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## Research Article

### Exploring the Adaptability of Foreign Special Education Teachers Working with Students with Special Needs in Columbia South Carolina

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#### ABSTRACT

Foreign teachers of students with special needs undergo the process of adaptation as they face different work dynamics. This phenomenological study aimed to explore the experiences of adaptation among foreign teachers in teaching learners with disabilities in South Carolina. Seven (7) foreign Special Education teachers teaching in South Carolina, who have participated in the interviews. Through thematic analysis, the study revealed themes to describe their lived experiences, views in working in the Special Education setting in South Carolina, and their adaptation to work. In terms of lived experiences, teachers described their experiences with themes such as: journeying through emotional and reflective realities of teaching; relationship building and collaboration; managing institutional demands and complex student needs; and adapting instruction and demonstrating pedagogical creativity. Foreign Special Education teachers viewed themselves of having global perspectives contribute to enriching the school community; and play the role of being the builder of inclusive, trusting, and culturally responsive educational spaces were also highlighted in the study. Findings also reveal that teachers adapt through instructional and professional adaptation; relational and collegial adaptation; and cultural integration and adjustment as ways on how they adapt to the teaching environment in the USA. The essence of foreign Special Education teachers' experiences is captured by resilience, ongoing process of transformation, adaptation, and cultural integration, highlighting their critical role in enriching inclusive school environments. These findings highlight the need for culturally responsive training, supportive leadership, and inclusive policies to empower foreign Special Education teachers in U.S. classrooms.

**Keywords:** *Special Education teacher, Foreign SPED teachers, Adaptation, Experiences, Cultural integration, Global perspectives, Inclusive*

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## Background

The teaching profession is increasingly global, requiring educators to adapt to technological advancements and societal shifts. Career adaptability is therefore essential for maintaining resilience in dynamic work environments (Chen et al., 2020). This is particularly true for foreign teachers, especially those in Special Education, who work with learners facing physical, cognitive, emotional, or developmental challenges (Tierney et al., 2023). While foreign teachers enrich classrooms with diverse perspectives and teaching methods, they also encounter significant challenges. Evens (2023) noted these difficulties, and Johnson (2020) found that some teachers felt unprepared to support students with learning disabilities. To succeed, foreign educators must navigate multicultural dynamics and foster culturally responsive teaching (Abacioglu et al., 2020), while also adjusting to local educational policies and administrative expectations, which can differ markedly from those in their home countries (Matterson, 2022).

This study on the adaptation of Special Education teachers aimed to investigate how foreign educators adjust to teaching in unfamiliar educational systems, particularly in addressing the needs of learners with disabilities. It sought to understand their experiences in navigating local policies, cultural expectations, and institutional practices that shape their professional roles. The study also aimed to identify the specific support mechanisms, training programs, and resources that facilitate their successful integration into foreign school environments. Ultimately, it aspired to promote inclusive and culturally responsive teaching practices, while contributing to the global discourse on Special Education in international settings.

Although existing literature has examined the experiences of foreign teachers, most studies, such as those by Komar et al. (2021) and Yi et al. (2020), focus on general education or cultural adaptation outside the U.S., overlooking the specific realities of foreign educators in Special Education. In South Carolina, many foreign teachers serve students with special needs, yet their adaptation experiences remain undocumented, revealing empirical, population, and contextual gaps. While Gomez-Lange

(2024) highlighted the challenges faced by Filipino SPED teachers in adapting to professional demands in the U.S., little is known about the factors that support or hinder their integration. Furthermore, the limited use of theoretical frameworks and the dominance of surface-level methodologies point to theoretical and methodological gaps. This study addresses these gaps by employing a phenomenological approach to explore and give voice to the adaptation journeys of foreign Special Education teachers.

## Method

### *Research Design*

The study employed a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design, which allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences. As noted by Creswell (2017), qualitative research, is used to investigate complex experiences, behaviors, and perspectives by focusing on how; and why participants behave in certain ways rather than quantifying these actions (Korstjens & Moser, 2022).

Transcendental phenomenology, rooted in the work of Edmund Husserl (1931), emphasizes understanding human experience by setting aside the researcher's biases through a process called epoché or bracketing. Clark Moustakas (1994) later advanced this approach into a structured research method that prioritizes participants' voices and seeks to describe their lived experiences faithfully and without interpretation. Creswell and Poth (2018) further highlighted its value in uncovering how individuals construct meaning, while Vagle (2014) emphasized its usefulness in exploring experiences within real-world educational and social settings. Recent applications of this method include Edwards (2023), who explored teachers' attitudes and efficacy toward students with special needs, and Gills (2023), who examined teacher self-efficacy in inclusive classrooms in Northeast Ohio.

Employing transcendental-phenomenological research was appropriate for this study. This design made way for a deeper exploration and understanding of the subjective, lived experiences of foreign teachers in teaching students with special needs. Additionally, this study put emphasis on the participants'

perceptions and interpretations and captured personal experiences in rich detail.

Moustakas (1994) introduced transcendental phenomenology as a qualitative research method rooted in Edmund Husserl's philosophy, emphasizing the importance of epoché, or bracketing, to set aside the researcher's biases. This approach allowed the phenomenon to be understood through the authentic voices and lived experiences of the participants. Guided by this framework, the present study adopted transcendental phenomenology to explore the experiences of foreign elementary school teachers working with students with special needs. Through the process of bracketing, the researcher prioritized the teachers' perspectives, allowing their narratives to shape the findings.

Additionally, this study was grounded in the broader philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research, particularly interpretivism and constructivism. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), qualitative research seeks deep understanding rather than prediction, aligning with interpretivism's goal of uncovering how individuals make sense of their world. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that interpretivism and constructivism both focus on individual meaning-making, with constructivism emphasizing the personal construction of knowledge through experience. In this study, the focus was on the foreign teachers' context-specific interpretations and adaptive experiences while teaching students with special needs.

### **Research Setting**

The study was conducted in South Carolina, USA. This was specifically conducted in a public school located in Columbia, SC, which is in a mid-size city setting. It has a population of 22,123 learners serving. Columbia is home to several private schools specializing in education for students with specific learning needs.

To address the ongoing teacher shortages across the state, South Carolina has increasingly turned to recruiting foreign educators, including those specializing in Special Education. Through the International Visiting Teachers Program, the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) brings licensed teachers

from various countries to work in public schools. These international teachers serve in a range of subject areas, including Special Education, under the Exchange Visitor (J-1) visa program authorized by the U.S. Department of State. A report from November 2023 noted a 33% increase in the number of international teachers holding work visas in South Carolina classrooms for the 2023–2024 school year, with many filling in critical vacancies in Special Education. Given the growing presence of foreign SPED teachers in the region, exploring their experiences of adaptation offers valuable insights into the dynamics of inclusive education in South Carolina.

The study included the foreign teachers of students with special needs. These teachers are either self-contained or resource teachers. Self-contained Special Education teachers work with students who have disabilities in a separate classroom for all or most of the day. These classrooms are designed to provide more intensive, individualized instruction to meet students' specific needs, often focusing on both academic and life skills. In contrast, resource Special Education teachers offer support within general education settings and are typically for student who can benefit from part time or targeted assistance in specific subjects or areas where students need additional help. Both types of teachers play a vital role in ensuring that students with special needs receive appropriate education tailored to their unique needs.

Since the teachers under study were foreign teachers, this study accounted their lived experiences in their adaptation as teachers of students with special needs in the foreign country.

### **Sample**

This study was participated by seven (7) foreign teachers of students with special needs. This specifically included the teachers who are Africans and Latin American nationals. The study included foreign teachers teaching Special Education in South Carolina who met the following criteria: in terms of experience, status and willingness to participate. Teachers must have been teaching in Special Education for at least 6 months. Participants must be foreign teachers; and must be willing to share

their lived experiences and sign an informed consent form. They have met the following criteria: a) teaching in the Special Education for 6 months and above; b) a foreign teacher; c) teaching in the Columbia; d) must come from different countries other than the Philippines; and e) has willingness to share lived experiences by signing the informed consent.

### **Sampling Procedure**

To generate the sample for the study, purposive sampling was used since this specifically included foreign teachers teaching in Special Education class. A purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling wherein the sample is selected based on characteristics of a population and the objective of the study. Purposive sampling is also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling (Crossman, 2018).

Purposive sampling is valuable when studying specific subgroups where the researcher needs to gather insights from individuals with particular experiences or characteristics relevant to the study. In this study, purposive sampling was employed. The specific individuals who possess the characteristics or qualities relevant to this study was established. Only those who are foreign teachers teaching in the Special Education in South Carolina were included in the study.

The selection and recruitment of participants for this study followed a careful and systematic process. First, the researcher established clear inclusion criteria: participants must be foreign teachers (non-U.S. citizens and non-Filipinos) teaching students with special needs in South Carolina, with at least six months of Special Education teaching experience, and a willingness to voluntarily share their lived experiences by signing an informed consent form. Using these criteria, the researcher specifically targeted foreign teachers of African and Latin American nationalities.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who possessed the specific characteristics relevant to the study. Potential participants were identified through professional networks, educational institutions, and referrals. The researcher contacted these individuals, explaining the study's purpose and

procedures, and screened them to ensure they met all eligibility requirements.

Those who qualified were asked to review and sign an informed consent form, which detailed the study's ethical safeguards, including confidentiality and voluntary participation. Only teachers who provided signed consent were included. A total of seven (7) foreign Special Education teachers were successfully recruited. Throughout the recruitment process, the researcher ensured full adherence to ethical guidelines, safeguarding the rights, privacy, and dignity of all participants.

### **Data Collection Methods**

To collect data from foreign teachers currently teaching Special Education in South Carolina, three primary methods were employed: in-depth interviews, documents, and arts-based media.

**In-depth interviews.** These were conducted to gain detailed insights into the personal experiences, challenges, and strategies of foreign teachers in their adaptation to work as teachers of students with special needs.

**Documents.** Relevant documents, such as lesson plans, progress reports, and teaching materials, were analyzed to understand how these teachers plan and execute their lessons, as well as the educational goals they aim to achieve. These documents were asked from the participants and were analyzed in terms of their contents. This served as one of the sources of the descriptions of how they adapt to the changes they encounter in their workplace.

**Arts-based data.** Arts-based media, such as drawings, visual reflections, or creative representations from the teachers or students, were incorporated to capture more nuanced, non-verbal aspects of the teaching and learning experience. This method helped to explore emotional and creative dimensions that might not be fully conveyed through words alone.

By using the in-depth interviews, document analysis, and arts-based media, triangulation was employed. This made sure for a comprehensive, and varied aspects or angles of how foreign Special Education teachers adapt to new environments. Cross-verification among

these methods of collecting data enhanced the credibility of findings by examining similar themes from different perspectives or sources of information but all are coming from the same participants.

### Data Collection Procedure

**Preparing the Interview Questions.** The researcher created a set of semi-structured questions that align with the research objectives of accounting the foreign teachers' experiences and adaptation processes in their work as Special Education teachers. To ensure that questions are clear, relevant, and open-ended aiming to encourage detailed responses, these were submitted for validation process of the experts. Once the interviews were validated and ensured to address the objectives of the study, the researcher proceeded to the next step of preparing the interview materials such as printed questions, consent forms and audio recording devices.

**Obtaining consent.** Consent was obtained from the participants. The informed consent form was explained to them for them to thoroughly understand their extent of participation to the study. They were informed about the study, including its purpose, procedures, and what is expected of them. They signed the consent to voluntarily take part in the study. Then the time and place for the interview were agreed.

**Conducting the Interviews.** The interview happened in person. This was participated by 7 foreign teachers. It was started by introduction of the researcher and the review of the purpose of the interview. Using the interview guide, the interview was facilitated by the researcher. The guide consisted of validated questions to ensure that the research questions are addressed and possible themes were generated from the responses (see *Appendix A*).

Each interview was scheduled as agreed with the participants. Recording of the interview was done with the use of high quality audio recording device to capture the conversations clearly as this was transcribed. Before the recording, each participant was informed and their consent was secured to allow the researcher to record the interview.

