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Empathy in Practice: Exploring EFL Teachers' Strategies within the Cultural Landscape of Vietnam's Mekong Delta Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract: This qualitative study delved into the strategies employed by English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in Vietnamese higher education institutions (HEIs) to enhance their empathy in pedagogical practices. Rooted in the Mekong Delta context, the research aimed to shed light on the intricate interplay between cultural nuances and empathetic teaching. Through semi-structured interviews with 10 EFL educators from two institutions, the study uncovered several dominant themes. Key findings highlighted the significant emphasis teachers placed on understanding the socio-cultural backdrop of their students to foster empathy. Strategies such as the incorporation of students' personal narratives, empathetic listening, personalized feedback, and fostering empathetic group dynamics emerged as pivotal in building connections and facilitating effective language instruction. Grounding the findings in the Socio-cultural Theory and the Affective Filter Hypothesis provided theoretical underpinnings that emphasized the role of social interactions and emotional support in cognitive development and language acquisition, respectively. The study underscores the critical role of empathy in EFL teaching, providing valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and future research in similar socio-cultural contexts.

Keywords: *EFL teachers, empathy, higher education institutions, strategies, Vietnam.*

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Introduction

Empathy, a core human ability to understand and share the feelings of another, plays an indispensable role in the landscape of education. In the realm of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the significance of empathy becomes all the more salient (Jiang & Wang, 2018). As educators navigate through the intricacies of linguistic challenges and cultural nuances, the role of empathy in fostering a nurturing and effective learning environment is irrefutable. An empathetic teacher can bridge the cultural and linguistic gaps that might otherwise hinder the EFL learning process, thereby facilitating a more enriching and holistic learning experience (Hutchinson, 2013).

Vietnam, with its rapidly evolving education system and increasing global integration, has witnessed a surge in EFL education in recent decades (Tran & Tanemura, 2020). Higher education institutions (HEIs) in the country are the focal points of this change, being pivotal in shaping the future workforce and fostering global citizens. EFL teachers in Vietnamese HEIs thus bear the dual responsibility of not just imparting linguistic skills but also of nurturing cross-cultural understandings (T. T. T. Nguyen, 2017). Despite significant advancements in EFL methodologies, existing literature largely overlooks how empathy specifically influences teaching effectiveness and student outcomes within this context. This gap is particularly pronounced in studies focusing on the non-Western educational settings, where cultural factors may uniquely shape empathetic teaching practices.

This study, therefore, seeks to illuminate the strategies Vietnamese EFL teachers in HEIs adopt to hone their empathy. By delving into their experiences, practices, and insights, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of empathy in the EFL teaching-learning ecosystem in Vietnam. This deeper exploration will critically examine the existing gaps by investigating the integration and impact of empathy in classroom dynamics and its potential as a transformative tool in EFL instruction. The specific research question we aim to address is: How do Vietnamese EFL

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educators integrate empathy into their teaching practices? In doing so, it aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on empathy in EFL education and provide valuable takeaways for educators, policymakers, and institutions alike.

Literature Review

Empathy in Education

Empathy, as defined by Hogan (1969), is the ability to perceive accurately the internal frame of reference of another. Its importance in education has been highlighted by numerous researchers. García-Moya et al. (2020) emphasized that an empathetic understanding can foster an environment conducive to learning, while Goroshit and Hen (2016) observed that empathy encourages positive classroom behavior, reducing conflicts and misunderstandings. Research indicates that students tend to be more motivated and engaged when they perceive their instructors as empathetic (Aldrup et al., 2022; Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2009).

Empathy in EFL Teaching

The EFL classroom is not merely a place for language acquisition; it is a cultural crossroad. Ellis (2005) and Freiermuth and Huang (2021) argued that language is inherently tied to culture, making the process of teaching and learning a foreign language also a journey of navigating cultural nuances. In this context, empathy becomes vital. Aldrup et al. (2022) and Williams et al. (2016) noted that empathetic teachers could better understand the cultural and emotional backgrounds of EFL students, leading to more effective teaching strategies and increased student motivation.

Empathy in the Vietnamese Educational Context

Vietnam's historical and socio-cultural backdrop offers a distinct educational milieu. Thanh (2016) outlined that traditional Vietnamese classrooms are typically teacher-centered, with Confucian values emphasizing respect for authority. However, globalization and modern pedagogical approaches are transforming these classrooms. Given this transformation, the role of empathy becomes even more significant as it can bridge the gap between traditional and contemporary teaching methods (N. T. Nguyen, 2017).

