

Instructional Challenges in Thai Primary EFL: A Practitioner Inquiry of a Non-Thai Teacher

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Abstract

This study investigates instructional challenges faced by a non-Thai teacher in teaching English to Thai primary students within a cross-cultural classroom context. While previous research has primarily emphasized students' perceptions of foreign teachers, limited attention has been given to classroom-based instructional processes. This qualitative study involved 12 Thai primary students from Grades 3 to 6. Data were collected through classroom observations, reflective teaching notes, students' drawings, and short interviews and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicated that instructional challenges emerged in managing student engagement, delivering comprehensible English input, addressing affective barriers to participation, navigating the absence of Thai language support, and managing cross-cultural novelty in the classroom. These challenges required ongoing instructional adjustment. In response, the teacher implemented several solutions, including the use of visual support and contextual demonstrations to enhance comprehensibility, modeling and repetition to reinforce language input, and structured peer assistance to facilitate understanding and participation. These adaptive strategies enabled gradual improvements in student engagement and task completion across sessions. The study highlights the complexity of teaching young learners in cross-cultural EFL settings and underscores the importance of adaptive classroom practices in multilingual primary education contexts. The study also highlights the role of teacher agency in enabling adaptive instructional decisions in response to classroom challenges.

Keywords: Young Learners; Cross Cultural Classroom; Teacher Agency; Instructional Challenges

English has become an important subject in primary education across many Asian countries, including Thailand, as part of efforts to prepare young learners for global communication (Diyanti & Madya, 2021). In primary schools, English instruction is expected not only to develop basic language skills but

also to foster positive learning experiences appropriate to students' cognitive and emotional development (Diyanti & Madya, 2021; Lemana et al., 2025). However, despite such policy initiatives, English proficiency in Thailand remains low (Lemana et al., 2025), and teaching English to young learners remains challenging,

particularly in EFL contexts where students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom and instruction often relies on traditional grammar-focused methods rather than communicative approaches (Buacokrung et al., 2025; Islahuddin, 2023). This reliance on traditional methods is particularly problematic in rural contexts where resource limitations and a lack of exposure to English outside the classroom further hinder student proficiency (Kaosayapandhu, 2023). Compounding these systemic challenges, studies from across the Asian region indicate that the gap between nationally mandated communicative language policies and actual classroom implementation remains wide, particularly in under-resourced primary settings where teacher training, material availability, and institutional support are uneven (Wang et al., 2023).

While these policy and proficiency concerns are well-documented at the systemic level, a gap remains between theoretical ideals and everyday classroom realities. Theoretically, communicative and task-based approaches are widely recommended for young EFL learners, as they emphasize interaction, meaningful input, and learner engagement (Harmer, 1997). However, in actual classroom practice — especially in under-resourced or cross-cultural contexts — teachers often face constraints that limit the implementation of these approaches. In this study, the teacher-researcher did not speak Thai, which significantly shaped classroom interaction. The absence of a shared first language required the teacher to rely heavily on visual support, gestures, and simplified input. This condition highlights the importance of instructional clarity, where teachers must continuously adapt their strategies to ensure comprehension despite linguistic barriers (Cui & Teo, 2024). Therefore, the challenge is not only about what theories recommend, but how these theories are interpreted and applied in real-time teaching situations.

Teacher agency in this study refers to the teacher's ability to make adaptive

instructional decisions in response to dynamic classroom situations. In primary EFL contexts, teacher agency is particularly important because teaching effectiveness depends not only on lesson planning but also on how teachers respond to students' immediate needs, comprehension difficulties, and classroom interaction (Gu et al., 2022). Therefore, examining instructional challenges from the teacher's perspective provides important insights into how teaching is enacted in real classroom practice. Research on teacher agency in online and face-to-face EFL contexts further demonstrates that agentic teachers who engage in continuous reflection and pedagogical problem-solving produce better instructional outcomes, even within structurally constrained environments (Tang et al., 2024).

