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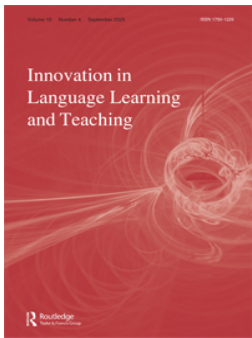
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# The benefits and challenges of queering TESOL: a qualitative research synthesis

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## ABSTRACT

This study presents a qualitative research synthesis of 14 empirical studies published between 2017 and 2024, examining queer pedagogies within international TESOL contexts. By synthesising recent literature, this study addresses both the theoretical underpinnings of queer pedagogies, as well as the benefits and challenges related to their practical application in TESOL. Specifically, the characteristics of queer pedagogies identified are the integration of LGBTQ+ identities within the curriculum, challenging heteronormative assumptions, and creating an environment where learners can openly discuss LGBTQ+ topics. The findings show that queer pedagogies can foster critical thinking, improve communicative skills and a greater sense of belonging among learners, highlighting their potential to facilitate second language acquisition. However, challenges arise due to entrenched societal beliefs, institutional reluctance and limited teacher training on LGBTQ+ issues. The thematic analysis reveals that while queer pedagogies promote diversity, inclusion and equity in language teaching, educators often face external pressures and insufficient resources, evidencing the need for targeted professional development to support the broader acceptance of queer pedagogies. This research contributes to TESOL scholarship by providing insights into how queer pedagogies can advance language education, including through their integration with other pedagogical approaches. Ultimately, it advocates for increased academic and pedagogical resources to support English language teachers in the implementation of queer pedagogies, and points towards the need for future studies to explore how these pedagogies are experienced by diverse learners across varied TESOL contexts.

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## KEYWORDS

Queer pedagogies; TESOL; qualitative research synthesis; second language acquisition; language teaching

## 1. Introduction

Queer pedagogy, which has emerged at the intersection of queer theory and critical pedagogy, aims to disrupt heteronormative assumptions and critically examine how

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sexuality and gender identities are constructed, regulated and represented within educational contexts (Britzman 1995; Bryson and de Castell 1993; Malinowitz 1995). This pedagogical approach moves beyond simple inclusion of LGBTQ+ identities, advocating instead for critical inquiry into how language, culture and institutions reproduce normative sexualities and genders (Nelson 1999; Nemi Neto 2018; Paiz 2018). While queer pedagogy has been extensively theorised within broader educational scholarship and increasingly explored within TESOL research (as detailed in Section 2), empirical studies examining its implementation in TESOL classrooms have yet to be systematically synthesised across diverse contexts. To the best of our knowledge, Qualitative Research Synthesis (QRS), which is increasingly employed in TESOL to synthesise findings across qualitative studies (Chong and Plonsky 2021), has yet to be applied to research into queer pedagogies within the field.

To address these gaps, this study undertakes a QRS of 14 primary research articles published between 2017-2024, aiming to synthesise and critically evaluate findings from the most recent literature on queer pedagogies in TESOL. By highlighting the defining characteristics, reported benefits and documented challenges of implementing queer pedagogies in the latest empirical research, this synthesis contributes to both the conceptual understanding and practical application of queer pedagogies in modern TESOL practices. The insights gained offer valuable implications for language teacher training and inform further research within the field.

## 2. Background

Before delving into the analysis, this section briefly defines key concepts and related terminology upon which the focus of this research (i.e. queer pedagogy in TESOL) is built.

### 2.1. Queer theory

Queer theory emerged from post-structuralist thought in the late 1980s and early 1990s, questioning essentialist assumptions about gender, sexuality and identity (Sedgwick 1990; Butler 1990; Jagose 1996). Queer theory rejects stable and binary categorisations of identity, emphasising instead fluidity, intersectionality and the socially constructed nature of sexuality and gender (Britzman 1995). A central tenet of queer theory is its critique of heteronormativity, which assumes that heterosexuality is the default or normative state, alongside cisnormativity, which privileges binary gender identities. Scholars such as Butler (1990) and Sedgwick (1990) emphasised that language plays a crucial role in maintaining these norms, reinforcing the idea that discourse shapes perceptions of identity and belonging. Malinowitz (1995) extended this discussion to education, highlighting the exclusionary effects of heteronormative curricula and the necessity of actively incorporating lesbian and gay perspectives.

### 2.2. Critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy, grounded in the works of Freire (1970) and further developed by scholars such as Giroux (1985) and Hooks (1994), views education as a means of challenging

social inequities and fostering critical consciousness among learners. This approach critiques traditional, hierarchical models of education that prioritise passive knowledge transmission, instead advocating for participatory, dialogic and transformative learning experiences (Darder et al. 2023; Kincheloe 2008). In the context of language education, critical pedagogy has been instrumental in promoting socially responsive teaching approaches that incorporate learners' lived experiences and address issues of power, culture and identity (Pennycook 1999; Canagarajah 2016).

### **2.3. The emergence of queer pedagogy and its application within TESOL**

*Queer pedagogy* synthesises queer theory's critical stance toward normative sexual and gender identities with critical pedagogy's commitment to social justice, liberation and critical inquiry (Bryson and de Castell 1993; Britzman 1995). According to Britzman (1995), queer pedagogy does not simply advocate inclusion or tolerance of lesbian and gay identities but rather invites critical exploration of how identities, norms and power dynamics are constructed within educational discourses and practices. For instance, in Malinowitz (1995) composition classrooms are argued to reinforce heteronormative norms, marginalising lesbian and gay students and limiting critical engagement with language and identity. By integrating queer perspectives and interrogating how language constructs power and identity, composition classrooms can become spaces for critical inquiry and transformation.

The application of queer pedagogy to TESOL emerged prominently in the 1990s, with Cynthia Nelson's pioneering work (cf. Nelson 1993, 1999, 2008). Initially, Nelson (1993) critiqued the invisibility of gay, bisexual and lesbian identities in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, highlighting the need for awareness of sexual diversity among learners. Later, Nelson (1999, 371) explicitly integrated queer theory into TESOL, emphasising that queer pedagogy shifts the educational focus 'from inclusion to inquiry', advocating for the critical examination of how language teaching itself participates in the construction of sexual identities and norms. This approach represents a significant departure from earlier pedagogical practices that typically either ignored sexuality or addressed it superficially through mere representation (cf. Paiz 2018).

