



Classroom Management as Situated Relational Practice: EFL High School Teachers' Cognitions and Experiences

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ARTICLE INFO:

Received date:

2026.04.26

Accepted date:

2026.06.11

Print ISSN: 2251-7995

Online ISSN: 2676-6876

Keywords:

Classroom Management;
Teachers' Perceptions; High
School Teachers; Qualitative
Research; Semi-Structured
Interviews



Abstract

Classroom management remains a central yet conceptually multifaceted dimension of effective teaching, particularly in high school EFL contexts characterized by linguistic, behavioral, and institutional complexity. While prior research has extensively examined classroom management strategies, comparatively limited attention has been given to how teachers themselves conceptualize and enact classroom management in situated practice. This qualitative interpretivist study explores EFL high school teachers' perceptions of classroom management and the challenges they encounter in their daily professional contexts. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 21 purposively selected EFL high school teachers working in public secondary schools in Mahabad and Orumiyeh, Iran. The interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings suggest that teachers conceptualize classroom management as a proactive, relational, and experience-based process shaped by student motivation, institutional constraints, and accumulated professional knowledge. Experienced teachers reported greater reliance on adaptive and preventive strategies, whereas less experienced teachers demonstrated stronger dependence on rule-based and reactive approaches. The study contributes to teacher cognition research by positioning classroom management as a form of situated pedagogical judgment rather than a fixed repertoire of techniques. Implications are discussed for teacher education and professional development in EFL settings.

Citation: Ebrahimi, E.; Zarei, N. & Kuhi, D. (2026). Classroom Management as Situated Relational Practice: EFL High School Teachers' Cognitions and Experiences. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning*, 18 (37), 151-170. DOI: 10.22034/elt.2026.71970.2860

Introduction

Classroom management is widely recognized as a foundational component of effective teaching and sustained student learning. It encompasses the strategies and practices through which teachers establish and maintain an environment conducive to instruction, engagement, and academic development (Emmer & Sabornie, 2015; Korpershoek et al., 2016). Beyond the regulation of disruptive behavior, contemporary scholarship conceptualizes classroom management as an integrated system involving relational, instructional, and organizational dimensions.

Managing classrooms presents particular challenges in high school EFL settings, where linguistic limitations, fluctuating student motivation, and institutional constraints intersect. Disruptive behaviors—such as inattentiveness, off-task talk, resistance to participation, and disengagement—can significantly reduce instructional time and undermine communicative language practice. Persistent management difficulties have been associated with elevated teacher stress, diminished instructional effectiveness, and increased attrition rates (Martin & Sass, 2010).

Although classroom management has been extensively examined, much of the literature has focused on identifying effective management strategies, behavioral interventions, and instructional practices aimed at improving student outcomes (Emmer & Sabornie, 2015; Korpershoek et al., 2016). Comparatively fewer studies have explored how teachers themselves interpret and experience classroom management within the situated realities of their professional practice (Borg, 2003; Hepburn et al., 2021). Understanding teachers' perceptions is essential for advancing teacher cognition research, which emphasizes the role of teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and experiences in shaping classroom practice (Borg, 2003, 2006), and for informing professional development initiatives that move beyond formulaic prescriptions toward context-sensitive pedagogical judgment.

Accordingly, this study investigates how EFL high school teachers conceptualize classroom management and how they navigate classroom challenges in practice and addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How do EFL high school teachers conceptualize classroom management within their professional practice?

RQ2. What classroom management challenges do EFL high school teachers encounter in their daily teaching contexts?

RQ3. How do EFL high school teachers respond to and manage these classroom challenges?

1. Review of Literature

1.1. Classroom Management

Classroom management refers to the strategies and practices through which teachers establish and sustain an orderly, supportive, and intellectually engaging learning environment conducive to instruction and student learning (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). Emmer and Sabornie (2015) conceptualize effective classroom management as encompassing the clear articulation of expectations, the establishment of consistent routines, and the cultivation of positive teacher–

student relationships. Rather than being confined to disciplinary control, classroom management encompasses preventive, instructional, and relational dimensions that structure everyday pedagogical practice.

