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Exploring EFL Teachers' Perception on Metalinguistic Knowledge, English Teaching Practices, Language Skills, and Critical Cognitive Abilities in EFL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Metalinguistic knowledge, English teaching practices, language skills development, and critical cognitive abilities represent important dimensions of effective English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. However, limited studies have explored how teachers perceive the interconnected relationship among these dimensions, particularly within multilingual Southeast Asian contexts. This study aimed to investigate Indonesian and Filipino middle-school EFL teachers' perceptions regarding metalinguistic knowledge, instructional practices, language skill development, and critical cognitive abilities, as well as contextual factors influencing their pedagogical decisions. A qualitative research design was employed involving 47 EFL teachers from middle schools in Indonesia and the Philippines. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations and analyzed through thematic analysis involving data familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, and interpretation. The findings revealed that teachers perceived metalinguistic knowledge as essential for developing learners' language awareness and independent language use. Teachers also emphasized the importance of learner-centered instruction, integrated language skills, and English learning as a medium for developing critical thinking. Nevertheless, classroom implementation was influenced by contextual factors, including language exposure, curriculum demands, classroom conditions, resources, and professional development opportunities. The study highlights the importance of integrated EFL frameworks that connect linguistic awareness, communication, and cognitive development.

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INTRODUCTION

Metalinguistic knowledge (MLK) has increasingly been recognized as a fundamental component of effective English language learning because it enables learners to consciously understand, analyze, and regulate language use beyond simple communication. Unlike implicit language competence, which involves the ability to use

language naturally, MLK refers to explicit awareness of linguistic structures, including grammar, morphology, vocabulary formation, pronunciation, semantics, discourse organization, and pragmatic functions (Almagro et al., 2024; Cenoz, 2022; Climent & Beltrán, 2024). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, MLK supports learners' ability to identify linguistic patterns, monitor their own language production, recognize errors, compare linguistic systems, and transfer previous knowledge to new communication contexts (Pastor & Sanz-Moreno, 2024; Poggio, 2020). However, the integration of MLK into classroom instruction remains inconsistent. English teaching practices frequently experience tension between explicit grammar-oriented instruction and communicative approaches that prioritize fluency but provide limited opportunities for learners to reflect on language form and function (Almagro et al., 2024; Pastor & Sanz-Moreno, 2024). Such imbalance may prevent students from developing deeper linguistic awareness and from understanding why specific language choices are appropriate in particular contexts. This issue becomes particularly significant at the middle-school level, where learners begin transitioning from basic language recognition toward more analytical, reflective, and independent language use. Therefore, teachers' understanding of MLK plays an essential role in determining whether classroom instruction encourages students to merely use English or to develop awareness of the principles underlying effective language communication.

The challenge of implementing effective EFL instruction is particularly evident in middle-school education in Indonesia and the Philippines, where English occupies different but equally important sociolinguistic positions. In Indonesia, English is predominantly taught as a foreign language, resulting in limited exposure outside formal learning environments. Indonesian EFL teachers frequently work with students who possess diverse levels of vocabulary knowledge, grammatical competence, motivation, and previous English experience. Classroom size, unequal learning resources, differences between urban and rural schools, and examination-oriented educational demands further influence instructional decisions. Meanwhile, although English has a stronger institutional and social presence in the Philippines, Filipino middle-school classrooms also face challenges related to diverse linguistic backgrounds, regional differences, socioeconomic variation, and the complex interaction between English, Filipino, and local languages. In both contexts, educational reforms emphasize learner-centered, communicative, collaborative, and technology-supported approaches; however, classroom implementation often remains influenced by teacher-centered explanations, textbook-based activities, controlled exercises, and assessment requirements (Adil et al., 2020; Alhazmi, 2024; Donoso, 2022). The gap between curriculum expectations and classroom realities suggests that teachers' perceptions of effective English teaching practices require deeper investigation, particularly regarding how they negotiate instructional ideals with contextual limitations.

