

Through Someone Else's Eyes: A Case Study of a Facilitator's View of the Perceived Benefits of Equine-Facilitated Learning (EFL)

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Abstract

Equine-Facilitated Learning (EFL) is a non-riding program that involves working with horses and relies on experiential learning for the client. EFL is used to facilitate increased awareness of individual consciousness by using equine-oriented activities to obtain positive outcomes, with emotional, social, physical, and cognitive goals. Current research suggests that EFL develops social skills and improves a sense of self in a range of clients from their own point of view. Given that client accounts may offer a limited perspective in some contexts, this case study explores facilitator insights to deepen understanding of EFL benefits. Taking an inductive approach, a single 2-hour semi-structured interview was conducted with an EFL facilitator who has owned and managed an EFL establishment since 2011. Thematic analysis identified three higher-order themes: emotional intelligence development, behavioral benefits, and the impact of the triadic dynamic: the facilitator, horse, and client. These themes further revealed the facilitator's perception that the client's emotional intelligence developed through mindfulness, introspective awareness, confidence, and empowerment, leading to behavioral benefits in both physical changes and socialization. Finally, the importance of the triadic dynamic highlighted the role played by both the facilitator and the horse in mirroring, creating a safe space, and signposting for the client. This study adds an additional aspect to the current body of scientific research on the role that the facilitator and horse play in achieving the positive outcomes described. Future research should aim to gain further perspectives from those involved in facilitating EFL and to enhance understanding of the role the horse plays in the EFL process.

Keywords

Human-equine dynamics; role of the horse; emotional intelligence

1. Introduction

Equine-Facilitated Learning (EFL) is a non-riding program that involves working with horses and relies on experiential learning for the participant [1,2]. EFL is used to facilitate increased awareness of individual consciousness by using equine-oriented activities to obtain positive outcomes with emotional, social, physical, and cognitive goals [3,4]. Current research suggests that EFL develops social skills and improves a sense of self in a range of participants, including adolescent offenders and both adolescents and adults experiencing poor mental health [1,5]. Participants can develop new perspectives on old problems by addressing preexist-

ing perceptions through equine interactions [6,7]. However, most research focuses on the impact of Equine-Assisted Interventions (EAI) on at-risk populations [1,8,9]. Given the positive outcomes reported in a range of participant groups, EFL may promote improved mental health and well-being for the wider population [10–12].

Well-being is defined as a state in which the individual realizes their own abilities, the normal stresses of life can be coped with, they can work productively, and are able to contribute to their community [13]. Poor well-being is a current national issue that leads to increased stress on health and well-being services; there has been a doubling in the rate of

self-reported work-related stress, depression, or anxiety per 100,000 since the coronavirus pandemic in the United Kingdom (U.K.) has been found [14]. This suggests that there is a need to explore alternative methods of improving well-being while balancing the challenges of increased demands on the National Health Service (NHS) and well-being organizations. Individuals with higher levels of self-confidence trust in themselves to successfully engage with the world, take on opportunities and new challenges, deal with difficult situations, and are ready to take responsibility when something goes wrong [15,16], which aligns with the definition of well-being. Partaking in sport and learning new skills and abilities are associated with the development of a positive sense of self [17], and the development of skills related to equine interaction can increase self-confidence through feelings of accomplishment [4]. It could therefore be argued that engaging in EFL activities aimed at promoting and developing self-confidence could be a factor in promoting well-being in the wider population [16,18,19].

There is extensive research available on the experiences of adolescents and adults with psychological problems or addictions who participate in EFL and EAI [2,4,18,20–25]. Participant accounts, however, may be limited and lack perspective, often due to a lack of self-awareness as well as a potentially limited ability to communicate effectively [26,27]. Interviewing the facilitator instead of participants allows researchers to identify gaps in the topic area, barriers that participants face, and best practice examples, to provide information on a wide variety of participants, and to offer a new perspective on EFL benefits for self-confidence [26,28]. This case study, therefore, aimed to explore the perceived changes and benefits of EFL from the perspective of a facilitator, including their role as a facilitator, and to consider the role of the horse in EFL.