Previous studies have emphasized that young learners require meaningful interaction, visual support, and engaging instructional activities to sustain attention and participation in language learning (Harmer, 1997; Summer & Böttger, 2022). In Asian EFL classrooms, these challenges are often compounded by differences in language use, classroom culture, and expectations between teachers and learners (Littlewood, 2012). A recent systematic review of young EFL learners' motivation and task engagement similarly identified instructional clarity, teacher warmth, and a variety of interactive activities as key determinants of sustained engagement in primary classrooms (Lena & Nikolov, 2025). In recent years, the presence of non-local or foreign teachers in primary EFL classrooms has increased. Existing research has frequently examined students' attitudes, motivation, or perceptions toward learning English with foreign teachers (Aslan & Thompson, 2016; Ross & Stückler, 2025; Wallace & Leong, 2020). While such studies provide valuable insights into learners' experiences, they often pay limited attention to the instructional challenges encountered by teachers during classroom practice, particularly in primary and cross-cultural contexts. Specifically, research

indicates that teachers in primary settings often struggle with classroom management, time constraints, and adapting instruction to diverse student characteristics ([Purwanti & Prasanti, 2025](#); [Şener & Çokkalışkan, 2024](#)). A recent study on foreign teachers navigating Thai and Japanese school contexts reinforces these findings, illustrating that intercultural communication differences and unmet expectations significantly affect how teachers adapt their instructional practices to local educational norms ([Derrah et al., 2024](#)).

Teaching English as a non-Thai teacher in a Thai primary school involves managing multiple instructional demands simultaneously ([Buacokrung et al., 2025](#)). These include maintaining student engagement, delivering comprehensible input, addressing affective barriers, and balancing cultural curiosity with instructional goals. For young learners, instructional clarity and classroom interaction play a crucial role in shaping learning outcomes ([Brown & Ellis, 1996](#)). However, how these challenges emerge and are addressed in everyday classroom remains underexplored, particularly in terms of how these challenges are addressed in real-time classroom interaction. These challenges also relate to teacher agency, as teachers are required to make continuous instructional decisions to respond to students' needs in dynamic classroom situations. In terms of instructional approaches, this study employs interactive and communicative types, where students are encouraged to participate actively and use language for real communicative purposes. These approaches were chosen because they support comprehension and engagement in a cross-cultural classroom where a shared first language between teacher and students is absent. The situation of non-Thai teachers in Thai schools has been examined in recent empirical work, which demonstrates that despite demonstrating effective classroom performance, these teachers regularly encounter administrative, linguistic, and cultural barriers that necessitate ongoing professional adaptation ([Srisitanont](#)

[Luangkrajang, 2023](#)). Moreover, research on intercultural foreign language teaching in primary school contexts indicates that teachers' preparedness for culturally responsive instruction is often inadequate, and that a disconnect persists between the academic advocacy for intercultural pedagogy and the realities of frontline teaching ([Wang et al., 2023](#)).

Therefore, this study aims to examine instructional challenges faced by a non-Thai teacher in teaching English to Thai primary students and to explore how these challenges are addressed in classroom practice. Rather than focusing on students' perceptions, this study adopts a classroom-based practitioner perspective, highlighting instructional experiences and pedagogical decision-making in a natural teaching context.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on instructional challenges from the perspective of a teacher-researcher in a Thai primary EFL classroom. While previous studies have largely examined students' attitudes, motivation, or perceptions toward learning English with foreign teachers ([Aslan & Thompson, 2016](#); [Wallace & Leong, 2020](#); [Ross & Stückler, 2025](#)), little attention has been given to the instructional side of the classroom, particularly how teachers navigate challenges as they arise during teaching. This study addresses that gap by examining instructional challenges directly from the teacher's perspective in a real classroom setting. What makes this study particularly distinctive is that the teacher-researcher did not speak Thai, a condition that shaped every aspect of classroom interaction and required continuous instructional adjustment throughout the teaching process. By foregrounding classroom practice rather than learner attitudes, this study contributes practical pedagogical insights for teachers working with young learners in cross-cultural and multilingual settings, particularly in contexts where the absence of a shared first language between teacher and students necessitates ongoing adaptation in

teaching strategies. Furthermore, this study is consistent with a growing body of practitioner inquiry research that emphasizes the value of teacher-generated knowledge in illuminating the micro-level complexities of classroom interaction that are often invisible in large-scale quantitative studies (Cui & Teo, 2024; Lee et al., 2023).

