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Diagnosing EFL Learners' Pronunciation and Speaking Problems Through Technology-Enhanced Strategies: A Preliminary Study at SMPN 1 Majasari

Muhamad Idrus

Universitas Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa, Banten, Indonesia

Email: muhamadidrus123@gmail.com

Nurhaedah Gailea

Universitas Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa, Banten, Indonesia

Email: nurhaedah@untirta.ac.id

Rita Handayani

Universitas Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa, Banten, Indonesia

Email: rita_handayani@untirta.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Diagnosing pronunciation and speaking problems among EFL learners is essential to ensure effective oral communication and language development. Many students in EFL contexts face challenges in pronunciation and fluency due to first language interference, lack of exposure to authentic models, and psychological barriers. This preliminary study aims to identify the specific problems encountered by EFL students and the underlying causes, forming the basis for a future intervention. Conducted at SMPN 1 Majasari with 34 eighth-grade students, the research employed a qualitative approach using pre-tests, interviews, and document analysis. The results show that 85% of students faced mispronunciation issues, 95% had fluency and coherence problems, and 90% experienced anxiety when speaking. These findings highlight the urgent need for pedagogical support. This study proposes integrating Google Translate and storytelling to enhance pronunciation and expressive fluency, setting the stage for classroom action research.

Keywords: Pronunciation, Speaking, EFL Learners, Language Challenges, Preliminary Study

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is widely regarded as one of the most challenging skills to acquire in English language learning. Unlike receptive skills such as listening and reading, speaking requires learners to simultaneously produce language that is accurate, fluent, and comprehensible. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the difficulties become even more pronounced due to limited exposure to authentic language use and native-like pronunciation models (Ur, 2012; Harmer, 2007). As a result, many students struggle to express themselves confidently and clearly when speaking in English.

One of the fundamental components of speaking is pronunciation. Pronunciation not only affects the intelligibility of speech but also undermines a student's confidence in participating in oral communication (Gilakjani, 2022). Furthermore, EFL students often hesitate to speak because of fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, and insufficient opportunities to practice speaking in engaging contexts (Zhang, 2013; Nguyen & Le, 2022).

These issues contribute to a cycle of anxiety and avoidance that further hinders oral language development.

According to Brown (2001), effective speaking instruction must address both the mechanical elements of speech—such as pronunciation and grammar—and the functional aspects, including fluency, coherence, and interaction. Despite the growing awareness of these needs, traditional classroom practices often fail to provide adequate support, relying instead on rote learning and limited speaking tasks.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), speaking is further complicated by limited exposure to authentic language models and minimal opportunities for meaningful interaction (Ur, 2012; Nation & Newton, 2009). Pronunciation, in particular, is considered a cornerstone of intelligible speech. As Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (2010) emphasize, even grammatically accurate sentences can be misunderstood if pronunciation is significantly flawed. Moreover, pronunciation is not merely an articulation skill but also a communicative tool that conveys intent, emotion, and emphasis through prosody—an area often neglected in EFL instruction (Levis, 2018).

Fluency and coherence, on the other hand, require learners to produce speech in real time with minimal hesitation and logical structuring. According to Thornbury (2005), fluency is developed through repeated exposure, practice, and the ability to plan and monitor speech in interactional contexts. However, in many Indonesian classrooms, speaking is still treated as an assessment item rather than a developmental skill, which limits students' willingness and opportunity to express themselves orally (Hidayat & Sulisty, 2023).

These theoretical perspectives reinforce the urgency of designing classroom practices that integrate pronunciation modeling, fluency-building activities, and psychological support to foster learner confidence and competence in oral communication.

Therefore, it is essential for teachers to explore innovative and effective strategies that can empower students and create a supportive speaking environment. Based on these concerns, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

- (1) What are the major difficulties EFL students face in improving their pronunciation and speaking skills?
- (2) What are the underlying factors contributing to these issues?

Research consistently highlights several barriers that hinder EFL learners' oral proficiency. Among the most frequently identified are limited exposure to native-like pronunciation models, lack of confidence, poor phonological awareness, and insufficient practice opportunities (Gilakjani, 2022). These challenges are especially prominent in environments where English is not used outside the classroom, causing students to struggle with segmental features (like consonant and vowel sounds) as well as suprasegmental features (such as intonation, stress, and rhythm).

