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Exploring the Effects of Teacher Self-Disclosure on EFL Learners' Idiomatic Expression Learning and Tolerance of Ambiguity

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Abstract

This quasi-experimental study examined whether teacher self-disclosure (TSD) improves EFL learners' acquisition of idiomatic expressions and their tolerance of ambiguity (TOA). Sixty-four upper-intermediate Iranian undergraduates were assigned to an experimental group (EG; n = 34), in which instructors integrated planned, curriculum-aligned personal self-disclosures across eight lessons, or to a control group (CG; n = 30) that received equivalent instruction without systematic self-disclosure. Measures administered at pretest and posttest were an idiomatic-expression test and Ely's (1995) Second-Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale. Between-group differences on idiom outcomes were examined with a Mann–Whitney U test, indicated a significant advantage for the TSD condition on idiom learning. TOA analyses showed equivalent pretest, but a significant between-group difference at posttest, confirming the experimental group performance. Moreover, Paired-samples tests indicated larger TOA gains for the EG than for the CG. We interpret these findings in terms of affective-cognitive mechanisms (reduced affective filter, enriched pragmatic context, narrative salience) associated with TSD and propose a research agenda to test whether TOA mediates or moderates TSD effects on idiomatic learning. Implications for EFL pedagogy and teacher education are discussed.

Keywords: Teacher self-disclosure; idiomatic expressions; tolerance of ambiguity; EFL

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and rationale

Idiomatic expressions are a central component of advanced L2 competence but remain a persistent challenge for EFL learners because

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many idioms resist literal translation and depend on cultural and pragmatic conventions (Adewumi et al., 2022). Mastery of idioms therefore requires not only lexico-semantic knowledge but also pragmatic sensitivity, contextualized exposure, and opportunities to infer nonliteral meanings from discourse. Traditional, form-focused vocabulary instruction often fails to provide the integrative, pragmatic scaffolding necessary for robust idiomatic knowledge (Adewumi et al., 2022).

Teacher self-disclosure (TSD), the pedagogically framed sharing of personal anecdotes, beliefs, or experiences by instructors, has been proposed as a technique that humanizes instruction, builds rapport, lowers the affective filter, and focuses learners' attention on contextualized meaning (Bouhafa et al., 2023; Qin, 2022). TSD can increase learner engagement and attention to pragmatic use by embedding target forms within salient narratives and by creating low-anxiety conditions that facilitate risk taking (Liu & Zhu, 2021; Qin, 2022). Recent quasi-experimental work in an Iranian EFL context reported positive effects of TSD on idiom comprehension, providing initial empirical support for these theoretical claims (Taheri et al., 2024). Together, these theoretical and empirical lines suggest plausible pathways by which TSD could support idiomatic expression acquisition: narrative salience improves encoding of nonliteral meaning, and lowered anxiety promotes hypothesis-testing and retention.

Tolerance of ambiguity (TOA) is an individual-difference construct indexing comfort with uncertain, incomplete, or multiple-meaning input and has been associated with adaptive inferencing and exploratory strategies in second-language learning (Basöz, 2015; Kamran, 2012). Ely (1995) developed the Second-Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (SLTAS) specifically for ESL/EFL populations; the SLTAS has since been used to connect TOA with strategy use and task performance in L2 contexts (Ely, 1995). Because idioms frequently present interpretive ambiguity until pragmatic cues resolve meaning, learners with higher TOA are plausibly more willing to entertain and test nonliteral interpretations, which may lead to superior learning outcomes (Basöz, 2015; Kamran, 2012).

Although separate literatures address TSD, idiom learning, and TOA, no published study to date has experimentally tested whether TSD not only facilitates idiom acquisition but also affects learners' TOA. The present quasi-experimental investigation addresses this gap by testing TSD effects on idiom learning and, using Ely's (1995) SLTAS, examining whether TSD produces differential gains in TOA.

1.2. Research questions and hypotheses

Building on the theoretical rationale and prior empirical work, the study was guided by two primary research questions and accompanying hypotheses:

RQ1. Does TSD significantly improve EFL learners' acquisition of idiomatic expressions?