**Collecting Documents.** For document collection, participants were invited to share teaching materials such as lesson plans, instructional activities, classroom strategies, and any other documents they felt represented their work with students with special needs. These documents served as an extension of their narratives, helping to illustrate how they adapted to the demands of Special Education. Participants were encouraged to describe the materials they shared, providing context and explaining how these documents reflected their experiences, strategies, and growth as foreign Special Education teachers. These documents are in sent through pictures. The participants were also given the freedom on what document they would like to send.

**Collecting Arts-based data.** In addition to document gathering, arts-based data collection was also employed. Participants were asked—only if they were willing—to create simple drawings or visual representations expressing their feelings and reflections related to teaching students with special needs and adapting to a new work environment. The participants were invited to explain the meaning behind their drawings, offering personal interpretations that were integrated into the analysis. The write the descriptions of their drawing representing their experiences. This was done after the interview but the researcher gave them enough time to draw. They were told that they are free to draw what they want to express.

These arts-based and document-based submissions complemented the interview data, providing a fuller, richer picture of the participants' adaptation journeys.

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data, was used to analyze the transcribed interviews. Moustakas' (1994) framework for data analysis was rooted in phenomenological research and focuses on understanding lived experiences. His approach involved systematically analyzing data to uncover essential themes and structures of a phenomenon.

To analyze the data using this framework, the researcher began with *Epoche (Bracketing)*, where the researcher set aside personal biases

and preconceptions to approach the study with an open mind, focusing solely on the participants' experiences. The next phase was *Phenomenological Reduction*, which involved Horizontalization, where every statement made by participants were treated with equal importance. The researcher refined the data through *Delimiting*, removing redundant or irrelevant information, and organized significant statements into Clusters of Meaning or themes. A *Textural Description* was developed to capture what the participants experienced. In the *Imaginative Variation step*, the researcher explored various perspectives and contexts to uncover how the experience occurred, leading to a *Structural Description* that explained the underlying factors shaping the foreign teachers' adaptation experiences. Finally, the *Synthesis of Textural and Structural Descriptions* merged the "what" and "how" of the experience, revealing its essence and providing a deeper understanding of the shared experiences among participants.

Meanwhile, the documents presented by the participants were used as supplementary evidence to support and validate their shared experiences. These documents were not subjected to a separate thematic analysis, but were referenced to strengthen the credibility of the participants' narratives.

Similarly, the arts-based data were not analyzed independently. Instead, participants provided their own explanations of their creative outputs, which were referred when analyzed data were presented. This approach ensured that the interpretation of the arts-based materials were based on the participants' intended meanings, enriching the description of their adaptation experiences without assigning themes to such.

### **Trustworthiness**

In order to ensure the quality and rigor of this research, the study followed the trustworthiness criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability. These principles guided the data collection, analysis, and interpretation, ensuring that the findings genuinely reflected the experiences of the participants.

**Credibility.** Credibility in qualitative research refers to the confidence that can be placed in the accuracy and truthfulness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018). It focuses on ensuring that the experiences recorded in the study truly represent the participants' realities, rather than being influenced by researcher assumptions. Strategies such as prolonged engagement, member checking, triangulation of data, and expert validation are commonly used to strengthen credibility.

To achieve credibility, this study utilized several strategies. In-depth interviews were conducted, and the interview questions were reviewed by an expert to ensure they were appropriate and targeted at capturing the participants' adaptation experiences. All interviews were recorded with participant consent, and transcripts were double-checked against the recordings to maintain fidelity to their words. Member checking was conducted, allowing participants to review and verify the accuracy of the emerging findings. Additionally, cross-validation of themes across different participants helped ensure that the interpretations genuinely reflected shared patterns in their experiences.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability ensures that the results of the study are shaped by the participants' responses and experiences, rather than being influenced by the researcher's personal biases or perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This principle emphasizes neutrality, with the aim of ensuring that the findings can be traced back directly to the data collected.

To uphold confirmability, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study, noting personal assumptions, potential biases, and reactions during both data collection and analysis. This reflective process allowed the researcher to remain critically aware of how personal views might influence the study. Participant validation also played a key role: participants reviewed and confirmed the findings before they were finalized, ensuring that the interpretations presented were faithful to their lived experiences.

**Transferability.** Transferability refers to the degree to which the findings of a qualitative

study can be applied to other contexts or settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Rather than seeking broad generalization, qualitative researchers aim to provide detailed descriptions that allow others to determine whether the findings are relevant to their own situations.

In this study, transferability was supported by offering thick, detailed descriptions of the research setting, participant backgrounds, and data collection processes. Rich accounts of the foreign teachers' experiences in South Carolina were provided, allowing readers to assess whether the findings could apply to similar Special Education contexts elsewhere. By grounding the study in vivid and specific contexts, the research invites others to see potential connections to their own environments.

**Dependability.** Dependability relates to the stability and consistency of the research findings over time and across different conditions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It involves ensuring that the research process is logical, well-documented, and can be followed by others who might want to repeat or build upon the study.

To strengthen dependability, the researcher validated the interview guide before its use and followed consistent procedures throughout data collection. Interviews were arranged at times and places most convenient for the participants, creating a comfortable environment that encouraged open and authentic sharing. An audit trail was also maintained, documenting all key decisions, adjustments, and reflections made during the study. This clear record of the research process supports the reliability and transparency of the findings.

### **Reflexivity**

In qualitative research, reflexivity means recognizing that the researcher is never fully separate from the study. Instead, the researcher's background, beliefs, and experiences inevitably shape how the research is designed, how questions are asked, and how findings are interpreted (Olmos-Vega, 2023). Being aware of these influences is essential to maintaining the integrity of the study. Reflexivity requires ongoing self-examination—thinking carefully about how one's position might affect

the research and striving to minimize any unintended impact on the participants or the results.

During interviews, the researcher avoided guiding participants' responses and instead created a space where they could freely share their thoughts, experiences, and reflections. Being mindful not to let personal opinions or reactions interfere, the researcher allowed participants' voices to lead the conversation, ensuring that their perspectives remained at the center of the study.

To further uphold fairness and ethical responsibility, the researcher followed strict procedures to protect participants' rights and trust. Informed consent was secured, confidentiality was guaranteed, and participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any point without consequences. Throughout the process, the researcher kept a reflexive journal, noting personal thoughts, emotions, and decisions along the way. This practice helped in catching any emerging biases early and making adjustments as needed. By staying reflective and committed to ethical principles, the researcher worked to ensure that the final findings stayed true to the lived realities of the foreign Special Education teachers who generously shared their stories.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study ensured that ethical considerations are adhered to. The ethical considerations such as informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality, justice, transparency, and permission to organization are discussed.

**Informed Consent.** Informed consent is a fundamental ethical principle in research, requiring that participants are fully aware of the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study before agreeing to participate (Babbie, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018). It ensures that individuals voluntarily choose to be involved, with a clear understanding of what participation entails. Providing informed consent respects participants' autonomy and upholds transparency between researchers and participants, serving as a safeguard for ethical research practice.

In this study, all participants were asked to sign an informed consent document prior to data collection. The consent form outlined the study's purpose, the nature of their involvement, the voluntary nature of their participation, and how the data would be used. Participants were given time to review the information and ask questions before signing. Their signatures signified their understanding and willingness to share their experiences related to adapting to Special Education roles in South Carolina.

**Voluntary Participation.** Voluntary participation ensures that individuals are free to decide whether or not to take part in a study without coercion or undue influence (Israel & Hay, 2006). It is crucial for protecting the autonomy of participants and upholding their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without facing negative consequences.

In this research, participation was entirely voluntary. The foreign Special Education teachers were clearly informed that they could refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions. This approach helped create a respectful and comfortable environment, encouraging open and honest sharing of their experiences.

**Anonymity and Confidentiality.** Anonymity and confidentiality are vital in protecting participants' identities and personal information (Wiles, 2013). Anonymity means that participants' identities are not linked to the data, while confidentiality refers to ensuring that any identifiable information is securely protected and not disclosed without consent. Together, these principles build trust between the researcher and the participants.

In this study, participants' names and identifying details were removed from the data to maintain anonymity. Confidentiality was further ensured by securely storing interview recordings and transcripts, accessible only to the researcher. Pseudonyms were used in reporting the findings, ensuring that participants' privacy and dignity were protected throughout the research process.

**Justice.** The principle of justice in research emphasizes fairness in participant selection, equitable treatment, and respect for all individuals' rights (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019).

Researchers must ensure that no group is unfairly burdened or excluded and that participants are treated with dignity and respect throughout the study.

Throughout this study, justice was upheld by treating all participants equally and respectfully, regardless of their background, experiences, or professional roles. Care was taken to ensure that all voices were valued and that participation was conducted fairly and equitably. This commitment helped build trust and encouraged open, authentic sharing from the foreign teachers involved.

**Transparency.** Transparency in research involves openly communicating the study's purpose, procedures, limitations, and any potential conflicts of interest (Resnik, 2018). Being transparent helps to maintain the integrity of the research and strengthens the credibility of the findings.

To maintain transparency, all important documents—including the informed consent form, interview guide, and study procedures—were included in the appendices. Participants were also informed about the study's limitations and potential biases. By openly sharing these aspects, the researcher ensured that the study process remained clear, honest, and accountable.

**Permission to Organization.** Obtaining institutional permission before beginning data collection is a critical ethical step that reflects respect for organizational authority and community standards (American Educational Research Association, 2011). Formal approval also ensures that research activities align with existing ethical guidelines and organizational policies.

Before beginning the interviews, the researcher secured formal written permission from the appropriate authorities at the participating schools. Only after receiving this approval did the researcher proceed with contacting the foreign Special Education teachers and scheduling interviews, strictly following the approved procedures and ethical protocols.

## Summary

The study employed a Qualitative-Phenomenological Design to explore the adaptation process of foreign teachers in Special



Education in South Carolina. This design focused on understanding the lived experiences of participants, capturing detailed narratives of their challenges and adjustments in their new teaching environments.

Using purposive sampling, the study specifically selected foreign teachers who have been teaching Special Education for at least six months and are willing to share their experiences. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, which were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes related to their adaptation process.

Ethical considerations were paramount in this study. Informed consent was obtained from the participants, ensuring they understand the study's purpose and agree to participate voluntarily. The researcher upheld anonymity and confidentiality to protect participants' identities and maintain the integrity of the data. Justice and transparency were maintained throughout the research process, with fairness in handling participants' rights and openness about the study's limitations.

## Results and Discussion

### *Operational Data Collection*

The data collection process for this study was guided by qualitative research principles, ensuring a thorough approach in capturing the lived experiences of foreign Special Education teachers in South Carolina. The researcher himself focused on the implementation of the research design and the gathering of rich, meaningful data from the selected participants.

Based on the audit trail (*Appendix A*), interviews were conducted to 7 foreign Special Education teachers – they were coded as Mr. D, Mr. T, Ms. L. Ms. D, Mr. O, Ms. F, and Ms. Z. The interviewed took place for more than 30 minutes and these were transcribed in verbatim format. The transcribed data is attached as *Appendix B*.

During the data collection, the researcher began by reaching out to potential participants who met the study's inclusion criteria. Permission was sought from the school principal for the conduct of the study. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and provided the informed consent form to each participant.

Those who voluntarily agreed to participate signed the form, confirming their willingness to take part in the interviews and to provide supplementary data, including documents and arts-based media.

*Interviews.* When consent was obtained, the researcher scheduled in-person interviews with each of the 7 participants at times and locations convenient to them, ensuring privacy and minimal disruption to their professional duties. Participants were reminded of the confidentiality of the study and the voluntary nature of their involvement.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a validated interview guide. These interviews explored the participants' adaptation experiences in teaching students with special needs, including their challenges, coping mechanisms, and adjustments as foreign teachers. Each session was audio recorded—with prior permission—to ensure accurate transcription and analysis.

*Documents.* In addition to interviews, participants were invited to share relevant documents such as lesson plans and teaching resources. These materials provided further insight into their instructional planning, teaching strategies, and the educational goals they aimed to achieve with their students (*Appendix G*).

*Arts-based.* Those who consented contributed visual reflections such as drawings or creative representations that expressed their personal experiences, emotions, or challenges. These creative works were discussed with the participants to clarify their symbolic meanings and relevance to their professional journeys (*Appendix H*).

