EMPATHY IN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

LA EMPATÍA EN LA ENSEÑANZA DE IDIOMAS EN LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR

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Empathy in Language Teaching in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Empathy in language teaching at the higher education level is critical in fostering student engagement, emotional well-being, and academic achievement. This study investigates the role of empathetic behavior in language instruction and its impact on learners and teaching dynamics in university contexts. Adopting a qualitative methodology, the research is grounded in recent scholarly literature, teacher reflections, and empirical data from a survey administered to **561 university instructors and students**. The findings indicate that empathetic teaching practices help create inclusive, low-anxiety environments where students feel safe participating and communicating, facilitating deeper learning and stronger teacher-student relationships. The data reveal that empathy enhances motivation, reduces emotional barriers, and supports the development of effective communicative skills essential to language acquisition. Moreover, the study emphasizes the importance of integrating emotional intelligence and empathetic competencies into teacher training programs to better prepare educators for diverse student populations' emotional and cognitive needs. The research calls for a pedagogical shift in higher education that embraces empathy not as a soft skill, but as a core instructional strategy that significantly influences the quality of language education. By fostering human connection and emotional awareness, institutions can enhance both academic outcomes and personal growth in university classrooms. This article contributes to ongoing discussions about innovation in language education by positioning empathy as a transformative force in teaching and learning.

Keywords: empathy, language teaching, higher education, emotional intelligence, student engagement

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La empatía en la enseñanza de idiomas en la educación superior

RESUMEN

La empatía representa un pilar fundamental en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en el ámbito de la educación superior, dado su impacto directo en la calidad del proceso educativo. Este artículo analiza la influencia de la actitud empática del docente en el aprendizaje, destacando su papel en la motivación, el compromiso del estudiantado y la construcción de entornos inclusivos. A través de un enfoque cualitativo que combina la revisión de literatura especializada, la reflexión docente y la aplicación de una encuesta a 561 estudiantes y profesores universitarios, se evidencia que la empatía fortalece el vínculo entre docentes y discentes, mejora el rendimiento académico y favorece un ambiente emocionalmente seguro. Concebida como la capacidad del profesor para reconocer y atender las necesidades afectivas y cognitivas del estudiante, la empatía se posiciona como un elemento clave para reducir barreras emocionales y facilitar el proceso de adquisición del idioma. Los hallazgos subrayan la necesidad de incorporar la inteligencia emocional y las competencias socioemocionales en los programas de formación docente, con el fin de responder de manera integral a las demandas del aula contemporánea. En definitiva, el estudio aboga por un cambio pedagógico que coloque la dimensión humana y emocional en el centro de la enseñanza de lenguas en el nivel universitario, promoviendo prácticas educativas más sensibles, inclusivas y eficaces.

Palabras clave: empatía, enseñanza de idiomas, educación superior, motivación, relación docente-estudiante.

INTRODUCTION

Language teaching in higher education encompasses much more than the simple transmission of grammatical structures and vocabulary memorization. It involves the holistic development of learners, addressing not only their cognitive abilities but also their emotional and social needs. As students navigate the complex process of acquiring a new language, their success depends heavily on the quality of the interpersonal interactions within the classroom. In this context, empathy emerges as a crucial pedagogical competency that enables educators to build meaningful human connections with their students. Empathy can be broadly defined as the capacity to understand, share, and appropriately respond to the emotional and academic experiences of others (Mercer, 2016). When applied to teaching, empathy becomes a powerful tool that nurtures supportive and inclusive learning environments, ultimately enhancing student motivation and academic achievement.

The importance of empathy in education is supported by decades of psychological and pedagogical research, which underscores its role in fostering trust, respect, and positive teacher-student relationships (Rogers, 1969). Emotional intelligence, with empathy as one of its core components, has been linked to effective teaching practices that respond sensitively to the diverse needs of learners (Goleman, 1995). In language education, where learners frequently face anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and communication apprehension, empathy is particularly vital. It allows instructors to recognize the emotional barriers that students encounter and to adapt their instructional strategies to create a classroom climate where learners feel safe to express themselves, take risks, and engage actively.

A growing body of research confirms that empathetic teaching positively affects learners' academic outcomes and psychological well-being. For instance, Mercer and Gkonou (2017) argue that empathy strengthens the social-emotional bond between teachers and students, which is fundamental to sustained motivation and persistence in language learning. Furthermore, Oxford (2017) highlights that learners who perceive their instructors as empathetic are more likely to engage deeply with the material, demonstrate higher resilience in the face of difficulties, and show greater confidence in their communicative abilities. These findings resonate with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that emotional states such as anxiety or low self-esteem can impede language acquisition, whereas a positive emotional environment facilitates it.

