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Teaching Neurodiverse Learners: Inclusive and Engaging Practices in English Classrooms

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Abstract

The growing awareness of neurodiversity in education has underscored the importance of adopting more inclusive practices in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Conventional language instruction, typically designed around neurotypical learning patterns, can present significant challenges for neurodiverse learners, including those with differences in attention, communication, learning, sensory processing, and emotional regulation. This paper explores the potential of neuro-inclusive teaching strategies to address the diverse cognitive, social, and emotional needs of learners in EFL contexts. A qualitative literature review approach is employed, integrating recent studies on differentiated instruction, multisensory learning, emotional safety, adaptive assessment, and technology-enhanced learning. A conceptual model is developed to illustrate the relationships among neurodiverse learner characteristics, inclusive pedagogical approaches, cognitive and affective processes, and language learning outcomes. This model emphasizes attention, motivation, engagement, and participation as key mediating mechanisms through which inclusive teaching practices can support language development. The article advocates for learning environments that foster accessibility, belonging, and meaningful engagement by reframing neurodiversity as a natural variation among learners rather than a deficit. The findings contribute to the expanding body of literature on inclusive language education and provide a theoretical foundation for future research and pedagogical practice aimed at supporting neurodiverse learners in EFL settings.

Keywords: Neurodiversity, EFL Education, Inclusive Pedagogy, Differentiated Instruction, Emotional Safety, Learner Engagement, Multisensory Learning.

1. Introduction

With the increasing knowledge of neurodiversity, our understanding of education and inclusion in the classroom is being transformed. The neurodiversity paradigm considers neurodivergent differences as natural and valid variations in the range of human cognitive diversity instead of a problem to be solved (Kapp, 2020; Cook, 2024).

This principle is of great importance for English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching. Language learning is a complicated process including cognitive, social, emotional, and communicative aspects, which may be experienced differently for individual learners. Neurodiverse learners contribute numerous skills to the EFL classroom, including creativity, visual thinking, imaginative problem-solving, and outstanding memory in specialized disciplines. But conventional educational environments usually promote sustained attentiveness, extended verbal teaching, standardized testing, and uniform participation requirements. Such expectations can generate challenges that limit the extent to which some learners can completely engage in language learning activities.

This problem is especially relevant in EFL classes when successful language learning demands learners be focused, digest auditory data, regulate emotion, infer meaning, and speak in a language that is still being learned. Second-language acquisition research has repeatedly shown that successful language learning is related to learners' engagement, willingness to speak, emotional well-being, and participation in the classroom (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Hiver et al., 2021; Dewaele & Li, 2020). Recent research on attention also indicates a need for more responsiveness in teaching. According to Mark (2023), today's attention habits have been radically altered by digital technology, multitasking, and the constant state of being online. More and more learners are being distracted and interrupted and thus impacting concentration, engagement, and cognitive processing. The findings are particularly important to EFL classrooms since communication and language acquisition are mostly dependent on sustained attention and active engagement. In a similar way, the educational research based on neuroscience highlights the relationship between attention, memory, emotion, and learning.

According to Medina (2021), teaching that stimulates the emotions and uses visual clues, movement, and meaningful interaction is more likely to get learners to recall material. These notions correspond to the standards of communicative language teaching and neuro-inclusive educational approaches.

Another main way to conceptualize student differences is through the notion of differentiated instruction. Successful teaching needs to be differentiated according to the readiness levels, interests, learning preferences, and cognitive profiles of the learners (Tomlinson and Moon, 2013). Differentiated instruction does not consider student diversity a problem but an essential feature of effective learning contexts.

Despite the significant increase in the amount of literature on neurodiversity, inclusive education, attention, and language learning recently, there has been little research that has brought these viewpoints together into a cohesive framework specifically for EFL classes. Much of the work on neurodiversity is presented from a general educational viewpoint and does not take proper consideration of the communicative requirements and social features of foreign-language learning. Therefore, there is a need for research that combines different viewpoints and converts theoretical discoveries into practical advice for EFL teachers. The present review examines the following thematic questions:

- What does recent literature suggest about differentiated instruction in neuro-

inclusive EFL classrooms?

- What does the literature suggest about the function of emotional safety in neurodiverse language learning?
- What are the recommended practices of neuro-inclusive EFL teaching?

