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Service-Learning with migrants through playful learning to foster pre-service EFL teachers' competences

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This study investigates the impact of a Service-Learning (SL) initiative designed for pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers as part of the INCLUSO Project. Addressing the need to develop intercultural and prosocial competences among future primary school teachers, the intervention engaged university students in teaching English to recently arrived migrants through playful learning strategies. Crucially, the integration of playful pedagogies led to the design of contextualized, stress-free and engaging lessons fostering migrant's English language proficiency and integration in European context. Employing a qualitative approach including focus group interviews the research explored the experiences and perceptions of seven undergraduate participants. Findings reveal that the SL experience fostered participants' critical thinking, empathy, and social responsibility, while challenging stereotypes and promoting social justice. Pre-service teachers demonstrated heightened intercultural sensitivity and developed adaptive strategies to navigate barriers in diverse classrooms. This study underscores the transformative potential of SL—particularly when synergistically combined with playful learning and critical reflection—in cultivating adaptable, inclusive, and socially responsive EFL teachers equipped to address the complex needs of diverse learners.

KEYWORDS

English as a foreign language teaching, intercultural competence, playful pedagogies, prosocial competence, Service-Learning, teacher training

1 Introduction

In the context of increasing cultural diversity and migration flows, the development of prosocial and intercultural competences has become a central concern in university education. These competences—such as empathy, a sense of solidarity, civic engagement, and awareness of cultural differences—are crucial not only for building more inclusive communities, but also for equipping students to succeed in diverse professional settings (Ruiz-Montero et al., 2023). In regions marked by multiculturalism and cross-border interactions, like Southern Europe, these skills are especially vital, as they help combat discrimination and support harmonious living.

International migration remains one of the defining features of the 21st century, with over 280 million people living outside their country of birth as of 2023 (International Organization of Migration-IOM, 2024). The Mediterranean region stands out as a complex and active migration route, shaped by geopolitical tensions, economic inequality, and historical connections. Spanish cities like Melilla and Ceuta have served as key gateways into Europe

for people escaping war, poverty, and environmental disasters (Fernández-Ramos, 2019), although more recently, main routes have shifted towards the Canary Islands and the Central Mediterranean (Frontex, 2025). These border areas present a complex reality where tight security measures, humanitarian efforts, and a diverse, multicultural population coexist. As a result, educational institutions find themselves navigating both significant challenges and profound opportunities.

Educational institutions in Melilla, which is the context of this study, and other border areas, also face considerable challenges including intense linguistic diversity and necessitating plurilingual competences (Cortina-Pérez et al., 2018; López-Medina and Pérez Agustín, 2024; Montero Alonso and Sayahi, 2021); insufficient intercultural training for educators and leaders, often limited to elective courses (Chilah Abdelkader et al., 2024); difficulties in integrating migrant students (Padilla and Olmos Alcaraz, 2019); and fostering coexistence in contexts marked by stereotypes and prejudice toward migrants (Gallardo-Vigil et al., 2023). These complexities challenge higher education institutions to move beyond conventional academic instruction and actively foster inclusive and socially responsive learning environments (Cherng and Davis, 2019; Hughes et al., 2023; Radhouane, 2023).

Despite these difficulties, such settings offer unique opportunities for university students to develop intercultural competences, critical thinking, and active citizenship. Recent studies further suggest that students educated in multicultural environments—particularly when active and experimental methodologies are employed—show higher levels of empathy, civic awareness, and intercultural sensitivity (Arnaiz-Sánchez et al., 2021; Civitillo et al., 2018; Garmon, 2005). Active learning methodologies, such as Service-Learning (SL) and other participatory approaches, place students at the center of the educational process by engaging them in meaningful activities and equip learners to identify, critically analyze, and address real-world societal problems, thereby fostering their social responsiveness (Doolittle et al., 2023).

This study arises from the idea that universities possess a significant potential as catalysts for inclusive education and social cohesion (Hooli et al., 2025), particularly in shaping attitudes towards multiculturalism (Leiva Olivencia, 2011), a goal effectively advanced through integration of playful pedagogies and SL. The study uses a qualitative inductive–deductive thematic approach to explore the competences and attitudes of EFL pre-service teachers enrolled in the Primary Education Degree program at the Melilla campus of the University of Granada. This study aims to explore how a SL experience using playful pedagogies with newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers influences the development of professional, intercultural, and prosocial competences among pre-service EFL teachers.

2 Literature review

2.1 Service-Learning as a transformative method for prosocial and intercultural competence development

In multicultural and borderland regions, such as those found along the southern frontier of Europe, addressing diversity is not simply a pedagogical choice — it constitutes an educational imperative (Segura-Robles and Parra-González, 2019). Inclusive education aims

to remove barriers to learning, particularly for marginalized or migrant students, and views diversity as a resource rather than a challenge. It promotes the integration of multiple cultural perspectives and languages into the curriculum to foster social cohesion (United Nations, 2015). Higher education is challenged to respond to cultural plurality by implementing inclusive methodologies that promote equity, empathy, and intercultural dialogue (Arnaiz-Sánchez et al., 2021; Figueredo-Canosa et al., 2020; Peñalva Vélez and Leiva-Olivencia, 2019).

Among the methodologies aligned with these principles, SL stands out as a particularly effective approach for advancing inclusive education and social justice goals (Rodríguez-Gallego et al., 2024; Santos-Pastor et al., 2021). According to Bringle and Hatcher (2000), SL is a well-integrated, academically grounded pedagogy that merges community service with structured reflection to enrich learning, foster civic responsibility, and address community needs while advancing curricular objectives. Research consistently shows that SL promotes prosocial behaviors, empathy, and civic awareness in higher education students (Chiva-Bartoll et al., 2020), serving as a dynamic method to connect theoretical instruction with real-world social issues and to foster students' personal, academic, and civic development (López-Vázquez et al., 2024; Ruiz-Montero et al., 2022, 2023, 2024).