Despite its recognized importance, empathy remains underexplored as a deliberate pedagogical strategy in higher education language classrooms, where the focus often remains on linguistic competence and measurable academic results. Traditional teaching approaches may inadvertently neglect the emotional experiences of learners, contributing to disengagement, demotivation, and suboptimal performance. This research seeks to fill that gap by investigating how empathy, when integrated intentionally into language teaching practices, influences student engagement, classroom participation, and academic success at the university level.

The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of empathy's multifaceted role in language instruction, exploring not only learners' perceptions but also how empathetic teaching practices are enacted and experienced within the classroom. By doing so, it aspires to inform language educators and program designers about the importance of incorporating emotional and relational dimensions into curriculum development and teacher training. The ultimate goal is to promote more holistic and effective language education models that recognize students as whole persons with intellectual and emotional needs.

In summary, this study frames empathy as a pivotal element that bridges cognitive and affective domains in language education, contributing to more meaningful, supportive, and productive learning experiences. It invites educators and researchers alike to reconsider the parameters of effective teaching and to embrace empathy as a vital pedagogical resource in cultivating thriving language learners.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In the context of higher education, many language learners struggle with anxiety, reduced motivation, and a sense of disconnection from classroom activities. Conventional instructional approaches frequently prioritize content delivery while overlooking the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of learning. This disconnect may hinder students' academic engagement and language acquisition. Therefore, this study investigates whether the integration of empathy into teaching practices can mitigate these challenges, thereby enhancing learner motivation, emotional security, and overall academic performance in the language classroom.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How does teacher empathy influence student performance and classroom participation in language instruction at the higher education level?

OBJECTIVES

GENERAL OBJECTIVE

- To analyze the role of empathy in language teaching within higher education and its impact on student engagement and academic outcomes.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- To define and contextualize the concept of empathy in the educational sphere.

- To examine teacher-student interactions in university-level language classrooms through the lens of empathetic practices.

- To identify how empathy contributes to the creation of inclusive, emotionally supportive, and effective learning environments.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Empathy, as a core component of emotional intelligence, is rooted in both psychological theory and humanistic educational philosophy. Goleman (1995) identified empathy as a key element of emotional intelligence, essential for interpersonal effectiveness in educational settings. Similarly, Rogers (1969), in his humanistic approach to education, emphasized the importance of empathetic relationships in fostering trust, respect, and meaningful learning experiences.

In the domain of language education, Mercer (2016) and Oxford (2017) argue that the emotional aspects of learning are just as critical as the cognitive, especially in environments where students are vulnerable to anxiety and performance-related stress. An empathetic teacher not only acknowledges students' emotions but actively works to lower affective barriers to learning. This aligns with Krashen's (1982) **Affective Filter Hypothesis**, which suggests that when students feel emotionally safe and supported, their ability to acquire language improves significantly. Furthermore, empathetic teaching enhances learners' willingness to take risks, engage in dialogue, and participate more fully in the classroom, contributing to a richer and more effective language learning experience.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a **mixed-methods descriptive approach**, combining quantitative data from a structured survey with qualitative reflections from participants to explore the role of empathy in language teaching. The objective was to assess learners' and teachers' perceptions of empathy and its impact on motivation, confidence, classroom engagement, and academic performance.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 562 individuals participated in the study, all based in Ecuador. The sample included both language teachers and university-level students from various higher education institutions across the country. Participants came from diverse linguistic and academic backgrounds but shared direct experience with language education, either as instructors or learners. The inclusion of both perspectives was intended to provide a more holistic understanding of the role of empathy in the context of language teaching and learning within Ecuadorian higher education.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

The primary instrument for data collection was a **structured questionnaire** designed to gather participants' perceptions and experiences regarding teacher empathy in the language classroom. The survey consisted of **ten multiple-choice questions**, each addressing a specific component of empathetic teaching, such as emotional support, communication, feedback, classroom climate, and motivation. The questions were formulated based on key constructs drawn from relevant literature on empathy, affective learning, and second language acquisition (e.g., Mercer, 2016; Pekrun, 2006).

Additionally, a smaller **qualitative component** was included. A sub-sample of **10 university language instructors** from Ecuador voluntarily shared their reflections on how they integrate empathetic practices into their pedagogy and how those practices influence student behavior, confidence, and academic performance. These narrative accounts were used to support and triangulate the quantitative findings from the survey.

Procedure

The survey was administered online over three weeks in June 2025. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and all participants provided informed consent. The questionnaire was distributed via

institutional mailing lists and academic platforms related to language education. Responses were automatically collected through a secure digital form.