2. Methodology

The present study adopted a qualitative thematic literature review technique to investigate current perspectives on neurodiverse learning in EFL classes. The review analyzed the relationship between neurodiversity, differentiated instruction, emotional safety, multisensory learning, attention, adaptive assessment, and neuro-inclusive pedagogical methods in language-learning situations. The appropriate literature created between 2020 and 2026 was retrieved using searches of Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, UNESCO, OECD and peer-reviewed educational journal publications. Other key theoretical works that continue to shape modern educational practice were also included to give conceptual footing, notably those by Gloria Mark, John Medina, Carol Ann Tomlinson, Mercer and Dörnyei, and Kapp.

The following keywords were combined to perform searches:

- EFL and neurodiversity,
- inclusive language education,
- language acquisition AND differentiated instruction,
- multisensory learning in EFL,
- ADHD and language acquisition,
- learning language and autism,
- learning emotional safety,
- attentiveness, language learning,
- adaptive testing,
- technology and language acquisition.

The review granted attention to peer-reviewed and Scopus-indexed studies, new EFL research, literature on inclusive education, neuroscience-informed educational studies, and theoretical works with clear practical importance. Publications that were irrelevant to the topics of study or had minimal instructional value were excluded. A thematic analysis was conducted to determine similar themes, patterns, and relationships across the literature. Four interrelated themes emerged: differentiated and multimodal instruction; emotional safety and student involvement; attention and cognitive control; and adaptive assessment supported by technology integration. The investigation further tried to relate the theoretical findings to the realities of the EFL classroom in terms of the translation of the literature into practical EFL teaching practices.

3. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Neuro-Inclusive EFL Teaching and Language Learning Outcomes