SL is increasingly recognized as a valuable pedagogical tool in teacher training, as it addresses diversity and fosters intercultural awareness, empathy, and appreciation for students' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Duarte et al., 2024). Moreover, SL aligns closely with current European educational policy frameworks that prioritize civic education, social cohesion, and intercultural competence as pillars of 21st-century higher education (European Commission, 2018).

In the field of language education, SL has also proven particularly effective in raising future teachers' awareness of linguistic diversity and social justice (Byram, 2020; Tinkler et al., 2018). By engaging with migrant communities, pre-service language teachers not only develop intercultural and prosocial competences but also internalize values such as solidarity, respect, and social responsibility, which are essential to civic education (Atlamaz, 2022; Hooli et al., 2023; Olszak, 2023). Additionally, SL has been shown to contribute to pre-service language teachers' academic and professional development, such as pedagogical and linguistic abilities, sociolinguistic consciousness (Chen, 2023) and critical language awareness (Duarte et al., 2024).

In contexts marked by high cultural and linguistic diversity—such as border regions or urban migration hubs—SL offers unique opportunities to build bridges between university students and marginalized populations, fostering mutual understanding and inclusive mindsets (Chiva-Bartoll et al., 2021). Furthermore, experiential SL projects have long-lasting impacts, shaping students' professional identities and influencing how they think and act both personally and professionally, ultimately preparing them to contribute meaningfully to inclusive and democratic societies (Pak, 2020).

2.2 The importance of prosocial and intercultural competences in teacher training

Higher education plays a crucial role in preparing socially responsible teachers capable of addressing complex societal

challenges, and acting with integrity in diverse, multicultural settings (Peñalva Vélez and Leiva-Olivencia, 2019). Cultivating prosocial and intercultural competences is particularly relevant for preparing pre-service teachers to effectively work in contexts where social cohesion and diversity management are pressing educational challenges (Guillén-Yparrea and Soledad, 2023; Peñalva Vélez and Soriano, 2010). This is especially important for EFL teachers—as English functions as a lingua franca in international communication, making the promotion of student’s intercultural awareness and understanding one of their core professional responsibilities (Suharni et al., 2024; Tatzali and Beazidou, 2023). However, previous studies reveal a persistent lack of systematic training in intercultural skills during teacher training education programs (Figueredo-Canosa et al., 2020; Massar, 2022). In response to this gap, SL has been shown to be effective pedagogical approach. Studies report that students who engage in SL projects with migrant communities, experience gains in prosocial competences, empathy, and social justice awareness (Lamonedo Prieto et al., 2019; Tinkler et al., 2018; Wehling, 2011). Such findings are especially relevant in university teacher education, where prosocial competences are essential for developing inclusive practices and fostering positive classroom climates (Leiva Olivencia, 2011).

As both prosocial and intercultural competences are key concepts in this study, it is necessary to clarify how they are understood. Firstly, prosocial competences are commonly defined as behaviors, such as helping, sharing, and comforting, which contribute to the well-being of the broader community (Freitas et al, 2021). Another definition describes them as voluntary actions intended to benefit others, which is seen something fundamental in educational context to creating positive and inclusive learning environments (Eisenberg et al., 2015). In educational contexts, schools have increasingly focused on fostering these behaviors, particularly in response to the social costs associated with antisocial behavior (Gottfredson and Aguinis, 2017).

Secondly, intercultural competence can be described as the ability to ensure shared understanding and interact with people as complex individuals (Byram, 2020), or as the cognitive, affective, and behavioral competences that enable individuals to interact effectively and appropriately in various cultural settings (Bennett, 2008). Intercultural competence is widely recognized as a combination of attitudes, knowledge, skills and awareness (Guo-Brennan, 2022). Following Morais and Ogden (2010), intercultural competences also include self-awareness and -reflection, referring to the recognition of one’s abilities and limitations related to intercultural interactions. Within educational settings, this reflective dimension is particularly emphasized. The capacity to interpret the world from diverse cultural perspectives is often referred to as intercultural literacy. Additionally, it should be noted that the term varies across academic disciplines, with labels such as intercultural competence, intercultural literacy, cultural competence, global competence, cross-cultural competence, or intercultural communication competence (Goldstein, 2025). Despite variations in terminology, intercultural competence stresses the ability to understand, communicate, and effectively interact with people across culture (Suharni et al., 2024).

2.3 Playful learning in civic and professional competence development

Play is an essential part of life, not only for children but also for adults. Playful pedagogies incorporate elements such as play, humor, and spontaneity into the educational experience, aiming to create an enjoyable and engaging environment for learners (Darwich et al., 2025). However, playful learning should not be confused with gamification, which centers on game-like elements, such as gaining points, as motivators. The essence of playful pedagogies is lightness and joy, which are not necessarily included in gamification (Darwich et al., 2025). Apart from joyfulness, Zosh et al., (2018) outline active engagement, meaningfulness, social interactivity, and iteration as the key principles of effective playful learning. These principles redefine play as a spectrum accessible across ages and contexts.

In contemporary education, playfulness is increasingly understood as a powerful tool for fostering curiosity, creativity, engagement and motivation in learning environments, regardless of learners’ age (Heidari-Shahreza 2024b, Hurme et al., 2023; Melasalmi et al., 2023). For adults, engaging in playful activities offers many advantages, including enhancing social connections, improving problem-solving capabilities, and making learning processes more accessible and enjoyable (Heidari-Shahreza 2024b; Tunçdemir, 2025). Similarly, research on adult EFL learners indicates that playfulness positively influences language proficiency and enhances communication (Barabadi et al., 2022).

