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PROMOTING TEACHER EMPATHY: FROM ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract: The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has brought in its wake a growing concern over teacher well-being. It is evidenced that prioritizing teacher well-being is closely intertwined with nurturing a culture of teacher empathy, as teachers with high empathy levels are better equipped to navigate negative emotions while promoting positive ones (Tarrasch et al., 2020). Several studies have been conducted in the field to investigate the levels of teacher empathy and its impacts on teaching and learning; however, very few examined the underlying reasons behind such observed levels. Moreover, there has been little research investigating empathy among Vietnamese teachers, especially the pre-service ones. This qualitative research was conducted to delve into the role of teacher empathy and the nuanced factors contributing to its development, as perceived by pre-service teachers at a university in Vietnam. Through analysis of data from semi-structured interviews, the findings revealed that the majority of participants were aware of the importance of empathy in their teaching profession. Besides, five main factors were identified as contributors to their empathy development, namely personal beliefs and values, personal skills, mindful lifestyle, professional practice, and past educational experience. These findings are anticipated to offer implications for both teachers and trainers working in teacher education.

Keywords: teacher empathy, EFL pre-service teachers, teacher well-being, teacher education

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PHÁT TRIỂN NĂNG LỰC THẤU CẢM CỦA GIÁO VIÊN: TỪ GÓC NHÌN CỦA GIÁO SINH CHUYÊN NGÀNH GIẢNG DẠY TIẾNG ANH

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Tóm tắt: Sự bùng phát của đại dịch COVID-19 kéo theo nhiều lo ngại về sức khỏe tinh thần của giáo viên. Có bằng chứng chứng minh rằng việc ưu tiên sức khỏe tinh thần cần được liên kết chặt chẽ với sự phát triển năng lực thấu cảm ở giáo viên, bởi giáo viên với năng lực thấu cảm cao thường có khả năng tốt hơn trong việc điều hướng cảm xúc tiêu cực và nuôi dưỡng cảm xúc tích cực (Tarrasch và cộng sự, 2020). Đã có nhiều nghiên cứu về mức độ thấu cảm của giáo viên và tác động của nó đối với giảng dạy và học tập; tuy nhiên, rất ít nghiên cứu đi sâu vào các nguyên nhân đằng sau sự phát triển ấy. Bên cạnh đó, nghiên cứu về năng lực thấu cảm của giáo viên tại Việt Nam, đặc biệt là giáo sinh, còn hạn chế. Nghiên cứu định tính này^o được thực hiện nhằm tìm hiểu vai trò của năng lực thấu cảm trong giảng dạy cũng như các yếu tố tác động đến sự phát triển thấu cảm theo góc nhìn của các giáo sinh tại một trường đại học ở Việt Nam. Thông qua phân tích dữ liệu từ các cuộc phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc, kết quả cho thấy phần lớn người tham gia nhận thức được tầm quan trọng của thấu cảm trong giảng dạy. Nghiên cứu cũng tìm ra năm yếu tố chính góp phần vào sự phát triển thấu cảm của họ, bao gồm: niềm tin và giá trị cá nhân, kỹ năng mềm, lối sống chánh niệm, sự thực hành nghề nghiệp và kinh nghiệm giáo dục trong quá khứ. Những phát hiện này được kỳ vọng sẽ mang lại những gợi mở ý nghĩa cho giáo viên và giảng viên chuyên ngành sư phạm.

Từ khóa: năng lực thấu cảm ở giáo viên, giáo sinh chuyên ngành giảng dạy tiếng Anh, sức khỏe tinh thần của giáo viên, đào tạo giáo viên

1. Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed an increasing interest in social and emotional development, as "learning to be" and "learning to live together" emerge as integral components among the four pillars shaping the foundations for education in the twenty-first century (Delors, 1996). One approach to nurturing social and emotional growth is social-emotional learning (SEL), which has recently been emphasized by UNESCO as the key to attaining United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (17 SDGs) (Yoshida, 2024). Among the social-emotional competencies, empathy is one of the instrumental skills. Numerous studies have underscored the importance of teacher empathy in effective teaching and learning, proving that empathetic teachers are more likely to succeed in improving teacher-student relationships, enhancing student learning motivation and performance, creating supportive learning environments and maintaining positive school climates (Cooper, 2010; Murphy et al., 2018; Narinasamy & Mamat, 2013).

