



Unpacking EFL Teachers' Understandings and Strategies of Self-Awareness Competence in the Classroom

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Abstract

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines self-awareness competence as the ability to assess one's emotions, values, and skills realistically. Utilizing this definition as a theoretical framework, this qualitative study aimed to explore EFL teachers' perceptions and strategies regarding self-awareness competence in the classroom. To accomplish this goal, 19 EFL teachers from Iran were recruited through convenience sampling and took part in one semi-structured written interview and four focus group interviews to exchange their perspectives and strategies for developing their self-awareness competence. Adopting the routine analytical steps in grounded theory, i.e., open, axial, and selective coding, the study identified three key components for the participants' self-awareness perceptions: knowing one's emotions, having a growth mindset, and having a realistic sense of self-perception. The participants also outlined two primary categories of self-reflection strategies - practical and cognitive - to enhance their self-awareness competence. It was found that reflective practices were essential tools for cultivating the self-awareness competence of EFL teachers. Additionally, the study unveiled that EFL teachers' attitudes and strategies toward self-awareness competence were harmonious. Ultimately, the findings demonstrated promising prospects for future EFL teachers to enhance their personalized reflective strategies.

Keywords: CASEL, EFL Classrooms, EFL Teachers' Understandings and Strategies, Self-Awareness Competence

Teaching a language is a demanding profession that necessitates addressing a diverse array of obstacles and stressors in the classroom, rendering it one of the most challenging careers (Li, 2021; Renandya & Jacobs, 2021). Consequently, language teachers must possess personal qualities that allow them to navigate socio-emotional difficulties, thereby enhancing the educational quality and learning outcomes in their classes

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(Heredia-Arboleda et al., 2021). For this purpose, scholarly studies propose that for teachers to instruct in an effective manner, they require engagement in metacognition (Hartman, 2001; Jiang et al., 2016). Metacognitive skills are crucial for language teachers as they encounter many challenges stemming from the unpredictable and often complex and ambiguous nature of the situations they face, which makes the teaching process difficult (Fairbanks et al., 2010; Haukås, 2018). Furthermore, teacher cognition heavily influences their teaching practices (Macalister, 2016; Phipps & Borg, 2009). According to Haukås (2018), teachers' metacognitive skills enable them to contemplate on their knowledge, beliefs, and teaching practices to actively design, execute, oversee, and evaluate their pedagogical endeavors and their students' learning outcomes consistently. These educators utilize their knowledge to improve their teaching methodology. In a similar vein, Hiver et al. (2019) posit that language teacher metacognition pertains to their ability to contemplate their own cognitive processes and modify their conduct to meet the needs of teaching a second language. Thus, it is essential for language instructors to cultivate their metacognitive skills, as they can modify their thoughts and actions to aid their students in enhancing their L2 learning and accomplishing their course objectives (Stewart & Reinders, 2023).

As per Hiver et al. (2019), language teacher metacognition comprises various competencies, of which self-awareness is a crucial element. Concerning the focus of the present study, the authors have made several efforts to provide a detailed definition of self-awareness. For example, Hiver et al. (2019) indicate that self-awareness refers to comprehending personal strengths and limitations as a subject matter expert and educator in the classroom. Recently, a systematic review of literature on self-awareness from multiple fields, including psychology, nursing, social work, and management education, was conducted by Carden et al. (2022). Multiple components that contribute to the definition of self-awareness were then identified. According to Carden et al. (2022), self-awareness involves an individual's assessment of their beliefs, values, internal mental states, physiological reactions, personality characteristics, motives, behaviors, and how others perceive them.

Aligned with these efforts, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a prominent organization dedicated to promoting social and emotional learning (SEL) for individuals over the past three decades, has defined self-awareness competence as "the ability to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts" (CASEL, 2022). The definition of self-awareness competence by CASEL includes the skills of evaluating one's strengths and weaknesses, identifying personal, cultural, and linguistic values, having a realistic and meaningful sense of self-perception, developing an optimistic outlook on life, and evaluating biases and prejudices. Indeed, a genuine sense of self-perception enables individuals to present an accurate portrayal of their reality, fostering self-confidence and self-efficacy (Landmark School Outreach, 2019).

In the field of TESOL research, it is also widely accepted that self-awareness among language teachers yields positive outcomes (Komorowska, 2022; Pinho et al., 2011;

Richards & Lockhart, 1994). Several studies have shown that teachers who practice self-reflection develop self-awareness, leading to a transformation in their teaching methods (Donyaie & Afshar, 2019; Farrell, 2018; Fahim et al., 2013; Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Mercado & Baeher, 2014; Min, 2013; Swatevacharkul, 2019). However, despite ample empirical evidence on the effectiveness of language teachers' self-awareness in educational settings (Komorowska, 2022; Ma, 2022; Pinho et al., 2011; Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001), there has been insufficient focus on investigating how they perceive self-awareness competence and the strategies they employ to cultivate it. More specifically, there is a lack of research on how language teachers perceive self-awareness competence based on CASEL's (2022) self-awareness definition components. Therefore, utilizing CASEL's definition of self-awareness competence as a theoretical framework, which offers a detailed and comprehensive breakdown of its constituent elements, the aim of this qualitative study was to acquire a contextualized perspective on EFL teachers' self-awareness competence and to propose a model of such competence for teachers in the EFL context. To accomplish this goal, the study analyzed the reported understandings and strategies of a sample of EFL teachers concerning their self-awareness competence in their classrooms.

The significance of this qualitative study lies in its investigation of teachers' self-awareness competence in the EFL context. This contribution expands scholarship on the matter and offers insights into how this competence can be enhanced in EFL teachers. Furthermore, this study could provide valuable insights into the development of metacognitive competencies for language teachers, specifically in the area of teacher self-awareness competence. More importantly, by pinpointing the key areas of teacher personality that require attention, these findings can significantly contribute to the existing literature on language teacher metacognition. This study can serve as a useful example for educators seeking to reflect on their own personalities and cultivate their self-awareness, which in turn can enhance their capacity for metacognitive language teaching.