Throughout the data collection phase, the researcher adhered strictly to ethical research standards, including protecting participant anonymity, ensuring informed consent, and securely handling all data. By utilizing triangulation through interviews, document analysis, and arts-based methods, the study strengthened the credibility and depth of its findings, offering a comprehensive understanding of how foreign Special Education teachers adapted to the U.S. educational context.

### **Operational Data Analysis**

The analysis of data in this study followed the steps outlined by Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological method, with the aim of capturing the essence of the lived experiences of foreign teachers working with students with special needs in South Carolina. In the coding process, the research used the suggestions of Saldana (2013). This systematic process ensured that voices were heard authentically and meaningfully throughout the analysis.

*Epoche.* To analyze the data in line with Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological approach, the process began with Epoche, also known as bracketing. In this phase, the researcher intentionally set aside personal biases, assumptions, and prior knowledge as a Special Education teacher to ensure that interpretations remained grounded solely in the participants' lived experiences.

*Phenomenological Reduction.* The researcher identified all statements relevant to the phenomenon of adaptation in Special Education teaching. Each statement was treated as having equal value at this stage, with no immediate prioritization or judgment. Systematic delimiting of the data, or phenomenological reduction was done where repetitive, vague, or irrelevant statements were removed, while clear and meaningful expressions were retained. These significant statements were then grouped into clusters of meaning, representing emerging codes and categories. Through this clustering, the researcher developed initial themes that reflected common experiences among the foreign teachers, such as cultural adaptation, emotional coping, instructional adjustment, and navigating systemic structures (see Appendix E).

*Textural Description and Structural Description.* With these themes established, the researcher created a Textural Description, which captured what the participants experienced. This included their challenges with unfamiliar policies, communication barriers, and moments of professional growth. The narrative was supported by direct quotations from the participants to preserve their authentic voices and emphasize the emotional and practical realities of their journeys. A Structural

Description was developed to explain these underlying influences and how they contributed to or constrained the process of adaptation.

Finally, the researcher synthesized both the Textural and Structural Descriptions to arrive at the essence of the experience. This synthesis provided a comprehensive understanding of the foreign teachers' adaptation journeys in Special Education, merging both the "what" and the "how" of their lived experiences. The outcome of this process was a rich, thematic, and contextualized portrayal of the challenges and transformations these educators undergo as they navigate the complexities of teaching students with special needs in a foreign educational setting (see Appendix F).

### **Participants' Demographic Profile**

The participants were seven (7) foreign teachers teaching students with special needs. Their profile varies based on their age, gender, educational background, socio-economic status, place of origin, number of years in teaching in Columbia South Carolina, and their current work assignment.

Participant 1, Mr. D, is a Colombian Special Education teacher with 12 years of experience, now teaching K-5 resource students in Columbia, South Carolina. He supports 20 students with IEPs, primarily those with autism or learning disabilities.

Participant 2, Mr. T, is a veteran educator from Zimbabwe with over 20 years of teaching experience, including 8 years in Special Education and 6 years in elementary education. For the past 6 years, he has been teaching in Columbia, South Carolina, managing a self-contained K-5 classroom with 13 students, most of whom have autism or learning disabilities.

Ms. L, the participant 3, is a Special Education teacher from Jamaica with over 12 years of experience, primarily working with students with autism and learning disabilities. She moved to Columbia, South Carolina, through the J1 cultural exchange program and now teaches a self-contained K-5 classroom with 10 students, all with IEPs.

Participant 4, Ms. D, is a dedicated Special Education teacher from Jamaica, South America, with over 15 years of experience—12 of which were spent in Special Education in her

home country. For the past 3 years, she has been working in a K–5 resource classroom in Columbia, South Carolina, where she supports 18 students with IEPs, primarily those with autism, ADHD, or learning disabilities.

Mr. O is a Special Education teacher from Mexico with over 9 years of teaching experience, including 6 years in Special Education in his home country. For the past 3 years, he has taught in a self-contained K–5 classroom in Columbia, South Carolina, where he supports 9 students with IEPs, including those with autism and developmental delays.

Ms. F is a seasoned Special Education teacher from Trinidad with over 18 years of teaching experience. She began her career in Special Education in Trinidad, later moving to

the United States where she first taught in Maryland for three years before settling in Columbia, South Carolina, where she has worked for the past eight years. Currently, she serves in a K–5 resource setting, supporting a caseload of 23 students with IEPs, many of whom also have Behavior Intervention Plans.

Ms. Z is from South Africa. She has with over 15 years of teaching experience, including 13 years in Special Education in her home country. For the past two years, she has been teaching a self-contained K–5 classroom in Columbia, South Carolina, where she supports 12 students with IEPs, most of whom have autism or developmental delays.

Table I shows the over-all description of the 7 participants of the study.

*Table I. Participants' Demographic Profile*

Participants	Age	Gender	Educational Background	Class Assignment	Place of Origin	Number of Years Teaching in Columbia, SC
Mr. D	35	Male	Bachelor in SPED	Resource Teacher	Colombia	2 of 12
Mr. T	48	Male	PhD in SPED	Self-contained Teacher	Zimbabwe	6 of 20
Ms. L	43	Female	MAED in SPED	Self-contained Teacher	Jamaica	1 of 12
Ms. D	39	Female	Bachelor in SPED	Resource Teacher	Jamaica	3 of 15
Mr. O	32	Male	MAED in SPED	Self-contained Teacher	Mexico	3 of 9
Ms. F	52	Female	PhD in SPED	Resource Teacher	Trinidad	8 of 18
Ms. Z	38	Female	MAED in SPED	Self-contained Teacher	South Africa	2 of 15

The information about the participants as reflected in the table provides the foundation of why they are selected and how they contributed the data for the study.

### ***Discussion and Presentation***

This study aimed to answer the research questions about the lived experiences of foreign Special Education teachers in teaching students with special needs in Columbia, South Carolina; adaptations to their work, their co-workers and their work environment; and their views about their lives as foreign Special

Education teachers. 7 themes were generated consisting 22 categories and 418 codes.

#### **1. The lived experiences of foreign Special Education teachers in teaching students with special needs in Columbia, South Carolina**

The lived experiences of the foreign Special Education teachers in teaching students with special needs in Columbia, South Carolina were described in themes such as: journeying through emotional and reflective realities of

teaching; relationship building and collaboration; managing complex student needs, institutional demands, and instruction.

### **Theme 1. Journeying through Emotional and Reflective Realities of Teaching**

This theme highlighted the emotional depth of teaching and personal growth over time among the foreign Special Education teachers. It includes moments of joy, realization, and resilience developed through everyday interactions with students with special needs and their journey of adapting teaching realities.

#### **Category 1: Celebrating moments of learners' growth and change**

For the participants, teaching in a new country and working with students who have disabilities can be both challenging and rewarding. One of the most powerful parts of the job was seeing students make small but meaningful steps forward and these moments often stay in the hearts of teachers.

Teachers shared touching stories about how small progress in their students made a big impact on them. For Mr. D, simple thing showed emotional growth for the student and reminded Mr. D why he loves teaching, a joy and realization of being a foreign Special Education teacher; and for Mr. O and Mr. T shared about valuing a small step of progress as part of his experience.

*"One of the biggest breakthroughs came when he finally learned how to ask for a break instead of getting frustrated. It might sound small, but for him, it was a huge milestone. It was his way of saying, 'I need a moment,' rather than shutting down or becoming upset. That moment reminded me why I do this work." (Mr. D Lines 36–38, Page 2)*

*"Maybe one month. Almost four weeks. Then, one day, he take a card. He match blue with blue. He didn't look at me, didn't say nothing, but... I knew that was something big." (Mr. O Lines 35–36, Page 2)*

*Progress in special ed is slow sometimes, but every little step is worth*

*celebrating, y'know? (Mr. T Lines 58–59, Page 2)*

Ms. L shared a beautiful moment where a student joined her in tapping blocks, which felt like their first real "conversation." She described the joy of that interaction, saying it gave her goosebumps.

*"One day, I tapped a block three times, and he tapped his once. That was the first moment, we had a kind of conversation. I got goosebumps. I kept going, tapping again, waiting. And every day, he joined in a little more." (Ms. L Lines 36–38, Page 2)*

The description of excitement and success was also evident in the drawing of Mr. O (Appendix H) who described that being a foreign Special Education teacher, he faces a mix of emotions – thrills and difficulties.

These stories showed that foreign teachers often find joy and purpose in small achievements, celebrating the growth and changes they witness among their students with special needs. As noted by Billingsley, Bettini, and Jones (2020), acknowledging even small signs of student progress helps sustain motivation and reinforces teachers' commitment to inclusive practices. Similarly, Cooper et al. (2022) emphasized that for many Special Education teachers, "progress" is not only measured by academic outcomes but also by emotional connection and interpersonal breakthroughs. These findings supported the idea that foreign teachers develop a broader, more personal understanding of success—one that is deeply tied to the relationships they build and the social-emotional development of their students.

#### **Category 2: Embracing patience**

Patience emerged as both a strategy and a personal transformation for foreign Special Education teachers as they were into the new learning environments and support students with diverse needs. Embracing patience became more than waiting since for the teachers, this became an intentional, emotional presence that allows space for trust, growth, and connection to develop over time with their learners.

*"I sit on the floor... not say anything. Just sit, near, maybe 2 feet. I put some matching cards, some shape puzzles on floor. No pressure. Just show... then I wait." (Mr. O Lines 31–33, Page 2)*

*"He taught me patience in a way I hadn't known before. I realized communication doesn't have to be loud to be powerful. Just being there, being present, that was the real strategy." (Ms. L Lines 44–47, Page 3)*

From Ms. D's drawing (*Appendix H*), patience was also mentioned as one of the crucial elements in building inclusive environment like that to where she works. This came from her idea that teaching in the Special Education means being inclusive too side from being culturally aware and respectful.

These reflections showed that patience is both a coping mechanism and a transformative learning experience for foreign teachers. What is particularly striking with this experience is how patience is learned through students not just applied to them. As noted by Macapagong et al. (2023), Filipinos as foreign teachers often come to embrace patience through their day-to-day encounters with cultural unfamiliarity and student diversity, treating it not just as a necessity, but as a skill shaped by experience.

### **Category 3: Reflecting on what matters**

The lived experiences of foreign education teachers highlight their reflection as playing part in their professional growth and finding out meaning to what they were doing. Despite the structured nature of their teaching days, the participants emphasized maintaining a flexible mindset. For instance, Ms. D recognized both the structured routines and the unpredictable moments that demand calm and immediate problem-solving.

*"It's structured, but flexible at the same time. There are definitely moments of frustration, like when a student gets off-task or there's a behavior incident, but I try to stay calm and think on my feet. At the end of the day, I spend some time reflecting, looking over what worked, what*

*didn't, and planning for the next day." (Ms. D Lines 91–94, Page 4)*

Similarly, Mr. O provided a deeply personal and emotive account of his reflective practice. His words reflected not only technical adjustments to pedagogy but an emotional engagement with student progress.

*"At end, I sit, I think. I write note, what work, what not. I try to learn every day. I see small progress in kids... and that make me want to come back tomorrow." (Mr. O Lines 66–67, Page 4)*

Mr. T's reflection was manifested by the practice of evaluating what succeeded or failed, and then adjusting lesson plans accordingly, demonstrated a mindful effort to refine teaching strategies in a way that promoted broader participation and engagement among all learners.

*"I reflect on how the day went, what worked, and what needs to be changed. I adjust my lesson plans and prepare for the next day, always thinking about how to make learning more inclusive." (Mr. T Lines 81–83, Page 3)*

These situations mentioned by the participants to have been requiring their patience are also manifested in the participants like the drawing in the Ms. T (*Appendix H*) presenting what were expected from them to be done – from here, he learned "the balance".

Based on the responses, foreign education teachers placed great importance on daily reflection as a means of maintaining emotional resilience and improving practice. Cooper et al. (2022) emphasized that regular reflective practices help teachers remain anchored in their core values such as dignity, equity, and individualized support despite systemic and cultural challenges. Similarly, Chu and Garcia (2021) noted that ongoing reflection enhances teachers' ability to adapt to culturally and institutionally diverse environments. It can be inferred that reflection becomes both a moral and emotional anchor, guiding their journey

through the complexities of teaching in an unfamiliar educational landscape.