Hypothesis 1. Learners instructed with systematic TSD will show greater gains on an idiomatic-expression test than learners receiving equivalent instruction without TSD.

RQ2. Does teacher self-disclosure significantly improve EFL learners' tolerance of ambiguity?

Hypothesis 2. Learners receiving instruction that includes systematic TSD will show larger pre–post improvements on SLTAS than learners in a no-disclosure control condition.

1.3. Significance

This study makes three interrelated contributions to research and practice in EFL pedagogy. First, it advances theory by linking a teacher-centred behavior with a learner-difference variable (TOA) in the underexamined domain of idiomatic learning. By testing whether a deliberate instructional practice (TSD) not only facilitates idiom acquisition but also shifts learners' tolerance for ambiguous input, the study integrates affective–cognitive mechanisms (e.g., reduced affective filter, greater willingness to hypothesize) with pragmatic and discourse-based accounts of idiom learning (Basöz, 2015; Ely, 1995; Taheri et al., 2024).

Second, the study offers methodological value. The quasi-experimental pretest–posttest design, the use of a psychometrically strong idiom test and a validated TOA measure (Ely, 1995), and the application of appropriate analytic procedures for nonnormal outcomes (e.g., Mann–Whitney U for idiom scores) provide a replicable template for future experimental and quasi-experimental work in classroom settings. This combination of design and measurement helps move research on classroom practices from descriptive correlations to more robust causal inference while retaining ecological validity.

Third, the study produces actionable implications for classroom practice and teacher education. The results suggest that purposeful, curriculum-aligned self-disclosures can create narrative-rich contexts that make nonliteral meanings more salient and can foster learners' tolerance for ambiguous or uncertain language input—an outcome likely to

generalize to other aspects of pragmatic competence (Liu & Zhu, 2021; Qin, 2022; Bouhafa et al., 2023).

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

The study employed a quantitative quasi-experimental design with intact groups to examine the effects of teacher self-disclosure on idiomatic expression learning and tolerance of ambiguity. Sixty-four upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners were assigned to either an experimental group (teacher self-disclosure instruction) or a control group (conventional instruction) in a two-group pretest–posttest setup. Both groups received the same idiomatic expression curriculum over six weeks using the PPP (Presentation–Practice–Production) teaching method. The only systematic difference was that, during the Presentation stage of each lesson, the experimental-group instructor shared personal anecdotes related to the target idiom (teacher self-disclosure), whereas the control-group instructor presented the idioms without personal disclosure. This manipulation served as the independent variable, while learners' performance on the idiomatic expression test and their tolerance of ambiguity scores were the dependent variables.

2.2. Participants

Participants were 64 male EFL learners (M_age = 18 years) from two private language schools in Chaharmahal province, Iran. According to placement tests, all participants were at the upper-intermediate level. To meet design requirements (at least 30 per group; Morgan, 2005; Hinkel, 2011), an initial pool of about 67 students was screened using the Oxford Quick Placement Test (version 2). Three students (1 experimental, 2 control) scoring below the upper-intermediate threshold were excluded. The final sample comprised 34 learners in the experimental group and 30 in the control group. All participants were male (reflecting the gender composition of the classes) and had a mean age of 18 years. No attrition occurred after group assignment, and group homogeneity was confirmed by the placement test and by pretest scores.

2.3. Instruments

2.3.1. Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT)

The OQPT Version 2 was used to verify that all participants met the upper-intermediate proficiency criterion. This 60-item multiple-choice test (Part 1: items 1–40; Part 2: items 41–60) assesses general English skills (grammar, vocabulary, reading, listening) and classifies scores of

37–48 as B2 (upper-intermediate). Only students scoring in this range were retained.

2.3.2. Idiomatic Expression Test

A 30-item multiple-choice test was developed by the researcher to measure learners' knowledge of idiomatic expressions. Thirty common English idioms were selected from *English Idioms in Use* (MacCarthy & O'Dell, 2002) based on frequency data from large corpora. These idioms were reviewed by two applied linguistics experts for relevance and difficulty. For the posttest, items were rephrased and distractors modified to create an alternate form. The test was piloted with 12 upper-intermediate learners, yielding high test–retest reliability ($r = .87$ for the pretest form and $r = .89$ for the posttest form). In this study, the idiom test was administered as a pretest and again as a posttest to both groups.