To date, numerous researchers have explored teacher empathy. Most of these studies

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focus on measuring empathy levels among teachers (e.g., Samavi et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022), or investigating the correlation between teacher's ability to empathize and elements of teaching, learning (e.g., Aldrup et al., 2022; Narinasamy & Mamat, 2013; Rogers et al., 2013). Scant attention, however, has been directed toward how teachers perceive empathy, especially concerning its role and development. This oversight is notable since comprehending these viewpoints could yield valuable insights for promoting the development of empathy among educators. To bridge this gap, this research aims to uncover perceptions of English as a foreign language (EFL) pre-service teachers about the role of empathy and the influences shaping their empathy development. This aligns with the recommendation from Bullough and Baughman (1997, as cited in Le, 2013) that any teacher education program should commence with an understanding of pre-service teachers' pedagogical beliefs. The study, therefore, centers on answering two questions:

1. *How do EFL pre-service teachers perceive the role of empathy in their professional life?*
2. *How do EFL pre-service teachers perceive the factors contributing to their empathy development?*

2. Literature Review

2.1. SEL and Social-Emotional Competences

The term "social-emotional learning" gained its first official definition in the book "Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators" in 1997 by nine co-authors at the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a leading organization in developing and promoting SEL in schools. To date, SEL has been widely acknowledged as an integral part of education and personal growth. According to CASEL's recent publications (e.g., 2013, 2020), SEL is the process by which individuals of all ages acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes to foster healthy identities, control emotions, accomplish individual and group objectives, express empathy, build supportive connections, and make responsible and caring decisions. Accordingly, the framework encompasses five social-emotional competencies that ones are expected to develop, i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision-making.

2.2. Conceptualization of Empathy

This study focuses specifically on empathy, an essential component within SEL's competency of social awareness. Despite its significant role, defining empathy proves to be a challenging task (Bouton, 2016). Two schools of thought historically dominated the field, with one viewing empathy through a cognitive lens and the others adopting an affective approach (Aldrup et al., 2022; Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). The former contended that empathy was more about comprehending than about sharing another person's feelings (Kohler, 1929). Meanwhile, from the affective standpoint, empathy refers to the emotional reactions and responses to another's affective experiences (Stotland, 1969). Given the "multidimensional nature" of empathy (Davis, 1996, p. 3), researchers in recent decades have tended to integrate both cognitive and affective components in empathy studies (e.g., Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright 2004; Preston & de Waal, 2002). The current paper also adopts this approach, acknowledging that incorporating both elements into the definition enables a more thorough understanding of empathy (Aldrup et al., 2022). While the cognitive aspect explains how people are able to recognize and label the feelings of others, the affective aspect of empathy explains why we are

moved to act empathetically toward others in need (Batson, 2009).

Besides the debate surrounding its cognitive or affective nature, another area of confusion when studying empathy is whether it is a trait or state. The trait view posits that empathy is an "innate, natural ability" that remains relatively stable over time (Kunyk & Olson, 2001, p. 321). Other evidence, however, challenges this idea. For example, Feshbach and Feshbach (2009) claimed that it is possible to train or enhance empathy.

In conclusion, the current study defines empathy as the ability to recognize, interpret and share with the emotions and situations of others. This definition involves both cognitive and affective components. And while it is influenced by both trait and state, empathy is more a skill that can be developed over time rather than a fixed capacity.

2.3. Empathy in Teaching Profession

Teachers in the twenty-first century are confronted with increasingly demanding roles, encompassing not only academic success but also the addressing of their social and emotional needs (Rieckhoff et al., 2020). These high expectations often leave teachers overwhelmed, affecting their relationships with students and general well-being (Valli & Buese, 2007). As a result, numerous studies have explored ways to help teachers manage their professional responsibilities effectively. Among these, emotional stability and empathy are often regarded as the most crucial factors (Kim et al., 2019; Stojiljković et al., 2012). Teacher empathy is defined as "the ability to express concern and take the perspective of a student", according to Tettegah and Anderson (2007, p. 50). In a similar vein, Ge et al. (2021) described teacher empathy as a process that involved understanding students' situations, sharing their emotions and demonstrating care for them. While teacher empathy is also employed during their communication with students' parents and fellow colleagues, in the scope of this study, the focus is on teacher-student relationships specifically.