To further understand the role of empathy within this evolving context, it is essential to examine how these cultural transformations influence teacher-student interactions. Prior research has highlighted the gradual shift from authoritarian pedagogies towards more collaborative and empathetic educational practices in Vietnamese schools (Mai & Thao, 2022; Thao & Mai, 2022). This shift is particularly influenced by increasing exposure to Western educational ideologies and the growing recognition of the importance of emotional intelligence in learning environments. Studies such as those by Dung and Zsolnai (2022) and Thi et al. (2024) have investigated how Vietnamese educators are integrating empathy into their teaching practices to not only comply with global educational trends but also to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

Strategies to Enhance Teacher Empathy

Across the globe, there are myriad approaches to cultivating empathy among educators. Block-Lerner et al. (2007) emphasized the importance of self-awareness, active listening, and perspective-taking. Additionally, teacher training programs have started integrating empathy-building modules, focusing on role-playing, reflective practices, and mindfulness exercises (Jennings, 2015). In the context of EFL, understanding students' linguistic backgrounds, cultures, and emotions can foster empathy (Miller & Gkonou, 2023). Expanding on this, the empathy development framework proposed by McAllister and Irvine (2002) offers a structured approach to nurturing empathetic skills in educators. Their model suggests a multistage process involving self-reflection, emotional regulation, and the deliberate practice of empathy in diverse educational settings. This framework emphasizes the dynamic and evolving nature of empathy, proposing that educators undergo continuous development through structured interventions and real-world applications. Applying McAllister and Irvine's (2002) model could particularly benefit EFL teachers, as it addresses the complexity of cross-cultural communication and the specific emotional challenges faced by language learners. While there is abundant research on empathy in education, a noticeable gap exists in studies that explore the specific strategies employed by EFL teachers in Vietnamese HEIs. While Nghia et al. (2020) did explore the teaching methods used in Vietnamese universities, the focus on empathy was scant. Thus, there is a pressing need to understand how EFL teachers in this unique context nurture and utilize their empathetic abilities. The value of empathy in EFL teaching is evident from the literature. While strategies to foster empathy among educators are well-documented globally, there is a discernible lacuna in studies centered on the Vietnamese higher education context. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the empathy-driven strategies of EFL teachers in Vietnamese HEIs.

Theoretical Frameworks Underpinning the Study

Underpinning this research are two principal theoretical frameworks. The first is the Socio-cultural Theory (SCT) by Vygotsky (1978), which posits that social interactions are fundamental to cognitive development. In the realm of EFL teaching, this translates to understanding that teachers' empathetic strategies and approaches are deeply intertwined

with their socio-cultural contexts. Previous studies leveraging SCT have demonstrated how empathy within the classroom environment can facilitate deeper social interactions and cultural exchange, thereby enhancing cognitive and linguistic development among students (Alkhudiry, 2022; Glăveanu, 2020). This research aims to build on these findings by examining how SCT principles specifically influence the development of empathetic competencies in teachers, considering their unique socio-cultural environments.

The second theoretical framework that grounds this research is the Affective Filter Hypothesis by Krashen (1992). This hypothesis emphasizes the role of emotional variables in language acquisition. An environment of anxiety or unease can serve as a 'filter' that impedes language learning, while a supportive, empathetic environment can lower this filter. Prior research utilizing the Affective Filter Hypothesis has explored how emotional support and teacher empathy directly correlate with reduced student anxiety and improved language acquisition outcomes (Baaqeel, 2020). This study extends these insights by investigating how empathy practiced by EFL teachers specifically lowers affective filters in Vietnamese HEIs. By leveraging this theory, the study seeks to explore how EFL teachers in Vietnamese HEIs utilize empathy to create a conducive learning atmosphere, thus facilitating better language absorption.

Methodology

Research Design

The design chosen for this research is qualitative in nature, focusing on deriving deeper, nuanced insights from the experiences, practices, and strategies of EFL teachers in Vietnamese HEIs. Recognizing that empathy, in the context of EFL teaching, is a multifaceted and deeply subjective phenomenon, the qualitative approach is ideally suited to capture the complexities and subtleties that might be overlooked by more quantitative, data-centric methods.

Participants

The participants in this study were carefully selected from two prominent HEIs located in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. A total of ten EFL teachers, five from each institution, were approached for this research. These teachers, with varied years of experience and backgrounds, provided a rich tapestry of insights into the realm of EFL teaching in this specific geographical and cultural context.

The choice of purposive sampling and the specific number of participants were guided by the principle of data saturation. The selection of ten participants, five from each institution, was determined as optimal to ensure a diverse and comprehensive range of perspectives while maintaining manageable data for in-depth analysis. This sample size is considered adequate for qualitative studies where the aim is to reach thematic saturation; previous research in social sciences has shown that saturation can often be achieved within 6 to 12 interviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). In this study, preliminary analysis after the first few interviews indicated recurring themes and diminishing returns on new information, suggesting that saturation was approached with ten participants.

Prior to the interviews, all participants were informed about the purpose and nature of the study. Transparency was maintained by ensuring that each teacher understood the research's objectives and their role in it. In line with ethical considerations, written informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation. They were made aware of their rights to withdraw from the study at any point without facing any repercussions. Confidentiality was a priority; participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous, and any information provided would be used strictly for research purposes. To this end, pseudonyms are employed in the presentation of the research findings to safeguard their identities.

Additionally, this study received formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the participating HEIs, ensuring adherence to the highest ethical standards. The IRB review process scrutinized the research protocol, consent forms, and the measures in place to minimize any potential risks to participants. This approval reinforced that the study conforms with both international ethical standards and local regulations concerning research involving human subjects.