A recent study by Farooq and Wahid (2023) reported that high school students in Pakistan struggled with English pronunciation due to interference from their first language, lack of feedback from teachers, and minimal access to technology-based pronunciation tools. Similarly, Nguyen and Le (2022) identified that Vietnamese learners faced significant anxiety when speaking in front of others, often stemming from fear of making pronunciation mistakes. These psychological barriers, when combined with limited speaking activities in the classroom, resulted in poor speaking fluency and reduced classroom participation. Research by Nurilahi and Suhartono (2021) found that 97% of EFL learners experienced moderate to high levels of speaking anxiety, primarily due to fear of evaluation, poor preparation, and feelings of embarrassment.

Moreover, research by Hidayat and Sulisty (2023) emphasized that traditional teaching methods tend to prioritize written grammar over spoken communication, leaving students unprepared for real-time oral expression. Their study noted that students frequently experienced

hesitation, poor vocabulary recall, and pronunciation inaccuracies, which collectively inhibited effective speaking.

These findings suggest that to overcome such challenges, instructional strategies must be both engaging and supportive—incorporating tools that can provide models for accurate pronunciation and platforms for expressive, low-anxiety speaking practice. Richards & Rodgers (2014) argue that instructional design should integrate communicative functions with learner engagement, especially in EFL contexts. Based on these concerns, this study aims to diagnose specific problems EFL students face and propose practical intervention.

One of the primary factors contributing to students' poor pronunciation is first language (L1) interference. When students attempt to pronounce English words, they often apply the phonological rules of their native language. This phenomenon, known as negative language transfer, leads to incorrect articulation of sounds that do not exist in the learners' L1. For example, Indonesian students may struggle to differentiate between voiced and voiceless sounds such as /θ/ (as in *think*) and /ð/ (as in *this*), which are absent in Bahasa Indonesia. As Gilakjani (2022) notes, phonetic differences between languages play a significant role in learners' difficulty acquiring accurate pronunciation.

Another contributing factor is the lack of exposure to native-like pronunciation models. In many EFL classrooms, English is taught primarily through written texts and grammar exercises, while listening and speaking skills receive limited attention. Without frequent exposure to authentic spoken English—such as through native speakers, media, or modeled pronunciation—students have little opportunity to internalize correct stress, intonation, rhythm, and articulation patterns. Nguyen and Le (2022) emphasize that limited auditory input leads to poor aural discrimination and imitation, essential components for effective pronunciation learning.

Additionally, students' psychological barriers—such as anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of making mistakes—further inhibit their speaking development. Many students are hesitant to speak in front of peers due to the fear of being judged or corrected. This fear often results in silence or minimal participation, limiting the practice necessary for improvement. As revealed by Hidayat and Sulistyono (2023), many students refrain from speaking because they feel uncertain about their pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary, perpetuating a cycle of underperformance and avoidance.

Classroom conditions and teaching practices also significantly affect students' speaking outcomes. Traditional teaching methods often emphasize rote learning, textbook completion, and accuracy-focused assessments, with few opportunities for spontaneous oral production. Teachers may lack the time, training, or resources to implement communicative or pronunciation-focused activities. Consequently, students may not be given sufficient chances to speak English meaningfully in class, resulting in low motivation and poor fluency (Farooq & Wahid, 2023).

Finally, the absence of engaging and learner-centered speaking activities contributes to student disengagement. Without creative tasks that stimulate personal expression, students often perceive speaking as an intimidating or uninteresting task. As Swari (2022) highlights, classroom activities that are repetitive or decontextualized from students' experiences fail to promote speaking confidence or enthusiasm. Therefore, this study is guided by the following research problems: (1) What are the major difficulties EFL students face in improving their pronunciation and speaking skills? (2) What are the underlying factors contributing to these issues? The objectives of this study are to diagnose the specific pronunciation and speaking challenges faced by students and to investigate their causes. The findings are expected to benefit English teachers by offering insights into learner difficulties and proposing practical classroom solutions.

