

Conceptualizing and Implementing Empathetic Pedagogy in EFL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Grounded in humanistic and social-constructivist theories, this qualitative case study examines how teacher empathy manifests in EFL classroom practices and relates to students' perceived learning experiences. Data were collected from 25 EFL students through reflective journals, semi-structured interviews with 18 of these students, and interviews with 5 teachers for triangulation. Thematic analysis revealed three interrelated dimensions of empathetic pedagogy: cognitive empathy (understanding learner difficulties, adaptive strategies, flexible learning opportunities), affective empathy (emotional sensitivity, encouragement, safe classroom climates), and empathic concern (constructive feedback, motivating low-confidence learners, consistent care). Students experienced these as concrete, observable practices rather than abstract traits. Teacher empathy was associated with greater motivation, engagement, emotional safety, and communicative confidence, alongside reduced anxiety and learning pressure. Findings suggest that empathy, when enacted as deliberate pedagogical practice, is closely linked to more positive students' perceived learning experiences, with implications for teacher training that prioritizes emotional attentiveness alongside instructional competence.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is no longer understood as a mechanical transfer of knowledge from teacher to student, rather it is increasingly recognized as a social and relational process, because learning occurs through interaction, dialogue, and emotional engagement, making affective domain a crucial component of holistic students' development. In this regard, Nodding's care theory positions education as a fundamentally relational act, emphasizing care, empathy and ethical responsibility within teacher-student relationship in classroom (M.-K. Chen & Shih, 2025). Relational ethics prioritizes the caring encounter, where teachers practice receptive engrossment in their students' needs, fostering a supportive environment that serves as the essential prerequisite for all cognitive and academic growth.

In the contemporary theories of Second language acquisition (SLA), the focus of acquiring language has shifted from purely cognitive models to an integrated approach that acknowledges the affective domain influences. However, recent empirical evidence suggests that the emotional climate of the classroom is a primary determinant of language acquisition success (Majumder & Beri, 2024). Specifically, the implementation of empathetic pedagogies- and instructional approaches rooted in emotional resonance- has been proven to catalyze students' outcomes in learning process.

Teacher's empathy comprises three interconnected dimensions: cognitive empathy, affective empathy, and empathic concerns. Cognitive empathy refers to the capacity to understand another person's view point, affective empathy involves recognizing and sharing others' emotional experiences, while empathic concern extends beyond understanding and feeling emotions to include responding to others with care and compassion (Guan et al., 2024). From this viewpoint, empathy extends beyond an individual disposition and functions as a professional stance that shapes how educators understand their student, plan learning activities and address both academic demands and emotional well-being (Zembylas, 2012).

Within EFL Instruction, empathy plays a particularly critical role, in this context, teachers' empathetic capacity can become a pivotal factor in students' language learning trajectories but alleviating anxiety, enhancing motivation, and mediating cultural differences (Li & Costa, 2025). Research indicates that when teachers prioritize empathy, there is a measurable boost in student motivation, and by lowering the affective filter empathetic engagement reduces language anxiety, allowing students to take greater risks with the target language (Fortuna, 2025). Integrating empathy in to the EFL Framework has been shown to increase specific English language skills, as students in supportive environment exhibit higher levels of engagement, improved oral fluency, and a more profound commitment to communicative tasks.

Indonesian regulatory frameworks, specifically Law No 14 of 2005 and Government Regulation no 19 of 2005, establish a multidimensional construct for educator proficiency. These statutes categorize teacher competence into four essential pillars of: pedagogical, personality, social and professional. In the context of language education, an instructor's mandate is not confined to developing linguistic mastery or designing multifaceted instructional strategies; rather, it fundamentally includes the cultivation of supportive interpersonal dynamics and the establishment of a prosocial classroom climate (X. Chen, 2024). Personality and social competencies is the legal basis of empathetic practice to build interpersonal dynamics in education, however it does not provide a manual on how to perform empathy in the classroom.

Teacher empathy involves recognizing and emotionally attuning to students' experiences while responding in supportive and constructive ways (Wang & Kang, 2023). Educators who adopt empathetic pedagogical practices demonstrates heightened sensitivity to learner's need and problem, enabling them to foster safe and inclusive classroom environments (Damianidou & Phtiaka, 2016). In such learning condition, it is significant in EFL Contexts, as they encourage students to feel accepted, take communicative risks while using English and sustain stronger motivation to engage in effective language learning. A study by Tettegah and Anderson (2007) identified that teacher empathy as the capacity to recognize and communicate an understanding of students' concerns while interpreting situations from learners' perspectives in classroom.

