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FACULTAD DE CIENCIAS DE LA EDUCACIÓN, HUMANAS Y  
TECNOLOGÍAS  
CARRERA DE PEDAGOGÍA DE LOS IDIOMAS NACIONALES Y  
EXTRANJEROS**

Effects of Inclusive Language on Reading Comprehension

**Work Present as a Requirement for Obtaining the Bachelor's degree as  
Licenciada en Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros**

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**Riobamba, Ecuador. 2026**

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We, the undersigned professors appointed as members of the Degree Tribunal for the evaluation of the research work “**Effects of Inclusive Language on Reading Comprehension**” presented by Gabriel Alejandro Quintanilla Ortiz, with ID number 0605628171, under the supervision of Mgs. Daysi Valeria Fierro Lopez, we certify and recommend the APPROVAL of this work for degree purposes. The research work has been previously evaluated, and the author’s presentation has been heard; we have no further comments.

In accordance with applicable regulations, we sign in Riobamba on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2026.

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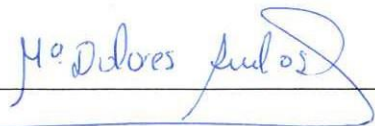
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## DEDICATORY

I want to dedicate this title to the most important person in my life, my mother **Paola**, who has always been there for me, the one who has never let go of my hand throughout my life, who sacrificed her youth to look out for her son's well-being. All my achievements are yours.

To the most beautiful star watching over me from heaven my grandmother **Graciela**, thank you for being with me every step of the way and for helping me fulfill this dream. To my grandfather **Henry**, who is like a father to me, thank you for your unconditional support and for always being there when I need you. To my aunts Karla and Diana, my uncles, and all my cousins for always being present.

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**Gabriel Alejandro Quintanilla Ortiz**

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## RESUMEN

Este estudio examina los efectos del lenguaje inclusivo sobre la comprensión lectora de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) en nivel B1 del MCER (Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las Lenguas). Mediante un diseño comparativo intrasujeto con un único momento de medición, 46 estudiantes completaron tareas de comprensión lectora (Parte A; 50 puntos) utilizando cinco textos tres redactados con características de lenguaje inclusivo (pronombre singular *they*, sustantivos neutros en cuanto al género) y dos con formas de lenguaje tradicional junto con un cuestionario de actitudes tipo Likert de 110 puntos (Parte B). Contrariamente a la hipótesis de investigación ( $H_1$ : el lenguaje inclusivo afecta negativamente la comprensión lectora por aumento de la carga cognitiva), la prueba *t* para muestras relacionadas reveló que los estudiantes obtuvieron puntuaciones significativamente más altas en los textos de lenguaje inclusivo ( $M = 8,75/10$ ) que en los textos tradicionales ( $M = 7,66/10$ ),  $t(45) = 5,69$ ,  $p < ,001$ ,  $d$  de Cohen = 0,84. La hipótesis nula fue, por tanto, rechazada. La gran mayoría (71,7 %) de los estudiantes mostró actitudes favorables o muy favorables hacia el lenguaje inclusivo, y el análisis de correlación entre actitudes y rendimiento en comprensión lectora resultó no significativo ( $r = ,27$ ,  $p = ,068$ ). Estos hallazgos sugieren que en contextos de alta aceptación actitudinal y exposición progresiva a formas inclusivas, el lenguaje inclusivo no deteriora la comprensión lectora en EFL y puede facilitarla. Se discuten las implicaciones para el diseño curricular en EFL, la formación docente y las políticas de lenguaje inclusivo.

**Palabras clave:** lenguaje inclusivo, comprensión lectora, inglés como lengua extranjera, carga cognitiva, actitudes, Ecuador

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of inclusive language on the reading comprehension of First Semester Students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at the B1 (lower-intermediate) level of the CEFR in an Ecuadorian educational context. Using a within-subjects comparative design with a single measurement point, 46 students completed reading comprehension tasks (Part A; 50 points) using five texts three constructed with inclusive language features (singular *they*, gender-neutral nouns) and two with traditional language forms together with a 110-point Likert-scale attitude questionnaire (Part B). Contrary to the research hypothesis ( $H_1$ : inclusive language negatively affects reading comprehension due to increased cognitive load), a paired-samples t-test revealed that students performed significantly higher on inclusive language texts ( $M = 8.75/10$ ) than on traditional texts ( $M = 7.66/10$ ),  $t(45) = 5.69$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.84$ . The null hypothesis was therefore rejected. A large majority (71.7%) of students held favorable or very favorable attitudes toward inclusive language, and correlation analysis between attitude and comprehension performance was non-significant ( $r = .27$ ,  $p = .068$ ). These findings suggest that in contexts of high attitudinal acceptance and progressive exposure to inclusive forms, inclusive language does not impair EFL reading comprehension and may facilitate it.

**Keywords:** inclusive language, reading comprehension, EFL, cognitive load, attitudes, Ecuador



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## CHAPTER I

### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction

The ability to understand texts in English is one of the key skills required to participate in social situations and academic institutions in today's world. Reading comprehension involves the cognitive processes necessary to decode, interpret, and establish the meaning of written language (Horvath et al., 2016). Additionally, language is not static; inclusive language is a practice that seeks to highlight the differences among various social groups in order to avoid the generic masculine form, favoring more inclusive ways of accounting for the diversity of the population (Formanowicz & Hansen, 2022).

Inclusive language, despite its social significance, also presents significant challenges in the reading process. In languages such as English, systematic grammar was formulated in such a way that the masculine form was understood as the general form, which influenced the direction that mental frameworks took during reading (Ashrafova, 2024). Inclusive language provides more balanced forms of representation and can influence a sense of belonging; it can also increase the cognitive load during reading, potentially affecting how information is analyzed (Román & Tamargo, 2025). The motivation for conducting this research stems from the fact that inclusive language is one of the most controversial issues today. There is an ongoing debate between advocates of its use and those who contend that it can undermine clarity and interpretation. From this perspective, it is essential to study, from a scientific standpoint, the extent to which the use of inclusive language relates to reading comprehension.

Regarding the methodology, this research adopts a quantitative approach. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive and inferential statistical procedures to identify patterns and determine the existence of a significant effect regarding the use of inclusive language. The objective of this research is to analyze how the use of inclusive language in English affects the reading comprehension of First Semester students at CEFR B1 level in an Ecuadorian educational context, providing empirical evidence for the current academic debate and guidance for improving teaching practices related to language use.

#### 1.2 Research Problem

According to Spinelli et al. (2023), in various languages, the masculine form is traditionally established as the norm, even when the text refers to diverse or unspecified groups. This form generally leads to representations that are biased toward the masculine, marginalizing certain groups. Consequently, language reinforces cognitive patterns that prioritize the masculine over other forms of expression.

Furthermore, inclusive approaches have been evaluated as ways to reduce this bias and promote more equitable forms of expression. Wang et al. (2025) note that while these forms of language help increase the visibility of different social groups, they also place greater mental demands on the reader's comprehension. Tornero and Alberca (2023) suggest that texts using inclusive language may generate additional processing demands, indicating that comprehension does not depend solely on content but also on the morphological and linguistic structure used. Added to this are ideological factors, such as traditional beliefs that influence the acceptance or rejection of new inclusive forms (Lange & Von Stockhausen, 2025).

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

The evolution of language toward more inclusive forms is a highly debated topic involving a complex tension between social equity and linguistic efficiency. While increasing empirical evidence suggests that traditional linguistic systems create biased representations and perpetuate gender-based inequities, resistance to linguistic change remains prevalent (Spinelli et al., 2023). Psycholinguistic research using eye-tracking has demonstrated that novel language forms tend to produce higher processing costs for a reader, including longer fixation times and greater cognitive load (Tibblin et al., 2026). In addition, non-canonical morphemes can disrupt sentence processing, requiring additional mental capacity to build a coherent textual representation (Román & Tamargo, 2025).

Moreover, L2 readers show particular sensitivity to surface linguistic information: Bordag et al. (2025) found an asymmetric retention pattern in which non-native readers attend more closely to linguistic form, potentially at the expense of meaning-level processing. This body of evidence underscores how closely working memory, attention, and reading are related when a reader attempts to comprehend a text whose structure deviates from familiar norms.

### **1.4 Justification**

Inclusive language is a pressing issue in both education and linguistics. Society recognizes the need to promote more inclusive forms of communication, which may have implications for the cognitive processes involved in reading tasks. It is therefore important to understand how variations in the morphological structure of texts influence students' reading comprehension.

The direct beneficiaries of this study are First Semester students in English language development, as the study identifies strategies to facilitate the adoption of inclusive language in English given its importance in current global trends. The indirect beneficiaries are professional teachers, who will gain the ability to understand the dynamics of inclusive language and make more informed pedagogical decisions. The contribution of this study lies in providing empirical evidence on the relationship between inclusive language use and cognitive processes in educational contexts.

## **1.5 Formulation of the Research Problem**

Does inclusive language have an impact on First Semester students of Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages reading comprehension in an EFL context?

## **1.6 Objectives**

### **1.6.1 General Objective**

Analyze how the use of inclusive language in English influences reading comprehension among First semester students of Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages at UNACH.

### **1.6.2 Specific Objectives**

**SO1:** Identify the application and use of inclusive language in educational settings and its influence through a theoretical-contextual framework.

**SO2:** Measure students' performance in reading comprehension tasks using English texts.

**SO3:** Compare performance in reading comprehension tasks using texts with inclusive language and texts with traditional language.

### **1.6.3 Research Hypothesis**

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Inclusive language negatively affects reading comprehension First Semester EFL students due to increased cognitive load.

**H<sub>0</sub>:** There is no statistically significant difference in reading comprehension performance between texts written in inclusive and traditional language.

## CHAPTER II

### 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 2.1 Inclusive Language

##### 2.1.1 Definition

Inclusive language is defined as a mode of communication, spoken or written, that deliberately avoids expressions which may be interpreted as discriminatory or exclusionary toward particular individuals or social groups on the basis of gender, ethnicity, ability, age, or social condition (Fernandez-Sanchez et al., 2024). According to UNESCO (1999), inclusive or gender-neutral language refers to the use of non-discriminatory terminology that treats women and men, and all gender identities, symmetrically and equitably, avoiding the use of the generic masculine as the default form of reference.