Despite widespread recognition of its importance, research on the role of teacher empathy has yielded mixed findings regarding its impact on students and teaching outcomes. On the one hand, some scholars contend that teacher empathy strengthens teacher-student relationships by establishing a foundation for effective communication (Narinasamy & Mamat, 2013; Samavi et al., 2022). This, in turn, contributes to a supportive learning environment (Cooper, 2010), enhances students' academic and social-emotional outcomes (Huang et al., 2018), and impacts teachers positively (Chang, 2013). Research by Milatz et al. (2015) showed that teachers who cultivated close relationships with their students experienced lower levels of burnout compared to those who maintained more distant and less congruent relationships. On the other hand, in an attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of the association between teacher empathy and effective teaching, Aldrup et al. (2022) concluded that there was limited evidence supporting a statistically significant positive association between empathy and quality of teacher-student interactions and student outcomes. For example, Hammel (2013, as cited in Aldrup et al., 2022) discovered that middle school teachers who reported higher empathy levels did not always perceive their teacher-student relationships as close and free of conflict.

A closer examination of the literature implies that findings on the role of teacher empathy are yet homogeneous, which necessitates further examination. Furthermore, knowledge about the determinants of empathy remains underdeveloped (Ge et al., 2021). Researchers have explored the impacts of interventions aimed at building teachers' knowledge and practice of empathy, yet further investigation is recommended to analyze the sustainability of these training (Whitford & Emerson, 2018). Additionally, the exploration of teacher empathy within Vietnamese context is

limited, with studies only marginally addressing it by showing that prospective teachers view empathy as a desirable moral quality (Dinh, 2020; Le, 2013; Le et al., 2023). Thus, the present research is being conducted aiming to fill these gaps to some extent.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Context

The present study is conducted at University A (pseudonym) in Vietnam. This is a public higher education institution with a strong emphasis on language education, linguistics, international studies and related social sciences and humanities. In response to research calls for teacher training in SEL (Do & Zsolnai, 2021; Stipp, 2019), University A is one of the few institutions in Vietnam to have introduced a SEL course titled "Emotional Intelligence and Social Communication" (EISC) to their teacher preparation programs. This course aims to educate and cultivate emotional intelligence and social communication skills among students pursuing teacher education at the university, with a view to "developing a community of students and lecturers who are self-aware, can regulate emotions, can empathize and connect with each other, create happy lives, successful careers and positively inspire the broader community, toward personal development", as stated in the course outline. The course is compulsory for all students pursuing language teacher education at the university, including those who study English Language Teacher Education. Every year the number of enrollment to this SEL course is from 1500-1800 students.

During the course, students are equipped with knowledge of the mixed model of EI introduced by Daniel Goleman in 2001. This is a refinement of his earlier framework in 1995. The four dimensions in the refined model are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management (see Figure 1). It is important to note that although Goleman initially coined it as an EI model, Cherniss (2010) later emphasized that it aligns more closely with a model of emotional and social competence (p. 116).

Figure 1

Goleman's (2001) Mixed Model of Emotional Intelligence (p. 28)

	Self (Personal Competence)	Other (Social Competence)
Recognition	<p>Self-Awareness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional self-awareness • Accurate self-assessment • Self-confidence 	<p>Social Awareness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy • Service orientation • Organizational awareness
Regulation	<p>Self-Management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional self-control • Trustworthiness • Conscientiousness • Adaptability • Achievement drive • Initiative 	<p>Relationship Management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing others • Influence • Communication • Conflict management • Visionary leadership • Catalyzing change • Building bonds • Teamwork and collaboration

Upon further examination of the syllabus, additional topics covered in the course include "mindfulness, emotions, emotion regulation, empathy/how to look deeply and listen attentively, giving emotional care for others, as well as Buddhist principles including

compassion, interbeing, and impermanence" (Nguyen & Luong, 2023, p. 38). There is a session of guided meditation in each lesson, usually followed by brief self-reflection and circle sharing. Students are also required to write down their reflections on various aspects of life while they are at home. Throughout the course, there are many other activities, most of which are designed to encourage reflective practice and cultivate mindful lifestyle among students.

3.2. Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative approach, with data collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The interviews were guided by an interview protocol containing three sections. Section 1 is to gain information about participants' background and previous learning, teaching experience. Section 2 explores their general understanding and practice of empathy during teaching while section 3 focuses on the factors shaping their development of empathy.