Playful learning in primary teacher education is seen as a pedagogical approach that creates interactive and meaningful experiences to develop cognitive, social, and emotional skills crucial for future educators (Li and Kangas, 2024). That is particularly important, as an effective play-based learning often involves a teacher who has a playful attitude and thus incorporates joy, spontaneity, and humor into the learning process (Shin, 2022). Moreover, teacher training must equip future teachers with the skills to guide play effectively, as assistance is showed to enhance children’s learning and development because the adult can promote the child’s acquisition of a learning goal, even as the child’s agency is preserved (Skene et al., 2022).

Furthermore, teacher education programs require a “double didactic perspective”, as educators model effective teaching strategies for their students, who are themselves learning to teach (Pedersen, 2025). This dual focus creates the need for approaches that not only impart theoretical knowledge but also provide practical experiences, such as SL, which allows pre-service teachers to apply playful learning techniques in real-world contexts and challenging environments, such as working with vulnerable groups like adult migrants (Corral-Robles et al., 2022; Hooli et al., 2025).

Direct engagement allows pre-service teachers to cultivate competences, such as social and emotional skills (Darwich et al., 2025). However, participation does not always lead directly to learning; rather, learning can be fostered by including action, observation, and reflection. Thus, combining playful learning with critical SL experiences, including reflective processes, such as focus group interviews, can enhance the learning process.

2.4 English language education as a tool for migrant inclusion

In today's globalized societies, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education is increasingly recognized not only as a means of linguistic communication but also as a tool for promoting intercultural citizenship and social cohesion (Porto and Zembylas, 2020). The concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), as proposed by Byram (1997, 2020), highlights that EFL education should develop attitudes of openness and curiosity, intercultural knowledge, interpretive skills, and critical cultural awareness—key elements for fostering empathy, solidarity, and inclusion. This intercultural dimension is particularly relevant for migrants, who frequently face linguistic barriers that hinder access to education, employment, and healthcare. Through EFL learning, migrants can not only acquire communicative skills but also build intercultural awareness and the confidence to participate actively in community life, develop social networks, and advocate for their rights (Borlongan, 2023).

In border regions and urban migration hubs, English often functions as a lingua franca in intercultural encounters, making it an additional communicative bridge that complements the acquisition of the host country's national language (Hilmarsson-Dunn et al., 2010). Moreover, EFL classrooms can serve as spaces for negotiating identities and building “third places”, where learners construct new cultural meanings (Kramsch, 1993, 2013). In this sense, EFL teaching aligns with the notion of intercultural citizenship (Porto and Zembylas, 2020), encouraging students to critically engage with diversity and participate as active, responsible members of pluralistic societies.

From a pedagogical perspective, EFL teachers play a crucial role as intercultural mediators, promoting prosocial values and socio-emotional competences—such as empathy and solidarity—which are central to inclusive education (Gkonou and Mercer, 2017). Moreover, EFL educators can cultivate a sense of belonging and foster the social integration of migrant students by strategically employing certain pedagogies. Playful approaches are demonstrably effective in establishing engaging, psychologically safe, and stress-free learning environments, which not only boost motivation and accelerate language acquisition (Heidari-Shahreza, 2024b; Yang et al., 2022) but also enhance social cohesion within diverse learning communities. For migrant students, approaches such as translanguaging (García and Wei, 2014) have been shown to empower learners, validate their linguistic identities, and facilitate more equitable participation in multicultural classrooms. Thus, EFL education is not limited to language instruction but constitutes a transformative tool for building inclusive and intercultural learning communities.

3 Materials and methods

This study adopts a qualitative, hybrid inductive–deductive thematic approach to explore the experiences, perceptions, and professional growth of pre-service teachers participating in SL projects. This design enables a comprehensive examination of the research questions and offers deep insights into how SL experiences contribute to the development of professional,

prosocial, and intercultural competences in future EFL teachers working in multicultural and borderland contexts. The objective is not to generalize the findings but rather to explore how pre-service EFL teachers construct meaning from their involvement in a SL project with refugees and the ways in which this experience influences their personal, professional, and social development.

3.1 Participants

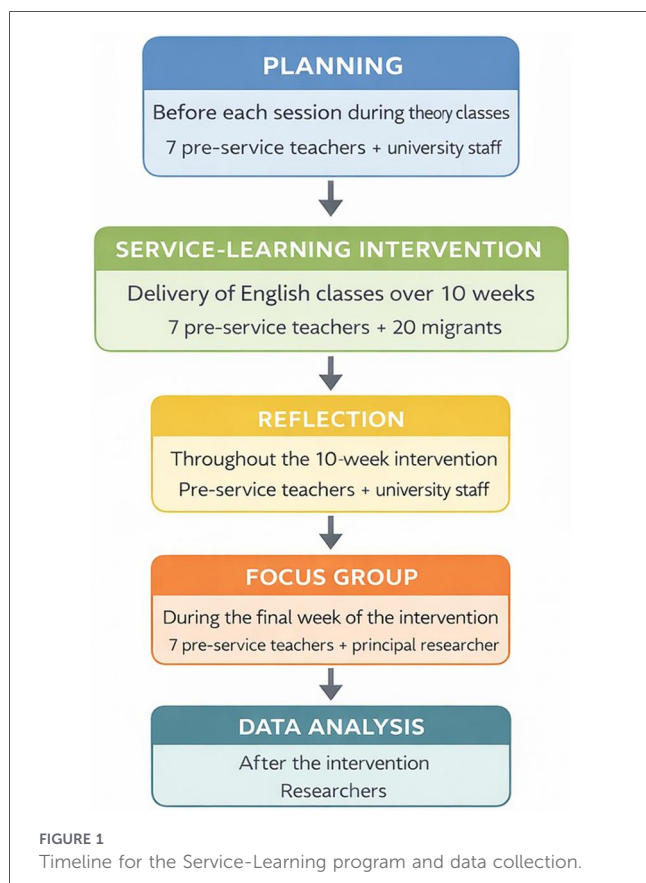
As a part of the nationally granted INCLUSO Project (Hooli et al., 2025), a total of seven undergraduate students (five female and two male) enrolled in the bachelor's degree in Primary Education at the Faculty of Education and Sports Sciences (Campus of Melilla, University of Granada) participated in this study. The ages ranged between 20 and 25 years old ($M = 22.0$, $SD = 1.83$). The compulsory SL intervention was integrated into a fourth-year course within the EFL specialization. Although participation in the data collection for this research was voluntary, all students who enrolled and completed the course agreed to take part in the study and provided informed consent in accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects.

