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Empathetic Pedagogies in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Teaching: Specific Strategies and Experiences from the Mekong Delta Context

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Abstract: In the current landscape of global education, the importance of understanding and effectively integrating emotional intelligence into teaching practices has gained significant attention. Within this framework, the role of empathy in teaching is emerging as a crucial component, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings where cultural and linguistic barriers present unique challenges. This study delves into the intricate role of empathy in EFL teaching, particularly within the Mekong Delta region. Employing qualitative research methods, in-depth interviews with 10 EFL educators were conducted to extract nuanced insights about their perceptions and experiences regarding empathetic practices in the classroom. The findings, after conducting thematic analysis, revealed multiple thematic areas: the challenges of balancing empathy with academic rigour; the influence of personal experiences on empathetic practices; the relationship between empathy and student motivation; empathy's role in conflict resolution and classroom management; and the profound impact of empathy on teachers' self-growth and renewal. Through the lens of socio-cultural theory and transformative learning theory, the study illuminates the deep intertwining of empathy with socio-cultural dynamics and transformative educational experiences. While the results underscore the paramount importance of empathy in enhancing classroom dynamics, student motivation and teacher development, they are grounded in the specific socio-cultural context of the Mekong Delta.

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Therefore, generalisations to broader EFL contexts should be made with caution. This research contributes to the burgeoning literature on empathetic pedagogies, emphasising its significance in modern EFL teaching environments.

Keywords: EFL; empathy; Mekong Delta; university lecturers, strategies, experiences

1. Introduction

Empathy, traditionally understood as the capacity to understand and share the feelings of another, is a foundational element in building effective human relationships. In educational contexts, teacher empathy plays a pivotal role in shaping positive student outcomes, fostering supportive learning environments, and enhancing teacher-student rapport (Meyers et al., 2019). Previous research has often highlighted the general importance of empathy in education, but there remains a lack of detailed analysis on how empathy specifically functions within the EFL teaching environment. This oversight in the literature signifies the need for focused studies in this area. Teachers who are empathetic are more equipped to recognise students' emotional and cognitive needs, facilitating a more inclusive, respectful and nurturing classroom. However, the specific dynamics of empathy in teaching, particularly in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, have not been thoroughly explored, representing a significant gap in current research.

In the context of EFL teaching, empathy assumes a particularly significant role. EFL students often navigate the challenges of not only grasping a new language but also coming to terms with the cultural nuances and subtleties associated with it. In such an environment, the teacher's ability to empathise can be the linchpin in a student's language acquisition journey, reducing anxiety, promoting motivation, and bridging cultural divides (Li & Costa, 2023). The motivation for this study stems from the need to better understand how empathy is operationalised in these settings and its impact on both teachers and students. This underlines the importance of addressing the aforementioned gap, especially in diverse and rapidly changing educational landscapes.

Vietnam, with its rapidly expanding higher education sector and increasing emphasis on English language proficiency, provides a unique context to explore the subject (Thao & Mai, 2022). In examining the Vietnamese EFL teaching context, this study aims to fill a critical void in the existing literature. Vietnamese EFL teachers in higher educational institutions are at the forefront of this linguistic and cultural exchange. Yet, there exists a knowledge gap in understanding the practices and strategies these educators employ to foster and promote their empathy in classroom settings. This gap is particularly pronounced in the context of Vietnam's evolving educational system and its impact on EFL teaching.

This study seeks to delve into the lived experiences of Vietnamese EFL teachers in higher educational contexts, examining their perceptions, challenges and the pedagogical approaches they adopt to cultivate empathy in their teaching practices. The objectives of this research are to identify and analyse the strategies

employed by Vietnamese EFL teachers to foster empathy, understand the challenges they face in this endeavour, and explore the implications of these practices for EFL teaching and learning. The research questions focus on how empathy is integrated into teaching practices, its effects on student engagement and learning, and the ways in which cultural and contextual factors influence empathetic teaching in the Vietnamese context. By understanding these practices in depth, this research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on empathy in education, offer insights for teacher training programmes, and pave the way for more empathetic and effective EFL teaching methodologies in the Vietnamese context and beyond. This addresses the critical problem gaps identified, providing a comprehensive understanding of empathy's role in EFL teaching and its potential to transform educational practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Empathy in Education

Empathy's centrality in education is not a new idea. Rogers (1975) emphasised the critical role of empathy in promoting optimal learning environments. Researchers have consistently found that teacher empathy is linked with numerous positive outcomes, such as increased student motivation, enhanced classroom atmosphere, and better student-teacher relationships (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2009). Within a pedagogical context, teacher empathy can lead to more individualised instruction and enhanced feedback, acknowledging the unique struggles and strengths of each student (Ahmed & Mikail, 2023).