Empirical research consistently demonstrates that effective classroom management is associated with heightened student engagement, reduced disruptive behavior, and improved academic outcomes. (Berliner, 2001; Korpershoek et al., 2016; Wolff et al., 2021). When classroom management proves ineffective, teachers often devote substantial instructional time to managing disruptions and regulating student behavior, thereby reducing opportunities for academic engagement and learning (Emmer & Sabornie, 2015; Korpershoek et al., 2016). From learners' perspectives, well-managed classrooms provide clear behavioral and academic expectations, foster a supportive and psychologically safe learning environment, and create structured opportunities for active participation and engagement (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; Korpershoek et al., 2016).

Classroom management is widely regarded as one of the most demanding dimensions of teaching, particularly for novice practitioners. Research indicates that persistent difficulties in managing student behavior contribute substantially to teacher stress and burnout and constitute a significant factor in professional attrition (Emmer & Sabornie, 2015; Sabornie & Espelage, 2021). As a result, classroom management remains a central concern in teacher education and professional development.

1.2. Classroom Management Strategies

Classroom management strategies are frequently categorized into preventive, supportive, and corrective orientations. Preventive strategies aim to minimize disruptive behavior through the early establishment of clear rules, routines, and instructional expectations. These strategies include lesson organization, effective classroom layout, and proactive monitoring of student behavior (Gage et al., 2018; Hepburn & Beamish, 2019).

Supportive strategies emphasize the cultivation of positive classroom relationships and the reinforcement of appropriate behavior through motivational and engagement-based practices. Such approaches emphasize respect, communication, and the development of a cooperative learning environment. By contrast, corrective strategies entail reactive responses to misbehavior, including disciplinary sanctions and corrective feedback. Although corrective strategies are sometimes necessary, research suggests that an overreliance on punitive measures may negatively affect classroom climate and teacher–student relationships (Sabornie & Espelage, 2021; Korpershoek et al., 2016).

Effective classroom management typically requires the calibrated integration of preventive, supportive, and corrective practices, adapted to contextual and learner-specific demands. Teachers' choices of strategies are influenced by their beliefs, experience, training, and institutional expectations (Hepburn & Beamish, 2019; Martin & Sass, 2010).

1.3. Classroom Management: Clarification and Scope

Classroom management has been defined as “the actions teachers take to create and maintain a learning environment conducive to successful instruction” (Brophy, 1996, 5). Marzano, Marzano, and Pickering (2019) conceptualize classroom management as comprising several

interrelated components, including the establishment of rules and procedures, disciplinary practices, teacher–student relationships, and teachers’ mental and emotional readiness for managing classrooms.

Importantly, classroom management should not be reduced to disciplinary control alone. While discipline is one component, effective classroom management also involves instructional planning, student engagement, and the creation of a positive classroom atmosphere. Crookes (2003) argues that a well-managed classroom is not necessarily devoid of disorder; rather, it is one in which disruptions do not impede instructional continuity or learning processes.

These perspectives highlight classroom management as a dynamic and context-sensitive process that extends beyond behavioural control to include instructional and relational dimensions of teaching.

1.4. Classroom Management Models and Approaches

Numerous theoretical models have been proposed to guide teachers in structuring classroom behavior and learning environments. Wolfgang and Glickman (1986) identify three broad approaches to classroom management: relationship-based approaches, rule- and reward-based approaches, and confronting–contracting approaches. Relationship-based approaches emphasize communication, empathy, and support for students’ emotional needs. Rule- and reward-based approaches focus on teacher control through clearly defined rules, rewards, and consequences. Confronting–contracting approaches encourage shared responsibility between teachers and students in addressing behavioural issues.

Other influential models include the assertive discipline model (Gage et al., 2018; Hepburn & Beamish, 2019), which advocates for the clear establishment and consistent enforcement of classroom rules, and Sabornie & Espelage (2021) concepts of “withitness” and “overlapping,” which stress teachers’ awareness of classroom dynamics and their ability to manage multiple events simultaneously. Glasser’s (1998) choice theory model positions teachers as leaders who support students in making responsible behavioral choices rather than relying on coercive discipline.

In addition, Weber’s framework of authority, as discussed by Pellegrino (2010), distinguishes between traditional, legal–rational, and charismatic forms of authority in educational settings. These perspectives underscore that classroom management practices are shaped by teachers’ authority, values, and interactions with students.

Rather than endorsing a single prescriptive model, research suggests that effective classroom management requires contextual sensitivity, adaptive judgment, and professional flexibility (Korpershoek et al., 2016; Wolff et al., 2021).