Literature Review

According to CASEL (2022), SEL is an educational approach that fosters individual well-being by nurturing five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Relevant to the particular focus of this study, self-awareness is defined by CASEL as the capacity to identify one's emotions, thoughts, and values and to recognize how they affect behavior within diverse situations. This involves recognizing both strengths and limitations with a confident and directed approach. The competence set encompasses integrating personal and social identities, identifying emotions, recognizing personal, cultural, and linguistic assets, demonstrating honesty and integrity, establishing connections between feelings, values, and thoughts, examining prejudices and biases, developing self-efficacy, fostering a growth mindset, and cultivating interests and a sense of purpose. Taking CASEL's (2022) definition of self-awareness competence into account, this research is the inaugural study focusing solely on exploring EFL teachers' self-awareness competence based on this

definition. As a result, there is a lack of scholarly literature on this subject. Nevertheless, numerous studies have analyzed specific elements of self-awareness. For instance, previous studies have extensively examined teachers' self-awareness abilities within the framework of teacher self-efficacy (Künsting et al., 2016). These investigations have consistently shown a positive correlation between high self-efficacy among teachers and their classroom practices and well-being (Akbarzade Farkhani et al., 2022; Bing et al., 2022; Fathi & Saeedian, 2020).

Teachers' self-efficacy is primarily linked to their sense of self-perception and competence, which can be categorized into two distinct domains (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). The first domain is teachers' personal teaching efficacy, encompassing their convictions regarding teaching and their capacity to promote and influence student learning (Ross, 1992). The second domain is teachers' general teaching efficacy, pertaining to their beliefs regarding teaching practices that yield learning effectiveness (Ross, 1992). It has been shown that highly self-efficacious teachers tend to plan their performances and solve classroom challenges better than lowly self-efficacious teachers who tend to give up on their teaching when facing challenges (Ma, 2022). For instance, studies conducted by Kola and Sunday (2015) and Kheirzadeh and Sistani (2018) have established a significant correlation between teacher self-efficacy and student achievement. In a correlational study conducted by Mahmoodi et al. (2022), the relationship between teacher classroom management orientation, self-efficacy, burnout, and student performance was analyzed. The study gathered information on teacher characteristics through a battery of questionnaires administered to 82 EFL teachers in Iran. The results showed a significant correlation between teachers' classroom management orientations, self-efficacy, burnout and the achievement of students in their second language.

Teachers' self-efficacy is significantly associated with their inclination to incorporate instructional innovations (Guskey, 1988), engagement in teaching, stress management, classroom delivery and questioning techniques, and retention (Coladarci, 1992). For instance, a SEM study conducted by Faravani (2022) investigated the relationship between teachers' persistence, self-efficacy, and participation in continuing professional development (CPD). For this study, 204 EFL teachers in Iran completed a brief grit scale, a teacher self-efficacy scale, and a teacher CPD questionnaire. The findings revealed that teachers' persistence and self-efficacy significantly forecasted CPD and the Pearson correlation analysis indicated a strong correlation between teachers' self-efficacy and CPD.

Much attention has also been devoted to the outcomes of teacher self-efficacy in educational settings. For instance, Xu and Jia's (2022) study using SEM analyzed the function of self-efficacy and stress on teachers' emotional exhaustion and work commitment. The study included a sample size of 295 Chinese EFL teachers who responded to four sets of questionnaires. The study found a positive correlation between high levels of teacher self-efficacy and work engagement. The consequences of teachers' self-efficacy in the classroom were also investigated by Alibakhshi et al. (2022). They

obtained data from 20 EFL teachers who participated in a series of semi-structured interviews. Their discoveries identified three significant results of teacher self-efficacy in the classroom: improvement in pedagogy, consideration of learner-related factors, and enhanced psychological well-being of teachers.

Additionally, teachers' self-efficacy has been found to have a negative correlation with burnout (Tzioti et al., 2010). In a study using SEM, Fathi et al. (2021) examined the relationship between teacher self-efficacy, emotion regulation, burnout, and reflection in a sample of 238 EFL teachers in Iran. The researchers collected data through four questionnaires and found evidence supporting the hypothesized relationship between the four variables. Specifically, the results indicated that teachers' self-efficacy, emotion regulation, and reflection contribute to the reduction of burnout among teachers.

In fact, teachers' self-reflection plays an essential role in enhancing their self-efficacy, leading to personal growth and psychological well-being (Dewey, 1993; Schon, 1992). Reflective teachers continuously assess their practice, discover ways to improve student achievement, and bridge theory and practice, as emphasized by Farrell et al. (2020). Relevant to this particular issue, Akbari et al. (2010) proposed a model for EFL teacher reflection comprising five components: practical, affective, cognitive, metacognitive, and critical. The practical component includes the use of tools such as reflective journals, teaching portfolios, conversation, observation, and self-assessment. The affective component involves reflecting on students' emotions, needs, goals, and performance. The cognitive component includes participating in workshops, seminars, and conferences to enhance professional development. The metacognitive component involves teachers' recognition of their personality, thoughts, and beliefs as a teacher. Lastly, the critical component involves teachers' analysis of the sociopolitical aspects of pedagogy.

Comparable to self-reflection, self-assessment is also seen an essential component of effective teaching for educators, as identified by Borg and Edmett (2019). Research has shown that self-assessment has a significant positive impact on the self-efficacy and self-regulation of both teachers and students (Chung et al., 2021; Nieminen et al., 2021). For instance, Huang's (2022) review of studies on EFL teachers' self-assessment highlighted its function to enhance their self-regulation and self-efficacy. It was discovered that the self-assessment of teachers was strongly linked to their ability to regulate and have confidence in themselves.

Overall, the literature review on teacher self-awareness in EFL contexts demonstrated that there is more attention given to teachers' self-efficacy, which positively affects both teachers and students. Teachers' self-efficacy significantly impacts their classroom practices, student achievement, well-being, engagement, stress management, instructional innovation adoption, questioning techniques, classroom delivery, and retention. Additionally, evidence showed that high self-efficacy levels are linked to lower burnout rates amongst teachers. The aforementioned findings are crucial and they enhance our comprehension of the crucial position of teacher self-efficacy in the EFL scenario. However, there is a lack of research on how teachers perceive their self-

awareness competence and the strategies they utilize to cultivate it in the classroom. Furthermore, according to CASEL's explanation of self-awareness competence, the enhancement of one's self-efficacy is just one part of self-awareness proficiency. Consequently, prompted by the limited amount of qualitative research on EFL teachers' self-awareness competence, this research attempted to investigate how EFL teachers perceive and incorporate self-awareness competence in the classroom, following CASEL's definition. To achieve these objectives, the study utilized two research questions to guide the course of action.