Another ethical consideration addressed was the potential emotional and psychological impact of reflecting on their teaching experiences. Given that empathy is an emotive subject, participants were assured of a respectful, non-judgmental environment during the interviews. Post-interview, participants were provided with a summary of their contributions and were given an opportunity to clarify, amend, or retract any part of their input.

By drawing from a small, focused group of EFL teachers in the Mekong Delta region, this study aimed to delve deep into the intricacies of their empathetic strategies, while ensuring ethical standards were upheld throughout the research process.

Data Collection

The primary method for data collection in this research was semi-structured interviews. Recognizing the importance of a well-structured interview protocol, a pilot study was initially conducted. This preliminary step involved interviewing two EFL teachers (who were not part of the main study) from similar educational institutions in the Mekong Delta. The

pilot study's primary aim was to test the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the interview questions. Feedback from these pilot interviews was invaluable, leading to revisions in the interview protocol to ensure that the questions were more aligned with the study's objectives and were culturally sensitive.

Post revisions, some of the key interview questions included:

- "Can you describe a moment in your teaching experience where you felt a deep connection with a student or group of students?"
- "How do you perceive the role of empathy in your teaching practices, especially when handling linguistic and cultural challenges?"
- "In what ways do you believe your cultural background influences your empathetic approaches in the classroom?"
- "Are there specific strategies or practices you employ to better understand and connect with your students?"

Each interview was scheduled at a time and place most convenient for the participant, ensuring that they were comfortable and at ease. The majority of interviews took place in quiet, private rooms within the respective HEIs, minimizing external disturbances and creating an environment conducive to open conversation. Each interview ranged from 45 minutes to an hour, allowing ample time for participants to reflect upon and share their experiences.

Given the cultural and linguistic nuances of the region, the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. This choice was deliberate, ensuring that participants could express their thoughts and feelings without the constraints of a foreign language. It also ensured a more natural flow of conversation, leading to richer, more nuanced insights. Following the interviews, the recorded conversations were transcribed and then translated into English for analysis, with special care taken to retain the essence and nuances of the participants' responses. Throughout this process, the integrity of the data was paramount, ensuring that the voices of the EFL teachers were captured authentically and faithfully.

Data Analysis

The data derived from the semi-structured interviews underwent a rigorous process of thematic analysis. This approach was chosen for its capacity to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns or "themes" within qualitative data. The intention behind employing thematic analysis was to capture the depth, complexity, and nuances of the EFL teachers' experiences and perspectives on empathy in their pedagogical practices (Braun et al., 2023).

The process began with familiarization, where each transcript was read and reread multiple times by the researcher to immerse oneself fully in the data. This immersion allowed for an intimate understanding of the participants' narratives, laying the foundation for the subsequent steps. Initial codes were then generated. Each line, sentence, or segment of the data that seemed pertinent to the research question was highlighted and given a tentative label or code. These codes represented the most fundamental element of the raw data that conveyed some form of meaningful information related to empathy in EFL teaching. To enhance the reliability of the coding process, two additional researchers were involved in the coding scheme to ensure intercoder reliability. A kappa statistic was calculated to measure the level of agreement among coders, aiming for a kappa value of 0.79, indicating a substantial agreement (Foody, 2020).

Following the coding phase, the search for themes commenced. Codes were collated and sorted into potential themes and sub-themes. These emergent themes were mapped and re-mapped, constantly refined to ensure that they captured the essence of the data effectively. Once a set of candidate themes was established, they were reviewed against the dataset. This step served as a validation check, ensuring that the proposed themes were representative of the data as a whole. Themes were either refined, combined, or discarded based on their coherence, consistency, and significance. The data were discussed by the research team to be in the management and organization. The team facilitated the sorting and arrangement of codes into themes, while also drew to visualize data connections and analyze patterns. The final step involved defining and naming themes. Each theme was given a clear, concise name, and a detailed analysis was conducted to elucidate what each theme signified, its scope, and the overall story it narrated about the data. This step culminated in the production of a detailed report, rich with direct quotations from participants, capturing the interplay of empathy and EFL teaching within the Vietnamese higher education context.

Throughout this analytical journey, the researcher maintained a reflexive stance, regularly jotting down thoughts, reactions, and insights in a research diary. This ensured that the analysis remained grounded, transparent, and authentic to the participants' lived experiences.

Findings

Emphasis on Cultural Context in Empathy-driven Strategies

A prominent theme that emerged from the interviews was the strong emphasis EFL teachers placed on the cultural context when implementing their empathy-driven strategies. A significant majority (n=8 out of 10) underscored the intricate relationship between empathy and socio-cultural understanding. One participant, Linh, stated, "*In the heart of*

the Mekong, our traditions, values, and social norms deeply influence our students' approach to learning English. Recognizing and respecting this cultural underpinning allows me to connect with my students on a much deeper level, aiding in their language acquisition journey." Similarly, Phong reflected, *"I have often found that before I can effectively teach English, I need to 'speak' the cultural language of my students. Their cultural background is the lens through which they view the world, and by acknowledging and incorporating that into my teaching, I create a bridge of understanding."* "Understanding these cultural nuances is not just about being a good teacher; it is about being present, being respectful, and truly engaging with the student's world," mentioned Dao, another participant. Quyen, echoing Dao's sentiment, added, *"When you show you care about where they come from, students open up. They engage more, not just with the language but with the learning process itself."* These insights reveal a deep layer of engagement that goes beyond conventional teaching and taps into the emotional and cultural resonance with students.