1.5. Teachers’ Knowledge and Knowing in Classroom Management

Teachers’ classroom management practices are deeply intertwined with their professional knowledge base and experiential understandings of pedagogy. Teacher knowledge encompasses subject-matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and practical knowledge developed through classroom experience (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). Teachers’ classroom

management practices are shaped by both formal pedagogical knowledge and experiential, context-bound knowing (Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Wolff et al., 2021).

Educational theorists have distinguished between knowledge, understood as a formalized body of information, and knowing, conceptualized as an active, experience-mediated process (Polanyi, 1966; Wolff et al., 2021). Dewey viewed knowing as a dynamic and action-oriented process grounded in lived experience, whereas Polanyi highlighted the importance of tacit knowledge—knowledge that is acquired through practice and often remains difficult to articulate explicitly. Such tacit knowledge is highly personal and context-dependent and plays a significant role in teachers' classroom management judgments and decision-making.

In the context of teaching, these perspectives suggest that effective classroom management cannot be fully understood through prescriptive rules alone. Instead, it involves teachers' reflective practice, accumulated experience, and ongoing interaction with learners. Experienced teachers develop tacit classroom management scripts that enable rapid and adaptive responses to classroom events (Berliner, 2001; Wolff et al., 2021). Accordingly, understanding teachers' perceptions of classroom management requires attention to both formal pedagogical preparation and the tacit, experience-based knowledge constructed in practice.

1.6. Teachers' Perceptions of Classroom Management

Teachers' perceptions of classroom management significantly shape how they interpret student behavior and select regulatory and instructional responses.

Research indicates that experienced teachers tend to employ more preventive and flexible strategies, while novice teachers are more likely to rely on reactive or rule-based approaches (Berliner, 2001; Martin & Sass, 2010). These differences are often attributed to variations in professional confidence, classroom experience, and contextual understanding.

Teachers' perceptions of classroom management are also shaped by institutional conditions, professional expectations, and accountability pressures (Hepburn & Beamish, 2019). When teachers perceive classroom management as a relational and proactive process, they are more likely to foster positive learning environments and constructive teacher–student relationships. Conversely, when classroom management is perceived primarily as behavioral control, instructional practices may become rigid and less responsive to students' needs.

Qualitative exploration of teachers' perceptions provides insight into how educators navigate classroom challenges within situated institutional contexts. Such understanding is essential for designing teacher education and professional development programs that address the practical realities of classroom teaching.

1.7. Empirical Background and Research Gap

A substantial body of research has examined classroom management practices and their effects on teaching and learning outcomes. For example, Gage et al. (2018) found that effective classroom management practices were associated with increased student engagement and reduced disruptive behavior. Similarly, Korpershoek et al. (2016), in a meta-analysis of

classroom management interventions, reported positive effects of preventive and supportive management strategies on students' academic, behavioral, and motivational outcomes.

Research has also explored teachers' perceptions and implementation of classroom management practices. Hepburn, Beamish, and Alston-Knox (2021) found that although teachers recognized the value of evidence-based classroom management approaches, contextual constraints often influenced their implementation. Likewise, Kennedy et al. (2017) reported that teachers' classroom management practices were shaped by professional experience and opportunities for professional learning.

Within language education contexts, Tai (2023) demonstrated that classroom management in English-medium secondary classrooms is closely linked to language use, learner engagement, and classroom interaction. Similarly, Aliakbari and Bozorgmanesh (2015) highlighted the importance of classroom management strategies in promoting learner participation and instructional effectiveness in EFL classrooms.

Research on teacher expertise has further shown that experienced teachers differ from novice teachers in their management practices. Berliner (2001) and Wolff et al. (2021) found that experienced teachers rely more heavily on tacit knowledge, anticipatory awareness, and adaptive decision-making, whereas less experienced teachers tend to depend more on explicit rules and reactive strategies.

Beyond classroom management research, studies in teacher cognition have emphasized the importance of understanding teachers' thinking and decision-making processes. In a comprehensive review of language teacher cognition research, Borg (2003) argued that teachers' classroom practices are shaped by complex interactions among beliefs, professional knowledge, prior experiences, and contextual factors. Borg highlighted that teachers actively interpret and adapt pedagogical principles to the realities of their classrooms rather than simply implementing prescribed methods. This perspective suggests that classroom management should be understood not only as a set of observable practices but also as a cognitive and contextually situated dimension of teaching.

