

A Teacher's Experience in Teaching of English to a Learner with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: An Autoethnographic Study

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Abstract: This autoethnographic study explores the lived experience of an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher working with a learner diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in a private tutoring context in Ecuador. Although inclusive education has gained increasing attention in educational policy and research, teachers often face difficulties implementing inclusive practices effectively in EFL settings with limited institutional support. The study examines how emotional awareness, reflective practice, and pedagogical adaptation shape inclusive language teaching. Data were collected over six weeks through reflective journals, field notes, and teaching artifacts involving a nine-year-old learner with ADHD. The findings indicate that effective teaching in this context depended on emotional regulation, instructional flexibility, movement-based activities, and the incorporation of the learner's personal interests. The study also highlights the importance of teacher responsiveness and reflection in supporting learner engagement and participation. This research contributes to a more human-centered understanding of inclusive EFL teaching by emphasizing empathy, flexibility, and relational interaction as central elements of inclusive pedagogical practice.

Keywords: ADHD, Autoethnography, EFL Teaching, Inclusive Education, Neurodiversity, Teacher Reflection

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1. Introduction

When people think about teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), they often picture lessons focused on grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills. But teaching a language is much more than just passing on knowledge about words and rules, it's a deeply human process shaped by our feelings, the relationships we build, and the unique ways each learner thinks and learns. Teaching isn't just about following technical steps; it's also about connecting with students and constantly adjusting to what each person needs. This becomes especially true when teaching students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), whose attention, emotions, and behaviors can make traditional teaching approaches less effective.

ADHD is commonly characterized by difficulties in sustaining attention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity, which can significantly impact learning processes in formal educational settings. In language learning contexts, these challenges may be intensified by the cognitive demands of acquiring a new language, including memory, concentration, and processing speed. As a result, learners with ADHD may struggle to engage with conventional teaching methods that rely heavily on sustained attention, repetition, and structured tasks. This situation highlights the need for more flexible, responsive, and inclusive approaches to language teaching that acknowledge and accommodate learner variability.

In recent years, inclusive education has gained increasing attention in both research and educational policy, promoting equitable access to learning opportunities for all students regardless of their abilities or backgrounds (UNESCO, 2020). Inclusive education emphasizes the importance of recognizing diversity as a resource rather than a limitation and calls for pedagogical practices that respond to the needs of all learners. Within this framework, teachers are expected to design and implement instructional strategies that are adaptable, student-centered, and sensitive to individual differences. However, despite these advances, many teachers continue to face significant challenges when attempting to translate inclusive principles into everyday classroom practice. In EFL contexts, these challenges are often exacerbated by limited access to specialized training, lack of

institutional support, and the pressure to meet standardized learning outcomes. Teachers frequently find themselves navigating complex classroom dynamics without sufficient preparation to address the needs of neurodiverse learners. This creates a gap between the theoretical ideals of inclusive education and the realities of teaching practice. Inclusive pedagogy, therefore, requires not only knowledge of instructional strategies but also the ability to respond flexibly and reflectively to learners' emotional and cognitive needs (Florian & Beaton, 2018).

Existing research on ADHD in education has primarily focused on behavioral management techniques, classroom interventions, and measurable learning outcomes. While these studies provide valuable insights into effective instructional strategies, they often overlook the lived experiences of teachers who work directly with learners in real educational contexts. In particular, there is a lack of research that explores how teachers experience, interpret, and respond to the challenges of teaching learners with ADHD, especially within EFL settings. This gap is even more evident in underrepresented contexts such as Ecuador, where research on inclusive language teaching practices remains limited. Moreover, few studies adopt an autoethnographic perspective that foregrounds the emotional, reflective, and relational dimensions of teaching.

Autoethnography offers a valuable methodological approach for examining how personal experiences intersect with broader educational and cultural contexts. By focusing on the teacher's voice, emotions, and reflective processes, this approach allows for a deeper understanding of how inclusive practices are constructed and negotiated in real-life teaching situations.

This study addresses these gaps by exploring the lived experience of an EFL teacher working with a learner diagnosed with ADHD in a private tutoring context in Ecuador. Drawing on an autoethnographic approach, the study examines how emotions, reflection, and pedagogical adaptation shape inclusive teaching practices over time. It seeks to move beyond purely technical perspectives on teaching and to highlight the importance of human, emotional, and relational factors in the learning process.

