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Exploring EFL Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions with the Inclusion of Students with Autism in Public Schools Cuenca, Ecuador

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RESUMEN

La presente investigación explora las experiencias y percepciones de profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) en Cuenca, Ecuador, a medida que experimentan e interpretan el proceso de inclusión de estudiantes con trastorno del espectro autista (TEA) en aulas de escuelas públicas. El estudio obtuvo importantes conocimientos sobre los sentimientos, metodologías y compromisos morales asociados a la enseñanza inclusiva a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas y un enfoque cualitativo dentro del paradigma interpretativo. Los resultados de este estudio mostraron que los profesores se dedican a la inclusión incluso frente a obstáculos significativos como un plan de estudios sólido, la falta de apoyo institucional y recursos limitados. Utilizan técnicas de aula invertida, diseño universal para el aprendizaje (DUA), respuesta física total (RFT) y pictogramas como estrategias de adaptación. El pensamiento creativo de los profesores y su gran sentido del deber se ponen de manifiesto en las estrategias mencionadas, que a menudo se crean mediante el método de ensayo y error. Además, los educadores ven la inclusión como una oportunidad de desarrollo tanto profesional como personal. Sin embargo, identifican la falta de formación especializada, los problemas de gestión del comportamiento y la fatiga emocional como los principales obstáculos. No obstante, muchos muestran una capacidad de recuperación asombrosa, a menudo como resultado de la obligación moral y la empatía más que de las directrices oficiales o los marcos institucionales. El estudio concluye que los esfuerzos individuales de los profesores son insuficientes para lograr una educación integradora. Para garantizar el éxito de la educación inclusiva son necesarios un apoyo estructural, un liderazgo escolar cooperativo y un desarrollo profesional centrado. Este estudio desarrolla nuestro conocimiento de las prácticas

inclusivas desde el punto de vista de los profesores de EFL. Además, proporciona sugerencias útiles para los líderes legislativos, educadores y funcionarios escolares que deseen mejorar la educación inclusiva en Ecuador. Adicionalmente, este estudio promueve ambientes de aprendizaje más equitativos y alentadores para los estudiantes neurodivergentes a través del reconocimiento del compromiso de los educadores y las dificultades que encuentran.

PALABRAS CLAVES: autismo, estrategias inclusivas, educación pública, Cuenca, Ecuador, alumnos neurodivergentes, profesores de EFL, inclusión educativa y percepción de los profesores.

ABSTRACT

The present research explores the experiences and perceptions of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in Cuenca, Ecuador, as they experience and interpret the process of inclusion of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in public school classrooms. The study gained important insights into the feelings, methodologies, and moral commitments associated with inclusive teaching through semi-structured narrative interviews and a qualitative approach within the interpretive paradigm. The findings of this study showed that teachers are dedicated to inclusion even in the face of significant obstacles such as a strong curriculum, lack of institutional support, and limited resources. They use flipped classroom techniques, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Total Physical Response (TPR), and pictograms as adaptive strategies. The teachers' creative thinking and strong sense of duty are evident in the aforementioned strategies, which are often created through trial and error. In addition, educators see inclusion as an opportunity for both professional and personal development. However, they identify lack of specialized training, behavior management problems, and emotional fatigue as the main obstacles. Nevertheless, many show amazing resilience, often as a result of moral obligation and empathy rather than official directives or institutional frameworks. The study concludes that individual teacher efforts are insufficient to achieve inclusive education. Structural support, cooperative school leadership, and focused professional development are necessary to ensure the success of inclusive education. This study develops our knowledge of inclusive practices from the point of view of EFL teachers. In addition, it provides useful suggestions for legislative leaders, educators, and school officials who wish to improve inclusive education in Ecuador. Additionally, this study

promotes more equitable and encouraging learning environments for neurodivergent students through the recognition of educators' commitment and the difficulties they encounter.

KEYWORDS: autism, inclusive strategies, public education, Cuenca, Ecuador, neurodivergent students, EFL teachers, educational inclusion, and teacher perception.

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CHAPTER I

1. Introduction

1.1 Context

In Ecuador, inclusive education has transformed, especially in the last decades, in terms of the integration of students with learning difficulties in EFL classrooms. According to the Ministry of Education (2016), approximately 78% of students with disabilities are currently part of regular educational institutions, a figure that reflects the country's commitment to ensuring equal educational opportunities. This change is being affected through national policies such as the Organic Law of Intercultural Education (LOEI), which is supporting inclusive practices at all educational levels (Páez, 2013). Despite these rules, the consistent use of inclusive core principles in English classrooms remains a complicated and transformative process. This is especially true when addressing the specific needs of neurodivergent learners, such as students with autism.

In the English language teaching, these obstacles are more emphasized. EFL teachers not only have to facilitate language learning but also adapt their teaching methods to help students with diverse cognitive, behavioral, and communicative capacities. For students with autism, this usually requires the use of multisensory strategies, visual aids, predictable routines, and individualized lesson planning to accommodate their specific learning styles and needs (Ravet, 2011 & Zuretti, 2020). Although the adaptations are effectively implemented, it depends on the teachers' prior training, their attitudes about inclusion, and the presence or absence of professional development networks and collaborative support. For that reason, understanding the

lived experiences of EFL teachers in this context is essential to inform teacher education programs and the development of policies aimed at more inclusive classroom practices (Coughlan et al., 2023).

Besides, inclusive education in Ecuador is formed due to social attitudes and public awareness of autism. "In neglected or rural regions, wrong ideas and lack of knowledge about autism spectrum disorder often influence how teachers, classmates, and families view and support students with autism" (UNESCO, 2023). This absence of knowledge often causes exclusion, which puts more pressure on teachers to perform in the classroom. According to the Vice-Presidency of the Republic of Ecuador (2011), inclusive teachers are considered key innovators of transformation, fostering a fairer, equitable, and inclusive society. Thus, teachers contribute not only to academic learning but also to the construction of inclusive values such as empathy and respect among students (UNESCO, 2009, p. 8). For this reason, this study aims to examine how teachers of English in Cuenca, Ecuador, understand their responsibilities and deal with the difficulties of inclusion when working with students with autism.

1.2 Diagnosis of the Situation

Recently, inclusive educational policies have been promoted to ensure that all students, no matter what their individual characteristics or educational needs are, receive equitable opportunities in an environment of respect and support (Ministry of Education of Ecuador, 2022, p. 4). On the contrary, the implementation of these educational policies in public institutions has proven difficult due to several influences that affect the smooth development of the learning process. Often, these problems include lack of training of instructors, inadequate resources, and

little institutional support that prevent inclusive teaching methods in the classroom from being implemented effectively.

The biggest challenge that inclusive education in public schools in Cuenca has been the inclusion of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in EFL classes. English teachers often have students with ASD in their classes, but many seem to have no idea how to deal with these children. Without appropriate training and support from their schools, they have to cope on their own. Whether these students get the help they need depends mostly on the effort and patience that their teachers can devote to them.

Based on our observations during the practicum, it was observed that the inclusion of students with special needs, particularly neurodivergent students, is often limited in English classrooms in public schools. Classes usually follow a uniform didactic approach, with minimal adaptations in methodology, materials, or classroom set-up. When teachers do not thoroughly understand or identify autism-related behaviors, misunderstandings can occur that affect both the academic progress and social integration of these students.

1.3 Importance of the Study

This study is meaningful because it aims to fill a serious gap in educational research in Ecuador, specifically, the limited exploration of the experiences of EFL teachers working with autistic students. Although inclusive education has been the subject of several studies, there is a lack of research focused on how language teachers adapt their instructional practices to meet the needs of neurodivergent students (Intriago, Mena, & Morocho, 2019; Páez, 2013). Language

classrooms present unique challenges due to their strong emphasis on social communication, interaction, and participation, areas that can present difficulties for students on the autism spectrum (McAllister, 2012). Through a synthesis of existing literature and comparison with the experiences of Cuenca EFL teachers, this research offers significant insights that could inform both policy decisions and teacher training.

The results of this study will contribute valuable knowledge to the field of inclusive education by highlighting the experiences and perceptions of EFL teachers who work directly with students with autism. Their perspectives can help to show how inclusion is being approached in real classroom settings in public education, beyond the guidelines written in official policies. The information that this study will provide is essential for understanding if the current practices are actually meeting the needs of neurodivergent students or if teachers have problems adapting their lessons and meeting inclusion due to different factors such as lack of training, resources, or institutional support. By focusing on English classrooms, a space where communication and interaction are key, this study offers real examples of how inclusive strategies are applied in practice and where improvements are still needed.

Additionally, the study will serve as a reference for teacher education programs and for ongoing professional development in Ecuador. By learning from the real-life experiences of teachers, future educators can prepare themselves in a better way to work with diverse learners from the start of their careers. This research also supports the idea that inclusion is not only about placing students with special needs in regular classrooms but about adapting teaching methods so that all students feel seen, valued, and supported. Inclusive education is about helping schools to

recognize and overcome barriers to learning and participation for all children" (Booth & Ainscow, 2011, p. 4). In this way, the findings of this study can inform future policies and contribute to more effective, inclusive, and human-centered teaching practices.

1.4 Research Question

- What are EFL teachers' experiences and perceptions that emerge about the inclusion of students with autism in a public school setting?

1.5 Sub-questions

- What challenges do EFL teachers face when working with students with autism?
- What strategies do EFL teachers find most effective in supporting students with autism?

1.6 General Objective

- To analyze EFL teachers' experiences and perceptions about the inclusion of students with autism in a public school setting.

1.7 Specific Objectives

- To identify the EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences about teaching English to students with autism.
- To determine EFL teachers' perceptions on the use of inclusive strategies for students with autism in public school settings.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section analyzes the inclusion of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in English classes with a focus on EFL teachers' experiences and perceptions in the Ecuadorian public education context. It is based on national and international studies to investigate inclusive pedagogies, teaching practices, and theoretical models that will inform inclusive education. This comprehensive review places the study in the context of the current academic conversation and serves as a foundation for further research into the ways in which inclusive practices, social attitudes, and teacher preparation contribute to the development of inclusive environments for autistic students.