Six EFL pre-service teachers were contacted via social media platforms and invited to participate in the interview. They were third-year and fourth-year students studying English Language Teacher Education at University A, and had completed the aforementioned EISC course one and two years ago. All participants possessed over two years of experience in teaching and/ or tutoring English. Interestingly, some participants even had brief experience teaching English abroad. Demographic information of participants is described in Table 1.

Table 1

Profiles of the Interviewees

Name (pseudonyms)	Gender	Year of enrollment	Teaching experience
Alex	Male	Fourth-year student	4 years
Mia	Female	Third-year student	3 years
Tracy	Female	Fourth-year student	2 years
Victor	Male	Fourth-year student	4 years
Heidi	Female	Third-year student	3 years
Grey	Female	Third-year student	2 years

After the data was collected, thematic analysis was utilized to examine the verbatim transcription of the interviews.

4. Findings

Data from the semi-structured interviews reveal that empathy can have both positive impacts and negative impacts on different aspects of the teaching profession, as perceived by EFL pre-service teachers. Regarding the factors contributing to their empathy development, five themes emerged, namely personal beliefs and values, personal skills, mindful lifestyle, professional practice, and past educational experience.

4.1. Positive Impacts of Teacher Empathy as Perceived by the Pre-Service Teachers

Positive impacts of empathy on teaching were found in most responses, within which four categories emerge, i.e., improved teacher-student relationships, supportive learning environment, effective instructional support, enhanced job satisfaction.

First, empathy among EFL pre-service teachers is perceived as instrumental in the quality of teacher-student relationships. Four pre-service teachers (Alex, Mia, Victor, Anne) described how empathetic interactions fostered a sense of closeness and connection between themselves and their students. This closeness was described as fundamental in creating an

environment where students felt comfortable and open to engaging with their teachers.

"If we empathize, students will feel closer to us, they may be willing to share more with us and be more comfortable in the classroom. It also affects the relationship between teachers and students." (Alex)

"Teaching is not only about knowledge. It is also the interactions with students, social-emotional connection with them. Improving empathy is fundamental in connecting those things." (Mia)

"When I get familiar with it and apply it for a period of time, I realize that my students have a deeper connection with me. They not only care about themselves, but also about the relationship between us. And students begin to share more with me, not only about their studies but also about their personal life with friends or family. I think this is a very good thing." (Anne)

Interestingly, Victor used a simile to highlight the pivotal role of empathy in teaching. Empathy, as he perceived, is the pathway to a strong and positive connection between teachers and students.

"Because empathy is what creates connection. We cannot teach a student who doesn't open their heart to us. Just as we must clear a path before vehicles can travel. Empathy is what creates that path. Most teachers are excellent with solid professional training. But without this connection, the educational journey becomes very difficult." (Victor)

Second, empathetic teaching practices contribute to the creation of a supportive learning environment where students feel secure, welcomed and valued for their individual differences. Tracy and Victor recalled experiences when their being empathetic had encouraged students to make mistakes and learn from their experiences without fear.

"Especially when I teach students in foundational courses. They are quite afraid of speaking and afraid of making mistakes. [...] In such circumstances, I need to understand the reasons behind their fear to help students overcome it." (Tracy)

"That means students must feel safe with me first [...] before they dare to open their heart to try and make mistakes without being shy. These are the things that I see my students have changed." (Victor)

Moreover, empathy enables teachers to acknowledge and respect the diverse needs and backgrounds of their students. As Victor and Taylor remarked, empathetic teachers will refrain from initial judgements to look into students' unique circumstances. This facilitates a deeper understanding of students' backgrounds and needs, ultimately contributing to more effective support and inclusive classroom environment.

"There will be students with special circumstances. [...] If I have empathy, I will delay my initial judgment to go deeper and find out the many factors that create their personality." (Victor)

"I realize that many students are influenced by their L1, so there are some sounds in English that they will have trouble producing. [...] Some of my students often make mistakes about the /l/ sound and /n/ sound. I think the first thing is not to laugh at them, because it's part of their culture, part of their first language." (Taylor)

Third, teacher empathy paves the way for effective instructional support, thereby heightening student engagement and learning outcomes. Four EFL pre-service teachers highlighted the importance of understanding students' psychological needs and adapting teaching strategies accordingly. While Heidi shared insights from her work with young learners and Grey recounted her teaching experience in Thailand, Nancy and Taylor provided broader observations.