2.2 The Unique Role of Empathy in EFL Teaching

EFL teaching is characterised by its unique challenges: linguistic barriers, cultural nuances and often, the emotional struggles students face in grasping a new language. Studies from various parts of the world, including Europe, Asia, and the Americas, indicate a universal recognition of the importance of empathy in this context. For example, research in the European context emphasises the role of empathy in addressing the diverse cultural backgrounds of EFL learners (Di Giunta et al., 2010; Williams & Mercer, 2016), while studies from Asia highlight empathy's role in overcoming the anxiety associated with learning English as a non-native language (Han, 2005). Williams and Mercer (2016) found that EFL teachers who exhibited empathy fostered a safer environment for language learning, where students were more likely to take risks in using the new language, knowing that their struggles were understood and valued. Furthermore, cultural sensitivity, an offshoot of empathy, helps in bridging misunderstandings that may arise due to cultural differences inherent in language learning (Maxwell, 2008).

2.3 Empathy in Vietnamese Higher Educational Context

While Vietnamese education has traditionally been teacher-centred, there has been a paradigm shift towards student-centred approaches in recent years, with empathy becoming a sought-after trait in teachers (Thao & Mai, 2022). Research conducted within Vietnam shows how empathy in teaching addresses the specific socio-cultural and educational challenges faced by Vietnamese students. This includes studies highlighting how Vietnamese EFL teachers navigate the cultural expectations of respect and authority in the classroom while employing

empathetic practices (Nguyen, 2008). Additionally, insights from Vietnamese educators on the integration of empathy into their teaching methodologies provide a richer understanding of empathy's role in this specific cultural context. However, the exact nature and manifestation of empathy within Vietnamese classrooms remain largely underexplored.

2.4 Promoting Empathy in EFL Classrooms

Several strategies have been identified in the literature to promote empathy in EFL settings. These include reflective teaching practices, where teachers actively reflect on their interactions with students (Thao et al., 2023); the use of literature and narratives to bridge cultural gaps (Fernández-Llamazares & Cabeza, 2018); and ongoing teacher training programmes that emphasise the affective dimensions of teaching (Zembylas, 2010).

2.5 Challenges in Cultivating Empathy

While the merits of empathy are well-documented, cultivating it in the classroom is not without its challenges. Some teachers may perceive it as a naturally inherent trait, underestimating the potential for its development (Dewaele, 2019). In contexts where curricular demands are high, teachers may prioritise academic objectives over emotional connections. Moreover, cultural factors might influence how empathy is perceived and expressed (Goroshit & Hen, 2016).

Empathy stands as a crucial element in teaching and learning, more so in EFL contexts. This heightened importance in EFL settings arises from the additional linguistic and cultural barriers that students face. Unlike in a native language environment, EFL learners not only grapple with the complexities of a new language but also often encounter unfamiliar cultural references and norms embedded within it. Empathy from teachers in these settings helps bridge these gaps, providing a supportive environment that acknowledges and respects these unique challenges. Additionally, empathy plays a key role in reducing the anxiety and frustration that often accompanies language learning, fostering a more positive and effective learning experience. While the benefits of teacher empathy are universally acknowledged, its application and promotion, especially in unique cultural contexts like Vietnam, warrant further exploration. This study aims to fill this gap, shedding light on the practices and perceptions of Vietnamese EFL teachers in higher educational settings.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

The current study adopts a qualitative research approach, aiming to obtain a deep and contextual understanding of Vietnamese EFL teachers' practices in promoting empathy within higher educational contexts. Qualitative research, rooted in interpretivism, posits that reality is constructed by individuals in their interactions with the world (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach aligns well with our intent to explore the nuanced and multifaceted experiences of educators as they navigate the challenges and joys of fostering empathy in their classrooms.

Underpinning our research design are two key theoretical frameworks. The first is the socio-cultural theory (SCT) (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978), which emphasises the significance of social interactions and cultural contexts in shaping cognitive development. This theory is pertinent as it recognises the interplay between culture (in our case, the Vietnamese higher educational context) and individual cognition (teachers' perceptions and practices). By adopting this lens, we acknowledge that the ways in which EFL teachers understand and practice empathy are inextricably tied to their socio-cultural milieu.

The second framework is the transformative learning theory (TLT) (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009), which posits that adult learning often involves deep shifts in perspective, prompted by critical reflections on one's experiences. As teachers engage in reflective practices to foster empathy, they might undergo such transformative shifts, re-evaluating their pedagogical approaches and relationships with students. By embedding our research within this framework, we aim to capture not just the practices of educators, but also the deeper cognitive and affective processes that underlie their journey towards empathetic teaching.

3.2 Participants

The participants of this study were 10 EFL lecturers from two prominent higher educational institutions located in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. The Mekong Delta, with its distinct cultural and socio-economic dynamics, offers a unique backdrop against which to explore the empathetic practices of tertiary EFL educators. The selection of participants was purposeful, aiming to ensure a breadth of experiences and backgrounds. Among the 10 participants, there was a range in terms of years of teaching experience, educational qualifications and areas of specialisation within EFL teaching.

In keeping with the ethical guidelines of qualitative research, several measures were put in place to ensure the dignity, rights and well-being of the participants. Firstly, all participants were informed about the objectives, procedures, potential risks and benefits of the study through an informed consent form. They were assured that participation was entirely voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without any repercussions. To maintain anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in all research outputs, and any identifiable information was carefully redacted. Furthermore, participants were given the opportunity to review and provide feedback on the preliminary findings, ensuring their perspectives were accurately represented.