Beyond teaching practices, the development of integrated language skills remains a persistent challenge in middle-school EFL classrooms. Effective English proficiency requires the interconnected development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills rather than isolated practice of individual competencies. Listening provides linguistic input, speaking facilitates interaction, reading expands conceptual understanding, and writing requires learners to organize and communicate ideas coherently. Nevertheless, classroom practices in Indonesia and the Philippines often prioritize reading, vocabulary, and grammar because these areas are comparatively easier to manage and assess in large classrooms (Adil et al., 2020; Pourmohammadi et al., 2021). Consequently, students may demonstrate competence in completing structured exercises while experiencing difficulties in authentic communication, interpreting complex texts, expressing opinions, or

constructing well-organized written arguments. The increasing influence of digital environments further intensifies this challenge because students encounter abundant English information through online platforms but may lack strategies for evaluating, interpreting, and communicating information effectively (Everly & Cai, 2020; Mohamed et al., 2023). Developing integrated language skills therefore requires instructional approaches that connect linguistic knowledge, authentic communication, feedback, and reflective learning. Teachers' beliefs about language skills development are critical because they influence classroom interaction patterns, activity selection, instructional priorities, and assessment practices.

Furthermore, contemporary English education increasingly requires the development of critical cognitive abilities because language functions not only as a communication medium but also as a tool for reasoning, problem solving, and knowledge construction. Middle-school learners are expected to interpret information, evaluate evidence, compare perspectives, construct arguments, and generate solutions through English-mediated learning experiences. However, classroom activities in many EFL contexts continue to emphasize memorization, literal comprehension, and reproduction of information rather than analysis, evaluation, and creation (Deng et al., 2022; Donoso, 2022). Developing critical cognitive abilities in English classrooms presents additional complexity because learners must simultaneously manage linguistic demands and cognitive challenges. Limited vocabulary, insufficient grammatical resources, and low confidence may restrict students' ability to express complex ideas even when they possess relevant knowledge. Therefore, teachers need to design learning activities that provide appropriate linguistic scaffolding while maintaining meaningful cognitive demands. This requires teachers to perceive English not merely as an academic subject but as a medium through which students develop reasoning, reflection, and intellectual independence (Adil et al., 2020; Alhazmi, 2024; Rasool et al., 2024).

Given these interconnected issues, examining EFL teachers' perceptions of metalinguistic knowledge, English teaching practices, language skills development, and critical cognitive abilities is essential. Teachers represent the central agents who translate curriculum policies into classroom experiences; therefore, their beliefs influence what aspects of language they emphasize, how they organize learning activities, and what outcomes they consider important. Teachers who value MLK may create opportunities for linguistic analysis, reflection, and cross-language comparison, whereas teachers with stronger emphasis on communication may prioritize fluency-oriented activities with limited explicit language reflection. Similarly, teachers' understanding of integrated language skills and critical cognition determines whether classrooms emphasize isolated skill practice or authentic tasks requiring communication, reasoning, and problem solving (Cenoz, 2022; Climent & Beltrán, 2024). Although previous studies have explored individual aspects of MLK, language skills, or critical thinking, limited research has simultaneously examined these dimensions from teachers' perspectives within comparative Southeast Asian EFL contexts. This represents an important research gap because understanding teacher perceptions provides insight into how pedagogical beliefs, contextual factors, and instructional practices interact.

The novelty of this study lies in developing an integrated understanding of EFL teachers' perceptions by examining the relationships among metalinguistic knowledge, English teaching practices, language skills development, and critical cognitive abilities within middle-school classrooms in Indonesia and the Philippines. Rather than focusing on a single instructional component, this study provides a multidimensional analysis of how teachers conceptualize effective EFL learning in multilingual educational environments. The study aims to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions regarding (1) the

role of metalinguistic knowledge in English learning, (2) the implementation of English teaching practices, (3) strategies for developing integrated language skills, and (4) the promotion of critical cognitive abilities among middle-school learners. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: *How do Indonesian and Filipino middle-school EFL teachers perceive the role of metalinguistic knowledge, English teaching practices, language skills development, and critical cognitive abilities in EFL classrooms?*

RQ2: *What contextual factors influence similarities and differences in Indonesian and Filipino EFL teachers' perceptions regarding effective English teaching and learning practices?*