Despite these contributions, existing research has largely focused on identifying effective classroom management strategies, evaluating intervention outcomes, or measuring teachers' practices quantitatively. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to examining how EFL high school teachers themselves conceptualize classroom management and how they draw upon professional knowledge and experience to navigate classroom challenges within specific linguistic and institutional contexts. Consequently, the experiential and cognitive dimensions of classroom management remain underexplored in EFL settings. The present study addresses this gap by investigating how EFL high school teachers interpret, negotiate, and operationalize classroom management within their professional practice.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative interpretivist design to explore how EFL high school teachers conceptualize and experience classroom management within their professional contexts. An interpretivist orientation was deemed appropriate because the study sought to understand

participants' subjective meanings, professional judgments, and contextually situated interpretations rather than to measure predefined variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Classroom management, particularly within EFL contexts, is not merely a set of observable techniques but a form of situated pedagogical decision-making embedded in institutional and relational conditions. Accordingly, qualitative inquiry enabled an in-depth examination of teachers' lived experiences, interpretive frameworks, and tacit knowledge structures.

Given the exploratory nature of the research question, a qualitative approach allowed the researcher to examine how teachers conceptualize classroom management, how they experience classroom-related difficulties, and how they respond to these challenges in real teaching situations. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method because they provide both structure and flexibility, enabling participants to express their perspectives in detail while allowing the researcher to probe emerging issues (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2.2. Context of the study

The study was conducted in public high schools in Mahabad and Orumiyeh, two cities located in West Azerbaijan Province, Iran. The participants' first languages were Kurdish or Turkish, and English was a foreign language for all participants. English is taught as a foreign language within a centralized curriculum framework characterized by standardized textbooks, exam-oriented assessment practices, and relatively large class sizes. Teachers operate within institutional constraints including limited technological resources and restricted autonomy in curricular adaptation.

2.3. Participants

Twenty-one high school EFL teachers participated in the study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that all had sustained experience managing secondary-level language classrooms. The sampling strategy prioritized information-rich cases capable of providing nuanced insight into classroom management practices (Patton, 2015).

Participants varied in age, teaching experience, and educational background. The majority ($n=15$) had more than 20 years of professional experience, while six participants had fewer than 20 years. This distribution allowed for comparative insights across stages of professional development.

Importantly, inclusion criteria required that participants be actively teaching EFL in secondary schools at the time of data collection, ensuring contemporaneous relevance of their accounts.

2.4. Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, selected for their capacity to balance systematic inquiry with interpretive flexibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interview protocol was developed based on themes emerging from classroom management literature and teacher cognition research. Questions were designed to elicit teachers' perceptions of classroom challenges, decision-making processes, and adaptive strategies.

Three overarching guiding questions structured the interviews:

RQ1. How do EFL high school teachers conceptualize classroom management within their professional practice?

RQ2. What classroom management challenges do EFL high school teachers encounter in their daily teaching contexts?

RQ3. How do EFL high school teachers respond to and manage these classroom challenges?

Follow-up prompts were used to clarify meaning, explore examples, and elicit reflective elaboration. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. Transcripts were produced verbatim to preserve linguistic nuance and interpretive detail.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase framework. Analysis proceeded iteratively rather than linearly and involved the following stages:

1. **Familiarization:** Transcripts were read repeatedly to develop immersion in the data.
2. **Initial Coding:** Meaningful segments related to classroom management challenges and strategies were coded inductively.
3. **Searching for Themes:** Codes were examined for patterns and clustered into provisional thematic categories.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** Themes were refined through constant comparison to ensure internal coherence and external distinctiveness.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Thematic boundaries were clarified, and analytic definitions were constructed.
6. **Producing the Report:** Themes were contextualized within existing literature and interpreted in relation to the research question.

Coding was conducted manually to ensure close engagement with the data. To enhance analytic credibility, a peer researcher independently reviewed a subset of transcripts and coding decisions. Discrepancies were discussed until interpretive consensus was achieved.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of the representations. In addition, peer review was employed during the coding process to reduce researcher bias and strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). The researcher's professional background in language education may have influenced both data interpretation and thematic development. To mitigate potential bias, reflective memos were maintained throughout the analytic process, documenting interpretive decisions and emergent assumptions. This reflexive practice contributed to greater transparency and confirmability.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and their voluntary participation. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports. All data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

2.7. Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, several strategies were employed in line with established qualitative research criteria (Nowel et al., 2017). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, member checking, and peer review. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participants. Dependability was addressed through clear documentation of the research procedures and analytical steps, while confirmability was strengthened by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions and theme development.