Despite widespread agreement on the importance of empathetic pedagogies in education, a significant gap persists between teacher's cognitive understanding of empathy and its practical enactment in the classroom. Many educators intellectually implement empathy values, recognizing to be supportive, caring and responsive to students' emotional needs (Jia et al., 2024). However, this belief often remains at the level of intention rather than action; teachers frequently struggle to translate empathy into concrete pedagogical strategies, classroom interactions, and instructional decisions, as a result, empathy becomes an abstract ideal rather than a visible classroom practices on daily basis. Addressing this gap requires moving beyond empathy as a personal disposition toward empathy as teachable, observable, and systematic pedagogical practices in the classroom.

This study investigates how EFL Teachers bridge the gap between their internal understanding of empathy and their classroom reality through qualitative analysis of classroom practices and teacher-student interactions (Hieu & Thao, 2024). This study is guided by two research questions: (1) How are empathetic pedagogies enacted by teachers in authentic EFL instructional contexts? (2) How do empathetic pedagogical practices influence students' engagement, emotional safety, and willingness to communicate? By documenting these practices systematically, the research seeks to develop a repertoire of empathetic actions that can be adapted by other EFL Practitioners. It is intended to move empathy from an abstract belief to a set of observable, actionable strategies that support effective language learning.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore students' experiences of empathetic pedagogies in EFL classrooms and examine teachers' empathetic practices within a university context, in several content-based courses that took place from 2nd to 6th semesters. This study focuses on a single case; this design allows for a rich, contextualized exploration of complex educational phenomena that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone (Farahian & Rezaee, 2012). Qualitative research seeks to investigate social and educational phenomena using data gathered from multiple sources, including observations, interviews, instructional designs, interventions, and archival materials (Taherdoost, 2022).

2.2 Participants

This study involved 25 third-year students in 6th semester enrolled in the English Education Study Program at a university in Bogor, Indonesia. All participants underwent content-based courses, during which they were exposed to empathetic pedagogical practices across multiple EFL classroom environments from 2nd to 6th semesters. Purposive sampling was employed as the primary sampling strategy, consistent with Creswell's (2013) assertion that qualitative research requires selecting information-rich cases from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance. All 25 participants submitted reflective journals documenting their empathetic pedagogical experiences across three years of study. Following journal submission, 18 of the 25 students voluntarily participated in semi-structured interviews, allowing deeper exploration of themes emerging from their reflective journals. These interviews were conducted individually to elicit detailed accounts of students' experiences with empathetic pedagogical practices. To triangulate findings, five teachers consistently identified by students as practitioners of empathetic pedagogy were also interviewed using a semi-structured format. Teacher interviews focused on their pedagogical approaches and intentions, providing a complementary perspective that strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the study's overall findings.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout this study in accordance with established principles of qualitative research ethics. Prior to data collection, all participants received clear explanations of the research purpose, procedures, and their rights as participants. Informed consent was obtained from all 25 participants, reflecting Creswell's (2013) assertion that researchers must respect the rights of participants by gaining informed consent. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. To safeguard confidentiality and anonymity, participants were assigned coded identifiers from Participant 1 - Participant 25, teacher 1- teacher 5, ensuring no personally identifiable information was disclosed in the findings. Furthermore, collected data, including reflective journals and interview transcripts, were stored securely and accessed exclusively by the researcher. These measures align with Guillemin and

Gillam's (2004) ethical principle of procedural ethics, which emphasizes institutional compliance and ongoing relational responsibility toward participants throughout the entire research process.

2.4 Research Instruments

The primary data collection instruments in this study were document analysis and semi-structured interviews to capture participants' experiences of empathetic pedagogical experiences. Document analysis focused on participants' reflective learning journals, which were written consistently over the course of one academic semester. The course employed empathetic pedagogies. These journals served as a valuable source of longitudinal data, allowing students to articulate their thoughts, emotions, and learning experiences as they unfolded in response to empathetic pedagogical practices in the EFL Classroom. In addition to document analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted to deepen and clarify the findings derived from the journals about the empathetic pedagogies experiences. This is the item sample of the instrument:

Table 1. Dimensions, Sub-dimensions, and Sample Interview Items of Empathetic Pedagogy