Beyond the cognitive and pedagogical dimensions of instruction, the emotional demands placed upon non-native language teachers in cross-cultural classrooms represent an important yet underexplored dimension of teacher experience. Teaching in an environment where one's own first language is absent not only heightens the communicative burden but also creates emotional labor as teachers continuously monitor student comprehension, manage behavioral dynamics, and sustain a positive relational atmosphere without the social lubricant of a shared linguistic code. A recent systematic review on teacher emotion regulation in EFL contexts concluded that high emotional labor, particularly in sociocultural diverse settings, significantly intensifies the psychological demands of instruction and directly mediates instructional quality and student engagement outcomes (Xu et al., 2026). This emotional dimension is especially salient in primary school settings where young learners are developmentally sensitive to teacher affect and classroom atmosphere. For non-Thai teachers, the need to remain emotionally attuned to students while navigating cultural unfamiliarity and linguistic distance creates layered professional challenges. Integrating intercultural communicative competence into EFL instruction has been shown to positively mediate these challenges by fostering mutual understanding and reducing the affective distance between teacher and learners (Lee et al., 2023). As such, any account of instructional challenges in cross-cultural primary EFL settings must attend not only to curricular and pedagogical difficulties but also to the affective dimensions of teaching that shape moment-by-moment classroom decisions.

The practitioner inquiry orientation of this study also has broader implications for teacher education and professional development in EFL contexts. Practitioner research, or insider inquiry conducted by teachers about their own classroom practice, occupies a unique epistemic position in applied linguistics because it generates situated knowledge that is simultaneously analytical and actionable (Cui & Teo, 2024). In Thai primary schools, the professional development landscape for non-Thai teachers has been shown to be limited in terms of both availability and relevance, with foreign teachers frequently reporting insufficient institutional support for navigating cultural and pedagogical barriers (Srisitanont Luangkrajang, 2023). By documenting instructional challenges from within the classroom, this study contributes to a mode of knowledge production that can inform pre-service teacher preparation programs, in-service training initiatives, and curriculum design in EFL contexts where cross-cultural teaching is increasingly common. Primary school EFL teachers' self-efficacy, attitudes, and contextual awareness have been identified as critical mediators of instructional effectiveness, suggesting that reflective practitioner accounts can serve as powerful professional development tools (Liu & Reynolds, 2025). Furthermore, as communicative language teaching policies continue to expand across Asia, there is a growing need for documentation of how such policies are enacted and adapted at the classroom level, particularly by teachers who operate across linguistic and cultural boundaries. This study responds to that need by positioning the teacher-researcher's experience as a site of scholarly inquiry, thereby contributing to both the empirical literature on Thai primary EFL instruction and to broader conversations about teacher agency, cross-cultural pedagogy, and instructional adaptation in diverse language learning contexts.

Method

This study employed a qualitative

classroom-based practitioner inquiry. The research focused on identifying instructional challenges encountered during English teaching and examining how these challenges were addressed in classroom practice. The study was conducted in a natural classroom setting as part of regular English instruction, without introducing any additional experimental treatment. This qualitative approach was selected to allow for an in-depth examination of the existing situation, enabling a comprehensive understanding of instructional challenges within their contextual environment ([Şener & Çokçalışkan, 2024](#)).

The participants consisted of 12 Thai primary students from Grades 3 to 6 at a public school in Loei Province, Thailand. These students exhibited varied levels of English proficiency and had limited exposure to English outside the classroom. The researcher also served as their English teacher, adopting a teacher-researcher role that enabled direct observation of instructional challenges as they emerged during classroom interactions.