Since Nelson's foundational contributions, queer pedagogy in TESOL has continued to develop, gaining greater recognition in recent years due to increased global attention to LGBTQ+ rights, social justice and inclusive educational practices (cf. Gray 2013, 2021; Paiz 2018; Merse 2018). In a more recent conceptualisation, Nemi Neto (2018) has defined queer pedagogy as educational practices that explicitly promote the inclusion, recognition and visibility of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual (LGBTQIA) students in language classrooms, while critically confronting classroom-based heteronormativity. Thus, queer pedagogy critiques pedagogical and linguistic practices that reinforce artificial binaries (such as the gender binary) often found in textbooks, English language teaching (ELT) materials and classroom interactions (Knisely and Paiz 2021), aiming to promote equity, acceptance and the creation of safe, inclusive learning environments for queer<sup>1</sup> students.

Despite the notable developments in the application of queer pedagogy to the TESOL field, a systematic review of empirical studies across contexts, specifically examining the defining characteristics, benefits and challenges associated with modern implementations of queer pedagogies in international TESOL classrooms, is, at present, lacking.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. The current study

This research aims to systematically synthesise recent empirical evidence (2017-2024<sup>2</sup>) to identify and critically evaluate the defining characteristics, benefits and challenges associated with recent applications of queer pedagogies<sup>3</sup> in international TESOL contexts. The guiding research questions (RQs) are:

1. What are the main characteristics of queer pedagogies identified in recent empirical TESOL research?
2. What benefits of adopting queer pedagogies in TESOL have recent empirical studies reported?
3. What are the challenges of implementing queer pedagogies in TESOL as documented in recent empirical research?

#### 3.2. Justification

This research employs QRS to analyse queer pedagogies in TESOL, ensuring *openness* in data coding, where much attention is devoted to adopting a flexible, responsive approach to coding to capture themes emerging from the data (Chong and Plonsky 2024). However, recognising that themes do not exist independently of researcher interpretation (Braun and Clarke 2021), a reflective stance is adopted. In this regard, it seems important to acknowledge that both authors identify as queer. One is a second language (L2) learner of English whose identity was affirmed through inclusive L2 teaching practices and learning materials, while the other is an English language teacher who actively strives to foster inclusive learning environments. These positionalities, along with the authors' theoretical understandings of queer pedagogies (as outlined in the Section 2) and previous life experiences, inevitably shape the identification, analysis and interpretation of themes.

Employing QRS offers several advantages in TESOL research, addressing the limited generalisability of smaller studies by synthesising global findings (Chong, Bond, and Chalmers 2022). It is especially useful in compiling qualitative data from smaller practitioner-led studies, enhancing their impact and relevance (Chong and Plonsky 2021). Additionally, a QRS approach promotes reflective, evidence-based teaching and innovation within TESOL (Liu and Chong 2024). By synthesising teacher and learner beliefs, experiences and perceptions from diverse educational settings, QRS provides a comprehensive view of how specific pedagogical practices are implemented and experienced (Chong and Plonsky 2024); here, more specifically, queer pedagogies across international TESOL contexts.

#### 3.3. Design

This study follows established QRS guidelines by Chen (2016) and Chong and Plonsky (2021), using structured processes for literature search and selection, ensuring rigour and accuracy (Drisko 2020).

Since the study reviews publicly available journal articles, no significant ethical issues were anticipated. Adherence to academic integrity and ethical standards was ensured,

following the British Educational Research Association's (2024) guidelines. Ethical approval was granted on August 5<sup>th</sup> 2024 by the Languages and Linguistics ethics committee at York St John University (code LL01017).

### 3.4. Procedure

A systematic literature search strategy was developed using Boolean operators (e.g. AND) to combine search terms and ensure focused results. The search targeted queer pedagogies within TESOL and related areas (e.g. ELT, EFL), drawing on three main sources: (a) digital libraries and databases, (b) widely referenced journals in TESOL (including open-access journals) and (c) supplementary searches via Google Scholar. The following keyword combinations were used:

1. Queer pedagogy/ies, LGBT pedagogy/ies, LGBTQ+ pedagogy/ies AND TESOL
2. Queer pedagogy/ies, LGBT pedagogy/ies, LGBTQ+ pedagogy/ies AND EFL
3. Queer pedagogy/ies, LGBT pedagogy/ies, LGBTQ+ pedagogy/ies AND ELT

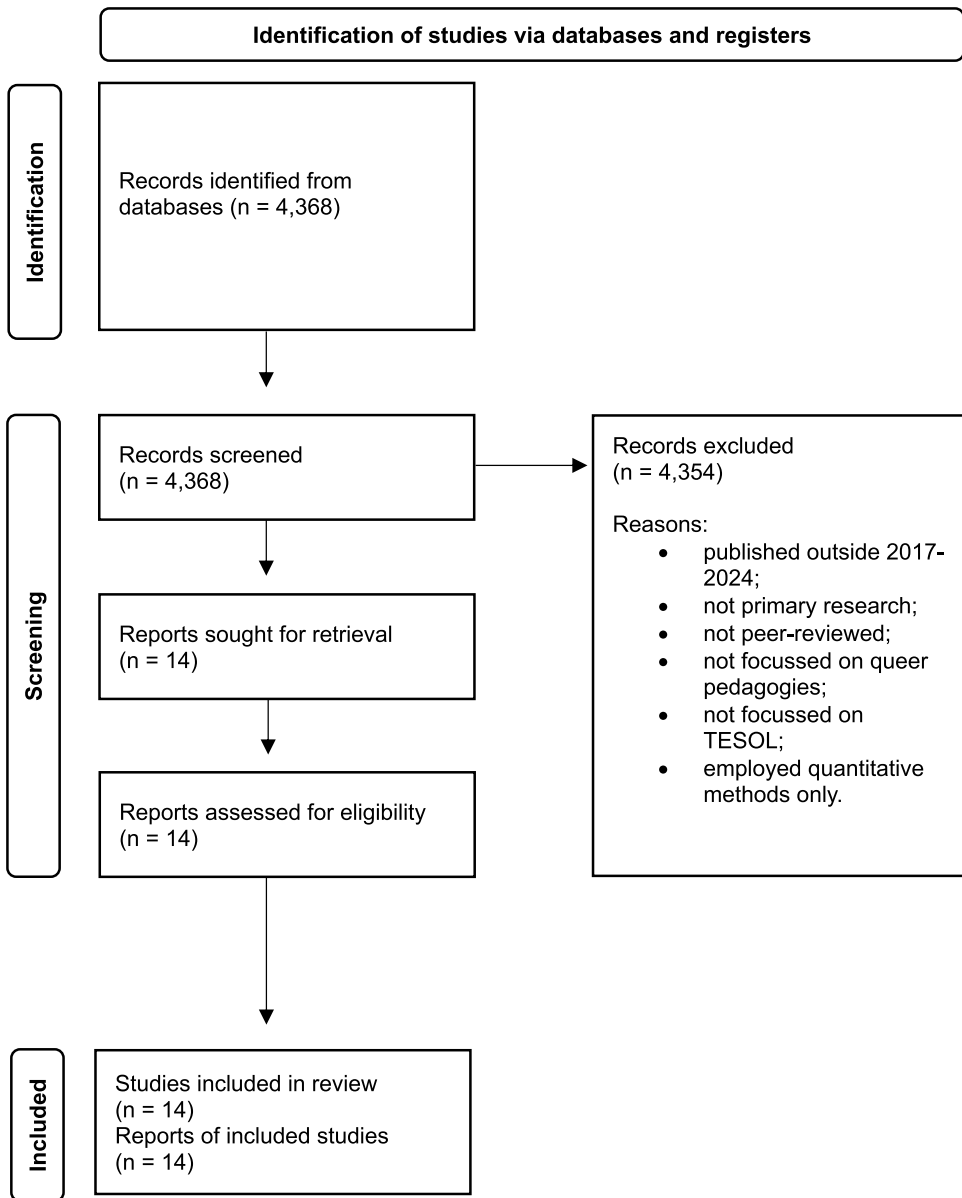
The literature search targeted the following digital libraries: *Academic Search Ultimate (EBSCOhost)*; *Cambridge Core*; *Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)*; *Educational Resource Information Centre (ERIC)*; *JSTOR*; *Science Direct*; *WILEY Online Library*; *York St John University Library*.