The purpose of this study is to understand how teaching a learner with ADHD influences the teacher's beliefs, emotions, and instructional decisions. It also aims to identify the strategies that emerge through reflective practice and to analyze how these experiences contribute to the development of a more inclusive and human-centered approach to EFL teaching.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What emotions, beliefs, and reflective processes emerge from the experience of teaching an ADHD learner in an EFL context?
2. What instructional strategies and pedagogical adaptations develop throughout this experience?
3. How does this lived experience reshape the understanding of inclusive and effective EFL teaching?

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts an autoethnographic approach to explore the lived experience of an EFL teacher working with a learner diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that combines elements of autobiography and ethnography, allowing researchers to analyze personal experiences in relation to broader cultural, social, and educational contexts (Ellis et al., 2011). This approach is particularly suitable for this study, as it enables a deep exploration of the emotional, relational, and pedagogical dimensions of teaching, which are often difficult to capture through more traditional research methods.

In this study, the researcher assumes a dual role as both teacher and investigator. This positioning allows for direct access to the teaching process, including real-time observations, emotional responses, and reflective insights. At the same time, it requires a high level of reflexivity to critically examine personal assumptions,

biases, and interpretations. Reflexivity was therefore an ongoing process throughout the study, guiding both data collection and analysis.

The study was conducted in a private tutoring context in Manta, Ecuador, over a period of six weeks. The instructional setting consisted of one-to-one sessions held twice a week, providing a personalized learning environment that enabled close observation of the learner's behavior, engagement, and responses to various teaching strategies. The participant was a nine-year-old learner diagnosed with ADHD, referred to by the pseudonym Juanita to ensure confidentiality and protect her identity. The choice of a private tutoring context is significant, as it differs from traditional classroom environments in terms of structure, flexibility, and teacher-student interaction. This setting allowed for greater adaptation of instructional strategies and provided opportunities to respond immediately to the learner's needs. At the same time, it required the teacher to take full responsibility for designing and adjusting the learning experience, highlighting the importance of reflective decision-making in the teaching process.

Data were collected through multiple qualitative instruments, including reflective journals, field notes, and teaching artifacts. The reflective journal served as the primary data source, documenting the teacher's emotional responses, pedagogical decisions, challenges encountered, and reflections after each session. This ongoing documentation allowed for a detailed reconstruction of the teaching experience over time.

Field notes were used to record observable aspects of the learner's behavior, such as attention span, levels of engagement, emotional reactions, and responses to specific activities. These notes provided a more descriptive and immediate account of classroom interactions, complementing the reflective nature of the journal entries.

Teaching artifacts, including lesson plans, instructional materials, and samples of the learner's work, were also collected as supporting data. These artifacts offered concrete evidence of how instructional strategies evolved throughout the study and how the learner engaged with different types of activities.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, focusing on the identification of recurring patterns and meaningful categories within the data. The analysis process involved multiple stages, including initial reading, coding, categorization, and theme development. Codes were assigned to segments of data related to key aspects such as attention, emotional regulation, instructional strategies, learner engagement, and teacher reflection. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that captured the main dimensions of the teaching experience.

The thematic analysis was not a linear process but an iterative one, involving continuous movement between data collection, reflection, and interpretation. This recursive approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the relationships between different aspects of the teaching experience and supported the development of meaningful insights.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from the participant's guardian prior to the beginning of the research. The learner's identity was protected through the use of a pseudonym, and all identifying information was removed from the data. Additionally, the researcher maintained a reflexive stance to ensure that the dual role of teacher and researcher did not compromise the well-being of the participant or the integrity of the study.

3. Results

The analysis of the data revealed several recurring patterns related to attention, emotional regulation, and instructional practices in the EFL context. These patterns emerged consistently across the six-week period and were reflected in both the learner's behavior and the teacher's reflective observations.

Flexibility as a key factor in engagement.

One of the most significant findings was the importance of flexibility in sustaining learner engagement. Initially, lessons were planned with a structured sequence of activities. However, it became evident that rigid adherence to lesson plans often resulted in disengagement. For example, during one session, the learner was expected to

complete a worksheet focused on vocabulary repetition. Within minutes, she became distracted, started moving around the room, and showed little interest in the task.