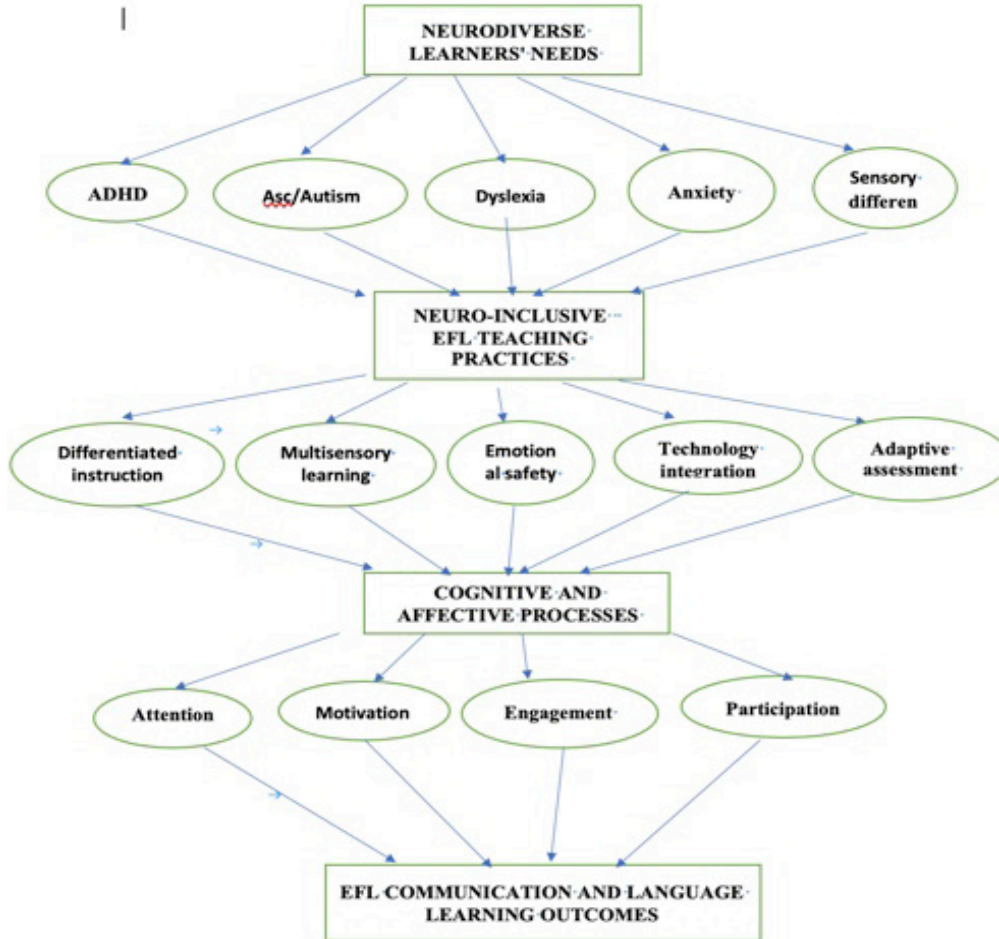


Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework that suggests neuro-inclusive teaching approaches mediate the relationship between learner brain diversity and academic achievement. The framework conceptualizes differentiated instruction, emotional safety, multisensory learning, adaptive assessment, and technology integration as interconnected pedagogical mechanisms that promote attention, engagement, and participation rather than perceiving neurodiversity as a barrier to language learning. These features in turn result in better communication, willingness to communicate, communicative competence, and language learning results.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Theme 1: Differentiated and Multisensory Teaching in Neuro-inclusive EFL Classrooms

The current corpus of research has continuously supported the idea that differentiation is one of the most effective pedagogical strategies to accommodate neurodiverse learners in the EFL classrooms. Differentiation recognizes that learners arrive with varied levels of readiness, interest, ways of communication, learning styles, and cognitive profiles (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). Therefore, a good instruction demands flexibility, not constancy. Research has shown that modifying the content, learning activities, assessment systems, and classroom environment can improve engagement and involvement for different learners (Gheysens et al., 2023). Shorter instructions, scaffolded tasks, visual organizers, opportunities to learn jointly, and movement-based activities benefit neurodiverse learners. Tomlinson and Moon (2013) refer to the educational response to learner variability as differentiation; Medina (2021) explains the neuroscientific foundation of why such flexibility facilitates learning. "The more sensory pathways you stimulate, and the more you connect them to the learner's experiences, the greater the attention and the better the memory," Medina says. Research from multimedia learning also reveals that a mix of visual, aural, and interactive learning options improves comprehension and retention (Mayer, 2021). This study demonstrates that multimodal techniques reduce cognitive overload and improve accessibility.

Such techniques can be done in EFL classes using images, gestures, videos, graphic organizers, or realia to give vocabulary rather than textual definitions. For instance, while teaching the words related to emotions, the EFL teacher can utilize images, emojis, facial expressions, role-play games, and short films to simplify the meaning. This approach so exposes the learners to the language through various sensory channels, thereby enhancing comprehension and retention. Speaking activities can be changed similarly through pair work, collaborative projects, knowledge gap exercises, role plays, and digital storytelling. These strategies provide chances for communication for the whole class and for neurodiverse learners. The literature taken together demonstrates that diversified and multimodal education are not just accommodations but rather basic components of effective language teaching. These tactics respect the diversity of students and offer several ways to interact and communicate, resulting in more accessible, engaging, and effective EFL learning environments.

4.2 Theme 2: Emotional Safety and Learner Engagement in Neurodiverse Language Learning

A common topic in recent studies is that emotional safety is a critical component of successful language learning. Language acquisition, unlike many academic topics,

demands learners speak publicly, make mistakes, express opinions, and interact with peers in a language that they may not yet have full mastery of. And so language classrooms are essentially spaces of vulnerability and risk-taking. For neurodiverse learners, these demands might be increased by anxiety, sensory sensitivities, communication problems, previous unpleasant educational experiences, or fear of social judgment.

In a recent study, emotional safety is frequently discussed as a precondition for meaningful participation in language learning (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). Research has shown that learners are more ready to interact, take part in classroom discussions, and experiment with language if they feel that the learning environment is encouraging, respectful, and inclusive. Therefore, emotional safety plays the role of a psychological support system and a pedagogical aspect that influences communication and language development.

The connection between emotional safety and learner engagement is particularly clear when seen through the lens of language learner psychology. Dewaele and Li (2020) claim that positive emotions such as enjoyment, confidence, curiosity, and interest have a tremendous impact on language learning motivation and communicative participation.

Similarly, Mercer (2021) notes that learner well-being and engagement are closely intertwined. These findings imply that emotional safety has a direct impact on learners' willingness to speak, which has been a well-known key predictor of second-language acquisition.