From a critical discourse perspective, Fairclough (2015) conceives language as a form of social practice that both reflects and reproduces relations of power; consequently, inclusive language constitutes an intentional intervention in discourse designed to dismantle asymmetries embedded in conventional usage. Lakoff (1973), in her foundational work on language and women's place, demonstrated that linguistic forms are never neutral: the systematic use of masculine generics and gendered terminology contributes to the symbolic subordination of women, which inclusive language seeks to redress. Halliday's (1978) systemic functional linguistics reinforces this view by positing that language is a meaning-making resource shaped by social context, such that changes in linguistic choices necessarily entail changes in the social meanings communicated.

In summary, inclusive language can be understood as a conscious and systematic linguistic practice oriented towards representing human diversity equitably, grounded simultaneously in sociolinguistic, critical, and functional theoretical frameworks (Sue et al., 2019; Fairclough, 2015; Halliday, 1978).

##### 2.1.2 Importance

The importance of inclusive language derives from its capacity to shape social perception and cognitive representation. Stahlberg et al. (2007) demonstrated, across multiple empirical studies, that masculine generics evoke a male bias in mental representations, causing readers and listeners to retrieve predominantly male exemplars of a given human category. The adoption of inclusive forms mitigates this bias and contributes to a more balanced representation of social reality. Sue et al. (2019) further argue, through the framework of microaggressions, that everyday language choices can communicate hostile or demeaning messages to marginalized groups, often unintentionally, thereby reinforcing systemic inequities.

In educational settings, the importance of inclusive language is amplified because schools function as primary agents of socialization. UNESCO (1999) emphasizes that the language used in educational resources and institutional communication directly influences students'

perceptions of equity and belonging. When learners encounter language that acknowledges their identity and presence, the affective climate of learning is enhanced, with potential downstream effects on motivation and engagement (Fernandez-Sanchez et al., 2024).

### **2.1.3 Characteristics**

Inclusive language exhibits several distinguishing characteristics. First, it is intentional: its use reflects a deliberate communicative choice rather than an automatic linguistic habit (Fairclough, 2015). Second, it is person-centered, prioritizing the dignity and individuality of the person over their categorical membership (Fernandez-Sanchez et al., 2024). Third, it is context-sensitive, requiring speakers to adapt strategies to the audience, register, and purpose of communication, as Sue et al., (2019) mentions for gender-inclusive language explicitly recommend. Fourth, it is dynamic, evolving alongside social norms and the changing self-designations of the groups it seeks to represent (Sue et al., 2019).

### **2.1.4 Inclusive Language in Education**

Within education, inclusive language operates at the level of curriculum, instructional materials, and classroom interaction. UNESCO (1999) established early guidelines mandating non-sexist language in educational publications, a policy direction that has since expanded to encompass cultural, linguistic, and ability-based inclusion. Halliday's (1978) functional perspective is particularly relevant here: because language constructs the learner's model of the social world, inclusive linguistic choices in textbooks and teacher discourse contribute to shaping equitable social schemas. Fairclough (2015) adds that the classroom is a site of discursive socialization in which dominant or inclusive language ideologies are transmitted, making teacher language a powerful pedagogical instrument.

### **2.1.5 Inclusive Language in EFL Classrooms**

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, inclusive language acquires additional layers of complexity. Learners must simultaneously acquire the linguistic system of English and navigate its evolving inclusive conventions, such as the singular pronoun *they* and gender-neutral occupational nouns (Sanford & Filik, 2007). Because English is a natural-gender language marking gender primarily through pronouns rather than through extensive morphological agreement (Stahlberg et al., 2007), the integration of inclusive forms is structurally less demanding than in grammatical-gender languages such as Spanish, yet it still requires deliberate pedagogical attention. The EFL classroom thus becomes both a space for language acquisition and a site where learners encounter the social values encoded in inclusive usage (Sue et al., 2019; Fairclough, 2015).

## **2.2 Types of Inclusive Language**

Inclusive language encompasses several interrelated but distinct categories, each addressing a particular dimension of social diversity. The classification presented here draws on the guidelines of UNESCO (1999), the American Psychological Association (2021), and UNICEF (2017).

### **2.2.1 Gender-Inclusive Language**

Gender-inclusive language seeks to represent all genders equitably and to avoid the generic masculine. As Sue et al., (2019) mentions for gender-inclusive language in English identify strategies such as the use of gender-neutral nouns (*chairperson* instead of *chairman*), the singular *they*, the pairing of pronouns, and sentence restructuring to avoid unnecessary gendering. Stahlberg et al. (2007) provide the empirical rationale for these strategies, demonstrating that masculine generics produce measurable male bias in cognition. The APA (2021) similarly recommends the singular *they* as the preferred gender-neutral pronoun in academic writing.

### **2.2.2 Cultural Inclusion**

Cultural inclusion refers to linguistic practices that respect and represent ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity, avoiding terms that stereotype or marginalize particular communities (Sue et al., 2019). UNESCO (1999) and UNICEF (2017) advocate for terminology that recognizes cultural identity with accuracy and dignity, particularly in multilingual and multicultural educational contexts such as Ecuador, where indigenous and intercultural identities are constitutionally recognized.

### **2.2.3 Disability-Sensitive Language**

Disability-sensitive language employs person-first or identity-first constructions to avoid reducing individuals to their disability (American Psychological Association, 2021). The APA (2021) guidelines explicitly recommend expressions such as *a person with a disability* over stigmatizing alternatives, while recognizing that some communities prefer identity-first language. UNICEF (2017) emphasizes that disability-inclusive language in educational materials supports the full participation of children with disabilities.

### **2.2.4 Neutral Language**

Neutral language comprises strategies that omit reference to gender or other social categories altogether when such reference is irrelevant to meaning (Sue et al., 2019). This includes the use of collective nouns, passive constructions, and gender-neutral occupational titles. The APA (2021) notes that neutralization is one of the two principal strategies for achieving inclusive communication and is particularly suited to natural-gender languages such as English.

## **2.3 Reading Comprehension**

### **2.3.1 Definition**

The RAND Reading Study Group, under the direction of Snow (2002), provided one of the most influential definitions of reading comprehension, characterizing it as the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language. This definition emphasizes three components: the accurate decoding of print, the active construction of meaning through inference, and the motivated

engagement of the reader. Grabe and Stoller (2019) extend this conception to second-language reading, defining comprehension as the coordinated operation of lower-level processes (word recognition, syntactic parsing) and higher-level processes (inferencing, comprehension monitoring, building a coherent mental model).

From a cognitive standpoint, Kintsch (1988), through the Construction-Integration Model, conceptualizes comprehension as the formation of a coherent mental representation built in two phases: a construction phase, in which propositions from the text and from prior knowledge are activated, and an integration phase, in which these propositions are consolidated into a unified situation model. Anderson (as discussed in Snow, 2002) similarly underscores the role of schema activation, whereby readers interpret new information in light of pre-existing knowledge structures.

### **2.3.2 Importance in EFL Learning**

Reading comprehension occupies a central position in EFL learning because it constitutes the primary channel through which learners are exposed to extended, meaningful input in the target language (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). Nunan (2015) argues that reading is foundational to the development of overall language proficiency, as it supports vocabulary acquisition, grammatical awareness, and the consolidation of written discourse conventions. For EFL learners, who often have limited access to naturalistic spoken input, reading becomes an indispensable source of comprehensible input in the sense articulated by Krashen (1982).

### **2.3.3 Cognitive Processes**

Reading comprehension engages a constellation of cognitive processes. Kintsch (1988) identifies the construction of a textbase and a situation model as central operations, both of which draw heavily on working memory. Snow (2002) describes comprehension as an interaction among the reader, the text, and the activity, situated within a broader sociocultural context. For EFL readers specifically, Grabe and Stoller (2019) note that lower-level processes are often not fully automatized, meaning that a greater proportion of limited working-memory resources is consumed by word recognition and syntactic parsing, leaving fewer resources available for higher-level meaning construction.

## **2.4 Levels of Reading Comprehension**

The hierarchical taxonomy of reading comprehension levels, originally systematized by Barrett (1968) and elaborated by Pearson and Johnson (1978), distinguishes among progressively more demanding cognitive operations. These three levels directly inform the design of the reading comprehension instrument employed in the present study.

### **2.4.1 Literal Comprehension**

Literal comprehension involves the recognition and recall of information explicitly stated in the text (Barrett, 1968). It is the most basic level and includes identifying details, sequences, and explicitly stated main ideas. Pearson and Johnson (1978) characterize this level as the

establishment of a textbase that closely mirrors the surface propositions of the passage. In the present study, this level corresponds to the Literal subscore of Part A.

#### **2.4.2 Inferential Comprehension**

Inferential comprehension requires the reader to go beyond explicitly stated information, drawing conclusions, making predictions, and establishing relationships implied but not directly stated (Pearson & Johnson, 1978). Barrett (1968) situates inference at the core of meaningful comprehension, as it entails the integration of textual cues with prior knowledge, precisely the integration phase described by Kintsch (1988). This level corresponds to the Inferential subscore of Part A.

#### **2.4.3 Critical Comprehension**

Critical comprehension, the highest level in the Barrett (1968) taxonomy, involves evaluating the text, judging the validity and reliability of its content, distinguishing fact from opinion, and recognizing the author's purpose and ideological stance. Pearson and Johnson (1978) emphasize that this level requires the reader to adopt an evaluative posture toward the text. In the context of inclusive language, critical comprehension is especially pertinent, as it enables readers to detect and interrogate the social assumptions encoded in linguistic form.

### **2.5 Reading Comprehension in EFL Contexts**

#### **2.5.1 Difficulties in EFL Learners**

EFL learners encounter distinctive obstacles in reading comprehension. Brown (2007) identifies limited automaticity in word recognition, restricted vocabulary, and incomplete syntactic knowledge as principal barriers that distinguish L2 from L1 reading. Harmer (2015) adds that EFL learners frequently lack familiarity with the cultural and rhetorical conventions of English texts, which impedes the construction of an accurate situation model. Richards and Renandya (2002) note that many EFL learners over-rely on bottom-up decoding strategies, neglecting the top-down processes such as prediction and schema activation, that mature readers integrate fluidly.