3. Findings

The thematic analysis revealed that teachers conceptualize classroom management not primarily as disciplinary control but as an ongoing process of negotiating motivation, authority, and relational dynamics within institutional constraints. Four interrelated themes emerged:

1. Classroom management as motivational negotiation
2. Institutional and structural constraints
3. Experience as adaptive pedagogical knowledge
4. Relational strategies as preventive practice

3.1. Classroom Management as Motivational Negotiation

Across interviews, teachers consistently framed classroom management challenges as rooted less in overt defiance and more in diminished student motivation. Inattentiveness, excessive peer interaction, reluctance to participate, and mobile phone use were interpreted not merely as rule violations but as indicators of disengagement.

One teacher noted:

“Students are not always disruptive, but they are mentally absent. They don’t see why English matters”.

This comment reflects a broader pattern in which classroom management was closely linked to perceived relevance and engagement rather than behavioral compliance alone.

Teachers emphasized that in EFL contexts, limited exposure to English outside the classroom and exam-oriented curricula reduce communicative investment. As a result, management efforts often centered on sustaining attention and fostering interest rather than enforcing discipline per se.

3.2. Institutional and Structural Constraints

Participants frequently attributed classroom management difficulties to structural conditions beyond their immediate control. Large class sizes, rigid curricula, limited technological resources, and restricted authority in disciplinary decision-making were described as amplifying management challenges.

Several teachers expressed concern about diminished institutional backing:

“Sometimes we cannot enforce rules consistently because the administration intervenes.”

This perceived erosion of authority contributed to feelings of professional vulnerability, particularly among less experienced teachers.

Importantly, teachers did not position misbehavior solely as student-centered but as embedded within systemic conditions. Classroom management, therefore, emerged as institutionally mediated practice rather than purely individual competence.

3.3. Experience as Adaptive Pedagogical Knowledge

A significant distinction emerged between experienced and less experienced teachers. Participants with extensive teaching backgrounds described classroom management as intuitive, flexible, and anticipatory.

An experienced teacher stated:

“After many years, you can feel when something will go wrong. You adjust before it becomes a problem.”

This anticipatory capacity reflects tacit professional knowledge consistent with expertise research (Berliner, 2001). Rather than relying strictly on explicit rules, experienced teachers emphasized preventive orchestration—modifying pacing, grouping patterns, or interactional tone.

In contrast, less experienced teachers reported greater reliance on explicit rules and expressed uncertainty in responding to unpredictable behavior. For them, classroom management was described as cognitively demanding and emotionally taxing.

3.4. Relational Strategies as Preventive Practice

Teachers consistently underscored the importance of relationship-building as foundational to effective management. Strategies such as learning students’ names, maintaining eye contact, informal conversation, and demonstrating empathy were described as reducing disciplinary incidents.

One participant observed:

“If students feel respected, they don’t want to disturb the lesson.”

This perspective reflects a relational model in which authority is constructed through trust rather than coercion.

Cooperative learning activities—pair work, group discussions, and games—were also framed as management tools. These strategies redistributed interactional energy and reduced

opportunities for off-task behavior. Teachers perceived instructional variation not only as pedagogical enhancement but as preventive management.

Theme	Experienced Teachers	Less Experienced Teachers
Authority	Relational	Rule-based
Strategy	Preventive	Reactive
Emotional Response	Confident	Overwhelmed

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore high school teachers' perceptions of classroom management strategies and the challenges they encounter in their teaching practice. The findings indicate that teachers conceptualize classroom management as a complex, dynamic, and context-dependent process shaped by student behavior, instructional conditions, institutional constraints, and professional experience. This section discusses the findings in relation to existing research and theoretical perspectives on classroom management and teacher cognition.

4.1. Classroom Management as Situated Pedagogical Judgment

The findings reconceptualize classroom management not as the mechanical application of strategies but as a form of situated pedagogical judgment enacted within linguistically and institutionally constrained environments. Teachers' accounts suggest that classroom management in EFL contexts operates at the intersection of behavioral regulation, motivational mediation, and instructional orchestration.

This extends traditional strategy-oriented models by demonstrating that management practices are embedded in teachers' interpretive frameworks rather than applied as standardized techniques. In this sense, classroom management emerges as an expression of teacher cognition—reflecting context-sensitive decision-making shaped by accumulated experience and professional knowledge.