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore EFL learners' experiences and perspectives regarding metalinguistic knowledge, English teaching practices, language skills development, and critical cognitive abilities in middle-school English classrooms in Indonesia and the Philippines. A qualitative approach was selected because the research objectives focused on understanding participants' perceptions, interpretations, classroom experiences, and contextual realities rather than measuring variables quantitatively. Qualitative inquiry enables researchers to examine complex educational phenomena by capturing participants' meanings, beliefs, and interactions within authentic learning environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since language learning involves cognitive, social, and cultural dimensions, qualitative methods are considered appropriate for investigating how learners perceive the role of language awareness, classroom practices, and the development of higher-order thinking abilities.

The qualitative design was particularly suitable for addressing the research questions because it allowed an in-depth exploration of how EFL learners experience English instruction and how classroom environments influence their development of linguistic and cognitive competencies. Through interviews and classroom observations, the study examined not only what learners experienced but also how instructional practices, teacher–student interactions, and contextual factors shaped those experiences. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between instructional practices and learners' perceptions of metalinguistic awareness, integrated language skills, and critical cognitive engagement.

Nevertheless, qualitative research may involve several limitations, including researcher interpretation bias, limited generalizability due to relatively small samples, and potential influence of participants' willingness to express their authentic perspectives. To address these issues, several strategies were implemented. Data were collected from multiple sources through interviews and classroom observations to enable methodological triangulation. The researchers also applied systematic coding procedures, maintained reflexive notes throughout the analysis process, and continuously compared emerging themes with the original data to minimize subjective interpretation. Member checking was conducted by allowing participants to review the interpretation of their responses, ensuring that the findings accurately represented their perspectives. These procedures enhanced the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the qualitative findings.

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 47 EFL learners who were actively involved in English language classes at middle schools in Indonesia and the Philippines. The participants were selected because middle-school learners represent an important developmental stage in which students transition from foundational English knowledge

toward more analytical language use, independent learning, and higher-order cognitive engagement. At this level, learners begin developing greater awareness of grammatical structures, discourse patterns, and strategies for interpreting and producing English in academic and social contexts.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling because the study required learners who had direct experience with English classroom instruction and could provide meaningful information related to the research focus. The selection criteria included students who were officially enrolled in middle-school English classes, had participated in regular English learning activities during the academic year, and were willing to share their perceptions and experiences through interviews and classroom observations. The sample represented learners from two Southeast Asian EFL contexts, Indonesia and the Philippines, allowing the study to explore similarities and contextual differences in English learning experiences. The participants represented diverse educational backgrounds and classroom environments. Indonesian participants studied English primarily as a foreign language within formal school settings, where opportunities for English exposure outside the classroom were relatively limited. Filipino participants represented a context in which English has a stronger presence in education and public communication while coexisting with Filipino and various local languages. This diversity provided valuable insight into how different language ecologies influence learners' perceptions of English learning, classroom interaction, language skill development, and critical cognitive engagement.

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed about the purpose of the study, procedures, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any stage. For participants below the age of legal consent, permission was obtained from relevant school authorities and guardians before data collection. All participant identities were anonymized to protect privacy and confidentiality.

Instruments and Data Collection Technique

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. These instruments were selected because they complemented each other in exploring both participants' reported experiences and actual classroom practices. Interviews provided access to learners' perceptions, reflections, and interpretations of English learning experiences, while observations enabled researchers to examine classroom interactions, instructional activities, and learner engagement in authentic contexts.

The interview protocol was developed based on the conceptual framework of the study, including four major dimensions: metalinguistic knowledge, English teaching practices, language skills development, and critical cognitive abilities. Interview questions explored learners' understanding of English learning processes, experiences with grammar and language reflection, opportunities to practice listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and classroom activities that encouraged analysis, evaluation, creativity, and problem solving. The semi-structured format allowed researchers to maintain consistency across participants while providing flexibility to explore unexpected responses and emerging issues. The observation instrument was developed to document classroom activities related to teacher instructional approaches, learner participation, language use, feedback processes, and cognitive engagement. The observation framework focused on indicators such as opportunities for language reflection, integration of language skills, student interaction, questioning patterns, problem-solving activities, and evidence of higher-order thinking during English lessons. Classroom observations were conducted in authentic teaching environments to capture naturally occurring learning processes.