Next, relevant articles were searched in internationally refereed and open-access journals using the same keywords. Journals consulted included, among others: *Acta Educationis Generalis*; *Adult Learning*; *Applied Linguistics*; *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*; *ELT Journal*; *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*; *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*; *Language Awareness*; *Language and Education*; *Language Learning*; *Language Teaching Research*; *RELC Journal*; *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios Educativos*; *Sexuality and Culture*; *System*; *TESOL Journal*; *TESOL Quarterly*; *The CATESOL Journal*; *The Language Learning Journal*; *The Modern Language Journal*.

A rigorous screening followed. From 4,368 records, we excluded items that: fell outside 2017-2024 (the *a priori* five-year window, from 2019 to 2024, was broadened owing to limited yield); were not primary peer-reviewed research; did not focus on queer pedagogies and TESOL; were quantitative-only. In total, 14 studies met the inclusion criteria and were selected for synthesis, which aligns with the typical range for TESOL qualitative research syntheses on pedagogy (e.g. 16 studies in a QRS of technology-mediated TBLT studies by Chong and Reinders 2020). The study selection process is summarised in [Figure 1](#) (PRISMA flow diagram; adapted from Page et al. 2021). A full list of studies included is provided in the Appendix.

### 3.5. Analysis

Of the 14 selected articles, 12 employed a qualitative design, while two used mixed methods with a significant qualitative component. For mixed-methods studies, only the qualitative data findings were analysed to align with the QRS approach (Chong and Plonsky 2021). The analysis focused on the findings and discussion sections to identify



**Figure 1.** PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the identification, screening and inclusion of studies in the qualitative research synthesis on queer pedagogies in TESOL.

themes pertinent to the RQs, ensuring methodological soundness (despite the narrower scope, as discussed in the limitations).

While this study primarily followed Chen’s (2016) and Chong and Plonsky’s (2021) guidelines, thematic analysis was chosen over grounded theory because the aim was specifically to identify, analyse and report recurring themes across existing qualitative data, rather than to construct new theoretical frameworks (Braun and Clarke 2019; Braun, Clarke, and Terry 2014). Indeed, thematic analysis is particularly effective for

qualitative synthesis due to its flexibility in accommodating diverse data sets, clarity of analytical procedures and suitability for studies aiming to synthesise existing qualitative findings (Thomas and Harden 2008; Terry et al. 2017).

The analysis process began with initial coding to identify key themes relevant to the RQs (Dawadi 2020). This involved assigning short labels, or 'codes', to key sections of the text (Peel 2020). The codes were then grouped into descriptive categories, organising the data to reflect broader themes (Finlay 2021). To capture finer details, sub-categories were developed within each descriptive category, along with the number of studies per sub-category (Liu 2023).

### **3.6. Reflexivity and reliability**

This article is adapted from an MA dissertation completed by author LF under the supervision of author MZ. The core work of identifying, screening and analysing the data was conducted by LF, with ongoing supervisory input and feedback from MZ throughout. All key decisions during the screening, data extraction and analysis stages were discussed collaboratively, following a dialogic approach typical of supervised postgraduate research. This included joint review of inclusion/exclusion criteria, theme development and interpretation of findings. As such, while inter-coder reliability was not formally calculated, rigour was maintained through regular supervisory meetings, where codes and themes were critically reviewed and refined.

This process also reflects our commitment to reflexivity. As noted in Section 3.2, both authors' queer identities and lived experiences informed our engagement with the material. In line with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021), we recognise that theme generation is inherently interpretive and shaped by researcher positionality. The approach taken is also consistent with the Synthesis Methods and Reporting Tool (SMART) developed for research syntheses in applied linguistics (Chong 2025), which explicitly acknowledges that adjustments may be necessary when synthesising literature as part of a supervised thesis. As stated in SMART, inter-coder reliability 'may not be compulsory' in such contexts, and a reduced number of databases is acceptable for postgraduate research (Chong 2025, 16). Nonetheless, the present article has been revised and expanded to meet the standards of peer-reviewed publication, with all sections substantially revised and expanded by the first author prior to submission.

## **4. Findings**

The findings are organised according to the three key RQs. First, themes related to the characteristics of queer pedagogy in TESOL are presented, followed by themes addressing the benefits and challenges of implementing queer pedagogies in TESOL. A detailed breakdown of the analytical categories, descriptive and subcategories, as well as examples of initial coding, are provided in Tables 1–3. Full coding can be retrieved from the OSF project page at: <https://osf.io/63kax/>.

### **4.1. Characteristics of queer pedagogies in TESOL**

RQ1 (serving as the analytical category) aimed to identify the main characteristics of queer pedagogies in TESOL, revealing three key themes: *Integrating LGBTQ+ identities into the curriculum*, *challenging heteronormativity in learning*, and *creating an open environment*