Such findings resonate with expertise research (Berliner, 2001) and align with conceptualizations of tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966), suggesting that effective management relies on anticipatory awareness and adaptive responsiveness rather than rule enforcement alone. The findings are also consistent with Wolff, Jarodzka, and Boshuizen (2021), who reported that expert teachers possess well-developed classroom management scripts that enable them to anticipate and respond effectively to emerging classroom events. Similarly, Stahnke and Blömeke (2021) found that experienced teachers demonstrate greater situation-specific skills in perceiving, interpreting, and responding to classroom management challenges than novice teachers. In the present study, experienced teachers likewise described classroom management as an intuitive and preventive process based on accumulated professional experience. However, while previous studies primarily examined expertise through observations and performance-based measures, the present study extends this research by illuminating how teachers themselves conceptualize the development of management expertise

and the role of experience in shaping classroom management decisions within EFL high school contexts.

4.2. Motivational Mediation in the EFL Classroom

A central contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that teachers frame management challenges primarily as motivational rather than disciplinary phenomena. In EFL settings, limited exposure to English beyond the classroom and exam-oriented curricular pressures appear to weaken students' communicative investment. Consequently, teachers' management efforts frequently focus on sustaining engagement, constructing relevance, and maintaining attention. This positions classroom management as intertwined with motivational pedagogy rather than as a discrete behavioral domain.

This finding is consistent with research emphasizing the central role of motivation in effective language learning and classroom functioning. For example, Dörnyei (2001) argued that teachers' motivational practices are fundamental to maintaining learner engagement and participation. Similarly, Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008) found that teachers' motivational strategies were positively associated with students' classroom engagement, suggesting that behavioral participation is closely linked to motivational conditions. Our findings extend this line of research by showing that experienced EFL teachers often interpret classroom management itself as a process of fostering and sustaining motivation rather than merely regulating behavior.

The findings also resonate with studies highlighting the relationship between learner self-efficacy, willingness to communicate, and classroom participation. Research by MacIntyre et al. (1998) and Peng and Woodrow (2010) suggests that students who experience linguistic anxiety or lack confidence in their language abilities are less likely to engage actively in classroom interaction. In the present study, teachers similarly perceived disengagement not simply as a behavioral issue but as an indicator of linguistic insecurity and reduced communicative confidence.

At the same time, our findings broaden previous classroom management research, which has often focused on behavioral control, discipline, and rule enforcement (e.g., Emmer & Sabornie, 2015). Rather than emphasizing corrective interventions, participants highlighted the importance of creating meaningful learning experiences and maintaining students' interest. This suggests that classroom management in EFL contexts may involve a stronger motivational dimension than has been emphasized in general education literature.

From an applied linguistics perspective, these findings indicate that management and language learning processes are inseparable. Behavioral disengagement often signals linguistic insecurity, limited self-efficacy, or perceived irrelevance of target language use. Thus, classroom management in EFL contexts cannot be divorced from language learning conditions, identity negotiation, and communicative opportunity structures. This interpretation broadens the conceptual terrain of classroom management research by embedding it within the ecology of second language learning.

4.3. Authority as a Relationally Constructed Practice

Teachers' accounts indicate that authority in the EFL classroom is not merely institutional but relationally negotiated. Rather than relying exclusively on hierarchical control, experienced teachers described cultivating legitimacy through trust, empathy, and interpersonal presence. This finding is consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of teacher–student relationships in effective classroom management. For example, Marzano, Marzano, and Pickering (2019) found that positive teacher–student relationships are among the most influential factors contributing to successful classroom management. Similarly, Evertson and Weinstein (2006) argued that classroom management extends beyond behavior control to include the creation of supportive learning environments that foster academic and social-emotional development.

The findings also align with Hepburn, Beamish, and Alston-Knox (2021), who reported that teachers viewed relationship-building and preventive approaches as essential components of effective classroom management. Likewise, Tai (2023) found that classroom management in English-language classrooms is closely connected to interactional processes and the quality of teacher–student communication. These studies, together with the present findings, suggest that authority is not simply imposed through formal roles but is actively negotiated through ongoing classroom interactions.