2.1 Previous Research

González (2021) investigated how teacher training influences inclusive teaching practices in EFL settings in public schools in Quito. This study is mixed method in that it employed surveys and follow-up focus group interviews with English teachers from five institutions. Results showed that most participants had not received specialized training related to autism. The teachers reported using general classroom management strategies rather than inclusive methods. In addition, strict curricular requirements and large class sizes were seen as obstacles to adapting classes for diverse learners. Based on these findings, Gonzalez concluded that the best intentions alone do not translate into effective inclusion. "Effective inclusion practices require more than intent; they depend on robust teacher preparation and adaptable school systems" (González,

2021). The study highlights how systemic limitations affect teacher performance, making it one of the problems facing Cuenca and other regions. Therefore, it is essential to investigate how EFL teachers perceive and cope with these challenges and to use their perceptions as a basis for future teacher education reforms.

This research is very valuable to us, as it connects directly to the purpose of our study: to understand how EFL teachers in Cuenca interpret and manage the challenges of inclusive education, especially for students with autism. Gonzalez's (2021) findings indicate that even in public schools such as those in Quito, teachers often lack specific training in inclusive practices and resort to general strategies that may not meet the needs of neurodivergent students. This is the same as what we observed in our practicum in Cuenca, where lack of institutional support and rigid curricula hinder the practice of inclusive education. This study supports the idea that teachers must have the necessary tools and adequate training to effectively help diverse learners. Through comparing our results with Gonzalez's research, we can more clearly analyze the barriers of EFL teachers.

Lopez (2023) conducted research in rural public schools in the province of Azuay to explore how EFL teachers handle the needs of students with autism. The researcher dedicated six months to conducting classroom observations and interviewing seven teachers with experience teaching students with special needs. The results highlighted deep concern among the teachers about the lack of external support and resources. But some teachers proved their resilience through creating their own visual materials, fostering peer support, and asking colleagues and families for suggestions on how to manage inclusive practices. This study concluded that

teachers in rural areas, generally, tend to work without the facilities available in urban schools, although they develop strategies based on experience and empathy. Lopez emphasized that exploring and discovering the practices of teachers in local contexts, such as in Cuenca, can discover valuable methods and strategies for fostering inclusion, even in resource-poor settings. This enhances the relevance of the present study in identifying real-world practices, barriers, and beliefs related to autism inclusion in EFL classrooms.

This research proves to be particularly useful for our work, as it relates to the particular setting of our study and supports our overall purpose of examining the actual practices that EFL teachers employ to integrate students with autism in Cuenca's public schools. It also relates to our questions about how teachers cope with challenges arising from resource scarcity. Lopez's (2023) findings show that, even without formal support systems, some teachers are actively creating inclusive strategies based on their own initiative, empathy, and cooperation with families and peers. This ability reflects what we sought to explore in our study: how teachers in Cuenca manage the complexities of including students with autism in public schools. This attention to local and context-specific practices in Lopez's research supports our goal of identifying practical and well-grounded methods that can guide broader inclusion policies and teacher training programs. It also underscores the relevance of recording teachers' experiences as a basis for meaningful educational reform in both urban and rural settings in Ecuador.

A study was conducted in several European countries to analyze and compare different inclusive classroom settings and paid more attention to students with autism. This research focused on the importance of collaboration among teachers, demonstrating that co-teaching

practices and shared planning improved the academic and social experiences of students with autism (Lindsay, 2020, p. 15). The study also highlighted the effectiveness of peer-mediated interventions, culturally responsive teaching practices, and multidisciplinary planning, especially in learning contexts such as EFL classrooms. Lindsay's findings provide valuable insight to show how collaborative teaching models and peer interventions can significantly improve inclusion practices for students with autism. This study gave more emphasis on receptive strategies and collaboration, which supports the view that inclusion is about more than individual effort. Together it calls for institutional support as well as planning and preparation. From this point of view, the current research supports the existing research with evidence that successful inclusion is possible when educators are trained through teamwork and structured settings.

This study is useful for our research, as it provides insights for our theoretical framework and is relevant to the specific objective of finding collaborative techniques used for EFL teachers in Cuenca public schools. It also provides useful material for our study of both systematic approaches to inclusive education and institutional policies for inclusive education. “Lindsay (2020, p. 15) provided useful ideas for English teachers to use, where inclusive development can be achieved through the application of cooperative teaching models and peer-to-peer activities.” The focus on responsive teaching also accommodates the linguistic and cultural diversity seen in Ecuadorian classrooms. It also shows how cooperative planning and teamwork can help create more inclusive learning environments. This research supports our belief that inclusive education requires institutional reform, not just the personal effort of the teacher. It emphasizes the need to

use conscious techniques and cooperative strategies adopted in Cuenca's public English classrooms.

"Huang (2019, p. 10) conducted a study where the opinions and experiences of EFL teachers in East Asian EFL settings on the inclusion of autistic children were examined." According to the findings of the Huang (2019) study, many EFL teachers claimed to be prepared to work with autistic learners, but encountered problems. Some of the problems were large class sizes, rigid curricula, and lack of resources for neurodivergent students. According to Huang (2019) teachers needed more institutional support and practical resources to properly implement inclusion strategies. This study is useful for the present research because it highlights teachers' attitudes and actual practice in the EFL classroom, a problem in under-resourced public institutions. Huang's research reinforces the argument that perceptions must be accompanied by tangible support systems, such as adaptable curriculum, smaller class sizes, and specialized teaching tools. Huang (2019) notes that while teacher attitudes are often positive, actual inclusion is limited by curriculum rigidity and resource scarcity. In the context of Cuenca public schools, these results suggest that even if teachers are open to inclusion, structural barriers may limit their ability to implement inclusive education.

This study is useful because it supports the questions of this research related to teaching divergent students. Furthermore, it aligns with our purpose of discerning what structural barriers impact the inclusion of autistic students in the local public EFL setting. "While teachers expressed willingness to include autistic learners, they often felt unprepared due to large class sizes and rigid curriculum structures" (Huang, 2019, p. 22). The challenges identified in their

study, such as insufficient resources, inflexible curriculum, and overcrowded classrooms, are also present in the Ecuadorian setting. This research helps us to better understand the pedagogical challenges that our participating EFL teachers may face and provides us with a comparative perspective through which we can analyze the answers gathered in our study.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

When conducting research, it is important to rely on clear theories that help both the researcher and the reader make sense of the topic. In this study, understanding inclusive education and how it is applied in EFL classrooms with autistic students requires a solid theoretical foundation. One of the key perspectives we consider is the social model of disability, which focuses on how society and institutions create barriers that limit people with disabilities. This view reminds us that teaching practices, classroom environments, and school systems play an important role in including or excluding students with autism. Another important approach we rely on is Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which supports flexible teaching methods that can be adapted to a variety of learning styles, especially useful when working with students with autism. This model encourages teachers to design lessons and learning spaces that take into account different types of learners from the beginning, rather than making adjustments only when problems arise. Finally, the concept of inclusive pedagogy, which promotes teaching practices that value diversity and aim to meet the needs of all learners, is also considered. This approach emphasizes the importance of adapting teaching.

2.3 Theories Related to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

One of the most important ideas guiding this study is that inclusion must go beyond simply placing students with disabilities in regular classrooms. According to Ainscow (2020), inclusion involves reshaping school culture, policies, and teaching practices so that all students, regardless of background or ability, can participate and learn fully. This perspective shifts the focus from trying to fit students into the existing system to adapting the system to support each student. For this reason, it is highly relevant to our research, especially when considering how Ecuadorian public schools can make significant changes to include students with autism.

Debasu & Chekol (2024) also emphasize that in public schools, implementing these inclusive policies requires grappling with curricular flexibility, teacher preparation, and resource planning. “Inclusive education is not just about placing students with disabilities in classrooms; it also involves adapting pedagogy and structure to promote meaningful participation” (Debasu & Chekol, 2024, p. 14). This viewpoint is relevant in EFL classrooms, where both neurodiversity and language difficulties combine to require thoughtful teaching strategies that take into account the needs of children with autism.

Another crucial perspective comes from Petersson-Bloom & Holmqvist (2022), who highlight the role of teacher attitudes and professional development in creating inclusive classrooms for students with autism. They note that having a positive attitude toward inclusion is a good starting point, but it must be supported with real strategies, accommodations, and institutional support. These include individualized support plans, the use of technology support, and the application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to make learning

accessible to all. In Ecuadorian public schools, where resources may be limited, providing teachers with the tools and knowledge to implement these approaches is critical to successful inclusion. This study was guided that both personal commitment and institutional support are necessary in EFL contexts.

2.4 Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

When it comes to creating inclusive classrooms, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a useful framework that focuses on designing learning experiences that meet the needs of all learners from the beginning. Kim & Park (2020) emphasize that UDL encourages teachers to plan lessons that are flexible and take into account different ways of engaging learners, presenting information, and allowing them to demonstrate what they have learned. Therefore, rather than making changes only when problems arise, the UDL suggests that teachers design with diversity in mind from the beginning.

However, this approach is relevant for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), who frequently face challenges in traditional classrooms, where teaching methods are rigid and routines are uncertain. Mesibov & Shea (2010) explain that students with autism may struggle in environments that rely heavily on verbal instruction or quickly paced social interactions, common features in language classrooms. UDL provides tools to overcome these barriers promoting the use of visual aids, hands-on activities, nonverbal communication strategies, and supporting technologies. These methods not only benefit students with autism, but also support other students with different needs and preferences.

Kim & Park (2020) also emphasize that teachers should not only focus on the disabilities of students with autism, but also recognize their strengths. For example, some autistic students have strong visual memory, logical thinking, and skills that can be used effectively in language learning activities. When teachers design tasks where students can take advantage of these strengths, students are more likely to succeed.