Drawing from the SCT, these insights can be interpreted as a manifestation that social interactions are fundamental to cognitive development. By actively integrating the socio-cultural nuances of the Mekong Delta into their teaching, these EFL educators are effectively weaving a rich tapestry of socio-cultural interactions, facilitating a deeper connection and understanding with their students. This practice aligns with the tenets of SCT, emphasizing that learning does not occur in isolation but is deeply embedded in social contexts. Furthermore, the Affective Filter Hypothesis also offers an illuminating perspective on this finding. By demonstrating empathy through cultural understanding, these teachers are creating an environment where students feel seen, valued, and respected. Such an atmosphere is likely to lower students' affective filters, thus making them more receptive to language learning. The emphasis on cultural context, therefore, serves as a dual tool: it fosters genuine connections and also facilitates a more conducive learning environment, echoing the principles of the Affective Filter Hypothesis.

Role of Personalized Feedback in Enhancing Connection and Learning

Another salient theme that surfaced from the data was the significance of personalized feedback in the EFL teaching process. Out of the ten participants, seven (n=7) highlighted the pivotal role tailored feedback played in not just academic development but also in fostering a sense of understanding and connection between teacher and student. Quyen remarked, *"When I take the time to understand each student's strengths, weaknesses, and learning trajectory, and then craft feedback tailored to their specific needs, it sends a powerful message. It tells them that I see them, I understand them, and I care about their progress."* On a similar note, Tien shared, *"Personalized feedback is more than just academic guidance; it is an emotional bridge. When students realize their individual challenges and efforts are recognized, they feel more connected and motivated."* "Each feedback session is a chance to reinforce our bond, to acknowledge their unique journey in mastering a new language," explained Dao, further illustrating the personalized approach. Binh, discussing the direct impact of such practices, stated, *"The feedback I give is always laced with encouragement and constructed advice, making sure it is attuned to their emotional as well as educational needs."* These additional voices underline the dual role of feedback as both a pedagogical strategy and an emotional support mechanism.

Examining these reflections through the lens of the SCT, it becomes evident that such feedback practices transform a simple pedagogical tool into a medium of meaningful socio-cultural interaction. Feedback becomes a dialogue, a two-way exchange that is rooted in mutual understanding and respect. This aligns with SCT's principle that cognition is deeply interwoven with social interactions. Through personalized feedback, teachers are actively engaging in a socio-cultural dance, reinforcing the interconnected nature of learning and social context. Furthermore, invoking the Affective Filter Hypothesis, this finding underscores the emotional underpinnings of effective language acquisition. By providing feedback that resonates with the individual experiences and challenges of the students, teachers are likely reducing anxiety, boosting self-esteem, and enhancing motivation. Such an emotionally supportive environment can significantly lower the affective filters of students, rendering them more open and receptive to the learning process.

The Power of Empathetic Listening in Navigating Linguistic Barriers

Emerging distinctly from the narratives of the participants was the role of empathetic listening in addressing and navigating linguistic challenges in the EFL classroom. A notable majority, with n=6 out of 10 teachers, emphasized the transformative impact of genuinely listening to their students. Dao expressed, *"It is not just about hearing the words they are saying but really understanding the struggles behind them. When I listen empathetically, I can detect nuances, hesitations, and the underlying emotions, which often gives me clues about where the linguistic gaps or misconceptions lie."* Similarly, Binh shared, *"Empathetic listening is like a bridge over turbulent waters. It helps me guide my students over their language barriers. When they know they are truly being listened to, they are more willing to take risks, make mistakes, and learn from them."* "This type of listening fosters an atmosphere of trust and respect, which is crucial for effective communication and education," noted Minh, another teacher. Truc added, *"When students feel understood, not just academically but also emotionally, it changes everything. They engage more fully, and their motivation levels soar."* These insights further illustrate the critical nature of empathetic listening in educational settings, especially in the challenging environment of language learning.

Analyzing these insights in light of the SCT, it becomes apparent that empathetic listening acts as a conduit for deeper socio-cultural interactions. By actively and empathetically engaging in the act of listening, teachers are participating in a

rich social exchange that transcends mere linguistic interactions. They are diving into the socio-cultural depths of their students' narratives, thereby aligning with SCT's premise that meaningful learning is deeply rooted in social contexts. When we bring in the Affective Filter Hypothesis to this discourse, the profound impact of empathetic listening on language acquisition becomes even more evident. By creating an environment where students feel genuinely listened to, teachers are likely reducing any associated anxiety or fear of making mistakes. This emotional support can, in turn, lower the students' affective filters, making them more open to engaging with the language, even if it means stumbling at times. Empathetic listening, as emphasized by the participants, thus serves a dual purpose: it fosters a sense of genuine connection and understanding, while simultaneously creating an emotionally safe space for students to grapple with and overcome their linguistic challenges.