Mark's (2023) work is particularly relevant in relation to attention and cognitive overload. Hamilton and Petty (2023) look at empathetic pedagogy and teacher-student relationships, while Mark (2023) questions the cognitive effect of constant interruption, multitasking, and environmental distractions. Together these views suggest that emotional safety is not only a component of interpersonal relationships but also of the broader sensory and cognitive environment in which learning occurs. Noise in the classroom, inconsistent routines, visual clutter, and frequent interruptions can all affect concentration and the ability to manage emotions. The research also relates to the requirement for predictability of educational methods. Many neurodiverse learners thrive in a structured learning environment with clear communication of expectations, transitions, and scheduling of lessons. "Seeing lesson plans, specific directions, and the same routines in the classroom takes away the ambiguity and helps kids control their emotions," she said. These strategies are especially beneficial in EFL classes when learners are more likely to be apprehensive about speaking, listening, or performing in a foreign language. Another component that is often overlooked is the time needed for processing. Research points to the need for extra time for neurodiverse learners to create replies, to process information, and to sequence language output. Teachers who make time for thinking before they ask for responses create more equal communication environments. This method supports neurodiverse learners and encourages deeper thinking and more engagement for all students. For instance, an EFL teacher may provide learners with a minute of quiet

preparation time and sentence openers such as "In my opinion...", "I agree because...", or "One advantage is..." before a speaking activity. This approach diminishes anxiety about communicating, facilitates language processing, and promotes participation of those learners requiring more time to generate a response. Overall, the evidence consistently places emotional safety as a key constituent of neuro-inclusive EFL education. Emotional safety creates better communication, learner confidence, classroom participation, and readiness to communicate. Therefore, the development of supportive and emotionally safe classroom environments needs to be seen as an important part of effective language teaching, not as an additional problem.

4.2.1 Critical Synthesis

The role of positive impact in second language learning has been examined by Dewaele & Li (2020), and the wider relationship between learner well-being and engagement by Mercer (2021). In this line, Hamilton and Petty (2023) expound on this issue by demonstrating emotional safety because of empathy-based teaching, and Mark (2023) highlights the effects of cognitive overload and environmental distractions. To conclude, these views indicate that emotional safety is a psychological and cognitive fact. Thus, the effective EFL courses should offer positive teacher-student relations and learning environments that reduce too much cognitive load and promote sustained attention.

4.3 Theme 3: Neuro-inclusive Classroom Practices and Assessment

The research describes a variety of classroom approaches that promote neuro-inclusive EFL teaching by removing obstacles to involvement and by providing many opportunities for engagement. Although various research recommends a range of alternative approaches, there is great consensus on a number of core elements that define good neuro-inclusive education. Multisensory learning is one of the most commonly suggested strategies. Research repeatedly shows that language teaching is more effective for learners when it is embedded with visual, aural, tactile, kinesthetic, and social components (Medina, 2021; Mayer, 2021). In practice, this approach may mean that vocabulary is presented by images, gestures, real items, movies, songs, and role-play activities rather than by verbal explanations alone. Visual aid is another often proposed method. Learners can employ tools like graphic organizers, visual schedules, color-coding of information, mind maps, and step-by-step instructions to structure knowledge and reduce cognitive demands. Such technologies are especially useful in EFL classrooms, as students sometimes need to acquire new vocabulary, grammatical structures, and communicative tasks all at once. It also shows that flexible grouping and collaborative learning are crucial characteristics. Learners have opportunities to practice language in safe social circumstances such as pair work, small-group chats, cooperative projects, and information-gap tasks before they move into whole-class interaction. Hiver et al. (2021) claim that such sorts of engagement lead to deeper participation and enhance the desire of learners