2. Case Background

The participant (female) was the founder and manager of a U.K. EFL establishment, founded in 2011. The facilitator had previously engaged in EFL as a form of personal self-development during her previous public service role. The facilitator was qualified as an Equine-Facilitated Learning Practitioner through Learning through Exploration and Active Participation (LEAP) and adhered to its professional and ethical standards within the management of the organization. The center was purposively chosen due to the large variation in its clients: men and women aged 14 to 70 years old, who engaged in EFL for a variety of psychological and social reasons. The center was also affiliated with a charity working with youth offenders (two programs per year; with 28 to 30 men per program). The center welcomed 101 clients in 2023 (ranging from children in care or struggling at school with mental health challenges to adults struggling with self-confidence or mental well-being) and ran EFL sessions over the course of 10 hours per client over several weeks. According to the facilitator, the facility's remit does not include working with clients who have diagnosed psychological disorders. All clients complete a consent form that includes relevant medical and psychological history; however, no formal diagnostic assessment was conducted as part of this study, and the researchers did not independently verify the clients' psychological status. The center also provided workshops open to anyone, lasting between 2.5 and 3 hours, focusing

on building self-confidence, creating boundaries, and developing or increasing emotional regulation and emotional resilience. No incentives were provided for participation in the research, and written and verbal consents were obtained prior to the start of the interview.

Most studies on the benefits of EFL are qualitative and include single-case designs [2,29]. Case studies are defined as an in-depth exploration of a variety of different clients [30]. A case study approach is designed not only to promote debates and critical thinking but also to serve as the first step toward developing a form of evidence-based therapy [30,31]. In addition, the unique perspective of the facilitator provides multiple vantage points for evaluating the benefits, both short- and long-term, of EFL on a range of clients, drawing on seven years of experience as an EFL facilitator [2,32]. For the purposes of this case study, the facilitator was asked to reflect only on the benefits for adult clients wishing to improve their confidence and well-being but who do not suffer from any form of psychological disorder (e.g., bipolar disorder or severe/chronic depression). A semi-structured interview was used to collect data, allowing the researcher to further investigate the participant's responses by asking follow-up questions. Having guiding questions helps prevent the interview from straying too far from the central questions of the study [33,34]. An interview guide (see **Supplementary Materials**) was developed based on existing research and focused on addressing the facilitator's perception and understanding of EFL, her experiences with EFL clients, and the implications of EFL for clients' self-confidence [9,20].

The study was granted ethical approval by the Hartpury University Human Research Ethics Committee (ETHICS2025-4-LR). Participant information, interview recordings, and transcripts were stored securely in line with the University's Code of Research Practice (2020) and data protection legislation [35,36]. The interview took place in person and was conducted by SDJ, lasting one hour and fifty-one minutes, and was digitally recorded using QuickTime on a MacBook Pro (2010). The interview was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized prior to analysis.

The interview was transcribed verbatim, and the data were analyzed through inductive thematic analysis, identifying, analyzing, and reporting the themes found within the transcript [28,37,38]. Patterns, words, and phrases were written down and then grouped according to similar meanings [39]. The themes were organized in detail and interpreted in terms of social theory, moving from a description of events to a broader interpretation of their connotations [37,38,40]. The themes identified by the primary researcher were independently confirmed by the other author.

Consideration of the researcher's characteristics could influence the interpretation of the findings. The research team was composed of a student researcher and a member of the academic staff specializing in sports psychology and equestrian sport science. Both researchers have extensive equine backgrounds, and the latter author has experience working within EFL and EAT settings. While shared equine experiences between the interviewer and the EFL facilitator offered opportunities to build rapport during the interview process [41,42], care was taken during data interpretation to

ensure that personal bias did not influence the results. Collaborative efforts among individuals with varied experiences provided multiple vantage points for interpreting the data.