For this study, the UDL model served as an important point in analyzing how EFL teachers adapt their classes. This also helped to reflect on whether teaching practices are designed with inclusion in mind or whether there are adaptations that occur only when difficulties arise. The UDL also reinforced the idea that inclusive education is not just about accommodating a few students in the classroom, but about creating environments for them and welcoming to all.

2.5 Disability as a social construction

"Disability is created by social oppression, not by the physical impairment or difference" (Oliver, 1996, p. 22). In contrast to this theory, the medical model identifies the "problem" as being within the individual. Examining how Ecuadorian public education institutions, including curriculum design and teacher expectations, may unintentionally exclude students with autism is made easier through the social model in this study. This critical perspective allows us to examine the attitudes of EFL teachers and the extent to which institutional variables influence their ability to adopt inclusive practices. According Oliver (1996) theorized that disability is socially constructed, students with autism can be successful in mainstream EFL classrooms with appropriate accommodations and support.

In English language teaching, disability has been only a social construct that implies language learning difficulties among students with autism are not necessarily due to cognitive deficits, but to a lack of differentiated instruction and inclusive teaching strategies. According to Goodley (2011), the social model compels educators and policy makers to remove barriers such as rigid curriculum, standardized assessment systems, and teacher expectations that limit the participation of neurodivergent learners. When teachers are not trained to recognize neurodivergent behaviors or do not have access to inclusive teaching materials, autistic students are excluded without realizing it. The social model promotes the idea that, with appropriate supports such as multimodal instruction, flexible communication options, and peer collaboration, students with autism can thrive in language learning environments.

Listening to the real experiences of English teachers who work with students on the autism spectrum can offer valuable insights into how school environments, classroom routines, and education policies influence inclusion. Barton (2003) points out that when disability is seen as a result of social barriers rather than individual limitations, it becomes clear that meaningful change must start at the institutional level. This includes reflecting on the role of English teachers, designing lesson plans, and adapting learning materials to make classrooms accessible to all students. Furthermore, this idea connects with the purpose of the present study, which aims to explore how EFL teachers in Cuenca, Ecuador, perceive and manage the challenges of inclusion. By reflecting on their experiences, this research supports a shift towards a more just and empowering approach to inclusive education that focuses on transforming school systems instead of just placing responsibility solely on individual teachers.

2.6 Inclusive practices in EFL classroom

In EFL classes, inclusive practices are ways of teaching intended to guarantee that everybody, regardless of their aptitudes or challenges, can engage in language learning in a meaningful way. Florian & Black-Hawkins (2011) argue that inclusive pedagogy focuses a strong emphasis on appreciating the diversity of learners and designing classrooms that meet their needs. Students with autism may find it difficult to understand abstract ideas or deal with unpredictable classroom dynamics, so EFL teachers may employ multisensory teaching aids, visual aids, regular routines, and easier instructions.

According to research by Corbett (2001), inclusive strategies involve changing the teaching and learning culture rather than only providing accommodations. This suggests a change in perspective where differences are viewed as learning assets rather than as a weakness in the context of Cuenca's public schools. To support both autistic students and the rest of the class, English teachers should incorporate visual schedules into their lesson plans, allow for differentiated production (such as using drawings rather than oral presentations), and give extra wait time during speaking activities.

According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiated instruction is an important part of inclusive education. This strategy also requires teachers to adapt their teaching methodologies and assessment techniques in relation to the learning profiles, interests, and English levels of their students. For example, in an English class, one group of students may work with writing while another group uses flash cards to represent real-life situations. Due to traditional teaching methods, differentiation makes sure that students with autism are not left behind. But for it to be

implemented successfully, educators must know inclusive practices and have institutional support, two things that Ecuadorian schools frequently lack.

Additionally, peer-assisted strategies for learning that encourage cooperation and social contact are helpful in inclusive EFL classes. Structured peer interactions promote empathy among peers and aid in the development of communication skills for autistic learners (Kamps et al., 2015). These strategies are particularly helpful while learning a language because communication is essential. EFL teachers can reduce the social isolation of autistic students and promote active engagement through fostering a friendly classroom environment. In addition to contributing to language learning, these inclusive activities support each student's entire social and personal growth.

2.7 Strategies for supporting students with autism

Teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward inclusion are fundamental in shaping the effectiveness of inclusive practices in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms. A positive attitude can foster inclusive behaviors, promote student participation, and improve learning outcomes. Avramidis & Norwich (2002) argue that teachers' positive attitudes correlate strongly with willingness to engage in inclusive pedagogies and professional development. In Ecuador, particularly in cities like Cuenca, the effectiveness of inclusive education is closely linked to teachers' views of their professional roles in meeting the varied needs of their students, especially those diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). When educators see value in inclusive practices, they are more likely to continue to train and adapt their teaching methodologies to support all learners.

Nevertheless, many challenges affected how teachers perceive their ability to work in inclusive ways. As Rodriguez & Ramos (2021) point out, large class sizes, rigid curriculum, and insufficient access to resources make it difficult for EFL teachers in Ecuador to feel confident about being inclusive. Frequently, lack of preparation during teacher training programs, regarding neurodiversity, leaves teachers unsure about how to implement inclusive strategies. This insecurity can lead to misunderstandings, biases, or difficulties in creating effective lessons for students with autism.

Despite these challenges, several teachers show a strong willingness to improve their inclusive practices, however, especially when they receive professional support or guidance. Florian (2014) describes inclusive pedagogy as a mindset that requires teachers to remain open to change, learn from experience, and adjust their methods to support all learners. In Cuenca, we have seen evidence that many EFL teachers are willing to take on this challenge, even if they are sometimes unsure about the best strategies to use. This demonstrates the importance of viewing teachers' perceptions not just as personal opinions, but as reflections of their training and collaboration with colleagues.

Sharma et al. (2008) notes that when teachers have access to spaces in which they can share experiences, learn from each other, and discuss challenges, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward inclusion. Seeing inclusive practices in action, whether through peer observation, encourages teachers to try new strategies. Ultimately, improving teachers' strategies for supporting students with autism requires more than an individual effort. It involves creating

school cultures that value diversity, foster empathy, and support lifelong learning. Giving teachers the tools and space to reflect on their work can help practice in inclusive education.

2.8 Teacher training and readiness for inclusion

Teachers that teach English in inclusive settings, those working with students with autism, face a number of difficulties that go even deeper than the needs of the English language classroom. The lack of specific training in special education is one of the biggest challenges. As highlighted by Forlin & Sin (2010), educators are frequently expected to implement inclusive practices while receiving minimal or no instruction in research-based strategies for instructing neurodiverse students. In Ecuador, the issue is especially severe in public schools, where inclusion may be superficially discussed in teacher preparation programs without making any particular mention of disorders like ASD. Teachers are then forced to rely on trial and error, which frequently results in frustration and poor instruction.

Adapting curricula is another difficulty. The goal of EFL instruction is often to help students achieve communicative competence, which can be especially difficult for autistic students who may struggle with social cues, pragmatic language use, or spoken expression. Mesibov & Shea (2010) argue that a highly customized approach is necessary for students with autism, which frequently includes sensory elements, rote-based training, and visual assistance. EFL teachers in Cuenca, however, say they lack the time and resources necessary to modify their lessons to accommodate these demands, particularly when teaching classes of more than thirty students. Experimentation and individual planning are discouraged with pressure to meet

standardized learning outcomes, which further increases the gap between curriculum objectives and student requirements.

Regarding classroom management, plenty of teachers say they feel overwhelmed when trying to help autistic individuals and the rest of the class. According to Jordan et al. (2009), maintaining a balance between academic instruction and behavioral control is necessary for effective inclusive teaching and is challenging without systemic support. Lack of access to specialized staff, like psychologists or therapists, or school-wide behavioral intervention strategies are common complaints made by Ecuadorian educators. Due to the lack of organized support, instructors are forced to handle difficult behavioral issues alone, which frequently leads to high stress levels and, in certain situations, burnout among educators. In rural locations, where resources are even more limited and professional development possibilities are more limited, the situation becomes worse.

Lastly, a significant discrepancy exists between inclusive education policy and real-world classroom practices. Although national mandates are used by Ecuador's Ministry of Education to promote inclusive education (UNESA, 2020), many of these policies lack concrete implementation procedures. Instructors frequently lack clarity on how to link inclusion with EFL standards or what inclusion actually involves in practice. In the absence of clear policies, continuous oversight, and regional support networks, inclusion runs the risk of being perceived more as a formality than as a commitment to education. According to Perez & Salazar's (2021) research, educators become confused when national objectives do not align with the realities of the classroom. In addition to more clearly stating policy, closing this gap will necessitate

increased funding for teacher preparation, resource distribution, and interprofessional cooperation.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

3. Research paradigm

This study was developed under the interpretive research paradigm, which is based on the premise that social reality is shaped by human experiences and the sociocultural contexts in which those experiences occur. As Rehman & Alharthi (2016) explain, interpretivism emphasizes understanding the subjective meanings individuals assign to their interactions, actions, and environments. In the same line, Bhattacherjee (2012) states that interpretive researchers aim to understand a specific phenomenon through the meanings that the participants bring to them, making this paradigm appropriate for educational research involving real-life scenarios.

In this case, the interpretive paradigm aligns with the purpose of exploring how EFL teachers perceive and experience the inclusion of students with autism. As Shah et al. (2013, as cited in Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022) state, interpretivism gives the opportunity to the researchers to approach reality as constructed, negotiated, and interpreted by individuals. This theoretical

position supports the investigation of inclusion as a complex process in which context and meaning are important and which is determined by teachers' beliefs, classroom dynamics, and institutional norms.

3.1 Type of research

This study follows a qualitative research approach. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is a process of exploring and understanding a human or social problem based on building a holistic picture composed with words, reporting detailed views of participants, and conducted in natural settings. This means that a qualitative paradigm allows the researcher to understand reality from a different perspective; this aligns with the purpose of this study, which focuses on the experiences and perceptions of EFL teachers in relation to the inclusion of students with autism in public institutions.