1. What do EFL teachers understand by self-awareness competence?
2. What kinds of self-awareness strategies do EFL teachers report using in their classrooms?

Method

Design

This study utilized an exploratory qualitative approach to examine the scope of self-awareness competence among EFL teachers. The rationale for employing this approach was to gain insight into the participants' actual attitudes and lived experiences (Heigham & Croker, 2009). To achieve this objective, a group of EFL teachers were interviewed to elucidate their self-awareness perceptions and strategies in the classroom. Data were screened using three coding cycles of grounded theory, including open, axial, and selective coding (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), to create a model of self-awareness competence for EFL teachers within the classroom.

Participants

Nineteen EFL teachers from various districts in Iran participated in this study. These participants were recruited through convenience sampling and took part in a series of interviews, which included one semi-structured written interview and four focus group sessions. The reason for using convenience sampling was due to the ease of access to participants, as suggested by Ary et al. (2018). Additionally, based on multiple criteria, including age, gender, academic degree, teaching experience, teaching level, and contexts, a diverse sample was selected. The objective of selecting a heterogeneous sample was to cover a range of characteristics in the study.

The qualifications of the participants were as follows: Of the 19 participants, 11 were female, and eight were male. Fourteen of them were Ph.D. candidates, while one held a Ph.D. degree. In terms of teaching experience, 16 participants had more than five years of experience, and three had less than three years of experience. As for teaching context, 11 taught at language institutes, one at a public school, and six at universities. The participants' teaching levels were diverse: 10 taught at an advanced level, seven at an intermediate level, and one at a basic level. The age range of the participants was between 26 and 35 years old. It is important to note that the researchers conducted interviews with a total of 19 participants and reached data saturation after analyzing the data. Additionally, in accordance with ethical considerations in educational research, participants provided informed consent and were informed of the research goals, data

collection procedures, and the confidentiality of personal information collected during the study.

Instruments

The study employed three instruments to collect data. The initial instrument was a six-item personal information inventory that recorded participants' baseline characteristics, such as age, gender, academic degree, teaching experience, teaching level, and contexts. The second instrument was an interview to obtain the participants' self-awareness, understanding and strategies. Interviews were selected as a means of collecting firsthand information where respondents shared their perspectives and experiences on the topic (Berg & Lune, 2012). The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, wherein a set of fixed questions were asked to all participants relevant to the research objectives, ensuring consistency amongst them (Flick, 2009). Additionally, this type of interview allows participants to clarify, elaborate, or rephrase their responses as necessary. The written interview mode was selected due to its greater convenience and adaptability for collecting textual data compared to other modes. A set of interview questions was then formulated based on the literature and subsequently approved by the research mentors for transparency and relevance. The evaluation process included assessing item relevance and transparency on a four-point scale, ranging from poorly relevant to completely relevant. Additionally, clarity was evaluated on a four-point scale ranging from poorly clear to completely clear. The content validity index (CVI) was calculated by dividing the number of research mentors who rated the item as transparent or relevant by the total number of research mentors. The index was measured on a scale from 0 to 1. Items with a value greater than 0.79 are deemed clear, items with a value ranging from 0.70-0.79 necessitate revision, and items with a value below 0.79 should be excluded (Rodrigues et al., 2017). Following this, CVI attained a value of 0.93, indicating support for the transparency and relevance of the items. It is important to note that the objective of the semi-structured written interview was to inquire about the participants' personal comprehension of self-awareness and the strategies they employ through general questions. The interview then consisted of some open-ended questions about the participants' familiarity with self-awareness as a competency, their interpretations of it, and the strategies they have used. All questions were written in English and expected responses to be provided in the same language, as all participants were EFL teachers with sufficient proficiency.

A Focus group interview (FGI) was utilized as the third instrument to triangulate the data and obtain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' contributions to the research concerns (Maxwell, 2022). To this end, four FGIs were carried out with four sub-groups consisting of all those who completed the semi-structured written interview. The first three FGIs consisted of three sub-groups, each with five participants, while the last FGI comprised a sub-group of four participants. Throughout each FGI session, the participants were prompted to recount their real-life classroom experiences to elicit their attitudes and strategies regarding their self-awareness competence. FGIs were deemed

favorable as they cultivate an affable atmosphere wherein participants can candidly express their viewpoints on a specific topic. Typically, these interviews comprise of four to six participants, and interviewers solicit assorted perspectives and personal experiences through general queries (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

Procedures

The data collection procedure commenced by informing the participants about the study's primary objective. The research ethics were maintained by acquiring consent from the participants and assuring them that their identity and responses would remain confidential to the research team. The participants were then requested to complete the personal information inventory and semi-structured written interview questions in English. All the responses should also be in English. To ensure accessibility, we combined the personal information inventory with the semi-structured interview questions and provided online versions of both instruments via WhatsApp, Telegram, and email to the participants. The completion time for both instruments was 45 minutes.

One week later, four FGIs were conducted with four sub-groups composed of the participants who completed the semi-structured written interview to triangulate the data. To this end, all 19 participants were first divided into four sub-groups, considering their readiness and availability. Then, the first three FGIs were conducted with three sub-groups, each with five participants, while the last FGI was conducted with a sub-group of four participants. Each interview consisted of three phases: warm-up, conceptualization of the construct, and discussion. The warm-up questions promoted a welcoming atmosphere as the participants shared their backgrounds. Subsequently, the researcher presented the conceptual definition of self-awareness competence proposed by CASEL (2022). Afterwards, the participants discussed and shared their perspectives and strategies based on their individual classroom experiences pertaining to self-awareness competency. Additionally, the interview questions concentrated on the frequently mentioned topics raised by the participants. For practical reasons, all FGIs were conducted via the WhatsApp video calling platform and recorded for transcription and analysis. Each FGI lasted approximately two hours, and the participants were free to speak in both Persian and English for the purpose of more conscientious expression.

Data Analysis

This study utilized a systematic approach in grounded theory to analyze the data through three coding cycles: open, axial, and selective coding. A systematic approach in grounded theory is employed when a researcher seeks to create a visual model of the hypothesis based on the findings (Creswell, 2012). For this purpose, open coding involves categorizing data, axial coding identifies relationships between categories and sub-categories, and selective coding uncovers interrelationships between categories to create an explanation or narrative for the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Selective coding was used in this study to create a model of EFL teachers' self-awareness competence, which encompasses their perceptions and classroom strategies.