**Table 1.** Main characteristics of queer pedagogies identified in recent empirical TESOL research.

Analytical category (research question)	Descriptive category	Subcategory [number of studies per subcategory]	Example of initial coding
What are the main characteristics of queer pedagogies identified in recent empirical TESOL research? (RQ1)	1. Integrating LGBTQ+ identities into the curriculum	1a. Explicit inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics [11]	'I was teaching LGBTQ+ rights as the official curriculum' (Leal and Crookes 2018, p.43) 'One student teacher asked to describe a person who has fought for LGBTQ+ rights' (Banegas, Jacovkis, and Romiti 2020, p.10)
		1b. Normalising non-binary or gender-neutral language use [4]	'I model the utility of gender-neutral language' (Tarrayo 2023, p.494) '... asking students to supply their preferred pronouns (including they/them)' (Tarrayo and Salonga 2023, p.376)
	2. Challenging heteronormativity in learning	2a. Critically analysing heteronormative assumptions [6]	'... all of you [students] assumed the addressee is a woman' (Merse and König 2023, p.156) '... questioning of a heteronormative education system' (Tarrayo and Salonga 2023, p.370)
		2b. Addressing LGBTQ+ discrimination [5]	'I warned them about the difference between two (slur) words and then I told them that laughing in that way is a rude behaviour' (Güney 2023, p.1284) 'I also use authentic materials ... that treat gender discrimination as a problem' (Tarrayo 2023, p.494)
	3. Creating an open environment where learners can express LGBTQ+ ideas and opinions	3a. Encouraging freedom of expression [9]	'I encourage freedom of expression during class discussion' (Tarrayo, Potestades, and Ulla 2021, p.1643) 'I also make sure that students are free to voice out or express their thoughts if they have any issues with the class' (Ulla and Paiz 2023, p.7)
		3b. Honouring queer perspectives [5]	'I acknowledge gay students who can speak gay lingo ... ask them to perform how they make meaning' (Tarrayo 2023, p.495) '... open minded to topics that LGBTQ+ students can bring out' (Ulla and Paiz 2023, p.7)
		3c. Teachers discussing their own gender identity/sexual orientation [4]	'I decided to come out to my students' (Leal and Crookes 2018, p.45) 'I talk so openly about my own gender identity' (Tarrayo and Potestades 2024, p.843)

Alt text: This table outlines the main characteristics of queer pedagogies identified in recent empirical TESOL research, categorised into three descriptive categories: 1) integrating LGBTQ+ identities into the curriculum, with subcategories on explicit inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics and normalising non-binary or gender-neutral language use; 2) challenging heteronormativity in learning, with subcategories on critically analysing heteronormative assumptions and addressing LGBTQ+ discrimination; 3) creating an open environment for students to express LGBTQ+ ideas and opinions, with subcategories on encouraging freedom of expression, honouring queer perspectives, and teachers talking openly about their gender identity/sexual orientation. Initial coding examples are included.

**Table 2.** Benefits of adopting queer pedagogies identified in recent empirical TESOL research.

Analytical category (research question)	Descriptive category	Subcategory [number of studies per subcategory]	Example of initial coding	
What benefits of adopting queer pedagogies in TESOL have recent empirical studies reported? (RQ2)	1. Developing soft skills	1a. Critical thinking [7]	'... queering ELT becomes a liberatory practice where the learners critically engage' (Tarrayo and Potestades 2024, p. 844) '... exposing students to more queer representation will ... strengthen their critical thinking skills' (Tarrayo and Salonga 2023, p. 373)	
		1b. Social and cultural awareness [11]	'... queer inquiry ... more likely to foster understanding of the diversity of human experience' (Kaiser 2017, p. 15) '... through learning about sexuality, learners are able to understand social and cultural differences' (Banegas, Jacovkis, and Romiti 2020, p. 9)	
		2a. Technical linguistic proficiency [3]	'... handling for some, a controversial topic while using English accurately' (Rhodes and Coda 2017, p. 103) '... invaluable topic to practise the four skills ... including presenting new language' (Banegas, Jacovkis, and Romiti 2020, p. 10)	
			2b. Communicative awareness [7]	'... using a queer perspective means ... being attentive to how English is used' (Tarrayo and Salonga 2023, p. 370) '... being knowledgeable in fair language entails responsible and intelligent communication' (Tarrayo 2023, p. 492)
		3. Facilitating inclusion	3a. Fostering a sense of belonging [4]	'... using gender neutral language ... making students feel a sense of belonging' (Tarrayo 2023, p. 492) '... there is a ... sense of belongingness for queer students' (Tarrayo and Salonga 2023, p. 371)
			3b. Enabling a welcoming atmosphere [6]	'... thereby creating a ... supportive learning environment' (Tarrayo 2023, p. 843) '... creating and maintaining a respectful environment for all students' (Rhodes and Coda 2017, p. 103)
	3c. Feeling comfortable/safe when learning [7]		'... by using gender fair language, we can create a safe space' (Tarrayo 2023, p. 490) '... students ... can feel comfortable about themselves' (Kaiser 2017, p. 15)	
	4. Lowering the affective filter	4a. Increasing positive emotions towards learning [5]	'... students will be confident in expressing themselves in the classroom since there are no biases that create psychological pressure that may be present' (Tarrayo 2023, p. 492) '... LGBTQ+ topics in the classroom have affective benefits ... for learners' (Kaiser 2017, p. 14)	

Alt text: This table summarises the benefits of adopting queer pedagogies identified in recent empirical TESOL research, categorised into four descriptive categories: 1) developing soft skills, with subcategories on critical thinking and social and cultural awareness; 2) improving learner communication, with subcategories on technical linguistic proficiency and communicative awareness; 3) facilitating inclusion, with subcategories on fostering a sense of belonging, enabling a welcoming atmosphere, and feeling comfortable/safe when learning; 4) helping to lower the affective filter, with one subcategory on increasing positive emotions towards learning. Initial coding examples are included.

**Table 3.** Challenges of implementing queer pedagogies in TESOL.

Analytical category (research question)	Descriptive category	Subcategory [number of studies per subcategory]	Example of initial coding	
What are the challenges of implementing queer pedagogies in TESOL as documented in recent empirical research? (RQ2)	1. Established belief systems opposing queer pedagogies	1a. Religious beliefs [9]	'... certain topics should be avoided to comply with the religious culture' (Rhodes and Coda 2017, p. 102) '... when we approach sexual education ... may conflict with our religious beliefs' (Banegas, Jacovkis, and Romiti 2020, p. 9)	
		1b. Teacher and student ideologies [10]	'... Most of my students kept saying, "I never met a gay person"' (Leal and Crookes 2018, p. 45) '... I believe that sexual education has to be discussed at home with the family' (Banegas, Jacovkis, and Romiti 2020, p. 9)	
		1c. Ideas about grammatical correctness when using singular the singular 'they' pronoun [4]	'... professors have refused to call students their preferred pronouns ... ungrammatical' (Tarrayo and Salonga 2023, p. 380) '... I still don't buy the idea that the pronoun 'they' could be used to refer to a singular antecedent' (Tarrayo 2023, p. 635)	
	2. Reluctance from governing powers	2a. Insitutional control [7]		'... the academy in its current state is an oppressive institution' (Buyserie and Ramirez 2021, p. 198) '... apprehension because it may ruin our job if we do it [queer pedagogy] wrong' (Banegas, Jacovkis, and Romiti 2020, p. 9)
			2b. Parental complaints [3]	'... and even the parents are strict [regarding queer pedagogies]' (Güney 2023, p. 18) '... one parent complained why students were being taught the 'wrong idea' that gender and sex are two different concepts' (Tarrayo and Potestades 2024, p. 848)
		2c. Government restrictions [3]	'... the greatest challenge in advocating for issues of the marginalised is the [governmental] system' (Tarrayo 2023, p. 491) '... queer inclusive discourse may be difficult to achieve because teachers are policed by the administration' (Güney 2023, p. 18)	
	3. Lack of resources for teachers	3a. Insufficient and traditional training [4]	'... I did not have prior training on queer pedagogies' (Ulla and Paiz 2023, p. 6) '... few teacher training or communities of practices ... related to queering ELT' (Tarrayo and Salonga 2023, p. 379)	