2.3.3. Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale

Learners' tolerance of ambiguity was measured using the Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (SLTAS) developed by Ely (1995). The SLTAS consists of 12 self-report items (e.g., "It is frustrating when I don't completely understand some English grammar.") answered on a four-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). This scale yields a total score ranging roughly from 12 to 48, with lower scores indicating higher ambiguity tolerance. Ely (1995) reported high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$) for this scale. For our context, the SLTAS was translated into Persian and piloted with a small sample of learners; the resulting Cronbach's α was similarly strong (approximately .85). The SLTAS was completed by all participants before instruction (pretest) and again after the six-week treatment (posttest).

2.4. Data Collection Procedure

The experimental instruction took place as an extracurricular six-week idiom course (50 minutes per session, 5 idioms per session). All students volunteered and were motivated to improve their idiomatic competence. In the first week, both groups completed the idiomatic expression pretest and the SLTAS to assess baseline performance. During weeks 2–6, the researcher (who served as instructor for both classes) taught the 30 idioms using the PPP approach. In each lesson's Presentation phase, the experimental-group teacher introduced the new idiom along with a related personal anecdote (teacher self-disclosure), whereas the control-group teacher provided a standard explanation and examples without self-disclosure. Both groups then engaged in guided Practice activities and

Production tasks for the same idioms. All other instructional variables (materials, examples, practice exercises) were held constant. No additional interventions were applied. In the final week, immediately after the sixth lesson, all learners again took the idiomatic expression test and completed the SLTAS posttest. This pretest–posttest design allowed comparison of change in idiom learning and ambiguity tolerance between groups.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (version 27). Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were computed for all test scores. Prior to inferential analysis, assumptions of normality were evaluated with Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk tests and by inspecting Q–Q plots. In the idiomatic expression test data, normality was violated and a few outliers were detected, so nonparametric analysis was used. Specifically, a Mann–Whitney *U* test compared the experimental and control groups on both pretest and posttest idiom scores. In contrast, SLTAS scores did not significantly deviate from normality, so independent-samples *t*-tests were employed to compare the groups on tolerance scores.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Research Question One

Research Question One compared idiomatic expression learning outcomes between two groups of EFL learners: those taught via teachers' self-disclosure and those taught conventionally. Preliminary checks confirmed group equivalence on general proficiency and idiomatic pretest scores. After instruction, we assessed the post-test of idiomatic expressions.

Normality tests indicated non-normal distribution for the idiomatic post-test scores (Table 1): both Kolmogorov–Smirnov (K–S = .208, $p < .001$) and Shapiro–Wilk (W = .934, $p = .002$) were significant. Therefore, we used the Mann–Whitney U test (a nonparametric alternative) to compare the two groups.

Table 1. *Normality tests for idiomatic expression post-test*

Test	Statistic	df	Sig.	Outliers detected
Kolmogorov–Smirnov	0.208	64	< .001*	None
Shapiro–Wilk	0.934	64	0.002	None

*Note: $p < .05$ indicates non-normal distribution.

Descriptive analysis (using mean ranks, since distributions were skewed) is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Group performance on idiomatic expression post-test

Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Experimental	34	28.00	1292.0
Control	30	21.27	788.0
Total	64		2080.0

The experimental group (teacher self-disclosure) had a higher mean rank (28.00) than the control group (21.27), suggesting better post-test performance in idiomatic expressions. To test significance, we conducted the Mann–Whitney U test.

Table 3. *Mann–Whitney U test for idiomatic expression post-test*

	Mann–Whitney U	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Idiomatic Test	323.000	–2.548	0.011

The Mann–Whitney test yielded U = 323.000, $Z = -2.548$, $p = .011$ (two-tailed). Because $p < .05$, we conclude that the difference between groups is statistically significant. In practical terms, the students taught via teacher self-disclosure performed significantly better on the idiomatic expressions test than those taught conventionally.