To begin the coding procedures, all textual data obtained from the semi-structured written interview and four FGIs were initially merged and then transferred for analysis

using MAXQDA software. During the open coding cycle, the textual data were carefully scrutinized to pinpoint the words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs specifically relevant to the research concerns. The objective was to identify and extract key ideas that aligned with the research objectives. Subsequently, utilizing the In Vivo coding technique, which entails the use of the participants' language, words, and terminology, a total of 210 codes were identified (Saldana, 2015).

In the axial coding cycle, similarities and relationships among the codes became apparent through constant comparison. Then, a number of preliminary patterns emerged from the data landscape, which were then linked together to create 7 broad themes and 30 sub-themes. To create a grounded theory, selective coding was used to develop a classroom model of EFL teachers' self-awareness competence, which includes three central perceptions and two key categories of strategy. Besides, to establish the dependability of the processes, an external examiner (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was asked to re-analyze 25% of the data, and a 90% coefficient of agreement was achieved. An example of the three coding cycles is shown below.

Table 1
An Example of Open, Axial, and Selective Coding cycles

Interview Transcript	Open Coding Framework	Axial Coding Framework	Selective Coding Framework
Participant 5: We should be open to learning about ourselves.	Openness to Self-Development (In Vivo coding)	Having a Growth Mindset	The Core Components of EFL Teachers' Self-Awareness Understandings
Participant 7: First by asking a colleague to observe my class and tell me the points.	Asking Colleagues to Observe Classes (In Vivo coding)	Self-Evaluation	Practical Reflective Strategy

Several measures were taken to increase the trustworthiness of the study. First, to increase the credibility of the data, we maintained the confidentiality of the participant's responses and identities, obtained signed consent forms, and followed open and direct interview schedules. In addition, by sending the researcher's interpretations to the participants for accuracy and confirmation, we further enhanced the credibility of the participants' responses. Methodological and data triangulation was achieved through the use of two data collection tools, such as a semi-structured written interview and four focus group interviews, which resulted in consistent data. Ultimately, all phases of the study were documented and reported to maintain transparency.

Results

EFL Teachers' Self-Awareness Understandings

As illustrated in Figure 1, the results of the open and axial coding cycles indicated three overarching themes regarding the participants' understanding of self-awareness

competence: knowing one's emotions, having a growth mindset, and having a realistic sense of self-perception.

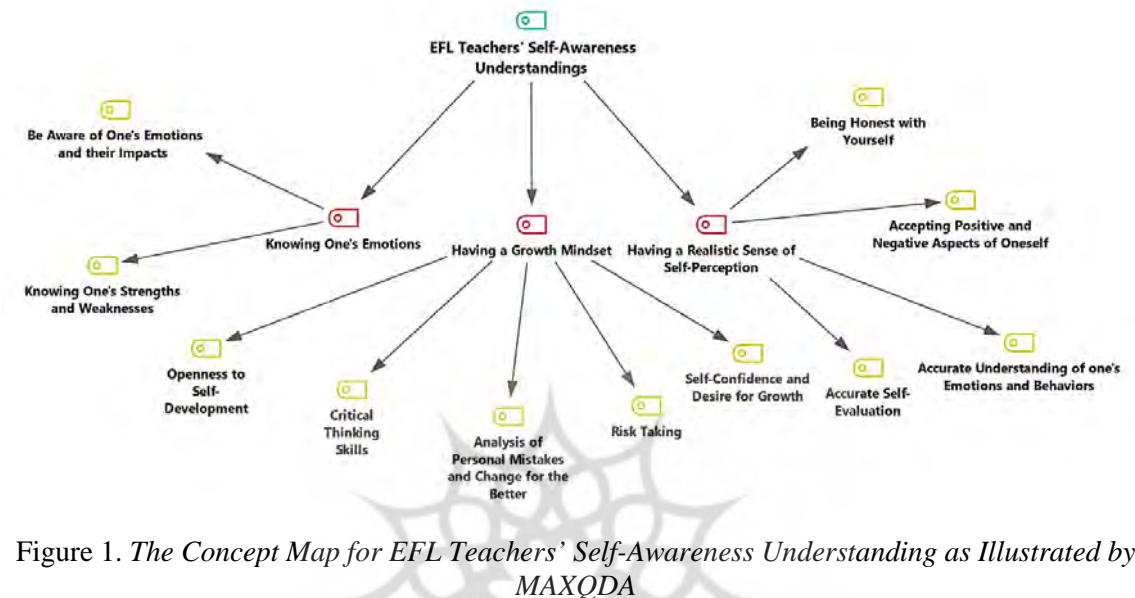


Figure 1. *The Concept Map for EFL Teachers' Self-Awareness Understanding as Illustrated by MAXQDA*

Knowing One's Emotions

Knowing one's emotions was the most commonly reported perception among the participants, with two supporting sub-themes. The majority of the participants defined self-awareness competence as the capability to acknowledge their emotions and their effects on their behaviors, in addition to comprehending their strengths and weaknesses. For the first sub-theme, which pertains to awareness of one's emotions and their effects, the majority of the participants noted that self-awareness entails recognizing one's emotions, thoughts, and values and their influence on classroom behavior. Participant 17, for instance, proposed that "In my opinion, self-awareness competence means having the ability to understand my thoughts, emotions, and values, as well as how these factors influence my behavior in the classroom". This participant believed that there is a strong connection between an individual's emotions and behaviors and that self-awareness involves recognizing one's emotional states and their potential outcomes.

Participants also identified knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses as the second sub-theme related to self-awareness competence. Some of the participants explicitly reported that self-awareness includes the ability to properly recognize one's limitations, strengths, and weaknesses. For instance, participant 18 claimed that "It is the ability to recognize your emotions and thoughts, how they influence your behavior, and to identify your limitations, strengths, and weaknesses," adding that self-awareness competence also embraces the ability to determine one's strengths and weaknesses.