3.2 Service-Learning program

The students participated in the SL intervention conducted at the Temporary Stay Center for Immigrants (TSCI) in the autonomous city of Melilla, Spain. As part of the experience, they taught English to a group of 20 recently arrived adult migrants, primarily from North and West Africa. This context—marked by linguistic and cultural diversity—offered a unique opportunity for the pre-service teachers to engage in real-life intercultural interactions, applying their didactic knowledge while developing prosocial and intercultural competences in a multicultural and transborder educational environment.

The SL intervention program took place over ten weeks, as seen in Figure 1, with one session each week lasting between 45 and 50 min. The pre-service teachers delivered self-prepared lessons to the migrant participants, who were divided into two groups. The sessions were conducted simultaneously in two separate classrooms to facilitate systematic organization and enhance the involvement of pre-service teachers. This arrangement required that pre-service teachers alternate teaching responsibilities among groups of 2 or 3 classmates. This collaborative structure ensured that all participants had the opportunity to engage in both direct instruction and observational learning, thereby maximizing their exposure to diverse classroom management scenarios and pedagogical challenges. The university staff provided continuous feedback to support their pedagogical decision-making.

All lessons and activities were planned under the guidance of the university staff during the weekly theory classes, some days before going to the TSCI for the practical sessions. Through this process, the university students engaged with curricular content of their course by designing, delivering, and assessing EFL activities aimed at supporting vulnerable groups.



When designing their SL sessions, the pre-service teachers were guided to incorporate inclusive teaching strategies that address varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. A challenge was that many of the migrants had little to no knowledge of English, with most only speaking their native languages. In this multilingual context, translanguaging was as a useful pedagogical strategy. The learning activities were designed around the key principles of effective playful learning outlined by Zosh et al. (2018)—active, engaged, meaningful, socially interactive, iterative, and joyful. The pre-service teachers integrated dynamic, motivating, and participatory activities such as simulations, games, role-playing, movement-based exercises, and Total Physical Response using sports facilities and outdoor areas. These strategies promoted active engagement among migrant learners, shifting them from passive reception to direct involvement. The sessions were designed to be meaningful, focusing on functional English for real-life scenarios like banking or doctor visits, making the learning immediately applicable to the migrants' daily lives. The nature of these activities fostered a socially interactive environment, crucial for language acquisition and building connections, particularly through group games and collaborative tasks. Furthermore, the pre-service teachers engaged in an iterative process, adapting their planning and strategies in response to learner engagement and feedback. Finally, the activities were designed to be infused with joy, reflecting the understanding that positive emotional states are integral to effective learning environments.

The SL intervention included a reflective component in which pre-service teachers took part in guided discussions that connected their practical experiences with relevant theoretical perspectives.

This reflective process culminated in a focus group interview during which the participants articulated their perceptions of the SL experience and its impact, analyzed the development of their professional competences, and reflected on the challenges during the intervention. To further encourage critical thinking, the interview included questions about participants' attitudes toward social justice and their awareness of the social injustices faced by migrants.

This reflective practice encouraged pre-service teachers to reconsider their assumptions, process the realities they faced during the intervention, and think more critically about the social justice implications of their practice. Pre-service teachers were encouraged to actively participate in these reflections, as their engagement was assessed alongside pedagogical and linguistic components during their self-prepared sessions.

3.3 Instruments

The focus group interview technique was chosen to evaluate students' SL experience due to its capacity to assess learning processes and outcomes, at the same time it is particularly suitable for gathering insights and capturing shared experiences (Buss Thofehrn et al. 2013; Krueger and Casey, 2015). The aim of this qualitative technique was to gather information about participants' perceptions, experiences, and reflections regarding the educational and personal impact of the program.

The focus group interview, which was conducted after the SL experience, was moderated using a semi-structured guide. This guide included open-ended questions related to the students' engagement in the intervention, their perceived learning outcomes, and especially, the impact of the experience on their views on cultural diversity, migration, social inclusion and social responsibility. The three key dimensions, which each included 4–6 open-ended questions, were:

- (1) The impact of SL on attitudes toward social justice, which assessed participants' awareness of social injustices faced by migrants, and the participants' commitment to promoting equity and social justice.
- (2) The impact of SL on prosocial behavior, which meant participants' empathy, sense of solidarity, active involvement, and commitment to defending the rights and dignity of migrants.
- (3) The impact of SL on attitudes toward cultural diversity, which assessed participants' attitudes, perceptions, and motivations toward intercultural interaction and solidarity with migrants.