Additionally, recognising the power dynamics inherent in research, particularly when educators are the subjects of study, efforts were made to ensure the participants felt comfortable and in control during the interview process. This was achieved by allowing them to choose the interview location and time, ensuring they felt at ease in familiar surroundings. Moreover, they were reassured that there were no right or wrong answers, and the research was a platform for them to share their experiences and insights freely.

3.3 Data Collection

The primary method of data collection employed in this study was semi-structured interviews. This approach was chosen to facilitate a deeper exploration of the lived experiences of EFL lecturers in the Mekong Delta, allowing for a balance between structured inquiries and open-ended discussions that could capture the nuances of their empathetic practices. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data collection instrument, several measures were taken. The interview questions were carefully crafted to align with the research objectives and were reviewed by a panel of experts in EFL teaching and qualitative research methodology. This process ensured that each question was relevant, clear and capable of eliciting meaningful data.

Before the main data collection phase, a pilot interview was conducted with an EFL lecturer who met the criteria of the main participant pool but was not part of the primary study group. The purpose of this pilot was twofold: to test the clarity and appropriateness of the interview questions, and to gauge the approximate duration of each interview. Feedback from this pilot interview was invaluable; it led to revisions in the interview guide, ensuring the questions were culturally sensitive, clear and conducive to eliciting rich responses. Additionally, the pilot helped in refining the instruments for higher reliability, ensuring consistency in responses across different participants.

Some of the revised interview questions included:

- How do you perceive the role of empathy in your teaching practice?
- Can you recall a specific instance where your empathetic understanding profoundly impacted a student's learning experience?
- How do cultural nuances of the Mekong Delta influence your approach to empathy in the classroom?

3.4 What challenges, if any, have you faced in attempting to integrate empathy into your EFL teaching, and how have you navigated them?

Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, ensuring that participants had ample time to reflect and elaborate on their experiences. The interviews took place in quiet, comfortable locations chosen by the participants, typically in their respective institutions or a quiet place they preferred. This consideration aimed to create a conducive environment for open dialogue, where the participants felt at ease. Furthermore, the lengthy duration of each interview allowed for thorough exploration of each question, adding to the reliability of the collected data by providing depth and detail.

Given the cultural and linguistic context of the study, it was deemed appropriate to conduct the interviews in Vietnamese. This decision ensured that participants could express themselves fully and comfortably, without the constraints of a second language potentially limiting the depth and richness of their responses. However, it is noteworthy that this choice necessitated careful translation procedures during data analysis to retain the essence of the participants' narratives. To ensure the validity of the translation process, a bilingual expert was

engaged to oversee the translation of the responses, ensuring the accuracy and fidelity of the original meanings expressed by the participants.

3.5 Data Analysis

Upon completion of the data collection phase, the study transitioned into the intricate process of data analysis. Guided by the principles of thematic analysis, the research aimed to identify, analyse and interpret patterns or themes within the collected data. Thematic analysis, as propounded by Braun et al. (2023), is a flexible yet robust method that allows for a detailed and nuanced understanding of the data, making it particularly apt for the rich narratives obtained from our participants. To ensure data validity, it was imperative to involve participants in the verification process. After the initial analysis, the participants were provided with the transcripts and preliminary interpretations of their responses. They were then asked to review these documents to confirm the accuracy and authenticity of the representation of their perspectives. This step was critical in maintaining the integrity of the research findings and ensuring that the interpretations truly reflected the participants' views.

The first step in the thematic analysis process was the transcription of the interviews. Given that the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, each was meticulously transcribed verbatim in the original language to preserve the authenticity of participants' expressions and sentiments. Following transcription, an initial familiarisation phase was undertaken. This involved multiple readings of the transcripts, allowing for immersion in the data and a preliminary understanding of potential patterns. Handwritten notes and memos were made during this stage, capturing initial reactions and observations.

Next, a systematic approach to coding was initiated. Both inductive and deductive coding strategies were employed, allowing for themes to emerge organically from the data while also being informed by the research objectives and guiding theoretical frameworks. Each transcript was coded line by line, with codes representing the most basic elements of the raw data that appeared significant. Subsequent to the initial coding phase, the codes were grouped based on potential themes and subthemes. This clustering process was iterative, with themes being continuously refined, combined, separated, and, in some instances, discarded. Regular discussions and reflections ensured that the emerging themes genuinely encapsulated the essence of the participants' narratives.

After the identification and consolidation of primary themes and subthemes, the next phase involved defining and naming them. Each theme was detailed in terms of its scope, significance and the nuances it brought to the overarching narrative of the study. Finally, the validated themes were interpreted in light of the study's objectives and theoretical underpinnings. This interpretative phase aimed to situate the findings within the broader discourse on empathy in EFL teaching, providing insights, implications and potential avenues for future research.