A qualitative approach is appropriate in this study since it allows the researcher to find and analyze subjective experiences and different perspectives in depth. When it comes to inclusive education, it is important to bear in mind different factors such as the understanding of the teacher about autism, their professional challenges, and their individual approaches regarding inclusion in the classroom are all complex and established in their personal and contextual realities. Using this approach makes it possible to capture those layers of meaning and represent them authentically. It also promotes flexibility and openness during data collection, which is essential when working with personal narratives.

3.2 Research method or design

This study used a narrative research design, which focuses on the collection and analysis of participants' personal testimonies and experiences. We chose this method because it allowed us to explore how EFL teachers in Cuenca make sense of their work with students with autism. Through listening to their stories, we gained a deeper understanding of the challenges they face, the strategies they use, and how they reflect on how they view their role as inclusive teachers.

A narrative inquiry is useful when the goal is to explore personal meaning and lived experiences in real contexts. As Connelly & Clandinin (2006) explain, this approach gives value to the participants' voices and allows researchers to study how people interpret a variety of events in their personal and professional lives. In this study, narrative inquiry helped us to see inclusion not only as a policy or a teaching method, but as a reality shaped by teachers' beliefs, and everyday experiences.

3.3 Techniques and Instruments

For this study, semi-structured interviews were used as the main technique to gather information about teachers' experiences of inclusion. This method allowed us to guide the conversation with prepared questions while giving participants enough freedom to share their personal stories, reflections, and opinions. The open-ended questions asked of the teachers encouraged them to talk about their experiences in their own words, which helped us gain deeper insight into their daily challenges, teaching strategies, and feelings about working with students on the autism spectrum.

The semi-structured interviews were helpful because they provided flexibility to explore unexpected themes that arose during the conversations. As Kvale & Brinkmann (2015) note, this method is especially effective when investigating personal experiences and understanding how people make sense of their actions. By using this approach, we were able to gather rich and detailed information that helped us see how Cuenca teachers navigate inclusion in their EFL classrooms.

3.4 Sample or Participants

This study will be involved eight EFL teachers that worked in public schools in Cuenca, Ecuador. However, all of them had direct experience teaching students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). We selected these teachers through purposive sampling, which allowed us to focus on participants who could provide insights related to the objectives of the study. The main selection criteria were that the teachers had at least one student with autism in their classroom and were willing to share their experiences.

We were looking for diversity in the sample in terms of teaching experience, age, and type of public institution in which they worked. This variety helped us capture different perspectives on how inclusion is practiced in EFL classrooms in diverse contexts. Participants provided valuable reflections on their teaching methods, the challenges they face, and their ideas about institutional support. Their testimonies formed the basis for analyzing how inclusion is carried out in real classrooms, beyond the theory presented in official guidelines.

3.5 Stages of the research

To ensure methodological consistency and alignment with the interpretive paradigm and qualitative method, the growth of this research project followed a precisely designed sequence of steps. Each stage helped to deepen the knowledge of EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences about the inclusion of autistic students in public schools.

3.5.1 Identifying the Research Problem

To identify the problem, the most important problem observed during teaching practice in English classrooms was examined in depth to define the research question. It also became clear during this process that EFL teachers faced continued difficulties in including students with autism due to a lack of training, resources, and institutional support. During this phase, reflective observation and classroom evidence were used to define the problem and highlight areas that needed further study. Relevant literature was also reviewed to better understand the broader background of inclusive education and to help justify the need for this research. All of this guided the methodological approach and thus shaped the research topics, problem, and context.

3.5.2 Formulating Research Objectives

Once our research question was defined, the next step was to establish clear and achievable objectives that would guide the entire study. Since our main interest was to explore how EFL teachers perceive and manage the inclusion of students with autism in public schools, we configured our objectives for this purpose. Furthermore, these objectives helped us focus on collecting teachers' personal experiences, understanding the strategies they use, and identifying

the institutional barriers they face. In addition, having well-defined objectives kept our study aligned with the qualitative approach we chose and gave us a clear direction for collecting and analyzing the data. Most importantly, it ensured that the study offered meaningful perspectives on inclusive education based on the real public school context in Ecuador.

3.5.3 Designing the Study.

For this qualitative inquiry, we opted for the interpretive paradigm, as it fit perfectly with the goal of the study: to listen to teachers' experiences. In turn, this perspective made it possible to better understand how teachers of English as a foreign language conceive and manage the inclusion of students with autism in the context of public schools. To achieve this, we brought together narrative research with documentary analysis, thus providing a global view that encompassed both teachers' personal experiences and institutional habits.

Participants were purposively chosen, prioritizing those teachers with direct first-hand experience working with autistic students. Also, this approach guaranteed that the data collected would be substantive and fully relevant to the research questions posed. These ethical issues, such as obtaining informed consent, preserving confidentiality, and ensuring free participation, were taken very seriously at every stage to safeguard the rights and dignity of all involved.

3.5.4 Data Collection.

To begin collecting information, we first contacted the EFL teachers we had selected and clearly explained the purpose of our research. As soon as they confirmed their willingness to participate, we arranged interviews at times and places that were most convenient for them.

Next, before each interview began, we made very sure that they understood the objectives of the study, and they signed consent forms confirming that they were participating voluntarily. We also assure them that everything they shared would be confidential and that their names would not appear anywhere in the research report.

We therefore conducted the interviews in person, following a semi-structured interview approach. We prepared a set of key questions about their experiences with inclusive education, the difficulties they encountered when teaching students with autism, and the strategies they often used in their classrooms. In addition, we encouraged them to speak with freedom and to share their personal reflections and insights beyond the prepared questions. The interviews had a duration of 30 to 40 minutes. With the participants' permission, we recorded each conversation so that we could later review them and transcribe them word for word, making sure that no important details were lost during the analysis process.

3.5.5 Data Analysis.

In this step, the transcripts of the interviews that were conducted were examined through thematic coding, with codes developed inductively by identifying recurring patterns, challenges, strategies, and beliefs expressed by the participants. Subsequently, these emergent themes were grouped into broader categories, such as institutional barriers, integrative pedagogical approaches, and underlying values of educators. In order to strengthen the reliability and depth of the findings, a documentary analysis was also conducted. This methodological triangulation contributed to a more comprehensive interpretation of the data.

3.5.6 Interpreting Results.

At this final stage, the themes that emerged from the data were then compared to literature on inclusive education and autism. The analysis produced was then able to consider convergence and divergence between teachers' lived experiences and their theoretical basis. The interpretation aimed to provide insights into the realities faced by EFL teachers, contributing to the broader discourse on inclusive practices in Ecuadorian education.

CHAPTER IV

4. Results and discussion

In this chapter we analyze and present the information gathered from the interviews through systematic coding. As we explained in the previous chapter, this research aimed to explore how EFL teachers experience and perceive the inclusion of students with autism in public schools in Cuenca, Ecuador. Since this study followed a narrative design, the participants' voices played a central role. Their narratives helped us to understand how they make sense of inclusion in their schools and classrooms.

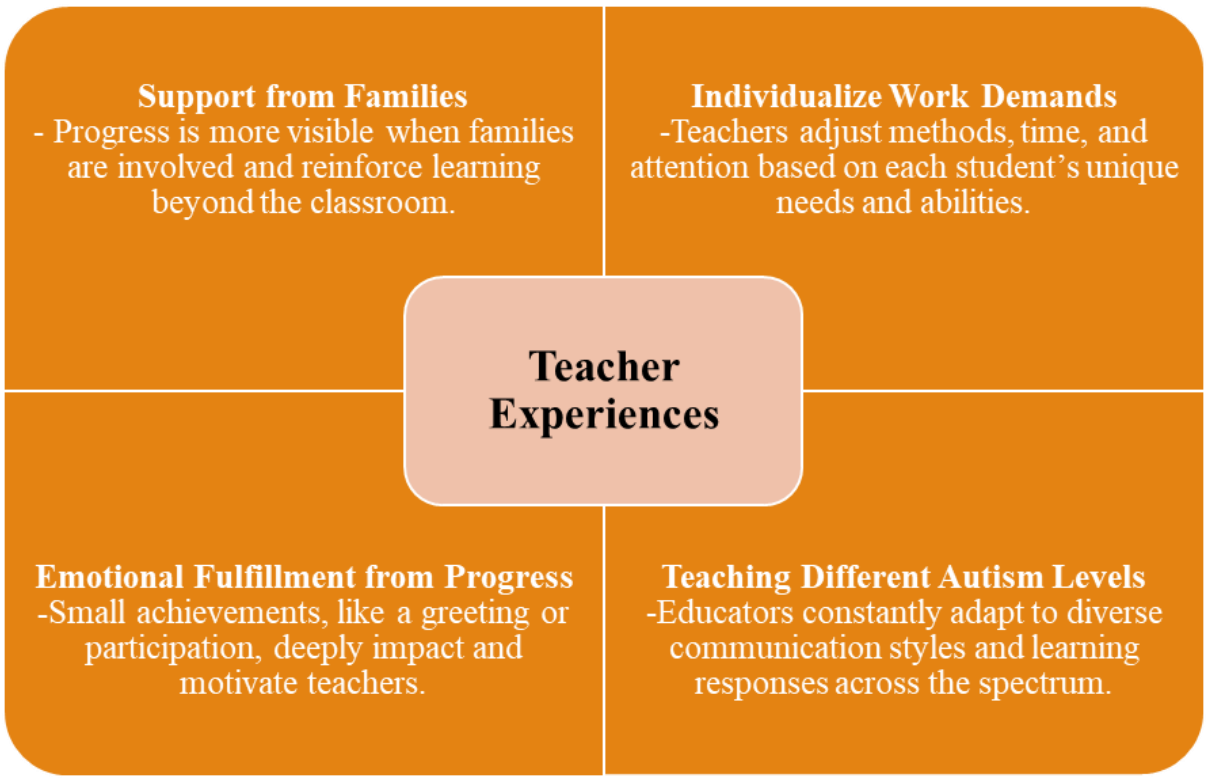
To analyze the information collected from the semi-structured interviews, we used MAXQDA software. This tool allowed us to group similar ideas and identify common themes

that emerged across the teachers' experiences. These themes reflect patterns in what they said and how they feel about inclusion. Because our study is based on the interpretative paradigm, the goal was not to measure or compare but to understand the meaning behind their experiences and give value to their perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The results shown in this chapter are organized into main themes or codes that came up during the coding process. Each theme is supported by quotes from the participants that help illustrate what they went through. We also include a brief visual (such as a diagram or figure), a description of what the theme is about, and a reflection that connects the teachers' voices with the literature and theories we reviewed earlier.