Dimensions	Sub-dimension	Interview Item Example
Cognitive Empathy <i>Understanding students' learning conditions</i>	Understanding learning difficulties	Did your lecturer ever openly acknowledge the challenges of learning English?
	Adapting teaching strategies	Did your lecturer adjust the way they explained things based on what students needed?
	Flexible learning opportunities	Were you given choices in how you participated?
	Recognizing emotional states	Have you ever felt anxious about speaking English in class? Did your lecturer seem to notice?
Affective Empathy <i>Sharing and responding to students' emotions</i>	Emotional warmth & encouragement	How did your lecturer respond when you gave an incomplete or incorrect answer?
	Safe classroom atmosphere	How would you describe the overall atmosphere of your English class?
	Providing additional academic support	When you did not understand something, how did your lecturer respond?
Empathic Concern <i>Compassionate and supportive actions toward learners</i>	Motivating low-confidence students	Were there times when you felt discouraged or lacked confidence?
	Consistent care through actions	Did you feel the lecturer genuinely and consistently cared about your progress?
	Learning motivation	Did your lecturer's empathetic approach affect how motivated you felt to study or practice English?
Effects of Empathetic Pedagogy <i>Impact on students' learning experiences and outcomes</i>	Engagement & reduced pressure	Did you feel more willing to participate in this class?
	Emotional & academic support	Did you feel emotionally supported as a learner, not just academically helped?
	Communicative confidence	Do you feel more confident communicating in English now?

2.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out through a thematic analysis process. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2021). Coding followed six-phase thematic analysis: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Journals and interview transcripts were systematically read, coded, and categorized to identify recurring patterns related to empathetic pedagogy and its influence on learning experiences. Students' journals and interview transcripts were carefully read, coded, and categorized to identify recurring patterns, themes, and meanings related to empathetic pedagogy and its influence on learning experiences. By triangulating data from reflective journals and interviews, the study enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Trustworthiness was also established through member checking with participants by reviewing a summary that describes three emphatic dimensions and asking for feedback to enrich the analysis and confirm its accuracy to maintain the credibility of the research findings. To further ensure interpretive accuracy, the coded data and emerging themes were cross-checked by two independent experts in English education, a process aligned with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) concept of peer debriefing, which they describe as a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer to explore aspects of the inquiry. This expert validation confirmed the credibility and consistency of thematic interpretations drawn from participants' journals and interview transcripts.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings will be displayed under 4 main themes of: experiences of cognitive empathy, affective empathy, empathic concern, and the effect of empathetic pedagogies experiences in the EFL Classroom.

3.1. Cognitive Empathy Experiences in the EFL Classroom

3.1.1 Understanding Students' Learning Difficulties

One of the most prominent expressions of cognitive empathy identified in the data was the lecturer's awareness and acknowledgment of students' learning difficulties. Students repeatedly described how the lecturer recognized common challenges faced by EFL learners and addressed them explicitly during instruction. One participant concluded in the journal that:

"The lecturer always acknowledged our challenges as English learners and openly explained the obstacles we might face." (Participant 3)

This statement illustrates that the lecturer did not assume English learning to be a neutral or effortless process, but openly recognized the cognitive and emotional barriers that students encounter, such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, and lack of confidence in oral communication. Interview data further reinforce this finding. One participant explained:

"I felt a bit shy to speak. My lecturer was actually really helpful. She explained things again in a simpler way." (Participant 4)

This response highlights two key aspects of cognitive empathy: the lecturer recognized students' fear of making linguistic errors and, second, rather than dismissing or minimizing this fear, the lecturer responded by modifying instruction. This suggests that cognitive empathy was experienced through instructional clarity and responsiveness, rather than through verbal reassurance alone.

To triangulate the findings, the teacher was also interviewed regarding her awareness of students' learning difficulties. Her responses closely mirrored the experiences described by students, confirming that her instructional decisions were consciously rooted in empathetic awareness. When asked about how she approached students' challenges in the EFL classroom, the teacher explained:

"I always try to remind myself that these students are learning not in their mother language. So before I even start a lesson, I think about what might be difficult for them." (Teacher 1)

Overall, the findings demonstrate that students interpreted cognitive empathy as teachers' ability to anticipate learning difficulties, openly acknowledge them, and adjust teaching accordingly. Such practices created a learning environment in which students felt understood rather than judged, which in turn supported their willingness to engage with challenging language tasks.