#### **2.5.2 Vocabulary and Comprehension**

The relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension is one of the most robust findings in second-language research. Grabe and Stoller (2019) report that vocabulary breadth and depth are among the strongest predictors of L2 reading comprehension, as insufficient lexical knowledge disrupts the lower-level processing on which higher-level comprehension depends. Brown (2007) similarly argues that a threshold level of vocabulary is necessary before learners can read with adequate comprehension. In the context of inclusive language, novel lexical items such as gender-neutral nouns, may initially increase lexical processing demands, though this effect may diminish with exposure (Richards & Renandya, 2002).

### **2.5.3 Motivation and Comprehension**

Motivation plays a decisive role in reading comprehension outcomes. Harmer (2015) emphasizes that learner engagement and interest substantially affect the cognitive effort invested in reading, and consequently the depth of comprehension achieved. Richards and Renandya (2002) advocate for the selection of texts that are relevant and meaningful to learners as a means of sustaining motivation. This consideration bears directly on inclusive language: texts that affirm learners' identities may enhance motivation and engagement, potentially offsetting any processing costs associated with unfamiliar linguistic forms.

## **2.6 Relationship Between Inclusive Language and Reading Comprehension**

This section, central to the present investigation, examines the theoretical and empirical links between inclusive language and reading comprehension across five dimensions: comprehension, participation, identification with the text, motivation, and the reduction of biases. The analysis draws on critical and sociocultural perspectives that frame language and literacy as inherently social and political practices (Freire, 1970; Cummins, 2000; Gee, 2015; Norton, 2013).

### **2.6.1 Influence on Comprehension**

From a sociocultural standpoint, Gee (2015) argues that reading is never a neutral cognitive act but is embedded in social "Discourses" that shape what and how readers understand. Inclusive language, by aligning the text with equitable social Discourses, may facilitate comprehension for readers who recognize themselves within it. Cummins (2000) contributes the distinction between conversational and academic language proficiency, suggesting that comprehension is enhanced when academic texts are made cognitively and culturally accessible. Inclusive language, when familiar to the reader, may reduce the construct-irrelevant difficulty that otherwise impedes accurate comprehension.

### **2.6.2 Influence on Participation**

Freire (1970), in his critical pedagogy, conceives reading as an act of "reading the word and the world," in which learners become active participants in meaning-making rather than passive recipients. Inclusive language supports this participatory stance by signaling to all learners that they are legitimate participants in the discourse community. Norton (2013) reinforces this through her concept of "investment," whereby learners participate more fully in literacy practices when those practices affirm their identities and offer a return on their social and cultural investment.

### **2.6.3 Influence on Identification with the Text**

Norton's (2013) theory of identity and language learning is especially pertinent here. She argues that learners invest in language practices that allow them to imagine and construct valued identities. When a text employs inclusive language, learners from diverse backgrounds are more likely to identify with its content, strengthening the affective bond

between reader and text. Gee (2015) similarly notes that identification with the social world projected by a text deepens engagement and comprehension. This identification may explain why, in certain contexts, inclusive texts elicit stronger reading performance.

#### **2.6.4 Influence on Motivation**

The motivational consequences of inclusive language follow from the preceding dimensions. Freire (1970) holds that education grounded in the learner's reality fosters intrinsic motivation, while Norton (2013) links motivation to the learner's investment in identities afforded by the text. Cummins (2000) adds that affirming students' identities and prior knowledge creates the conditions for engaged motivated learning. Inclusive language, by validating learner identities, can thus enhance the motivation that Harmer (2015) and Richards and Renandya (2002) identify as a key determinant of comprehension.

#### **2.6.5 Influence on the Reduction of Biases**

Finally, inclusive language contributes to the reduction of cognitive and social biases. Stahlberg et al. (2007) demonstrated empirically that gender-fair forms reduce the male bias evoked by masculine generics, producing more balanced mental representations. Gee (2015) and Freire (1970) frame this at the ideological level, arguing that critical engagement with language can disrupt the reproduction of social inequities. By exposing EFL learners to inclusive forms within meaningful reading tasks, educators may simultaneously develop comprehension and cultivate more equitable social cognition (Sue et al., 2019; Cummins, 2000).

Taken together, these five dimensions suggest that the relationship between inclusive language and reading comprehension is not unidirectional. While cognitive load theory predicts potential processing costs for unfamiliar forms (Sweller, 2023), the sociocultural and critical perspectives reviewed here predict facilitative effects through participation, identification, motivation, and bias reduction. The present study contributes empirical evidence to adjudicate between these competing predictions.

### **2.7 Previous Studies**

This section reviews recent empirical studies, both international and regional, that examine the intersection of inclusive language, reading, and EFL learning. Each study is summarized in terms of its objective, methodology, results, and relation to the present investigation.

#### **2.7.1 Tibblin, Gyax, Van De Weijer, and Granfeldt (2026)**

**Objective:** To investigate, using eye-tracking, how French native speakers process gender-fair forms during natural reading. **Methodology:** Experimental eye-tracking study measuring fixation and re-reading times. **Results:** Gender-fair forms were recognized but harder to integrate at the discourse level, with processing cost modulated by attitude and exposure. **Relation:** Provides direct psycholinguistic evidence for the cognitive-load hypothesis tested in the present study, while highlighting attitude as a moderating variable.

### 2.7.2 Bordag, Opitz, and Berulava (2025)

**Objective:** To examine how L1 and L2 German readers retain content versus surface linguistic information. **Methodology:** Eye-tracking experiment with picture and sentence verification tasks. **Results:** L1 readers retained content information more strongly, whereas L2 readers showed enhanced retention of surface linguistic forms. **Relation:** Suggests that EFL readers attend closely to linguistic form, which may shape how inclusive structures are processed in the present sample.

### 2.7.3 Lange and Von Stockhausen (2025)

**Objective:** To synthesize research on factors shaping attitudes toward and use of gender-inclusive language. **Methodology:** Systematic literature review of 34 empirical studies. **Results:** Sexist beliefs consistently predicted negative attitudes; neither gender nor age were reliable predictors; use has risen with exposure and progressive norms. **Relation:** Frames the interpretation of the favorable attitudes observed in the present sample and supports the exposure hypothesis.

### 2.7.4 Yang and Zhang (2024)

**Objective:** To study Chinese EFL learners' awareness and use of English epicene pronouns and the gender inclusivity of grammar textbooks. **Methodology:** Mixed-methods design combining a learner survey with textbook content analysis. **Results:** A minority of learners used gender-neutral singular pronouns, while most still exhibited gender bias; textbooks largely lacked inclusive forms. **Relation:** Demonstrates the EFL-specific gap in inclusive-language awareness that the present study addresses in the Ecuadorian context.

### 2.7.5 Tarrayo (2023)

**Objective:** To explore EFL teachers' perspectives on integrating gender-fair language in Philippine higher education. **Methodology:** Qualitative study based on teacher interviews and reflective accounts. **Results:** Gender-fair language ensured inclusivity, promoted gender visibility, and challenged norms of gender asymmetry, though teachers reported integration challenges. **Relation:** Establishes the pedagogical relevance of inclusive language in EFL classrooms, complementing the learner-focused approach of the present study.

### 2.7.6 Chen et al. (2025)

**Objective:** To examine the role of inclusive and culturally responsive language testing for migrant and global EFL learners. **Methodology:** Theoretical-empirical analysis of assessment practices in English-mediated instruction. **Results:** Culturally and linguistically inclusive assessments allowed learners to demonstrate comprehension more accurately, reducing construct-irrelevant difficulty. **Relation:** Supports the design rationale of the present study's instruments and the interpretation of inclusive texts as access-enhancing.

### 2.7.7 Spinelli, Chevrot, and Varnet (2023)

**Objective:** To test the comprehension efficiency of different gender-fair language strategies.

**Methodology:** Experimental comparison of neutral and other gender-fair forms. **Results:** Neutral forms alone were not sufficient for fairness; different strategies produced different processing and fairness outcomes. **Relation:** Informs the selection and interpretation of the inclusive strategies used in the present study's reading texts.

### 2.7.8 Metruk, Kováčová, and Vojšovičová (2025)

**Objective:** To assess the impact of innovative reading comprehension strategies on the reading literacy of Slovak EFL learners. **Methodology:** Quasi-experimental intervention study. **Results:** Innovative strategies produced a large positive impact on EFL reading literacy and higher-level comprehension. **Relation:** Supports the present study's emphasis on the multiply determined nature of EFL comprehension and the role of instructional design.

### 2.7.9 Synthesis of Previous Studies

Across these studies, three patterns emerge. First, inclusive language can impose measurable processing costs (Tibblin et al., 2026; Spinelli et al., 2023), but these are strongly moderated by attitude and exposure (Lange & Von Stockhausen, 2025). Second, EFL learners exhibit distinctive sensitivity to linguistic form (Bordag et al., 2025; Yang & Zhang, 2024). Third, inclusive language carries pedagogical and access-related benefits that may offset its cognitive costs (Tarrayo, 2023; Chen et al., 2025; Metruk et al., 2025). The present study extends this literature by testing, in an under-researched Ecuadorian EFL context, whether inclusive language helps or hinders reading comprehension at the B1 level.

## CHAPTER III

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Approach

A **quantitative research methodology** was implemented in this study. It measures and analyzes the effects of inclusive language on EFL First Semester students' reading comprehension through the generation and analysis of numerical data via descriptive and inferential statistical procedures. Quantitative research emphasizes objective measurement and allows for comparison between conditions in order to identify potential causal associations between variables (Rana et al., 2021). This approach was chosen because the research problem is operationally definable in measurable performance outcomes, and the research hypothesis requires a statistical test of significance to be confirmed or rejected.

#### 3.2 Research Modality

The research modality used was **field research**, because data were gathered from participants in their natural educational setting a secondary-education classroom in Ecuador. As noted by Abuhamda et al. (2021), field research allows an investigator to collect data by measuring the actual events and experiences of individuals in their normal environment. Additionally, **bibliographic-documentary research** was employed to develop the theoretical framework of the study, using existing literature on inclusive language, reading comprehension, and EFL teaching and learning to guide the development of data collection instruments and the analysis of results (Grazziotin et al., 2022).

#### 3.3 Type of Research

The study was categorized as **explanatory and correlational**. It is explanatory because it investigates the relationship between the independent variable (linguistic type of reading material: inclusive vs. traditional) and the dependent variable (students' reading comprehension performance). Explanatory studies examine why and under what circumstances a phenomenon occurs, making them one of the highest-quality research types within educational research (Putri et al., 2025). The correlational dimension allows for examination of associations between reading performance and student attitudes toward inclusive language.