Having a Growth Mindset

The second most frequently mentioned perception by the participants was the adoption of a growth mindset, comprised of five sub-themes elucidating that teacher self-awareness involves cultivating a mindset of growth, and seizing opportunities for self-improvement. Then, the first sub-theme, openness to self-development, revealed that some participants believed that self-awareness involves being receptive to the various resources that are accessible to individuals for personal growth. Participant 5, for instance, expressed that: "I think self-awareness means being open to learning about yourself by having the courage to accept feedback from others to improve yourself".

The second sub-theme, critical thinking skills, illustrated the participants' ability to approach all occurrences in their environment from a critical perspective for the sake of self-improvement. For instance, participant 6's response supports this notion: "Self-awareness refers to thinking critically and trying to be curious. In this way we can increase our creativity, our consciousness, and our ability to handle complex situations in our job better".

Analyzing personal errors and striving for self-improvement, the third sub-theme, revealed that several participants believed that recognizing and learning from one's mistakes would foster their self-awareness competence. For example, participant 5 emphasized that: "Having self-awareness means that we can objectively analyze our personal mistakes and find practical solutions to change for the better".

Risk-taking emerged as the fourth sub-theme, as some participants maintained that developing self-awareness necessitates taking risks and gaining knowledge from the experience. Participant 11, for instance, remarked: "Self-awareness means I am not afraid to make mistakes and take risks in the classroom to learn a lot." This implies that self-awareness involves having no fear of making mistakes, as it adds to one's personal knowledge.

The final sub-theme that emerged was the importance of having self-confidence and a desire to grow as another aspect of self-awareness competence. According to some participants, self-awareness involves the ability to remain motivated for self-improvement. For instance, Participant 17 stated: "Self-awareness means maintaining confidence, drive, and a desire to grow," suggesting that possessing a sufficient level of self-confidence for growth can also be considered a component of self-awareness.

Having a Realistic Sense of Self-Perception

Having a realistic sense of self-perception was the third most common perception among the participants. This broad theme, supported by four sub-themes, largely represented the participants' identification of self-awareness with having a reasonable sense of self. Then, the first sub-theme, having an accurate self-evaluation, uncovered that some participants linked self-awareness with objectively appraising their strengths, limitations, and weaknesses. For example, participant 17 articulated that: "Self-awareness is the ability to realistically evaluate our strengths and weaknesses and consistently

improve upon our limitations." This suggests that self-awareness entails continually assessing and developing one's assets.

Having an accurate understanding of one's emotions and behaviors, the second sub-theme, revealed that the participants understood self-awareness as the degree to which individuals gain an authentic comprehension of their emotional states and behaviors. They emphasized having a precise understanding of their own emotional processes and behaviors to achieve self-awareness. For instance, participant 4 stated that: "Self-awareness involves having a more accurate understanding of our own emotions and behaviors."

Accepting one's positive and negative aspects, the third sub-theme, demonstrated that self-awareness is linked to the degree to which individuals accept both their positive and negative traits. For example, participant 17 responded, "I think it refers to see both positive and negative things in my nature, as I believe that acknowledging my shortcomings and embracing my strengths is a great confidence booster," suggesting that teachers' acceptance of their strengths and weaknesses cultivates their self-awareness competence.

Finally, regarding the last sub-theme, being honest with yourself, some participants stated that self-awareness pertains to an individual's integrity with themselves. Participant 17 continued, "I try to be honest with myself. It helps me to respond to compliments, feedback, and criticism openly and seriously". In fact, this participant believed that self-awareness is the degree to which individuals are able to accurately perceive themselves, thereby accepting others' feedback.

EFL Teachers' Self-Awareness Strategies

After conducting open and axial coding cycles, Figure 2 shows that the results generated four primary themes for self-awareness strategies: speculative practices, getting feedback, self-evaluation, and personal knowledge-expanding practices.

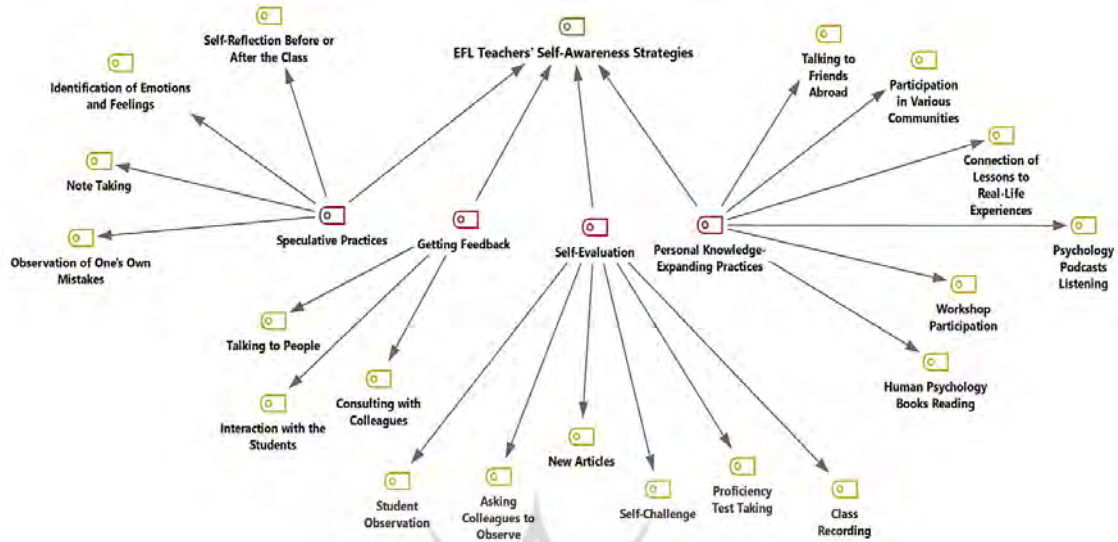


Figure 2. *The Concept Map for EFL Teachers' Self-Awareness Strategies as Illustrated by MAXQDA*

Speculative Practices

The predominant strategy reported by the participants entailed speculative practices related to four sub-themes. The majority reported that engaging in self-reflection to identify their emotions, errors, and responses in particular situations is a means of augmenting self-awareness competence. Then, in terms of self-reflection before or after the class, the participants reported reflecting on their actions, decisions, and teaching practices to present their best during class or to reflect on their accomplishments afterward. For example, participant 19 reported: “I am used to reflecting on my classroom behaviors, the types of instructional decisions I am likely to make, and the possible consequences of those decisions for my students before I enter my classroom”. This participant continued: “After my classes, I also reflect on my performance to see how much I was effective or ineffective,” demonstrating that this practice can be used as a strategy to enhance educators' self-awareness resulting in improvements in their overall classroom performance.