Nurturing Classroom Community through Empathetic Group Dynamics

Another theme that surfaced prominently from the discussions was the importance of cultivating a sense of community within the classroom using empathetic group dynamics. Of the participants, five (n=5 out of 10) accentuated the role of group activities and collaborative efforts infused with empathy to foster a sense of belonging and collective learning. Minh reflected, *"In my classroom, group activities are not just about language practice. They are opportunities for students to support, understand, and learn from one another. I design tasks that require them to step into each other's shoes, fostering empathy among peers."* Truc, another participant, shared a similar sentiment, *"When students collaborate and engage empathetically with their peers, the entire classroom environment becomes more supportive. They become more patient with each other's linguistic challenges and are more willing to collectively problem-solve."* *"Empathy in group settings creates a ripple effect. One act of understanding leads to another, and soon, the whole class moves in harmony,"* noted Nghia, emphasizing the cascading impact of empathy. Huyen added, *"It is like watching a garden bloom. As each student grows in their understanding of others, the entire class flourishes together."* These additional insights highlight the transformative power of empathy in creating an integrated and supportive learning community.

When viewed through the SCT prism, this focus on empathetic group dynamics is a vivid illustration of SCT's emphasis on social interactions as a cornerstone of cognitive development. By actively cultivating an environment where students not only interact with the teacher but also engage deeply with their peers, the EFL educators are fostering a vibrant socio-cultural ecosystem within their classrooms. This approach resonates with the idea that knowledge is co-constructed through social interactions and that peers play a vital role in this process. Furthermore, the Affective Filter Hypothesis offers added depth to this finding. By nurturing a classroom environment imbued with mutual respect and understanding, teachers are actively lowering the affective barriers that might impede language acquisition. In a supportive community where students feel emotionally safe and valued, their receptivity to learning is enhanced, and their apprehensions minimized. The emphasis on empathetic group dynamics, as highlighted by the participants, thus emerges as a potent tool in both building meaningful social connections and optimizing the language learning experience, echoing the principles of both SCT and the Affective Filter Hypothesis.

Embracing Student Narratives to Foster Empathy and Connection

A striking observation from the interviews was the significance teachers attached to the personal narratives and stories of their students. Four participants (n=4 out of 10) explicitly highlighted the transformative power of integrating these narratives into the EFL teaching process. Huyen mentioned, *"Whenever I introduce a new linguistic concept or theme, I often ask students to relate it to their own stories or experiences. This not only makes the lesson more relatable but also creates a space where students feel seen and heard."* Meanwhile, Nghia reflected, *"Language is not just about words and grammar; it is about stories, emotions, and experiences. When I embrace and incorporate my students' narratives into our lessons, it bridges the gap between mere linguistic instruction and genuine human connection."* *"This approach allows students to own their learning process and makes the language more meaningful to them,"* explained Dao, reinforcing the educational impact of personal narratives. *"Their own stories become tools for both teaching and learning,"* Phong added, highlighting the dual function of narratives in the classroom. These participant insights vividly illustrate how personal stories enrich the educational experience, making learning more engaging and deeply personal.

One can discern the harmonious alignment with SCT in the intertwined nature of social context and cognitive development. By bringing students' personal narratives to the forefront of instruction, teachers are essentially entwining the socio-cultural fabric of their students' lives with their academic pursuits. This practice creates a rich tapestry of interconnected learning experiences, where language acquisition is seamlessly blended with socio-cultural explorations. Furthermore, the principles of the Affective Filter Hypothesis shed light on the profound emotional implications of this approach. By valuing and integrating students' personal narratives, teachers create an environment where students feel emotionally validated and understood. Such recognition can significantly reduce potential anxieties or inhibitions students might harbor, consequently lowering their affective filters. This, in turn, enhances their openness to the language-learning process, further fostering their linguistic abilities.

Discussion

Emphasis on Cultural Context in Empathy-driven Strategies

The findings of this study, particularly the emphasis on the cultural context in empathy-driven strategies, resonate with a growing body of research on empathy in education. However, what sets this study apart is its deep exploration of the intersection of empathy with the unique cultural nuances of the Mekong Delta in the Vietnamese context.

Previous studies have highlighted the role of empathy in effective teaching, asserting that educators who demonstrate empathy tend to have students who are more engaged, motivated, and successful (Hutchinson, 2013). These studies, while fundamental, often approached empathy from a universal perspective, occasionally sidestepping the intricate cultural intricacies that define and shape the learner's experience.

Our study builds on this general understanding by providing a detailed analysis of how specific cultural elements within the Mekong Delta influence empathetic teaching practices. For example, unlike Choi and Yang (2011), who focused broadly on the benefits of empathy in the classroom, our study dives into how specific socio-cultural norms and values in the Mekong Delta shape the implementation and effectiveness of these empathetic strategies. This provides a critical layer of understanding that extends beyond the general appreciation of empathy's role in education to a detailed examination of its interplay with localized cultural dynamics.