#### 3.4 Research Design

The design used was a **within-subjects comparative design with a single measurement point**. Each participant completed both inclusive and traditional language reading tasks, serving simultaneously as their own comparison unit. This design is appropriate in educational contexts where group equivalence cannot be assumed and random assignment to mutually exclusive groups is not feasible. Both conditions were administered in a single

session, with the order of text presentation counterbalanced across participants to control for order effects.

- **Inclusive Language Condition:** Three reading texts constructed with inclusive language elements (singular *they*, gender-neutral occupational nouns, avoidance of generic masculine forms).
- **Traditional Language Condition:** Two reading texts written using conventional English with generic masculine forms as the default.

### 3.5 Study Population and Sample

Participants were First Semester students at the **B1 lower-intermediate CEFR level**, enrolled in an First Semester Students EFL program. The sample comprised **N = 46 students** (36 female, 10 male). Given the relatively small and bounded accessible population, all available participants were included; no probability sampling procedure was applied (Abuhamda et al., 2021).

### 3.6 Operationalization of Variables

**Table 1.** Operationalization of Research Variables

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Operational Definition</b>	<b>Instrument / Measure</b>
<b>Independent Variable: Inclusive Language</b>	Texts with gender-neutral constructions: singular <i>they</i> , gender-neutral nouns, avoidance of generic masculine	Five reading passages (3 inclusive / 2 traditional); matched for length, vocabulary, syntactic complexity
<b>Dependent Variable: Reading Comprehension</b>	Ability to decode, integrate, infer and evaluate meaning from written English at CEFR B1 level	Part A battery: 50 pts (Literal /15, Inferential /15, True/False /20); validated by expert judgment
<b>Moderating Variable: Attitude toward IL</b>	Student disposition toward inclusive language across cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions	Part B Likert questionnaire (110 pts; 3 dimensions; 22 items)

*Note.* IL = Inclusive Language; CEFR = Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

### 3.7 Instruments

#### 3.7.1 Reading Texts

Five reading passages were purpose-built for this study. Texts 1, 3, and 5 used inclusive language constructions (singular *they*, gender-neutral nouns). Texts 2 and 4 used traditional language. All five texts were matched for approximate length, vocabulary level, and syntactic complexity. Equivalence was verified through expert judgment by two specialists in Applied Linguistics and EFL pedagogy.

#### 3.7.2 Reading Comprehension Battery: Part A

A **50-point reading comprehension battery** was administered, comprising three subscores: (a) Literal comprehension (/15), assessing explicitly stated information; (b) Inferential comprehension (/15), assessing the ability to derive interpretations from contextual clues; and (c) True/False evaluation (/20). Content validity and linguistic suitability were confirmed through expert judgment by specialists in applied linguistics (Chen et al., 2025).

#### 3.7.3 Attitude Questionnaire: Part B

A **110-point Likert-scale questionnaire** measured student attitudes toward inclusive language across three dimensions: Dimension 1 — Cognitive (/35), Dimension 2 — Affective (/40), and Dimension 3 — Behavioral (/35). Scores were classified as: Unfavorable (< 60), Neutral (60–76), Favorable (77–99), and Very Favorable (100–110). Construct validity and cultural fairness were prioritized in the instrument design (Sanford & Filik, 2007).

### 3.8 Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected during a single classroom session following this structure:

**Step 1: Demographics:** Participants completed a brief demographic form (name, year, gender, date).

**Step 2: Reading tasks (Part A):** Participants read the five texts in a counterbalanced order and answered 10 comprehension questions per text (50 total).

**Step 3: Attitude questionnaire (Part B):** Upon completing all reading tasks, participants completed the 22-item attitude questionnaire.

Data were digitized into a structured spreadsheet for statistical analysis. All identifying information was treated confidentially.

### 3.9 Data Analysis

The following statistical procedures were employed:

Descriptive statistics: Mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) were calculated for all variables. Performance levels were classified using pre-established rubric thresholds.

Paired-samples t-test: Used to compare mean scores on inclusive vs. traditional language texts for the same participants ( $\alpha = .05$ ).

Wilcoxon signed-rank test: Applied as a non-parametric confirmatory test, robust to distributional assumptions.

Effect size: Cohen's  $d$  was calculated to assess practical significance (small = 0.20; medium = 0.50; large = 0.80; Cohen, 1988).

Pearson and Spearman correlations: Used to examine the bivariate relationship between Part A (reading comprehension) and Part B (attitude).

All analyses were performed in Python using the *scipy* and *numpy* libraries.

## CHAPTER IV

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 Overview

This chapter presents the statistical results obtained from 46 First Semester EFL students at the B1 level in Ecuador. Results are organized around: (1) descriptive statistics for all variables, (2) reading comprehension performance addressing Specific Objective 2, (3) comparative analysis addressing Specific Objective 3 and the research hypothesis, (4) attitude distribution and dimensional analysis, and (5) an extended discussion integrating findings with current theoretical and empirical literature.

#### 4.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for all variables. The reading comprehension battery (Part A) yielded a mean of  $M = 41.57$  ( $SD = 6.75$ ) out of 50 (83.1%). The inclusive language subtest means ( $M = 8.75$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ) exceeded the traditional language subtest mean ( $M = 7.66$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ), both out of 10. The attitude questionnaire (Part B) produced a mean of  $M = 81.02$  ( $SD = 13.88$ ) out of 110, corresponding to the "Favorable" classification.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for Reading Comprehension and Attitude Measures ( $N = 46$ )

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Part A Total (/50)	4 6	41.57	6.75	22	50
Literal subscore (/15)	4 6	20.43	3.68	11	25
Inferential subscore (/15)	4 6	21.13	3.35	12	25
True/False subscore (/20)	4 6	16.39	3.04	7	20
Inclusive Language Avg (/10)	4 6	8.75	1.46	4.3 3	10
Traditiona l Language Avg (/10)	4 6	7.66	1.53	4.5 0	10

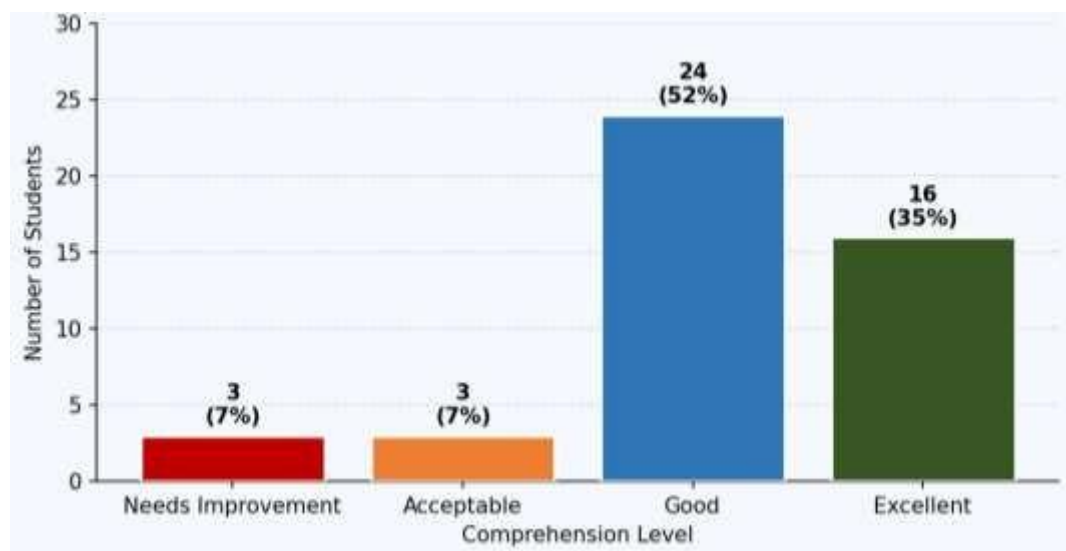
<b>Part B Total (/110)</b>	4 6	81.02	13.8 8	48	106
<b>Dimension 1: Cognitive (/35)</b>	4 6	27.28	4.64	15	35
<b>Dimension 2: Affective (/40)</b>	4 6	28.26	5.69	12	40
<b>Dimension 3: Behaviora l (/35)</b>	4 6	25.48	5.64	12	35

Note. SD = Standard Deviation. Part A maximum = 50; Part B maximum = 110.

### 4.3 Reading Comprehension Performance (Specific Objective 2)

#### 4.3.1 Performance Levels

Figure 1 shows the distribution of reading comprehension levels. The majority performed at the "Good" level (n = 24; 52.2%), followed by "Excellent" (n = 16; 34.8%). Only 6 students (13.0%) fell below "Good." These results confirm that the sample possessed adequate reading competency as a baseline, ruling out floor-effect confounds.



**Figure 1.** *Distribution of Reading Comprehension Performance Levels (Part A, N = 46).*

### 4.3.2 Subscores

The Inferential subscore was highest ( $M = 21.13/25$ ; 84.5%), followed by Literal ( $M = 20.43/25$ ; 81.7%) and True/False ( $M = 16.39/20$ ; 82.0%). Balanced performance across all three dimensions indicates that students engaged with texts at multiple cognitive levels, consistent with B1 proficiency.