4. Findings

4.1 The Influence of Cultural Context on Empathetic Teaching

A salient theme that emerged from the data was the profound influence of the cultural context of the Mekong Delta on empathetic teaching practices. A substantial majority of the participants (n=8 out of 10) highlighted the ways in which the cultural and social nuances of the region shaped their understanding and enactment of empathy in the classroom.

For instance, Mr. Tuan remarked, *“In our Mekong culture, emotions and relationships hold significant importance. We often prioritise harmonious relationships and understanding each other deeply. So, when I approach my students, I naturally draw from this cultural inclination to connect, to understand and to be understood.”* Similarly, Ms. Lan shared, *“Growing up in the Delta, I have been imbued with values of community and solidarity. These values guide my teaching. I see my students not just as learners but as part of a wider community, and empathy becomes a bridge connecting us.”*

Drawing from the SCT, these narratives underscore the idea that teaching practices, including empathetic approaches, are not isolated behaviours but are deeply rooted in cultural and social contexts. SCT’s assertion that cognitive development is heavily influenced by social interactions becomes particularly pertinent here. The educators’ inclination to employ empathy can be seen as a manifestation of their socio-cultural upbringing in the Mekong Delta, where communal values and deep interpersonal connections are emphasised.

Furthermore, leaning into the TLT, it appears that these educators, through their reflective practices, have not only recognised but also harnessed their cultural heritage to foster transformative learning experiences for their students. The cultural values they grew up with have catalysed shifts in their pedagogical approaches, underscoring the deep interconnectedness of empathy, cultural context and transformative learning.

4.2 Challenges of Balancing Empathy with Academic Rigour

Another notable theme that surfaced from the collected data pertained to the challenges EFL educators face in balancing empathy with the demand for academic rigour. Seven of the 10 participants (n=7 out of 10) expressed experiences of tension between creating an empathetic classroom environment and maintaining high academic standards.

Ms. Thu shared her struggle by saying, *“While I genuinely want to connect with my students and understand their personal challenges, I also have the responsibility to ensure they meet academic standards. Sometimes, it feels like walking a tightrope, where too much empathy might compromise the rigour, and too much emphasis on academic outcomes might overshadow genuine understanding.”* Echoing a similar sentiment, Mr. Huy remarked, *“It is a fine balance. I want my students to succeed academically, but I also do not want to create an environment where they are too stressed or afraid to share their challenges. It is not always easy to find that middle ground.”*

Drawing upon the SCT, this challenge can be understood in light of the broader societal expectations placed on educators. In many educational contexts, teachers

are not just responsible for cognitive development but are also expected to nurture students emotionally. However, the pressure to produce strong academic results, often driven by societal and institutional demands, can sometimes clash with the more humane, empathetic aspects of teaching.

From the perspective of the TLT, this balancing act can be seen as a catalyst for reflective practices. By grappling with this tension, educators are pushed to critically reflect on their teaching beliefs and practices. Such reflections can lead to transformative learning moments for the educators themselves, as they continuously reassess and redefine their roles, striking a balance between fostering empathy and ensuring academic success.

4.3 The Role of Personal Experiences in Shaping Empathetic Practices

An intriguing pattern that emerged from the interviews was the pivotal role of personal experiences in shaping and refining the empathetic practices of EFL educators. A significant proportion of participants (n=9 out of 10) articulated that their own experiences, both as learners and as individuals, profoundly influenced their empathetic approach in the classroom.

Mr. Binh, reflecting on his student days, mentioned, *“I recall the pressures and challenges I faced as an EFL learner. The times I felt misunderstood or unsupported remain vivid in my memory. These experiences act as a constant reminder, guiding me to be more compassionate and understanding towards my students.”* Similarly, Ms Phuong shared a poignant personal experience: *“A few years ago, I went through a personal crisis, and it affected my teaching. The empathy and patience I received from colleagues and some students were overwhelming. It made me realise the power of empathy and its reciprocal nature.”*

Using the framework of SCT, it is evident that personal histories and experiences are integral to the social fabric of an individual’s life, deeply influencing their cognition and actions. Teachers, as social beings, carry these experiences into the classroom, which in turn mould their interactions and pedagogical choices. Their past, intertwined with societal and cultural elements, shapes their empathetic practices.

Further, the TLT offers insights into how these personal experiences serve as catalysts for change. Confronted with their own challenges, either as students or in their personal lives, educators undergo critical self-reflection. Such reflection often paves the way for transformative learning, where educators’ perspectives on empathy shift, leading to a deeper, more genuine connection with their students.

4.4 The Relationship between Empathy and Student Motivation

A recurring theme that materialised from the data was the perceived direct relationship between educators’ empathetic practices and heightened student motivation. A majority of participants (n=8 out of 10) observed that their empathetic approaches led to an observable increase in student enthusiasm, engagement and intrinsic motivation.