3. Case Analysis and Discussion

The case study interview identified three higher-order themes relating to the perceived benefits of EFL for clients from the perspective of the facilitator: emotional intelligence development, behavioral benefits, and the impact of the triadic dynamic (Figure 1). Each theme is discussed in relation to current literature and its impact on EFL practice.

3.1. Emotional Intelligence Development

The facilitator discussed emotional expression and the recognition of emotions to promote positive changes in EFL clients. How one perceives, regulates, uses, and understands their own emotions and the emotions of others is referred to as Emotional Intelligence (EI) [43]. Through an increase in self-awareness and self-perception, being in control of one's emotions is seen as a benefit in using one's interpersonal management skills [44]. People who experience difficulties in emotion regulation are likely to experience difficulties controlling and reducing emotional experiences and are

more likely to express negative emotions [45]. Stress-related challenges have been associated with dysregulation of biological systems, such as the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis; although this study does not directly assess such mechanisms, it is possible that experiential learning approaches like EFL may support clients' perceived abilities to manage stress [46]. As psychosocial stress (life experiences) is one of the most common triggers of HPA axis dysregulation (which can lead to decreased self-confidence and negative experiences), it is recommended to use a biopsychosocial approach for treatment and prevention [46].

With the client developing an understanding of their emotions and how to recognize them, they are better able to perform (e.g., in sports or general life activities). Although more rigorous research needs to be done in the field of EI and the correlation between EI and its influence on stress, the preliminary findings indicate that those with higher levels of EI are better equipped to deal with stress, have more positive life outcomes, and experience better psychological well-being [47]. This study found that four specific lower-order themes reported by the facilitator could indicate the development of EI in clients of EFL: mindfulness, interoceptive awareness, confidence, and empowerment.