Qualitative data were collected through short written narratives submitted by university instructors via email. The instructors were asked to reflect on their teaching strategies, experiences with empathetic practices, and observations of their students' reactions to empathetic versus non-empathetic behaviors in the classroom.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, with the results expressed in percentages to represent the frequency of responses to each survey item. The results were organized into categories based on thematic relevance, such as the perceived importance of empathy, teacher behavior, motivation, confidence, and student reactions to feedback.

Qualitative responses were reviewed through thematic content analysis to identify recurring ideas, attitudes, and pedagogical strategies related to empathy. These insights were integrated into the discussion to enrich the interpretation of survey findings and to provide practical examples of empathetic teaching in action.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards, ensuring confidentiality, voluntary participation, and transparency throughout the process. No identifying information was collected, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined the significance of empathy in language teaching by analyzing learners' perspectives, experiences, and the perceived influence of empathetic instruction on their motivation, confidence, and academic progress. The findings underscore empathy as a foundational component of effective language instruction, reaffirming the vital role that emotional and relational factors play in second language acquisition. This aligns with frameworks in social-emotional learning and learner-centered pedagogy, which emphasize the emotional climate as critical to learner success (Mercer, 2016).

The data revealed a strong consensus regarding the importance of empathy in language classrooms: 84% of respondents considered it "very important," while 15.3% deemed it "important." Such agreement

supports Mercer and Gkonou's (2017) argument that empathy contributes to a secure learning environment where students feel understood and emotionally supported. In evaluating their teachers, the majority of students perceived their instructors as highly empathetic, with 50.3% labeling them as "very empathetic" and 45.5% as "empathetic." These perceptions suggest that most teachers demonstrate emotional awareness and care in their practice. This aligns with Oxford (2016), who maintains that empathy enhances motivation and resilience, and Lamb (2017), who links teacher empathy with increased classroom engagement and participation. However, the small minority of learners who perceived a lack of empathy underscores the need for continuous teacher development in emotional intelligence and affective communication.

Empathy's role in student motivation and self-confidence was especially prominent in the findings. A significant 86.3% of students indicated that their teacher's empathy had a strong positive influence on their motivation to learn, consistent with Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory, which posits that emotional support enhances academic drive and goal orientation. Learners who feel valued and understood are more likely to persist and enjoy the learning process (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016). In addition, 74.7% of participants reported that teacher empathy boosted their confidence in learning a language—a particularly important outcome in foreign language instruction, where fear of mistakes often inhibits performance. This effect reflects what Cooper (2004) refers to as the "empowerment effect," where empathic teaching fosters a sense of competence and self-assurance. Furthermore, 84.7% of learners noted that receiving constructive feedback from empathetic teachers made them feel motivated to improve, confirming the pedagogical value of emotionally informed correction (Jansen et al., 2024).

Regarding strategies perceived to promote empathy in the classroom, students ranked effective communication highest (47.8%), followed by the establishment of inclusive learning environments (30.3%) and the use of constructive feedback (20.5%). These preferences are consistent with research by Al-Ghabban (2018), who emphasizes the role of dialogue and inclusivity in strengthening student-teacher relationships and fostering a sense of belonging. Wink and Smith (2021) further argue that empathy should be systematically embedded into instructional planning to meet both the emotional and cognitive needs of learners. When asked which qualities of empathy they valued most in their teachers,

respondents cited patience with mistakes (34.9%) and sensitivity to individual learning needs (33.9%) as their top priorities. This finding aligns with Karimian (2022), who observed that trust and low-anxiety environments—both outcomes of teacher patience—enhance language acquisition. Also noted were the importance of receiving positive feedback (16.6%) and enjoying a relaxed classroom atmosphere (14.6%), echoing studies by Olivares-Cuhat and Zimotti (2023), who found that emotionally safe learning spaces foster both academic performance and student satisfaction.

The overall impact of empathy on learning outcomes was also notable. More than half of the students (54%) reported significant improvement in their language skills due to teacher empathy, while an additional 41.7% reported some improvement. These results support previous findings that empathetic teaching not only addresses learners' emotional needs but also facilitates academic achievement by fostering engagement, persistence, and trust (Dumancic, 2025; Mercer, 2016). The ability of teachers to adjust instruction to students' contexts and provide emotionally resonant support is a defining characteristic of effective language instruction.

Finally, students were asked how they would respond if their teacher lacked empathy. Nearly half (49.9%) indicated they would confront the teacher to express their feelings, while 24.6% stated they would become demotivated and might abandon the course. Others reported they would ignore the situation or seek an alternative instructor. These responses reflect an evolving student mindset in which emotional well-being and empathic interaction are seen not merely as optional, but as essential aspects of the educational experience. As MacIntyre, Gregersen, and Mercer (2019) emphasize, learner agency and emotional security are crucial components of effective language education, and the presence or absence of empathy can have profound and lasting effects on learners' academic trajectories and personal development.