Mrs. Dao reflected on her observations, stating, *“When students feel understood and valued, not just for their academic performance but as individuals, I see a spark in them. They participate more, ask questions and even the quieter ones begin to come out of their shell.”* Mr. Vinh elaborated, *“Empathy is more than just understanding; it is showing students that their emotions, fears and aspirations matter. When they feel this genuine concern, they are more motivated to push their boundaries and engage deeply in learning.”*

Drawing insights from the SCT, it becomes clear that learning is not an isolated cognitive activity: it is deeply intertwined with emotions and social interactions. When educators provide an environment where students’ emotions and identities are validated through empathetic practices, it aligns with their inherent socio-cultural need for belongingness and validation. This, in turn, boosts their intrinsic motivation to learn and participate.

Furthermore, through the lens of the TLT, this relationship between empathy and motivation can be seen as a potential avenue for profound change in learners. As students feel more motivated in a supportive, empathetic environment, they become more receptive to transformative learning experiences. They start to engage critically, challenge their pre-existing beliefs and become more open to new perspectives and insights, furthering their holistic development.

4.5 Empathy as a Tool for Conflict Resolution and Classroom Management

An often overlooked dimension of empathy, which became evident from the interviews, is its role in conflict resolution and classroom management. An overwhelming majority of participants (n=9 out of 10) acknowledged that their empathetic practices played a crucial role in addressing classroom conflicts, and misunderstandings and ensuring a harmonious learning environment.

Mr. Minh reflected on a particular incident, stating, *“I had two students who were constantly at odds with each other. Instead of taking a strict disciplinary approach, I tried to understand the root of their disagreements. By empathising with both of them and facilitating a dialogue, not only did their personal conflict resolve, but the overall class atmosphere improved significantly.”* Ms. Chau shared a broader perspective: *“Empathy helps me anticipate potential friction points in the classroom. By understanding where each student comes from, both culturally and emotionally, I can often prevent conflicts before they escalate.”*

From the vantage point of SCT, these insights resonate deeply. Conflicts often arise from mismatches in socio-cultural understandings and expectations. By employing empathy, teachers tap into the underlying socio-cultural dynamics, enabling them to address and reconcile these mismatches, thus facilitating smoother classroom interactions and dynamics.

Moreover, the TLT offers a perspective on how these empathetic interventions can lead to broader transformative experiences for students. By witnessing and being a part of empathetically managed conflicts, students undergo reflective processes. They start to question their assumptions, reconsider their standpoints and often arrive at more inclusive and understanding perspectives. This not only aids in

immediate conflict resolution but fosters an environment conducive to long-term personal and collective growth.

4.6 Empathy as a Pathway to Self-Growth and Teacher Renewal

Perhaps the most profound insight that emerged from the interviews was the deeply personal impact of empathy on the teachers themselves. All participants (n=10 out of 10) felt that their empathetic practices were not just beneficial for their students but served as a vital pathway to their own self-growth and professional renewal.

Mrs. Hanh shared a heartfelt reflection, *“The more I opened my heart to understand my students, the more I understood myself. Empathy has made me revisit my teaching philosophies, question my biases and grow as an individual.”* In a similar vein, Mr. Long mentioned, *“Empathy is like a mirror. As I strive to understand my students’ feelings and perspectives, I inadvertently reflect on my own practices, beliefs and emotions. It has been an unexpected journey of self-discovery and rejuvenation.”*

Using the SCT as a lens, it becomes evident that teachers, much like their students, are deeply entrenched in their socio-cultural milieu. As they reach out empathetically to their students, they also navigate their own socio-cultural narratives, leading to deeper self-awareness and introspection. This dual process, of understanding others and reflecting upon oneself, results in a cyclical growth pattern, enriching the teacher both personally and professionally.

Furthermore, through the TLT, this self-growth can be seen as a transformative journey. As teachers engage empathetically, they are constantly exposed to diverse student experiences, challenges and perspectives. This exposure, coupled with reflective practices, often disrupts their existing beliefs and pushes them towards a transformative learning experience, redefining their teaching ethos and personal philosophies.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Influence of Cultural Context on Empathetic Teaching

The significant influence of the cultural context of the Mekong Delta on empathetic teaching practices echoes findings from previous studies that have highlighted the importance of cultural and societal nuances in pedagogical practices. For instance, studies in other Asian contexts, such as China and Japan, have similarly emphasised the role of cultural values in shaping teacher-student relationships and teaching methodologies (Lassila & Uitto, 2016; Wang & Du, 2014). These studies resonate with the narratives of Mr. Tuan and Ms. Lan, suggesting that in many Asian cultures, there is an inherent emphasis on harmony, community and deep interpersonal relationships which naturally translate into the educational realm.

However, a distinguishing aspect of our study, compared to earlier research, is the depth and specificity with which the cultural nuances of the Mekong Delta are interwoven with empathetic teaching practices. While previous studies have generally examined cultural influences at a broader, often national level (McAllister & Irvine, 2002), our study delves deep into the unique socio-cultural

milieu of the Mekong Delta, uncovering its distinct impact on empathy in teaching. This granularity offers a richer, more localised understanding, highlighting the idiosyncrasies of the Mekong Delta culture and its influence on education (Shultz, 2012).