In response, the activity was modified spontaneously into a game that involved movement and interaction, such as matching vocabulary cards placed around the room. This shift immediately increased the learner's engagement and participation. Similar situations were observed throughout the study, suggesting that flexibility in instruction was not simply beneficial but necessary for maintaining attention and involvement.

Emotional regulation as a condition for learning.

Another key finding was the central role of emotional regulation in the learning process. The data showed that the learner's ability to engage with tasks was closely linked to her emotional state. Moments of frustration, confusion, or fatigue often led to withdrawal or resistance. For instance, during a reading activity that required sustained attention, the learner became visibly frustrated after struggling to understand a sentence. She stopped participating, avoided eye contact, and expressed that the task was "too difficult." In contrast, when the teacher responded with reassurance, simplified the task, and provided encouragement, the learner gradually re-engaged.

These observations indicate that emotional support was not a secondary aspect of teaching, but a fundamental condition for learning. When the learner felt safe and supported, her willingness to participate increased significantly.

Movement as a support for attention.

The incorporation of movement-based activities emerged as another important pattern. Traditional seated tasks often resulted in decreased attention, while activities that allowed physical movement contributed to sustained engagement. For example, vocabulary practice was transformed into a "find and touch" activity, where the learner had to move around the room to identify objects or words.

During these activities, the learner demonstrated higher levels of focus and enthusiasm. She was able to remain engaged for longer periods compared to when she was required to sit still and complete written exercises.

This pattern suggests that movement played a functional role in supporting attention rather than being a distraction, challenging traditional assumptions about classroom behavior.

Interest drives content and motivation.

The data also revealed that the learner's motivation was strongly influenced by the relevance of the content to her personal interests. Activities that incorporated topics she enjoyed, such as games, stories, or familiar themes, resulted in higher levels of participation and engagement.

In one session, a grammar activity was initially met with resistance. However, when the same structure was introduced through a storytelling activity based on the learner's favorite characters, her attitude changed noticeably. She became more willing to participate, contributed ideas, and showed increased confidence in using the target language. This finding highlights the importance of connecting instructional content with the learner's interests as a way to enhance motivation and engagement.

Reducing emphasis on accuracy to support participation.

Finally, the study found that reducing the emphasis on accuracy contributed to a more supportive and inclusive learning environment. Initially, the learner showed hesitation when asked to produce correct answers, often expressing fear of making mistakes.

When the focus shifted toward communication and participation rather than correctness, the learner became more willing to engage. For example, during speaking activities, allowing approximate answers and encouraging effort rather than precision led to increased confidence and participation. This change in approach helped reduce anxiety and created a space where the learner felt more comfortable taking risks in the language learning process.

Patterns of fluctuation in attention and engagement.

In addition to the previously identified patterns, the data revealed that the learner's attention and engagement were not stable but fluctuated significantly within and across sessions. Rather than maintaining a consistent level of focus, the learner often alternated between moments of high engagement and periods of distraction. For example, during one session, the learner began an activity with enthusiasm, actively participating and responding to prompts. However, after a short period, her attention shifted, and she became disengaged, looking around the room and interacting with unrelated objects.

These fluctuations did not appear to be random but were influenced by factors such as task duration, level of difficulty, and emotional state. Short, varied activities were more effective in maintaining engagement, while longer or repetitive tasks often led to loss of focus. This pattern suggests that attention in this context should be understood as dynamic rather than fixed, requiring continuous adjustment of teaching strategies.

The role of teacher responsiveness in shaping interaction.

Another important observation was the influence of the teacher's immediate responses on the learner's behavior and engagement. The data indicate that the way the teacher reacted to moments of distraction or difficulty had a direct impact on the learner's willingness to continue participating. For instance, when moments of inattention were addressed through redirection or by modifying the task, the learner was more likely to re-engage. In contrast, when the response was delayed or when the activity remained unchanged despite visible disengagement, the learner's participation decreased.

This highlights the importance of real-time decision-making in the teaching process and suggests that responsiveness is a key component of effective instruction in inclusive contexts.

Development of a supportive teacher-learner relationship.

The findings also indicate that the relationship between the teacher and the learner played a significant role in shaping the learning experience. Over the course of the six weeks, a gradual increase in trust and familiarity was observed.