To ensure instrument validity, the interview and observation protocols were reviewed by experts in English language education and qualitative research methodology. Expert feedback was used to refine question clarity, relevance, alignment with research objectives, and appropriateness for middle-school learners. A pilot review was conducted to identify ambiguous questions and improve the accessibility of language used during interviews. Reliability in qualitative inquiry was supported through consistent application of interview procedures, standardized observation criteria, researcher agreement during coding, and continuous comparison of interpretations across data sources. These procedures contributed to the trustworthiness of the research instruments.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis was conducted through an iterative process involving data familiarization, coding, theme development, theme refinement, interpretation, and reporting. The analysis began with repeated reading and reviewing of interview transcripts and observation notes to develop a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and classroom contexts. During this stage, researchers identified significant statements, recurring ideas, and initial patterns related to metalinguistic knowledge, teaching practices, language skills development, and critical cognitive abilities.

Following data familiarization, the researchers conducted initial coding by systematically labeling meaningful segments of data. Codes were generated inductively from participants' responses while also being guided by the conceptual dimensions of the study. For example, statements related to grammar awareness, language comparison, vocabulary development, classroom interaction, speaking opportunities, reflective learning, and problem-solving activities were identified and categorized. Coding was continuously reviewed to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' actual experiences rather than predetermined assumptions.The next stage involved generating themes by examining relationships among codes and identifying broader patterns across participants and contexts. Related codes were grouped into potential themes representing central aspects of learners' experiences, such as awareness of language structures, challenges in developing English skills, teacher-supported learning practices, and opportunities for critical engagement. Themes were then reviewed by comparing them against the complete dataset to determine whether they accurately represented participants' perspectives and whether sufficient evidence supported each theme.

The final stage involved drawing conclusions and writing the findings by synthesizing the major themes into meaningful explanations of EFL learning experiences. Direct quotations from participants were incorporated to illustrate key interpretations and maintain the connection between findings and original data. The analysis process emphasized transparency, reflexivity, and evidence-based interpretation to ensure that conclusions accurately reflected the perspectives of middle-school EFL learners in both countries.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

RQ1: How do Indonesian and Filipino middle-school EFL teachers perceive the role of metalinguistic knowledge, English teaching practices, language skills development, and critical cognitive abilities in EFL classrooms?

The qualitative findings indicate that Indonesian and Filipino EFL teachers perceive metalinguistic knowledge as an essential foundation for meaningful English learning because it enables students to understand the relationship between language forms, meanings, and communicative purposes. Teachers from both contexts emphasized that grammar knowledge should not be taught merely as memorization of rules but should be

integrated with communication, reflection, and contextual language use. Indonesian teachers particularly highlighted the importance of students' awareness of sentence structures, vocabulary patterns, and grammatical accuracy, while Filipino teachers emphasized language comparison, contextual meaning, and students' ability to explain their language choices. Classroom observations supported these perceptions by showing that teachers frequently used questioning, correction, and explanation activities to encourage students to notice language patterns.

Teachers also perceived effective English teaching practices as those that combine teacher guidance with learner-centered activities. Although traditional practices such as explanation, textbook exercises, and grammar instruction remained common, participants expressed the need to provide more opportunities for interaction, collaboration, and authentic communication. Teachers viewed speaking activities, group discussions, and contextual tasks as important strategies for increasing students' confidence and engagement.

Regarding language skills development, participants recognized that listening, speaking, reading, and writing should be developed as interconnected competencies rather than separated components. However, teachers acknowledged practical challenges, particularly limited classroom time, differences in students' proficiency levels, and assessment pressures. Both Indonesian and Filipino teachers reported that speaking and listening activities often received less attention compared with reading and writing because productive skills require more classroom management and assessment time.