Figure 1

Key Experiences Shared by EFL Teachers When Working with Students with Autism



Experiences of EFL teachers (Cárdenas and Párraga, 2025)

Figure 1 highlights the key aspects of what EFL teachers experience while working with students with autism. These experiences were categorized into four main subthemes. The first is support from families. Teachers noticed that student progress is often more marked when parents are involved in the learning process at home. The second subtheme, individualized work demands, shows how teachers have to constantly adapt their methods, timing, and attention based on the different needs of each student. Third, emotional fulfillment from progress shows that even small achievements, like a greeting or spontaneous participation, can have a deep

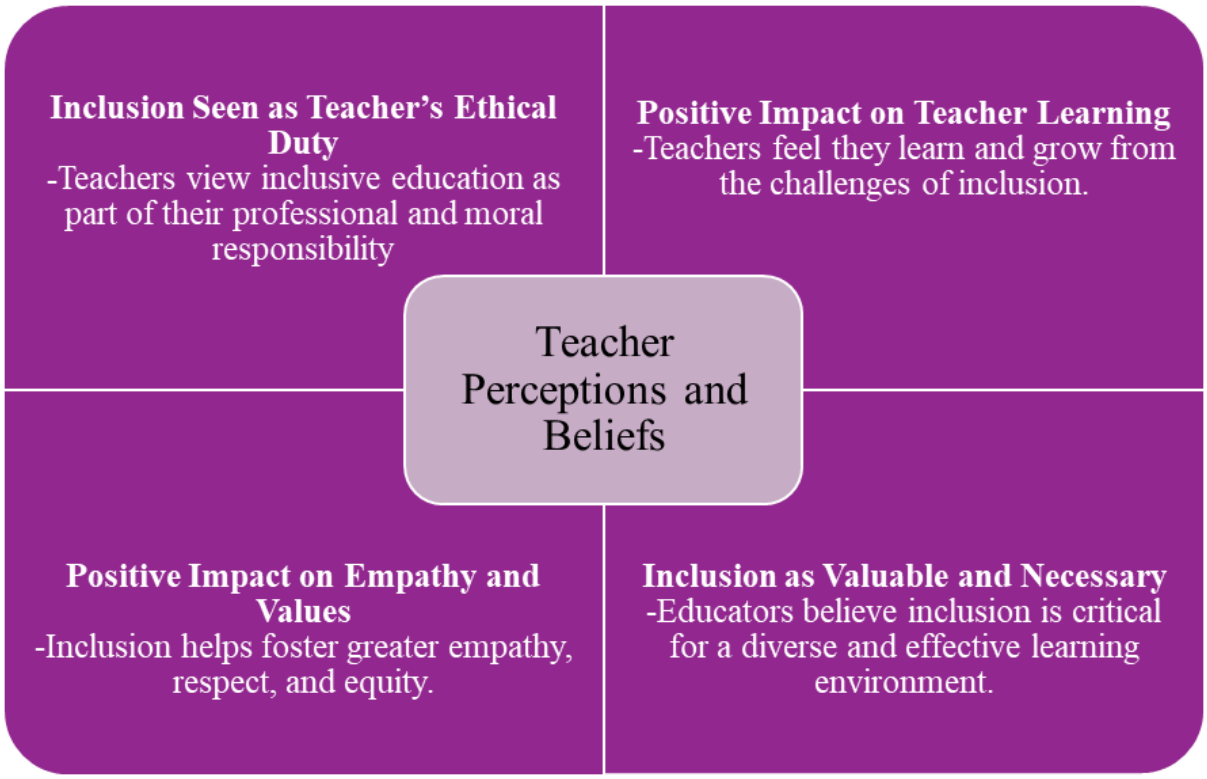
emotional impact on teachers and renew their motivation. Finally, teaching different autism levels highlights the need for flexibility, as educators work with students who have diverse communication styles and learning rhythms. What makes this theme unique is that it goes beyond planning lessons or using inclusive tools. It gives space to what teachers feel, how they adapt in real time, and what moments leave a lasting impact on them. These are not just strategies; they are personal experiences that show how much emotion, effort, and reflection go into trying to make inclusion meaningful in the classroom.

The participants shared powerful moments that reflect this emotional connection. Participant 6 said, *"As I said, when there is the support of the parents, the children flourish, they advance. This child did advance a lot, and it was fruitful to see her learn. Seeing or hearing her, perhaps, a "good morning, teacher" or a "bye-bye, teacher" is satisfying."* While Participant 3 reflected on the journey of a student with limited speech: *"Yes, non-verbal communication in a student with autism in the field of English. I can say that I was able to stimulate his communication and that he was able to communicate through a communication board, forming sentences."* These examples speak to a deeper truth: that for many teachers, progress isn't just academic; it is personal. The participation of the students, a spontaneous "hello," or a moment of confidence can feel like major breakthroughs. These experiences don't just benefit the student; they transform the teacher, too. What stands out in our study is that teachers don't wait for institutions to tell them how to feel or what to celebrate. They find value in small wins and build meaning through those moments. That is something the literature often overlooks, and it is one of the most valuable insights from this research.

Recent studies emphasize that inclusion is more than a pedagogical practice; it also is deeply emotional and personal for teachers. According to Artiles & Waitoller (2020), inclusive education relies on a teacher's ability to make sense of diverse realities, and this sense-making often depends on how emotionally connected they feel with their students' progress. In addition, Díez (2023) states that when teachers work with students who are in different levels of the autism spectrum, they often need to "relearn" how to teach, adjusting their methods, language, and expectations constantly. These recent findings align with the narratives of our participants; teaching inclusively is not just about knowing what to do, it is about caring enough to keep trying even when there is no manual to follow.

Figure 2

Beliefs and Perceptions of EFL Teachers Regarding Inclusive Education



Perceptions and beliefs (Cárdenas and Párraga, 2025)

Figure 2 shows four key beliefs that teachers have regarding inclusive education. First, many teachers described inclusion as an ethical duty, meaning that they see it not just as an obligation but as part of their moral and professional responsibility. Second, the participants perceive that inclusion has a positive impact on their own learning, understanding that inclusion drives them to grow, reflect, and become better teachers. Third, there was a positive impact on empathy and values; teachers highlighted that inclusive classrooms help to promote respect,

equity, and empathy among all students. Lastly, inclusion was perceived as valuable and necessary, especially for building diverse, fair, and real-world learning environments. These perceptions emerge frequently in the interviews, showing that inclusion is not just an obligation for the majority of the teachers; it is something they believe in. Despite the challenges, they described inclusion as something meaningful that will transform the system of education in our country and is beneficial for both students and themselves. This code emphasizes not just what teachers do to have inclusive classrooms, but what they believe about the process and how it impacts their identity and values.

The teachers' words reflect this deeper level of commitment. Participant 3 explained, *"We must be clear that many times we teachers have a wrong concept when we refer to inclusion. Many times, we only generate integration in our classrooms, and we do not generate inclusion. Although it is about giving an equitable education, which is what our students need, adapting our methodologies and our classroom to what they can respond to in an effective way in order to generate quality learning and warmth in the students."* Participant 2 shared, *"There are benefits for both parts for the classmates; it would be to cultivate more of the practice of values, such as empathy, respect, and equity, among others. And for the students with autism, they can relate in a more real way, let's say, in a real context."* These reflections show that inclusion is not seen as "extra work" for teachers; it is seen as an ethical responsibility that boosts the entire classroom environment. One particularly powerful idea that came up is how inclusion also improves the culture of the school, not just the experience of neurodivergent students. As researchers, we see this as one of the most meaningful takeaways from the study:

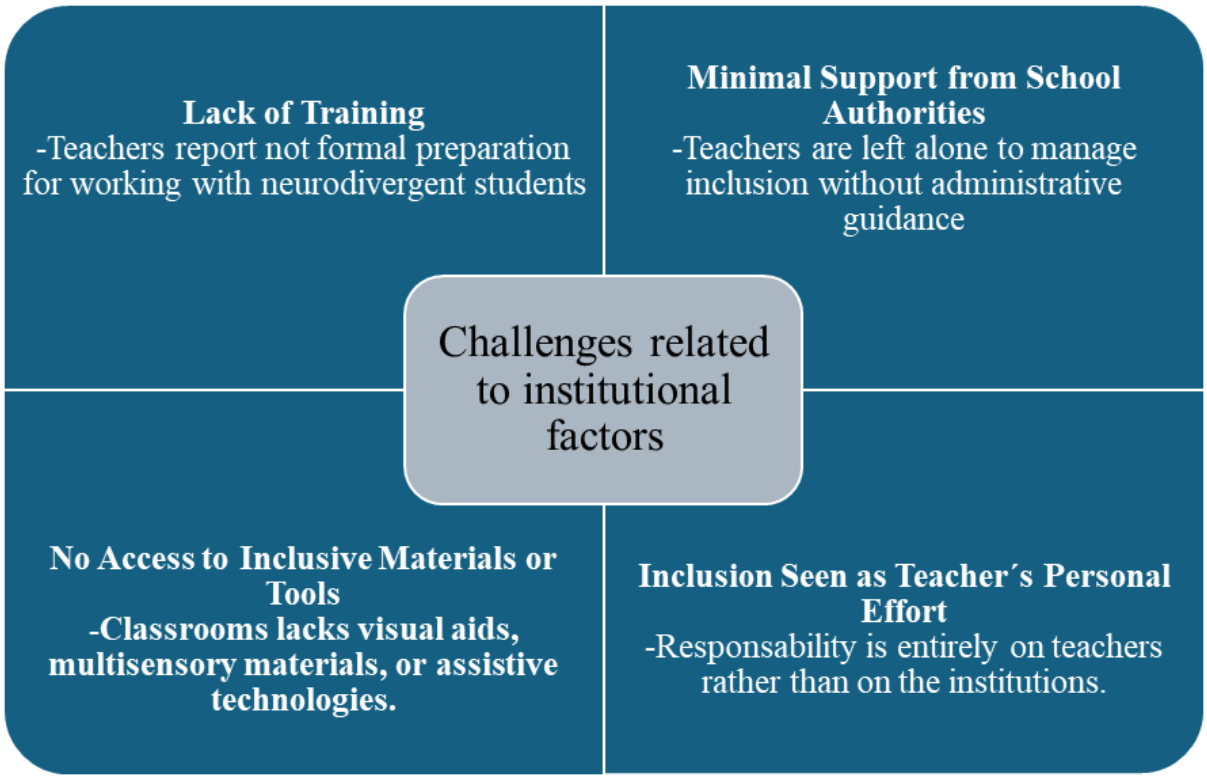
inclusion, when embraced by belief and not just by duty, has the power to transform teaching practices, classroom relationships, and the overall learning experience for everyone involved.

The existing literature states the idea that teachers' personal beliefs and values play a key role in how they approach inclusion. According to Arnaiz-Sánchez et al. (2022), inclusive practices are stronger and more consistent when teachers feel emotionally and ethically engaged with them, not just professionally obligated. Similarly, Hernández-Torrano & Somerton (2021) found that when teachers view inclusion as a moral responsibility, they tend to go beyond minimum requirements and actually reflect on how to improve learning for every student. In addition to that perspective, the participants also expressed that the exposure to settings in which inclusive teaching strategies are required helped them to learn about inclusion and understand diversity from a different perspective. This has a relation with Anderson and Topping (2020), who remarked that teachers who work in an inclusive setting often show personal growth and better understanding of social-emotional learning. The literature and our data both show that inclusion, when embraced with conviction, becomes a learning journey for teachers not just a policy to follow. Figures 1 and 2 offer strong evidence of this process. Figure 1 shows how teachers live inclusion in practice, adjusting to the emotional and academic realities of their students, building rapport, and responding to diverse needs that they have. Simultaneously, Figure 2 reflects the personal beliefs and values of the participants. They perceive inclusion not as an additional obligation, but as something they decide to do because they believe that it is needed and right. These findings respond in a direct way to our first specific objective, as they

provide a deeper understanding of what EFL teachers feel, believe, and experience when working with students with autism in public school settings.

Figure 3

Emerging Challenges Related to Institutional Factors in the Inclusion of Autistic Students in EFL Contexts



Challenges factors (Cárdenas and Párraga, 2025)

The graphic presented above shows the principal institutional challenges that teachers face when trying to include students with autism in their EFL classrooms. One of the main issues is the lack of training; teachers expressed that they have not received formal preparation for

working with neurodivergent students. In addition, there is minimal support from school authorities; that means that teachers have to manage inclusion on their own without guidance or collaboration from the authorities. Another big barrier is the lack of access to inclusive materials or tools, such as visual aids, multisensory resources, or assistive technologies. Lastly, many teachers described inclusion as their personal effort, where responsibility falls completely on them rather than being shared with the institution. All of these are systemic problems that go beyond the classroom itself. It shows that teachers are working in environments where inclusion is talked about in theory but not supported in practice.

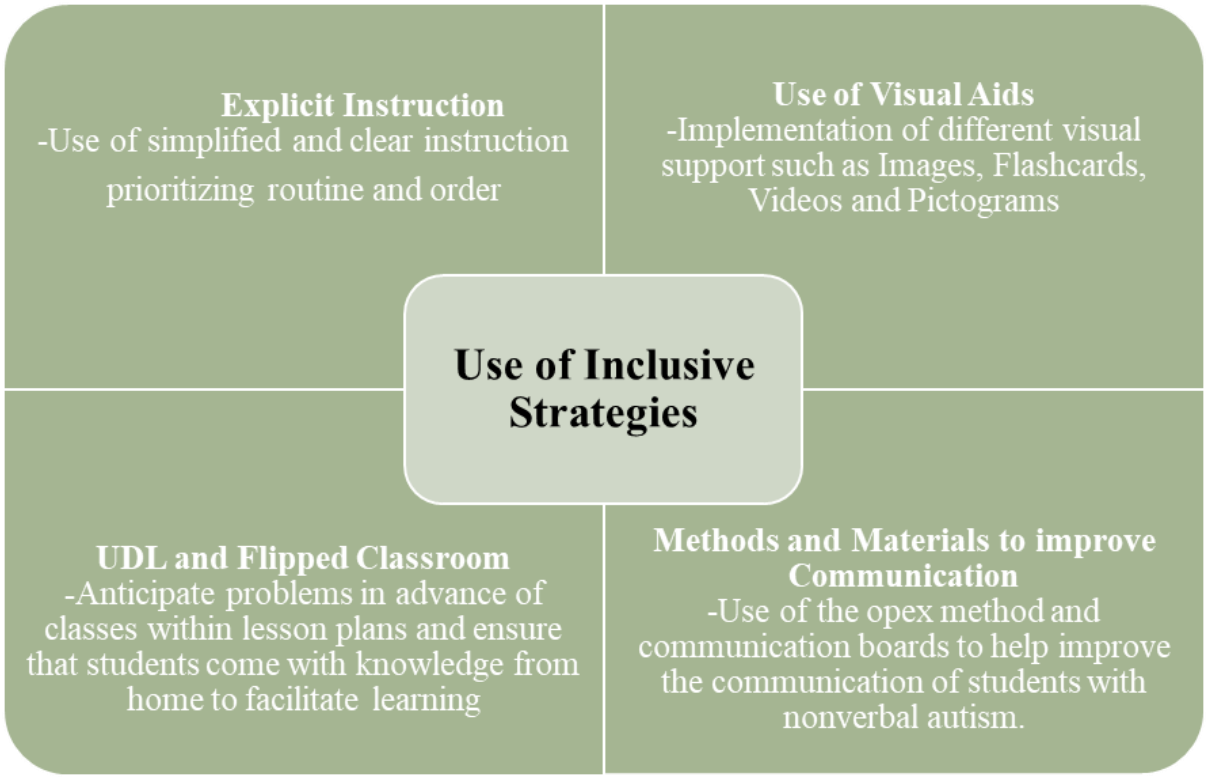
What teachers shared during the interviews highlights these points even more. Participant 1 said, *"Well, years ago we were with a DECE (Departamento de Consejería Estudiantil) staff, but we did not have great support, really, because there were situations that had been issued, but they remained on paper; there was no 100% support."* Participant 6 added, *"I prepare the modules for regular students and students with curricular adaptation or educational needs. As for support, we only have the DECE (Departamento de Consejería Estudiantil), nothing else. That is not a big deal. DECE (Departamento de Consejería Estudiantil), right now it's just a little bit of a slippery slope."* These voices show something deeper than just the lack of resources; they reveal that many teachers have gotten used to working without help. Some no longer expect institutional support at all, which points to a kind of silent resignation that isn't always mentioned in the literature. From a narrative perspective, this says a lot. These are stories of teachers doing their best with what little they have, showing resilience, but also frustration and fatigue. As researchers, we believe that this normalization of isolated work of teachers is one of the most worrying findings in our study. It shows that without meaningful institutional change,

inclusion will continue depending only on the personal effort of teachers, instead of being a shared responsibility supported by the school system.

These findings are aligned with Lopez's (2023) observations inside institutions in rural Azuay, where teachers need to generate teaching strategies on their own to meet the needs of students despite not having the necessary knowledge in the area, due to the lack of institutional intervention in the inclusive field. In the same line, González (2021) pointed out that structural barriers, such as the lack of support from the pertinent authorities and an inflexible curriculum, make the implementation of inclusive practices complicated. These studies support what emerged in our interviews: teachers' willingness exists, but it is often overwhelmed by the practically non-existent intervention of the authorities. Furthermore, Lindsay (2020) advocates for collaborative school leadership and multidisciplinary planning, something notably absent in the participants' experiences. This difference between what the official documents say and what the reality of institutions shows reveals a gap between inclusive policy and educational practice in our country.

Figure 4

Inclusive Strategies Used by EFL Teachers for Students with Autism



Inclusive Strategies (Cárdenas and Párraga, 2025)

The figure above illustrates the main inclusive strategies that EFL teachers use when working with students with autism in public schools. Among the most common approaches is the use of clear and simplified instructions, which help students understand what is expected from them without feeling overwhelmed. In addition, the participants mentioned the use of TPR (Total Physical Response), a method based on physical movement to reinforce meaning, something especially helpful for students who struggle with oral communication. Visual aids and pictograms were described as essential tools to support understanding and routine. In addition,

some teachers implement the flipped classroom, allowing students to be exposed to content at home and come to class with a base to work from. Others highlighted the usefulness of UDL (Universal Design for Learning) to adapt their lessons from the start, and some used the OPEX method, a communication system that allows students to express basic needs using structured sentence starters. These techniques align with recommendations by Kim & Park (2020) and Petersson-Bloom & Holmqvist (2022), who emphasize the value of multimodal strategies. Another strategy included the communication board, which helped students anticipate classroom activities and feel more secure. These strategies were not randomly chosen; they reflected the teachers' efforts to adapt their classes to meet the diverse needs of their students. Most of them were implemented based on the teachers' own classroom experiences rather than formal training. What stands out here is how much of this adaptation relies on trial and error, creativity, and a strong commitment to meet the necessities of every student.