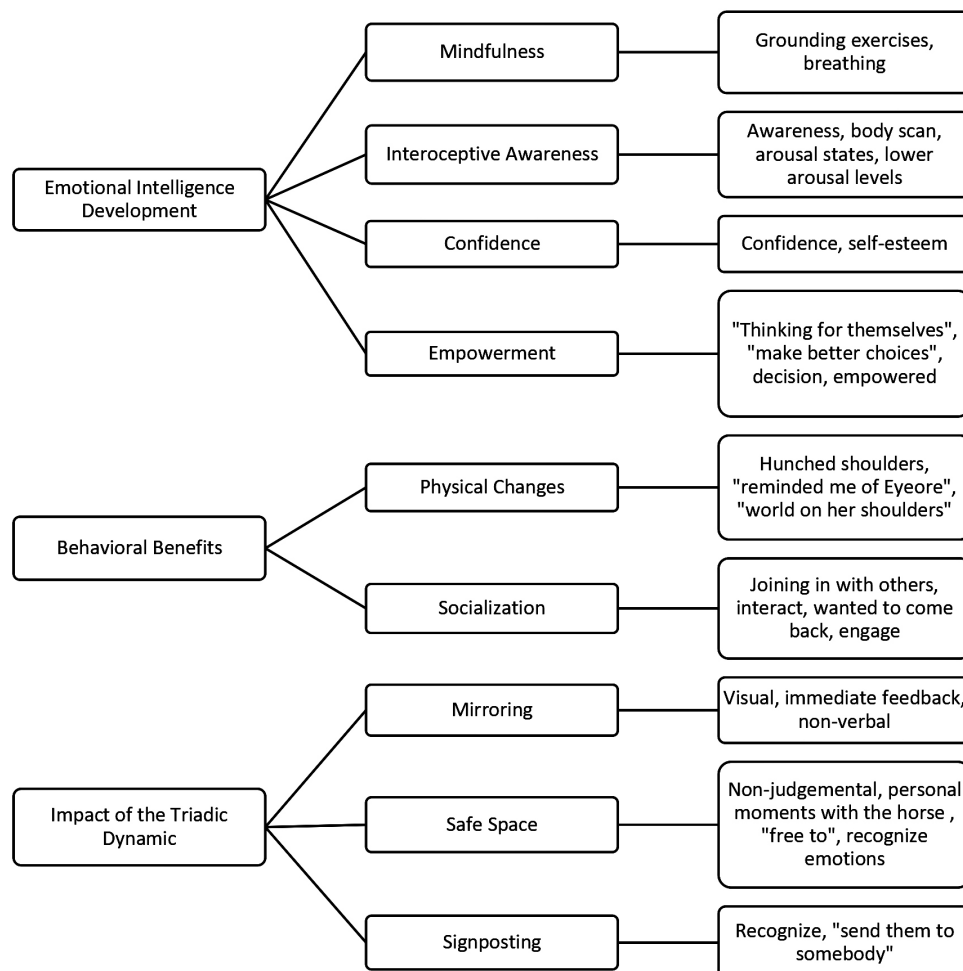


Figure 1: Higher- and lower-order themes.

3.1.1. Mindfulness

The EFL sessions begin with a body scan, a self-reflective exercise that focuses on helping the client become self-aware. This activity is defined as being mindful, in which the client is encouraged to intentionally pay attention to and nonjudgmentally accept feelings, sensations, and thoughts [48]. Afterward, a discussion takes place between the client and facilitator to acknowledge their emotions. Depending on how they are feeling, a specific exercise will be devised to achieve or overcome the objective or problem [49].

"Quite often they have default settings, but they do seem to remember the horse stuff, so they can refer back to it, and then they are better or able to deal with things as they arise."

Through participating in the act of mindfulness, the client can focus on skill-building and improving their mental well-being and resilience [50]. By having the mindful experience with the horses, clients can take away those experiences and see how they fit into their own lives [51].

3.1.2. Interoceptive Awareness

Having the ability to be aware of not only internal sensations within the body (e.g., hunger and pain) but also of emotional sensations is defined as having interoceptive awareness (IA) [52]. There are stated to be three stages of emotion processing: the first stage is the state of emotion, which can be executed and triggered subconsciously; the second is a state of feeling, which is represented subconsciously; and finally, the third is a state of feeling, which is made conscious [53]. There is an increasing recognition that the body and brain are coupled, which has aided scientific understanding of mental well-being [54]. It has been found that disruptions to this interoceptive system could contribute to a decrease in mental well-being [55]. When a client is not able to have effective IA, it has been suggested that these errors in interoceptive processing could be seen as biomarkers for different conditions [54]. With depression predicted to become the leading cause of disease burden by 2030, it is critical that opportunities such as EFL are presented to aid in improving mental well-being [56,57].

Through the development of IA, clients can work on recognizing and then self-regulating their emotions [58]. The facilitator mentioned that, to work with the horses, they would like the clients to sit at around 5 (out of 10) in terms of their arousal level. The arousal level can range from 0 (e.g., being asleep) to 10 (e.g., being extremely excited or anxious). By getting the clients to recognize their current arousal state, the facilitator can guide them through grounding exercises before proceeding with the EFL session [59].

"It's about managing people ... giving them the responsibility to manage their own states. If you feel yourself getting anxious, think of your anchor. Quite often when they go out and they're like 'something's happened' ... and then they anchor."

A variety of techniques are used, such as breathing, body scans, and anchors (something that the client thinks of that makes them feel good) [59,60]. By learning to recognize the signs of their arousal states and learning the techniques to self-regulate, the client can develop a better understanding

of the self and take these skills forward into their day-to-day lives [60].

The EFL facilitator identified that these skills are commonly developed by most clients over the course of their sessions. The facilitator discussed the clients' improved capability to recognize and understand why they were feeling a certain way, and how to cope with that, coping with anxiety and the unknown, learning to take a step back and break down the task when it was not working straight away (building blocks), changing their way of thinking, and changing their patterns.

"...for him to notice that when he's not stressed, the horses are happy to be around him, and it was like 'when I'm not stressed, people might like to be around me,' that kind of realization..."