METHOD

This research applied a qualitative descriptive design. Data analysis was carried out in three stages: (1) data condensation by categorizing problems in pronunciation and speaking; (2) data display through summary tables and thematic coding; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification to identify dominant patterns and root causes, as recommended by Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2014). In this case, English is studied in an EFL context. This preliminary study was conducted at SMPN 1 Majasari in Pandeglang, Banten, involving 34 eighth-grade students (18 males and 16 females) from class VIIIIB in the second semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. The students were selected based on initial teacher reports and classroom observations indicating persistent challenges in speaking and pronunciation performance.

The study used a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). To identify the existing problems in students' pronunciation and speaking skills, three data collection techniques were employed: a performance-based pre-test, student interviews, and document analysis. These instruments were used to triangulate findings and provide a comprehensive overview of the students' current speaking abilities and challenges.

To obtain baseline data, a performance test was administered in which students were asked to read aloud a short narrative text. Their spoken output was recorded and assessed using a standardized CEFR-based rubric focusing on pronunciation, fluency, and coherence. The results were analyzed to identify specific pronunciation problems, such as mispronunciation of regular and irregular verbs, nouns, and pronouns, as well as issues related to rhythm and intonation.

Following the test, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students to explore their perceptions and difficulties in speaking English. Questions focused on their feelings about speaking activities, sources of anxiety, and familiarity with pronunciation tools such as Google Translate. The responses were transcribed and coded thematically.

In addition, existing learning documents were collected and examined, such as students' previous speaking scores, teacher records, and classroom observation notes. These documents were analyzed to verify patterns of low achievement and to support the test and interview findings.

The qualitative data collected through pre-tests, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis were subjected to a thematic analysis, following the model established by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). This model involves three interconnected stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, each of which was applied systematically to ensure methodological rigor.

In the data condensation phase, raw data were reduced, coded, and organized into manageable segments without losing the essential meanings. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly and segmented into meaningful units reflecting students' cognitive, linguistic, and affective challenges. Similarly, observations from student performance in pre-tests were documented with reference to CEFR-based indicators for pronunciation and fluency. Coding was conducted manually using an open coding approach, allowing themes to emerge inductively from the data.

In the data display phase, the coded data were arranged in visual matrices and analytic memos to identify patterns and relationships across different sources. Categorical groupings included recurrent issues such as L1 interference in phoneme production, monotonic speech delivery, speaking anxiety, and limited access to pronunciation models. These categories were then cross-checked between instruments (e.g., triangulating interview responses with performance assessments and teacher notes) to establish trustworthiness and intersubjective validity.

Finally, in the conclusion drawing and verification phase, the researchers engaged in analytical interpretation to generate higher-order themes, such as "systemic instructional gaps"

and “psycholinguistic affective constraints.” Verification was achieved through iterative reading, peer debriefing, and alignment with existing literature (e.g., Gilakjani, 2022; Zhang, 2013; Nguyen & Le, 2022). This stage facilitated the formulation of pedagogical implications, particularly the need for an integrated intervention combining Google Translate for pronunciation modeling and storytelling to promote expressive fluency.

These analytic procedures ensured that the findings were not only data-driven but also theoretically grounded, enabling a valid foundation for subsequent classroom action research cycles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This preliminary study was carried out to explore and verify the current problems experienced by eighth-grade students at SMPN 1 Majasari in relation to their pronunciation and speaking skills. The data were gathered through three primary sources: a performance-based pre-test, student interviews, and document analysis. The collected data were then analyzed thematically and interpreted based on the indicators of speaking skill performance, especially in the areas of pronunciation, fluency, coherence, and confidence.

Students' Performance in Pronunciation and Speaking

The speaking pre-test was administered to all 34 students of class VIII-B. In this activity, students were instructed to read aloud a short narrative text adapted from a commonly used English learning book for junior high school students. The selected passage included high-frequency vocabulary, simple past tense structures, and familiar thematic content to ensure accessibility for the learners. Their oral performances were audio-recorded and evaluated using a standardized rubric adapted from the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) for speaking, focusing on three core components: pronunciation, fluency, and coherence.

