

**DOI: 10.24412/2470-1262-2025-2-3-136-160**

**УДК(UDC): 376.1-056.26:371.12(593)**

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***For citation: Pandayan Rhio P., (2025).***

***Foreign Teachers' Lived Experiences in***

***Managing Behavioral Challenges in Thailand's Inclusive Classrooms.***

***Cross-Cultural Studies: Education and Science,***

***Vol. 10, Issue 2-3 (2025), pp. 136-160 (in USA)***

***Manuscript received 19/11/2025***

***Accepted for publication: 05/11/2025***

***The author has read and approved the final manuscript.***

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## **FOREIGN TEACHER'S LIVED EXPERIENCES IN MANAGING BEHAVIORAL CHALLENGES IN THAILAND'S INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS**

## **ОПЫТ ИНОСТРАННЫХ ПРЕПОДАВАТЕЛЕЙ В ПРЕОДОЛЕНИИ КАЖДОДНЕВНЫХ ТРУДНОСТЕЙ В ИНКЛЮЗИВНЫХ КЛАССАХ ТАИЛАНДА**

### **Abstract:**

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of foreign teachers managing behavioral challenges in inclusive Thai government schools. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, it investigated how teachers navigate the complex weaving of systemic, cultural, and pedagogical demands. The research aimed to uncover the essence of their professional reality beyond a mere listing of difficulties.

Data from in-depth interviews with 15 foreign teachers were analyzed thematically. The findings reveal a state of ecological misalignment, where teachers face systemic paradoxes, such as expectations of authority without the cultural tools to assert it. In response, they engage in creative mediation, developing strategies like performative strictness and technological translation to bridge these gaps. This process of "paradox navigation" emerged as a core professional competency.

The study makes a theoretical contribution by synthesizing its dual frameworks to conceptualize teacher resilience as ecological sense-making and tool creation. Practically, the findings inform the CIRCLE Synergistic Plan, an actionable framework for policymakers and school leaders to realign systemic supports, foster collaboration, and enhance inclusive education for foreign educators and their students.

**Keywords:** Behavior Management, Creative Mediation, Ecological Misalignment, Foreign Teachers, Inclusive Classrooms, Paradox Navigation, Thai Education System, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

### **Introduction**

In response to globalization, the Thai Ministry of Education has initiated reforms, including a dedicated push to hire 10,000 native English speakers to improve students' language skills and confidence [1]. This globalized teaching workforce brings diverse viewpoints to cross-cultural classrooms [2], further enriched by international programs and the recruitment of foreign educators to expose students to different methodologies and cultures [3,4,5].

Concurrently, Thailand advances inclusive education, guided by the Salamanca Statement and reinforced by national legislation. However, despite these policy efforts, implementation struggles with resource gaps and insufficient teacher training persist [6].

Within this context, foreign educators in Thai government schools face significant behavioral challenges in inclusive classrooms. These stem from diverse learning needs, cultural differences, language barriers, and contrasting disciplinary approaches [7], often leading to disruptions and inattentiveness. Poor management of these issues contributes to teacher burnout and attrition [8], underscoring a critical problem. While effective behavior management is a policy priority, a significant research gap exists. There is limited exploration of the specific experiences of foreign educators in inclusive Thai classrooms and the disparity between these policies and school-level practices.

Therefore, to address this gap, this phenomenological study aims to explore the lived experiences of foreign teachers managing behavioral challenges in inclusive Thai government schools. It is guided by the following central research question: **What is the essence of the lived experience of foreign teachers in managing behavioral challenges within inclusive classrooms in Thai government schools?**

To fully investigate this essence, the study addressed these sub-questions:

1. What **systemic and cultural barriers** do foreign teachers perceive as most impactful on their classroom management, and how do they navigate these contradictions?
2. What **relational strategies** do foreign teachers employ to build trust and facilitate collaboration with students, Thai co-teachers, and parents to support positive behavior?
3. What **personal and pedagogical adaptations** do foreign teachers develop to cope with and manage diverse behavioral challenges?
4. Based on these findings, what **synergistic plan** can be proposed to improve inclusive classroom management and instruction for foreign teachers in the Thai context?

By answering these questions, this research sought to provide a nuanced understanding of how foreign teachers perceive and navigate these complexities, with the goal of informing more effective educational practices, supportive policies, and cross-cultural teaching frameworks in Thailand.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored primarily on two theoretical lenses:

**Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory** provides a holistic framework to understand the multiple layers of influence on foreign teachers. It posits that an individual's development is shaped by their interactions within various environmental systems, from the immediate setting (microsystem) to broader cultural and political contexts (macrosystem). The theory's PPCT model (Process, Person, Context, Time) is particularly relevant for analyzing how foreign teachers' lived experiences are shaped not only by their direct environment but also by their personal characteristics (e.g., prior experiences, language proficiency) and the wider socio-cultural context of Thailand [9,10]. This lens guides the exploration of the complex factors in inclusive classrooms, including the teachers' relationships with students, colleagues, and administrators, as well as the overarching social and cultural forces at play.

**Vygotsky's Social Constructivism Theory** emphasizes that knowledge and understanding are socially produced through language and culture. This lens is crucial for examining how foreign teachers co-construct meaning and management strategies through their socio-cultural interactions with students, peers, and other stakeholders in the Thai school system [11,12]. It helps decode how language barriers and cultural misunderstandings influence their perceptions of student behavior and how they develop culturally informed

classroom management strategies by collaborating with Thai colleagues and engaging with the local community [13].