It has been stated that higher levels of self-awareness lead not only to better decision-making and an understanding of one's own perception and thinking but also to the person becoming more authentic and confident within themselves [61].

3.1.3. Confidence

An increase in confidence is an attribute that the facilitator has often observed in their clients. The increase in confidence is relatively well documented within animal-assisted therapies (AATs) and sports coaching [44,49,62–64]. An increase in confidence is often seen due to the transferable life skills learned [65]. However, it has also been suggested that self-confidence could be situation-specific, meaning that a client might feel confident doing one thing but not another; this type of specific confidence is referred to as self-efficacy [66–68]. This contributes to behavioral change, and because self-efficacy expectations influence persistence, stimulation, thoughts, and behavior, it can be suggested that positive self-perception will lead to positive experiences [69].

"Doing this type of working with the horses... because they're big animals... it can be quite daunting for somebody... to go out in the field with a bunch of horses... just doing that is gonna boost somebody's self-confidence."

With clients experiencing positive outcomes in the tasks they undertake within the EFL sessions, it could be suggested that those building blocks discussed earlier are what help create the increase in confidence and, therefore, contribute to positive outcomes. With an increase in self-confidence, a positive behavioral change can be observed, and sometimes a change in the path the clients were following [49].

3.1.4. Empowerment

The facilitator highlighted the impact of the EFL sessions on the clients by recognizing the life changes they made as a result of their gained sense of empowerment. With confidence being an internal belief in one's abilities, empowerment aims to increase an individual's power and autonomy [70]. EFL activities are designed to encourage clients to make their own interpretations of what is happening within the session [71]. Often, the activities will be outlined with a simple instruction; it is then up to the client to conduct the activity in a way that they understand. They are asked to do what they think is right and are given the opportunity to think for themselves. When the horse responds to what the client asks of them, it helps build the client's feeling of empowerment—that they are capable of thinking for them-

selves and do not need to rely on everyone telling them exactly what to do [72].

"... it's just allowing yourself to consider the possibility that it can, you know, you can change, you're not stuck."

For some clients, this resulted in realizing that they did not want something anymore in their lives and made changes as a result. This was seen in the decisions around moving to another country or leaving long-term relationships that had not been working for a long time.

"The last I heard, she's (client) gone out to South America... it can be the difference between them carrying on as they were and... do something completely different with their lives."

The biopsychosocial model of health and illness was proposed in 1977 and has since been adapted as a potential model of well-being, stating that the psychological, biological, and social factors influence and interact with each other [73]. This indicates that each of these lower-order themes does not function independently but rather operates in conjunction with the others, with each factor exerting either a positive or negative impact on the rest [2].

3.2. Behavioral Benefits of EFL

The second higher-order theme identified was the behavioral benefits of EFL, followed by the second-order themes of physical changes and socialization.

3.2.1. Physical Changes

Clients were seen to become more confident in themselves when it came to asking the horse to do a certain task, or they would go from being a hunched-up person to bringing their shoulders back and smiling. There are a variety of studies that have looked at the impact of animal interactions on the physical characteristics of the clients. It has been suggested that 97% of family doctors agree that there are health benefits of owning pets, along with 71% of pet owners who are aware that pets improve mental and physical health [74]. From there, it can be suggested that this could be a reason why it is seen to improve mental well-being within EFL clients.

"She (client) really had the weight of the world on her shoulders... she reminded me of Eeyore. She came back about two weeks later; she absolutely bounced out of the car, completely different person."

Numerous studies have found that different emotions (such as anger, sadness, and happiness) can be identified correctly by looking at a person's gait [75–77]. The factors that play a key role in these perceptions are the amount of arm swing, heaviness of footsteps, and walking speed [78].

"She went from being this little hunched-up little person who was so down on herself to shoulders back, head up, big beaming smile, like 'YES, yes I can do this!'"