Importantly, participants in the present study perceived institutional constraints, particularly inconsistent administrative support, as factors that weakened or destabilized teacher authority. This finding is consistent with Egeberg, McConney, and Price (2016), who found that school-wide policies and organizational support significantly influence teachers' classroom management effectiveness. Similarly, OECD (2019) reported that institutional conditions and administrative practices can shape teachers' ability to maintain productive learning environments.

However, whereas previous studies have primarily examined relational classroom management and teacher authority in terms of their effects on student behavior and classroom climate, the present study extends this literature by exploring how EFL high school teachers themselves interpret the construction of authority within their professional contexts. The findings demonstrate that teachers perceive authority not as a fixed institutional entitlement but as a relational and context-dependent achievement shaped by trust, interaction, and institutional support. This perspective highlights the cognitive and experiential dimensions of classroom management and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of authority in EFL educational settings.

Theoretically, these findings support sociocultural perspectives on pedagogy, which emphasize that professional practice is shaped through interactional and institutional processes rather than by individual teacher agency alone.

4.4. Developmental Trajectories of Management Expertise

A notable distinction emerged between novice and experienced teachers, reinforcing research on teacher expertise and professional development. Experienced teachers described

anticipatory regulation and adaptive flexibility—hallmarks of script-based pedagogical knowledge.

Rather than applying rigid rules, they reported modifying pacing, interactional patterns, and instructional sequencing preemptively. This anticipatory orchestration reflects the proceduralization of management knowledge over time.

In contrast, less experienced teachers emphasized rule clarity and expressed greater emotional strain when confronted with unpredictable behavior. This suggests that classroom management competence evolves through reflective engagement with practice rather than through theoretical instruction alone.

The findings therefore reinforce arguments within teacher education research that experiential learning and mentoring are indispensable for developing management fluency. The present findings not only corroborate previous research on teacher expertise (Berliner, 2001; Wolff et al., 2021; Stahnke & Blömeke, 2021) but also extend it by demonstrating how experienced EFL teachers explicitly attribute their management competence to accumulated classroom experience, reflective adaptation, and contextual knowledge. This highlights the importance of examining classroom management as a cognitive and experiential process rather than solely as a set of observable practices.

4.5. Institutional Ecology and Structural Mediation

The study also highlights the institutional embeddedness of classroom management. Large class sizes, resource limitations, and centralized curricula were not peripheral concerns but central determinants of management complexity. This challenges individualistic framings that position management solely as teacher skill. Instead, classroom management emerges as structurally mediated pedagogical work, shaped by policy environments and material conditions.

This finding is consistent with previous research emphasizing the influence of contextual and institutional factors on classroom management practices. For example, Hepburn, Beamish, and Alston-Knox (2021) found that although teachers valued evidence-based classroom management strategies, their implementation was often constrained by organizational and contextual conditions. Similarly, Martin and Sass (2010) reported that teachers' classroom management practices are influenced not only by personal efficacy but also by environmental and institutional variables. In the context of language education, Tai (2023) demonstrated that classroom management challenges in English-medium secondary classrooms are closely intertwined with contextual factors, including classroom interaction patterns and institutional expectations.

The present findings also align with OECD (2019) reports, indicating that large class sizes, limited resources, and administrative pressures can increase teachers' workload and complicate classroom management efforts. However, while previous studies have largely examined the effects of institutional conditions on teachers' practices and well-being, the current study extends this line of research by showing how EFL high school teachers themselves interpret these structural constraints and perceive them as shaping their authority, decision-making, and classroom management strategies. The findings, therefore, suggest that classroom management

should be understood not only as an individual competence but also as a socially and institutionally situated practice.

From a policy perspective, this underscores the need for systemic interventions—such as reduced class sizes, professional autonomy, and institutional consistency—if classroom management effectiveness is to improve.

4.6. Theoretical Contribution

This study advances classroom management scholarship in three key ways:

1. It conceptualizes classroom management as situated pedagogical judgment rather than technical strategy implementation.
2. It integrates teacher cognition research into classroom management analysis within EFL contexts.
3. It reframes management challenges as motivational and ecological phenomena embedded in second language learning conditions.

By foregrounding teachers' lived experience, the study challenges prescriptive and decontextualized management models and argues for a relational, developmental, and context-sensitive understanding of classroom regulation.