While Bronfenbrenner's theory provided the *map* of the multi-layered ecosystem, Vygotsky's theory explained the *tools and processes* for navigation within it. Together, they framed the researcher's investigation of how foreign teachers (Person), through their daily interactions (Process), use mediation and scaffolding (Vygotsky) to navigate the specific Thai cultural and institutional Context over Time (the PPCT model).

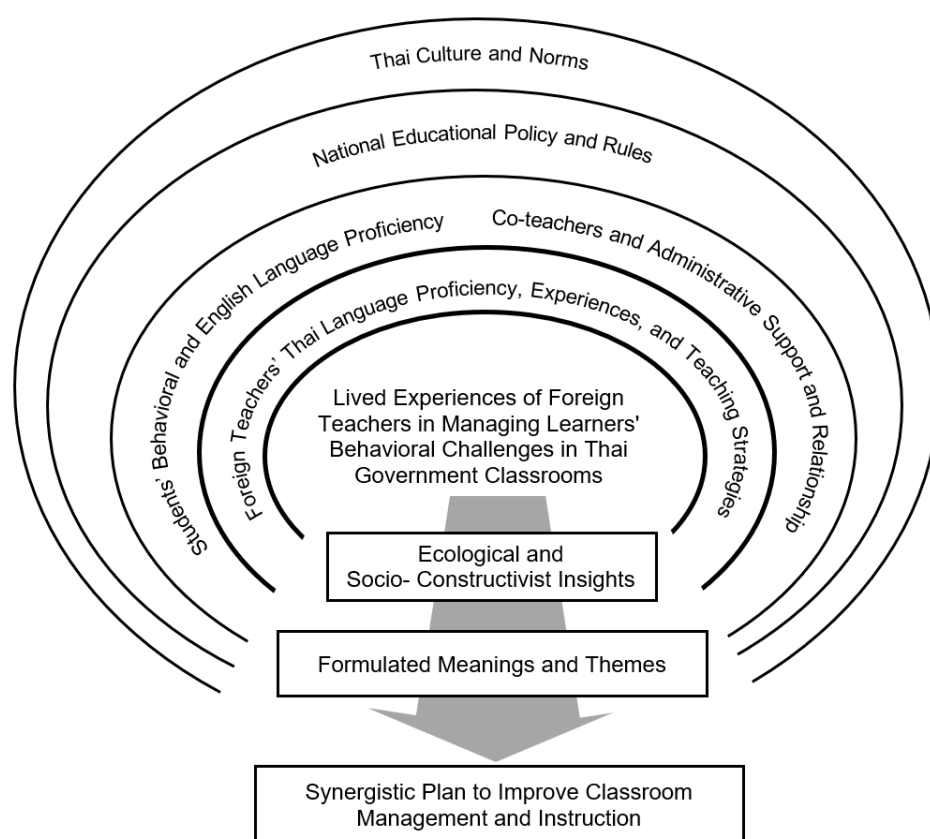


Figure 1. Ecological Model of Factors Shaping Foreign Teachers' Experiences

The model shown in Figure 1 illustrates the multi-layered ecosystem influencing foreign teachers in Thai inclusive classrooms. The core represents teacher-level factors (personal experience, Thai proficiency, teaching strategies), surrounded by the immediate school environment (student behavior, colleague collaboration). These are embedded within the national policy context (curriculum, disciplinary rules), all of which are encompassed by the overarching layer of Thai cultural norms. This layered framework, grounded in Ecological Systems Theory, guided the exploration of how these interconnected systems shape teachers' lived experiences and management of behavioral challenges.

## **Literature Review**

### **Thai Educational System and Policies**

The Thai educational system, guided by the 1999 National Education Act and the Child Protection Act of 2003, promotes inclusive education, free basic education, and holistic development. Despite these goals, challenges in behavioral management and English proficiency persist. Efforts like CEFR-compliant courses and foreign teacher placements address language gaps, but sustainability remains a concern. Legal frameworks support collaborative behavior management, but outdated punitive methods continue due to insufficient teacher training. Thailand needs to improve teacher preparation and adopt positive, evidence-based strategies. For foreign teachers in Thai primary schools, these challenges are amplified. The Child Protection Act outlines the roles of schools, families, and officials in promoting appropriate behavior, but reliance on punitive methods complicates the use of positive strategies. Foreign teachers also navigate cultural differences while managing behavior and addressing English proficiency needs. Understanding these policy gaps is crucial to exploring how foreign teachers adapt to and contribute to behavioral management.

### **Inclusive Education, Barriers, and Steps to Ensure Access**

Furthermore, the literatures revealed systemic barriers persist in inclusive education. UNICEF [14] revealed the exclusion faced by 240 million children with disabilities due to policy gaps, stigma, and inaccessible systems, while UNESCO and the Salamanca Statement of 1994 advocate for systemic reforms to address diverse needs through adaptable curricula and teacher training. Rapp and Corral-Granados [15] critiqued institutional practices that perpetuate exclusion, emphasizing how housing policies and fragmented school systems undermine inclusion. Thailand's challenges mirror these themes: despite progressive laws (e.g., 2008 Education Act), implementation lags due to insufficient resources, teacher training, and societal stigma [6,16,17]. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and flexible assessments [18, 19]), alongside context-specific policies and stakeholder collaboration are critical for progress [20,21].