Contrastingly, our study's findings shed light on how EFL teachers in the Mekong Delta intricately weave their empathetic approaches with a deep understanding of the region's socio-cultural nuances. This emphasis on the cultural lens is paramount. While Choi and Yang (2011) found that Korean EFL teachers employed empathy to foster a positive classroom environment, they did not delve as deeply into the cultural aspects as our study has. This underlines the uniqueness of our research, emphasizing the crucial relationship between socio-cultural understanding and empathetic teaching in the Vietnamese context.

Moreover, the reflections of participants echo the sentiments of scholars who advocate for a more culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2002). However, by comparing these reflections with previous research, it becomes clear that our approach offers a more granular and context-specific exploration. In the context of EFL teaching in the Mekong Delta, this study presents a richer, more nuanced understanding. The intertwining of cultural respect with empathetic teaching strategies not only enriches the classroom experience but also accentuates the profound role culture plays in shaping and influencing language acquisition journeys.

Role of Personalized Feedback in Enhancing Connection and Learning

The emphasis on personalized feedback as elucidated in this study echoes with the broader academic discourse on the role of feedback in learning. Traditionally, feedback has been lauded as a critical component of effective pedagogy, with numerous studies highlighting its significance in fostering academic growth (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). However, the depth with which our study delves into the socio-emotional implications of personalized feedback, especially within the EFL context of the Mekong Delta, offers a fresh perspective.

Several past studies have established a correlation between effective feedback and improved student performance (Brown et al., 2016). Yet, the nuanced understanding that feedback can serve as an "emotional bridge," as articulated by Tien, has been less explored. This distinct emphasis on the interplay between academic guidance and emotional connection, highlighted in our findings, marks a departure from more traditional, one-dimensional views of feedback. It underscores feedback not merely as a tool for academic correction but as a potent medium for fostering deeper teacher-student relationships.

Our findings introduce a critical examination of how emotional underpinnings in feedback can significantly enhance student engagement and receptivity in a culturally specific setting. This moves beyond the scope of studies like those by Charteris (2016), which, while insightful, do not fully integrate the cultural dimensions that critically influence feedback dynamics in non-Western contexts.

Moreover, while Charteris (2016) explored the concept of dialogic feedback, our study presents a culturally contextualized perspective. The personalized feedback practices of EFL teachers in the Mekong Delta, as revealed in this research, are inherently intertwined with the socio-cultural ethos of the region. The participants' reflections are reminiscent of the Vietnamese cultural values of mutual respect, understanding, and interconnectedness. This contextual specificity, presented through our data, offers an innovative perspective by situating feedback practices within the intricate fabric of local cultural practices and societal norms. Such a deeply ingrained cultural context adds layers of meaning to feedback, making it more than just a pedagogical tool, and highlights the importance of considering cultural nuances in educational practices.

The Power of Empathetic Listening in Navigating Linguistic Barriers

The revelation of empathetic listening as a potent tool in the EFL teacher's arsenal offers a compelling addition to the existing literature on language instruction methodologies. While the essence of listening has always been considered central to language acquisition, the profound emphasis on empathetic listening, as revealed in this study, brings a fresh dimension to this discourse.

Historically, the importance of listening in the language learning process has been well-documented. Rost and Candlin (1991), for instance, posits that listening plays a foundational role in language acquisition, providing learners with the input they need to process and produce new forms. However, the majority of such studies often delineate listening as a cognitive skill, primarily focusing on its technical aspects. The novel contribution of our research is in underscoring listening not just as a skill, but as a deeply empathetic act that can bridge the chasm between teacher and student, especially in the face of linguistic barriers. This approach diverges from traditional methodologies that prioritize the mechanics of listening over its relational aspects. By highlighting the empathetic dimensions of listening, our study challenges conventional teaching paradigms that often overlook the emotional and interpersonal dynamics critical to effective language learning.

Our findings, particularly the reflections shared by Dao and Binh, also present a stark contrast to the common practice in many EFL classrooms where the emphasis is often on speaking and producing the language rather than truly listening. Their narratives underscore a paradigm shift, suggesting that genuine progress might be more rooted in the quality of listening rather than the quantity of speaking. Furthermore, this study's emphasis on empathetic listening as a medium to understand the "struggles behind the words," as Dao articulated, offers a refreshing perspective. While Baas et al. (2015) discussed the various cognitive and metacognitive strategies employed by learners during the listening process, our findings bring to light the crucial role teachers play by listening with empathy, thereby offering more holistic support to their students.

In the Vietnamese EFL context, especially in the culturally rich milieu of the Mekong Delta, the act of empathetic listening takes on even deeper significance. Given the socio-cultural intricacies of the region (Pham et al., 2023), this enhanced listening strategy is not merely a pedagogical choice but a culturally attuned response that acknowledges and respects the linguistic and cultural diversity of the students. Listening becomes more than just an instructional strategy—it transforms into a gesture of respect, understanding, and genuine connection.