Data were collected during regular English lessons using multiple qualitative sources to capture instructional challenges in classroom practice, including classroom observations conducted by the teacher-researcher during teaching sessions. The observations focused on students' responses to instructional input, difficulties in understanding instructions, classroom interaction patterns, and moments that required instructional adjustment, with field notes written to document recurring instructional challenges.

Reflective teaching notes were written after each lesson to record instructional difficulties, classroom management issues, and strategies used to students' drawings were collected as supplementary data to provide non-verbal insights into classroom interaction and instructional practices.

To analyze the drawings, a simple visual content analysis was applied. The analysis focused on three aspects: (1) representation of

classroom interaction (e.g., teacher and student positioning), (2) inclusion of instructional elements (e.g., learning materials, written English words, visual aids), and (3) indicators of student engagement (e.g., facial expressions, activity depiction, use of speech bubbles). These visual elements were interpreted as representations of how students experienced classroom instruction. The drawings were not evaluated based on artistic quality, but as supporting data to complement observations and interviews.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a flexible and rigorous method well-suited to practitioner inquiry for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within rich qualitative data relevant to the research questions. The process followed an inductive six-phase approach: familiarization with the data through repeated reading and immersion in classroom observation notes, reflective teaching notes, students' drawings, and interview excerpts; systematic generation of initial codes to label features pertinent to recurring instructional challenges; collation of codes into potential broader themes; thorough review and refinement of themes against both coded extracts and the entire dataset; clear definition and naming of themes; and production of the interpretive narrative explaining how instructional challenges emerged during classroom practice and the strategies used to address them.

For students' drawings, visual elements were first described and coded (e.g., "teacher-centered classroom," "use of visual aids," "active participation"). These codes were then compared with observation notes and interview data to identify recurring patterns. Themes were generated through triangulation across these data sources, ensuring that interpretations were not based on a single type of data.

To enhance trustworthiness, credibility, and confirmability, multiple strategies were employed, including data source triangulation by iteratively comparing and cross-validating

findings across observations, reflections, drawings, and interviews; prolonged engagement in the natural classroom context; researcher reflexivity documented in reflective notes; and maintenance of a detailed audit trail for transparency.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study to uphold principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and respect for persons, as aligned with established guidelines for qualitative practitioner inquiry in educational settings (Şener & Çokçalışkan, 2024). Informed assent was obtained verbally from all participating students at the outset of data collection, with age-appropriate explanations of the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Parental consent forms were distributed and collected for all students, in compliance with the school's ethical protocols and Thai educational research standards. Students' identities were fully anonymized through pseudonyms in field notes, reflections, drawings, transcripts, and all reporting; no personal identifiers (e.g., names, photos, or specific details) were retained. Participation was seamlessly integrated into regular classroom activities, ensuring no additional time demands, coercion, psychological distress, or disruption to the teaching and learning process.

As a teacher-researcher, positionality was reflexively addressed through dedicated journal entries to minimize power imbalances and potential researcher bias while promoting transparency. To encourage honest feedback during interviews despite the dual role as their teacher, several strategies were employed. Interviews were conducted in an informal and supportive manner, emphasizing that there were no right or wrong answers and that students' responses would not affect their grades or classroom evaluation. The researcher also used simple and familiar language to ensure students' understanding, allowed peer support when needed, and created a non-threatening atmosphere by positioning the

interviews as casual conversations rather than formal assessments. These efforts aimed to reduce students' anxiety and power distance, thereby fostering more open and authentic responses.

Result and Discussion

The study involved 12 Thai primary students from Grades 3 to 6. Data were collected through classroom observations, reflective teaching notes, students' drawings, and short interviews. The analysis identified several recurring instructional challenges that emerged during classroom interaction. These challenges were related to managing engagement, delivering comprehensible input, addressing affective barriers, navigating L1 absence, and handling cross-cultural dynamics. Rather than focusing on students' perceptions alone, the results describe how these challenges became visible during teaching activities and classroom management, and how they were addressed in real-time classroom practice.