This relational development was reflected in the learner's behavior, as she became more willing to participate, express difficulties, and take risks in using the language. For example, in the early sessions, the learner often hesitated to respond and showed signs of uncertainty when asked to complete tasks. However, as the sessions progressed and the interaction became more supportive and predictable, she demonstrated greater confidence and initiative. This suggests that the relational dimension of teaching is closely connected to engagement and participation, particularly in contexts involving learners with ADHD.

Adaptation as an ongoing process rather than a fixed strategy.

Finally, the data highlight that instructional adaptation was not a one-time adjustment but an ongoing process that evolved throughout the study. Strategies that were effective in one session did not always produce the same results in subsequent sessions, requiring continuous modification and experimentation. For instance, an activity that successfully engaged the learner one day might need to be altered or replaced in the next session to maintain interest.

This ongoing need for adaptation reinforces the idea that teaching in inclusive contexts is inherently dynamic and cannot rely on static methods. Instead, it requires a flexible and reflective approach that responds to the learner's changing needs and conditions.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that effective teaching for learners with ADHD requires a combination of flexibility, emotional awareness, and adaptive instructional strategies. The patterns identified in this study reflect the dynamic nature of the teaching experience and highlight the importance of responding to the learner's needs in real time.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study provide meaningful insights into the complexities of inclusive EFL teaching, particularly when working with learners diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Rather than presenting learning difficulties as isolated challenges, the results highlight the dynamic interaction between emotional, cognitive, and pedagogical factors in the learning process. This perspective reinforces the idea that teaching effectiveness cannot be reduced to the application of fixed methods, but instead depends on the teacher's ability to respond flexibly and reflectively to the learner's needs.

One of the most significant findings of this study is the central role of emotional regulation in facilitating or hindering learning. The learner's engagement was strongly influenced by her emotional state, confirming that emotional factors are not peripheral but fundamental to the learning process. This finding aligns with Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that negative emotions such as anxiety or frustration can act as barriers to language acquisition, while positive emotional conditions can enhance learning. In this study, moments of emotional distress consistently reduced participation, whereas supportive and reassuring interactions helped lower anxiety and promote engagement.

The importance of emotions is further supported by research in foreign language learning, which identifies emotional experiences as key elements influencing motivation and learning outcomes. As suggested by Méndez-López (2013), emotions can function as facilitators of learning when they are positively managed within the classroom. The findings of this study reinforce this perspective, demonstrating that emotional awareness is not an additional component of teaching but a central element of effective pedagogical practice. Another key aspect highlighted by the findings is the role of flexibility in instructional design.

Traditional teaching approaches often rely on structured lesson plans and predetermined sequences of activities. However, the results of this study suggest that such rigidity may not be effective for learners with ADHD. Instead, the ability to adapt activities in real time, based on the learner's responses, proved essential for maintaining engagement. This finding supports the principles of inclusive pedagogy, which emphasize the need to accommodate learner diversity through responsive and adaptable teaching practices (Florian & Beaton, 2018).

In addition, the effectiveness of interest-driven and autonomy-supportive activities observed in this study reflects key principles of Self-Determination Theory. According to this framework, intrinsic motivation is enhanced when learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In this study, the learner demonstrated greater engagement when activities were connected to her interests and when she was given some degree of choice in the learning process. This suggests that motivation in language learning is closely linked to the relevance and personal meaning of the tasks, particularly for learners who may struggle with traditional forms of instruction.

The role of movement as a support for attention also challenges conventional assumptions about classroom behavior. In many educational contexts, movement is often interpreted as a sign of distraction or lack of discipline. However, the findings of this study suggest that movement can function as a regulatory mechanism that supports attention and engagement. This perspective aligns with more recent understandings of neurodiversity, which view differences in behavior not as deficits but as alternative ways of interacting with the learning environment. From this standpoint, effective teaching requires adapting the environment to the learner, rather than attempting to control or suppress natural behaviors.

Furthermore, the findings emphasize the importance of shifting from accuracy-oriented teaching to participation-oriented approaches. The reduction of emphasis on correctness allowed the learner to engage more freely and confidently in language use. This suggests that, particularly in inclusive contexts, creating a supportive environment where learners feel safe to take risks may be more beneficial than focusing exclusively on linguistic precision. This shift reflects a broader rethinking of what it means to be an effective language teacher, moving from control and correction toward facilitation and support.