### **Behavioral Challenges, Manifestations, Impact, and Needed Support**

Behavioral challenges in inclusive settings, such as externalizing (aggression, hyperactivity) and internalizing behaviors (anxiety, withdrawal), disproportionately affect students with disabilities [22,23,24]. These stem from sensory sensitivities, communication barriers, and unmet academic needs [25, 26, 27]. Attention difficulties, linked to ADHD and learning disabilities, exacerbate academic struggles [28,29]. Effective interventions include early

identification, IEPs, cognitive-behavioral strategies, and sensory integration [30,31]. Classroom dynamics, teacher practices, and cultural factors further influence behavior [32,33].

### **Foreign Teachers in Internation Settings**

Moreover, the reviewed literature highlighted the challenges of cross-cultural adjustment for international teachers, particularly in Thailand, where cultural differences impact classroom management. Identity negotiation between cultures plays a key role in this process [34]. Reflective practices, such as auto-ethnographic journaling, support teachers in processing their experiences and fostering personal growth [35,36]. Additionally, mentoring systems with reflective conversations help teachers navigate cultural shock and emotional pressures, improving their classroom management [2,37]. The studies vary in theoretical frameworks and methodologies, from post-structuralism [34] to reflective practice [35], and qualitative approaches like interviews and literature reviews [2, 36]. Despite these differences, they emphasize the importance of cultural adaptation, intercultural teaching, and strong support systems, all of which are critical for foreign teachers in overcoming challenges and managing behavior effectively. These findings are directly relevant to understanding the lived experiences of foreign teachers.

### **Management in Inclusive Classrooms**

The studies reviewed emphasize classroom behavior management, focusing on teacher self-efficacy, professional development, and positive teacher-student relationships. Effective strategies for managing challenging behaviors include setting clear expectations, positive reinforcement, and empathetic responses. Many studies highlight the importance of addressing cultural and emotional components in behavior regulation, as both teachers and students have unique learning needs and emotional barriers. The literature covers various aspects, including novice teacher experiences [38], the role of teacher empathy [39], and the influence of school administrators on classroom management [40]. Some studies focus on specific student populations (e.g., students with emotional or behavioral disorders, ADHD) or educational environments (e.g., Montessori schools, students with visual disabilities). For foreign teachers in Thailand, this research provides insights into cultural responsiveness, teacher self-efficacy, and empathy in managing diverse students with emotional and behavioral challenges. It also underscores the importance of professional development and school administration in supporting foreign teachers to adapt to local norms and classroom dynamics.

### **Teacher- Student Interactions**

The importance of positive teacher-student relationships in managing student behavior and fostering a productive learning environment. A strong, supportive relationship helps at-risk

students—such as those with disabilities, emotional struggles, or from low socio-economic backgrounds—feel valued, which is crucial for both academic and emotional success. The research underscores the need for a safe, respectful, and nurturing classroom, where trust and responsiveness are key to preventing problem behaviors and promoting emotional health. The studies, including those by Martinez and Wighting [41], Iznardo et al. [42], and Talty et al. [43], emphasize that caring relationships reduce disruptive behavior and enhance student growth. Additionally, Kozina et al. [44] and Zhou [45] stress the role of the teacher-student dynamic in managing aggression, stress, and emotional regulation. These findings are critical for shaping teacher training, intervention strategies, and classroom management practices, particularly in supporting socio-emotional learning and inclusive education.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of foreign teachers managing behavioral challenges in inclusive classrooms within Thai government schools. This design was selected to capture the complexity and richness of the participants' subjective perceptions and interpretations [46]. The aim was to describe the essence of their shared experiences, following a qualitative process that moved from data collection through interviews to thematic analysis and the generation of objective findings [47].

### **Participant Selection and Setting**

A purposive sampling technique was used to select 15 foreign in Pathumthani, Thailand, whose information are displayed in Table 1. Participants were required to have a minimum of three years of teaching experience in inclusive classroom settings. Purposive sampling ensured the selection of information-rich cases relevant to the phenomenon of interest, enhancing the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings [48]. The sample size aligns with recommendations for qualitative research to achieve data saturation [49].

Table 1. Participant Information

<b>Foreign Teacher</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Teaching Experience (Years)</b>	<b>Current Grade Level Taught</b>	<b>Current Subject Taught</b>
<b>1</b>	Male	8	Grade 1, 5, & 6	Science and English for Communication
<b>2</b>	Female	4	Grade 1 & 2	English
<b>3</b>	Female	17	Grades 1,5, & 6	English, Mathematics, Health, & Arts
<b>4</b>	Female	7	Primary and	English and Music

			Secondary	(currently Academic Coordinator)
5	Male	3	Grade 5 & 6	Mathematics
6	Female	8	Grade 6 & Secondary	English
7	Male	9	Grades 7 & 8	Mathematics
8	Female	8	Grade 3	English (Four Skills)
9	Female	6	Grade 3	Multiple subjects (Mathematics, Science, English, Computer, Scout, Reading, Activity)
10	Male	4	Grades 6, 7, 8, 9 & 12	Fine Arts
11	Male	25	Grades 5 and 6	Social Studies
12	Female	5	Grades 1, 2, 3 & 4	Physical Education
13	Female	33	Grade 5	English, Conversation
14	Female	7	Grade 1	English, Music, Arts
15	Male	7	Grades 4, 5 & 6	Reading and Writing, Conversation

### Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews using a guide with open-ended questions. This method allowed participants to share their thoughts and anecdotes openly, providing deep insight into their experiences [50]. The face-to-face interview setting fostered a comfortable atmosphere, encouraging detailed and insightful responses [51]. All interviews were conducted over a two-week period, audio-recorded with participants' written and verbal consent, and transcribed verbatim. The transcription process followed established steps to ensure accuracy, including careful listening, verbatim transcription, timestamping, and notation of non-verbal cues [52,53].