The second sub-theme, identifying emotions and feelings, highlights the significance of the participants' acknowledging their emotions to navigate them effectively and gain self-awareness. For instance, participant 17 reported, “One of the top strategies that I use is that I try to identify my emotions and feelings. I believe that learning the difference between frustration and anger will help me navigate my emotions.” This notion proposes that teachers who reflect on their emotions can more effectively navigate their feelings and, as a result, cultivate a genuine sense of self-awareness.

Additionally, in relation to note-taking, the third sub-theme, some participants reported that keeping personal records could be a valuable strategy for discovering self-

awareness. For instance, participant 15 said: "I trained myself to write down my daily affairs and reactions on different occasions to read later, like a week later, to know how much I was right or wrong in that particular moment." This highlights the potential of note-taking to enhance teachers' awareness of their effectiveness in conducting actions, reactions, and performances.

Finally, observing one's own mistakes, the last sub-theme reveals that individuals can improve self-awareness by acknowledging and learning from their own mistakes. This strategy was reported by some participants. For instance, participant 5 responded: "Self-awareness can be obtained through observing one's own mistakes, analyze them carefully, and learning from them. In fact, mistakes are chances that everyone needs to exploit for knowing themselves." Indeed, learning from personal mistakes for future opportunities can be considered a self-awareness knowledge-building strategy for teachers.

Getting Feedback

The second most commonly reported strategy was receiving feedback from others, which was supported by three sub-themes. The participants mainly relied on diverse human resources as a means of obtaining genuine feedback regarding themselves in order to enhance their self-awareness. Then, talking to people to get information about one's weaknesses and strengths was the first sub-theme in this category. For instance, participant 11 reported: "One way to get to know myself is to talk to others about my talents and abilities. This helps me get real information from other lenses". This participant demonstrated that obtaining feedback from others can result in genuine insights that foster self-awareness, "People see things in us that we can't see ourselves, so we can become aware of our weaknesses and strengths."

The second sub-theme pertained to student interaction. Some participants commented that students are valuable sources of information in the classroom to assist in developing teachers' self-awareness. For instance, participant 7 stated: "The interactions I have with my students are also important, asking students to tell me what they like and don't like about my classes and asking them to share their ideas." This implies that seeking input from students and facilitating open communication can effectively enhance a teacher's self-awareness.

Finally, the third sub-theme of consulting with colleagues revealed that some participants seek guidance from their close colleagues to develop self-awareness. For example, participant 19 reported, "I sometimes discuss issues with one of my close colleagues to get some advice and information. Because they know us well, and their feedback is real." This implies that because close friends or colleagues are familiar with our strengths and weaknesses, their feedback can provide valuable insights to increase our self-awareness competence.

Self-Evaluation

Self-evaluation emerged as the third most commonly reported strategy in this study. Supported by six sub-themes, this strategy mainly depicted the participants' efforts to assess various resources to evaluate their knowledge, behaviors, and teaching practices in

order to enhance their self-awareness. Subsequently, the first sub-theme of student observation was identified as a primary source for self-evaluation. For example, participant 4 reported: "I evaluate myself by observing students' performance in class. I think these sources of information are the easiest ways to increase my self-knowledge." This approach can offer valuable insights into areas for improvement and ultimately contribute to increasing one's self-knowledge.

Asking colleagues to observe, the second sub-theme was reported by some participants as requesting colleagues to observe their classroom and teaching practices and provide feedback on the quality of their performances. In this regard, participant 7 reported: "I gain self-awareness by asking a colleague to observe my class and tell me the points about the effectiveness of my classroom performances".

The third sub-theme, as claimed by participant 18, involved self-evaluation of one's teaching performance through an examination of new articles in the field, ultimately leading to heightened self-awareness: "I usually try to keep up by indulging in reading the latest articles, such as new teaching strategies, use of technology in teaching, and assessment, and then I analyze my teaching style against each new article I read".

Self-challenge, the fourth sub-theme, involved the participants' analyzing their actions, behaviors, and decisions by challenging themselves during difficult situations and attempting to apply the lessons learned in future situations. For instance, participant 5 responded:

One thing that helps me to know myself is to challenge myself. In hard situations, I try to analyze and ask myself the reason why I was not successful enough, and then I try to work on myself to get better.

Taking proficiency tests was another technique of self-evaluation, exemplifying the participants' regular attempts to test their productive and receptive language skills in order to become aware of their English proficiency. For example, one participant stated: "I take some professional tests like TOEFL or IELTS to get information about my English proficiency and to improve myself" (Participant 10).

Finally, the last sub-theme focused on class recordings for later self-evaluation, which demonstrated how participants utilized technology for self-assessment to enhance their self-awareness. In this regard, mobile phone and audio recordings were the most informative examples cited. For example, one of the participants said: "My main strategy is to record my class and voice so that I can listen to my class critically and find out any possible mistakes or weaknesses or misunderstandings" (Participant 1).

Personal Knowledge-Expanding Practices

Personal knowledge-expanding practices emerged as the last popular strategy among the participants. The strategy was backed by six sub-themes and revealed the participants' distinctive methods for increasing their self-awareness. Regarding the first sub-theme of studying human psychology, the participants explored a range of psychological and behavioral books aimed at increasing their self-awareness. For example, participant 19 stated:

I expand my knowledge of human psychology by reading books in this area. It will help me to compare what I have learned from the books with myself in order to know myself better or to discover my dark sides.

Attending workshops emerged as the second sub-theme identified by the participants as a strategy for enhancing self-awareness. "I will attend self-improvement workshops, such as psychological workshops held by some organizations or English teaching workshops at universities," reported Participant 3.

The third sub-theme was listening to psychological podcasts. According to some participants, there are psychological podcasts accessible on social media that they would use to enhance their self-awareness. For example, participant 9 responded, "By subscribing to some of the psychological sites available on social media and listening to their psychological podcasts, I can boost my self-awareness".