*(Continued)*

**Table 3.** Continued.

Analytical category (research question)	Descriptive category	Subcategory [number of studies per subcategory]	Example of initial coding
		3b. Teachers' limited knowledge of LGBTQ+ issues [4]	'... I wouldn't know where to begin' (Banegas, Jacovkis, and Romiti 2020, p. 9) '... I often feel that I am not well versed enough on the subject of queerness to discuss it in great depth' (Tarrayo and Salonga 2023, p. 379)
		3c. A lack of inclusive teaching resources [5]	'... struggled with contradictions between the program's selected materials and contemporary discrimination' (Leal and Crookes 2018, p. 42) '... the teaching materials ... label people as man and woman' (Ulla and Paiz 2023, p. 9)
		3d. Insufficient academic/educational research on queer pedagogies [2]	'... I think we are lacking on this aspect as there are limited research and programs regarding the matter' (Tarrayo, Potestades, and Ulla 2021, p. 1645) '... most language teacher education publications encourage avoidance of [queer pedagogy] topics' (Tarrayo and Potestades 2024, p. 849)
	4. Limited teacher capacity	4a. Teacher workload [5]	'... there are too many social justice issues to address in a language classroom' (Güney 2023, p. 19) '... teachers have too much on their plate already' (Banegas, Jacovkis, and Romiti 2020, p. 9)
		4b. Restricted teacher autonomy [3]	'... I do not really have the voice' (Tarrayo and Potestades 2024, p. 848) '... queer inclusive discourse may be difficult to achieve because teachers are policed' (Güney 2023, p. 18)
		4c. Limited time and energy for handling classroom disruptions following the implementation of queer pedagogies [4]	'... the arguments in class that ensue from such issues are draining and time consuming' (Tarrayo, Potestades, and Ulla 2021, p. 1644) '... I didn't talk about it further ... to not let them violate my class' (Güney 2023, p. 16)

Alt text: This table presents the challenges of implementing queer pedagogies identified in recent empirical TESOL research, categorised into four descriptive categories: 1) established belief systems opposing queer pedagogies, subcategorised into religious beliefs, teacher and student ideologies, and grammatical correctness ideas of using singular 'they'; 2) reluctance from governing powers, subcategorised into institutional control, parental complaints, and government restrictions; 3) lack of resources for teachers, subcategorised into insufficient and traditional training, limited knowledge of LGBTQ+ issues, a lack of inclusive resources, and insufficient academic/educational research on queer pedagogies; 4) limited teacher capacity, subcategorised into teacher workload, restricted teacher autonomy, and limited time and energy for handling classroom disruptions. Initial coding examples are included.

where learners can express LGBTQ+ ideas and opinions. Table 1 summarises these findings with examples of initial coding.

Within the first (descriptive) category, *integrating LGBTQ+ identities into the curriculum*, two main subcategories emerged: *Explicit inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics* (in 11 studies) and *normalising non-binary or gender-neutral language use* (in four studies). Explicit inclusion involved teaching LGBTQ+ rights, discussing queer topics, and incorporating LGBTQ+ materials. For instance, Leal and Crookes (2018) describe how supportive institutional conditions enabled a teacher to explicitly integrate LGBTQ+ rights into the official curriculum and openly discuss LGBTQ+ identities. Güney (2023) also notes instances where faculty actively stimulated classroom discussions about queer identities and equal rights through literature and speaking activities. In contrast, normalising gender-neutral language use was less commonly addressed but was highlighted by Tarrayo (2023), whose participants reported deliberately modelling gender-neutral language in class, such as adopting the singular 'they' to foster gender inclusivity.

The second category, *challenging heteronormativity in learning*, revealed two key subcategories: *Critically analysing heteronormative assumptions* (in six studies) and *addressing LGBTQ+ discrimination* (in five studies). For example, Buyserie and Ramírez (2021) describe a teacher encouraging students to critically analyse and challenge binary perspectives through their writing, explicitly guiding students to recognise complexities and move beyond binary worldviews. Güney (2023) presents an instance of a teacher actively addressing LGBTQ+ discrimination by correcting students who made queerphobic remarks during class and explaining the inappropriateness of such behaviour.

In the third category, *creating an open environment where learners can express LGBTQ+ ideas and opinions*, three subcategories emerged: *Encouraging freedom of expression* (in nine studies), *honouring queer perspectives* (in five studies), and *teachers discussing their own gender identity/sexual orientation* (in four studies). Teachers actively sought to establish classroom environments in which learners felt comfortable engaging openly with queer topics. For instance, Kaiser (2017) described how integrating LGBTQ+ materials, such as the 'It Gets Better' project, provided students like Trevor with opportunities to express their queer identities openly. Ulla and Paiz (2023) similarly emphasised teachers' beliefs that language classrooms should be inclusive spaces where students are free to express their identities without constraints, facilitating activities that accommodated diverse gender and sexual identities. Furthermore, teachers' openness about their own identities also contributed significantly to fostering a supportive atmosphere. Leal and Crookes (2018), for example, detailed how a teacher carefully planned and shared her LGBTQ+ identity during a curriculum unit on LGBTQ+ rights, thus explicitly connecting personal identity disclosure to pedagogical goals. One of the participants in Banegas, Jacovkis, and Romiti (2020) similarly indicated that educators should be prepared to openly discuss their own sexuality if they expect students to do the same, thereby reinforcing the importance of acknowledging and normalising sexual diversity within the classroom context.

#### **4.2. Benefits of adopting queer pedagogies in TESOL**

RQ2 aimed to explore the advantages of adopting queer pedagogies in TESOL, revealing four key themes: *Developing soft skills, improving learner communication, facilitating*

*inclusion, and lowering the affective filter.* Table 2 provides a summary with initial coding examples.