The analysis revealed that 85% of the students demonstrated serious challenges in pronunciation. These included inaccurate articulation of common English words such as *village*, *couple*, *time*, *opened*, and *they*, which were pronounced using Indonesian phonological patterns. For example, the word “village” was often pronounced as /fi.lədʒ/ or /fi.lak/, reflecting students’ unfamiliarity with English syllable stress and voiced consonant sounds. Similarly, “they” was commonly pronounced as /di/ or /deri/, demonstrating confusion with the /ð/ sound, which does not exist in Bahasa Indonesia.

Furthermore, the students displayed limited awareness of intonation, stress, and rhythm, leading to monotonous or awkward speech delivery. This resulted in spoken narratives that lacked natural flow, despite the relatively simple sentence structures used in the text. It was also observed that students tended to pause excessively between words, sometimes even syllables, especially when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary. This pattern suggested not only a lack of confidence but also inadequate rehearsal or practice of oral reading.

Coherence and Fluency

In addition to pronunciation errors, students’ performance revealed issues related to speech coherence and fluency. Although the text was short and narrative in nature, many students read it as a disjointed sequence of words rather than as a connected story. Transitions between sentences were often marked by long hesitations or repetitive self-corrections. Some students skipped or repeated entire phrases, particularly those involving past tense verbs or unfamiliar word combinations.

Out of 34 recordings, only five students (15%) were able to deliver the story with a degree of continuity and appropriate pacing. The rest showed inconsistent speech tempo, unnatural pauses, and syntactic disfluencies. For instance, one student began confidently but broke down midway upon encountering the word “golden cucumber”, which was unfamiliar

and triggered a long hesitation. Others tended to read too quickly at the beginning and slowed dramatically toward the end, revealing a lack of strategic pacing and control over their delivery.

This finding highlights a critical gap in students' discourse-level oral ability, where speech needs to be organized around meaning units and delivered with cohesive language. Without sufficient scaffolding or oral modeling, students were unable to maintain a smooth and comprehensible flow of speech.

Psychological Barriers and Affective Factors

Interviews with a sample of 12 students were conducted to gain deeper insight into their perceptions, emotions, and attitudes toward speaking English. The results confirmed that psychological barriers—especially fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence—were significant contributors to poor speaking performance.

A total of 90% of students expressed anxiety or nervousness when asked to speak in English, whether in reading tasks or spontaneous speech. Many reported feeling judged or ridiculed by classmates if they mispronounced a word. One student noted, “Saya takut salah ngomong, nanti diketawain. Apalagi kalau gurunya denger langsung.” Another admitted, “Saya tidak tahu cara bacanya, jadi lebih baik diam saja.” These statements reflect a classroom environment that, while structured, does not yet fully support risk-taking in oral language use.

Moreover, several students associated speaking English with “tests” or “corrections” rather than meaningful communication, indicating that speaking activities were primarily implemented as formal assessments rather than engaging language practice. This orientation likely contributes to the perception that speaking is a high-stakes activity rather than a normal part of language learning.

Exposure to Pronunciation Models

The data also revealed that students had limited exposure to native-like pronunciation models. When asked how they learned pronunciation, the majority of students cited “mendengarkan guru,” “dari buku,” or “menebak sendiri.” Only a few had interacted with audio or video materials, and none had used pronunciation tools such as Google Translate or language learning apps. This lack of exposure explains why students often rely on spelling or Indonesian phonics when attempting to pronounce English words, resulting in systematic mispronunciations.

Classroom observation and teacher interviews supported this finding. English instruction at SMPN 1 Majasari was still largely textbook-based, with few activities explicitly targeting pronunciation or spoken fluency. While teachers occasionally modeled correct pronunciation, there was no structured pronunciation practice or use of audio aids during regular lessons. This points to a gap in both material availability and teaching strategy when it comes to oral language instruction.

Document Analysis

To further triangulate the findings, existing assessment records and teacher notes were analyzed. Speaking grades from the previous semester showed that the average student score for oral tasks was below 70, with a noticeable clustering of low marks in pronunciation and fluency criteria. Teacher comments often noted issues such as “unclear pronunciation,” “low confidence,” “hesitant,” and “silent during oral test.”