Nurturing Classroom Community through Empathetic Group Dynamics

The emphasis on cultivating a nurturing classroom community through empathetic group dynamics, as delineated in this study, resonates with the broader academic narrative, yet offers unique insights specific to the EFL context of the Mekong Delta. The idea that classrooms should be communities of learners, where students support and learn from one another, has been advocated by several educational scholars (McCaleb, 1995). However, the intertwining of this concept with empathy, particularly in navigating the complexities of language acquisition, offers fresh depth to this discourse.

Many previous studies have extolled the virtues of group work in enhancing student engagement and promoting collaborative learning (Okolie et al., 2022). Yet, the nuanced approach highlighted in our findings, where group dynamics are deliberately infused with empathy, marks a distinctive contribution to this narrative. Minh's strategy of designing tasks that require students to "step into each other's shoes" not only facilitates linguistic practice but also fosters interpersonal understanding, a dimension often overlooked in traditional group activities. This specific integration of empathy distinguishes our approach from conventional models that view group activities primarily as vehicles for cognitive or skill-based outcomes. Our study explores how empathetic interactions within these groups can enhance emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and mutual respect among students, aspects critical to effective language learning yet rarely emphasized in typical group dynamics discussions (e.g., Qureshi et al., 2023).

Furthermore, while the power of collaborative learning has been well-documented (Alrayah, 2018), our study brings to light the added layer of empathy as a critical ingredient in this mix. Truc's observation that students become more patient with each other's linguistic challenges when they engage empathetically underscores the profound impact of this approach. It suggests that the true potency of group work in EFL settings might be unlocked not just through collaboration but through collaboration grounded in empathy. Additionally, by embedding this educational practice within the socio-cultural context of the Mekong Delta, we link these pedagogical strategies to broader societal norms and values, which further enhances their relevance and effectiveness.

The collectivist nature of Vietnamese culture, with its emphasis on communal bonds and mutual support (Phan & Locke, 2016), adds a rich contextual layer to our findings. In such a setting, empathetic group dynamics become more than just a pedagogical strategy; they resonate with the deeper cultural values of the students, making learning more meaningful and relatable.

Embracing Student Narratives to Foster Empathy and Connection

The significance of embracing student narratives, as illuminated in our study, offers a fresh perspective to the dynamics of empathy in the EFL classroom, especially when juxtaposed with existing literature. The idea that individual stories and personal experiences can serve as powerful pedagogical tools is not new. Numerous scholars (Calvert & Hume, 2022) have highlighted the educational potential of narratives, positing that they can serve as bridges between the personal and the academic, making learning experiences more authentic and relevant.

However, our study extends this conversation, particularly within the EFL context of the Mekong Delta. Huyen's and Nghia's reflections underscore a deeper dimension: the intertwining of empathy with student narratives in EFL instruction. It suggests that by tapping into the reservoir of students' personal experiences and stories, teachers are not merely making linguistic concepts more relatable but are also forging deeper emotional connections. This synthesis of the cognitive and emotional realms through narratives is a nuanced exploration that differentiates our study from others which might focus predominantly on either the cognitive or the emotional independently (e.g., Eekhof et al., 2022; Hisey et al., 2024). Our findings not only affirm the value of integrating narratives but also emphasize the role of empathy in making these narratives a transformative element of the educational experience.

Comparing this finding with the broader educational landscape, there seems to be a shared emphasis on the role of narratives. For instance, Barkhuizen (2014) explored how narratives can shape teacher identity and inform classroom practices. However, the uniqueness of our study lies in the intentional intertwining of empathy with narratives, especially in the context of language instruction. This approach, as our study suggests, goes beyond mere pedagogical strategy and delves into the realm of emotional resonance. Moreover, the emphasis on empathy in the utilization of narratives leverages the culturally rich environment of the Mekong Delta, where interpersonal connections and communal values are paramount.

Furthermore, considering the rich tapestry of Vietnamese culture, where oral traditions and storytelling hold significant cultural value (K. Nguyen et al., 2016), the integration of student narratives in the classroom resonates on a deeper, cultural level. This cultural alignment enhances the pedagogical impact, making the learning experience profoundly relevant and deeply embedded in the students' sociocultural reality. The act of sharing and valuing these narratives aligns with the cultural ethos of the region, thus rendering language learning more culturally rooted and meaningful.

Conclusion

Teaching English is a nuanced endeavor, particularly in diverse cultural contexts such as the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. At the heart of this study was an exploration into how EFL teachers in HEIs within this region employ strategies to enhance their empathy and, by extension, the quality of their instruction. Recognizing the transformative potential of empathy in educational settings, this study sought to delve into the specific practices and insights of EFL educators in the Vietnamese context, aiming to shed light on the interplay between empathy, culture, and language instruction. Utilizing a qualitative approach, our research was anchored in semi-structured interviews with ten EFL educators from two higher educational institutions in the Mekong Delta. This methodology provided a rich, in-depth understanding of the teachers' experiences, strategies, and perspectives. Grounded in the Socio-cultural Theory and the Affective Filter Hypothesis, our investigation aimed to contextualize the findings within these theoretical frameworks, offering a comprehensive perspective on the role of empathy in EFL instruction. Our findings illuminated several core themes, each emphasizing a distinct dimension of empathetic teaching practices. From the intricate relationship between empathy and socio-cultural understanding to the transformative power of personalized feedback, empathetic listening, empathetic group dynamics, and the integration of student narratives, our study highlighted a spectrum of strategies employed by the educators. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of empathy in the EFL classroom, revealing it as a potent tool that bridges linguistic instruction with emotional resonance, cultural sensitivity, and genuine human connection.