Furthermore, while many studies have examined the role of culture in teaching (e.g., Liston & Zeichner, 2013), few have explored its influence on empathetic teaching specifically. Our study, by foregrounding empathy, contributes a novel perspective, unveiling the intricate dance between cultural values and empathetic practices. It underscores that empathy in teaching is not just a universal good practice but is deeply influenced and moulded by specific cultural contexts. Additionally, while the SCT has been widely used to understand cultural influences on teaching, our study uniquely marries it with the TLT. This dual-framework approach allows for a holistic understanding, emphasising not just the cultural origins of empathetic practices but also their transformative potential in the classroom.

5.2 Challenges of Balancing Empathy with Academic Rigour

The challenge of balancing empathy with academic rigour, as elucidated by our participants, aligns with broader discourses in the field of education. Across different cultural and educational contexts, teachers grapple with the delicate act of marrying cognitive goals with socio-emotional learning (Devis-Rozental et al., 2018). Research from varied contexts, be it the competitive environments of East Asian classrooms or the diverse settings of Western education, alludes to this universal challenge faced by teachers.

For instance, studies conducted in high-stakes testing environments often report teachers feeling torn between catering to students' emotional well-being and ensuring they are adequately prepared for rigorous assessments (Arroyo-Romano & Benigno, 2016; Tagher & Robinson, 2016). The experiences of Ms Thu and Mr Huy seem to mirror these findings, highlighting that the tension between empathy and academic rigour is not exclusive to the Mekong Delta but resonates globally.

However, our study contributes a distinct voice to this global chorus. While the aforementioned tension is a universal phenomenon, how it manifests and is navigated in the EFL classrooms of the Mekong Delta brings forth unique insights. Given the specific socio-cultural fabric of the Mekong Delta, with its strong communal values and deep-rooted interpersonal relationships (Jamieson, 2023), the weight of the challenge might be felt differently. The heightened emphasis on relationships and understanding in this region might amplify the internal tug-of-war lecturers experience when juxtaposing empathy with rigorous academic standards. Moreover, while previous studies have highlighted the challenge, few have delved into its potential transformative implications for teachers. Our study, by juxtaposing the SCT (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978) and TLT (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009), offers a fresh lens. It posits that this very tension can be a catalyst for growth and transformation. Lecturers, while navigating this balance, are thrust into deep reflection, potentially reshaping their teaching philosophies and approaches.

5.3 The Role of Personal Experiences in Shaping Empathetic Practices

The influence of personal experiences on teaching practices has long been acknowledged in educational research. A plethora of studies suggest that teachers' past experiences, both in their formative years as students and in their broader life journeys, leave indelible imprints on their teaching philosophies and methodologies (e.g., Britzman, 2007; Lin et al., 2012). The narratives of Mr Binh and Ms Phuong resonate with these broader findings, highlighting the universality of this phenomenon.

However, our study adds a layer of depth to this understanding, particularly in the context of empathetic teaching in the EFL classrooms of the Mekong Delta. While the overarching theme of personal experiences influencing teaching is a global narrative (Richards & Gordon, 2017), the nuances of these influences, as articulated by our participants, are distinct. The intense recollections of past challenges, coupled with the socio-cultural backdrop of the Mekong Delta, seem to amplify the role of personal experiences in shaping empathy. This emphasis on past challenges and the empathy derived from them might be more pronounced in this specific context, given the region's cultural emphasis on interconnectedness, relationships and mutual understanding.

Furthermore, while many studies have highlighted the role of personal experiences in shaping teaching practices (Britzman, 2007; Lin et al., 2012), few have delved deep into their transformative implications, especially concerning empathetic teaching. Our research uniquely underscores how these experiences not only inform teaching practices but also lead to transformative learning moments for lecturers. Such moments, as our study suggests, have the potential to reshape lecturers' perspectives on empathy, nudging them towards a more profound, genuine connection with their students.

5.4 The Relationship between Empathy and Student Motivation

The profound relationship between empathy and student motivation, as highlighted in our findings, adds to the intricate mosaic of research emphasising the emotional and social facets underpinning educational engagement. Extensive research has underscored that students, when they perceive their learning environment to be understanding and supportive, exhibit elevated levels of intrinsic motivation, deeper engagement, and overall psychological well-being (Reeve, 2013).

Mrs. Dao and Mr. Vinh's insights resonate deeply with this paradigm, accentuating the indispensable role of empathy in sculpting a conducive learning milieu. The quintessential notion that students, when acknowledged not merely for their academic achievements but for their unique individualities, become more engrossed, participatory and intrinsically driven, finds echoing sentiments in broader educational research (Biesta, 2015).

Yet, the specificity and richness of our study emerge from its contextualised exploration within the EFL environment of the Mekong Delta. While the broader educational spectrum has acknowledged the positive interplay between empathy

and motivation (Longobardi et al., 2020; Messineo et al., 2021), our research delves into the nuances of this relationship in an EFL backdrop. Given the distinctive challenges typifying EFL settings, such as grappling with linguistic nuances, cultural dichotomies and potential feelings of estrangement, the impetus of empathetic pedagogy becomes even more pronounced. As our findings suggest, in such intricate contexts, empathy transcends its supportive role, metamorphosing into an essential catalyst that galvanises students to transcend barriers and engage more profoundly in their learning journey.