In relation to critical cognitive abilities, teachers perceived English classrooms as important spaces for developing students' reasoning, reflection, and problem-solving abilities. Participants explained that English learning should encourage students to analyze texts, express opinions, justify arguments, and evaluate information. However, teachers also reported challenges in implementing higher-order thinking activities because some students lacked sufficient vocabulary and confidence to express complex ideas in English. Representative interview excerpts illustrate these perceptions:

Teacher Indonesia 1: *"Students should not only know the grammar rules, but they need to understand why a sentence is used in a particular situation. When they understand the pattern, they can use English more independently."*

Teacher Philippines 2: *"I encourage students to compare English with their own languages because they become more aware of differences and similarities in communication."*

Teacher Indonesia 3: *"Speaking activities are important, but in a large class it is difficult to give every student enough opportunity to practice."*

Teacher Philippines 4: *"English should help students think critically. They need to explain their opinions, not only answer questions from the textbook."*

Table 1. Teachers' Perceptions of Metalinguistic Knowledge, Teaching Practices, Language Skills Development, and Critical Cognitive Abilities

Main Theme	Subthemes Identified	Interpretation of Teachers' Perceptions	Supporting Evidence
Metalinguistic Knowledge	Grammar awareness, vocabulary formation, language reflection	Teachers viewed MLK as necessary for understanding language structure and improving accuracy	Interview responses and classroom explanations
English Teaching Practices	Learner-centered learning, communication, contextual activities	Teachers supported movement from teacher-centered instruction toward interactive practices	Classroom observations and interviews
Language Skills	Integration of listening,	Teachers recognized the	Observation of

Development	speaking, reading, writing	importance of balanced skills but reported practical constraints	classroom activities
Critical Cognitive Abilities	Analysis, evaluation, reasoning, problem-solving	Teachers perceived English as a tool for developing higher-order thinking	Student discussion and reflective activities

Table 1 illustrates that Indonesian and Filipino EFL teachers perceive English learning as a multidimensional process involving linguistic awareness, pedagogical practices, skill integration, and cognitive development. The first theme, metalinguistic knowledge, indicates that teachers recognize the importance of students' awareness of language structures, vocabulary formation, grammar patterns, and contextual language use. Teachers viewed MLK not merely as knowledge of grammatical rules but as a reflective ability that enables learners to understand why certain expressions are appropriate in particular situations. This perception reflects a shift from traditional form-focused instruction toward a more analytical approach in which learners actively examine the relationship between language form, meaning, and communication. The findings suggest that teachers consider metalinguistic awareness as an important foundation for improving students' accuracy, independence, and ability to transfer linguistic knowledge into new contexts.

The remaining themes in Table 1 demonstrate that teachers also emphasize the importance of transforming English classrooms into environments that promote meaningful communication, integrated language skills, and higher-order thinking. Although teachers acknowledged the value of learner-centered and communicative approaches, they reported that practical classroom realities often influence the extent to which these approaches can be implemented. The development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills was perceived as requiring integrated learning activities rather than isolated exercises; however, limited time, large classes, and differences in learner proficiency created challenges. Similarly, teachers viewed critical cognitive abilities as essential outcomes of English learning, particularly students' abilities to analyze information, express arguments, evaluate ideas, and solve problems. These findings indicate that teachers' perceptions extend beyond language proficiency toward the development of learners who can use English as a tool for communication, reflection, and reasoning.

RQ2: What contextual factors influence similarities and differences in Indonesian and Filipino EFL teachers' perceptions regarding effective English teaching and learning practices?

The findings reveal that teachers' perceptions were strongly influenced by contextual factors, including language ecology, curriculum expectations, classroom conditions, availability of learning resources, and teacher professional experiences. Although Indonesia and the Philippines represent different English learning environments, teachers from both countries shared similar concerns regarding the challenges of implementing effective EFL instruction.

Language ecology emerged as an important factor shaping classroom practices. Indonesian teachers explained that English exposure is generally limited outside school, requiring teachers to provide most opportunities for English practice within classrooms. Consequently, teachers often emphasized vocabulary development, grammar awareness, and structured activities to build students' foundational competence. Filipino teachers, although working in an environment with greater exposure to English, reported that differences in students' linguistic backgrounds and proficiency levels required flexible instructional strategies, including bilingual explanations and translanguaging approaches.