### Data Analysis

The data analysis involved a dual approach. First, **MAXQDA software** was used to manage, organize, and code the qualitative [54]. Second, a **modified version of Colaizzi's seven-step thematic analysis method** was applied [55,56]. This iterative process involved:

- 1) Familiarizing yourself with the data,
- 2) Identifying significant statements,
- 3) Formulating meanings from those statements,
- 4) Clustering the meanings into themes,
- 5) Developing an exhaustive description,
- 6) Producing a fundamental structure of the phenomenon, and
- 7) Verifying the results with participants.

To ensure rigor, **thematic triangulation** was employed by interpreting the data through the complementary lenses of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory and Social Constructivism theory [57]. Furthermore, **bracketing** was practiced prior to data collection, wherein the researcher consciously set aside prior assumptions and experiences through reflexivity to mitigate bias [58,59].

### Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical standards. Prior to participation, all participants provided written informed consent, which detailed the research purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was anonymized; participants were assigned pseudonyms, and any details that could identify their schools were omitted from the report.

### Results

In this phenomenological study, the data analysis revealed seven core themes that encapsulate the essence of the foreign teachers’ experiences, illustrating a complex interplay between systemic structures, relational dynamics, and personal adaptation.

**Table 2** organizes the study's 61 codes into seven core, interconnected themes. The analysis reveals a dynamic relationship where **The System (Theme 1)**, comprising institutional policies and cultural norms, creates the conditions that **The Adaptive Teacher (Theme 4)** must navigate. This teacher employs **Communication strategies (Theme 5)** to implement **Pedagogical techniques (Theme 3)** within a **Relational context (Theme 2)**, all while directly managing the **Specific Behavioral Ecology (Theme 7)** and confronting systemic challenges in **Inclusion (Theme 6)**.

Table 2. Themes and Codes

Themes	Codes
1. The Contradictory System: Structural Barriers & Institutional Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Silent Systemic Tension</li> <li>• Institutional Support</li> <li>• Different Experiences in Thai Government Settings</li> <li>• Socioeconomic Perception</li> <li>• Procedures to Talk to the Principal or School Officials</li> <li>• Training and Professional Development</li> <li>• Teaching Level Transitions and Adjustment</li> <li>• Yelling and Hitting as a Control</li> <li>• Disadvantages of Leniency in Discipline</li> <li>• External Factor - Technology/Internet</li> <li>• Cultural Differences in Authority and Respect</li> <li>• Professional Isolation &amp; Communication Gap with Colleagues</li> <li>• Motivation for Teaching Abroad</li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Economic &amp; Familial Obligation</li><li>• Work Preference</li><li>• Recognition &amp; Professional Validation</li></ul>
2. Relational Practice: Trust & Social Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Building Rapport and Trust</li><li>• Collaboration with Thai Co-Teachers &amp; Staff</li><li>• Recreational Inclusion</li><li>• Parental Influence and Authority</li><li>• Negative Experience - Parental Conflict,</li><li>• Relational Coping - nodding &amp; small signals</li><li>• Rewarding Experience as a Foreign Teacher</li></ul>
3. The Pedagogical Repertoire: Management, Discipline & Engagement Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Effective Strategy- Performative Strictness</li><li>• Successful Strategy - Reward and Punishment</li><li>• Successful Strategy - Clear Rules &amp; Routines</li><li>• Successful Strategy - Engaging Pedagogy</li><li>• Effective Strategy- Reflection and Written Expression</li><li>• Compromise and Negotiation as a Strategy</li><li>• Setting Boundaries</li><li>• Importance &amp; Process of Behavior Management</li><li>• Varying the Strategies Applied to Behavior Management</li><li>• Teaching Materials</li></ul>
4. The Adaptive Teacher: Identity, Reflexivity & Emotional Labor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Teacher Emotional Reflexivity</li><li>• Emotional Toll and Teacher Self-Efficacy</li><li>• Proactive and Flexible Teachers</li><li>• Evolving Pedagogical Approach (Adaptation)</li><li>• Cultural Learning as a Key to Success</li><li>• Transnational Pedagogical Continuity</li><li>• Observation and Mood Assessment as a Precursor to Strategy</li></ul>
5. Communication & Language: The Primary Hurdle and Its Adaptive Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Language Barrier as a Primary Hurdle</li><li>• Adaptive Communication Strategies</li><li>• Technological Translation Fatigue</li><li>• Proxy Pedagogy Through Translators</li><li>• Effective Strategy- Translating Thai to English Vice Versa</li></ul>
6. Inclusion in Practice: Navigating Neurodiversity & Student Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Advocacy for Systemic Inclusive Education</li><li>• Inclusion Strategies</li><li>• Hidden Diagnostic Gatekeeping</li><li>• Lack of Understanding of Neurodivergence &amp; Differences</li><li>• Diagnostic Ambiguity</li></ul>
7. Specific Behavioral Ecology: Causes, Manifestations, and Cycles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Specific Behavioral Challenges</li><li>• Differentiated Challenge of "Attention-Seeking"</li><li>• Cyclical Nature of Misbehavior</li><li>• Social Contagion of Behavior</li><li>• Understanding Root Causes of Behavior</li><li>• Knowing and Understanding Students' Background</li><li>• Family and Health Background</li><li>• Compassionate Micro-Teaching</li><li>• Moral Reasoning and Reality-Based Discipline</li><li>• Adaptive Moral Modeling</li><li>• Compassion as a Professional Strategy</li></ul>