During the interviews, teachers shared several examples of how they adapt their teaching. Participant 1 explained, *"We work with the flipped classroom methodology; this methodology allows the child to come with the knowledge from home."* Participant 3 added, *"What I can recommend as a teacher and what has worked for me is to use the OPEX method. The OPEX method is an alternative or augmentative system that we can adapt to our students, and in English it is a little easier for us, since they can form sentences like 'I want a pencil; I want scissors."* These excerpts show more than just strategies; they show teachers building bridges between their students' needs and the content they are expected to teach. One powerful insight that emerged is that these strategies are often self-taught, developed through years of experience

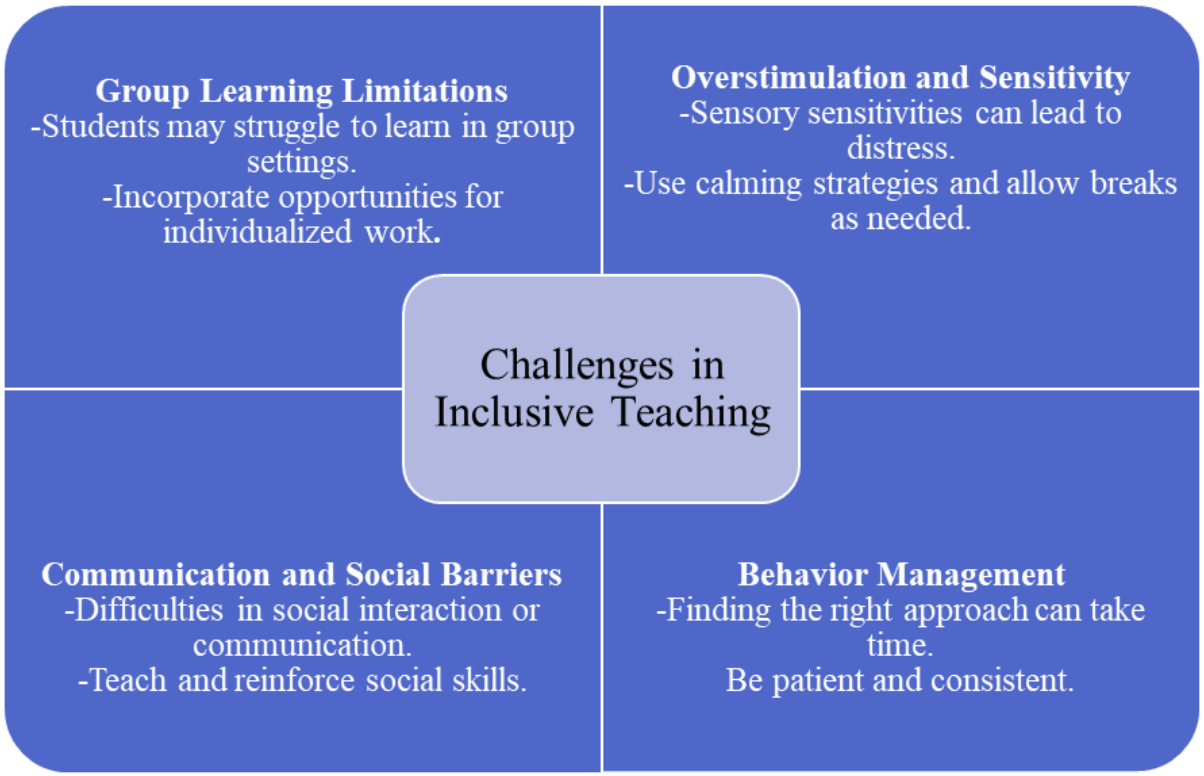
and trial. That is something the literature mentions less often: how much of inclusive practice in real classrooms is shaped not by policy, but by the teacher's own instinct, empathy, and creativity. We see this as one of the most valuable contributions of this study. It demonstrates that meaningful inclusion doesn't always begin with formal training; it often begins with the teacher simply deciding that every student deserves to understand and participate.

The majority of strategies mentioned by the teachers align with the ones proposed by experts in the field of inclusive education. As an example, Kim and Park (2020) highlight that UDL is effective for students with autism since it encourages teachers to create flexible learning environments from the start, rather than adjusting later.

In addition, Petersson-Bloom & Holmqvist (2022) add that inclusion is not just about positive attitudes; it requires concrete tools like pictograms, communication boards, or multimodal instruction. What is significant in this study is that most of these strategies are already being used despite the lack of training or institutional support. This suggests that, although teachers may not always name the methods using academic terms, they are applying inclusive principles in very practical and effective ways.

Figure 5

Challenges Faced by EFL Teachers When Including Autistic Students in the Classroom



Inclusive Teaching (Cárdenas and Párraga, 2025)

This final graphic illustrates four of the most common challenges that teachers face when they have to work with students with autism in EFL classrooms. One of the main difficulties is group learning limitations. Many students struggle to follow along with collaborative work, which often requires constant adaptation and close support. Teachers also face overstimulation and sensitivity, especially in noisy or unpredictable environments; some students become anxious or emotionally distressed when faced with too much sensory input. Another issue is communication and social barriers, as some students are non-verbal or have trouble

understanding social cues, making peer interaction and class participation more complex. Lastly, behavior management becomes challenging when students get distracted easily, disengage, or have emotional outbursts, which often require one-on-one intervention. These difficulties are not theoretical; they reflect the daily basis reality narrated by teachers during the interviews. While inclusion is a goal, the process of making it a reality involves patience, creativity, and constant adjustment. Each student presents different necessities, and teachers need to find ways to support everyone while they manage a full class. These are not minor issues; they affect how teachers plan, teach, and interact with all students.

The teachers we interviewed shared powerful stories that reflect these struggles. Participant 1 said, *"The impotence to carry out an activity leads them to cry, to despair… I have had to deal with that situation, but I have been able to cope with it so that the student can concentrate again… You have to be very patient."* Participant 2 mentioned, *"One challenge is to try to find the right technique for each situation, because each child with autism has different traits."* These are not just complaints; they are real reflections from teachers trying to do their best under pressure. What surprised us most is how emotionally exhausting the process can be, especially when the student becomes dysregulated and the teacher is left alone to manage it. In some cases, teachers described having to sit next to a student for the entire class because otherwise the child could not maintain attention. As researchers, we interpret this not just as a lack of institutional support but as a clear sign that inclusive education cannot succeed if the classroom is the only place where it happens. Inclusion needs to be reflected not just in intentions but in actions such as training processes, education policies, and how we value

teachers' time, emotional energy, and adaptability to meet the necessities of all their students. These insights remind us that inclusion is not a formula; it's a process that demands commitment, empathy, and shared responsibility.

Recent investigations highlight how inclusion becomes really challenging when there is no system in place to support the emotional, behavioral, and sensory needs of neurodivergent students. For example, Moreno-López et al. (2021) explain that many autistic students struggle with overstimulation and need calm, predictable environments to learn effectively. In addition, Freeman and Richards (2022) state that behavioral problems often arise not from frustration and difficulty communicating, but from them. Teachers, therefore, must be trained not only to teach content but also to know how to act and manage different behaviors respectfully and effectively. An important point also made by Gomez-Campos (2023) is that inclusion often breaks down in group activities, where social communication is necessary but not always accessible to all students. Our participants' experiences confirm these findings but also go further: they show how inclusion can feel overwhelming without the right tools, support, or time. The content from Figures 3, 4, and 5 reveals a clear panorama of how teachers face inclusion in real classrooms. Figure 3 shows that institutional limitations like lack of training and administrative support make inclusive education harder to apply. Figure 4 highlights the strategies that teachers consider the most appropriate to apply with students with autism, many of which are adapted through their own trial and error. Finally, Figure 5 explores the emotional and instructional challenges they deal with daily, such as managing behavior, sensory issues, and communication barriers. These three graphics respond directly to our second specific objective by uncovering how teachers

perceive the tools they use and the reality of putting inclusive strategies into practice in public school EFL settings.

CHAPTER V

5. Conclusions

This study set out to explore the experiences and perceptions of EFL teachers regarding the inclusion of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in public schools in Cuenca, Ecuador. The research aimed to address the general question of how these teachers view and manage inclusive education while meeting specific objectives related to the strategies they employ and the challenges they face. Through a narrative inquiry into their actual experiences, this study effectively addressed the main research question about teachers' experiences and views.

The first specific objective of the study, to identify the perceptions and experiences of EFL teachers, showed that many teachers consider inclusivity as both a moral and professional duty. The findings showed that EFL teachers perceive inclusion not only as a methodology but also as a moral and professional responsibility. Their experiences show that, despite limited formal training and insufficient institutional support, many rely on personal values, resilience,

and creativity to adapt to students with autism. The study underscores how inclusion often depends more on human connection and ethical dedication than on system-wide support.

Regarding the second specific objective, to determine teachers' perceptions of inclusive strategies, the study found that teachers use a variety of context-based inclusive strategies, including Total Physical Response (TPR), Universal Design for Learning (UDL), pictograms, communication boards, and flipped classrooms. These techniques were mostly implemented through experimentation and self-initiation, revealing a significant gap between theoretical preparation and practical application. Although many of these methods were found to be effective, lack of training, rigid curriculum, and poor collaboration posed significant barriers to sustainable inclusion.

The implications of these findings point to the vital role that teachers play in supporting neurodivergent students. However, relying solely on individual effort is neither sustainable nor equitable. Institutional reform is needed to ensure that inclusive practices are consistent, supported, and replicable across diverse school settings. Despite the strengths of this study, it is important to recognize its limitations. The scope was restricted to public schools in Cuenca, and the narrative research method relied heavily on self-reported data, which may not fully represent broader trends or be free of subjectivity.