## 4.4 Comparative Analysis: Inclusive vs. Traditional Language (Specific Objective 3)

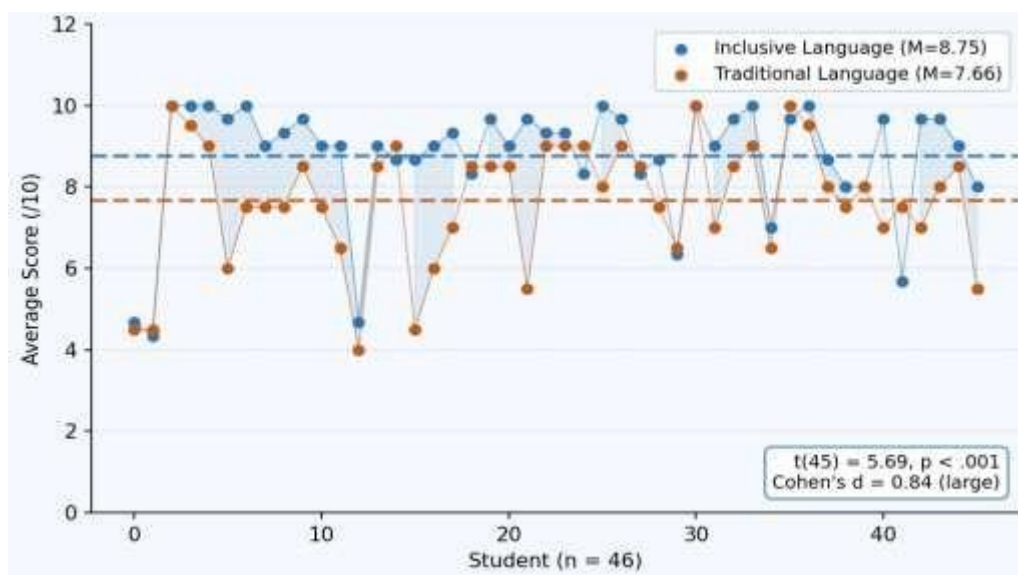
### 4.4.1 Paired-Samples t-Test

A paired-samples t-test compared inclusive language text scores (Texts 1, 3, 5) versus traditional text scores (Texts 2, 4). Contrary to  $H_1$ , students scored significantly higher on inclusive language texts ( $M = 8.75$ ) than on traditional texts ( $M = 7.66$ ),  $t(45) = 5.69$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.84$  (large effect). The Wilcoxon signed-rank test confirmed the result ( $W = 76$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Accordingly,  $H_0$  is rejected, but the direction of the effect does not support  $H_1$ .

**Table 3.** Paired-Samples t-Test: Inclusive vs. Traditional Language ( $N = 46$ )

Comparison	t(45)	p-value	Cohen's d	Wilcoxon p
Inclusive vs. Traditional Language	5.69	$< .001^{***}$	0.84 (large)	$< .001^{***}$

Note.  $df = 45$ .  $*** p < .001$ . Cohen's  $d$ : 0.20 small, 0.50 medium, 0.80 large (Cohen, 1988).



**Figure 2.** Individual Student Scores: Inclusive vs. Traditional Language Texts. Dashed lines = group means.  $t(45) = 5.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.84$ .

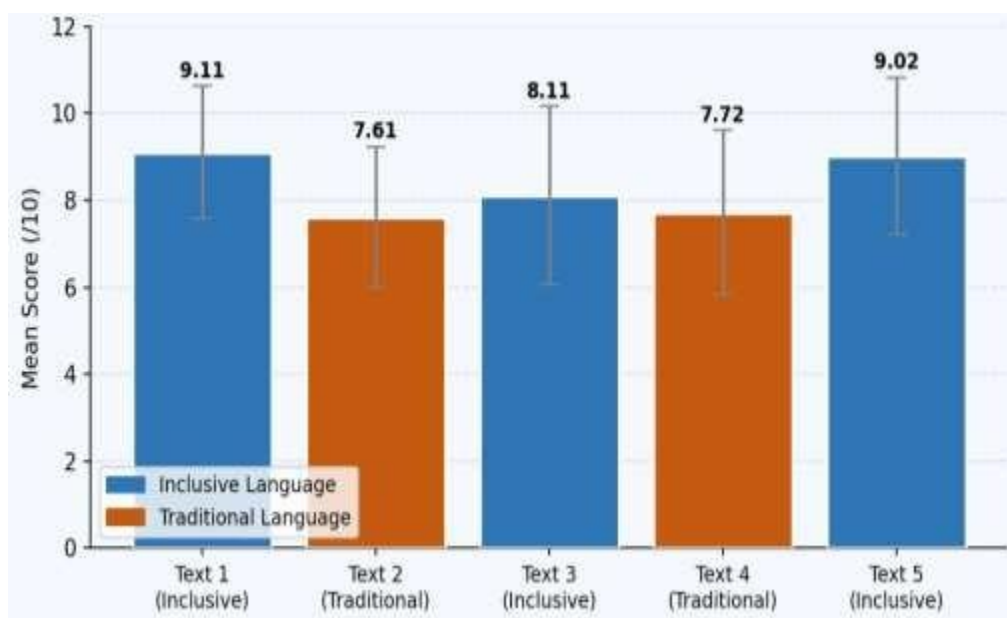
#### 4.4.2 Performance by Individual Text

Inclusive texts (T1: M = 9.11; T3: M = 8.11; T5: M = 9.02) consistently outperformed traditional texts (T2: M = 7.61; T4: M = 7.72). Variability was highest for Text 3 (SD = 2.05), suggesting greater individual differences when processing that inclusive passage.

**Table 4.** Descriptive Statistics by Individual Text (N = 46)

Text	Language Type	Mean (/10)	SD	Min	Max
Text 1	Inclusive	9.11	1.52	5	10
Text 2	Traditional	7.61	1.63	4	10
Text 3	Inclusive	8.11	2.05	1	10
Text 4	Traditional	7.72	1.89	3	10
Text 5	Inclusive	9.02	1.81	2	10

*Note.* All texts scored out of 10.



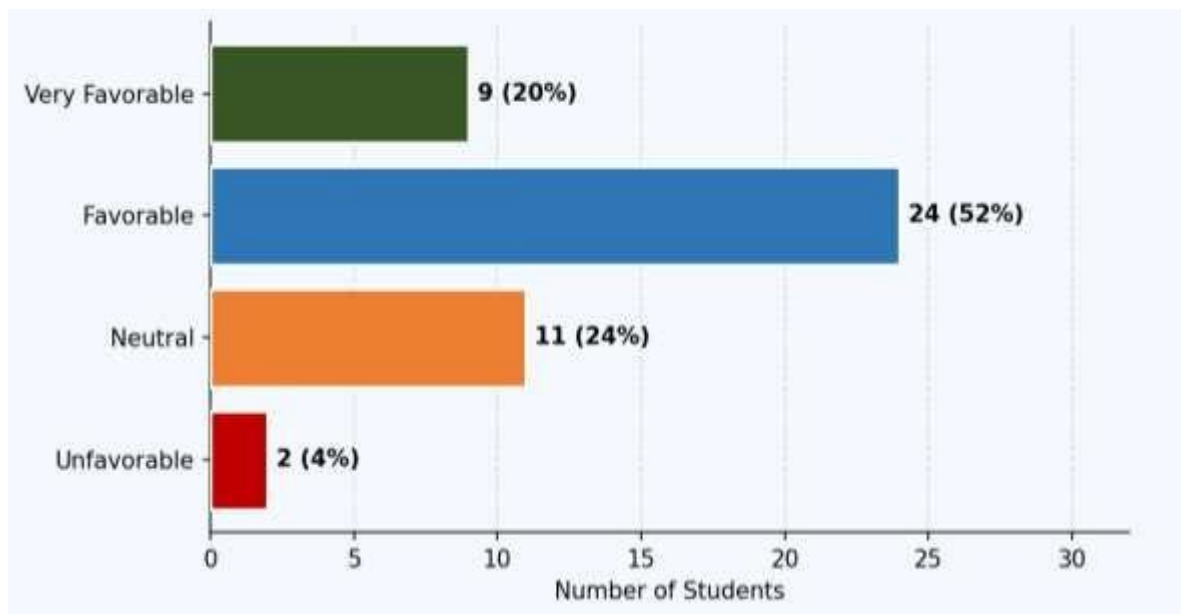
**Figure 3.** Mean Scores ( $\pm 1$  SD) by Text. Blue = Inclusive Language; Orange = Traditional Language.

#### 4.5 Attitude toward Inclusive Language (Part B)

Table 5 and Figure 4 present attitude distribution. A combined **71.7%** of students held Favorable or Very Favorable attitudes; only 2 students (4.3%) were Unfavorable. This predominant acceptance constitutes an important contextual variable.

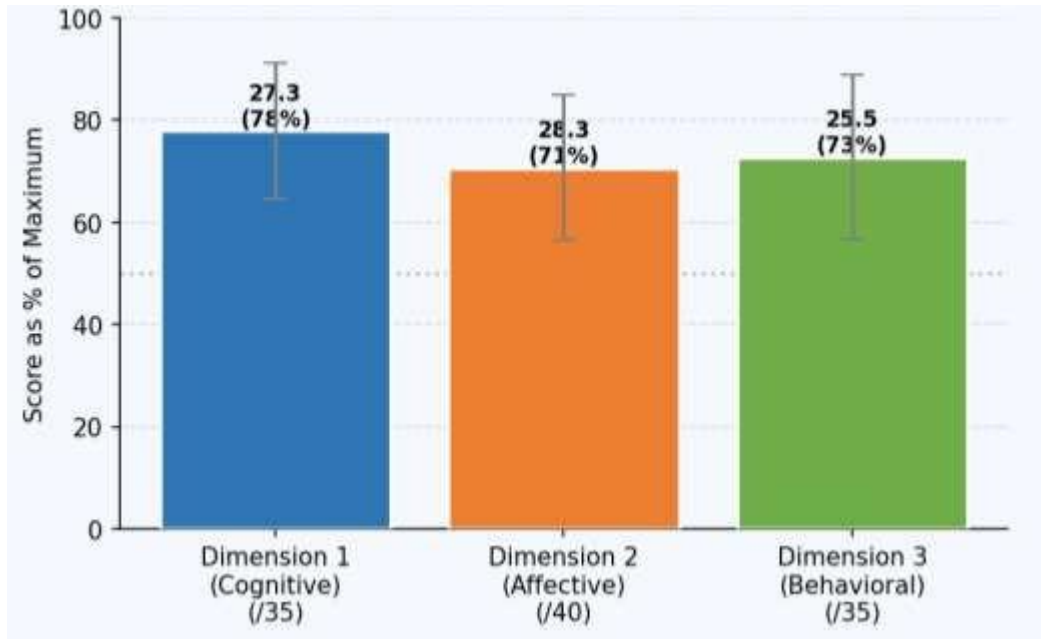
**Table 5.** Distribution of Attitude Levels toward Inclusive Language (Part B, N = 46)

Attitude Level	n	%	Score Range (/110)	Interpretation
Unfavorable	2	4.3	48–59	Low acceptance
Neutral	11	23.9	60–76	Moderate acceptance
Favorable	24	52.2	77–99	High acceptance
Very Favorable	9	19.6	100–106	Very high acceptance
<b>Total</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>48–106</b>	—