Challenges in Managing Student Engagement

Maintaining student engagement emerged as a recurring instructional challenge. Classroom observations showed that students were more attentive and participative during interactive activities such as games and role-play tasks. During a role-play shopping activity, for example, most students actively volunteered to participate and responded enthusiastically. Students' drawings frequently depicted classroom activities, learning materials, and the teacher smiling at the front of the classroom. Several drawings included speech bubbles and labeled objects, indicating involvement in task-based activities.

However, when lessons relied primarily on verbal explanation without sufficient visual or contextual support, students appeared less attentive. Reflective teaching notes recorded instances in which some students looked away, talked to peers, or waited for others to respond before engaging in tasks. This variation in participation was observed across grade levels.

These findings support previous studies emphasizing that meaningful interaction and engaging instructional activities are essential in sustaining young learners' attention in language classrooms (Harmer, 1997; Summer & Böttger, 2022; Lena & Nikolov, 2025). In contrast, when instruction relied primarily on verbal explanation, students' attention decreased noticeably. Some students became distracted, while others showed limited response to teacher questions, suggesting that verbal input alone was insufficient to support comprehension and engagement (Lubrick et al., 2019). These patterns highlight the importance of visual and contextual support in primary EFL instruction, a finding consistent with evidence from Chinese primary EFL contexts indicating that playful, interactive, and experiential learning approaches are most effective for primary-age learners (Liu & Reynolds, 2025).

From an instructional perspective, these findings underscore the need for flexible lesson planning. Rather than strictly following pre-planned activities, the teacher frequently adjusted instructional strategies in response to students' behavior, such as shifting from explanation to demonstration or incorporating brief interactive tasks to re-engage learners. As noted by Brown and Ellis (1996), classroom interaction and instructional clarity play a crucial role in shaping learning outcomes for young learners. This kind of adaptive decision-making reflects teacher agency in practice, where the teacher's capacity to respond to dynamic classroom conditions directly shapes students' engagement and learning (Gu et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2024).

Challenges in Delivering Comprehensible English Input

Delivering comprehensible English input was another prominent instructional challenge. Classroom observations indicated that students sometimes struggled to follow instructions delivered at a natural speaking pace. In several sessions, students hesitated to

begin tasks until instructions were repeated or demonstrated.

Short interview responses reflected this difficulty. One student stated, "I don't really understand." Another commented, "Teacher speak fast." These responses were consistent with classroom observations in which students remained silent or looked at peers for cues before responding.

Reflective teaching notes showed that students often relied on peer translation or non-verbal cues to understand the teacher's meaning, but this support was not always accurate. In one session, for example, a student did not fully understand the teacher's instruction to complete a task on a specific page and instead told their peers to open a different page in the workbook. As a result, several students followed this incorrect instruction and completed the wrong task before the teacher clarified it. This example shows how partial understanding can lead to inaccurate peer translation, which then affects how tasks are carried out in the classroom. To address this issue, the teacher simplified the language, repeated instructions using different wording, and used modeling and gestures to support students' understanding.

This finding reinforces the argument that instructional clarity is a critical component of effective English instruction for young learners, especially in EFL contexts (Brown & Ellis, 1996). It also aligns with previous research highlighting the importance of visual support and accessible instructional input in sustaining comprehension and participation (Harmer, 1997; Summer & Böttger, 2022). The dialogic and practitioner-oriented lens adopted in this study further illustrates how teachers make real-time adjustments in response to comprehension breakdowns, consistent with Cui and Teo's (2024) account of how classroom teachers navigate instructional challenges through reflective, adaptive practice. Rather than reflecting learners' limitations, comprehension difficulties in this study point to the complex instructional demands faced

by teachers in primary EFL classrooms.

Affective Challenges in Classroom Interaction

Affective factors also influenced classroom participation. Younger students, particularly those in Grades 3 and 4, demonstrated hesitation during speaking activities. Classroom observations noted signs of shyness, lowered voice volume, and avoidance of eye contact during oral tasks.