3.4 Procedures

The data collection process involved conducting a face-to-face focus group interview, which was conducted within the same week as the last SL session. This session lasted approximately 50 min and was moderated by the principal researcher using a semi-structured guide. The discussion was audio-recorded with participants' prior consent and later transcribed resulting in 18 pages of transcription. The language of the interview was

Spanish, but the transcription was later translated into English. To preserve participant anonymity and confidentiality when referencing the data, identifiers consisting of “P” followed by a random number (1–7) were used, in line with established ethical practices in qualitative research (Buss Thofehrn et al., 2013).

The ethical guidelines and best practices established by the University of Granada (Spain) (approval code: 1732/CEIH/2020) were strictly adhered. During the implementation of the SL intervention, informed consent was obtained from all participants, who voluntarily agreed to take part in the study. They were fully briefed on the aims and content of the research, and their anonymity and privacy were carefully safeguarded throughout the process.

3.5 Data analysis

The process of qualitative data analysis was guided by a hybrid inductive–deductive thematic approach, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach enabled a systematic identification and interpretation of themes aligned with both theoretical constructs and participant perspectives related to prosocial, intercultural, and professional competences.

The analysis followed these six steps:

- (i) Familiarization with the data, through repeated readings of the transcribed focus group interview.
- (ii) Generation of initial codes, capturing salient features, recurring ideas, and meaningful patterns.
- (iii) Searching for themes, guided by both the theoretical framework and inductive observations from the data.
- (iv) Reviewing themes, refining the structure and coherence of emerging categories.
- (v) Defining and naming themes, ensuring conceptual clarity and analytical depth.
- (vi) Producing the final report, connecting the findings to the research questions and theoretical background.

Two researchers with expertise in language education and qualitative analysis independently coded the data using NVivo 14 software. Inter-coder agreement was calculated, resulting in substantial reliability (Cohen’s Kappa = 0.82). Discrepancies were resolved through consensus discussions.

To ensure trustworthiness and rigor, peer debriefing and external validation were carried out by a third expert, who reviewed the thematic structure and assessed consistency between data and interpretation (Flick, 2014). The main categories were derived deductively from the literature, while subcategories emerged inductively from participants’ discourse. These are presented in detail in the Results section, including frequency counts to illustrate the prominence of each category.

4 Results and discussion

This section presents the outcomes derived from the analysis of focus groups conducted with university students and the discussion of the findings. The word cloud (Figure 2) provides a visual representation of the most frequently mentioned terms.

To facilitate a more comprehensive interpretation of the findings, the results are structured along three primary categories, as seen in Table 1. These three categories were divided into subcategories contributing to better understand the competences that university students developed during and after their SL experience with a group of migrants in Melilla. The excerpts provide insight into the experiences and perspectives of the participating university students. To ensure their privacy and protect their rights, each student has been assigned a code, as mentioned earlier.

4.1 Prosocial competences

Prosocial competences, which can be defined as those that facilitate social interaction and commitment to the well-being of others (Freitas et al., 2021), was made up of three subcategories. The first subcategory *Critical Thinking and Breaking Stereotypes* includes the capability to critically evaluate personal values, challenge established social norms and stereotypes, and participate in conversations that promote equality (Maddamsetti, 2021). The second subcategory *Empathy and Respect* refers to the capacity for empathy and the ability to view situations from multiple angles, thereby facilitating respectful interactions and behaviors. The third subcategory *Social Responsibility* means social concern and compromise individuals feel for others and society (Morais and Ogden, 2010).

4.1.1 Critical thinking and breaking stereotypes

As can be seen in Table 1, among the three subcategories, *Critical Thinking and Breaking Stereotypes* received the highest number of

TABLE 1 Distribution of references by category and subcategory.

Category	Subcategory	Number of references
1. Prosocial Competences	1.1. Critical Thinking and Breaking Stereotypes	22
	1.2. Empathy and respect	13
	1.3. Social responsibility	15
	TOTAL	50
2. Intercultural Competences	2.1. Sensitivity towards cultural diversity	10
	2.2. Linguistic barriers and intercultural interaction	13
	TOTAL	23
3. Teaching and Pedagogical Competences	3.1. Contextualized Pedagogical Design	11
	3.2. Critical Reflection on Teaching Practice	24
	3.3. Application of Pedagogical Resources, Methods and Strategies	14
	TOTAL	49

Bold values represent the total number of references within each category.

dialogue, and context—and understanding the context—of SL activities are crucial for maximizing their benefits (Hullender et al., 2015; McDougle and Li, 2022). Furthermore, some studies (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005) argue that direct contact with such groups during SL, if not properly prepared and guided, can reinforce stereotypical assumptions. However, well-prepared SL programs have been shown to support capacity of empathy and social responsibility (Tinkler et al., 2018). In this study, the pre-service teachers had an opportunity to learn and understand the context; their weekly visits and classes in the somewhat controversial center proved to have a significant impact on their perception on migrants. Furthermore, the integration of playful pedagogies within these SL sessions was instrumental in creating supportive and positive learning environments that facilitated genuine interaction and enhanced social connections between the pre-service teachers and migrant participants, as seen in the following example:

“I believe we did contribute, particularly not in terms of theoretical knowledge, but rather by bringing enjoyment and an example of a closer, more personal relationship with people who were previously strangers to us. I think we contributed that sense of fun and joy, which, in a way, they needed — and perhaps we did as well.” (P2)

That experience enabled them to understand the nuances of migrant realities and break down stereotypes (Kim and Kim, 2019).