Another important contribution of this study lies in its focus on the teacher's lived experience. Through the autoethnographic approach, teaching is understood not only as a set of strategies but as an evolving process shaped by reflection, emotion, and interaction. The findings show that the teacher's awareness of her own responses, assumptions, and decisions played a crucial role in adapting instruction and responding to the learner's needs. This highlights the importance of reflective practice as a core component of inclusive pedagogy, particularly in contexts where formal training on neurodiversity may be limited.

At a broader level, these findings contribute to the ongoing discussion about inclusive education in EFL contexts. While international frameworks, such as those promoted by UNESCO (2020), emphasize the importance of inclusion, the practical implementation of these principles often remains challenging. This study provides insight into how inclusive practices can be developed at the micro level of classroom interaction, showing that inclusion is not only a policy objective but a daily pedagogical practice that requires flexibility, empathy, and reflection.

Overall, the study suggests that effective EFL teaching in inclusive contexts involves more than the application of specific techniques. It requires a holistic approach that integrates emotional awareness, adaptive instruction, and continuous reflection. By foregrounding the teacher's lived experience, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of what it means to teach inclusively and highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that are both human-centered and context-sensitive.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the lived experience of an EFL teacher working with a learner diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) through an autoethnographic approach. By focusing on the emotional, pedagogical, and reflective dimensions of teaching, the study provides a deeper understanding of how inclusive practices are constructed and negotiated in real educational contexts. The findings highlight that effective language teaching in inclusive settings extends beyond the application of instructional techniques, requiring instead a holistic approach that integrates emotional awareness, flexibility, and continuous reflection.

One of the main contributions of this study is the identification of key factors that support meaningful learning for learners with ADHD, including emotional regulation, instructional flexibility, movement-based activities, and the integration of interest-driven content. These elements were not isolated strategies but interconnected components that shaped the overall learning experience. The findings suggest that when teaching practices are adapted to respond to the learner's emotional and cognitive needs, engagement and participation increase significantly.

Furthermore, this study emphasizes the importance of rethinking traditional assumptions about teaching and learning. Rather than viewing attention difficulties or movement as barriers, the findings support a perspective that recognizes these characteristics as part of a diverse range of learning profiles. This shift aligns with broader understandings of inclusive education, which advocate for the adaptation of teaching practices to accommodate learner diversity instead of expecting learners to conform to rigid instructional models.

Another important contribution lies in the central role of teacher reflection. The autoethnographic approach revealed that the teacher's ability to observe, interpret, and adapt to the learner's needs was fundamental in shaping effective instructional decisions. Reflection functioned not only as a tool for improving teaching practices but also as a means of developing greater awareness of the emotional and relational aspects of the learning process. This highlights the need for teacher education programs to place greater emphasis on reflective practice, particularly in relation to inclusive teaching.

In terms of practical implications, the findings of this study suggest that EFL teachers working in inclusive contexts should prioritize flexibility over rigid lesson planning, incorporate movement and interactive activities, and create emotionally supportive learning environments.

Additionally, connecting instructional content to learners' interests can significantly enhance motivation and participation. These strategies do not require extensive resources but rather a shift in perspective toward more responsive and learner-centered teaching practices. Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. As an autoethnographic study based on a single teaching experience, the findings are not intended to be generalized to all contexts. Instead, they provide an in-depth exploration of a specific situation, offering insights that may resonate with other educators facing similar challenges. Additionally, the dual role of the researcher as both teacher and investigator may have influenced the interpretation of the data, although efforts were made to maintain reflexivity throughout the study.

Future research could expand on these findings by exploring similar experiences across different educational contexts, age groups, and learning environments. Comparative studies involving multiple teachers or learners could provide a broader understanding of inclusive practices in EFL settings. Furthermore, research that integrates both teacher and learner perspectives could offer a more comprehensive view of the teaching and learning process.

Ultimately, this study highlights that inclusive teaching is not a fixed set of strategies but an ongoing process that requires sensitivity, adaptability, and reflection. By foregrounding the lived experience of the teacher, it underscores the importance of recognizing the human dimension of education and the need to create learning environments where all learners feel supported, valued, and capable of participating meaningfully.

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