Interview responses suggested that hesitation was associated with uncertainty and fear of making mistakes. One student stated, "I'm shy to speak English." Another mentioned, "I'm afraid wrong." These responses aligned with observed behaviors in which students waited for peers to answer first before attempting to respond. These affective responses were often observed alongside comprehension difficulties, particularly when students were unsure about task expectations. This reluctance to participate can limit the amount of spoken language practice, hindering the development of fluency and communication skills ([Laila et al., 2023](#)).

These findings are closely connected to students' comprehension of instructional input. When instructions were unclear, students were more likely to withdraw from participation, suggesting that emotional engagement and cognitive understanding are closely intertwined. This observation supports the view that English instruction in primary schools should prioritize positive learning experiences that consider both cognitive and emotional development ([Diyanti & Madya, 2021](#); [Lemana et al., 2025](#)). The emotional dimension of cross-cultural teaching is further underscored by recent research demonstrating that in sociocultural diverse EFL settings, teacher emotion regulation and the overall classroom affective climate directly mediate students' willingness to engage ([Xu et al., 2026](#)). To address affective barriers, the teacher employed supportive instructional practices, such as modeling answers, allowing choral responses, and encouraging peer support. These strategies helped create a classroom

environment where students felt more comfortable taking risks, aligning with the instructional emphasis on supportive classroom interaction highlighted by Brown and Ellis ([1996](#)). In addition, to manage the language barrier when students did not fully understand the instructions, the teacher adjusted the delivery by using slower speech, simpler vocabulary, and clear step-by-step explanations. When confusion was still visible, the teacher repeated the instructions using different wording and supported them with gestures, demonstrations, and visual cues. The teacher also checked students' understanding by asking them to show or repeat what they needed to do before starting the task. These strategies helped ensure that students could follow the activities and remain actively engaged.

Challenges Related to the Absence of L1 Support

The absence of Thai language use presented a significant instructional challenge. Several students expressed a preference for Thai explanations during interviews, as they felt it helped them understand the lesson more easily. For example, one student stated, "I wanna Thai teacher because I understand," while another noted that lessons were easier when explanations were provided in Thai. These responses indicate that the lack of a shared first language affected students' comprehension and influenced their participation during classroom activities.

Classroom observations showed that students occasionally turned to peers for clarification when instructions were not immediately understood. Peer translation and whispered explanations were observed during task transitions. Reflective notes indicated that while peer assistance supported task completion, it sometimes led to partial or inaccurate interpretation of instructions. Three types of peer assistance were observed in this context: direct translation, collaborative checking, and non-verbal guidance. Direct

translation involved a more proficient student relaying the teacher's instructions into Thai, which generally supported accurate task completion. Collaborative checking occurred when students compared their understanding before proceeding, helping confirm interpretation but occasionally leading to shared misunderstanding. Non-verbal guidance involved the use of gestures or demonstration to support task engagement, although it conveyed limited linguistic meaning. These distinctions indicate that the effectiveness of peer assistance depends on both the type of support and the comprehension level of the assisting peer.

In this context, teacher agency becomes an important concept in understanding classroom practice. Teacher agency refers to the teacher's ability to make decisions and adjust instructional strategies in response to students' needs and classroom situations ([Gu et al., 2022](#)). In primary EFL settings, this is particularly important because students often rely on the teacher's guidance to understand instructions and stay engaged in learning. Therefore, focusing only on students' perceptions is not sufficient. It is equally important to examine how the teacher responds to these challenges in real time, as these decisions directly shape classroom interaction and learning outcomes. Research on teacher agency in online and face-to-face EFL contexts further demonstrates that agentic teachers who engage in continuous reflection and pedagogical problem-solving produce better instructional outcomes, even within structurally constrained environments ([Tang et al., 2024](#)). The absence of L1 support also relates to the broader professional challenges documented among foreign teachers in Thai schools, where linguistic distance has been identified as a major structural barrier requiring ongoing instructional adaptation ([Srisitanont Luangkrajang, 2023](#); [Derrah et al., 2024](#)).