#### **Category 4: Dealing with various realities in new environment**

Foreign teachers often face challenges when they move into a new school system, especially when it comes to adjusting their teaching styles and ways of communicating. Their experiences showed that adapting to a new culture is not always easy, but it is necessary to help their students succeed.

Mr. D shared that his accent and way of speaking sometimes confused his students, especially those with autism who were sensitive to how words sound. This showed that part of cultural adjustment is not just about fitting in, but making sure students feel safe and connected.

*"That was another challenge. My accent or way of speaking sometimes confused students, especially those with autism who are sensitive to speech patterns. I had to adjust how I communicate to make sure they understood and felt comfortable." (Mr. D Lines 148–150, Page 5)*

Ms. D talked about another kind of adjustment.

*"Oh, that's been a bit of a shift. In Jamaica, teachers are more direct—we manage the class firmly, and there's a bit more structure. Here, I've had to adjust to a more relaxed style. But I still bring in routines and clear expectations because students, especially those with special needs, need that consistency." (Ms. D Lines 218–220, Page 7)*

Realities in their new environment were also embedded in the arts-based material shown by Ms. D mentioning about cultural awareness; Mr. T showing "adaptation" and "cultural demands" to describe balancing act of teacher adaptation as he named his art; and Ms. L highlighting a "Adaptation Growing Tree" piece of art where she mentioned cultural differences she needs to deal with.

Based on the results, foreign teachers find ways to blend what they know with what their students need, creating a teaching style that respects both their background and their new environment. Golis (2024) observed that expatriate teachers gradually revised their teaching approaches to align with local expectations, showing a willingness to merge their prior values with new educational demands.

Similarly, Koç (2024) emphasized that effective adaptation involves not only technical changes but also personal adjustments that reflect sensitivity to cultural norms. Ospina and Medina (2020) further highlighted that successful foreign teachers demonstrate flexibility and openness by modifying their communication styles and instructional methods in response to the cultural context. Their ability to adjust illustrates how crucial it is to remain flexible, patient, and open when working in a new cultural setting.

#### **Theme 2. Relationship Building and Collaboration**

Building relationships at work and working closely with others was an important part of the experience for foreign education teachers. They understand that helping students with special needs is not something they can do alone and it takes a team working together.

#### **Category 1: Collaborating with colleagues**

Collaborating with colleagues and other professional was an important experience among participants. Ms. D shared that she regularly works with speech therapists, counselors, occupational therapists, and other professionals. They met often to talk about how students are doing, what problems they are seeing, and how they can match their strategies. This showed how important teamwork is in making sure every student gets the support they need.

*"I collaborate with speech therapists, counselors, occupational therapists—really the whole team. We meet pretty regularly to discuss student progress, challenges, and how we can align our strategies." (Ms. D Lines 85–87, Page 3)*

Mr. T also pointed out that collaboration needs to be even stronger, especially between Special Education and general education teachers. He also believed there should be more training, like in trauma-informed practices and better ways to handle behavior.

*"More training—especially in trauma-informed practices and behavior strategies. And stronger collaboration between special ed and general ed teachers." (Mr. T Lines 174–175, Page 6)*

Collaboration with colleagues was also portrayed in the arts of Ms. Z, and Mr. Z who explained about collaboration as part of their work; and cooperation as portrayed in the work of Ms. D. (*Appendix H*). These pieces of art showed the importance of collaboration with their colleagues taking part in their experiences as foreign teachers in South Carolina.

These accounts of experience from foreign teachers highlight that working with others was a central part of their professional practice. For them, collaboration goes beyond formal meetings—it involved sharing ideas, solving problems collectively, and developing strategies that respond effectively to students' diverse needs. Paulsrud and Nilholm (2023) found that teachers value collaboration as a means of refining their practice and expanding their understanding of inclusive teaching. Similarly, Billingsley, Bettini, and Jones (2020) emphasized that collaboration with colleagues enhances instructional quality, reduces teacher isolation, and supports the delivery of individualized education. Chu and Garcia (2021) further noted that engaging in culturally responsive teamwork fosters both professional growth and emotional support. Foreign teachers viewed collaboration not only as a practical necessity but as a vital mechanism for personal development and for ensuring high-quality support for their students.

### **Category 2: Engaging and Connecting with families**

Connecting with families was another important part of the work that foreign education

teachers do. Their stories showed that they put a lot of effort into making sure parents feel included and valued in their child's education.

*"In my country, we go the extra mile. We stay late, we visit homes. So here, I still call parents, not only for problems, but to say good things. Some of them surprise, like, 'What happened?' And I say, 'No, just to say your child had a good day.' They happy." (Mr. O Lines 101–103, Page 5)*

The experience shared by Mr. D also puts a lot of focus on clear and respectful communication, especially with Spanish-speaking families.

*"I make it a priority now—regular updates to families, especially Spanish-speaking ones. I use both languages and keep communication clear and respectful." (Mr. D Lines 295–296, Page 9)*

For Mr. T, he now made an even stronger effort to stay connected with families, because he noticed that parents in the U.S. are more directly involved. This can also be triangulated with one document given by one of the participants communicating with the parents (*Appendix G*).

*"I've become much more intentional about that. Families here tend to be more directly involved, so I make sure to maintain regular communication—through meetings, phone calls, even notes home. I want them to feel like true partners in their child's learning." (Mr. T Lines 257–260, Page 8)*

It can be deduced from the data that foreign teachers work intentionally to engage families in meaningful and respectful ways. Their experiences underscored that strong connections with families play a crucial role in supporting student success. As Chu and Garcia (2021) observed, culturally responsive engagement with families strengthens trust and ensures that students' diverse backgrounds are acknowledged and integrated into the educational process.

### **Theme 3. Managing Complex Student Needs, Institutional Demands, and Instruction**

Foreign Special Education teachers managed complex student needs, heavy paperwork, and strict system rules. For the participants, they stay organized with daily routines, balance teaching with documentation demands, and adjust to a new education system.

#### **Category 1: Managing diverse and intensive student needs**

The participants shared about managing a lot of emotions, behaviors, and communication problems all at once. Foreign education teachers often worked in classrooms where students have many different and intense needs. They were not only teaching lessons but they were also helping students who may be struggling to express themselves, control their feelings, or behave safely in the classroom.

Mr. T said he used clear routines, sensory breaks, and positive behavior strategies to support his students.

*"I rely on clear routines, sensory breaks, and positive behavior strategies. But it takes a lot of multitasking—supporting one student while keeping the rest engaged." (Mr. T Lines 137–138, Page 5)*

Ms. L shared that one big challenge was how differently students in the U.S. express frustration compared to her experience in Jamaica. While students back home might stay quiet when upset, here she faced shouting, throwing things, and even aggressive behavior, which was surprising and hard for her at first.

*"Many things surprised me. One big challenge was how students here deal with frustration. In Jamaica, if a student was upset, they might go quiet. But here, I've seen loud shouting, throwing objects, even aggressive behavior. At first, I took it personal. I wasn't prepared for that." (Ms. L Lines 67–69, Page 4)*

Other participants shared various experiences:

*"Some students really struggle with communication or managing emotions, and that often leads to behavior issues. You might have a lesson planned, and suddenly someone has an outburst or shuts down, and it throws off the whole class dynamic. Keeping everyone on task while managing that kind of behavior, it's tough." (Ms. D Lines 156–159, Page 5)*

*"Some students here, they hit, they throw chairs, or they run outside. One time, one boy open the door and run to hallway, I was so scare." (Mr. O Lines 71–73, Page 4)*

*"There's one boy from last year, third grade. He was bright, very bright, but unpredictable. He'd tear up papers, crawl under the table, or just refuse to even enter the classroom some days." (Ms. F Lines 30–32, Page 2)*

Pieces of art like those presented by Ms. L highlighting a maze of behavior modification, signifies, that indeed, the participants are facing behavioral issues with the students. Mr. T has similar drawing mentions about "needs of students" he needs to attend to as part of his journey as a teacher in South Carolina.

The shared experiences reveal that working with students who have diverse and intensive needs requires not only instructional skill but also patience, emotional strength, quick decision-making, and continuous adaptability. Even highly experienced teachers reported feeling overwhelmed at times, yet their commitment remains centered on supporting each student's growth amidst daily challenges. As noted by Dapudong and Sy (2023), managing behavioral issues and emotionally charged interactions can be especially difficult for foreign Special Education teachers, who must adapt to new expectations while maintaining classroom order. Similarly, Gomez-Lange (2024) found that foreign teachers rely on patience and creativity to navigate these challenges and create safe, supportive learning environments for all students.



**Category 2: Structuring a day at work**

The participants shared that having a clear structure to their day is very important for managing all their responsibilities. With many students, paperwork, and activities to handle, careful planning helps them stay organized and focused.

Mr. T said he set aside specific times, like early mornings, planning periods, or after school, to work on administrative tasks. He uses digital tools to track student data, which makes it easier when he needs to write IEPs or progress reports, as shown in

*Appendix H.* Having a system in place saves him time and helps him stay on top of everything.

*"I set aside specific times, usually early morning, planning periods, or after school, to handle admin tasks. I use digital tools to track student data, which helps when writing IEPs or progress reports." (Mr. T Lines 102–103, Page 4)*

Ms. D and Mr. O also talked about their routine.

*"Well, I do some in the morning, yes. But a lot of it happens the day before too. In the morning, it's more about reviewing and making sure everything's set. Once I get to school, I usually go over the IEPs of the students I'll be working with that day. That helps remind me of their specific goals, like what we're targeting and how I need to support them." (Ms. D Lines 72–75, Page 3)*

*"My day start early. I go school before 7:00. I prepare everything... the visuals, the boards, the materials for each student. My class is self-contained, so... I have kinder, I have 2nd grade, even 5th grade, all in same room. So I prepare many activities." (Mr. O Lines 50–52, Page 3)*

Structures mentioned by the participants were also evident in the drawing of Mr. T portraying in his hands the lesson plans and IEPs;

and also in the drawing of Ms. L where IEP was part of the maze she deals with forming her experiences as Special Education teacher. IEP and other documents they need to prepare at school are also found in *Appendix G*.

The experiences of the participants highlighted that carefully structuring the school day—from preparing instructional materials to allocating time for administrative responsibilities—is essential for managing the complex demands of teaching students with special needs. Thoughtful planning contributes to a calm, predictable learning environment, which supports students' behavioral and emotional regulation while also reducing teacher stress. Billingsley, Bettini, and Jones (2020) noted that the extensive responsibilities of Special Education teachers require deliberate organization to avoid burnout and maintain instructional quality.

**Category 3: Balancing paper work and other tasks**

Teachers also shared about the challenges they face in balancing all their classroom responsibilities with the heavy amount of paperwork they must complete. Teaching students with special needs requires not only daily lessons but also detailed documentation (*See Appendix G*).

Ms. F explained that her day is packed with different tasks. She checks IEP goals, meets with paraprofessionals, teaches small groups for reading and math, and even supports students in general education classrooms. At the same time, she has to find moments to write progress notes, attend behavior meetings, and quickly adjust lessons based on how students are feeling that day.

*"First thing, I check IEP goals and meet with my paraprofessionals. Then I start rotating kids, some come for reading fluency, others for math. I push into general education too for inclusion support. In between that, I'm writing progress notes, sitting in behavior meetings, or quickly adjusting assignments because someone came in tired or dysregulated." (Ms. F Lines 60–63, Page 3–4)*

Other participants also shared:

*"My day starts quietly, before the rush. I come in early to set up visuals, check student data, and prepare mentally. With twelve students in a self-contained class, each with very different needs, I have to be ready before the day even begins." (Ms. Z Lines 42-44, Page 3)*

*"I've had to become super organized. I block off certain times during the week for paperwork, like IEP writing, lesson planning, or data entry. I break larger tasks into smaller parts, so it's not overwhelming." (Ms. D Lines 121-122, Page 4)*

Foreign teachers must juggle teaching, behavior management, paperwork, and meetings all at once. Careful time management, early preparation, and breaking tasks into smaller pieces help them survive the workload without feeling completely burned out. It can be inferred that teachers are always finding ways to stay organized, manage stress, and meet both their students' learning needs and the heavy paperwork expectations placed on them. Kulbaş and Kara (2021) highlighted that the ability to manage time effectively and remain resilient is essential for navigating the daily pressures of Special Education. It can be inferred that foreign teachers are continuously developing strategies to stay organized, manage stress, and fulfill both instructional duties and extensive documentation requirements.