Curriculum demands and assessment systems also influenced teaching decisions. Teachers in both countries reported experiencing pressure to complete curriculum requirements and prepare students for examinations. These conditions sometimes limited opportunities for project-based learning, extended discussions, and cognitively demanding activities. Despite these constraints, teachers expressed positive attitudes toward communicative approaches and technology-supported learning. Infrastructure and classroom resources represented another contextual influence. Participants identified large class sizes, unequal access to digital tools, and limited instructional materials as barriers to implementing innovative teaching strategies. Teachers indicated that technology could support authentic English learning; however, its effectiveness depended on school facilities and students' access to digital resources.

Teacher professional development was also identified as a critical factor. Participants believed that continuous training was necessary to strengthen teachers' metalinguistic knowledge, classroom management strategies, assessment literacy, and ability to design activities that integrate language skills and critical thinking.

Teacher Indonesia 5: *"Because students rarely use English outside the classroom, teachers need to create situations where English becomes meaningful and useful."*

Teacher Philippines 6: *"Students have different language backgrounds. Sometimes using their first language helps them understand difficult concepts before expressing them in English."*

Teacher Indonesia 7: *"The curriculum encourages active learning, but classroom size and examination requirements sometimes make it difficult."*

Teacher Philippines 8: *"Professional development is important because teachers need new strategies to develop communication and critical thinking."*

Table 2. Contextual Factors Influencing Indonesian and Filipino EFL Teachers' Perceptions

Contextual Factor	Indonesia Context	Philippines Context	Influence on Teaching Practices
Language Ecology	English mainly used in formal school settings	English has stronger social and educational presence	Determines exposure and classroom strategies
Curriculum and Assessment	Examination demands and curriculum coverage influence instruction	Standards and assessment requirements shape teaching priorities	Creates tension between communicative goals and assessment preparation
Classroom Conditions	Large classes and diverse student abilities	Mixed proficiency and multilingual classrooms	Requires differentiated teaching approaches
Resources and Infrastructure	Unequal access to technology and materials	Variation in digital access among schools	Influences technology-supported learning opportunities
Teacher Professional Development	Need for pedagogical and linguistic enhancement	Need for innovative multilingual teaching strategies	Shapes teachers' confidence and instructional choices

Table 2 highlights that teachers' perceptions of effective English teaching practices are shaped by the broader educational, linguistic, and sociocultural environments in which teaching occurs. The language ecology of each country represents one of the most influential contextual factors. Indonesian teachers generally described English as a foreign language with limited opportunities for authentic use outside classrooms, which encourages greater reliance on structured instruction, vocabulary development, and explicit language explanation. In contrast, Filipino teachers operate in a context where

English has a stronger presence in education, media, and public communication; however, they continue to encounter diverse learner backgrounds because students use multiple local languages alongside English. These differences influence how teachers perceive the role of first languages, translanguaging practices, and contextualized learning strategies in supporting English development.

The table also demonstrates that curriculum demands, assessment systems, classroom conditions, resource availability, and professional development opportunities significantly affect teachers' instructional decisions in both countries. Teachers reported that although educational policies increasingly promote communicative, collaborative, and technology-supported learning, implementation remains constrained by examination pressures, large class sizes, limited instructional resources, and unequal access to digital facilities. These contextual challenges create a gap between pedagogical ideals and classroom realities, requiring teachers to adapt instructional strategies according to available resources and student needs. Furthermore, teachers emphasized the importance of continuous professional development to strengthen their ability to integrate metalinguistic knowledge, language skills, and critical cognitive abilities into classroom practice. Thus, the findings suggest that improving EFL education requires not only changes in teaching approaches but also supportive educational systems that consider teachers' contextual realities.