Managing Cross-Cultural Novelty in the Classroom

Students' curiosity toward the non-Thai teacher emerged as both an engaging element and an instructional challenge. During several sessions, students asked questions about the teacher's background, appearance, or home country. These interactions occasionally shifted classroom focus away from lesson objectives. Students' drawings frequently emphasized the teacher's physical characteristics and central position in the classroom. Some drawings included detailed representations of the teacher's hair, clothing, or facial expressions, suggesting heightened attention toward the teacher as a cultural figure. While this curiosity contributed to classroom interest, it required instructional redirection to maintain lesson focus.

These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that the presence of a foreign teacher can increase students' curiosity and motivation, but simultaneously requires careful instructional management to prevent cultural interest from displacing lesson objectives ([Wallace & Leong, 2020](#); [Ross & Stückler, 2025](#)). As suggested by Littlewood (2012), differences in language use and classroom culture in Asian EFL contexts can affect interactional patterns between teachers and learners. In this study, while the presence of a foreign teacher sometimes increased students' curiosity and excitement, it also required careful instructional management to ensure that cultural interest did not distract from learning objectives. The teacher needed to balance rapport-building activities with structured instruction to maintain focus during lessons, aligning with the need for adaptable strategies in cross-cultural settings ([Brown & Ellis, 1996](#)). These dynamics align with findings from studies of foreign teachers in Thai and Japanese school contexts, which similarly highlight that intercultural sensitivity, cultural communication differences, and unmet expectations shape how foreign teachers integrate into and manage local classroom

environments ([Derrah et al., 2024](#)).

Managing cultural curiosity while maintaining instructional clarity thus emerged as an essential component of effective teaching practice in this context. The findings extend prior research on cross-cultural barriers in EFL acquisition ([Ross & Stückler, 2025](#)) by illustrating how these barriers materialize at the level of moment-to-moment classroom management rather than only at the level of student attitudes or language proficiency.

Instructional Insights from Students' Drawings

Students' drawings provided additional evidence of classroom interaction and instructional practices. Most drawings positioned the teacher at the center of the classroom, with students seated around or facing forward. Visual learning tools such as alphabet boards, classroom objects, and written English words were commonly included.

These visual representations reflected the importance of visual scaffolding within the classroom. The prominence of instructional materials and teacher-centered positioning suggested that visual support played a central role in facilitating lesson activities, particularly in contexts where verbal communication was limited. This aligns with research underscoring the role of visual and multimodal scaffolding in primary EFL settings, where comprehensible input is most effectively delivered through context-rich, visually supported activities ([Harmer, 1997](#); [Lena & Nikolov, 2025](#); [Wang et al., 2023](#)).

The drawings also corroborate findings from Themes 1 through 5 by illustrating students' subjective experience of the classroom: the teacher as a central, culturally distinctive figure; the salience of interactive materials; and the importance of visual cues in mediating instruction. As a data source, students' drawings thus complement interview and observation data by capturing dimensions of classroom experience that students may not articulate verbally, particularly in contexts where the shared language between teacher

and learner is limited.

Teacher Perspective on Instructional Challenges

Unlike previous studies that primarily examined students' attitudes and perceptions toward learning English with foreign teachers, such as preferences for native speakers in pronunciation, speaking, and culture ([Aslan & Thompson, 2016](#)), motivational factors influencing young EFL learners ([Wallace & Leong, 2020](#)), and general barriers to EFL acquisition ([Ross & Stückler, 2025](#)), this study foregrounds instructional challenges from the teacher's perspective. By directly observing and analyzing classroom practices, it reveals how teachers navigate multifaceted complexities in primary EFL instruction within cross-cultural settings, including real-time adjustments to sustain engagement and comprehension ([Brown & Ellis, 1996](#); [Lubrick et al., 2019](#)).