#### **Category 4: Systemic and documentation challenges**

The participants shared that adjusting to the U.S. education system, especially with its paperwork and legal processes (*shown in Appendix G*), was one of the biggest challenges they faced. They had to learn new expectations, technical procedures, and strict timelines that were very different from what they were used to in their home countries. As verbalized by the participants, they felt overwhelmed at first because there was so much specialized information to absorb, and the pressure to stay compliant with rules and documentation standards was very high.

*"One of the biggest was the language and communication gap, not with every-day English, but with the specific terms used in IEP meetings, behavior plans, and legal processes. It took time to get used to all that specialized vocabulary." (Mr. D Lines 144-146, Page 5)*

*"The paperwork is a challenge too. Between IEPs, tracking progress, and meetings, it's easy to feel stretched. Time management is key." (Mr. T Lines 140-141, Page 5)*

*"The paperwork. IEPs, behavior logs, emails to parents, it's a lot. Back home, we had reports, yes, but not with this level of detail. Some nights, I stayed very late just trying to get everything done." (Ms. L Lines 71-73, Page 4)*

From the shared responses, implication can be drawn that U.S. education system expects teachers not only to teach but also to become experts in managing documentation, legal processes, and specialized reporting. It added another layer of complexity to their work, requiring patience, organization, and ongoing learning. Most importantly, these experiences show that systemic and documentation challenges for foreign teachers are not just about extra tasks as they represent a deep adjustment to new professional standards and expectations. According to the South Carolina Department of Education (2024), Special Education teachers are expected to align with detailed procedures related to Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), data monitoring, and service delivery coordination. Most importantly, these experiences suggest that systemic and documentation-related challenges are not merely additional tasks for foreign teachers—they represent a significant adjustment to a new set of professional norms and institutional expectations.

#### **Category 5: Adapting instructional tools and routines**

For the participants, it was important to be flexible and creative when teaching students with special needs. Their experiences showed

that it's not enough to stick to a regular lesson plan but they have to constantly adjust their teaching tools, routines, and approaches based on what their students need each day. This theme highlighted how these teachers use adaptation and creativity to make sure every student can learn, even when challenges come up.

*"Mornings are the most organized. We begin with visual schedules and warm-up activities. I divide the class into rotations, some do literacy, others sensory tasks, others work on IEP goals. Transitions happen every 20–30 minutes, and each one has to be smooth. One disruption, and we risk a meltdown." (Ms. Z Lines 46–49, Page 3)*

*"I use a lot of visual cues and communication devices to guide the students. Throughout the day, we do a lot of small-group instruction, interventions, and built-in sensory breaks. I rely on tools like visual schedules, Picture Exchange Communication System, and social stories to support learning. Those structured breaks are really important, they help students regulate and refocus." (Mr. D Lines 88–92, Page 3)*

*"Once the students come in, we begin with a morning meeting. We go over the calendar, practice communication, and do some social skill routines." (Mr. T Lines 67–69, Page 3)*

*"Some kids can read little books. Some, they still learning colors. So I make small groups. We do circle time first, greeting with picture cards, attendance, calendar, weather. Then, I divide them. One group with me, do reading. Other group go with para... do independent work." (Mr. O Lines 54–57, Page 3)*

Adapting instructional tools and routines was a daily part of their teaching, especially when working with students who have a wide range of needs. These instructional materials which were used to establish routines are also found in *Appendix H*. Having clear routines and flexible tools helps for according to the foreign

Special Education teachers, students feel secure, focused, and ready to learn.

*"I want students to feel safe and know what's expected. I'm also more hands-on and creative with lessons because I'm used to working without a lot of materials." (Mr. T, Lines 194–195, Page 6)*

Mr. D explained that he relies heavily on visual cues and communication devices to help guide students. He used tools like visual schedules, the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), and social stories to support learning and communication. Built-in sensory breaks are also part of the daily routine, helping students stay regulated and ready to learn.

*"I bring a strong focus on emotional connection. I design hands-on, visual, and real-world lessons. I also incorporate cultural diversity and make learning feel personal for every student." (Mr. D Lines 233–234, Page 7)*

*"It shapes everything. In Jamaica, we're raised to respect order, discipline, and good manners. That's how I teach, even with students who have behavior challenges or communication delays. I still say things like, "Kind words, please," or "Try again the right way." I believe they understand the tone and the intention." (Ms. L Lines 87–90, Page 5)*

These instructional tools such as visuals, communication cards, visual check-ins and other manipulatives are presented in the pictures compiled in *Appendix H*. These are shared by the participants to describe what materials they usually and commonly utilize in their respective classes.

These experiences showed that adapting instructional tools and routines is a key strategy for supporting students with diverse needs. Teachers use structured, flexible routines and visual supports to create a predictable and responsive learning environment that meets students where they are. Gilmour, Nguyen, Redding, and Bettini (2023) noted that in response to evolving student needs, Special Education

teachers frequently adjust their instructional methods to ensure accessibility and individualized support.

## **2. Adaptations to their work, their co-workers and their work environment of the foreign Special Education teachers in Columbia, South Carolina.**

Themes describing the foreign teachers' adaptation to work were: instructional and professional adaptation; relational and collegial adaptation; and cultural integration and adjustment.

### **Theme 4. Instructional and Professional Adaptation**

The participants have adapted to the situation that when they enter classrooms that are very different from those in their home countries, they must quickly learn to adapt both their teaching practices and their professional habits to meet the expectations of their new school systems. This theme highlighted how these teachers respond to unfamiliar environments by adjusting their instructional approaches, developing new classroom strategies, and actively seeking opportunities for professional growth.

#### **Category 1: Adaptation of Different Teaching Methods and Class Environment**

Teachers had to change their teaching methods and adjust the classroom environment to better fit their students' needs in the U.S. They described learning to blend structure with flexibility, using more visual tools, hands-on activities, and support strategies that make lessons more accessible for all learners — especially those with disabilities.

*"Yes, it's about blending structured strategies, curriculum goals, and student needs. When all of that comes together, I know I'm giving my students the best chance to succeed." (Mr. D Lines 544–545, Page 16)*

*"I now use a lot more hands-on activities, visuals, and assistive tech to make the curriculum more accessible, especially for*

*students with autism or learning disabilities. It's helped them stay engaged and better understand the content." (Mr. T Lines 482–484, Page 14)*

*"I started using anchor charts and sentence starters. If the standard says 'identify theme,' I don't jump straight to that. I ask, 'What's the story about?' Then we build up from there. For the students still struggling, I add visuals or we act out scenes. That helps them connect." (Ms. L Lines 195–197, Page 10)*

To support these data, Appendix G shows the behavior modification tools and other monitoring and progress charts. Some of these materials that they have mentioned are found in the Appendix G section. Adaptation of Different Teaching Methods and Class Environment because teachers are combining structured goals with flexible approaches — using tools, visuals, and scaffolding techniques to make sure all students have access to meaningful learning experiences. Koç (2024) emphasized that such adaptations are not limited to curriculum design but also involve personalizing classroom practices to reflect students' cultural and developmental backgrounds.

#### **Category 2: Classroom Management and Behavioral Strategies**

Adapting to classroom management in the U.S. involved more than learning new rules. For the participants, it requires shifting communication styles and emotional approaches to better connect with students and support positive behavior. In unfamiliar systems, foreign Special Education teachers often adjust how they carry themselves, how they respond to conflict, and how they engage in team collaboration.

For instance, Ms. L brings a calm, steady presence to her classroom. She uses a gentle tone and stays composed, even during difficult moments.

*"I bring calmness into my classroom. I speak gently. I stay steady. That helped me build trust early, even if I sounded different or did things in a new way." (Ms. L Lines 212–213, Page 11)*

Mr. O started out unsure of how much to say in meetings. Coming from a different cultural norm where silence is often linked with respect, he kept quiet, afraid of saying something wrong. Over time, he noticed that open communication and active participation were encouraged. He adapted by speaking more in meetings, asking his team for support, and becoming more involved in shared planning. This shift helped him manage his classroom more effectively and feel more confident in his role.

*"I was very quiet. I think maybe I say something wrong. But later I learn here it's okay to talk. They like when you share. So I try more, speak more in meetings, ask my team when I need." (Mr. O Lines 221–224, Page 11)*

Classroom management becomes a space for cultural learning and adjustment. As seen in the drawing of Mr. D, Mr. T. Ms. L (*Appendix H*), cultural adjustment is crucial in their new environment. Based on what have been shared by the participants, adaptation in classroom management often involves adjusting personal habits and finding ways to balance one's cultural background with the expectations of a new environment. Classroom Management and Behavioral Strategies reflects an ongoing process of change where teachers shift from what's familiar to what's effective in their new context, using calmness, reflection, and communication as adaptive tools for success. Dapudong and Sy (2023) observed that teachers navigating unfamiliar behavioral norms and student dynamics must adjust their approaches with patience and cultural sensitivity. Yi et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of emotional regulation and interpersonal awareness in supporting these adjustments.

### **Category 3: Engaging in Professional Development Programs**

Foreign Special Education teachers demonstrated ongoing adaptation by reshaping their instructional practices, classroom management strategies, and professional knowledge to meet the demands of a new educational context.

Teachers described how such learning opportunities help them stay current on IEP requirements, behavior interventions, and inclusive strategies, which are all crucial in meeting the diverse needs of their students.

*"I took part in professional development workshops, asked for help from experienced colleagues, and studied U.S. laws and best practices. It wasn't easy at first, but I knew it was important to understand how the system works here so I could support my students properly." (Mr. D Lines 643–645, Page 19)*

*"I stay informed through a few different channels. First, I regularly attend school and district trainings. Those sessions are really helpful for learning about updates in IEP procedures, behavior strategies, and legal requirements." (Mr. T Lines 602–604, Page 18)*

*"I try to stay on top of things by attending professional development workshops and district trainings." (Ms. D Line 640, Page 19)*

One of the pictures when a participant attended a training is also shared (*Appendix H*). According to the participant, joining trainings is very important for them to learn better and perform better at work.

Based on the data, it is apparent that rather than relying solely on prior experience, they invest time and effort into learning the expectations, legal frameworks, and instructional approaches specific to Special Education in their new context. This includes attending workshops, participating in district trainings, and independently studying relevant laws and best practices.

These actions reflect a clear understanding that effective teaching in a foreign environment requires more than content knowledge since it demands cultural awareness, procedural fluency, and a willingness to grow. Professional development is framed by these educators as a cornerstone of their instructional and professional adaptation. It plays a crucial role in

shaping their ability to meet student needs, follow legal mandates, and grow personally and professionally within a new and often complex system.

According to Kulbaş and Kara (2021), career adaptability is shaped not only by technical skills but also by a teacher's capacity for ongoing learning and emotional resilience. Howe and Lisi (2020) further reinforced that professional reflection and development are essential for navigating legal responsibilities and improving responsiveness to students with disabilities. Thus, professional development plays a crucial role in helping teachers meet institutional expectations while also supporting their personal and pedagogical transformation.

### **Theme 5. Relational and Collegial Adaptation**

Relational and Collegial Adaptation captured how foreign Special Education teachers adapt to their professional environments by actively cultivating relationships and support networks.

This theme reflected three categories: fostering collaboration with colleagues to align instruction and services; seeking out mentorship and support systems that guide them through institutional procedures; and investing in relationship-building with students, families, and staff to create a sense of belonging. These relationships not only serve as emotional anchors but also facilitate smoother transitions into the professional culture of U.S. schools. These categories are discussed in the succeeding sections.

#### **Category 1: Fostering Collaboration**

Foreign Special Education teachers adapted when collaborative structures are in place. The ability to connect with colleagues both fellow international educators and local staff helps ease the adjustment process and promotes shared learning. For the participants, collaboration becomes a vital tool not just for instructional alignment, but also for emotional reassurance and professional confidence.