**Figure 4.** Distribution of Attitude Levels toward Inclusive Language (Part B, N = 46).

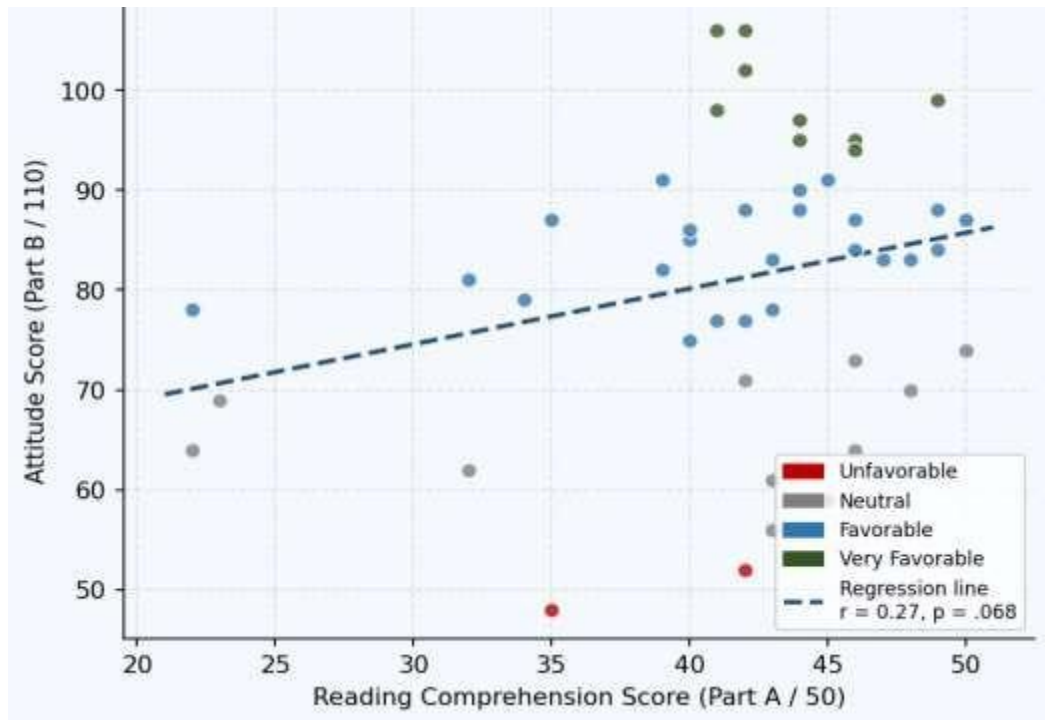
Figure 5 shows Part B dimension scores as percentage of maximum. Dimension 1 (Cognitive) was highest (77.9%), followed by Dimension 3 (Behavioral; 72.8%) and Dimension 2 (Affective; 70.7%), indicating that students' intellectual endorsement of inclusive language exceeded their affective and behavioral adoption consistent with the awareness-use gap documented by Lange and Von Stockhausen (2025).



**Figure 5.** Part B Attitude Scores by Dimension (% of Maximum,  $\pm 1$  SD). D1 = Cognitive, D2 = Affective, D3 = Behavioral.

#### 4.6 Correlation: Reading Comprehension and Attitude

Pearson  $r = 0.27$  ( $p = .068$ ) and Spearman  $\rho = 0.20$  ( $p = .172$ ) between Part A and Part B totals were both non-significant at  $\alpha = .05$ . Figure 6 visualizes the bivariate relationship.



**Figure 6.** Reading Comprehension (Part A) vs. Attitude toward Inclusive Language (Part B). Regression:  $r = .27$ ,  $p = .068$  (ns).

## 4.7 Hypothesis Testing Summary

**H<sub>0</sub>:** No significant difference between inclusive and traditional language conditions. **REJECTED**,  $t(45) = 5.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.84$ .

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Inclusive language negatively affects comprehension due to cognitive load. **NOT SUPPORTED**, the significant effect is in the opposite direction.

## 4.8 Discussion

The present findings yield three substantive contributions to the literature on inclusive language and EFL reading comprehension, each discussed below in relation to verified empirical sources from the last five years.

### 4.8.1 Superior Performance on Inclusive Language Texts

The most striking finding is that B1-level EFL students demonstrated significantly higher reading comprehension on inclusive texts ( $M = 8.75$  vs.  $M = 7.66$ ), with a large effect size ( $d = 0.84$ ). This directly contradicts the strict cognitive load prediction that novel morphological forms increase extraneous processing demands and thereby impair comprehension (Sweller, 2023; Clark & Kimmons, 2023).

Several explanations are supported by recent verified literature. First, Allen (2025) demonstrated that when students from diverse backgrounds read materials incorporating inclusive language, positive emotional effects reduced sense of alienation and increased motivation, can indirectly improve comprehension by freeing cognitive resources from identity-threat processing. Given that 71.7% of this sample held favorable or very favorable attitudes, the affective facilitation mechanism is a plausible explanation for the performance advantage.

Second, Lange and Von Stockhausen (2025), in their synthesis of 34 empirical studies, found that *exposure to inclusive language is a key driver of attitude and processing ease*, and that *progressive institutional contexts are linked to greater support and lower resistance*. Ecuador's evolving national curriculum and students' exposure to equity-oriented content may have primed this sample for more fluent processing of inclusive forms.

Third, Tibblin et al. (2026), using eye-tracking methodology with French readers, demonstrated that gender-fair forms are *recognized but harder to integrate* at the discourse level but that this integration difficulty is primarily observed in ideologically resistant participants. In a sample where resistance is low, integration costs may be reduced or absent, resulting in net-zero or even positive comprehension effects through identity-affirmative mechanisms.

### 4.8.2 L2 Surface-Form Processing and Inclusive Language

Bordag et al. (2025) reported that L2 readers devote greater attentional resources to *surface linguistic form* compared to L1 readers. This asymmetric retention pattern, documented with German L1/L2 participants, has direct implications for the present EFL Ecuadorian context: B1-level students who allocate heightened attention to linguistic structure may process inclusive forms such as singular *they* or gender-neutral nouns, as salient and distinctive features that strengthen memory encoding rather than disrupting comprehension.

Wang et al. (2025) further found that bilingual proficiency mediates word recall and recognition efficiency, suggesting that more proficient B1 learners can more readily accommodate novel forms. Additionally, Metruk et al. (2025) demonstrated that EFL students trained with innovative reading strategies show improved comprehension at inferential and critical levels, suggesting that this sample's strong inferential performance (84.5%) may have provided a cognitive buffer against any processing cost from inclusive forms.

#### **4.8.3 Attitude Does Not Directly Predict Performance**

The non-significant Pearson correlation ( $r = .27$ ,  $p = .068$ ) indicates that attitude toward inclusive language does not strongly predict reading comprehension performance. This is consistent with Lange and Von Stockhausen (2025), who note that multiple interacting factors shape both attitudes and performance outcomes, and that *neither gender nor age per se are reliable predictors* of inclusive language use.

These results confirm that reading comprehension in EFL contexts is multiply determined: lexical breadth, syntactic knowledge, background knowledge, and metacognitive strategy use play more decisive roles than attitudinal orientation (Ghazzoul, 2023; Hezam et al., 2022; Metruk et al., 2025). The higher Cognitive dimension score relative to the Affective and Behavioral dimensions echoes Lange and Von Stockhausen's (2025) finding that individuals who intellectually endorse inclusive language may still face habituated cognitive resistance in production contexts. In a reading context, this dissociation may have limited impact, further explaining the non-predictive role of attitude on comprehension outcomes.

Chen et al. (2025) provide additional context: culturally responsive and linguistically equitable assessments allow EFL students to demonstrate their true comprehension ability, suggesting that the inclusive texts in this study may have functioned not merely as novel linguistic input but as identity-affirming materials that reduced construct-irrelevant difficulty for a predominantly female, equity-oriented sample.

#### **4.8.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions**

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the sample size ( $N = 46$ ) limits statistical power for correlation analyses. Second, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; the within-subjects comparison controls for ability differences but does not isolate the text-type variable from text-specific topic effects. Third, individual text characteristics may not be perfectly equated despite expert review. Fourth, the absence of physiological measures (e.g., eye-tracking, reaction time) limits understanding of moment-by-moment processing dynamics.

Future research should employ larger stratified samples across proficiency levels and regions, longitudinal pre-test/post-test designs, and psycholinguistic process measures. Studies examining the role of prior exposure and training in inclusive language consistent with the recommendations of Lange and Von Stockhausen (2025) would be particularly valuable for informing curriculum design and language policy in Ecuadorian context.

## CHAPTER V

### 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 5.1 Conclusions

This study analyzed how the use of inclusive language in English influences reading comprehension among First Semester EFL students at B1 level in Ecuador. The evidence demonstrates that inclusive language did **not** negatively affect reading comprehension in this sample. On the contrary, students performed significantly better on inclusive texts ( $M = 8.75/10$ ) than on traditional texts ( $M = 7.66/10$ ),  $t(45) = 5.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.84$ . This finding challenges the cognitive load-based hypothesis and highlights the mediating role of attitudinal context and prior exposure.

The theoretical-contextual framework confirmed that inclusive language is a complex sociolinguistic phenomenon grounded in social constructionist theory (Jovanovic, 2021), Linguistic Relativity (Maruashvili, 2024), and Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 2023). Current research shows that while inclusive forms theoretically carry processing costs under conditions of unfamiliarity and ideological resistance (Tibblin et al., 2026), favorable attitudinal environments and increasing normative exposure can neutralize or reverse those costs (Lange & Von Stockhausen, 2025).

Students demonstrated adequate to high reading comprehension overall ( $M = 41.57/50$ ; 83.1%), with 87.0% performing at the "Good" or "Excellent" level. Inferential comprehension was the strongest dimension (84.5%), confirming that participants could engage with texts beyond surface decoding.

Comparison of conditions confirmed a systematic, statistically significant advantage for inclusive language texts across all three inclusive passages relative to traditional texts. The attitude questionnaire revealed that 71.7% of students held favorable or very favorable dispositions a contextual factor that likely modulated cognitive load dynamics, as supported by Allen (2025) and Lange and Von Stockhausen (2025).