4.7. Summary of Discussion

In summary, the findings indicate that high school teachers perceive classroom management as a proactive, relational, and experience-based process. While teachers face significant challenges related to student motivation, behavior, and institutional constraints, they employ a range of strategies aimed at fostering engagement and maintaining productive learning environments. Teaching experience emerges as a key factor influencing teachers' confidence and effectiveness in classroom management. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of classroom management from teachers' perspectives and provide a foundation for improving teacher education and professional development practices.

This study extends existing classroom management literature by conceptualizing classroom management not as a fixed set of strategies but as a relational and experience-based practice shaped by institutional and interactional conditions. By foregrounding teachers' perspectives, the findings challenge prescriptive models of classroom management and highlight the importance of situated professional judgment. This perspective contributes to ongoing discussions in teacher cognition research by illustrating how classroom management knowledge is constructed through experience rather than acquired solely through formal training.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how EFL high school teachers conceptualize and experience classroom management within their professional practice. The findings demonstrate that classroom management, as articulated by participants, cannot be reduced to disciplinary technique or procedural control. Rather, it emerges as a form of situated pedagogical judgment enacted within relational, motivational, and institutional ecologies.

Teachers did not primarily frame classroom management as the suppression of misconduct. Instead, they interpreted classroom challenges as manifestations of fluctuating student motivation, linguistic disengagement, and structural constraints. In doing so, they positioned management not as reactive enforcement but as anticipatory orchestration—an adaptive process involving relational negotiation, instructional calibration, and contextual responsiveness.

A central contribution of this study lies in foregrounding classroom management as an expression of teacher cognition in EFL contexts. The findings reveal that management competence develops developmentally through experiential accumulation, reflective adaptation, and tacit knowledge formation. Experienced teachers described preventive and relational approaches grounded in anticipatory awareness, whereas less experienced teachers relied more heavily on rule-based regulation. This distinction underscores that classroom management expertise is constructed over time rather than acquired solely through prescriptive training.

The study also highlights the structural mediation of classroom management practice. Institutional constraints—including class size, curricular rigidity, and inconsistent administrative support—shape teachers' authority and limit their pedagogical flexibility. Consequently, classroom management must be understood not as an individual teacher attribute but as a practice embedded within broader policy and institutional frameworks.

By integrating teacher cognition, motivational dynamics, and institutional ecology, this research extends classroom management scholarship in three significant ways. First, it reconceptualizes management as relational and experience-based rather than strategy-driven. Second, it situates classroom regulation within the specific linguistic and motivational conditions of EFL education. Third, it challenges decontextualized models that detach management from pedagogical and systemic realities.

The implications for teacher education are substantial. Programs preparing EFL teachers should move beyond procedural prescriptions toward experiential learning models that incorporate mentoring, reflective practice, and contextual problem-solving. Developing classroom management competence requires opportunities for situated engagement, not merely theoretical instruction. Likewise, policymakers and school leaders must recognize that sustainable classroom management depends on institutional coherence and structural support.

Future research would benefit from expanding the evidentiary base through classroom observations, longitudinal designs examining developmental trajectories, and comparative studies across cultural and policy contexts. Such inquiries would further illuminate how classroom management practices evolve and how institutional ecologies shape pedagogical judgment.

Ultimately, this study affirms that classroom management in EFL settings is neither peripheral nor purely technical. It is a central dimension of pedagogical expertise—constructed relationally, negotiated institutionally, and refined through experience. Recognizing classroom management as situated professional knowledge allows for a more nuanced and equitable

understanding of teachers' work and contributes to ongoing efforts to align theory, practice, and context in applied linguistics and teacher education research.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Like all qualitative studies, the present research has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted with a relatively small sample of 21 high school teachers from a specific educational context. As a result, the findings are not intended to be generalized to all high school settings. Instead, they provide context-specific insights into teachers' perceptions and experiences.

Second, data were collected solely through semi-structured interviews. While interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of teachers' perspectives, the inclusion of additional data sources—such as classroom observations, document analysis, or student perspectives—could have strengthened the findings through methodological triangulation.

Third, the majority of participants had extensive teaching experience, which may have influenced the prominence of experience-based interpretations in the findings. Future studies could benefit from a more balanced sample that includes a greater number of novice teachers to explore developmental differences in classroom management perceptions more systematically.

Future research may also adopt mixed-methods designs to examine the relationship between teachers perceived classroom management strategies and observable classroom practices or student outcomes. Comparative studies across different educational levels, school types, or cultural contexts would further contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of classroom management as a complex educational phenomenon.

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