Connecting lessons to real-life experiences emerged as the fourth sub-theme. The participants noted that real experiences overlap with some of the lessons they teach. By relating and comparing key points of the lessons with their own life experiences, they can increase self-awareness. "Sometimes, some lessons we teach in class have some similarities with our real life or have some wisdom in them, so by connecting them to real-life experience, I would expand my self-awareness," reported participant 10.

Participation in various communities, as demonstrated in the fifth sub-theme, involved attending diverse gatherings like school or friend meetups. This exposure facilitated the participants' familiarity with unique cultures, attitudes, and personalities, prompting them to reconsider their stereotypes and expand their self-awareness. "I participate in different communities, including gatherings of colleagues, parties and associations, to learn a lot about others and discover myself," said participant 3.

Finally, the final sub-theme discusses communication with pen pals abroad as a means of enhancing the participants' knowledge of English language proficiency and cultural awareness. "I have some friends from other countries. We talk about everything in English. It is great, not only do I learn about them, but I also learn a lot about myself and my misunderstandings," stated participant 10.

Following the completion of open and axial coding cycles, selective coding was conducted on all broad themes. This process led to the creation of a classroom model focused on the self-awareness competence of EFL teachers (Figure 3). The model comprises two major components: EFL teachers' perceptions and strategies for enhancing their self-awareness competence in the classroom. According to the model, teachers' perceptions encompass three core components, whereas their strategies consist of four main components.

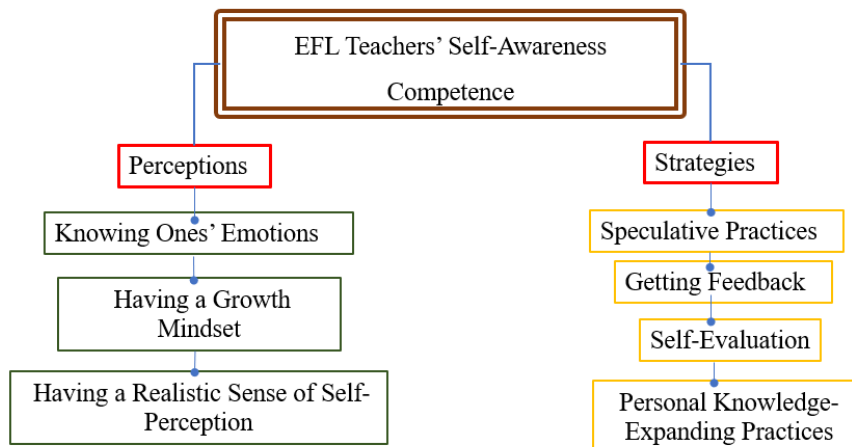


Figure 3. A Classroom Model of EFL Teachers' Self-Awareness Competence

Discussion

The primary goals of this research project were to examine how EFL teachers perceive and utilize self-awareness competence in the classroom. To achieve this, 19 EFL teachers were interviewed to share their views and strategies. Regarding the participants' comprehension of self-awareness competence, the fundamental concepts were knowing one's emotions, having a growth mindset, and having a realistic sense of self-perception. These concepts aligned with CASEL's (2022) definition of self-awareness competence, which emphasizes the capacity to comprehend one's own sentiments, beliefs, and principles, as well as how they affect actions in various settings. Among essential skills are recognizing strengths and weaknesses, understanding one's emotions, cultivating a growth mindset, and fostering a genuine sense of self (CASEL, 2022).

The first presiding perception indicated that the majority of the participants defined self-awareness competence as the capacity to understand one's emotional inclinations and how they impact one's actions, decisions, and instructional practices. Additionally, they acknowledged that self-awareness competence involves the capability to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of one's personal attributes. The second prevailing view among the participants was that self-awareness competence involved being receptive to learning about oneself and making positive changes. They believed that taking risks, analyzing personal mistakes, and striving for self-improvement could help individuals attain a sustainable level of self-awareness competence. Finally, regarding the third predominant perception, the participants maintained that self-awareness involves realistically identifying and evaluating an individual's emotions and behaviors. They argued that self-awareness requires honest self-evaluation that acknowledges both positive and negative traits alongside an authentic assessment of one's emotions and behaviors.

Consequently, it was revealed that the participants were successful in identifying the core components of self-awareness competence outlined by CASEL's (2022)

definition. Therefore, the comprehension of self-awareness competence among EFL teachers involves three fundamental elements, specifically knowing one's emotions, having a growth mindset, and having a realistic self-perception.

In terms of self-awareness strategies, the study found that the participants utilized four main self-awareness strategies, namely, speculative practices, getting feedback, self-evaluation, and personal knowledge-expanding practices. These strategies aligned with the components of EFL teacher reflection presented by Akbari et al. (2010). The findings revealed that speculative practices, getting feedback, and self-evaluation reflect features of Akbari et al.'s (2010) EFL teacher reflection practical component. The practical component includes various tools employed by teachers for self-fulfillment, such as teaching portfolios, self-evaluations, journals, interactions with others, and observations.

Subsequently, as far as speculative practices are concerned, the study found that the participants reported engaging in certain activities, such as self-reflection before and after the class, recording personal notes, identifying their emotions and reactions in different situations, and observing errors to improve their behavioral efficiency and expand their self-awareness competence (Akbari et al., 2010). Regarding obtaining feedback, the participants reported utilizing various human resources to receive evaluations about themselves. For instance, they solicit feedback from others regarding their abilities and talents or attentively listen to critiques. In addition, they reported interacting with students or consulting with colleagues as other ways to get feedback from human resources. On the whole, the participants believed that these sources of information are the most authentic to obtaining self-awareness competence.

In terms of self-evaluation, the study found that the participants analyzed certain data to measure their productivity in order to improve their self-awareness competence. For example, teachers can evaluate their teaching effectiveness by observing students, asking colleagues to observe their teaching, comparing their performances with professional updates, setting personal challenges, and recording classes for later review. These are among the methods reported as gaining firsthand information for one's self-evaluation. In this regard, the findings also support Huang's (2022) conclusion that self-evaluation is significant in fostering EFL teachers' self-awareness competence.

Finally, the participants reported some personal knowledge-expanding practices that echoed some features of Akbari et al.'s (2010) cognitive element of EFL teacher reflection. Basically, the participants referred to these practices in order to build on their personal knowledge for the development of their self-awareness competence. In this case, they referred to some personal strategies, i.e., reading books on human psychology, listening to psychology podcasts, and attending workshops, etc.