Discussion

The present study explored Indonesian and Filipino EFL teachers' perceptions regarding metalinguistic knowledge, English teaching practices, language skills development, and critical cognitive abilities in middle-school EFL classrooms. The findings reveal that teachers from both contexts perceive metalinguistic knowledge (MLK) as a fundamental element of effective English learning because it enables students to understand the relationship between linguistic forms, meanings, and communicative purposes. This finding confirms previous research emphasizing that MLK extends beyond grammatical knowledge by involving learners' conscious awareness of morphology, syntax, semantics, discourse, and pragmatic functions (Almagro et al., 2024; Cenoz, 2022; Climent & Beltrán, 2024). Teachers in the current study particularly emphasized that grammar should not be taught as isolated rules but should be connected with contextual language use, reflection, and communication. This perception supports the argument of Pastor and Sanz-Moreno (2024) that explicit attention to language form can strengthen learners' ability to analyze linguistic patterns and make appropriate language choices. The findings further extend previous studies by demonstrating how teachers in two multilingual Southeast Asian contexts interpret MLK not only as a linguistic competence but also as a mechanism for developing learner independence and reflective language use.

The findings also contribute to ongoing discussions regarding the relationship between explicit language instruction and communicative approaches in EFL classrooms. Previous studies have identified a persistent tension between form-focused instruction and meaning-focused communication, where excessive attention to grammar may reduce opportunities for authentic interaction, while purely communicative approaches may provide insufficient opportunities for language reflection (Almagro et al., 2024; Poggio, 2020). The present study confirms this tension, as teachers reported that grammar explanation, textbook exercises, and controlled activities remain common classroom practices, although they simultaneously recognize the importance of communicative and learner-centered approaches. This finding indicates that teachers do not necessarily reject traditional language instruction; rather, they attempt to integrate explicit knowledge with meaningful communication. Such an interpretation aligns with Tormo (2020), who argues

that reflective grammar instruction can enhance learners' understanding when linguistic forms are connected with meaning and usage. Therefore, the current findings extend existing literature by suggesting that the effectiveness of EFL instruction may depend not on choosing between explicit instruction and communication but on creating pedagogical balance between the two approaches.

Regarding English teaching practices, the findings demonstrate that teachers in Indonesia and the Philippines share similar aspirations toward learner-centered, collaborative, and technology-supported learning. However, classroom implementation remains influenced by contextual constraints, including class size, assessment demands, instructional resources, and students' proficiency differences. These findings correspond with previous research indicating that educational reforms promoting communicative language teaching frequently encounter challenges when implemented in resource-limited contexts (Adil et al., 2020; Alhazmi, 2024; Donoso, 2022). In the Indonesian context, teachers emphasized limited opportunities for English use outside school, resulting in greater reliance on classroom-based exposure and structured activities. This supports previous findings that EFL environments with limited target-language exposure require teachers to create meaningful opportunities for language practice within classrooms. Meanwhile, Filipino teachers highlighted the complexity of multilingual classrooms, where English interacts with Filipino and various local languages. This finding extends existing research on multilingual pedagogy by showing that teachers perceive students' first languages not only as potential obstacles but also as resources that can support comprehension and communication through strategic translanguaging (Cenoz, 2022).

The findings related to language skills development confirm previous research emphasizing the importance of integrating listening, speaking, reading, and writing rather than teaching them as separate competencies. Teachers in this study recognized that effective English proficiency requires interaction among the four skills; however, they reported that speaking and listening activities often receive less attention because they require greater classroom management and assessment time. This finding is consistent with studies showing that large-class environments frequently encourage teachers to prioritize receptive skills and written activities because these are easier to evaluate and manage (Adil et al., 2020; Pourmohammadi et al., 2021). The present study extends this discussion by revealing that teachers' perceptions of skill integration are influenced not only by pedagogical beliefs but also by practical classroom realities. Teachers demonstrated awareness of integrated skill instruction but required institutional support, appropriate assessment systems, and professional development to implement such approaches effectively.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that teachers perceive English classrooms as important spaces for developing critical cognitive abilities, including analysis, evaluation, reasoning, and problem solving. This finding supports contemporary perspectives that language education should move beyond linguistic accuracy toward the development of learners who can use language for knowledge construction and intellectual engagement (Deng et al., 2022; Rasool et al., 2024). However, teachers reported difficulties implementing higher-order thinking activities because some students lacked sufficient vocabulary, confidence, and linguistic resources to express complex ideas. This finding confirms previous research suggesting that cognitive development in EFL contexts requires simultaneous attention to language scaffolding and intellectual challenge (Alhazmi, 2024; Donoso, 2022). The present study extends earlier findings by demonstrating that teachers perceive critical thinking development as inseparable from language competence. In other words, students cannot fully engage in analysis and argumentation unless they possess adequate linguistic resources to express their reasoning.