The superior performance of the experimental group indicates that teacher self-disclosure positively impacted idiomatic expression learning. This finding resonates with prior research showing that appropriate self-disclosure can enhance student engagement and comprehension (Jebbour, 2021; Henry & Thorsen, 2021; Qin, 2022). According to Krashen's affective filter hypothesis (1982), a more relaxed and trusting classroom (fostered by self-disclosure) reduces learners' anxiety, allowing them to better acquire subtle language features like idioms. Similarly, Bandura's social learning theory (1977) suggests that students learn language patterns by observing their teacher; when teachers share idiomatic examples in personal contexts, students have concrete models to imitate. In short, our data suggest that teacher self-disclosure created a more authentic, supportive learning environment, which in turn translated into higher idiomatic expression test scores.

Conversely, some past studies have warned of possible downsides of self-disclosure (e.g., Naumann, 1988; Nussbaum & Scott, 1979), but our results indicate that, in this context, any such drawbacks (like reduced teacher authority) did not outweigh the benefits. The idiomatic learning gains align with other findings that self-disclosure can improve motivation, participation, and communication skills in language learners (Jebbour & Mouaid, 2019; Stoltz *et al.*, 2014). Thus, our evidence supports the instructional value of self-disclosure in teaching challenging language content.

3.2. Research Question Two

To answer RQ2 we first checked assumptions (normality and outliers), then examined group equivalence at pretest, computed within-group (paired) *t*-tests to assess pre-post change, and finally ran an independent-samples *t*-test on posttest scores to assess between-group differences.

Table 4. *Normality and outlier checks for TOA scores*

Measure	Group	N	Shapiro–Wilk W	p	Outliers detected
TOA pretest	Experimental	34	0.964	.215	None
TOA pretest	Control	30	0.971	.331	None
TOA posttest	Experimental	34	0.968	.263	None
TOA posttest	Control	30	0.957	.185	None

Shapiro–Wilk tests indicated no significant departures from normality for TOA pretest or posttest scores in either group (all $p > .05$). Visual inspection of boxplots and z-scores identified no extreme univariate outliers. These results support use of parametric tests.

Table 5. *Descriptive statistics for TOA*

Group	N	Pretest M	Pretest SD	Posttest M	Posttest SD
Experimental	34	3.30	0.60	3.70	0.55
Control	30	3.25	0.58	3.32	0.60

At pretest both groups had similar TOA means (EG M = 3.30, CG M = 3.25), indicating comparable baseline levels. After the six-week treatment, the experimental group's mean increased to M = 3.70 (SD = 0.55), whereas the control group's posttest mean changed only slightly (M = 3.32, SD = 0.60).

Table 6. *Independent t-test for TOA pretests*

Test	t	df	Mean Difference	95% CI	p (2-tailed)
TOA	0.35	62	0.05	[−0.21, 0.31]	.727

The pretest comparison confirmed no statistically significant difference between groups at baseline, $t(62) = 0.35$, $p = .727$; the 95% CI for the mean difference includes 0.05, supporting the assumption of initial equivalence.

Table 7. Paired sample *t*-tests: pre-post TOA

Group	M_ pre	M_ post	t	df	Mean Diff	95% CI	p	d
Experimental	3.30	3.70	4.10	33	0.40	[0.21, 0.59]	< .001	0.70
Control	3.25	3.32	1.24	29	0.07	[−0.06, 0.20]	.224	0.23

The experimental group showed a significant pre→post increase in TOA scores, $t(33) = 4.10$, $p < .001$, mean difference = 0.40 (95% CI [0.21,

0.59]), with a medium–large paired Cohen's $d = 0.70$. The control group did not show a significant pre-post change, $t(29) = 1.24$, $p = .224$.

Table 8. *Independent t-test for TOA posttest*

Test	t	df	Mean Difference	95% CI	p (2-tailed)	d
TOA posttest	2.84	62	0.38	[0.11, 0.65]	.006	0.71

The independent *t*-test on posttest TOA scores showed a statistically significant advantage for the experimental (TSD) group, $t(62) = 2.84$, $p = .006$. The mean difference (EG − CG) = 0.38 (95% CI [0.11, 0.65]) corresponds to a medium–large effect (Cohen's $d = 0.71$), indicating that, after treatment, learners exposed to teacher self-disclosure reported substantially greater improvements in tolerance of ambiguity than learners in the control condition.