Under the descriptive category *developing soft skills*, two main subcategories emerged: *critical thinking* (in seven studies) and *social and cultural awareness* (in 11 studies). For instance, Rhodes and Coda (2017) report that participants perceived lessons incorporating LGBTQ+ topics as having the potential to promote critical thinking by challenging students' assumptions about social norms and stereotypes. Similarly, Merse and König (2023) discuss how incorporating queer perspectives into literary texts (such as Shakespeare) can encourage deeper critical reflection on themes related to gender and sexuality. Additionally, studies highlighted the potential of queer pedagogies to foster social and cultural awareness. Kaiser (2017), for example, illustrates how exposure to LGBTQ+ narratives in class motivated a student to reflect on identity, privilege and positionality, ultimately aiming to broaden other people's perspectives. Likewise, in Banegas, Jacovkis, and Romiti (2020) one of the participants highlights how integrating comprehensive sexual education in language teaching can encourage critical thinking, enhance motivation, and support students in making informed and culturally aware decisions about health and identity.

The category *improving learner communication* includes two subcategories: *Technical linguistic proficiency* (in three studies) and *communicative awareness* (in seven studies). For instance, participants in Tarrayo (2024), argue for the use of the singular they for credibility, clarity and conciseness in communication, particularly when referring to individuals of unknown or non-binary gender. One of the participants in Banegas, Jacovkis, and Romiti (2020) also highlights how integrating comprehensive sexual education topics into language teaching creates opportunities for practicing core linguistic skills, grammar and vocabulary. Similarly, participants in Tarrayo (2023) suggest that the use of gender-fair language helps learners to become more sensitive communicators by critically engaging with language-related social issues, thus enhancing their sociolinguistic awareness and communication skills. Finally, in Güney (2023) it is noted that discussions on queer identities in English classrooms can prepare learners to engage more effectively in meaningful dialogues across cultures, helping to mitigate cultural misunderstandings and promoting openness toward global diversity.

In the *facilitating inclusion* category, three subcategories were identified: *Fostering a sense of belonging* (in four studies), *enabling a welcoming atmosphere* (in six studies), and *feeling comfortable/safe when learning* (in seven studies). Participants in studies by Tarrayo (2023) and Tarrayo and Salonga (2023) described how queer pedagogies, including the use of gender-neutral language and respectful pronoun usage, fostered students' sense of belonging, enabling learners, especially those unable to openly discuss their identities outside the classroom, to feel included. Participants in Leal and Crookes (2018) emphasised how teaching LGBTQ+ rights within a supportive institutional context provided conducive conditions for a welcoming environment for queer teachers (and, subsequently, learners). Likewise, teacher-participants in Tarrayo, Potestades, and Ulla (2021) stated that integrating a gender perspective created a more welcoming atmosphere, allowing students who were previously hesitant to participate freely and productively in English language activities. Further, a participant in Kaiser (2017) described a dedicated LGBTQ+ -themed class as enhancing comfort with one's queer identity, ultimately supporting overall confidence as a language user.

Finally, the category *lowering the affective filter* included one key subcategory: *Increasing positive emotions towards learning* (in five studies). For example, Kaiser (2017) explicitly addresses the affective benefits of teacher-facilitated discussions on LGBTQ+ topics, which provided students like Trevor with opportunities to claim their own voice and openly affirm their identities. Additionally, in Tarrayo (2023), a participant noted that the absence of biases causing emotional or psychological pressure allows students to feel more confident expressing themselves in the classroom.

### 4.3. Challenges of implementing queer pedagogies in TESOL

RQ3 explored the challenges of implementing queer pedagogies in TESOL, revealing four key themes: *Established belief systems opposing queer pedagogies, reluctance from governing powers, lack of resources for teachers, and limited teacher capacity*. A summary of these findings is shown in Table 3, with initial coding examples.

The first descriptive category, *established belief systems opposing queer pedagogies*, includes three subcategories: *Religious beliefs* (evident in nine studies), *teacher and student ideologies* (in ten studies), and *ideas about grammatical correctness when using the singular 'they' pronoun* (in four studies). In several studies, participants reported avoiding LGBTQ+ topics due to institutional religious cultures or personal beliefs. For example, Rhodes and Coda (2017) describe instructors hesitating to address queer issues in faith-based institutions, anticipating homophobic reactions from clergy members in their classrooms. Similarly, a participant in Banegas, Jacovkis, and Romiti (2020) expressed concern that teaching comprehensive sexual education might conflict with personal religious convictions and provoke backlash from parents. Some participants' responses in Ordem and Ulum (2020) went so far as to frame LGBTQ+ issues as a disorder, often relying on pseudo-scientific discourse, highlighting the persistence of pathologising beliefs. Teacher and student ideologies also posed challenges. In Leal and Crookes (2018), a teacher reported that students frequently claimed they had 'never met a gay person,' reflecting widespread (erroneous) assumptions and limited exposure to queer identities. Further, in Banegas, Jacovkis, and Romiti (2020), participants expressed discomfort with discussing sexual education in school, arguing that such topics were more appropriate for the home. Finally, grammatical concerns emerged as a point of resistance in Tarrayo and Salonga (2023), where participants questioned how to reconcile the use of non-binary pronouns like 'they' in the classroom with prevailing norms of prescriptive grammar outside of the classroom.

The second category, *reluctance from governing powers*, yielded three subcategories: *Institutional control* (evident in six studies), *parental complaints* (in three studies), and *government restrictions* (in three studies). Several participants reported feeling constrained by institutional norms or fearful of repercussions when addressing LGBTQ+ issues in the classroom. For example, in Buyserie and Ramírez (2021), a participant described academia as an oppressive institution resistant to transformation, highlighting the broader structural barriers to queering education. Similarly, participants in Güney (2023) voiced concerns about administrative interference and possible disciplinary action for discussing queer topics, particularly within conservative school cultures. Parental complaints were also a concern, with participants noting fears of backlash from parents if queer topics were introduced in class (Güney 2023). This issue was further echoed in Tarrayo and

Potestades (2024), where one participant described how school policies explicitly prohibited any reference to homosexuality in instruction or assessment materials. Government-level restrictions were also highlighted. In Güney (2023), participants described how broader state discourses and policies contributed to a hostile environment for queer inclusion in education. Similarly, in Tarrayo (2023), participants attributed resistance to queer pedagogies to dominant religious ideologies and systemic cultural norms reinforced at both societal and institutional levels.