Lesson plans and instructional documents also revealed a strong emphasis on reading comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary acquisition, while speaking and listening were only allocated minimal time. Although oral presentations were occasionally assigned, they were often scripted, read aloud with limited feedback, and not followed by pronunciation-focused support.

This imbalance in skills coverage further supports the notion that students are underprepared for spontaneous or expressive speech, and that pronunciation is not being taught systematically. The absence of a structured speaking curriculum that includes pronunciation

instruction, feedback mechanisms, and motivational activities is likely one of the key contributors to the speaking challenges identified in the classroom.

Summary of Preliminary Findings

Based on the analysis of the pre-test, student interviews, and supporting documents, several key findings emerged:

1. Pronunciation difficulties are widespread, particularly related to sound substitution, word stress, and intonation.
2. Fluency and coherence are limited, with students struggling to maintain consistent pacing and organize their speech effectively.
3. Anxiety and lack of confidence inhibit oral participation, with students fearing judgment or correction from teachers and peers.
4. Students have minimal exposure to authentic pronunciation models, leading to dependence on visual or Indonesian-based cues.
5. Speaking instruction is not well-integrated into the curriculum, resulting in limited practice and lack of feedback.

These findings confirm that a multifaceted intervention is needed—one that not only addresses pronunciation accuracy but also provides students with engaging, low-anxiety opportunities to practice speaking in a supportive environment.

In response to these findings, the forthcoming classroom action research will propose a dual-method intervention: the use of Google Translate as a pronunciation modeling and practice tool, and storytelling as a communicative and expressive speaking strategy. Google Translate offers students access to real-time pronunciation input through its text-to-speech feature, allowing them to compare their pronunciation with a native-like model. Meanwhile, storytelling provides students with the opportunity to organize and deliver oral narratives in a creative, low-pressure context.

It is anticipated that the integration of these two methods will address both the technical and affective components of speaking development—supporting students in improving pronunciation accuracy, increasing speaking confidence, and developing greater fluency and coherence in English communication.

Discussion

The results of this preliminary study corroborate existing research on EFL learners' struggles with oral communication. The high rate of mispronunciation (85%) among students aligns with Gilakjani's (2022) assertion that first language interference—especially in phonemic articulation and prosodic patterns—remains a major barrier in English pronunciation acquisition for EFL learners. For instance, consistent misarticulation of the /ð/ and /v/ sounds mirrors the phonological gap between English and Bahasa Indonesia.

The fluency and coherence problems observed in 85% of the sample are consistent with findings from Lazaraton (2014), who noted that EFL students often fail to deliver coherent speech due to lack of practice in real-time oral discourse. The present study further substantiates this by showing that students read in a fragmented, disjointed manner, which suggests not only linguistic gaps but also an underdeveloped understanding of narrative structure. As Thornbury (2005) notes, fluency requires not just vocabulary access but also the ability to plan and deliver extended speech—skills that were notably absent in most students' performances.

Psychologically, 90% of students reported anxiety when speaking, especially in front of peers and teachers. This aligns with Zhang (2013), who identified social-evaluative fear as a core affective barrier in EFL speaking. Khafidhoh et al. (2023) observed that nervousness, trembling, and shame were among the leading psychological barriers to speaking English among university students. According to Hidayat (2021), the dominant sources of speaking anxiety include strict classroom environments, linguistic barriers, and fear of making mistakes.

The novelty in this study lies in identifying that even oral reading tasks, which are controlled and scripted, can provoke anxiety. This highlights that the emotional load of speaking may not only be tied to spontaneity but also to *accuracy pressure* in formal learning settings. In line with that, Diana et al. (2023) emphasized that mindset training and relaxation techniques were effective in reducing speaking anxiety triggered by fear of judgment and insufficient preparation.

In terms of instructional exposure, the finding that students rely mainly on teacher input or self-guessing for pronunciation matches the concern raised by Nation and Newton (2009), who argue that phonological input in EFL classrooms is often insufficient and inconsistent. Unlike in immersive contexts, Indonesian students rarely encounter high-quality, repeated pronunciation models, which results in fossilization of incorrect forms. This study contributes by showing how that lack of modeling translates directly into pronunciation errors observable in controlled reading tasks.