to communicate. Today, the integration of technology is becoming more and more vital in neuro-inclusive education. Educational technology can increase accessibility and student agency when implemented effectively (Lai and Bower, 2020). Students can access resources and demonstrate understanding in other methods such as captioned videos, speech-to-text apps, text-to-speech software, audiobooks, and interactive language learning platforms. These are very effective aids for students with problems with reading, writing, attention, and processing information. The study also deals with the need for adaptive assessment. The standard timed exam can penalize children for issues with processing speed, not linguistic ability. Researchers suggest flexible assessment approaches such as portfolios, project-based learning, oral interviews, visual presentations, collaborative projects, and reflective diaries (Tomlinson & Moon, 2021). In practice, teachers may provide students with alternative ways to demonstrate learning. For example, a learner may opt to give a live oral presentation, record a video presentation, create a digital tale, or participate in a structured interview. This flexibility provides students an opportunity to display their communicative ability and negates constraints related to fear, processing speed, or sensory sensitivity. Another suggested technique involves learning tasks with movement. Students can participate in gallery walks, vocabulary stations, role plays, theater exercises, and classroom surveys that get them up and moving and interacting socially. These activities are especially helpful for students who have problems with concentration, because they allow physical activity to be part of the learning process, instead of a distraction from it. Learner choice alternatives are also recommended in the literature. Allowing students to choose topics, styles of presentation, themes of projects, or learning tools can improve student autonomy and motivation. Choice-based learning runs simultaneously with individual education since it takes into account individual preferences, strengths, and interests. A comprehensive review of literature reveals that certain common underlying concepts are present for different techniques. Although the terminology and the implementation vary, there is a consensus among all experts on the need to reduce cognitive overload, increase learner autonomy, improve flexibility, and encourage active participation. These ideas are in line with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and modern learner-centered education. A significant finding coming from the literature is that methods initially meant to benefit neurodiverse learners are often beneficial to all students. Flexible assessment, visual organizing, collaborative learning, and multimodal instruction seem to increase engagement and accessibility for all learners in diverse classrooms, rather than for some groups of learners. Therefore, neuro-inclusive pedagogy is not just a specific solution but rather a larger pedagogical philosophy for the present-day EFL classrooms.

4.3.1 Critical Synthesis

Multimedia training can improve cognitive processing (Mayer, 2021). Medina (2021) explores the neurological consequences of multimodal learning. Tomlinson and Moon (2021) underline the need for differentiation and flexible assessment. Lai and Bower

(2020) discuss the contribution of technology to the advancement of accessibility and learner autonomy. Although these learning experts' methodologies are different, they come to a common conclusion that the highest performance of learners is when instruction is adaptable, exciting, accessible, and responsive to individual traits. In this view, neuro-inclusive EFL education is less a particular teaching technique and more a confluence of cognitive, technical, pedagogical, and emotional difficulties.

5. Implications for EFL Teachers

The implications of the findings of this review for current EFL teaching practice are important. Teachers need to recognize first that variation among students is a normal and expected element of language classrooms, not a rare phenomenon that requires special attention. When appropriately supported, neurodiverse learners have unique talents, perspectives, and ways of processing information that can enrich classroom experiences. Thus, the objective of neuro-inclusive pedagogy is not to create distinct learning experiences for specific students but to create adaptive environments that allow inclusive participation for all learners. Secondly, lesson design should include more diversified and multimodal tactics. Language teachers can make learning more accessible by providing visual, aural, kinesthetic, and collaborative learning experiences in one course. Language instruction can be aided with images, gestures, graphic organizers, movies, and real-world scenarios. Visuals, physical exercises, and communicative tasks can assist grammar training and provide learners with the opportunity to relate abstract concepts to meaningful use of language. These strategies could be helpful for neurodiverse youngsters and also increase engagement with the wider student population.

Third, emotional safety should be regarded as an integral component of communicative language education. Language acquisition is a process of risk-taking and public communication, and so learners benefit from classrooms that foster respect, patience, and psychological safety.

Teachers can create emotional safety by establishing predictable routines, allowing time to reflect, promoting collaborative learning, and responding to failures as growth opportunities rather than signals of failure. These approaches are effective in reducing communication anxiety and increasing learners' willingness to participate. Assessment practices require careful consideration too. Traditional assessment systems tend to reward speed and consistency, which might disadvantage children who absorb information differently. Neuro-inclusive assessment, therefore, must provide numerous ways for learning to be demonstrated. In addition to traditional assessment methods, the use of portfolios, project-based learning, presentations, interviews, digital storytelling, and reflective journals provides a fuller picture of student development.

Finally, technology could improve a lot of accessibility and involvement. Captioned films, text-to-speech and speech-to-text software, interactive language learning applications, and digital collaboration tools provide learners with multiple methods to access content and demonstrate their understanding. Technology, when

used correctly, can help to promote student autonomy and reduce the barriers to engagement.

