiatives enable educators to critically examine and reflect on their responses to inclusive education policies within the sociocultural context of Thailand or similar contexts.

REFERENCES

- Aljuhaish, S. F., Senom, F., & Othman, J. (2020). From EFL to ESL context: The impact of sociocultural environment on teachers' professional identity development. *3L: Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 26(4), 74–86. <http://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2020-2604-06>
- Andriana, E., Kiling, I., & Evans, D. (2022). Inclusive education for indigenous students in the Indonesian context. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2022.2127494>
- Bagum, M., Naz, B., Afzal, A., Kalsoom, T., Samreen, H., & Rehman, N. U. (2024). Investigating the impact of inclusive teaching strategies on classroom engagement: A quantitative analysis of teachers' perceptions across diverse student populations. *Qualitative Research*, 24(1), 283–305. <https://doi.org/10.1234/qr.v24.i1.11>
- Bevan-Brown, J., Heung, V., Jelas, Z. M., & Phongakorn, S. (2014). Why is inclusive education important to my country? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 18(10), 1064–1068.
- Chan, C., & Lo, M. (2017). Exploring inclusive pedagogical practices in Hong Kong primary EFL classrooms. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 21(7), 714–729. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2016.1252798>
- Cook-Sather, A. (2022). *Co-creating equitable teaching and learning: Structuring student voice into higher education*. Harvard Education Press.
- Coşgun, G. E., & Savaş, P. (2023). Professional identity development of English teachers: A data-driven model. *Review of Education*, 11(1), e3394. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3394>
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed). Sage.
- Fairley, M. J. (2020). Conceptualising language teacher education centered on language teacher identity development: A competencies-based approach and practical applications. *TESOL Quarterly*, 54(4), 1037–1064. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.568>
- Flores, B. B. (2001). Bilingual education teachers' beliefs and their relation to self-reported practices. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 25(3), 275–299. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15235882.2001.10162795>

- Foreman, P., & Arthur-Kelly, M. (2017). *Inclusion in action*. Cengage Learning.
- Gee, J. P. (2010). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (3rd Ed). Routledge.
- Gorski, P. C., & Dalton, K. (2020). Striving for critical reflection in multicultural and social justice teacher education: Introducing a typology of reflection approaches. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 71(3), 357–368. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487119883545>
- Kwangmuang, P., Jarutkamolpong, S., Sangboonraung, W., & Daungtod, S. (2021). The development of learning innovation to enhance higher-order thinking skills for students in Thailand junior high schools. *Heliyon*, 7(6), e07309. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07309>
- Lee, J., Carr, S., Herzing, L. J., Norton, C., & Palmer, L. (2023). Diversity is not enough: Advocating and organising for inclusion in archaeology. *Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association*, 34(1), 17–27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apaa.12173>
- Losberg, J., & Zwozdiak-Myers, P. (2021). Inclusive pedagogy through the lens of primary teachers and teaching assistants in England. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1946722>
- Medina González, M., & Hardison, D. M. (2022). Assistive design for English phonetic tools (ADEPT) in language learning. *Language Learning & Technology*, 26(1), 1–23.
- Moradkhani, S., & Ebadijalal, M. (2024). Professional identity development of Iranian EFL teachers: Workplace conflicts and identity fluctuations. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 23(2), 256–270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2021.1988605>
- Orozco, I., & Moriña, A. (2023). How to become an inclusive teacher? Advice from Spanish educators involved in early childhood, primary, secondary and higher education. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 38(5), 629–644. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2022.2145688>
- Rushton, E. A., Rawlings Smith, E., Steadman, S., & Towers, E. (2023). Understanding teacher identity in teachers' professional lives: A systematic review of the literature. *Review of Education*, 11(2), e3417. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3417>
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. SAGE Publications.
- Sauntson, H. (2019). Language, sexuality and inclusive pedagogy. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 29(3), 322–340. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijal.12239>
- Sedikides, C., Alicke, M. D., & Skowronski, J. J. (2021). On the utility of the self in social perception: An Egocentric Tactician Model. *Advances in experimental social psychology*, 63, 247–298. <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.aesp.2020.11.005>
- Shaw, A. (2021). Inclusion of disabled Higher Education students: why are we not there yet? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1968514>
- Taladngoen, U. (2016). Language policy and English language teaching practice in Thailand: A perfect match or a mismatch? *Manusat Paritat: Journal of Humanities*, 41(1), 17–26.
- Tatham-Fashanu, C. (2023). A third space pedagogy: embracing complexity in a super-diverse, early childhood education setting. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 31(4), 863–881. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2021.1952295>
- Tiernan, B., Casserly, A. M., & Maguire, G. (2020). Towards inclusive education: instructional practices to meet the needs of pupils with special educational needs in multi-grade settings. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(7), 787–807. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1483438>
- UNESCO. (2016). *Education for people and planet: Creating sustainable futures for all*. UNESCO.
- United Nations. (2022). *Goal 4 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs*. United Nations. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>
- Vorapanya, S., & Dunlap, D. (2014). Inclusive education in Thailand: Practices and challenges. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 18(10), 1014–1028. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2012.693400>
- Walker, M., McLean, M., & Mukwando, P. (2022). *Low-income students, human development and higher education in South Africa: Opportunities, obstacles and outcomes*. African minds.
- Walton, E. (2016). *The language of inclusive education*. Routledge.
- World Bank. (2017). *World Development Report 2017: Governance and the Law*. World Bank Group.
- Wray, M., & Houghton, A. M. (2019). Implementing disability policy in teaching and learning contexts—shop floor constructivism or street level bureaucracy?. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 24(4), 510–526. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1491838>
- Zhang, Z. (2022). Toward the role of teacher empathy in students' engagement in English language classes. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 880935. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.880935>