3.1.2 Adapting Teaching Strategies Based on Students' Needs

The second sub-dimension of cognitive empathy identified in this study involved the lecturer's ability to adapt teaching strategies in response to students' cognitive readiness, learning preferences, and sociocultural backgrounds. One participant reflected in the journal:

"She truly understands that we grasp concepts more easily when they are connected to experiences in our daily lives." (Participant 7)

This statement suggests that the lecturer possessed a clear understanding of how students process information. Rather than relying solely on abstract explanations or textbook definitions, the lecturer connected lesson content to students' everyday experiences. By grounding instruction in familiar experiences, the lecturer demonstrated awareness of students' learning limitations and strengths. Interview data further elaborated on this point:

"The way my lecturer explains things is not too formal, it feels relaxed and chill. The examples she gives are always relevant to our daily lives." (Participant 11)

This response indicates that cognitive empathy was also reflected in the lecturer's communication style. The use of informal language, age-appropriate expressions, and relatable examples made students feel cognitively comfortable and socially connected.

Teacher's opinion mirrors participants' reflection that the lecturer's informal, age-appropriate communication style made learning feel accessible and personally meaningful, the teacher confirms:

"I always ask myself: will my students actually relate to this? If the example feels too distant or too textbook-like, I change it" (Teacher 2)

These findings suggest that cognitive empathy extends beyond recognizing students' difficulties to actively redesigning instructional delivery. The lecturer's teaching strategies were intentionally aligned with students' cognitive development, linguistic competence, and sociocultural context.

3.1.3 Providing Flexible Learning Opportunities

Students consistently described classroom practices that allowed for choice, collaboration, and varied modes of participation. One participant noted in the journal:

"Students are always actively involved in the learning process through brainstorming sessions, group discussions, and collaborative work." (Participant 14)

These instructional practices reflect an understanding that students differ in how they learn, participate, and express understanding. This recognition is a core element of cognitive empathy, as it involves anticipating differences in learners' cognitive and social engagement. Interview data further supported this finding:

"My lecturer gave us flexibility. We could choose topics, decide to work alone or in groups, and choose how to participate." (Participant 10)

Allowing students to choose topics and modes of collaboration enabled them to engage in ways that matched their abilities and confidence levels. From the students' perspective, this flexibility was not perceived as a lack of structure but as thoughtful instructional design.

To further validate these findings, the teacher confirmed that providing varied participation opportunities was a deliberate pedagogical choice grounded in his awareness of students' diverse learning needs. When asked about his use of collaborative and flexible activities, he explained:

"I never want to force everyone into the same mode of participation. So I try to offer options: choose your topic, choose your partner, and choose how you want to contribute." (Teacher 3)

The lecturer's willingness to accommodate different learning preferences demonstrated an understanding of students' diverse cognitive needs. Cognitive empathy, therefore, was experienced through inclusive teaching practices that respected individual differences rather than enforcing uniform expectations.

3.2 Affective Empathy Experiences in EFL Classroom

3.2.1 Recognizing Students' Emotional States

Several students emphasized that speaking English in class often triggered anxiety, especially for those who lacked confidence in their language proficiency. One student explained that the lecturer encouraged learners to share personal experiences and opinions without imposing pressure or strict expectations, which significantly alleviated feelings of fear and intimidation:

"I felt the lecturers were quite sensitive to students who lacked confidence or felt anxious. The lecturer encouraged us to share experiences without pressure, so it didn't feel intimidating." (Participant 3)

This statement illustrates how students experienced affective empathy through the lecturer's awareness of emotional vulnerability and their ability to adjust instructional approaches accordingly.

To corroborate students' perceptions of emotional sensitivity, the teacher was interviewed about his awareness of and responses to students' emotional states during EFL classroom interactions, one teacher explained:

"In my class, I always tell students at the beginning, there are no wrong answers here." (Teacher 3)

Importantly, the absence of explicit references to emotional recognition in the documentation data suggests that this aspect of empathy was enacted implicitly through interactional practices rather than formal instructional planning.