4.1.2 Empathy and respect

This subcategory emphasizes the importance of the capacity to understand others' feelings, thoughts, and experiences and to meet people and situations with consideration and respect (Llorent and Álamo, 2016; Ruiz-Montero et al., 2022). Cultivating empathy and respect is essential for fostering positive relationships and promoting social inclusion in diverse educational settings (Silva et al., 2023). Additionally, empathy is related to willingness to work on inclusion as a teacher (Vantieghe et al., 2023). Thus, this subcategory includes competences and attitudes which are essentials to connect with students from diverse backgrounds, understand their perspectives, and create inclusive and welcoming learning environments.

During the focus group interview, the *Empathy and Respect* subcategory was coded 13 times. The pre-service teachers demonstrated an ability to recognize the challenges faced by migrant students and expressed empathetic attitudes toward their circumstances. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

“When the time came to learn the word “swim” in English, well, one of the students commented that he had come swimming, and that many of them had come swimming from Morocco. So, as teacher, it impacts you a lot because you say, okay, I'm not just here to do some activities, vocabulary, and leave, but you realize the reality they have had and are experiencing...” (P3)

This reflection shows how the empathy increases when pre-service teachers engage directly with individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (Atlamaz, 2022).

Additionally, the pre-service teachers expressed that the experience facilitated their capacity, not only feel empathy and respect for the difficulties and cultural backgrounds of their students, but also show it to students:

“[...] we have created a very, very good bond, or quite strong [...] And I would love to continue contributing.” (P1)

Pre-service teachers mentioned that they had empathic bonds and relationships with migrants, which has been shown to lead to more responsive teaching practices (Juma, 2024).

“So I've always tried to maintain that—a close relationship with them and, above all, to support and guide them throughout the process.” (P1)

“In fact, we really enjoyed our participation there, and you realize that they are people just like you. Everything we had in mind due to misinformation, false rumors, and so on turned out not to be true — quite the opposite, in fact.” (P2)

4.1.3 Social responsibility

This subcategory reflects the degree of perceived social concern individuals feel for others, society, and the environment (Komrelliwar and Akre, 2023; Morais and Ogden, 2010; Ponce Iturralde and Cevallos Bravo, 2022). It also involves recognizing one's obligations to society and acting in a way that benefits others and promotes the common good (Güleç, 2020). This subcategory was mentioned 15 times by pre-service teachers. In their testimonies the responsibility towards the common good is highlighted, as seen in the following example:

“There is still a long way to go and it is not that easy, but I think we have started a turning point to improve our environment and ourselves.” (P2)

Social responsibility is also defined as recognition that different groups do not profit equally from equal opportunities (Kimanen, 2022), and these aspects were mentioned by some participants, for example:

“[...] this type of project can open opportunities [...] to see what other people are suffering and not discriminate against them.” (P4)

SL is demonstrated to not only promote civic engagement and social responsibility (Albanesi and Compare, 2023) but also commitment and taking action to challenge injustice in communities and societies (Tinkler et al., 2018). This was observed in the testimonies of pre-service teachers, as they also expressed their new commitment to defending the migrant community against misinformation:

“They use this type of center or this type of people to blame them for problems that have nothing to do with them, such as economic problems, racism, and so on. And it’s very easy because you don’t see what’s inside, you don’t see how we can help them. So, before someone tells you. It is better you experience it yourself to create your own opinion, your own vision, and that it is not tarnished by prejudices, or media, or false information.” (P3)

These reflections highlight a transformation in their understanding and a readiness to advocate for social justice (Martini et al., 2023). The participants expressed satisfaction with their efforts, but also a desire to continue participating in similar experiences. The pre-service teacher’s reflection reveals that the SL initiative was impactful and fulfilling. The pre-service teachers not only develop essential skills but also cultivate commitment to working towards social justice and equity.

4.2 Intercultural competences

In this study, intercultural competence was key as the target group of the intervention was migrant groups whose country of origin was mainly Morocco and Mali. As Spain is a multicultural country, where 19 percent of the population are foreign-born (INE, 2025), intercultural competence can be considered as an essential element of educational quality, promoting aspects like coexistence, appreciation of others, and interaction through mutual understanding (Peñalva Vélez and Leiva-Olivencia, 2019). Furthermore, Melilla has even more diversity due its geographical location, which make interculturality as one of the key competences to be developed by the students of the Faculty of Education and Sport Sciences of University of Granada in Melilla.

Across academic, professional, and governmental spheres, intercultural competence is now viewed as something indispensable for working and handling this increasingly interconnected and multicultural world (Goldstein, 2025). Within the context of initial teacher training Peñalva Vélez and Leiva-Olivencia (2019) identify four key skills that constitute this competence: positive attitudes towards cultural diversity, communicative ability, the ability to handle conflicts in intercultural situations, and awareness of one’s own culture and how it influences the vision and interpretation of reality. The development of these competences in pre-service teachers is crucial for addressing racism and promoting peaceful coexistence in diverse educational settings (Figueredo-Canosa et al., 2020).

Intercultural aspects were coded 23 times during the focus group interview, primarily reflecting students’ sensitivity and attitudes toward cultural diversity, as well as challenges in intercultural communication. Based on the content of these references, two subcategories were identified, as shown in Table 1.

4.2.1 Sensitivity towards cultural diversity

The subcategory *Sensitivity Towards Cultural Diversity* highlights the participants’ capacity to recognize cultural diversity, leading to better intercultural communication as people are willing to grasp, accept, and appreciate cultural differences (Segura-Robles and Parra-González, 2019). This sensitivity is important for teachers working in multicultural

contexts, as it can help them to create inclusive and equitable learning environments (Ankomah, 2020; Peñalva Vélez and Leiva-Olivencia, 2019; Segura-Robles and Parra-González, 2019).