The third category, *lack of resources for implementing queer pedagogies*, revealed four subcategories: *Insufficient and traditional training* (in four studies), *teachers' limited knowledge of LGBTQ+ issues* (in four studies), *a lack of inclusive teaching resources* (in five studies), and *insufficient academic/educational research on queer pedagogies* (in two studies). Specifically, participants in Ulla and Paiz (2023) reported having no prior exposure to queer pedagogical approaches during their teacher education. Similarly, one participant in Tarrayo (2024) reflected on how their traditional grammar-based training led to discomfort with non-binary pronoun use, especially in contexts where grammatical correctness is institutionally enforced. Teachers' limited knowledge was also apparent, as participants in Banegas, Jacovkis, and Romiti (2020) and Tarrayo and Salonga (2023) expressed a lack of confidence in addressing aspects related to queer pedagogies, citing concerns about unintentionally reinforcing stereotypes or offending students due to insufficient background knowledge. Teacher in Rhodes and Coda (2017) and Leal and Crookes (2018) also noted the scarcity of materials with LGBTQ+ representation, often having to adapt or replace existing content, and participants in Ulla and Paiz (2023) further highlighted that most teaching materials continued to portray rigid gender binaries. Finally, one teacher in Tarrayo, Potestades, and Ulla (2021) observed the absence of relevant programmes or studies, while in Tarrayo and Potestades (2024) it was noted that many publications in language teacher education actively encourage the avoidance of queer-related content.

The final category, *limited teacher capacity*, encompasses three subcategories: *Teacher workload* (evident in five studies), *restricted teacher autonomy* (in three studies), and *limited time and energy for handling classroom disruptions following the implementation of queer pedagogies* (in four studies). In Banegas, Jacovkis, and Romiti (2020, 9), one participant expressed that teachers had 'too much on their plate', making it difficult to address additional topics such as sexuality or gender identity in the classroom. In Güney (2023), participants similarly noted that the multitude of social justice issues already present in language education could be overwhelming, with one participant highlighting how the institutional policing of discourse in state or religious schools made it especially difficult to integrate queer-inclusive content. The issue of restricted autonomy was also prominent in Tarrayo and Potestades (2024), where non-tenured faculty expressed hesitation to incorporate queer pedagogies due to limited decision-making power, with one participant stating they could not challenge top-down curricular decisions. Finally, several studies described how teachers lacked the time and energy to manage student reactions to queer pedagogies. In Tarrayo, Potestades, and Ulla (2021), a participant described class debates around gender issues as emotionally draining and time-consuming. Similarly, in Güney (2023), one participant, Zeynep, recounted avoiding further discussion on gender diversity after a student inquiry during her internship, fearing that such questions might derail the class.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Interpretation

This review of 14 recent empirical studies (2017–2024) highlights the diverse strategies through which queer pedagogies are being enacted in TESOL classrooms across global contexts. The findings reveal a wide range of practices: some teachers incorporate LGBTQ+ topics explicitly into classroom content, such as through dedicated units on queer identities or discussions of LGBTQ+ rights (e.g. Leal and Crookes 2018; Güney 2023; Kaiser 2017), while others foster inclusion by modelling gender-neutral or non-binary language (e.g. Tarrayo 2023; Tarrayo 2024). Creating an open classroom environment where learners feel safe expressing diverse identities is a common focus, often achieved through inclusive role-play activities (Ulla and Paiz 2023), respectful language practices (Tarrayo, Potestades, and Ulla 2021) or teachers' voluntary disclosure of their own identities (Leal and Crookes 2018; Banegas, Jacovkis, and Romiti 2020).

While the pedagogical strategies vary, queer pedagogies are consistently identified as having the potential to contribute to both linguistic and affective learning outcomes. Studies describe how these approaches may foster critical thinking (Rhodes and Coda 2017; Merse and König 2023), cultural awareness (Banegas, Jacovkis, and Romiti 2020; Güney 2023) and sociolinguistic sensitivity (Tarrayo 2023; Tarrayo 2024). Affective benefits are also highlighted, including students' increased confidence and emotional comfort when engaging with inclusive content (Kaiser 2017; Tarrayo and Salonga 2023). These findings resonate with Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, which posits that learners acquire language more effectively when affective factors such as anxiety are low and motivation and self-confidence are high. Furthermore, well-established approaches such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and translanguaging (e.g. Bonacina-Pugh, Da Costa Cabral, and Huang 2021) offer promising frameworks through which queer pedagogies can be meaningfully enacted. For instance, TBLT encourages students to engage in meaningful, goal-oriented language use (cf. Ellis 2017), and could support queer pedagogies by engaging learners in tasks such as designing inclusive materials, or analysing representations of gender and sexual identity in the media. Meanwhile, translanguaging as a pedagogy can encourage learners to move fluidly between languages and modes of expression (cf. Bonacina-Pugh, Da Costa Cabral, and Huang 2021), and could enable more authentic and affirming expressions of queer identities and experiences by fostering experimentation with language and loosening reliance on rigid language boundaries.

However, the findings also reveal substantial challenges. Two of the most prominent barriers to implementing queer pedagogies are entrenched belief systems and institutional resistance. As previously discussed, the influence of religion, prescriptive grammar ideologies and socio-cultural norms continue to shape both teacher and student perspectives (e.g. Rhodes and Coda 2017; Banegas, Jacovkis, and Romiti 2020; Leal and Crookes 2018; Ordem & Ülüm, 2020). Many teachers fear professional repercussions or parental complaints (e.g. Güney 2023; Tarrayo and Potestades 2024), and some educational policies explicitly prohibit discussion of queer topics. These findings echo Jackson et al. (2021), who argue that broader socio-political forces often constrain teacher agency and shape the possibilities for inclusive pedagogy in language education.

A further challenge concerns the ‘lack of means’ for implementation. Many teachers report inadequate training, insufficient knowledge of LGBTQ+ issues and a lack of appropriate materials (e.g. Ulla and Paiz 2023; Tarrayo 2024; Rhodes and Coda 2017). As noted in the literature, underprepared teachers may feel unsure of how to implement queer pedagogies without reinforcing stereotypes or triggering classroom conflict (Curran 2006; Liddicoat 2009). Despite some progress in the field, this synthesis suggests that such concerns persist, pointing to gaps in both teacher education and available resources. Moreover, the continued framing of queer pedagogies as a peripheral or ‘add-on’ concern may limit their integration into mainstream TESOL practices (Paiz 2018).

Finally, the review highlights the limited capacity of teachers, many of whom are overworked, under-supported and/or lacking institutional autonomy. Participants described feelings of burnout, emotional strain and time constraints when handling controversial or identity-based classroom discussions (e.g. Tarrayo, Potestades, and Ulla 2021; Güney 2023). These challenges are consistent with broader research on teacher stress and workload (Yu and Yu 2023), and may be intensified when educators feel unprepared or unsupported in addressing queer content. Improving training and structural support for teachers may therefore be essential not only for effective implementation, but also for the sustainability of queer pedagogies in TESOL. As Debreli and Ishanova (2019) argue, professional development that builds teacher confidence and competence can reduce classroom disruptions and foster more inclusive environments.