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### **Theme 1: The Contradictory System: Structural Barriers & Institutional Context**

Operating within the macrosystem and exosystem, teachers confronted a landscape defined by fundamental institutional contradictions. The analysis revealed a system characterized by profound internal contradictions. Foreign teachers are expected to maintain classroom authority but are systematically denied the culturally-recognized tools to wield it. As one teacher starkly observed the disparity in respect: *"They're really afraid of their Thai teachers. For us... I just stand in the classroom in front of them. Oh, they're just talking, busy talking... So, I said to myself, why are you like that?"* (Foreign Teacher 11). Policies, such as those prohibiting physical contact, further complicate discipline, creating a disciplinary limbo. Furthermore, while the system rhetorically commits to inclusive education, this is not backed by structural support. A teacher highlighted the flawed implementation of a key support role: *"The shadow teacher is not actually focusing on the student because he or she cannot understand what the student is doing. They don't know the condition"* (Foreign Teacher 10). The foundational role of foreign teachers is communication, yet significant language barriers persist, crippling instruction. One teacher expressed the resulting futility: *"Yes, even if I translated it in Thai... they really don't care. That's where I feel that I'm not an effective teacher"* (Foreign Teacher 6). Ultimately, the burden of navigating these systemic failures is placed squarely on the individual teacher, who is expected to adapt perpetually through what one participant described as a *"trial and error thing"* (Foreign Teacher 11).

### **Theme 2: Relational Practice: Trust & Social Interaction**

The mesosystem revealed both the critical importance and the profound challenges of building connections between the classroom, colleagues, and parents. Effective teaching emerged as fundamentally relational. Success was depicted as being built on authentic connections with students, which required a conscious, strategic performance. A teacher explained this deliberate approach: *"I make sure that in my class I'm strict but if there's no class, I try to befriend them... But they know the boundaries"* (Foreign Teacher 14). Collaboration with Thai co-teachers was identified as a critical, yet often complicated, fault line. A common challenge was the language barrier hindering this collaboration, as one teacher noted: *"You have something to point out to the students, but the co-teachers can't help me at the moment"* (Foreign Teacher 5). The teacher-parent relationship was a powerful external determinant, capable of being a destructive obstacle. One teacher recounted a severe challenge: *"The parents, specifically the mom... goes directly to the principal's office... and told them to replace me... because the way that I discipline the kids is not good"* (Foreign Teacher 1). In the face of these complexities, teachers derived profound satisfaction from human connection, as one teacher shared: *"The most rewarding is sometimes,*

*the kids when you greet them, they say, 'Teacher, I miss you. Teacher, I love you.'... You don't expect that"* (Foreign Teacher 13).

### **Theme 3: The Pedagogical Repertoire: Management, Discipline & Engagement Strategies**

Within the immediate classroom microsystem, teachers developed a fluid repertoire of strategies to manage the complex behavioral ecology. Teachers employed a diverse and flexible strategic repertoire. A prominent finding was the conscious use of **performative strictness**. A teacher framed this as a necessary tool: *"You need to show how you dislike their misbehavior by raising your voice. Your facial reaction you need to show that you're infuriated... so they can focus"* (Foreign Teacher 14). This was complemented by structured **systems of reward, punishment, and clear routines**, whose effectiveness depended entirely on consistent enforcement. As one teacher affirmed, *"I am really consistent with my implementation when it comes to discipline"* (Foreign Teacher 9). Proactively, **engaging pedagogy** was a key strategy to preempt disruption. A teacher explained, *"I always use... games to get their attention... visual aids in order to attract more attention from them, to motivate them more to learn"* (Foreign Teacher 11). Underpinning all strategies was the **centrality of relationships**, manifested through compassion and understanding. One teacher described managing a challenging student by focusing on potential: *"The solution I came up with is trying to somehow acknowledge him whenever he does good. Try to make him like he is not just an unruly kid, but also he has potential"* (Foreign Teacher 8).