It has been suggested that changes in mood and confidence result in changes in body posture [78]. By being able to identify physical changes, the facilitator can gain a better understanding of the client and adjust the session to aid in the client's progression, which could result in a reduction in the number of sessions required without reducing the positive outcomes [79]. Studies that have looked at progression in psychotherapy due to feedback from the client have shown

clinically significant positive outcomes. In this scenario, the same could be applied, as the client gains a better understanding of self and develops self-confidence [80].

3.2.2. Socialization

One of the social benefits observed within EFL was the socialization aspect and the desire to socialize afterward. One of the clients was reluctant to participate in the session and was described as not wanting to interact with anyone and keeping to themselves [81]. This was further explained by the social worker, who advised that the client had been let down quite a lot in their life, which resulted in a lack of trust in others and themselves [82]. The interaction between the horse and the client, potentially through the role that the horse plays within EFL, led to a change. This change impacted how the client interacted with other people afterward.

"There was something that happened with her and the horse on the yard, and that interaction between them just really made a difference to her for that afternoon....followed that up with the social worker, and she said... they have noticed a [positive] difference in her."

This further aligns with studies that have examined the impact of EFL and EAT on social interaction changes among clients. Although these studies have focused primarily on clients with intellectual and physical disabilities, this does not diminish the fact that similar changes have been observed in clients with low self-esteem as well [82], suggesting that EFL may positively influence clients' social cognition and behavior.

3.3. Impact of the Triadic Dynamic

The final higher-order theme identified was the impact of the triadic dynamic on client interactions (facilitator, horse, client), with the lower-order themes of mirroring, safe space, and signposting.

3.3.1. Mirroring

The facilitator discussed how they believe that horses can serve as an instinctive behavioral mirror, meaning that they are able to provide clients with immediate visual feedback about their behavior [2]. Practitioners in this field, as suggested by various studies [2,20,83], subscribe to the belief that working with horses decreases the likelihood of clients ignoring or avoiding the recognition of their own internal emotions (cognitive avoidance). Despite this effect not being empirically tested, it is considered a widely held belief within the field of EFL.

"She's talking about this guy; the horse just gets further and further and further away from her ... as far away from her as he could possibly get... [it could be suggested that] the clinginess pushed him [the guy] away and the horse just mirrored that and went to the end of the line."

The horse is believed to reflect what the participant is feeling. Through practitioner interpretation of equine responses to human body language, arousal states, and affective cues, the immediate feedback can be discussed with the client [84,85]. With the horse being a prey animal, it is believed by practitioners to be able to sense incongruence in clients and see it as a potential danger. To prevent the horse from perceiving it as a dangerous situation, the clients are required to recognize their own emotions and regulate them, intensifying

the client's sense of being present [21,86,87]. It has been suggested that instant feedback and nonverbal communication allow for establishing trust between the horse and client [4,88]. By promoting trust and instant visual feedback, the client is believed to be unable to engage in cognitive avoidance and is given the opportunity to address what they are seeing in the present moment. The added feedback from the facilitator is therefore critical to aiding in the client's development of self [89]. It is therefore important for the facilitator to be present during the sessions, as this helps the client gain a better understanding of themselves. This, in turn, allows for an increase in self-confidence and a decrease in stress, leading to an improvement in the client's overall well-being [90,91].

3.3.2. Safe Space

It is speculated that animals give less complex social signs than humans, and therefore create a reduced processing load, which could allow for a greater degree of social understanding and interaction [92]. Since the human-equine relationship is based on the development of mutual trust, positive interactions with horses provide a starting place for exploring and developing trust and relationships with another living being [2,93]. The facilitator highlighted the importance of the creation of a safe space to aid in the development and maintenance of that trust within the triad. As horses are not able to make a distinction regarding the client's religion, social, or racial standing, the client is simply a being, creating a nonjudgmental environment [11,94].

"...people give us tissues and stop us [from crying] ... because they can't deal with it. So a part of it [EFL] is allowing somebody the space, if they want to cry and howl and wail, then they can... once they're a bit more together, then we can kind of talk about it... it's really important to give people the space to emote however they need to."