## **5.2. Implications**

This research provides key insights into how queer pedagogies are implemented in TESOL, along with the associated benefits and challenges. A significant contribution is the diversity of international perspectives, with data drawn from Southeast Asia, Europe, North America and South America. Despite cultural differences, common themes such as the impact of religious beliefs and societal norms emerged, indicating that global factors influence the adoption of queer pedagogies. These findings extend beyond TESOL, as benefits like soft skills development are valuable across subjects (Qizi 2020; Lavi, Tal, and Dori 2021), while challenges like teacher stress and limited capacity are universal concerns in education (Herman, Reinke, and Eddy 2020; Fernández-Batanero et al. 2021).

Moreover, it is interesting to note resistance among some teachers to using singular ‘they’, often due to prescriptivist views about English grammar (e.g. Tarrayo 2023; Tarrayo and Salonga 2023). This resistance persists despite well-documented evidence that singular they has been used for centuries in literature and speech, including (and likely preceding) the works of Chaucer and Shakespeare (cf. Solomon 2019). This highlights how concerns about its usage are often rooted less in linguistic accuracy and more in ideological discomfort with gender diversity. One of the implications of this ongoing debate is the clear need for targeted continuous professional development (CPD), which would help teachers become better informed about language variation and change, reflect on personal biases, and gain the confidence to implement inclusive practices such as queer pedagogies. As Vadivel, Namaziandost, and Saeedian (2021) argue, CPD not only enhances subject knowledge but also builds critical thinking and collaboration among educators, thereby laying the groundwork for more equitable and

inclusive teaching. In this context, CPD can have the potential to play a key role in equipping teachers to understand the benefits of enacting queer pedagogies. CPD can also offer strategies for managing classroom challenges, ensuring teachers feel equipped to handle potential disruptions when addressing LGBTQ+ topics (cf. Tarrayo, Potestades, and Ulla 2021; Güney 2023), and help empower them to develop queer-inclusive materials – an area where resource shortages remain common (Rhodes and Coda 2017; Ulla and Paiz 2023). Since teacher training supports the selection of appropriate teaching methods and positively influences students' engagement and academic performance (Hafeez 2021), the value of CPD in fostering inclusive learning environments to ultimately serve the best interests of learners themselves should by all means be prioritised.

In addition, owing to the significant benefits of implementing queer pedagogies such as fostering inclusive learning environments that affirm LGBTQ+ students and enrich all students' understanding of diversity, it is imperative to address institutional resistance to these approaches. Many educators feel constrained by institutional or governmental policies and fear repercussions for integrating queer content (e.g. Tarrayo and Potestades 2024; Güney 2023). This resistance underscores the need for researcher activism to advocate for systemic changes based on credible research (Rose 2019; Warren, Bedrettin, and Ward 2024). This advocacy is particularly crucial in the current climate, where there has been a notably dangerous pushback against diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, as exemplified by recent policy changes in the United States aimed at dismantling DEI programmes (The White House 2025).

### **5.3. Limitations**

As with any research, this study has limitations (Akanle, Ademuson, and Shittu 2020). As already acknowledged in the Methodology, only the findings and discussion sections of selected articles were analysed, which may offer a narrower view of the content. While efforts were made to remain close to the original meaning by drawing themes from quoted material, this focus may have led to a less comprehensive understanding of the articles as a whole.

Moreover, thematic analysis was chosen for its ability to uncover in-depth themes; however, due to the subjective nature of coding, theming and categorising, this method relies heavily on researcher interpretation (Finlay 2021). For example, categorising 'facilitating inclusion' as an advantage could be contested, as the value of inclusivity may be viewed differently depending on context (Adamson et al. 2021).

Furthermore, most analysed articles focused on educators' perceptions, potentially offering a less holistic view of queer pedagogies in terms of their characteristics, benefits and implementation challenges.

### **5.4. Recommendations**

To enhance future research on queer pedagogies in TESOL, grounded theory may offer a more robust approach due to its comprehensive nature, encompassing data collection through to theory development (Esmaeilee 2024). Additionally, analysing entire studies rather than solely findings and discussion sections could provide a more thorough critical perspective.

Future research should also consider the perspectives of students, including how both queer and non-queer learners perceive and experience queer pedagogies. This could involve classroom observations or interviews to explore how students respond to these practices across different contexts.

Building on the current QRS which focused primarily on educators' views, such work would offer a more complete picture of the characteristics, benefits and challenges associated with the enactment of queer pedagogies in international TESOL classrooms.

## 6. Conclusion

This QRS has examined 14 recent empirical studies (2017–2024) on queer pedagogies in TESOL, with the aim of identifying their core characteristics, associated benefits and implementation challenges. The synthesis reveals that queer pedagogies are enacted in diverse ways across global TESOL contexts, from the explicit inclusion of LGBTQ+ content in curricula to the modelling of inclusive language and the creation of safe classroom environments. These strategies are often shaped by cultural, institutional and pedagogical factors.

The findings highlight several linguistic and affective benefits of queer pedagogies. In terms of language development, queer pedagogies have the potential to promote communicative skills, critical thinking and increased sociocultural awareness. Affective outcomes include enhanced learner motivation, feeling safe and a stronger sense of belonging, which are factors known to support second language acquisition as posited by Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis. Additionally, the integration of queer pedagogies with approaches like TBLT and translanguaging offers a promising direction for engaging learners in inclusive and meaningful language use while loosening reliance on rigid distinctions between named languages.

However, significant challenges persist. Many educators remain constrained by personal belief systems, institutional control or national policy restrictions that limit discussions of gender and sexuality in TESOL classrooms. A lack of adequate teacher training, pedagogical resources and professional autonomy further impedes the implementation of queer pedagogies. These structural and ideological barriers reflect the need for greater support within teacher education and ongoing continuous professional development programmes.

Overall, the synthesis demonstrates that queer pedagogies can enrich TESOL by promoting not only diversity, inclusion and equity, but also enhanced language learning conditions. Future research, particularly involving classroom-based observations and learner perspectives, is recommended to examine how different (English) language learners respond to queer pedagogies in practice.

## Notes

1. Consistent with queer theory (cf. Section 2.1), from which queer pedagogy originates, this study uses the term *queer* broadly to refer to individuals whose identities do not align with heteronormative or cisnormative expectations, including (but not limited to) lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, genderqueer and other sexual or gender identities. The term *queering* describes pedagogical practices that actively include, respect and

support queer individuals, while critically challenging normative assumptions regarding sexuality and gender in classroom settings (cf. Ulla and Paiz 2023).

2. As explained in Section 3.4, the initial intention was to synthesise research published within the last five years (from 2019 to 2024); however, due to the limited number of available studies, the timeframe was subsequently expanded to cover the period from 2017 to 2024, ensuring sufficient data for meaningful analysis.
3. In this study, the plural in queer pedagogy-ies is used to emphasise the diversity of approaches and practices within queer-informed teaching. While *queer pedagogy* can refer to the broader, unified framework that combines queer theory and critical pedagogy, *queer pedagogies* highlights the various ways these principles can be adapted and implemented.

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