3.2.2 Responding with Emotional Warmth and Encouragement

Documentation data revealed that students frequently associated the lecturer's kindness with increased comfort and ease during learning activities. One participant noted:

"The lecturer is genuinely very kind and warm in the way she treats every student..." (Participant 8)

This perception of kindness was further elaborated in the interview data, where students explained how lecturers expressed encouragement through verbal affirmations and supportive feedback. One student reflected on this experience as follows:

"My lecturer often gave positive comments like 'Good try' or 'you can do it,' even when our answers were not perfect." (Participant 1)

From the students' perspective, emotional warmth and encouragement functioned as protective factors that fostered confidence and resilience.

To validate students' perceptions of emotional warmth and encouragement, teacher was interviewed about her deliberate use of affirmative and supportive language in the EFL classroom. When asked about how she maintained a warm and encouraging classroom atmosphere, one teacher reflected:

"I always try to find something positive to say first, even when a student's answer is completely wrong."
(Teacher 4)

The findings suggest that affective empathy was experienced not through dramatic emotional expressions, but through consistent, everyday acts of affirmation and kindness.

3.2.3 Creating a Safe and Comfortable Classroom Atmosphere

Both documentation and interview data strongly supported this theme, with students consistently describing the classroom environment as relaxed, supportive, and non-threatening. One participant described this experience as follows:

"The lecturer never makes it feel like a rigid, pressured class. Instead, everything flows naturally."
(Participant 17)

This description suggests that the lecturer's communication style played a key role in shaping the emotional climate of the classroom. Rather than maintaining a distant or authoritative stance, lecturers appeared to engage students in a manner that encouraged dialogue and mutual understanding.

Interview data further reinforced this finding; several students noted that they did not feel judged by either the lecturer or their peers when expressing themselves, even when they made mistakes. One student explained:

"For me, the classroom atmosphere felt safe and supportive. I didn't feel judged when speaking English, either by the lecturer or from my friends." (Participant 8)

This sense of non-judgment was central to students' interpretation of affective empathy. Emotional safety enabled students to take risks, experiment with language, and engage more actively in classroom activities.

To further validate students' perceptions of a safe and comfortable classroom atmosphere, teacher was interviewed about her intentional efforts to cultivate emotionally secure learning environments, one teacher reflected:

"From the very first meeting, I try to set a tone that says: this is a safe space." (Teacher 1)

The lecturer's role in setting a respectful tone and modelling supportive behaviour appeared to influence peer interactions as well, contributing to a collective atmosphere of acceptance.

3.3 Empathic Concern Experiences in EFL Classroom

3.3.1 Providing additional academic support

The documentation data indicate that lecturers demonstrated empathic concern by delivering timely and direct academic feedback aimed at supporting students' learning progress. One participant noted that:

"The lecturer always used direct and constructive feedback whenever we submitted our work or answered questions in class." (Participant 21)

Highlighting how feedback functioned as a key form of instructional support, this direct feedback reflected lecturers' attentiveness to students' academic needs and their readiness to intervene when learning difficulties arose. As one participant explained,

"The lecturer supported students by giving constructive feedback, being open to questions, and providing additional explanations. "(Participant 2)

Importantly, feedback was not perceived merely as evaluative or corrective; instead, it served as guidance designed to help students deepen their understanding and improve performance.

The teacher was interviewed about her approach to providing academic feedback and additional instructional support. When asked about how she approached giving feedback to students, one teacher explained:

"I always make sure my feedback is specific and actionable. I want my students to know exactly what they did well and precisely what they need to work on next." (Teacher 2)

Such academic assistance signalled lecturers' genuine commitment to student success and exemplified empathic concern enacted through responsive and practical teaching strategies.

3.3.2 Encouraging and motivating low-confidence students

Empathic concern was also reflected in lecturers' efforts to encourage and motivate students who experienced low confidence or diminished motivation. One participant remarked,

"Whenever I felt discouraged or lost my focus, he always found the right words and the right approach." (Participant 19)

This response indicates that lecturers not only recognized students' struggles but also took deliberate action to sustain their engagement and perseverance.

Students reported that when they felt anxious or uncertain, lecturers responded patiently, offered clear guidance, and provided positive reinforcement. As one participant described,

"When students felt anxious or lacked confidence, the lecturer responded with patience and clear guidance. They also praised small progress, which helped us feel more confident." (Participant 10)

Such encouragement reduced students' anxiety, strengthened their self-belief, and increased their willingness to participate actively, demonstrating empathic concern through motivational and emotionally responsive practices.