The pre-service teachers showed their willingness to get to know other cultures and traditions during the focus group, as seen in the following example:

“It is always good to be willing to learn about new culture because it enriches us, because we live in a world with incredible diversity. And I think it’s always good to know a little and not judge at first.” (P5)

This comment reflects a mindset that values cultural diversity. At the same time, it encourages individuals to approach cross-cultural interactions with respect, both aligning with principles of intercultural competence. Furthermore, the pre-service teachers’ comments showed positive attitudes and open-mindedness towards other cultures and cultural differences. At the same time, they strongly rejected cultural barriers, as seen in this example:

“I think it’s nonsense! If that person has the same tastes as you, or you have something in common, what does culture or where they come from or their race have to do with the relationship you can maintain, such as a friendship or another kind of relationship.” (P1)

This participant suggested that focusing on shared interests and what people have in common is a key way to connect those from different cultural backgrounds. This perspective underscores that intercultural competence requires recognizing and challenging cultural stereotypes and prejudices (Semião et al., 2023). For future teachers, this means avoiding grouping students based on their cultural background and instead treating them as unique individuals with distinct learning needs.

4.2.2 Linguistic barriers and intercultural interaction

The subcategory *Linguistic Barriers and Intercultural Interaction* emerged as a significant theme, revealing that pre-service teachers found many challenges in communicating with—and teaching—individuals with whom they did not share a common language.

“Well, due to the difficulties they had because some of them didn’t even write or even know Spanish...or didn’t know how to pronounce some words, and so on, it made it more difficult.” (P3)

The pre-service teachers showed the necessity of equipping educators with strategies to bridge linguistic gaps and promote effective communication in diverse classrooms, which are issues highlighted in previous studies (Nurazizah et al., 2021; Thapa, 2019).

These experiences led the pre-service teachers to reach solutions and try to break down barriers. They showed the capacity to adapt using multiple strategies, such as translanguaging, non-verbal communication techniques, and translations, as seen in the following example:

“Since we did not have a common language, and we had never been in this situation of having to communicate without using language, it was difficult for us. I started to use more gestures, flash cards to communicate in a non-verbal way.” (P2)

The pre-service teachers demonstrated an effort to overcome linguistic obstacles to establish communication and relationships with migrant students. The findings also highlight the value of flexibility, multilingualism, peer support and translanguaging strategies, which can enhance students’ self-awareness, motivation, and confidence. These approaches allow for better understanding and communication across different linguistic backgrounds, inclusive learning environments and comprehensive learning (Eller and Nieto, 2021; Ocampo, 2023; Song et al., 2022). To conclude, the SL experience with migrants cultivated cultural competence and sociolinguistic awareness, which includes understanding linguistic repertoires, in pre-service teachers (Atlamaz, 2022).

4.3 Pedagogical-Didactic competences

In this study, the development of teaching and pedagogical competences emerged as a core outcome of the SL experience. Participants were placed in real educational scenarios that required them to design and adapt their instruction in response to the linguistic and cultural diversity of recently arrived migrants. This situated practice fostered key dimensions of pedagogical development, especially relevant in EFL teacher training, where educators are expected to function not only as language instructors but also as intercultural mediators and facilitators of inclusion (Byram, 1997, 2020; Porto and Zembylas, 2020).

The analysis yielded 49 codes related to this category, organized into three main subcategories: (i) *Contextualized Pedagogical Design* (11), (ii) *Critical Reflection on Teaching Practice* (24) (iii) *Application of Pedagogical Resources, Methods and Strategies* (14), as presented in Table 1. These dimensions reflect the evolving capacity of pre-service teachers to bridge theory and practice in a socially responsive way.

4.3.1 Contextualized pedagogical design

This subcategory highlights the participants’ ability to design pedagogical interventions that respond to the real-life needs and sociocultural contexts of their learners. Teaching English to recently arrived adult migrants—many of whom faced linguistic, educational, and social vulnerability—required pre-service teachers to move beyond standard lesson formats and instead prioritize functional, situated learning through playful pedagogies.

Participants reported a clear shift in how they conceived language teaching, emphasizing playful learning, usefulness and immediate applicability over abstract or decontextualized content. This pedagogical intentionality resonates with the notion of contextualized EFL instruction, where linguistic input is meaningfully embedded in learners’ everyday realities (Kramsch, 1993; Porto and Zembylas, 2020). As students noted:

“I didn’t want to seem like the typical strict teacher who’s just there to give lessons, but rather that they also really enjoyed

what they were doing, and that they could also see that what we were covering would be useful in their daily lives.” (P1)

“I always tried to prepare very functional sessions and activities—things like going to the bank or the doctor, useful things for them.” (P4)

This approach demonstrates an emerging awareness of intercultural citizenship and the transformative potential of EFL classrooms, especially in multicultural contexts. It also reflects a commitment to inclusive pedagogy, where activities are designed not only to teach English, but to empower students to navigate their new environment and interact with local services (Borlongan, 2023; Byram, 1997).

Some participants further described incorporating learners’ cultural knowledge and preferences—such as discussing familiar foods or interests—as a strategy to create relevant and emotionally engaging lessons, as seen in the following example:

“We asked typical questions such as which football team they support or what food they like, mainly in order to use that information to better plan the following session.” (P6)

This attention to personalization supports the development of empathy and reinforces the role of the EFL teacher as a cultural mediator (Gkonou and Mercer, 2017).