The findings demonstrate that challenges related to student engagement, instructional clarity, affective support, and cultural dynamics are not isolated but dynamically interconnected, as evidenced by instances where unclear input exacerbated shyness and withdrawal, limiting oral practice ([Diyanti & Madya, 2021](#); [Laila et al., 2023](#); [Lemana et al., 2025](#)). Teachers must thus make continuous pedagogical decisions during interaction, adapting strategies like visual scaffolding, repetition, and peer support to immediate student responses ([Harmer, 1997](#); [Summer & Böttger, 2022](#)). This practitioner-focused lens is consistent with a growing body of practitioner inquiry research that emphasizes the value of teacher-generated knowledge in illuminating the micro-level complexities of classroom interaction ([Cui & Teo, 2024](#)). It also aligns with the systematic review evidence on teacher agency in EFL settings, which demonstrates that teachers' reflective and adaptive decision-making is among the strongest predictors of instructional effectiveness in cross-cultural and linguistically diverse classrooms ([Tang et al., 2024](#); [Gu et al.,](#)

2022).

Furthermore, this study contributes a more nuanced understanding of English teaching in Thai primary schools, extending cross-cultural research ([Littlewood, 2012](#); [Derrah et al., 2024](#)) and offering actionable insights for educators in comparable EFL contexts. The interconnected nature of the instructional challenges documented here, from comprehensible input and affective barriers to cultural novelty and L1 absence, suggests that effective primary EFL teaching requires not only subject matter competence but also a sophisticated capacity for cross-cultural pedagogical adaptability. These findings have direct implications for the professional preparation and ongoing development of non-native and foreign EFL teachers working in Asian primary school contexts ([Srisitanont Luangkrajang, 2023](#); [Wang et al., 2023](#); [Liu & Reynolds, 2025](#)).

Conclusion

This study examined the instructional challenges faced by a non-Thai teacher in teaching English to Thai primary students from a practitioner-oriented perspective. The findings reveal that instructional challenges in this context are multifaceted and interconnected, encompassing issues of student engagement, comprehensible input, affective participation, linguistic scaffolding, and cross-cultural classroom dynamics. Each of these challenges was addressed through adaptive instructional strategies, such as the use of visual support, simplified language, modeling, repetition, and structured peer assistance. As these strategies were consistently applied across sessions, the classroom situation gradually shifted toward a more positive direction, where students became more willing to participate, showed greater confidence in completing tasks, and demonstrated improved responsiveness to instructions. These changes suggest that identifying and responding to instructional challenges in real time played a direct role in shaping a more engaging and functional

classroom environment.

Rather than positioning these challenges as isolated difficulties, the study demonstrates that they emerge dynamically during classroom interaction and require continuous pedagogical adjustment. Teaching young learners in a cross-cultural EFL context demands flexible lesson design, visual and contextual scaffolding, and sensitivity to students' emotional and linguistic needs. The findings highlight the central role of teacher agency in navigating real-time instructional decisions within multilingual and multicultural classrooms.

By foregrounding classroom practice rather than student perception alone, this study contributes to the growing body of research on cross-cultural EFL pedagogy and extends previous discussions on non-native English-speaking teachers by emphasizing instructional processes in primary education settings. The practitioner-based perspective offered in this study provides practical insights for teachers working with young learners in similar contexts.

However, this study was limited to one teacher-researcher and a small group of students within a single school context. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to all Thai primary classrooms or to other EFL environments. Future research is suggested to use a longitudinal approach to observe classroom learning over a longer period. It is important to examine how the initial cross-cultural novelty of having a non-Thai teacher gradually decreases as students become more familiar with the teacher. As this familiarity develops, the teacher-student relationship may also change, which can influence how students respond to instructions and participate in classroom activities. By focusing on these changes over time, future studies can better understand how instructional challenges and classroom interaction develop in cross-cultural learning contexts.

Overall, the study underscores that effective English instruction in cross-cultural

primary settings requires adaptive pedagogy, reflective practice, and sustained professional support to respond to the complex realities of classroom interaction.

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