To validate students' perceptions of motivational support, teacher was interviewed about his deliberate efforts to encourage and sustain the engagement of low-confidence students. His responses confirmed that motivating discouraged learners was a deeply intentional and empathetically grounded aspect of their teaching practice. He said, *"I pay very close attention to students who go quiet or seem disengaged (Teacher 3)".* This account powerfully mirrors all prior findings that lecturers responded to anxiety with patience, clear guidance, and praise for little progress.

3.3.3 Showing consistent care through actions

Students consistently described the lecturer as patient, approachable, and supportive across the duration of the course. One participant stated,

"Overall, the lecturer showed care and concern by being patient, approachable, and supportive throughout the course." (Participant 9)

This consistency was perceived as a meaningful form of care that extended beyond isolated moments of assistance.

Interview data further revealed that lecturers regularly monitored students' understanding and continuously offered help when difficulties arose. As one participant noted,

"He paid attention to students' difficulties and always tried to help when we didn't understand the material."
(Participant 10)

For students, empathic concern was therefore experienced as ongoing, sustained support rather than sporadic intervention.

Consistent with previous studies linking empathic concern to supportive teaching behaviours (Cooper, 2004; Zembylas, 2012), these findings also confirmed by teacher's account that said *"I am always watching: not in a threatening way, but in a caring way (Teacher 3)"*. However, unlike research emphasizing empathy as a reaction to existing difficulties (Goroshit & Hen, 2014), the present study suggests a preventive orientation, where lecturers proactively cultivated supportive learning conditions before major challenges emerged.

3.4 The effect of empathetic pedagogies experiences in EFL Classroom for Students

3.4.1 Empathetic Pedagogies Increased Learning Motivation

Many students reported that empathetic behaviors demonstrated by the lecturer, such as encouragement, positive feedback, and attentiveness to students' experiences, significantly influenced their desire to engage in learning activities. As one participant stated,

"I felt genuinely more motivated to learn and actively apply English teaching methods after experiencing my lecturer's empathetic approach." (Participant 22)

This excerpt illustrates how empathetic teaching practices extended students' motivation from passive participation to active application of knowledge. Interview data further clarified that students perceived motivation as being closely linked to the lecturer's supportive and non-judgmental approach. Rather than discouraging participation, the lecturer's empathetic responses fostered a sense of psychological safety that encouraged students to continue trying.

3.4.2 Empathetic Pedagogies Enhanced Engagement and Reduced Learning Pressure

Students reported that empathetic teaching practices helped create a positive and supportive atmosphere where they felt comfortable participating without fear of negative judgment. Documentation data indicated that students were more willing to ask questions, share opinions, and engage in discussions when they perceived the lecturer as empathetic and supportive, as one participant noted:

"Ever since my lecturer started creating such an empathetic and supportive classroom environment, I have felt far more engaged and willing to participate actively." (Participant 15)

Interview excerpts revealed that students associated empathy with a sense of emotional safety. When lecturers demonstrated patience, understanding, and openness, students felt less anxious about making mistakes or expressing incomplete ideas.

3.4.3 Empathetic Pedagogies Perceived Emotional and Academic Support

Another effect of teacher empathy evident in the findings was students' perception of being emotionally and academically supported. Both documentation and interview data showed that students felt reassured knowing that the lecturer was attentive to their needs and willing to provide guidance when difficulties arose, as one participant said:

"My lecturer genuinely cared about both my emotional wellbeing and my academic progress in every learning session." (Participant 13)

Students reported that such support influenced their emotional experiences in the classroom, increasing positive emotions such as enjoyment, confidence, and interest while reducing negative emotions such as anxiety and frustration. This finding aligns with research demonstrating that empathetic teaching practices are associated with increased positive emotions and decreased negative emotions, which in turn enhance engagement and learning outcomes in EFL contexts.

3.4.4 Empathetic Pedagogies boost the development of Communicative Confidence

Students attributed their increased confidence to the interactive and participatory learning environment facilitated by the lecturer. Through activities such as role-playing, group discussions, and collaborative tasks, students were provided with opportunities to practice expressing ideas in supportive settings. One participant explicitly noted,

"This helps me increased my confidence in communicating ideas effectively in a multicultural environment."
(Participant 3)

This interview excerpt highlights how empathetic pedagogy supported not only linguistic development but also confidence in intercultural communication. From the students' perspectives, the lecturer's choice of interactive strategies reflected an understanding of their emotional needs and communicative challenges. Rather than emphasizing linguistic accuracy alone, the focus was placed on meaningful communication and

Based in Teachers' interview, it is acknowledged that their empathetic practices were deliberately designed to foster psychological safety and sustained learner engagement. When asked about the overall impact of empathetic teaching on students' learning experiences, one teacher reflected:

"When I approach my students with genuine empathy: truly listening, encouraging, and caring about their progress, they become more willing to take risks, more confident." (Teacher 2)

This response confirms that empathetic pedagogies were experienced by both students and teachers as profoundly impactful, validating the study's central findings regarding the inseparable relationship between teacher empathy and meaningful, motivated, and confident EFL learning.