Table 1

Survey Item	Response Option	%
1. How important is empathy in language teaching?	Very important	84.0
	Important	15.3
	Slightly important	0.7
2. How would you rate your language teacher's empathy?	Very empathetic	50.3
	Empathetic	45.5
	Slightly/not empathetic	4.2
3. Does teacher empathy influence your motivation?	Yes, a lot	86.3
	Yes, a little	13.0
	No	0.7
4. Have you experienced learning gains due to teacher empathy?	Yes, I've improved a lot	54.0
	Yes, I've improved a little	41.7
	No noticeable change	4.3
5. How important is it that your teacher understands your interests and needs?	Very important	56.9
	Important	38.1
	Slightly important	5.0
6. How does teacher empathy affect your confidence?	Increases my confidence	74.7
	Decreases my confidence	9.4
	It depends	10.0
	No effect	5.9

Perceptions of Teacher Empathy and Its Impact on Language Learning
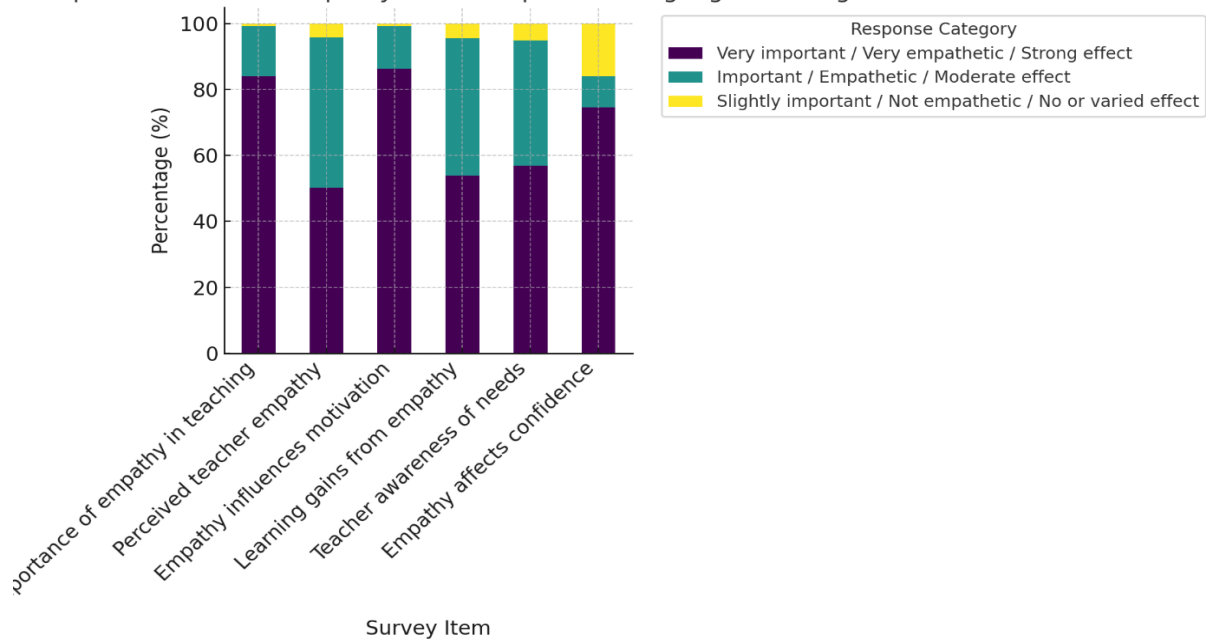
Table 2

Survey Item	Response Option	%
1. Which strategy best fosters empathy in language classrooms?	Effective communication	47.8
	Inclusive learning environment	30.3
	Constructive feedback	20.5
2. How do you feel when receiving constructive feedback?	Motivated to improve	84.7
	Anxious about making mistakes	13.5
	No answer or other	1.8
3. Which aspect of empathy is most important in a language teacher?	Understanding my individual needs	33.9
	Being patient with my mistakes	34.9
	Creating a relaxed environment	14.6
	Giving positive feedback	16.6
4. What would you do if your teacher wasn't empathetic?	Talk to the teacher to express my feelings	49.9
	Look for another teacher or course	13.5
	Ignore the situation	11.9
	Feel demotivated and drop the course	24.6