Overall, it can be estimated that the reported strategies align with two major categories based on the characteristics of their sub-themes when compared to Akbari et al.'s (2010) proposed components for EFL teachers' reflection. In this regard, speculative practices, getting feedback, and self-evaluation can be classified as practical reflective strategy types and personal knowledge-expanding practices can be classified as cognitive, reflective strategy types.

Subsequently, based on the emerging themes, it can be hypothesized that the model of EFL teachers' self-awareness competence consists of two main elements: their perceptions and strategies. Their perceptions center on three key components: the recognition of their emotions, the development of a growth mindset, and the establishment of an authentic sense of self. Their strategies revolve around practical and cognitive reflection, suggesting a convergence between the stated strategies and perceptions. Self-reflection is crucial for cultivating accurate self-awareness competence, which entails recognizing one's genuine emotions to foster a mindset geared toward growth (Farrell et al., 2020). Hence, this model offers additional confirmation of the current literature regarding the significance of teachers' self-reflection practices in cultivating their self-awareness competence (Donyaie & Afshar, 2019; Farrell, 2018; Fahim et al., 2013; Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Mercado & Baecher, 2014; Min, 2013; Stewart & Reinders, 2023; Swatevacharkul, 2019).

Conceptually, the findings shed light on the significant role of reflection as the primary tool for improving EFL teachers' self-awareness skills (Abdar & Shafaei, 2022). Specifically, the study indicates that practical reflective strategies are preferred by EFL teachers and dominate the EFL context. The participants in this study reported engaging in diverse reflective strategies to enhance their self-awareness concerning their behaviors, actions, and practices within the classroom. This helped them modify and improve themselves afterward. In fact, the participants' reporting of reflective strategies for developing self-awareness competence provided qualitative evidence further supporting empirical evidence from experimental studies that documented the positive impact of teachers' high levels of self-efficacy on both teachers' and students' classroom practices and well-being (Akbarzade Farkhani et al., 2022; Alibakhshi et al., 2022; Bing et al., 2022; Faravani, 2022; Fathi et al., 2021; Fathi & Saeedian, 2020; Kola & Sunday, 2015; Kheirzadeh & Sistani, 2018; Mahmoodi et al., 2022; Tzioti et al., 2010; Xu & Jia's, 2022).

In practice, the cognitive strategies reported in this study can contribute to the professional development of EFL educators. According to Zamani et al. (2023), EFL educators need to acquire strategies such as participating in relevant seminars, workshops, and webinars, as well as engaging in peer observations to enhance their knowledge for better teacher recruitment. As teachers increase their self-awareness competence through practical reflective strategies, it can be argued that the findings aligned with the individual development planning (IDP) model of EFL teachers proposed by Haghi et al. (2023), which identified self-evaluation as one of the fundamental categories of EFL teachers' IDP. Boosting EFL teachers' self-awareness through cognitive and practical reflective strategies can have a direct impact on the development of their pedagogical content knowledge (PDK) as well. In this study, the participants reported using these strategies primarily to identify their strengths and weaknesses. Subsequently, the findings provided further evidence for the PDK model of EFL teachers, as developed by Sadeghi et al. (2022).

Altogether, increasing self-awareness is one of the factors contributing to the development of language teachers' metacognitive skills (Stewart & Reinders, 2023). In

the current study, the participants' perceptions towards self-awareness competence, including knowledge of their emotions, having a growth mindset, and an authentic sense of self, as well as practical and cognitive reflective strategies, emphasized the importance they place on enhancing metacognitive skills for improved classroom performance, as has been suggested by multiple scholars (Fairbanks et al., 2010; Hartman, 2001; Haukås, 2018; Hiver et al., 2019; Jiang et al., 2016; Macalister, 2016; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Stewart & Reinders, 2023). Finally, the findings will contribute to Carden et al.'s (2022) systematic review of literature on self-awareness components by providing significant insights into EFL teachers' self-awareness perceptions and strategies in the applied linguistics field.

Conclusion

The central purpose of this study was to examine how EFL teachers made sense of and implemented self-awareness competence in the classroom. As has been mentioned, the current study drew on CASEL's (2022) definition of self-awareness competence as a theoretical framework. Employing this definition has the advantage of basing the findings on the latest definition of self-awareness postulated by one of the leading figures in SEL, which aims to boost individuals' well-being. Besides, the organization of CASEL has spent almost three decades revising and refining the five core competencies based on the execution of SEL in educational settings. As a result, a much more comprehensive definition has been achieved, including the components of each SEL competency, such as self-awareness competence. This ensures that the study framework and findings were maximally relevant to the construct, ultimately inspiring confidence in the model developed.

The self-awareness model developed for EFL teachers in this study revealed three fundamental aspects of self-awareness proficiency: understanding one's emotions, embracing a growth mindset, and having a realistic self-perception, as well as two primary categories of strategies - cognitive and practical reflection. The findings indicated a correlation between the perceptions and strategies discussed. Furthermore, the findings verified the significance of self-reflection in the EFL setting, providing further evidence for the utility of teachers' reflective practices in bolstering their self-awareness competence. Additionally, it augments the most recent comprehensive survey of literary works investigating how proficiency in self-awareness is defined in other disciplines.

Subsequently, these lines of research have several pedagogical implications. First, it is highly recommended that future EFL teachers concentrate their efforts on cultivating a comprehensive understanding of the concept of self-reflection and refining their personal reflective practices, considering the integral role that reflection plays in the development of self-awareness competence. Second, the connection between teachers' self-awareness competence and personal development in language teaching should be emphasized by Applied Linguists. This is because enhancing self-awareness competence can assist them in becoming more metacognitive language teachers, ultimately improving their classroom practices and well-being. Finally, the findings should be utilized by teacher educators to

incorporate practical reflective strategies in EFL contexts. This inclusion can improve the quality of teacher preparation programs and aid prospective EFL teachers in becoming more metacognitively oriented language teachers.

However, the study has certain limitations. One limitation pertains to the exclusion of baseline characteristics of the participants during data analysis due to the study focus. Another limitation is the possible lack of generalizability of the findings since the researchers utilized a qualitative approach and relied solely on interviews as their data collection instruments. Hence, there is a necessity for meticulous research utilizing mixed methods designs and systematic data collection methods to broaden our comprehension in this area.

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