The findings of this study on the empathetic strategies employed by EFL teachers in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam carry significant implications for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers in the realm of language instruction and beyond. Firstly, the strong emphasis on the interplay between empathy and socio-cultural understanding highlights the necessity of culturally attuned pedagogies. It underscores the importance of grounding language instruction in the cultural and socio-historical realities of the learners. For educators and curriculum developers, this calls for a rethinking of 'one-size-fits-all' approaches to language instruction, instead advocating for curricula that resonate with the unique cultural sensibilities of the learner demographic. The significance attached to personalized feedback points towards the transformative power of individualized instruction. Teachers and educational institutions should be encouraged to prioritize pedagogical approaches that recognize and value the unique learning trajectories, strengths, and challenges of each student. Such an approach not only aids academic development but also fosters deeper emotional connections between teachers and students.

The value of empathetic listening, as emphasized by the participants, calls for enhanced teacher training programs. Current and aspiring EFL educators could greatly benefit from training that equips them with the skills to genuinely listen and respond to their students, going beyond surface-level linguistic cues to understand the emotions, struggles, and aspirations underlying their words. Furthermore, the importance of fostering empathetic group dynamics implies that

collaborative learning environments should be central to EFL instruction. Schools and institutions might consider reshaping their classrooms to be more conducive to group interactions, emphasizing tasks and activities that promote mutual understanding, respect, and collective problem-solving among students. Lastly, the integration of students' narratives into the learning process underscores the importance of student agency in education. This finding suggests that educators should be actively seeking avenues to allow students to voice their stories, experiences, and perspectives, integrating them into the fabric of the instructional process. Such a practice not only renders lessons more relatable but also champions the idea of education as a dialogic exchange, where both teachers and students contribute to the co-construction of knowledge.

Recommendations

Building upon the insights gleaned from this research on empathetic strategies employed by EFL teachers in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, several avenues open up for subsequent investigations. Firstly, a comparative study examining the empathetic pedagogical practices across different cultural and regional contexts within Vietnam could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the nuances and variations in empathy-driven teaching approaches. Such a study could shed light on the specificities of each context and the overarching principles that might be universally applicable. Additionally, while this study focused on the perspectives of teachers, a complementary investigation that centers on students' perceptions of empathetic practices in the EFL classroom would be invaluable. Understanding the impact of such strategies from the learners' viewpoint can provide a more holistic picture of the teaching-learning dynamic, pinpointing areas of alignment or divergence between teacher intentions and student perceptions.

Given the prominence of group dynamics in the findings, a deeper exploration into the specific group-based activities and methodologies that foster empathy would be beneficial. Such research could serve as a practical guide for EFL educators, detailing specific tasks, exercises, and collaborative ventures that have been found effective in nurturing empathy and mutual understanding among students. Moreover, a longitudinal study tracking the long-term impacts of empathy-driven EFL instruction on students' linguistic achievements and socio-emotional development would offer insights into the sustained benefits or challenges of such an approach. Such an investigation could provide empirical evidence on the lasting implications of integrating empathy into language instruction. Lastly, with the increasing adoption of technology in education, research examining the potential of digital tools and platforms in enhancing or impeding empathetic interactions in the EFL classroom would be timely. As the educational landscape evolves with technological advancements, understanding how empathy can be fostered in both physical and virtual classrooms becomes crucial.

Limitations

Every research endeavor, no matter how meticulously planned and executed, is bound to have certain limitations, and this study is no exception. One of the primary limitations of this investigation pertains to its sample size and scope. With a focus on just 10 EFL teachers from two HEIs in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, the findings might not be wholly representative of the broader community of EFL educators in the region, let alone the country. The experiences and insights of these participants, while valuable, might be influenced by specific institutional cultures, teaching philosophies, or personal biases that do not necessarily resonate with a wider audience. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study, reliant predominantly on semi-structured interviews, might have introduced elements of subjectivity. While efforts were made to ensure unbiased and comprehensive data collection, the participants' self-reported experiences and perceptions might be influenced by memory biases, social desirability, or the dynamics of the interview process itself.

The study's focus on teacher perspectives, without incorporating the viewpoints of students, presents another limitation. While the teachers provided insights into their strategies and beliefs regarding empathy in the EFL classroom, the direct recipients of these strategies—the students—were not consulted. Their experiences, perceptions, and feedback could have offered a more rounded understanding of the impact of empathetic teaching practices. Lastly, the study's contextual specificity, concentrating on the unique cultural and regional nuances of the Mekong Delta, might limit the generalizability of the findings. While this specificity was intentional, aiming to delve deep into the particularities of this region, it means that the insights might not directly apply to other cultural or geographical contexts without further adaptations or considerations.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Le: Conceptualization and writing. Pham: Data collection and analysis. Tran: Conceptualization and editing.

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