4.3.2 Critical reflection on teaching practice

The *Critical Reflection on Teaching Practice* subcategory explores how the SL experience prompted participants to reflect critically on their role as future EFL teachers and adapt their pedagogical decisions to the needs of a linguistically and culturally diverse learner group. Teaching English to newly arrived migrants—many of whom had little to no prior experience with the language—required pre-service teachers to reconsider conventional approaches and engage in flexible, student-centered decision-making. This evolution resonates with the idea of intercultural and socially responsive EFL education, where critical reflection is central to building inclusive teaching identities (Byram, 2020).

Participants described how the experience challenged them to observe, interpret, and rethink their strategies based on learners’ engagement and feedback. One participant recalled a key moment of pedagogical shift:

“I think it was a turning point, because as the sessions progressed and we had more information, we started planning differently. And I think you could say—even the students were enjoying the lessons more.” (P2)

This process of adapting instruction to learners’ responses illustrates the emergence of practical pedagogical knowledge, a form of situated reflection that supports inclusive EFL teaching. Rather than focusing solely on grammar or vocabulary, participants reflected on how playful language teaching could empower learners in real-world situations and how their own flexibility as teachers influenced outcomes.

Moreover, many reported increased confidence and awareness of their professional development path. For instance, a participant noted:

“In the end, that’s how you learn — by gaining hands-on experience and realizing that some activities simply don’t work... You might try fifty activities and only three of them actually work. But you still need to try those fifty... That’s what it’s really about. Teaching is a lifelong journey; as teachers, we are always on that journey — it never really ends.” (P3)

Pre-service teachers recognized that teaching English in multicultural settings involves constant adjustment, emotional resilience, and a willingness to learn from failure—competences essential for interculturally competent EFL educators (Gkonou and Mercer, 2017; Porto and Zembylas, 2020).

4.3.3 Application of pedagogical resources, methods and strategies

This subcategory focuses on how the pre-service teachers applied and adapted pedagogical resources, methods, and strategies to address the specific needs of a linguistically diverse group of learners who often had lower literacy. The SL experience served as a practical testing ground where students explored how to implement inclusive EFL teaching practices using creative, flexible, and non-traditional approaches.

Participants reported a process of trial and error, highlighting the importance of experimentation and responsiveness.

“We realized not all sessions or activities were equally successful... some worked better than others, and we learned how to adjust the planning. There were activities where participation dropped, and others where we could see they were more engaged.” (P3)

Participants described how dynamic and playful activities involving movement, visuals, role-play, and everyday topics (e.g., free time, food, or transport) led to increased motivation and participation. They also observed high levels of engagement and enjoyment evoked by playful learning pedagogical strategies among migrant participants. As one participant explained:

“A game like “capture-the-scarf game” using English vocabulary worked much better, and they enjoyed it so much that they even wanted to repeat it.” (P3)

This reflective use of diverse strategies aligns with current research in EFL pedagogy, which emphasizes multimodal learning, scaffolded communication, and the use of culturally relevant materials (Han, 2021; Porto and Zembylas, 2020). Pre-service teachers emphasized playful learning, employing tools such as flashcards, gestures, physical games, and storytelling—not only to teach vocabulary but also to facilitate interaction and build confidence among learners.

Additionally, participants demonstrated an understanding of differentiated instruction by modifying tasks according to learners’ abilities, interests, and prior knowledge. They showed

awareness of how playfulness, translanguaging and non-verbal communication could bridge linguistic and cultural gaps, particularly in multicultural classrooms (García and Wei, 2014).

5 Conclusion

This study highlights the significant role of SL in enhancing the professional, intercultural, and prosocial competences essential for pre-service EFL teachers. In line with previous research, participants reported growth in critical thinking, empathy, social responsibility, and sensitivity to cultural diversity (Alt et al., 2022; Chiva-Bartoll et al., 2020). They also developed adaptive strategies to address linguistic barriers, including translanguaging practices (Duarte et al., 2024), and demonstrated increased capacity to design contextualized and inclusive learning experiences (Duarte et al., 2024; López-Vázquez et al., 2024). These findings support existing evidence that SL meaningfully bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

Playful learning also proved both feasible and pedagogically valuable within this sensitive multicultural context. The activities implemented reflected the core characteristics identified by Zosh et al. (2018): they were active, socially interactive, meaningful, iterative, and joyful. Participants perceived these approaches as enhancing engagement, supporting language acquisition, and fostering genuine connections and confidence among migrant learners.

However, the findings of this study have certain limitations. The small sample size of seven participants limited the possibility of conducting rigorous quantitative analyses. Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs with larger samples of teacher candidates. Additionally, researchers should collect qualitative data from multiple stakeholders, such as university staff and community organizations, to triangulate findings and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the SL experience, as well as the long-term impact of SL and playful pedagogies on teachers’ competences and professional identity formation.

Overall, these findings confirm and extend prior research on SL in teacher education by illustrating how SL, when combined with playful pedagogies, can foster intercultural sensitivity, professional growth, and inclusive teaching practices.

In conclusion, by facilitating opportunities for future educators to learn in real-world contexts with migrants and by employing methodologies that integrate both SL and playful pedagogies, teacher training programs can promote the development of adaptive teaching strategies and deepen understanding of diverse learner needs. Additionally, such programs can enrich professional identity formation and foster a commitment to social justice and inclusive education. An active and reflective learning environment, grounded in playful learning pedagogies, can prepare future educators who are adaptable, inclusive, and equipped to create engaging learning experiences for all.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by The Ethics Committee of the University of Granada (Spain) (approval code: 1732/CEIH/2020). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

E-MH: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Data curation, Methodology, Formal analysis. JO-M: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. SC-R: Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Data curation.

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