Although direct experimental tests of teacher self-disclosure (TSD) on tolerance of ambiguity (TOA) are relatively rare, our results fit with several related findings. Ely's (1995) development of the SLTAS foregrounds the link between classroom experiences and TOA changes; prior correlational work has connected lower anxiety and supportive instruction with higher ambiguity tolerance (Basöz, 2015; Kamran, 2012). Studies of teacher immediacy, rapport, and empathy (e.g., Cayanus & Martin, 2016; Goodboy et al., 2014) report improved affective outcomes and increased learner willingness to take communicative risks, outcomes consistent with higher TOA. Qin (2022) and Liu and Zhu (2021) argue that teacher behaviors that humanize instruction (including planned self-disclosure) lower the affective filter, increasing students' openness to uncertain input; our experimental evidence supports this pathway.

Two complementary mechanisms plausibly explain why TSD increased TOA in this study:

1. **Affective-filter reduction (Krashen, 1982):** TSD tends to build rapport and reduce classroom anxiety (Goodboy et al., 2014; Cayanus et al., 2008). Lower anxiety reduces the affective filter, allowing learners to attend to, process, and tolerate ambiguous or uncertain L2 input rather than avoid it. The experimental group's higher TOA is consistent with greater emotional safety and readiness to engage with ambiguous idiomatic inputs.
2. **Reframing ambiguity via narrative salience and normalization:** TSD embeds ambiguous forms (e.g., idioms) within personal narratives that model how fluent speakers deal with uncertainty, infer meaning from context, and accept temporary misunderstanding as part of learning (Bandura, 1977; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Hearing a teacher recount an experience

where an idiom's meaning was deduced or negotiated normalizes ambiguity and frames it as solvable, thereby increasing learners' tolerance and exploratory strategies.

From a sociocultural viewpoint (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), TSD provides mediated scaffolding: teachers model interpretive strategies and regulate learners' affective states, supporting internalization of tolerance for ambiguity. Positive-psychology constructs such as resilience and adaptive coping may also be strengthened when students perceive teacher support (Avarandeh et al., 2020), which in turn promotes tolerance for uncertain linguistic input.

4. Conclusions

This study provides converging evidence that systematic TSD both enhanced Iranian EFL learners' idiomatic expression learning and raised their TOA. The experimental group's superior performance on the idiomatic-expression posttest supports the hypothesis that embedding idioms in teacher-generated personal anecdotes produces stronger acquisition than equivalent instruction lacking systematic disclosure. Likewise, the TSD group's significantly higher TOA at posttest and its larger pre-post TOA gain confirm that planned self-disclosure can produce measurable shifts in learners' comfort with uncertain or multiple-meaning input. These empirical outcomes are consistent with accounts that emphasize affective and pragmatic mechanisms: by humanizing instruction and lowering anxiety, TSD reduces learners' affective filter and creates conditions more conducive to hypothesis-testing and uptake of nonliteral meanings (Krashen, 1982; Qin, 2022). At the same time, by embedding target idioms in salient narratives, TSD enriches pragmatic context and models interpretive strategies that help learners infer and retain figurative meanings (Bandura, 1977; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In short, the data indicate that deliberate, curriculum-aligned self-disclosure functions through dual affective–cognitive pathways to support both idiom mastery and greater tolerance for ambiguity.

5. Implications

5.1. Theoretical implications

The findings extend theory in second language acquisition by linking a teacher-centered communicative behavior to changes in an important learner individual-difference variable. First, the results support theoretical frameworks that view classroom interpersonal behavior as causally relevant to cognitive outcomes: Qin's (2022) synthesis argues that self-disclosure shapes classroom climate and learner engagement, and the present data show that these shifts can translate into concrete gains in lexical-pragmatic knowledge. From a social learning perspective,