*"Yes, connecting with other foreign teachers was a game-changer. Talking to people who are going through the same*

*transition made me feel less isolated. We shared ideas, classroom tips, even advice on adjusting to local life." (Mr. T Lines 747-749, Page 22)*

*"My co-teacher and my paras, they help me big time. When I confuse with progress report, my co-teacher sit with me, show me step by step. That help me do it, and help my confidence too." (Mr. O Lines 280-281, Page 15)*

*"My grade-level team, without a doubt. From the start, they included me in planning, explained unfamiliar terms, shared resources. It made everything feel less overwhelming." (Ms. Z Lines 280-281, Page 15)*

Most of the pieces of arts presented by the participants mention about collaboration with colleagues as very helpful in their adaptation in the new environment. This is shown in the art of Ms. D; Mr. D; Ms. L; and Ms. Z.

The responses above highlighted the importance of being supported by co-teachers, other professionals, and grade-level teams who provide guidance and share responsibilities. Collaboration functions as both a guide for the professionals trying to adapt in the working environment, and gaining identity development in a new system. Paulsrud and Nilholm (2023) emphasized that collaboration with colleagues enhances teachers' capacity to respond to student needs and fosters a sense of shared responsibility. Similarly, Billingsley, Bettini, and Jones (2020) noted that supportive professional relationships reduce isolation and strengthen teachers' confidence in their instructional roles, particularly for those adjusting to new cultural and institutional contexts.

#### **Category 2: Mentorship and Support Systems**

Mentorship also emerged as an important way of adaptation for foreign Special Education teachers facing the complexities of a new educational environment. Support from administrators and assigned mentors provides not only technical guidance but also emotional reassurance during times of uncertainty.

These responses of the participants described how mentorship especially from individuals who understand the immigrant teaching experience creates a safe space to ask questions, vent frustrations, and build competence.

*"My assistant principal made time for one-on-one check-ins. When I struggled with classroom behavior or paperwork, she listened and offered hands-on help, not just advice. That support meant a lot." (Ms. Z Lines 286-288, Page 15)*

*"The district give me mentor, another international teacher. We talk sometimes after class. We share tips, stories. Make me feel not alone." (Mr. O Lines 289-290, Page 15)*

Mr. D showed a drawing of hands surrounding a person and label it "Hand of Support: A Collaborative Setting" to describe the support given to him.

Results implied that having someone consistently present to listen, guide, and provide encouragement reinforces the powerful sense that they are supported and valued throughout their professional journey. This presence offered more than just technical assistance; it cultivates trust, boosts confidence, and reassures foreign teachers that their challenges are both seen and shared. Rather than navigating the complexities of a new educational system in isolation, they begin to understand adaptation as a collective and relational process. Chu and Garcia (2021) emphasized that culturally responsive collaboration fosters emotional support and a sense of belonging, which are essential for teachers adjusting to new environments. Likewise, Billingsley, Bettini, and Jones (2020) highlighted that shared professional experiences and strong collegial networks reduce feelings of isolation and reinforce teachers' ability to meet diverse student needs effectively.

### **Category 3: Relationship building**

For the participants, building relationships was a key component of cultural integration, especially when transitioning to a new environment. For teachers, establishing positive,

trusting relationships with colleagues and the broader school community can significantly impact their comfort, confidence, and sense of belonging.

Mr. T reflected on the role socializing plays in bridging the gap between him and others as a foreign teacher.

*"Socializing helps close the distance that sometimes comes from being a foreign teacher. And it makes asking for help or offering support feel more natural. Those relationships have played a huge role in helping me settle into a new system and feel confident in my role here." (Mr. T Lines 679-681 Page 20)*

Interestingly, Ms. L highlighted the importance of small gestures and offering help as a way to build trust and open the door for meaningful conversations. Ms. D emphasizes the power of small talk and casual interactions, as well as volunteering and offering help with tasks such as co-planning and shared responsibilities.

*"I looked for small ways to help. If someone needed assistance, I offered. That opened the door for conversation. I also asked, 'How do you usually do this?' That showed respect, and people were more open with me after that." (Ms. L Lines 239-241, Page 13)*

*"Sometimes the best connections happen over small talk or just being present at school events. I also make a point to volunteer when I can, offering help with materials, co-planning, or just pitching in with shared responsibilities. That kind of support goes a long way in building trust and teamwork." (Ms. D Lines 666-669, Page 19)*

Supporting these interview data were the drawings of Ms. F showing relationships with students; and Ms. D and Ms. L's mentions of adaptations and collaboration.

The responses reflected a shared understanding that social interaction, peer support, and collaborative engagement play a vital role

in bridging cultural gaps, fostering mutual respect, and establishing a sense of belonging. These relational practices are particularly significant in the adaptation process of foreign education teachers, who often rely on professional and social networks to navigate unfamiliar environments. Chu and Garcia (2021) emphasized that culturally responsive collaboration not only enhances instructional effectiveness but also contributes to emotional well-being and professional integration. Similarly, Gangwani et al. (2022) found that informal social interactions and institutional support are crucial in helping foreign teachers adjust to new cultural expectations and develop a stable professional identity.

### **Theme 6. Cultural Integration and Adjustment**

Cultural integration and adjustment are essential for the foreign Special Education teachers to adapt to the new cultural or professional environment. These involved the delicate balancing act of adapting to new cultural norms while maintaining one's personal identity and values. The following categories and responses offer valuable insights into how educators approach this challenge, focusing on respectful adaptation, cultural sensitivity, and relationship-building.

#### **Category 1: Respectful adaptation and personal adjustments**

Adapting to a new cultural context often required adjusting personal behaviors and communication styles. The response of Ms. L below showed how learning the pace and expectations of a new environment can be key to successful adaptation.

*"A little. I try to match their pace, but still keep my respectful tone. One time, a teacher told me, 'Just send the email, no need to ask.' I thought I was being polite, but I realized they want independence here." (Ms. L Lines 254–256, Page 13)*

Ms. D shared how she has found that sharing her cultural background can help others better understand her perspective.

*"I've found that sharing my cultural background actually helps others understand where I'm coming from. It opens the door for conversations and helps build comfort and understanding. I'm also mindful of communication styles and work habits — what might be normal for me might be interpreted differently here. So I try to stay aware and adjust when needed." (Ms. D Lines 710–713, Page 21)*

One of the participants shared a picture with fellow teachers whom they befriend with. As shared by Ms. D, this picture is treasured as this symbolizes being accepted by others of different culture.

The results offered valuable insights into the process of respectful adaptation. The participants' experiences underscore the importance of aligning with the pace, social norms, and communication expectations of their new environment while still maintaining politeness and respect rooted in their own cultural backgrounds. Ospina and Medina (2020) highlighted that successful integration into foreign educational settings often depends on a teacher's ability to adjust communication styles and relational behaviors in culturally appropriate ways.

#### **Category 2: Cultural sensitiveness and understanding**

Cultural integration also required developing sensitivity to the differences in how people from various cultures approach challenges, communicate, and collaborate. This requires an open mind, patience, and a deep respect for diverse ways of working. As shared by Mr. T, it is important to have an open mind and mutual respect

*"For me, managing cultural differences starts with having an open mind and showing mutual respect. I really try to listen and observe how people interact, how they talk, how they approach challenges, so I can understand and adjust without losing who I am as a teacher." (Mr. T Lines 684–686, Page 20)*



Ms. Z contrasted the formality and hierarchy she was accustomed to in South Africa with the more casual, egalitarian approach of her new environment, where titles are less commonly used, and meetings often feature jokes and informal exchanges.

*"It's been subtle but ongoing. In South Africa, we're formal, titles are used, hierarchy is clear. Here, people joke in meetings, call administrators by first names." (Ms. Z Lines 262–263, Page 14)*

In addition, Mr. D spoke to the importance of patience and flexibility during the adaptation process. He recognized that it takes time to adjust and that asking questions and accepting feedback with a positive attitude helps facilitate his learning.

*"Patience and flexibility. It takes time to adjust, and I remind myself that I'm still learning. I listen, I ask questions, and I accept feedback with a positive attitude. I try to adapt where needed, but I also stay authentic to who I am. And I think that balance helps me contribute meaningfully to the school community." (Mr. D Lines 738–741, Page 21)*

Ms. F emphasized the importance of observation and asking questions when unsure about cultural norms or expectations.

*"I stay observant. I ask if I'm unsure. I try to understand even if I don't agree. It's about respect. And over time, I've found a balance, holding onto my roots while adapting to this environment." (Ms. F Lines 322–323, Page 17)*

To support the theme, Participant's 4 drawing as shown in *Appendix H* explain more about adaptation. This drawing is described as:

*"My drawing, Balancing Act: Teacher Adaptation, illustrates the various responsibilities I balance daily—lesson planning, needs of students, IEP, and cultural accommodation. I have drawn myself balancing on a tight wire, with books*

*written on either side with a variety of responsibilities. My students look up to me at the bottom, reflecting the high demand placed on me as a teacher. The act of balancing is representative of how I have battled to balance all these demands amidst the change in learning environment. Through experience, collaboration, and inner strength, I have found balance despite challenges." Participant 4*

It can be gleaned from the results that cultural integration is a dynamic process requiring sensitivity to how individuals from diverse backgrounds approach challenges, communicate, and collaborate. As educators encounter these cultural differences, it becomes clear that cultivating deep respect for varying cultural norms and practices is essential. Fernandes, Jardim, and Lopes (2021) emphasized that interpersonal skills such as empathy and cultural awareness are foundational in building effective relationships in diverse settings.

### **3. How teachers view their work as foreign Special Education teachers in South Carolina.**

Foreign Special Education teachers had different views on their work in South Carolina. The encompassing theme of these views is bearer of global perspectives in an inclusive learning environment.

#### **Theme 7. Bearer of Global Perspectives in an Inclusive Learning Environment**

The participants brought unique strengths to their new school communities. Their different cultural backgrounds, teaching experiences, and ways of thinking add richness to the learning environment and help students and staff see the world through a wider lens. At the same time, these teachers show a high level of flexibility and creativity as they adjust to new education systems and school expectations. This theme highlights two major ways they strengthen school communities: by contributing global perspectives and by adapting and innovating their teaching in unfamiliar systems.

### **Category 1: Bringing Global Insights and Fulfillment in a Foreign Teaching Environment**

Being a foreign teacher was about more than just teaching lessons; and it is about bringing a new way of thinking, living, and connecting into their school communities. They feel proud that their different backgrounds help enrich the schools they work in.

Ms. Z described the experience as “doing two jobs” such as teaching and translating her identity at the same time. But for her, this challenge is something to be proud of. She feels she brings something global and grounded into her classroom, and she believes it leaves a lasting mark on her students and colleagues.

*“Like I’m doing two jobs, teaching, and translating who I am. But I’m proud of that. I bring something global, something grounded. That has value, and I believe it leaves a mark.” (Ms. Z Lines 140–142, Page 7)*

Mr. O reflected on how his experiences in Mexico shaped how he teaches now. Meanwhile, Mr. D shared that being a foreign Special Education teacher has a big impact not only on students but also on the entire school community.

*“Oh yes. In Mexico, we have little tools. So here, I see students use what we have, and they grow. It feel good. I don’t wait for big things. I look for small success. Every small thing mean something.” (Mr. O Lines 160–163, Page 8)*

*“I believe my presence as a foreign Special Education teacher brings a big impact, not just to my students, but also to the school as a whole. It’s not only about teaching content. I bring a different perspective, a different way of connecting, and that makes a difference in both classrooms and the wider school community.” (Mr. D Lines 466–469, Page 14)*

Arts-based materials shared by the participants have highlighted how they played a role in the Special Education school. For instance, Mr. T while describing his work as challenging

also acknowledge his role to fulfill the expectation of his students.

Foreign teachers see themselves not only as educators but also as cultural ambassadors. Their role extends beyond delivering academic content, as they actively share their worldviews, foster cross-cultural understanding, and cultivate meaningful relationships within their school communities. Golis (2024) described how foreign teachers gradually shifted from initial resistance to appreciation of local norms, learning to integrate their own cultural perspectives into their teaching practice. Likewise, Abacioglu et al. (2020) emphasized that culturally responsive teaching involves recognizing one’s identity as both an instructor and a bridge-builder across diverse cultural experiences. This dual role contributes to a sense of fulfillment, as teachers witness the positive impact of their work on students and colleagues alike

### **Category 2: Teaching as Adaptation and Innovation in Unfamiliar Systems**

The participants revealed that one of the biggest adjustments they had to make as foreign teachers was adapting to a much more technical and regulated education system. In their home countries, while good teaching practices and student relationships were important, there was less focus on heavy documentation and strict legal compliance.