## 5.2 Recommendations

Given that students demonstrated superior performance with inclusive language texts and predominantly favorable attitudes, EFL curriculum designers should systematically integrate inclusive language constructions into reading materials. Early and consistent exposure reduces novelty-driven processing costs (Lange & Von Stockhausen, 2025).

Teacher training programs should include explicit professional development on the linguistic structure and pedagogical implications of inclusive language (Bradley, 2024). Since teachers are the primary model for students' normative language representations, their confident and natural use of inclusive forms in the classroom is essential.

The non-significant correlation ( $r = .27$ ,  $p = .068$ ) confirms that attitude alone does not determine comprehension outcomes. Future studies should measure attitude as a moderating variable, control prior inclusive language exposure, and use stratified designs to disentangle attitudinal from proficiency-related effects (Lange & Von Stockhausen, 2025).

Longitudinal designs incorporating pre-test/post-test comparisons, larger samples stratified by proficiency level and region, and process measures such as eye-tracking are needed to establish causal inference and generalize findings across Ecuadorian EFL contexts. Such research would contribute directly to evidence-based national language policy.

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## ANNEXES

### Annex 1. Reading Comprehension Assessment Instrument

#### PART A: Reading Comprehension Test

*Instructions: Read each text carefully. Then answer the questions that follow. For multiple-choice questions, circle the letter of the best answer. For True/False questions, circle T or F.*

**Scoring: Multiple Choice = 1 point each | True/False = 1 point each | Maximum per text = 10 points**

#### TEXT 1 Inclusive Language

##### Equality in the Classroom

Every student has the right to choose their own path after finishing school. Some of them decide to pursue higher education, while others prefer to enter the workforce directly. Teachers and counselors encourage each student to reflect on their strengths and interests. A student who feels represented in the classroom is more likely to participate actively and develop confidence in their abilities. Schools that use inclusive language create environments where everyone regardless of gender, background, or ability feels welcomed and valued. When a teacher addresses their students with respectful and neutral language, they contribute to a more equitable and supportive learning community. Research suggests that students who identify with the characters or subjects in a text tend to engage more deeply with the content, improving both comprehension and retention.

#### Literal Comprehension

<b>1. According to the text, what do teachers and counselors encourage students to do?</b>	
a) Choose a university immediately	b) Reflect on their strengths and interests
c) Avoid entering the workforce	d) Focus only on academic subjects

<b>2. What pronoun does the text use to refer to a student without specifying gender?</b>	
a) He / his	b) She / her
c) They / their	d) It / its

<b>3. According to the text, inclusive schools create environments where everyone feels:</b>	
a) Stressed and pressured	b) Confused about their future

c) Welcomed and valued	d) Obligated to attend university
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**Inferential Comprehension**

<b>4.</b> What can be inferred about a student who does NOT feel represented in the classroom?	
a) They will always succeed academically	b) They may participate less and feel less confident
c) They prefer to work individually	d) They have more career options

<b>5.</b> Why might the use of inclusive language improve reading comprehension according to the text?	
a) Because it makes texts longer	b) Because students identify more with the content
c) Because it uses more advanced vocabulary	d) Because it avoids grammar rules

<b>6.</b> The phrase 'equitable and supportive learning community' most likely means:	
a) A community where only top students benefit	b) A fair environment where all students are supported
c) A school with expensive technology	d) A place where teachers make all decisions

**True / False**

<b>7.</b> The text states that only students with high grades can choose their own path after school.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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<b>8.</b> According to the text, teachers who use respectful language contribute to a more equitable community.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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<b>9.</b> The text suggests that inclusive language has no effect on student engagement.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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<b>10.</b> Research mentioned in the text links student identification with a text to better comprehension and retention.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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## **TEXT 2 Traditional Language**

### **Equality in the Classroom**

Every student has the right to choose his own path after finishing school. Some of them decide to pursue higher education, while others prefer to enter the workforce directly. Teachers and counselors encourage each student to reflect on his strengths and interests. A student who feels represented in the classroom is more likely to participate actively and develop confidence in his abilities. Schools that use clear and direct language create environments where everyone regardless of gender, background, or ability feels welcomed and valued. When a teacher addresses his students with respectful and consistent language, he contributes to a more equitable and supportive learning community. Research suggests that students who identify with the characters or subjects in a text tend to engage more deeply with the content, improving both comprehension and retention.

### **Literal Comprehension**

**11.** According to this text, what do teachers and counselors encourage each student to do?

- |                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| a) Choose a career before graduating | b) Reflect on his strengths and interests |
| c) Only focus on science subjects    | d) Avoid asking for guidance              |

**12.** What pronoun is used in this text to refer to a teacher?

- |                 |              |
|-----------------|--------------|
| a) They / their | b) She / her |
| c) He / his     | d) It / its  |

**13.** According to this text, what type of language do schools use to create welcoming environments?

- |  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| a) Inclusive and gender-neutral language | b) Clear and direct language      |
| c) Academic and formal language          | d) Simple and repetitive language |

### **Inferential Comprehension**

**14.** A female student reading this text might feel that the language is:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| a) Fully representative of her experience | b) Directed primarily at male students |
| c) Too complex to understand              | d) Written in a foreign language       |

<b>15.</b> What effect might the repeated use of 'he/his' have on a student who does not identify as male?	
a) It makes the text easier to read	b) It may reduce their sense of inclusion
c) It improves grammar awareness	d) It has no effect whatsoever

<b>16.</b> Compared to Text 1, this text communicates a similar message but differs mainly in:	
a) The topic it addresses	b) The pronouns used to refer to students and teachers
c) The conclusions about education	d) The number of ideas presented

**True / False**

<b>17.</b> In Text 2, the pronoun 'his' is used generically to refer to any student, regardless of gender.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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<b>18.</b> Text 2 states that language in the classroom has no impact on student participation.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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<b>19.</b> The main idea of Text 2 is identical to the main idea of Text 1.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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<b>20.</b> Both texts agree that students who identify with the content of a text tend to comprehend it better.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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### TEXT 3 Inclusive Language

#### Career Choices and Identity

Young people today face a wide range of career possibilities. Whether someone wants to become an engineer, a nurse, an artist, or an entrepreneur, they deserve equal encouragement and support from their teachers and family. Counselors play a key role in helping students discover their potential, regardless of who they are. When career guidance materials use gender-neutral language, every student regardless of their identity can see themselves in the options presented. A student who reads about 'a doctor and their patients' rather than 'a doctor and his patients' is more likely to feel that the profession is open to them. The language we use shapes not only how we think about ourselves, but also what we believe is possible.

#### Literal Comprehension

21. According to the text, who plays a key role in helping students discover their potential?

a) Parents and siblings

b) Counselors and teachers

c) Government officials

d) University professors

22. What example does the text use to illustrate inclusive language in career guidance?

a) 'A nurse and his patients'

b) 'A doctor and his patients'

c) 'A doctor and their patients'

d) 'A teacher and her students'

23. According to the text, what language do we use shape?

a) The school's budget and resources

b) How we think about ourselves and what we believe is possible

c) The government's education policies

d) The difficulty of academic subjects

#### Inferential Comprehension

24. What does the text imply about career guidance materials that use gendered language?

a) They are more accurate and professional

b) They may exclude some students from seeing themselves in certain careers

c) They are preferred by most teachers

d) They have no effect on students' decisions

<b>25.</b> The phrase 'the language we use shapes what we believe is possible' suggests that:	
a) Language is only important for writers	b) Language influences our perception of opportunities
c) Students should learn more languages	d) Vocabulary tests improve career prospects

<b>26.</b> Which statement best summarizes the main argument of this text?	
a) Career guidance should focus only on academic subjects	b) Inclusive language in career materials helps all students see themselves in various professions
c) Gender-neutral language is too complex for students	d) Students should choose careers based on tradition

**True / False**

<b>27.</b> The text argues that only certain students deserve encouragement in their career choices.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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<b>28.</b> The text states that a student is more likely to feel a profession is open to them when gender-neutral language is used.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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<b>29.</b> According to the text, inclusive language has no connection to how students perceive their opportunities.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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<b>30.</b> The text mentions that language affects not only self-perception but also beliefs about what is achievable.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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## TEXT 4 Traditional Language

### Career Choices and Identity

Young people today face a wide range of career possibilities. Whether a man wants to become an engineer or a woman wants to become a nurse, he or she deserves equal encouragement and support from his or her teachers and family. Counselors play a key role in helping each student discover his or her potential. When career guidance materials use gender-specific language, students can see themselves reflected in the roles assigned to their gender. A student who reads about 'a doctor and his patients' may associate the medical profession with male professionals. The language he or she encounters in educational settings influences how he or she thinks about future roles and responsibilities.

### Literal Comprehension

31. According to this text, who plays a key role in helping students discover their potential?

a) Parents and siblings

b) Counselors

c) Government officials

d) University professors

32. What pronoun combination does this text use to refer to a student?

a) They / their

b) She / her only

c) He or she / his or her

d) It / its

33. What example does this text use involving a medical professional?

a) 'A nurse and their patients'

b) 'A doctor and his patients'

c) 'A doctor and her patients'

d) 'A teacher and their students'

### Inferential Comprehension

34. What does the text imply a student might associate the medical profession with after reading 'a doctor and his patients'?

a) Female professionals

b) Non-binary professionals

c) Male professionals

d) International professionals

35. Compared to Text 3, what is the main difference in language use?

a) Text 4 avoids mentioning careers

b) Text 4 uses gender-specific pronouns while Text 3 uses gender-neutral ones

c) Text 3 focuses only on female students	d) Text 4 uses more complex vocabulary
---	--

<b>36.</b> What effect might the language used in Text 4 have on a student who does not fit the traditional gender binary?	
a) It would make the text easier to understand	b) It might make them feel excluded from certain career options
c) It would motivate them to study harder	d) It has no effect on career perceptions

**True / False**

<b>37.</b> Text 4 uses gender-neutral pronouns throughout to refer to all students.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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<b>38.</b> According to Text 4, the language encountered in educational settings influences how students think about future roles.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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<b>39.</b> The main topic of Text 4 is identical to the main topic of Text 3.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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<b>40.</b> Text 4 implies that associating professions with specific genders may limit how students perceive career opportunities.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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## TEXT 5 Inclusive Language

### Language and Belonging in Schools

The words we use in the classroom carry significant meaning. When teachers refer to 'all students' and use pronouns like 'they' to describe individuals, they signal that every person in the room is acknowledged and valued. A school that promotes inclusive communication fosters a sense of belonging for all learners those who identify as male, female, non-binary, or any other identity. Studies in educational linguistics suggest that students who feel seen through language demonstrate higher levels of engagement, better academic performance, and greater emotional well-being. Language is not merely a tool for transmitting information; it is a powerful force that shapes identity, builds community, and either opens or closes doors of opportunity. When institutions commit to using language that includes everyone, they take a meaningful step toward genuine educational equity.