Discussion

The findings answer the first research question by showing that empathetic pedagogy in EFL classrooms is enacted not as an abstract disposition but as a set of concrete, observable instructional decisions distributed across three interlocking dimensions of empathetic pedagogy. Cognitive empathy was enacted through lecturers' explicit acknowledgment of learners' linguistic struggles, adaptive re-explanation, and flexible participation structures. This supports Bialystok and Kukar's (2018) argument that cognitive empathy is a rational, perspective-taking act rather than an emotional merger with the learner. Affective empathy findings similarly confirm Wang & Kang (2023) contention that teacher empathy and immediacy shape learners' affective outcomes, but this study nuances that claim: affective empathy was rarely expressed through overt emotional language and instead operated through routine, almost invisible acts, small affirmations. The empathic concern findings present a more significant departure from prior literature. Where M.-K. Chen & Shih (2025) Frame empathic response primarily as reactive, triggered by visible signs of student difficulty, this study's teachers described proactive, preventive monitoring: watching for disengagement before it escalated into failure. This reframes empathic concern as anticipatory care rather than remedial intervention, aligning more closely with Noddings' (2013) relational ethic of ongoing attentiveness than with deficit-response models of teacher support.

Addressing the second research question, the data confirm Fortuna, (2025) claims that empathetic engagement reduces language anxiety and increases motivation and risk-taking, and extend Zembylas (2012) positioning of empathy as a professional stance by demonstrating its downstream effects on

communicative confidence specifically, not just general engagement. Students consistently linked empathetic practice to a willingness to attempt spoken English despite imperfection, suggesting empathy operates as a mediating variable between classroom climate and communicative output, not merely between climate and comfort. These findings imply that empathy is a teachable competency rather than an innate trait, embedding it into practicum supervision, microteaching feedback, and reflective journaling will be beneficial. Concretely, EFL teacher education could incorporate rubrics distinguishing cognitive, affective, and empathic-concern behaviours, allowing teachers to receive targeted feedback on perspective-taking, emotional responsiveness, and consistency of care that allows empathetic pedagogies practices.

4. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how empathetic pedagogy is enacted in EFL classrooms and how it shapes students' engagement, emotional safety, and communicative confidence. The findings show that teacher empathy operates as a multidimensional, learnable pedagogical practice rather than an abstract personality trait. Cognitive empathy was enacted through lecturers' perspective-taking, adaptive explanation, and flexible learning opportunities that helped students feel intellectually understood. Affective empathy shaped the emotional climate of the classroom through warmth, encouragement, and a consistently safe atmosphere, often communicated implicitly through tone and everyday interaction rather than explicit emotional language. Empathic concern was experienced as sustained, action-oriented, and notably preventive, with lecturers monitoring students' progress and intervening before difficulties escalated. Together, these three dimensions produced measurable effects on students' motivation, engagement, reduced learning pressure, and communicative confidence, confirming that empathy functions as a structural rather than peripheral force in EFL learning.

For EFL lecturers, these findings suggest that empathy can be cultivated through deliberate, everyday instructional choices: acknowledging learner difficulty openly, adapting explanations to students' realities, offering flexible participation, and sustaining encouragement even amid error. For teacher education programs, empathy should be integrated explicitly into training curricula, practicum supervision, and reflective teaching exercises, rather than left as an implicit expectation under broader personality or social competency standards.

This study is limited by its small sample size and single-institution context, which restrict the generalizability of findings across different EFL settings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data from journals and interviews may be subject to recall bias and social desirability, without direct verification through observed classroom behavior. Future research should incorporate classroom observation to triangulate self-reported experiences with actual teacher practice, employ mixed-methods designs to capture both the depth and prevalence of empathetic pedagogy, and adopt longitudinal approaches to examine how empathetic teaching influences language development and learner confidence over time.

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