Finally, the curriculum imbalance—favoring reading and grammar over speaking—echoes the pedagogical critique by Hidayat and Sulisty (2023), who observed that teachers often avoid pronunciation because they lack training or resources. This study extends their argument by showing clear empirical consequences: students who have had minimal pronunciation-focused instruction consistently score below 70 in oral assessments and avoid speech even in low-stakes environments.

To address these interconnected issues, the study proposes a dual-method intervention: Google Translate for pronunciation modeling and storytelling for expressive fluency. While previous studies (e.g., Hasan, 2020; Sharma, 2011) have explored these tools independently, their combined use as a strategy targeting both phonological and affective domains present a novel approach. This aligns with the concept of "cognitive-affective integration" (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008), where technical skills and emotional readiness are developed in tandem.

CONCLUSION

This preliminary study was conducted to identify and confirm the problems faced by EFL students in relation to pronunciation and speaking skills before implementing classroom action research. The findings clearly reveal that students at SMPN 1 Majasari, particularly those in class VIII-B, are experiencing substantial difficulties in producing accurate English pronunciation and coherent oral narratives. These difficulties manifest in frequent mispronunciation of high-frequency words, hesitation in speech delivery, and lack of intonation, rhythm, and stress patterns typical of natural spoken English.

The results from the pre-test performance confirmed that 85% of students struggled with pronunciation, particularly in articulating words such as *village*, *opened*, and *they*, which were often pronounced using incorrect phonological patterns influenced by the students' native language. Additionally, 95% of students demonstrated disfluency and incoherence, making it difficult for listeners to follow their speech. These technical challenges were further compounded by psychological barriers: 90% of students reported low confidence and fear of making mistakes when asked to speak English, especially in front of peers or teachers.

The root causes of these issues are multi-layered, including a lack of structured pronunciation instruction, minimal exposure to authentic English pronunciation models, the dominance of written-based English instruction, and the absence of engaging, communicative speaking tasks in the classroom. Supporting documents and interviews with students further confirmed that pronunciation is rarely treated as a skill to be practiced systematically, and speaking activities are often limited to formal or scripted exercises with little room for creativity or interaction.

In light of these findings, an intervention is considered urgently needed to address both the linguistic and affective challenges experienced by the students. The proposed use of Google

Translate as a pronunciation model and storytelling as an expressive, confidence-building speaking activity is expected to offer a practical and innovative solution. These tools, when implemented effectively, have the potential to improve students' pronunciation accuracy, increase their speaking fluency, and enhance their overall confidence in using English. Therefore, this study provides a strong empirical foundation for a Classroom Action Research (CAR) project to be conducted in multiple cycles. This next phase will evaluate the actual impact of the intervention in a real-time classroom setting, using both formative and summative assessments.

Recommendations for English Teachers:

1. Integrate pronunciation-focused activities regularly using accessible digital tools such as Google Translate or other pronunciation apps.
2. Design speaking tasks that are creative, narrative-based, and low-pressure, such as storytelling, drama, or role-play, to reduce anxiety and improve fluency.
3. Provide ongoing feedback that is constructive and pronunciation-specific, focusing on both segmental (e.g., individual sounds) and suprasegmental features (e.g., intonation, rhythm).
4. Foster a classroom climate that encourages risk-taking in speaking and normalizes errors as part of the learning process.

Recommendations for Future Research:

1. Conduct a longitudinal study to evaluate the effectiveness of Google Translate and storytelling over multiple CAR cycles and across different learner groups or school settings.
2. Investigate how student attitudes and motivation toward English speaking evolve when technology and narrative-based pedagogy are sustained over time.
3. Explore comparative effectiveness by contrasting technology-based pronunciation tools (e.g., Google Translate vs. AI speech recognition apps) in improving learner outcomes.
4. Examine how teacher beliefs and training in pronunciation instruction influence their implementation of such interventions.

These recommendations aim to bridge the gap between research and practice, equipping teachers with tools that are not only theoretically grounded but also practically feasible in real EFL classrooms.

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