### **Theme 4: The Adaptive Teacher: Identity, Reflexivity & Emotional Labor**

At the core of the ecosystem, the teacher's personal identity and emotional resilience were constantly forged through a cycle of challenge and adaptation. The internal world of the teacher was defined by a continuous cycle of emotional challenge, reflexivity, and adaptation. Classroom challenges exacted a significant **emotional toll**, triggering doubt. One teacher shared a moment of crisis: *"Yes. It's like, you know, I really cry... What am I going to do? As if I am not an effective teacher. As if I am questioning my worth as a teacher"* (Foreign Teacher 13). This initiated a critical cycle of **reflexivity**, where teachers moved from reactive emotion to reflective understanding. After a hurtful incident with a student, a teacher reflected: *"I relaxed myself... We chatted then she explained... I saw from there that... you can't always retaliate... we should really understand them"* (Foreign Teacher 14). This internal process gave rise to an external identity of the **proactive and flexible practitioner**. As one teacher summarized, *"Every day is a new way for me because when you use this kind of strategy today, it may or may not work the next day. So,*

*you really have to think a lot of ways"* (Foreign Teacher 8). Underpinning this adaptability was **cultural learning**, identified as a fundamental prerequisite. A teacher advised, *"If you know the cultural differences between the country where you're from and here in Thailand, it will be easy for you to have the solution"* (Foreign Teacher 9).

### **Theme 5: Communication & Language: The Primary Hurdle and Its Adaptive Strategies**

The teacher's role as a mediator was most tested by the primary hurdle of language, which permeated every level of the ecosystem. The language barrier was consistently identified as the primary obstacle. One teacher succinctly stated, *"language barrier here in Thailand was the number one problem among the foreign teachers"* (Foreign Teacher 1). The consequences included an **erosion of authority**, as a teacher explained: *"even if I'm mad at them because of their misbehavior, if they don't understand what I'm saying, it has no effect"* (Foreign Teacher 13). In response, teachers developed adaptive strategies: **personal upskilling** (*"Learn the language... Save yourself, learn basic Thai"* - Foreign Teacher 8); **technological mediation** (*"I have to go to Google Translate, or I have to ask a student to please translate"* - Foreign Teacher 6); and **proxy pedagogy** (*"If they really do not get what I am saying, I ask one smart kid... 'Oh, you tell your classmate how to say this in Thai'"* - Foreign Teacher 11). These strategies, however, came with the hidden cost of **translation fatigue**, an exhausting cognitive labor that disrupts teaching momentum: *"there's my momentum up, but I have to stop just to accommodate the students who can't speak"* (Foreign Teacher 6).

### **Theme 6: Inclusion in Practice: Navigating Neurodiversity & Student Needs**

A critical mesosystem failure was exposed in the gap between the policy of inclusion and the reality of unsupported practice. A stark gap was found between the philosophy of inclusion and its practice. Teachers often operated in an information vacuum characterized by **diagnostic ambiguity**, forced to become detectives. One teacher recalled a realization: *"I was kind of irritated... So, I said, okay, you go to the blackboard and draw... So, then I realized, ah, this kid has something. That is the time I realize he is special..."* (Foreign Teacher 11). This was exacerbated by **hidden diagnostic gatekeeping**, where parental denial prevented official acknowledgment. A teacher noted, *"the parents are not aware of their condition, and they don't want to claim that the students are special education"* (Foreign Teacher 10). In response, teachers became **compassionate practitioners**, developing their own reactive strategies. One teacher's approach was rooted in empathy: *"I talk to them one by one... I ask them, why are they like that? Because I really want to know their background and reasons"* (Foreign Teacher 7). These

experiences led them to become vocal **advocates for systemic inclusive education**, calling for fundamental change: *"First, they should acknowledge that there are students who are special needs. Acknowledging that would mean that they're opening the schools to more solutions"* (Foreign Teacher 8).

### **Theme 7: Specific Behavioral Ecology: Causes, Manifestations, and Cycles**

The classroom microsystem was characterized by a complex behavioral ecology where misbehavior followed predictable patterns and cycles. Misbehavior was revealed to be a complex ecosystem. Misbehavior was revealed to be a complex ecosystem. Teachers identified multifaceted **underlying triggers**, such as emotional distress. One teacher uncovered that a student was *"looking for the attention"* he lacked at home (Foreign Teacher 7). These root causes manifested as specific **disruptive behaviors**, including defiance, as one teacher experienced: *"They tend to be disrespectful. They talk back, and even one time he even answered to me like, 'up to you'... 'I don't care'"* (Foreign Teacher 11). A pivotal finding was the **cyclical nature and social contagion** of misbehavior. A teacher described a futile pattern: *"the two boys, they will stop, but the thing is after five minutes, they will be the same"* (Foreign Teacher 1). Furthermore, misbehavior spreads rapidly, as another observed: *"the other students think that what their friends do was right... and then they're all laughing... they do it too, because they think that it was right"* (Foreign Teacher 1). This ecology underscored the necessity of diagnostic, empathetic approaches that address root causes rather than merely reacting to symptoms.

### **Discussion**

This study provided a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of foreign teachers managing behavioral challenges in inclusive Thai government schools. The findings revealed that their professional reality is defined by navigating a landscape of systemic contradictions through relational creativity and continuous personal adaptation. The analysis, framed by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, illuminates the multi-layered complexity of this cross-cultural teaching context.

### **Theoretical Interpretation: Navigating Contradictory Ecological Systems**

The findings vividly illustrate foreign teachers operating within what can be termed a **contradictory ecological system**. Using Bronfenbrenner's framework, significant tensions were identified at every level:

- **Microsystem:** The immediate teacher-student dynamic was often dysfunctional. Teachers were expected to maintain authority but were denied the culturally-recognized tools to do

so, as students showed markedly different respect to Thai teachers, whose *"presence alone is very effective enough for them to stop talking"* (Foreign Teacher 11).