Furthermore, our study's emphasis on the transformative ramifications stemming from this interrelationship between empathy and motivation offers a novel lens to the discourse. Whereas numerous studies have underscored the immediate, tangible benefits emanating from empathetic teaching (Frank et al., 2011; Hoerr, 2016), our research pioneers the longer-term transformative potential embedded in this dynamic. By postulating that an environment imbued with empathy predisposes students towards transformative learning experiences, our study ventures into uncharted territories, accentuating the enduring, holistic dividends of empathetic teaching.

5.5 Empathy as a Tool for Conflict Resolution and Classroom Management

The elucidation of empathy's role in conflict resolution and classroom management, as portrayed in our findings, dovetails neatly with a burgeoning body of research underscoring the humanistic elements pivotal in effective classroom management. Traditionally, disciplinary measures and strict regulatory frameworks have dominated the discourse around classroom management (Frederick, 2013). However, in recent times, there has been a tangible shift towards more understanding, compassionate and emotionally intelligent approaches, of which empathy is a cornerstone.

Mr. Minh's anecdote offers a tangible representation of how a proactive, empathetic approach can transform individual conflicts into opportunities for collective growth. This microcosmic narrative magnifies a broader paradigm, where empathy not merely addresses the surface manifestations of conflicts, as stated by Zhuravlova and Chebykin (2021), but delves into their deeper socio-cultural and emotional substrates. Ms. Chau's testament, which emphasises the preemptive potential of empathy, further buttresses this narrative. When teachers become adept at 'reading' their students through an empathetic lens, they are better positioned to anticipate, and thereby ameliorate, potential flashpoints.

Contrasting our findings with extant literature, while the intrinsic value of empathy in classroom management is increasingly acknowledged (Cooper, 2011), our study provides a nuanced exploration specific to the EFL setting in the Mekong Delta. In an EFL context, where linguistic, cultural and educational variances can accentuate misunderstandings, the mediating role of empathy assumes amplified significance. Our research underscores this dimension, elucidating how empathy, in such contexts, transcends its traditional supportive role, evolving into an indispensable tool for harmony and collaborative learning.

Furthermore, our emphasis on the transformative ramifications of empathetically managed conflicts is a salient contribution to the discourse. While empathy's immediate benefits in conflict resolution are increasingly recognised (Rosler et al., 2017), our exploration into its long-term transformative potential for both educators and learners provides fresh perspectives. By positing that such interventions predispose students towards deeper reflection and holistic growth, our study underscores the enduring dividends of empathetic classroom management.

5.6 Empathy as a Pathway to Self-Growth and Teacher Renewal

The exploration of empathy's influence on teachers' self-growth and renewal offers a refreshing perspective on the educational discourse, especially when most discussions focus predominantly on student outcomes. Our findings resonate with an emergent body of research that places teacher well-being and development at the heart of effective pedagogical practice (Roeser et al., 2012). The intricate relationship between teachers' empathetic engagements and their self-growth underscores a critical yet often overlooked dimension of teaching: that teachers are also learners on a continuous journey of self-discovery and evolution. Mrs Hanh's revelation, emphasising the introspective power of empathy, is particularly poignant. Her assertion that empathy prompts a revisitation of teaching philosophies and questioning of biases signifies the depth of introspection such practices can catalyse. The notion of empathy as a 'mirror', as articulated by Mr. Long, further elucidates this concept. Empathy, in this context, acts as a reflexive conduit, wherein teachers' endeavours to understand their students inadvertently lead them to profound self-reflection and self-understanding.

Drawing parallels with prior research, the symbiotic relationship between empathy and teacher self-growth finds echoes in holistic teaching paradigms, which emphasise the inseparability of personal and professional development (Jain et al., 2015). Our study amplifies this narrative by delving deeper into the specific mechanisms through which empathy catalyses this growth, particularly in the EFL context of the Mekong Delta. The intertwining of SCT with this dynamic reveals that as teachers navigate the diverse socio-cultural terrains of their students, they concurrently journey through their own terrains, often encountering revelations and insights previously uncharted.

Moreover, our study's emphasis on the transformative potential of empathetic practices for teachers is a significant contribution to the field. While the TLT has predominantly been employed to understand student experiences (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009), our research posits that teachers, when engaged in deep empathetic practices, undergo similar transformative processes. Their encounters with diverse student narratives, coupled with introspection, often disrupt established pedagogical paradigms, propelling them towards renewed teaching philosophies and a deeper sense of self.

6. Conclusion

In the evolving landscape of education, particularly in the context of EFL teaching in the Mekong Delta, this study embarked on a journey to unravel the multifaceted role of empathy in the classroom. Grounded in both the SCT and the TLT, our investigation delved deep into educators' perspectives, aiming to comprehend the nuances of empathetic practices and their ensuing implications. Using a qualitative approach, we gathered rich narratives through interviews with 10 EFL educators, seeking to capture the essence of their experiences and reflections on empathy's role in their pedagogical practices.