The second research question examined contextual factors influencing similarities and differences between Indonesian and Filipino teachers' perceptions. The findings indicate that language ecology, curriculum expectations, classroom conditions, resources, and professional development significantly shape teachers' instructional decisions. These findings align with previous research emphasizing that teacher beliefs and classroom practices are socially and institutionally situated rather than developed independently from educational contexts (Cenoz, 2022; Climent & Beltrán, 2024). Although Indonesia and the Philippines differ in their sociolinguistic positions of English, teachers from both countries reported similar challenges related to translating curriculum expectations into classroom practices. This similarity suggests that contextual constraints may produce comparable pedagogical challenges despite differences in national language policies.

The study also highlights the importance of teacher professional development as a pathway for improving EFL instruction. Participants indicated that continuous professional learning is necessary to strengthen teachers' metalinguistic understanding, instructional strategies, assessment literacy, and ability to design cognitively demanding activities. This finding supports previous studies emphasizing that teachers require both linguistic knowledge and pedagogical knowledge to implement contemporary EFL approaches effectively (Pastor & Sanz-Moreno, 2024; Poggio, 2020). The novelty of the present study lies in integrating four dimensions—MLK, teaching practices, language skills, and critical cognitive abilities—within a comparative Indonesia–Philippines EFL context. Previous studies have generally examined these components separately, whereas this study demonstrates their interconnected nature from teachers' perspectives. The findings suggest that effective EFL education requires a holistic framework in which linguistic awareness, communication, skill integration, and cognitive development are addressed simultaneously.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that Indonesian and Filipino EFL teachers perceive metalinguistic knowledge, effective teaching practices, integrated language skills development, and critical cognitive abilities as interconnected components of successful English education. Teachers recognize that MLK enables learners to understand language structures, reflect on language use, and apply linguistic knowledge in meaningful contexts. The findings demonstrate that teachers increasingly move beyond viewing grammar as memorization toward understanding language awareness as a foundation for independent and reflective learning. At the same time, teachers acknowledge the importance of communicative and learner-centered approaches that encourage interaction, collaboration, and authentic language use. However, the implementation of these approaches remains influenced by classroom realities, including limited instructional time, large class sizes, assessment demands, and differences in students' English proficiency.

The study further concludes that contextual factors strongly influence how teachers interpret and implement effective English teaching practices. Although Indonesia and the Philippines differ in language ecology and educational environments, teachers in both contexts experience similar challenges in transforming curriculum expectations into classroom realities. Language exposure, multilingual classroom conditions, access to resources, assessment systems, and professional development opportunities shape teachers' pedagogical choices. The study contributes a novel perspective by providing an integrated understanding of EFL teachers' perceptions across four interconnected dimensions rather than examining isolated aspects of language teaching. These findings imply that teacher education programs should strengthen teachers' metalinguistic knowledge, ability to integrate language skills, and competence in designing cognitively demanding learning

activities. Future educational reforms should consider contextual realities and provide sustainable support systems that enable teachers to implement effective, reflective, and learner-centered EFL instruction.

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DECLARATION OF USING AI TOOLS

The authors declare that artificial intelligence (AI)-based tools were utilized as supportive instruments during the preparation of this manuscript. AI tools were employed to assist with language refinement, organization of academic writing, and improvement of manuscript clarity. However, all conceptual development, research design, data interpretation, findings, and scholarly arguments were independently developed and verified by the authors. The authors remain fully responsible for the accuracy, originality, ethical standards, and intellectual content of the manuscript.

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