By creating a positive learning situation, the development of learning and behavior results in the association of positive emotions and interpersonal management skills. The EFL sessions could therefore result in improved self-perception, leading to an increase in self-confidence [9,18,95,96].

3.3.3. Signposting

The facilitator discussed the importance of having the appropriate training to be aware of the support network available to direct clients to the correctly qualified professional if needed [97]. Signposting is an informal process, where information is given to clients to ensure they are being supported in a way that addresses their needs [98]. The clients are required to fill out a form, allowing for the opportunity to disclose any history or trauma; however, this information can sometimes be left out or misinterpreted. It is crucial for the facilitator to be able to recognize trigger moments during the sessions, making signposting an important factor to consider [99,100].

"Even though I am not qualified to deal with it [significant trauma], I'm able to recognize it and can send them to somebody who is."

It can be difficult for clients to contact new agencies, and it is therefore important that the facilitator takes the first step to recognize an issue (not diagnosing), and to signpost to the most appropriate agency [100,101]. By the facilitator helping to bridge the gap between the client and the refer-

ral, it can help instill confidence and encourage the ability to seek appropriate help [99,102]. This allows the client to contact the correct service rather than potentially being added to a waitlist for a service that is not able to help them in the first place [97].

3.4. Limitations

This case study was conducted based on the EFL Center owner's perception of the effectiveness of EFL. This position within the business could promote bias in the perceived benefits and improvements; therefore, there is no way of objectively assessing whether the participant's beliefs are true. Though the aim of the interview was to ask unbiased questions, the researcher was a novice in the field, and the framing of the questions could be reviewed for future research to ensure that challenges and negative experiences are also explored in more depth. As this study is based on a single case, it can only explore one participant's interpretation of the perceived impact of EFL on their clients. A further limitation is that client experiences were reported indirectly via the facilitator's reflections rather than through direct client accounts. While this approach was approved by the University's Research Ethics Committee and ensured that no identifiable information was included, it may have constrained the depth of insight into clients' perspectives and may carry implications when sensitive outcomes are described. Future research should take a qualitative, interview-based approach with a larger sample population of facilitators, both from similar backgrounds and those with diverse backgrounds and roles within an EFL business.

3.5. Future Research and Industry Recommendations

The present case study has offered a rare insight into the facilitator's perception, and as such, it adds a different point of view to current research surrounding EFL. Future research should address the limitations presented to aid in a broader contextual view of the perceived impact of EFL on clients. This would help strengthen the validity of the findings and contribute to a more comprehensive evidence base. Considering the role of the horse, which has been highlighted as crucial in this study, warrants further research to explore it in greater depth. This could offer insights into the perceptions that shape clients' experiences. Understanding the different human-equine dynamics across various contexts may enhance the current understanding of the horse's impact.

4. Conclusion

This case study explored the perceived changes and benefits of EFL from the perspective of the facilitator, their role as a facilitator, and the role of the horse in EFL. The outcomes of this case study demonstrate that EFL has a perceived positive benefit for the client, resulting in emotional intelligence development and behavioral benefits, which concur with the findings of other studies. It demonstrates the impact of the roles of both the facilitator and the horse, highlighting the environment in which EFL takes place. This case study adds an additional aspect to the present body of scientific research by suggesting that the roles of the facilitator and the horse play important parts in achieving the positive outcomes described. Future research should aim to gain further perspectives from those involved in facilitating EFL and to enhance understanding of the role the horse plays in the EFL process.

Supplementary Materials

The **Supplementary Materials** include the interview guide used in this study.

Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization, SDJ & ED; methodology, SDJ; validation, SDJ & ED; formal analysis, SDJ & ED; resources, SDJ; writing-original draft preparation, SDJ & ED; writing- review and editing, SDJ & ED; visualization, SDJ; supervision, ED; project administration, SDJ & ED. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability

These data are confidential and therefore not publicly available.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval

This study received ethical approval from the Hartpury University Ethics Committee (ETHICS2025-4-LR). The study complied with the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki.

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