Our findings illuminated several key themes, underscoring the intricate tapestry woven by empathy in educational settings. EFL educators not only recognised empathy as a vital tool in fostering student motivation and engagement but also deemed it instrumental in classroom management and conflict resolution. However, navigating the balance between empathy and academic rigour emerged as a discernible challenge, reflecting the often competing demands of emotional connection and academic outcomes. Notably, the most profound revelation was the deeply personal impact of empathy on the educators themselves, where it served as a pathway for their self-growth and professional renewal.

The revelations from this research have several profound implications for educators, policymakers and stakeholders in the realm of education, especially in EFL settings. To begin with, the pivotal role of cultural context in shaping empathetic teaching practices implies that any pedagogical interventions or training should be contextually grounded. Generic, one-size-fits-all teaching strategies might overlook the deep-seated cultural nuances that influence educators' empathetic inclinations. Institutions, especially in regions like the Mekong Delta, should consider integrating context-specific training modules that underscore the importance of cultural nuances in empathetic teaching.

The challenges associated with balancing empathy and academic rigour bring to the fore the need for a reevaluation of classroom expectations and evaluation metrics. Educational stakeholders must deliberate on whether the prevailing academic standards and assessment methods inadvertently stifle the nurturing aspects of teaching. In light of these findings, there might be merit in developing assessment mechanisms that value and reward empathetic teaching approaches alongside academic outcomes. Moreover, the relationship between empathy and heightened student motivation offers a compelling argument for investing in professional development programmes that focus on building teachers' empathetic skills. As educators foster deeper connections with their students, not only do learning outcomes improve, but classroom environments also become more conducive to holistic student development.

Furthermore, recognising empathy's role in conflict resolution and classroom management suggests that empathy training can be a powerful tool in teacher preparation programmes. Equipping teachers with skills to harness empathy for addressing classroom challenges can lead to more harmonious learning environments and reduce potential disruptions. Lastly, the profound personal

impact of empathy on educators themselves points to the inherent value of fostering empathetic practices for teacher well-being and professional growth. Institutions should consider implementing support systems or reflective practice sessions that allow educators to explore, understand and enhance their empathetic capacities, leading to both personal and professional rejuvenation.

7. Recommendations for Further Studies

This research, while offering illuminating insights into the realm of empathetic practices in EFL teaching, also underscores the vast expanse of uncharted territories awaiting scholarly exploration. Given the profound interplay between cultural contexts and empathetic teaching observed in this study, future research could delve deeper into understanding specific cultural determinants that influence empathy in diverse EFL settings. Comparative studies spanning multiple cultural regions, contrasting the Mekong Delta with other areas, for instance, could offer richer, more nuanced insights into the socio-cultural foundations of empathetic teaching. Furthermore, the tension between academic rigour and empathy, as highlighted in our findings, warrants a more granular investigation. It might be worthwhile to conduct longitudinal studies that track the long-term academic trajectories of students who have experienced varying balances of rigour and empathy. Such studies could provide tangible evidence of the optimal balance that maximises both academic outcomes and student well-being.

The clear correlation between empathetic teaching and student motivation also opens avenues for experimental studies. Implementing controlled interventions where one group experiences enhanced empathetic teaching while another does not could help in quantifying the precise impact of empathy on student motivation and learning outcomes. Additionally, the role of empathy in conflict resolution and classroom management suggests a need for case-study-based research. Detailed, in-depth explorations of specific classroom conflicts and their resolution through empathetic practices could offer practical blueprints for educators grappling with similar challenges. Lastly, the personal growth and renewal experienced by educators through empathetic practices point to a need for a closer examination of the psychological and emotional dimensions of teaching. Studies focusing on the mental and emotional well-being of teachers, and how they are intertwined with their empathetic practices, could be immensely beneficial for teacher training and professional development programmes.

8. Limitations

Like all research endeavours, this study is not without its limitations. First and foremost, the sample size, though diverse, was relatively small, encompassing only 10 EFL educators. This poses challenges in generalising the findings across broader EFL contexts. While the selected participants provided rich and diverse insights, they may not represent the vast spectrum of EFL educators, both in terms of teaching approaches and personal backgrounds. Another limitation pertains to the inherent nature of qualitative research. The findings are based on personal narratives and reflections, which, although authentic, are subjective and might be

influenced by various biases. The educators' memories and interpretations of their experiences could be affected by hindsight bias, potentially colouring their recollections in ways that align more closely with their present beliefs than with the actual events as they transpired.

Additionally, the study predominantly focuses on the educators' perspectives, leaving a potential gap in understanding the students' perceptions of empathy in the classroom. While teachers provided insights into the observed impact of their empathetic practices on student motivation, behaviour and academic performance, the study did not incorporate direct feedback from students, who might have offered a different perspective on these practices and their impacts. The cultural context, primarily centred on the Mekong Delta region, might also limit the applicability of findings in diverse EFL settings. Cultural nuances and societal expectations can vary significantly across regions, and what holds true in one context might differ in another. Lastly, the use of only two theoretical frameworks, SCT and TLT, provided a focused lens for interpretation but also restricted the breadth of theoretical perspectives.

9. References

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