Bandura's (1977) model helps explain how teachers' narrated use of idioms provides observable models of pragmatic inference, thereby scaffolding learners' internalization of strategies for interpreting nonliteral language. The observed increase in TOA further suggests that ambiguity tolerance is dynamic and can be fostered through pedagogic experience rather than treated as a fixed trait; this aligns with work emphasizing the malleability of affective and motivational constructs in L2 settings (Yu et al., 2021). Moreover, the dual-pathway account, affective-filter reduction alongside enriched pragmatic cueing, integrates immediacy and rapport theories with cognitive-pragmatic perspectives (Goodboy et al., 2014; Liu & Zhu, 2021), offering a coherent theoretical explanation for how interpersonal teacher behaviors may produce both emotional safety and improved inferential processing. Finally, situating these effects within sociocultural theory highlights the role of teacher-mediated scaffolding: TSD not only supplies contextual cues but also models regulatory strategies for coping with uncertainty, thus facilitating the internalization of tolerance for ambiguity (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

5.2. Practical implications

Pedagogically, the study suggests that teachers can purposefully use personal narrative to make challenging language items, particularly idiomatic expressions, more tractable for learners. Integrating brief, curriculum-aligned anecdotes when presenting idioms appears to increase the salience and memorability of nonliteral meanings, and it creates a classroom climate that tolerates risk-taking and hypothesis-testing. Teacher-education programs should therefore consider training modules on effective, professionally appropriate self-disclosure that emphasize relevance to learning goals and cultural sensitivity, since indiscriminate disclosure can have downsides if it undermines authority or appropriateness (Naumann, 1988; Nussbaum & Scott, 1979). Classroom practitioners and materials developers can operationalize these insights by designing lesson sequences that invite teacher and learner autobiographical connections to target forms, and by encouraging explicit discussion of uncertainty as a normal and instructive part of language learning. Because increased TOA is likely to transfer beyond idioms to other areas requiring inferential processing (e.g., pragmatics, inferencing from context), teachers who model coping with ambiguity and normalize partial understanding can foster learner dispositions that support autonomous, exploratory learning across curricular domains. In short, planned, relevant self-disclosure—used judiciously and aligned with pedagogical aims—constitutes a low-cost, scalable strategy for improving

both linguistic outcomes and learners' readiness to engage with uncertain input.

6. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Several limitations of the present study warrant caution and suggest directions for future research. The sample was relatively small and homogeneous (upper-intermediate male undergraduates from two private language schools in one Iranian province), which constrains the generalizability of the findings to other populations, proficiency levels, and sociocultural contexts. The quasi-experimental use of intact classes and a single instructor delivering both conditions, although pragmatic, raises the possibility of instructor- or cohort-related confounds despite efforts to hold materials constant. The intervention's duration (six weeks) and reliance on immediate posttests leave open questions about the durability of TSD effects; without delayed posttesting or measures of long-term retention, we cannot determine how enduring the idiom and TOA gains are. The measurement of ambiguity tolerance via self-report is another limitation: triangulating SLTAS scores with behavioral tasks (e.g., ambiguous-sentence interpretation tasks, eye-tracking during disambiguation) would strengthen inferences about actual changes in tolerance-related behavior. Finally, while the pattern of results is consistent with a mediation account in which increased TOA explains part of TSD's effect on idiom learning, the present design did not test mediation directly.

Future research should therefore pursue several avenues. Replication studies with larger, more diverse samples (including female learners, different age groups, and learners from varying cultural backgrounds) would assess external validity. Experimental designs that randomize at the individual level, or multi-instructor studies that counterbalance instructors across conditions, would reduce potential instructor and cohort biases. Longitudinal and delayed posttest designs would clarify the persistence of both idiom learning and TOA changes over time. Researchers should compare types and depths of disclosure (for example, brief relevant anecdotes versus extended personal narratives, or disclosures framed as successes versus failures) to identify which disclosure features maximize learning while maintaining professional boundaries. Empirical tests of mechanism—specifically, mediation analyses to determine whether TOA change mediates the effect of TSD on idiom acquisition—would directly address theoretical claims about affective–cognitive pathways. Finally, employing mixed methods that combine quantitative outcome measures with qualitative data on learners' perceptions would provide richer insight

into how and why TSD reshapes both competence and disposition in EFL contexts.

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