Empathetic Strategies and Student Reactions in Language Classes
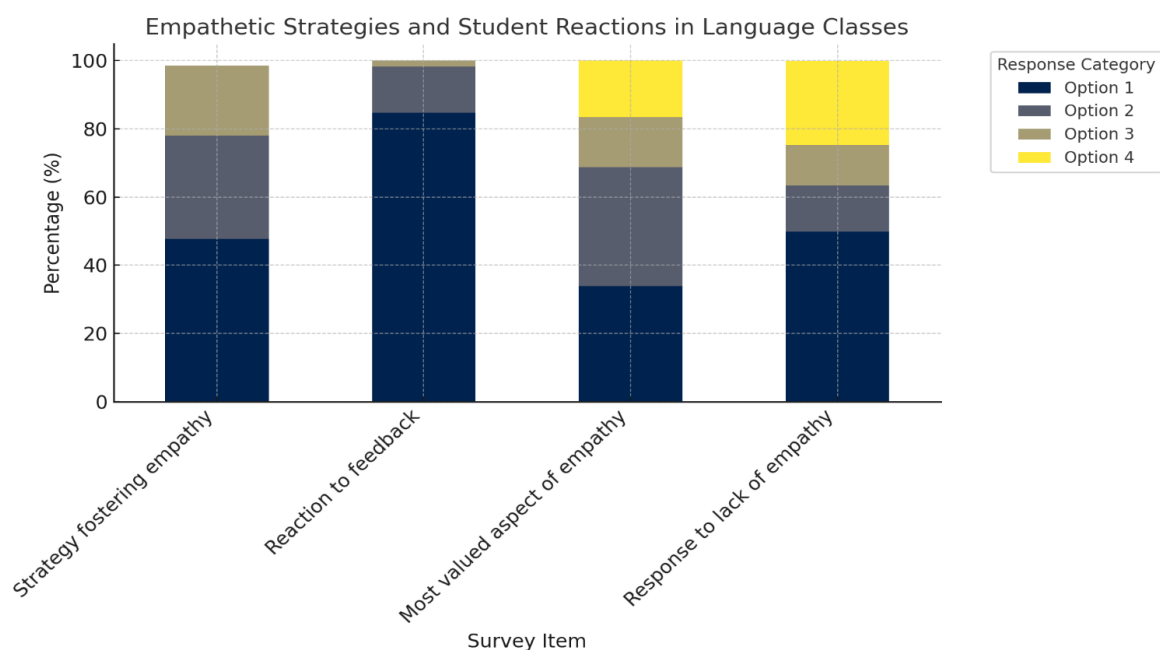
The results demonstrate a strong consensus on the importance of empathy in language teaching, with 84% of respondents considering it "very important" and 86.3% acknowledging its significant influence on motivation. Additionally, 74.7% report increased confidence due to teacher empathy. The most valued empathetic strategies include effective communication (47.8%) and patience with student errors (34.9%). Importantly, 95.7% of students feel they have benefited from empathetic teachers, confirming empathy's role as a critical element in effective language instruction.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical role that empathy plays in the language learning process, underscoring its impact on students' motivation, confidence, classroom engagement, and overall academic improvement. The results confirm that learners not only recognize the value of empathetic teaching but also benefit from it significantly, both emotionally and cognitively. A large majority of respondents emphasized that empathy—manifested through effective communication, patience with errors, inclusive practices, and constructive feedback—creates a safe and supportive learning environment that enhances participation and achievement.

Moreover, students' willingness to advocate for themselves in the face of non-empathetic teaching reflects a growing awareness of the emotional dimensions of education. They see empathy not as a luxury but as a necessity in language classrooms. This reinforces the idea that empathy is not just a

desirable personality trait but a professional competence that must be actively developed and sustained through teacher training and reflective practice.

The study also affirms the theoretical perspectives of affective language learning, particularly the control-value theory of emotions and social-emotional learning models, which suggest that positive emotional interactions between teachers and students are essential for academic success. When empathy is integrated into language instruction, students are more likely to feel confident, valued, and motivated—factors that directly influence their willingness to take risks, make mistakes, and persist through challenges.

In light of these findings, the promotion of empathy in language education should be considered a pedagogical imperative. Language programs at all levels would benefit from including emotional intelligence and empathy training as part of teacher education and professional development. Such efforts can help foster inclusive, respectful, and engaging classrooms where all students are supported not only as learners but as individuals.

Future research could further explore the long-term effects of empathy on language proficiency development, classroom dynamics, and student well-being. Additionally, cross-cultural studies might offer deeper insights into how empathy is expressed and interpreted in diverse educational settings. Overall, this study contributes to a growing body of literature that advocates for more humanistic, emotionally responsive approaches to language teaching and learning.

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