Mr. T explained that the biggest difference he noticed was the strong emphasis on legal paperwork in the U.S. Everything such as student progress, services provided, goals had to be carefully documented, which was not a strong focus in his origin country.

*“The biggest difference is the emphasis on legal compliance. Everything here has to be documented—progress, services, goals. That wasn’t the case back home.” (Mr. T Lines 399–400, Page 12)*

Ms. L shared a similar experience.

*“They’re heavier here, for sure. In Jamaica, we also had high standards, but we focused more on how we show up in the classroom, how we teach, how students*

*respond. Here, it's more technical. There's documentation for everything, data tracking, IEP goals, timelines." (Ms. L Lines 159–161, Page 8)*

Ms. D agreed and explained that while detailed tracking allows for more targeted instruction, it also makes the workload heavier.

*"Absolutely. It allows for a more targeted approach. But also, the expectations around paperwork and procedures are a lot stricter here. In Jamaica, we didn't really track student progress in such a detailed way, and IEPs weren't followed as thoroughly. So now, I have to be extra organized to keep up with timelines and documentation." (Ms. D Lines 438–441, Page 13)*

These documentations mentioned by the participants are attached as *Appendix G*.

Foreign teachers are not only adapting their instructional approaches—they were also transforming how they manage their professional responsibilities. This aligns with the theme of *Teaching as Adaptation and Innovation in Unfamiliar Systems*, as these educators are learning to navigate complex bureaucratic structures, meet rigorous technical and legal requirements, and modify their practices within a highly structured educational framework. Kulbaş and Kara (2021) noted that career adaptability in Special Education involves not only mastering technical competencies but also developing strategic approaches to meet evolving institutional challenges.

### **Category 3: Bridging Cultures and Building Educational Access**

Teachers viewed their work as bridging cultures and expanding educational access. They brought their own cultural experiences into the classroom while making sure that every student's background is honored and included. By sharing global perspectives, they helped students and colleagues open their minds to new ways of thinking and learning.

Mr. D shared that he works closely with general education teachers, modeling inclusive practices and promoting collaboration

between staff. His goal is to build cultural awareness and help create a more accepting and welcoming school community.

*"I help bridge cultural gaps, working with general ed teachers, modeling inclusive practices, and promoting collaboration. I aim to build awareness and a stronger, more accepting school culture." (Mr. D Lines 483–484, Page 14)*

Mr. T explained that at first, some families had questions and hesitations, but once they saw his dedication to their child's growth, trust naturally followed.

*"In the beginning, some families had questions, but once they saw my commitment to their child's progress, trust followed. I focus on clear communication and listening to concerns, which helps build strong relationships." (Mr. T Lines 447–449, Page 13)*

Ms. D talked about how students' natural curiosity about her background helped create connections. Students would often ask her about where she came from or how to say words in her language. She said these small moments helped break the ice and made the classroom feel more open, real, and welcoming.

Mr. T also shared how he combined teaching strategies from Zimbabwe with the expectations of the U.S. system. By blending both, he found ways to give his students the support they needed while also respecting the educational culture he came from.

*"The students are usually very curious, they'll ask questions about where I'm from, or they'll want to learn how to say something in my language. I think that helps break the ice. It builds trust and makes the classroom feel more open and real." (Ms. D Lines 488–490, Page 14)*

*"I've brought what worked for me in Zimbabwe and combined it with what's expected here. It's helped me give my students the support they deserve." (Mr. T Lines 430–431, Page 13)*

Ms. F's drawing supported the description that teachers are combining their culture in the original country and what is expected from them in the host country as she mentioned "I stand on a bridge between my home country's teaching method and US inclusive education system."

Foreign teachers serve as cultural connectors, drawing from their backgrounds to build trust, overcome cultural barriers, and foster inclusive learning environments. This reflected the theme *Bridging Cultures and Building Educational Access*, as these educators are not only introducing global perspectives but also strengthening relationships and expanding opportunities for learners through trust, collaboration, and cultural sensitivity. Abacioglu et al. (2020) emphasized that culturally responsive teaching empowers educators to engage with diverse student needs by integrating empathy and cross-cultural understanding into their practice. Similarly, Chu and Garcia (2021) noted that collaboration rooted in cultural awareness enhances both student engagement and educational equity, particularly in inclusive classrooms.

#### **Category 4: Evolving as Educators and Learners in a Foreign Landscape**

The participants shared that being a foreign teacher is a journey of constant learning and growth. Every day, they are not only helping students, but also learning more about a new education system, a different culture, and themselves as professionals.

Mr. O explained that while he helps students with their IEP goals, he also focuses on their emotions. Mr. D shared that every day brings something new — new things to learn, new students to support, and new motivations to continue teaching.

*"I help with IEP, yes, but I also help them with emotion. I see when one child is upset, even if he don't say. I know when they need a break. Maybe it's from my background, I don't know, but I notice these small things." (Mr. O Lines 142–144, Page 7)*

*"Every day brings something new, new things to learn, new students to support, and new reasons to keep doing what I do. That's what keeps me motivated." (Mr. D Lines 383–384, Page 12)*

Ms. D reflected that even though her job is challenging, it is deeply rewarding. She said that knowing she played even a small part in her students' success makes all the effort worth it.

*"Just knowing I played even a small part in helping them succeed, it makes the work worth it. Plus, I'm also learning and growing every day. I'm navigating a new culture, a different education system, and new teaching methods. That mix of personal and professional growth? It keeps me going." (Ms. D Lines 374–376, Page 11)*

Learning as part of how they view as foreign Special Education teachers are also manifested in the art of Ms. Z highlighting that "I continue to grow personally and professionally"; and Ms. L's "journey of trial and error.." as part of how she viewed her work in the "maze".

Foreign teachers were not only adapting to their new environments but are also continually evolving as educators, learners, and individuals. They find strength, purpose, and new skills through their daily experiences in a foreign educational landscape. This aligns with the theme *Evolving as Educators and Learners in a Foreign Landscape*, as these teachers view themselves as lifelong learners who grow emotionally and professionally through both the challenges and the successes they encounter.

Theobald, Goldhaber, Naito, and Stein (2021) highlighted that foreign Special Education teachers often reshape their instructional methods and perspectives to meet new system demands, demonstrating resilience and adaptability. Similarly, Howe and Lisi (2020) emphasized the importance of continuous self-evaluation and learning in building the professional identity of educators, particularly when working across culturally and structurally different educational systems.

### **Category 5: Centering Inclusion and Individualized Support**

Inclusion was a central part of their work in U.S. schools. They described how they must constantly adjust their teaching to make sure that students with special needs can learn alongside their peers in general education classrooms.

Mr. D said that in the U.S., inclusion is expected. He works closely with general education teachers to adapt lessons and provide the right supports for each student.

*"Very much so. In the U.S., inclusion is a major expectation. I have to work with general ed teachers, adjust lessons, and provide supports so that students with special needs can be in regular classrooms. In Colombia, inclusion is rare. Special Education often happens separately, and there aren't many formal programs to bring students together." (Mr. D Lines 428–431, Page 13)*

Support to students with special needs which was given by the participants were described in terms of the use of varied materials in the class depending on the learning needs. The sample materials are seen in *Appendix H*.

Mr. T reflected that inclusion and individualized support matched his teaching beliefs. He has always believed in student-centered learning, and he sees the U.S. focus on collaboration and meeting individual needs as something that fits well with his own values and teaching style.

*"In many ways, yes. I've always believed in student-centered learning and adapting to individual needs. The focus on inclusion and collaboration here fits well with that." (Mr. T Lines 420–421, Page 13)*

Teachers embraced the challenge of inclusion by making sure their students have what they need to succeed — whether that means changing lessons, working with other teachers, or designing supports that fit each child's needs. They saw inclusion not just as a rule, but as a meaningful part of how they care for and

teach their students. Centering Inclusion and Individualized Support was the theme representing these responses because teachers are working hard to adapt their instruction, build collaboration, and ensure that every student regardless of ability, is supported in meaningful and respectful ways.

### **Category 6: Nurturing Through Emotional Awareness and Relational Care**

This theme emphasized that their responsibilities extend far beyond academic instruction. These teachers recognize their roles as not just providers of knowledge but as key figures in fostering emotional growth, cultural understanding, and strong interpersonal relationships with their students. Their views of their roles are shaped by both their cultural backgrounds and the unique challenges of teaching in a foreign context, especially within the field of Special Education.

For the teachers, when working in Special Education, emotional awareness was critical to their teaching philosophy. In their roles, foreign Special Education teachers also see themselves as cultural brokers, working to bridge gaps between students' diverse backgrounds and the educational system as reflected in the statement of Mr. D. Also, the arts-based data manifest this idea, particularly that of Ms. F. describing her role as a bridge of two worlds – home country and the new teaching environment.

*"Absolutely. I've become more precise, more informed. These expectations have made me better. I've learned how to balance structure with empathy, and that balance, I think, is powerful." (Ms. Z Lines 175–176, Page 9)*

*"I bring in multicultural topics and show students that learning and communication vary across cultures. This builds empathy, respect, and a safe space for everyone." (Mr. D Lines 502–503, Page 15)*

*"They'd ask questions, 'Do you have McDonald's in Jamaica?' or 'Did you wear uniforms?' It might sound small, but it*

*helps build relationships. I always answer with joy, so they know it's okay to ask."*  
(Ms. L Lines 179–181, Page 9)

Foreign Special Education teachers may originate from educational systems that place a stronger emphasis on community and emotional support. Adapting to more structured and performance-driven environments requires them to reflect deeply on how to preserve emotional awareness while meeting academic and procedural expectations. This finding illustrates how foreign Special Education teachers perceive their roles as complex and fundamentally relational. They see themselves not only as instructors but also as emotional supporters and cultural liaisons who guide students through both academic challenges and social-emotional development. Bin Abdullah, Rahim, bin Jeinie, Zulkafli, and bin Nordin (2021) emphasized that strong relational support helps teachers manage work demands and maintain meaningful connections with students. Similarly, Cooper et al. (2022) noted that sustaining core values such as care, empathy, and individualized attention is essential in fostering student growth within inclusive learning environments.

### Summary of Findings

The findings from the research on foreign Special Education teachers provided a understanding of their experiences, views, and adaptations within new cultural contexts. Themes were generated to describe these:

#### 1. What are the lived experiences of foreign Special Education teachers in teaching students with special needs in Columbia, South Carolina?

Teachers described their experiences with themes such as: journeying through emotional and reflective realities of teaching; relationship building and collaboration; managing institutional demands and complex student needs; and adapting instruction and demonstrating pedagogical creativity.

#### 2. What are the adaptations to work, their co-workers, and work environment of Special Education teachers in Columbia, South Carolina?

It becomes evident that adaptation is a multi-faceted process. Findings reveal the themes such as instructional and professional adaptation; relational and collegial adaptation; and cultural integration and adjustment as ways on how they adapt to the teaching environment in the USA.

#### 3. How do teachers view their work as foreign Special Education teachers in South Carolina?

The teachers viewed themselves as builder of inclusive, trusting, and culturally responsive educational spaces were also highlighted in the study.

### Implications

The implications presented herein include the practical implications and the theoretical implications.

#### Practical Implications

Based on the findings of this study, several important implications emerge that can inform practices and school-level policies regarding the recruitment, and professional support of foreign Special Education teachers.

The study underscored the importance of recognizing the emotional and reflective journey foreign teachers go through. Participants spoke about the fulfillment they experienced from small breakthroughs with students, suggesting that professional development should include space for reflective practices. As supported by Gangwani et al. (2022) and Smith (2019), these opportunities help foster resilience and emotional well-being, which are critical in managing the demands of Special Education work.

Foreign teachers often brought diverse cultural perspectives that shape their teaching and relationships with students. As echoed by Abacioglu et al. (2020), schools should not only support cultural adaptation but also create spaces where cultural identity is respected and integrated into practice. Cultural competence training should be part of school-wide professional learning to encourage inclusion and help both foreign and local staff collaborate effectively.