- **Mesosystem:** Crucial connections between microsystems were weak or counterproductive. Inconsistent disciplinary approaches between home and school meant that *"every behavioral challenge should not only be solved in the classroom... it should also be dealt with at home"* (Foreign Teacher 8), yet such collaboration was often absent.
- **Exosystem:** Institutional policies created paradoxical situations. While physical discipline was officially prohibited, foreign teachers observed it being used by some Thai colleagues, creating an uneven disciplinary field.
- **Macrosystem:** Broader Thai cultural values surrounding authority, respect, and communication created a context that foreign teachers had to navigate without innate understanding. As one teacher noted, *"in Thai culture... if you keep on shouting at them, they won't follow you"* (Foreign Teacher 8).

This ecological analysis reveals that the challenges are not isolated incidents but are interconnected features of a system that places foreign teachers in a position of structural disadvantage, forcing them into a cycle of perpetual adaptation.

### **The Sociocultural Struggle for Mediation and Scaffolding**

Vygotsky's theory provides a complementary lens, pointing to the **sociocultural barriers to effective teaching and learning**. The primary struggle was one of mediation:

- **Language as a Cultural Tool:** The critical lack of a shared language represented a fundamental breakdown in the primary cultural tool for mediation. This led to situations where even excellent preparation failed because *"you can't achieve during the actual lesson because of the language"* (Foreign Teacher 2).
- **Scaffolding and the ZPD:** Teachers struggled to identify students' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and provide appropriate scaffolding due to language barriers and a pervasive *"diagnostic ambiguity"* regarding neurodivergent needs. This was exacerbated by a lack of effective collaboration with Thai co-teachers, a missed opportunity for professional scaffolding.

In response, teachers became creative mediators, developing adaptive strategies like using Google Translate and visual aids. However, these strategies came with a significant cognitive and emotional cost, effectively transforming their role from educator to translator.

Table 3. Theoretical Interpretation of Key Findings

Key Finding	Support from Bronfenbrenner's Theory	Support from Vygotsky's Theory
<b>Authority disparity</b>	Microsystem dysfunction due to cultural hierarchies	Lack of access to cultural tools of authority
<b>Language barriers</b>	Mesosystem breakdown between teacher-student and school-cultural systems	Inadequate mediation through cultural tools and signs
<b>Diagnostic ambiguity</b>	Exosystem failure in support structures	Inability to identify students' ZPD for appropriate scaffolding
<b>Teacher adaptation</b>	Chronosystemic development over time	Internalization of new strategies through social experience

### Alignment with and Extension of Existing Literature

The findings confirm and extend previous research on inclusive education in cross-cultural contexts. The gap between policy and practice aligns with global studies on inclusion [60], but this study details the specific mechanisms of failure, such as the provision of shadow teachers who *"don't know the condition"* of the students they support (Foreign Teacher 10).

Similarly, while language and cultural barriers are well-documented challenges for foreign teachers [61], this study provides a detailed catalog of adaptive strategies and, crucially, highlights their hidden costs, such as "translation fatigue." A key extension is the concept of **"hidden diagnostic gatekeeping,"** where a systemic reluctance to formally diagnose special needs forces teachers into reactive, improvised support.

### Resolving Paradoxes: The Teacher as Reflective Pragmatist

The study revealed several seemingly contradictory findings that, upon deeper analysis, reveal the sophisticated pragmatism of successful foreign teachers.

- **Performative Strictness vs. Compassionate Connection:** Teachers consciously employed both "performative strictness" and "compassionate micro-teaching." This is not a contradiction but a sophisticated dual strategy. Strictness established necessary boundaries, while compassion ensured students felt safe within them, encapsulated by one teacher's philosophy: *"I'm a very strict teacher, but I'm not strict without love"* (Foreign Teacher 4).
- **Relational Resilience Amid Systemic Deficiencies:** Despite significant systemic obstacles, teachers demonstrated remarkable resilience. This can be understood as **relational compensation**; profound satisfaction derived from successful student connections—such as when a student says, *"Teacher, I miss you"* (Foreign Teacher 13)—provided sufficient emotional reward to offset systemic frustrations.

Table 4 . Alignment with and Extension of Previous Research

<b>Research Area</b>	<b>Consistent with Previous Findings</b>	<b>New Contributions from this Current Study</b>
<b>Inclusive Education</b>	Gap between policy and implementation [60]	Specific mechanisms of how inclusion fails in practice despite structural supports
<b>Cross-Cultural Teaching</b>	Language and cultural barriers [61]	Detailed catalog of adaptive strategies and their emotional costs
<b>Neurodiversity Support</b>	Misinterpretation of behaviors [62]	Concept of "hidden diagnostic gatekeeping" and teacher-driven diagnosis
<b>Ecological Systems</b>	Importance of multi-level interventions [63]	Specific contradictions between ecological levels that create practitioner dilemmas

### **The Essence of the Experience**

In answer to the primary research question, the essence of the foreign teachers' experience is **navigating systemic contradiction through relational creativity and transformative adaptation**. They are not merely implementing teaching strategies but are constantly engaged in "paradox navigation," balancing competing demands within an ecological system that often works at cross-purposes. Their journey is one of transformative adaptation, developing new cultural understandings, pedagogical repertoires, and a professional identity forged in the crucible of the cross-cultural, inclusive classroom. This study underscores that supporting these educators requires not just technical training but systemic reforms that address the fundamental ecological contradictions they navigate daily.