6. Limitations

This article is based on an analysis of the current literature and does not include original empirical data obtained from EFL learners or teachers. Thus, the conclusions are reliant on the extent, quality, and methodological approaches of the studies analyzed. Though research provides useful information on neuro-inclusive teaching approaches, results should be taken with a grain of salt given the variety of educational environments in different nations, institutions, and student groups. The second constraint relates to the generality of neurodiversity itself. Neurodiverse learners are a very diversified population with a wide range of strengths, challenges, and educational requirements. It is therefore challenging to generalize findings across neurodiverse profiles.

In addition, the efficiency of neuro-inclusive practices can be influenced by class size, the expertise of the teacher, institutional support, resources, and cultural attitudes towards education and learning. Finally, while the study is relevant to EFL situations, part of the data comes from more general educational fields and not only second language acquisition studies. Further research should continue to examine neuro-inclusive pedagogy in language-learning circumstances, particularly, and assess the impact of different approaches on communication, engagement, and language-learning outcomes over time.

7. Conclusion

The increasing recognition of neurodiversity has led educators to re-evaluate traditional assumptions about teaching, learning, and participation in EFL programs. The data discussed in this article illustrates that neuro-inclusive pedagogy provides a suitable model for addressing the multitude of cognitive, emotional, and communicative needs of learners in today's language learning environments. The results indicate that varied instruction and multimodal learning support language acquisition by providing numerous ways to acquire materials, process information, and participate in communication. Emotional safety is also important as learners can participate, take risks, and communicate effectively in a foreign language. Other studies suggest that student engagement is higher when classroom strategies reduce cognitive overload, improve autonomy, and acknowledge individual differences.

The study further explores the impact of real-life classroom practices such as the use of visual aids, collaborative learning, flexible grouping, effective use of technology, and modifications in student assessment. These tactics enable learners to communicate, interact, and develop their language skills in more open and available learning environments. It's also worth noting that the results indicate that interventions that were first demonstrated to aid neurodiverse learners tend to perform well for all kids, including making learning more flexible and responsive.

One of the most important outcomes from this study is that neuro-inclusive education is not just for a small group of students. So it's not a unique method to be learner-centered. It's part of a larger concept of learner-centeredness that variation is an important part of good teaching. EFL teachers can enhance engagement and communication among diverse learners by incorporating differentiated teaching, emotional safety, multisensory learning, adaptive assessment, and accessible technology in their classrooms. This study additionally examines the effects of real-life classroom methods such as the use of visual aids, collaborative learning, flexible grouping, assistive technology, and changes in the way students are assessed. These strategies help students to pair, to participate, and to build their language skills in more open and available learning contexts. Importantly, the results indicate that interventions initially found to benefit neurodiverse learners tend to be successful for all students, such as enhanced flexibility and responsiveness in learning.

8. Recommendations

The findings of this review led to numerous major suggestions for educational practice. EFL teachers should increasingly apply customized and multimodal instruction that acknowledges learner variation as a regular feature of today's classrooms. Teachers should provide students with several ways to learn material, engage in activities, and demonstrate their understanding rather than relying on textbook lecture and whole-class discussion. Schools should commit to continued professional development in neurodiversity, inclusive education, and neuroscience-informed teaching. Many teachers say they wish to support neurodiverse students but have few alternatives for specialized training. Professional learning programs that focus on practical classroom strategies can help teachers gain the confidence and abilities to construct more inclusive learning environments. Educational leaders and governments should also support systems of assessment that recognize several ways of proving learning. The focus should shift more towards portfolios, project-based learning, oral evaluations, and other flexible ways of assessing that give a fuller picture of what learners are capable of doing. Likewise, it's important to invest in assistive technologies and inclusive educational resources to increase accessibility. Finally, this study recommends future research to go beyond theoretical discourse and investigate how neuro-inclusive methods might be implemented in real EFL classrooms. Longitudinal studies and classroom studies with teachers and learners would give useful insights into the influence of tailored teaching, emotional safety, multisensory learning, and adaptive assessment on language learning outcomes across time. This kind of research would contribute to developing more evidence-based methods to neuro-inclusive EFL education.

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