Notably, a key challenge for many participants was adapting to legal and procedural requirements such as IEP writing, progress monitoring, and compliance reporting. Consistent with Billingsley & Bettini (2019), there was a need for structured and targeted professional development that focuses on the technical aspects of Special Education in the U.S. Mentorship programs can serve as additional support, helping teachers manage these responsibilities without feeling overwhelmed.

Moreover, collaboration with colleagues, support staff, and families was a recurring theme in successful adaptation. Schools should create opportunities for team-building, co-teaching, and shared planning, which can significantly improve foreign teachers' sense of community and instructional effectiveness. As Golis (2024) suggests, these supportive networks are vital for sustaining motivation and improving classroom outcomes.

Participants demonstrated that while they adapted to system expectations, they also brought unique teaching styles and creativity to their roles. Schools should embrace this duality by offering flexibility in instructional approaches while maintaining accountability. Professional development should support innovative practices that still align with Special Education standards, as described in the findings of Yi et al. (2020).

Teachers often needed to adjust not only to professional expectations but also to everyday cultural norms, including communication styles and classroom management strategies. This highlights the importance of mentorship, cultural training, and peer dialogue to help teachers manage classroom dynamics effectively, as supported by McCormack (2019) and Ospina & Medina (2020).

### ***Theoretical Implications***

The results of this study also offered meaningful contributions to existing theoretical frameworks on teacher adaptation and work integration. The Theory of Work Adjustment (Lofquist & Dawis, 1969) provided a useful lens through which to interpret the adaptation of foreign Special Education teachers. The theory posited that successful work adjustment occurs

when there is alignment between the individual's abilities and the demands of the environment. This study supported that idea, showing how teachers adjusted their instructional approaches and communication styles to align with the structure of the U.S. Special Education system, while also seeking environments that respected their cultural values and teaching philosophies. Adaptation, then, was shown to be reciprocal—requiring both teacher flexibility and institutional responsiveness.

In addition, the study's findings support the theoretical importance of culturally responsive education frameworks, which recognize the value of teacher identity, background, and belief systems in shaping classroom practice. As teachers navigated cultural dissonance and built meaningful relationships, they created culturally safe spaces for students. This aligned with the work of Abacioglu et al. (2020), highlighting the theoretical significance of integrating personal identity into teaching practice.

The emotional demands shared by participants underscore the theoretical need to include emotional resilience and self-reflection in models of professional development. Drawing from frameworks that prioritize teacher well-being, such as those described by Smith (2019), this study affirms that resilience is not just about endurance—it involves intentional reflection, connection, and emotional support.

The success of foreign teachers was strongly tied to the quality of their professional relationships and support networks. These findings reinforce social capital theories in education, which emphasize the value of collaborative ties and mentorship in enhancing teacher capacity. Thomas (2019) and Golis (2024) similarly argue that adaptation is relational, and that teacher success is often rooted in a school's willingness to invest in social and emotional supports for newcomers.

Both the practical and theoretical implications of this study highlight the need for a holistic, culturally responsive, and relationship-driven approach to supporting foreign Special Education teachers. Schools and systems that recognize both the challenges and contributions of these educators—and offer the training, mentorship, and flexibility they need are

better positioned to create inclusive environments that benefit not only teachers, but the diverse students they serve.

## Conclusions

This study has effectively highlighted the lived experiences, adaptation processes, and evolving professional perspectives of foreign Special Education teachers working with students with special needs in Columbia, South Carolina. Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, the following conclusions were drawn from the study:

1. **The lived experiences of foreign Special Education teachers in Columbia, South Carolina**, were marked by emotional resilience, cultural adaptation, and professional growth. They encountered challenges such as behavior management, unfamiliar educational policies, and communication barriers, but also found fulfillment in student progress and daily reflection. These experiences align with the Theory of Work Adjustment and Career Construction Theory, highlighting the role of flexibility and identity reconstruction in navigating a new environment. Through perseverance and empathy, these teachers found meaning and purpose despite initial difficulties and cultural transitions.
2. **In terms of adaptation to work**, Foreign Special Education teachers demonstrated considerable adaptability as they adjusted to instructional demands, school policies, and collegial relationships in U.S. schools. They refined teaching practices, collaborated across disciplines, and learned to navigate IEP documentation. Challenges included cultural differences in work norms and classroom expectations. The Adaptive Performance Framework and Theory of Work Adjustment highlight how their flexibility and environmental fit supported their success. Collegial support and shared responsibilities helped ease the transition, while their diverse perspectives contributed to more inclusive and culturally responsive teaching environments.
3. **Foreign Special Education teachers perceptions on their roles** evolved from initial uncertainty to a strong sense of identity

and purpose in their roles. As they gained confidence in navigating Special Education systems and fostering student growth, they began to see themselves as both educators and cultural contributors. Career Construction Theory explains how these teachers built new identities through adaptability, reflection, and commitment. They valued their roles in shaping inclusive learning environments and embraced their influence as bridge-builders between cultures. Their views highlight the significance of institutional support in enabling meaningful and sustained professional integration.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following are recommended:

**For Students in Special Education.** Students benefit when foreign teachers are well-supported and equipped to meet diverse needs. Improved teacher adaptation leads to more inclusive, empathetic, and responsive classroom experiences.

**Parents.** Parents may strengthen their child's learning experience by building open, supportive relationships with foreign Special Education teachers. Welcoming teachers, communicating regularly, and working together can help bridge cultural gaps, making school a more inclusive and nurturing place for students with special needs.

**For Foreign Special Education Teachers.** Foreign teachers are encouraged to engage in mentorship, seek professional development, and embrace cultural learning to support their adjustment. Their diverse teaching approaches can enrich learning environments and promote inclusion.

**For School Administrators.** Schools should establish mentorship programs for foreign Special Education teachers and provide cultural sensitivity training to foster an inclusive environment. Strengthening collaboration between foreign and local educators through shared planning and teaching can enhance support for students with special needs.

**For Future Researchers.** Future research should explore the adaptation experiences of foreign teachers in various contexts to deepen



understanding and inform better support systems across educational settings.

**For the Philippine Educational System.**

The Philippine education sector may consider adopting best practices from other countries in supporting learners with disabilities, especially in teacher preparation, inclusive classroom strategies, and Special Education policies.

Teacher education programs in the Philippines may incorporate training on emotional resilience, cultural competence, and adaptability by providing simulations, workshops, and exposure to diverse classroom settings. Greater emphasis may also be placed on international standards and documentation practices, such as developing and managing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and understanding inclusive education models, to make Filipino teachers more globally competitive and confident.

**For US Educational System.** The U.S. educational system may further support foreign Special Education teachers by offering better orientation, cultural sensitivity programs, and ongoing mentorship. Helping them adjust to classroom expectations and policies can make their transition smoother.

## Limitations

Several limitations were encountered during the course of this study. First, while the original plan was to include ten participants, only seven foreign Special Education teachers were ultimately available and willing to participate. This smaller sample size may limit the breadth of perspectives and experiences captured, although the richness of each participant's narrative still contributed meaningfully to the findings.

Second, time constraints also posed a challenge. The researcher faced limitations in scheduling interviews and conducting follow-ups within a tight academic timeline, which may have affected opportunities for deeper probing or extended engagement with participants.

Lastly, the data analysis process especially the transcription and theme development stages took longer than anticipated. Transcribing each interview verbatim, immersing in the data, and carefully identifying recurring

patterns required significant time and effort. While this rigorous process ensured depth and authenticity in the analysis, it also extended the study timeline and required continual adjustments to manage both quality and deadlines.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of foreign Special Education teachers and provides a strong foundation for further research in this underexplored area.

## Reflection

As a fellow foreign Special Education teacher, listening to the stories shared in this study was both personal and eye-opening. While I entered this research wanting to understand the adaptation process of others, I soon found myself moved by how closely their journeys mirrored many parts of my own moments of uncertainty, of quietly observing, of trying to find the right words or timing in a space that feels unfamiliar. It reminded me that behind every professional role is a human being doing their best to feel understood, valued, and included.

What struck me the most was how time played such a significant role in everyone's adjustment. Almost all participants spoke about how things felt in the beginning as they have hesitant greetings, and struggling with the pace and expectations. And yet, their stories didn't stay there. Over time, I saw how they slowly made sense of their environment, found trusted colleagues, learned through mistakes, and began to speak with confidence. That gradual transformation stood out—not as something imposed on them, but something they chose to grow through.

The use of a phenomenological approach proved especially effective in capturing the depth of participants' lived realities. This method allowed the researcher to understand how foreign teachers make meaning of their experiences, emotionally, professionally, and relationally. The integration of arts-based data and document analysis further deepened the understanding of how these educators adapt in real and symbolic ways.

As I listened and read their words, I also reflected on how space affects us as educators. The physical spaces—classrooms, staff rooms,

school hallways—often come with unspoken rules. For many, those spaces initially felt overwhelming or even isolating. But it was through acts of kindness, shared laughter, and being invited in—even just for a quick lunch chat—that those spaces began to feel more like home. It reminded me that inclusion doesn't always require grand gestures; sometimes, it's the consistent warmth of being seen and acknowledged.

What also came through clearly was the emotional labor many of these teachers carried. Adapting was not just about learning policies or instructional tools but it involved a deep awareness of their presence, their body language, and how they showed care in ways that sometimes crossed language or cultural boundaries. I found their honesty humbling. They spoke of exhaustion, but also of the joy of small victories like a child making progress, a co-worker offering guidance, or simply feeling that their perspective mattered.

This study deepened my belief in the power of relationships. The participants' reflections showed that meaning was made not just in tasks, but in connection with students, colleagues, administrators, and even with themselves. They navigated complex environments with a blend of humility and quiet courage. And in doing so, they didn't just adapt they helped shape the environments they were part of.

Conducting this research has made me more reflective, not just as a scholar but as an educator. It has taught me to be more patient, more open, and more intentional in the way I support others in this shared journey. I walk away from this study not only with findings, but with a deeper sense of responsibility—to advocate for inclusive spaces, to listen more carefully, and to honor the stories that shape our work in Special Education.

Finally, as the researcher considers the implications of this study, there is a renewed advocacy for more inclusive, supportive, and empathetic environments for foreign educators in Special Education. The findings serve as a reminder for school leaders and policymakers to listen more attentively to the voices of these professionals and to build structures that nurture their success. Ultimately, this study has

been a transformative journey for the researcher—reinforcing the value of cultural empathy, the strength found in shared experience, and the importance of creating inclusive schools where both students and teachers can thrive.

## Summary

This study thoroughly explored the adaptability of foreign Special Education teachers working with students with special needs in Columbia, South Carolina, through a transcendental phenomenological lens. Using in-depth interviews, document analysis, and arts-based methods, the research captures the complex realities, emotional experiences, and professional journeys of seven foreign educators. The findings revealed multiple challenges faced by the participants, including cultural dissonance, communication barriers, unfamiliar educational policies, emotional strain, and the demands of managing students with intensive needs. These challenges often led to feelings of professional isolation, cultural tension, and the need for continuous emotional adjustment.

Despite these difficulties, the study highlighted the participants' resilience, reflective thinking, and strong commitment to inclusive teaching. The educators shared personal strategies such as embracing patience, adjusting teaching styles, fostering collaboration, and building trust with families and colleagues. These adaptive responses reflected their deep dedication to supporting students with special needs and integrating into a new professional culture. Their narratives also underscored the transformative impact of small student successes, cultural learning, and personal growth that result from their teaching roles.

Moreover, the study emphasized the urgent need for structured support systems for foreign Special Education teachers. It called for culturally responsive training, clearer policy orientation, emotional wellness support, and inclusive collaboration among school staff. These were essential to ensure the long-term effectiveness and well-being of foreign educators. The research contributed meaningfully to the growing body of literature on global teacher mobility and inclusive education by

centering the voices of foreign Special Education teachers, a group often overlooked in educational discourse.

Ultimately, this study served as both a documentation of lived experiences and a call to action. It urged school leaders, policymakers, and educational stakeholders to recognize the unique challenges and strengths of foreign teachers and to foster environments where their contributions are valued and supported. By doing so, the field of Special Education can move closer to building inclusive, equitable, and globally enriched classrooms for all learners.

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