To summarize, this research contributes to inclusive education in EFL classroom settings. It provides evidence of both the potential and the challenges faced by teachers working with students with ASD. It highlights the need for systemic change while recognizing the resilience and innovation of educators with limited resources in under-resourced settings. This study offers

practical recommendations for teacher educators and school administrators in search of creating inclusive EFL practices in Ecuador that are more equitable and supportive of neurodivergent students.

5.1 Recommendations

Considering the findings of this study, multiple recommendations are made to improve the inclusive teaching of English for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Ecuadorian public schools. As a first step, school administrators should offer professional development focused on inclusive methodologies for EFL. Training courses should include guidance on methods such as Total Physical Response (TPR), Universal Design for Learning (UDL), alternative tools for communication, pictograms, and the use of communication boards. Through appropriate continuing training, teachers will be better equipped to meet the academic and emotional needs of neurodivergent students.

Following this, learning institutions should enhance collaboration among staff. They should form multidisciplinary teams, improve communication channels, and encourage shared lesson planning. In addition, school leaders should promote reducing class sizes and making curriculums more flexible. These changes are essential to mitigating some of the structural barriers identified in this study and to ensuring that teachers do not work in isolation.

Furthermore, it is important to encourage and support teachers to document and share their context-based strategies through professional development networks, workshops, and learning communities. Many effective methods, such as flipped classrooms, the OPEX method,

and the use of visual aids, were developed by teachers themselves. These approaches need to be recognized, organized, and distributed so that other educators can learn from them and adapt them to their own contexts.

Moreover, policymakers and school administrators should invest in some schools basic digital tools that support inclusive education. Although many schools have equipment such as projectors and laptops, these resources are often underutilized due to lack of time or training. Visual learners, particularly students with ASD, benefit from structured, predictable, and interactive content. Therefore, teachers should have both the tools and planning time to effectively incorporate technology into their inclusive EFL lessons.

Finally, future research should investigate how inclusive strategies can be applied across different regions, school types, and educational levels in Ecuador. Continuous studies would be useful to measure the sustained impact of inclusive practices and teacher training programs. Research comparing public and private institutions could also reveal valuable insights into the effectiveness and scalability of inclusive models.

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Appendixes

(Appendix 1) Consent signed by the school's rector

UNAE

UNAE PEDAGOGÍA DE LOS IDIOMAS NACIONALES Y EXTRANJERO

CONSENTIMIENTO INFORMADO PARA LA REALIZACIÓN DE ESTUDIO EDUCATIVO PARA PROYECTO DE TITULACIÓN EN LAS MODALIDADES PRESENCIAL, SEMIPRESENCIAL E HÍBRIDA

Azogues, 12 de febrero de 2025.

1. DATOS INFORMATIVOS:

1.1. Apellidos y nombres: Nayeli Alexandra Cárdenas Fernández Martín Armando Párraga Miño	
1.2. Carrera: Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y extranjeros	**1.3. Itinerario:** Reuniones a acordar con los docentes de inglés
1.4. Ciclo: Noveno Ciclo	**1.5. Paralelo:** 1

Luego de lo antes declarado, en pleno uso de mis condiciones mentales, siendo total y enteramente responsable, manifiesto mi disposición para realizar este estudio educativo en la modalidad establecida por la institución educativa. Esperando su favorable acogida y autorización. Atentamente,

Nombres y apellidos: Nayeli Alexandra Cárdenas Fernandez

Firma: _____

C.I.: 0107141459

Nombres y apellidos: Martín Armando Párraga Miño

Firma: _____

C.I.: 0107569055

Autorizado.

Nombres y apellidos: María Patricia Candela Pinargote

Firma: _____

C.I.: 1306450857

Sello de la institución: _____

(Appendix 2)

Consents signed by EFL teachers

(Control + Click on the link to see the consents)

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/181zO8tXB4vWJIxOtVvs5iWy8yc-yjO9o?usp=sharing

(Appendix 3)

Summary with coded segments in MAXQDA

(Control + Click on the link to see the coded segments)

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1WHHpjeMdSRXlUUvv5qNVQtXA-pVMyyua/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=110940062211914639040&rtpof=true&sd=true

(Appendix 4)

Codebook in MAXQDA

(Control + Click on the link to see the codebook)

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1voLqm0XoupHP3KU1mMhprRObUOHubxyf/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=110940062211914639040&rtpof=true&sd=true

(Appendix 5)

Semi structured interview applied to EFL teachers

Formación del profesorado

1. ¿Ha tenido experiencia enseñando inglés a niños con autismo? Descríbanos por favor
2. ¿Cuánto tiempo lleva enseñando inglés y en qué niveles ha impartido clases?

Percepciones de los profesores de inglés sobre la inclusión

3. ¿Qué opina sobre la inclusión de estudiantes con autismo en las clases de inglés?
4. ¿Cuáles cree que son los beneficios de tener un aula inclusiva para los estudiantes con autismo y para el resto del grupo?

Dificultades en la enseñanza inclusiva

5. ¿Qué desafíos ha enfrentado al enseñar a estudiantes con autismo en el aula de inglés?
6. ¿Qué estrategias ha utilizado para superar esos desafíos y apoyar a estos estudiantes?

Estrategias pedagógicas

7. ¿Podría describir alguna experiencia positiva que haya tenido enseñando a estudiantes con autismo en su aula?
8. ¿Qué adaptaciones realiza en sus planificaciones o materiales didácticos para hacer que el aprendizaje sea más accesible para estos estudiantes?

Comunicación e interacción dentro del aula

9. ¿Cómo maneja la interacción entre estudiantes con autismo y sus compañeros en actividades grupales?
10. ¿Qué estrategias utiliza para fomentar la participación activa de los estudiantes con autismo en actividades de expresión oral o auditiva, considerando sus necesidades específicas?

Necesidades y apoyo de la institución

11. ¿Qué tipo de apoyo ha recibido de su institución para trabajar con estudiantes con autismo (recursos, formación, personal especializado, etc.)?
12. ¿Qué cree que podría mejorar en su institución para facilitar la inclusión y el aprendizaje de estudiantes con autismo en clases de inglés?

(Appendix 6)

Certificate signed by the tutor of thesis project

UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DE EDUCACIÓN

CERTIFICADO DE TUTORÍA PARA EL TRABAJO DE TITULACIÓN
CARRERAS DE GRADO PRESENCIALES

Carrera de: Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros

Yo, Agnes Orosz, Tutora del Trabajo de Integración Curricular Carreras de Grado de Modalidad Presencial denominado "**Exploring EFL Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions with the Inclusion of Students with Autism in Public Schools Cuenca, Ecuador**" perteneciente a los estudiantes Nayeli Alexandra Cárdenas Fernández y Martín Armando Párraga Miño, doy fe de haber guiado y aprobado el Trabajo de Integración Curricular.

Por tanto, autorizo su presentación para evaluación ante el tribunal correspondiente.

El trabajo fue revisado con una herramienta de prevención de plagio, la cual reportó un 8 % de coincidencia en fuentes de internet, fuentes bibliográficas y demás publicaciones cumpliendo con la normativa legal vigente de la Universidad Nacional de Educación.

Se expide la presente certificación para los fines pertinentes en la ciudad de Azogues, **01 de septiembre del año 2025.**



Fdo.: AGNES OROSZ
Docente tutor
Universidad Nacional de Educación - UNAE

UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DE EDUCACIÓN

DECLARATORIA DE PROPIEDAD INTELECTUAL Y CESIÓN DE DERECHOS DE PUBLICACIÓN PARA EL TRABAJO DE TITULACIÓN

CARRERAS DE GRADO PRESENCIALES

En el marco de lo establecido en el artículo 13, literal b) del Reglamento de Titulación de las Carreras de Grado de la Universidad Nacional de Educación, Yo, *Martín Armando Párraga Miño*, con cédula de ciudadanía 0107569055 estudiante de la carrera de Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros.

DECLARO QUE

Que todas las ideas, opiniones y contenidos del trabajo titulado **Exploring EFL Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions with the Inclusion of Students with Autism in Public Schools Cuenca, Ecuador** son de mi exclusiva responsabilidad, según el artículo 114 del Código Orgánico de la Economía Social del Conocimiento, Creatividad e Innovación.

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Finalmente, concedo a la Universidad Nacional de Educación - UNAE, la autorización para la publicación de Trabajo de Titulación cuyo título es **Exploring EFL Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions with the Inclusion of Students with Autism in Public Schools Cuenca, Ecuador** en el repositorio institucional y la entrega de este al Sistema Nacional de Información de la Educación Superior del Ecuador para su difusión pública respetando los derechos de autor, como lo establece el artículo 144 de la Ley Orgánica de Educación Superior.

Ratifico con mi suscripción la presente declaración, en todo su contenido, en la ciudad de Azogues, 1 de septiembre de 2025.

Martín Armando Párraga Miño
C.I: 0107569055

UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DE EDUCACIÓN

DECLARATORIA DE PROPIEDAD INTELECTUAL Y CESIÓN DE DERECHOS DE PUBLICACIÓN PARA EL TRABAJO DE TITULACIÓN

CARRERAS DE GRADO PRESENCIALES

En el marco de lo establecido en el artículo 13, literal b) del Reglamento de Titulación de las Carreras de Grado de la Universidad Nacional de Educación, Yo, *Nayeli Alexandra Cárdenas Fernández*, con cédula de ciudadanía 0107141459 estudiante de la carrera de Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros.

DECLARO QUE

Que todas las ideas, opiniones y contenidos del trabajo titulado **Exploring EFL Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions with the Inclusion of Students with Autism in Public Schools Cuenca, Ecuador** son de mi exclusiva responsabilidad, según el artículo 114 del Código Orgánico de la Economía Social del Conocimiento, Creatividad e Innovación.

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Ratifico con mi suscripción la presente declaración, en todo su contenido, en la ciudad de Azogues, 1 de septiembre de 2025.

Nayeli Alexandra Cárdenas Fernández
C.I: 0107141459