### **Limitation**

This study has several limitations. First, the findings are based exclusively on the perspectives of foreign teachers (predominantly Filipino) in Thai government schools, and do not incorporate the views of other key stakeholders such as Thai administrators, co-teachers, students, or parents. Consequently, critical themes like hidden diagnostic gatekeeping and professional isolation are presented from a single viewpoint.

Second, the reliance on self-reported interview data makes it susceptible to biases, such as social desirability bias. The reported effectiveness of certain management strategies was not verified through direct classroom observation or independent measures of student outcomes. Finally, the study's cross-sectional design provides a snapshot in time. It does not track the longitudinal development of teacher strategies or student behaviors, documenting processes like pedagogical adaptation retrospectively rather than as they unfolded.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

The findings suggest that effective support for foreign teachers and inclusive education in Thailand requires a systemic, multi-level approach. Key implications are shown in Table 3.

Table 5. Multi-level Recommendations for Practice

Level	Recommendations
<b>Policy Level</b>	Develop clear protocols for identifying and supporting neurodiverse students; align inclusion policies with cultural values; fund adequate support staff
<b>Institutional Level</b>	Provide genuine collaboration time for foreign and Thai teachers; create consistent discipline frameworks; implement assistive technology systems
<b>Classroom Level</b>	Encourage teachers to develop cultural knowledge; create sensory-friendly environments; use consistent routines with flexible implementation
<b>Professional Development</b>	Offer training in identifying neurodiversity; develop communication strategies for limited-language contexts; teach culturally-responsive behavior management

### The CIRCLE Synergistic Plan

From these implications, the **CIRCLE Plan (Collaborative, Intercultural, Reflective, Community-Led Ecosystem)** is proposed. This framework creates a sustainable support system through five interconnected pillars as shown in Figure 2.

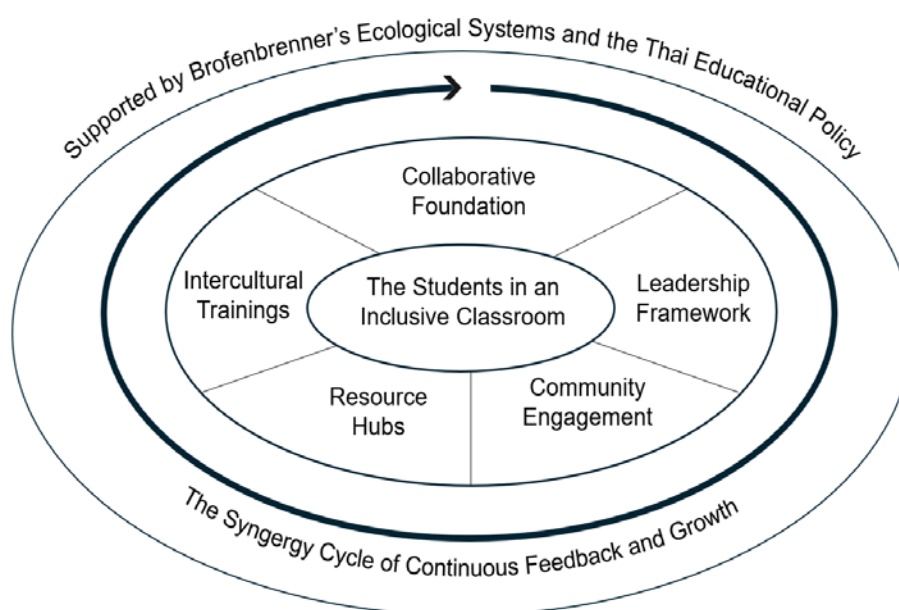


Figure 2. The CIRCLE (Collaborative, Intercultural, Reflective, Community-Led Ecosystem) Plan for Inclusive Thai Classrooms (Pandayan, 2025)

1. **Collaborative Foundations:** Mandate structured co-teaching partnerships with shared planning and defined roles to end teacher isolation.
2. **Intercultural Training:** Implement dual-track professional development for foreign teachers (on Thai cultural norms) and Thai staff (on Western pedagogies and neurodiversity).

3. **Resource Hubs:** Establish school-based "Inclusive Practices Hubs" with translated resources, visual aids, and clear referral pathways for student support.
4. **Community Engagement:** Use technology and school events to build bridges with parents, demystifying teaching methods and fostering mutual respect.
5. **Leadership Framework:** Empower a rotating committee of teachers and administrators to advocate for resources and ensure frontline experiences inform school-wide decisions.

### Conclusion

This study demonstrates that foreign teachers in Thai inclusive classrooms navigate a landscape of systemic contradictions, where institutional expectations often lack adequate support. Through the lenses of Ecological Systems Theory and Sociocultural Theory, the research reveals that effective teaching in this context requires **ecological consciousness**, an understanding of how different systemic levels interact, and **sociocultural mediation**, which is the ability to bridge cultural and linguistic gaps through creative scaffolding.

The findings underscore that sustainable improvement requires addressing these systemic misalignments directly. The proposed **CIRCLE Synergistic Plan** offers a comprehensive framework to transform these challenges into opportunities for intercultural educational innovation. By fostering collaboration, providing targeted resources, and empowering all stakeholders, this ecosystem-based approach can create more supportive and effective inclusive learning environments, moving beyond relying solely on individual teacher resilience toward building genuinely supportive professional ecosystems.

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