### Literal Comprehension

41. According to the text, what do schools that promote inclusive communication foster?

a) Academic competition among students

b) A sense of belonging for all learners

c) A focus on standardized testing

d) Strict discipline policies

42. What does the text say language is, beyond a tool for transmitting information?

a) A set of grammar rules

b) A commercial product

c) A powerful force that shapes identity and builds community

d) A subject studied only in literature class

43. According to studies mentioned in the text, students who feel seen through language demonstrate:

a) Lower academic performance

b) Higher engagement, better performance, and greater well-being

c) Increased test anxiety

d) Less need for teacher support

### Inferential Comprehension

44. The phrase 'language either opens or closes doors of opportunity' most likely means:

a) Language determines school entrance requirements

b) The way we speak can expand or limit people's perceived possibilities

c) Students must speak multiple languages to succeed	d) Grammar mistakes prevent career advancement
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<b>45.</b> What does the text imply about institutions that do not use inclusive language?	
a) They are more academically rigorous	b) They may fail to provide genuine educational equity
c) They produce better academic results	d) They follow international education standards

<b>46.</b> Based on all five texts, which conclusion is best supported?	
a) Traditional language is always clearer than inclusive language	b) Inclusive language positively influences student engagement and comprehension
c) Students prefer traditional texts for academic tasks	d) The type of pronoun used does not affect reading comprehension

**True / False**

<b>47.</b> The text states that inclusive language benefits only students who identify as non-binary.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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<b>48.</b> According to the text, using 'they' to describe individuals signals that every person is acknowledged.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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<b>49.</b> The text claims that language plays no role in shaping identity or building community.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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<b>50.</b> The text suggests that institutional commitment to inclusive language is a step toward educational equity.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
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## PART B: Perception Questionnaire Likert Scale

*Instructions: Rate each statement from 1 to 5 according to your personal experience and opinion. There are no right or wrong answers. Please respond as honestly as possible.*

<b>1 Strongly disagree</b>	<b>2 Disagree</b>	<b>3 Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>4 Agree</b>	<b>5 Strongly agree</b>
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### Dimension I Perception of inclusive language in educational texts (O.E. 1 & 2)

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1. When a text uses 'they/their' instead of 'he/his,' it is easier for me to feel included.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. I notice when a text uses language that includes all genders.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Reading texts with inclusive language makes me feel more motivated to read.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. I find it easier to understand texts that use neutral pronouns.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. I feel that educational texts in English should represent all students, regardless of gender.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. I pay attention to the pronouns used in English reading texts.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. I believe that inclusive language in texts makes them feel more modern and relevant.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Dimension II Reading comprehension and language type (O.E. 2 & 3)**

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
8. I understand English texts better when they use inclusive language.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. The type of pronoun used in a text does not affect my reading comprehension. (*)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. When a text exclusively uses 'he/his' to refer to all students, I feel it is incomplete.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. I pay more attention to a text that uses language that represents everyone.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. I find it distracting when a text uses only masculine pronouns to refer to all students.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
13. Texts with inclusive language are just as easy to understand as traditional texts.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
14. I feel more engaged with reading tasks when the text uses language I can identify with.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
15. Seeing myself represented in a text helps me focus and understand the content better.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Dimension III Attitudes toward inclusive language in the classroom (O.E. 1 &**

3)

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
16. I believe teachers should use inclusive language in English class materials.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
17. Using inclusive language in the classroom makes the environment feel safer for me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
<b>18.</b> I have noticed teachers using inclusive language during English lessons.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>19.</b> I think the language used in school texts influences how much I identify with the content.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>20.</b> I feel that my school promotes the use of inclusive language in the classroom.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>21.</b> I would prefer English textbooks that use gender-neutral language.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>22.</b> I think all students benefit when schools use inclusive language, regardless of their gender identity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*(\*) Item 9 is reverse scored: a response of 1 indicates the highest level of agreement with the impact of language on comprehension.*

## Annex 2. Expert Validation Certificate – Instruments

### EXPERT VALIDATION FORM — DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT

Effects of Inclusive Language on Reading Comprehension - Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo

Expert name: Mónica Kripkaya Garmas Alvarado  
 Academic degree: Bachelor of Education in  
 Specialization / Area: English Language Teaching  
 Institution: UNACH

INSTRUCTIONS: For each section, rate the four criteria from 1 to 4. 1 = Does not meet - 2 = Low - 3 = Moderate - 4 = High. Criteria: Clarity, Coherence, Relevance, Sufficiency.

#### PART A — READING COMPREHENSION TEST (50 items, 5 texts)

#	Dimension / Component	Clarity	Coherence	Relevance	Sufficiency
1	Text 1 (Inclusive) — 10 items (Literal / Inferential / Critical)	4	4	4	4
2	Text 2 (Traditional) — 10 items (Literal / Inferential / Critical)	4	4	4	4
3	Text 3 (Inclusive) — 10 items (Literal / Inferential / Critical)	4	4	4	4
4	Text 4 (Traditional) — 10 items (Literal / Inferential / Critical)	4	4	4	4
5	Text 5 (Inclusive) — 10 items (Literal / Inferential / Critical)	4	4	4	4

#### PART B — ATTITUDE QUESTIONNAIRE (22 items, 3 dimensions)

#	Dimension / Component	Clarity	Coherence	Relevance	Sufficiency
1	Dimension 1 — Cognitive attitudes (7 items / 35 pts)	4	4	4	4
2	Dimension 2 — Affective attitudes (9 items / 40 pts)	4	4	4	4
3	Dimension 3 — Behavioral intentions (7 items / 35 pts)	4	4	4	4

#### OVERALL VERDICT (mark one with an X)

- Applicable  
 Applicable with modifications  
 Not applicable

Observations / Recommendations:

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Mónica Kripkaya Garmas Alvarado  
 Signature / Stamp

Item's V will be computed from these ratings:  $V = \sum (v_i) / n$ . Validity threshold:  $V \geq 0.85$

## EXPERT VALIDATION FORM — DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT

*Effects of Inclusive Language on Reading Comprehension - Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo*

Expert name: Mg. Georgette Carolina Marín Silva  
 Academic degree: Master - PhD Candidate  
 Specialization / Area: English  
 Institution: Escuela Superior Politécnica de Chimborazo

INSTRUCTIONS: For each section, rate the four criteria from 1 to 4: 1 = Does not meet - 2 = Low - 3 = Moderate - 4 = High. Criteria: Clarity, Coherence, Relevance, Sufficiency.

### PART A — READING COMPREHENSION TEST (50 items, 5 texts)

#	Dimension / Component	Clarity	Coherence	Relevance	Sufficiency
1	Text 1 (Inclusive) — 10 items (Literal / Inferential / Critical)	4	4	4	4
2	Text 2 (Traditional) — 10 items (Literal / Inferential / Critical)	4	4	4	4
3	Text 3 (Inclusive) — 10 items (Literal / Inferential / Critical)	4	4	4	4
4	Text 4 (Traditional) — 10 items (Literal / Inferential / Critical)	4	4	4	4
5	Text 5 (Inclusive) — 10 items (Literal / Inferential / Critical)	4	4	4	4

### PART B — ATTITUDE QUESTIONNAIRE (22 items, 3 dimensions)

#	Dimension / Component	Clarity	Coherence	Relevance	Sufficiency
1	Dimension 1 — Cognitive attitudes (7 items / 35 pts)	4	4	4	4
2	Dimension 2 — Affective attitudes (8 items / 40 pts)	4	4	4	4
3	Dimension 3 — Behavioral intentions (7 items / 35 pts)	4	4	4	4

### OVERALL VERDICT (mark one with an X)

- Applicable  
 Applicable with modifications  
 Not applicable

Observations / Recommendations:

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Signature / Stamp

Aller's V will be computed from these ratings:  $V = \sum (r_i - 1) / (n - 1)$ . Validity threshold:  $V \geq 0.80$ .

## EXPERT VALIDATION FORM — DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT

Effects of Inclusive Language on Reading Comprehension - Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo

Expert name: Marcos Antonio Apolon Rojas  
 Academic degree: Master in Teaching English  
 Specialization / Area: English  
 Institution: UNACH

INSTRUCTIONS: For each section, rate the four criteria from 1 to 4. 1 = Does not meet - 2 = Low - 3 = Moderate - 4 = High. Criteria: Clarity, Coherence, Relevance, Sufficiency.

### PART A — READING COMPREHENSION TEST (50 items, 5 texts)

#	Dimension / Component	Clarity	Coherence	Relevance	Sufficiency
1	Text 1 (Inclusive) — 10 items (Literal / Inferential / Critical)	4	4	4	4
2	Text 2 (Traditional) — 10 items (Literal / Inferential / Critical)	4	4	4	4
3	Text 3 (Inclusive) — 10 items (Literal / Inferential / Critical)	4	4	4	4
4	Text 4 (Traditional) — 10 items (Literal / Inferential / Critical)	4	4	4	4
5	Text 5 (Inclusive) — 10 items (Literal / Inferential / Critical)	4	4	4	4

### PART B — ATTITUDE QUESTIONNAIRE (22 items, 3 dimensions)

#	Dimension / Component	Clarity	Coherence	Relevance	Sufficiency
1	Dimension 1 — Cognitive attitudes (7 items / 35 pts)	4	4	4	4
2	Dimension 2 — Affective attitudes (8 items / 40 pts)	4	4	4	4
3	Dimension 3 — Behavioral intentions (7 items / 35 pts)	4	4	4	4

### OVERALL VERDICT (mark one with an X)

- Applicable  
 Applicable with modifications  
 Not applicable

Observations / Recommendations:

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Signature / Stamp

Likert V will be computed from these ratings:  $V = 1 / (4 - 1)$ . Validity threshold:  $V > 0.80$ .

### **Annex 3. Link of the Instruments**

<https://gabrielquintanilla-app.github.io/english-reading-comprehension-assessment/>