"But after a few sessions, I realized that my students are just children. And every child loves playing, don't they? The important thing is that a teacher motivates them to learn and makes learning English fun for them. [...] I think that for each level of student, teachers must empathize

and understand their psychology in order to organize reasonable activities during class." (Heidi)
"But Thai students in those regions only require additional motivation from teachers to learn English. Recognizing this, I tailored my lessons to align with the students' needs and capabilities." (Grey)

"When it comes to imparting knowledge, it is also easier to personalize. Because when I talk with students, I understand what kind of person they are, what type of learner they are." (Nancy)

"I think it will be difficult for a teacher to communicate well or to teach 100% effectively if he or she lacks empathy. For example, the way we convey knowledge, the language we use, are they appropriate to students' age?" (Taylor)

Besides being able to cater to students' diverse learning preferences and abilities, empathetic teachers are more patient when teaching. When Mia encountered initial challenges with her Thai students grappling with the Latin alphabet, empathy enabled her to remain composed. Likewise, empathizing with students' struggles in speaking fluently, Victor patiently waited for them to articulate their thoughts.

"Because Thai people don't use the Latin alphabet, my students had great difficulties with the way to pronounce and write in English. At first, I was angry. I felt a bit impatient, because I thought these are very normal things for me. And then I realized that I had not put myself in students' shoes. As they only used their own language, these things were new to them. [...] It helps me to calm down while teaching, instead of just feeling impatient." (Mia)

"The common thing about this B1-level group is that students will have difficulty with pronunciation. Or for them, producing a speech of only about 2-3 sentences is indeed very difficult. So in many cases, I have to wait. Waiting for a very long time. Because I don't want to disrupt them as they haven't said anything yet. I don't want to show that I'm too impatient to take away their chance." (Victor)

For Anne, she mentioned the role of empathy in guiding teachers to deliver feedback that nurtures growth. As she explained, empathetic teachers should understand that students may feel inferior and self-conscious when receiving feedback on their mistakes. Hence, error analysis should be approached with a positive attitude so as to empower students to overcome their challenges with confidence.

"It's natural for students to make mistakes, but this can sometimes make them feel like they haven't performed well enough. If a teacher employs empathy in this situation, they won't immediately point out the mistake or criticize the students for it. [...] Instead, they'll start by giving positive feedback on what the students have done well, and then address any errors in a constructive manner. [...] This approach helps students recognize their mistakes without feeling discouraged and maintain their confidence as they continue their learning journey." (Anne)

Fourth, empathetic teaching practices contribute to teachers' overall job satisfaction by alleviating stress and promoting a sense of fulfillment. Four EFL pre-service teachers (Alex, Victor, Grey and Nancy) described how empathy allows them to teach with greater ease and pleasure. Victor, in particular, emphasized how it prompts him to reflect on his teaching practices with a heightened sense of purpose.

"I think that if I sympathize with students for once or twice, both students and I will feel more comfortable." (Alex).

"I have no regrets about not being kind enough or not doing what I should have done. I understand their needs and their abilities. And I have acted accordingly. [...] Students have gained new knowledge and skills." (Victor)

"When a student says they haven't done their homework, as a teacher I feel a little disappointed. [...] I can only ask them why. Knowing the reason makes me less disappointed and angry." (Grey)

"Empathy not only boosts my inner peace but also reduces negative feelings in my overall well-being. [...] When I enjoy my hours in the class, I find teaching less tiring." (Nancy)

4.2. Negative Impacts of Teacher Empathy as Perceived by the Pre-Service Teachers

While teachers empathizing with students offers significant benefits, it is essential to recognize the potential repercussions. Through thematic analysis, decreased job satisfaction emerges as the main category associated with empathetic teaching practices. Alex was the only pre-service teacher to mention how empathizing with students' struggles and challenges can evoke feelings of annoyance and discomfort, particularly in response to repeated instances of student misbehavior or non-compliance.

"The third time when a student fails to do their homework [...] makes me more uncomfortable than the first time. That is, my empathy makes me feel uncomfortable and signals a need for change." (Alex)

4.3. Pre-Service Teachers' Perception of Factors Contributing to Their Empathy Development

Five main themes emerge from the interview that address the second research question. They are: (1) personal beliefs and values, (2) personal skills, (3) mindful lifestyle, (4) professional practice, and (5) past educational experience.

Personal beliefs and values encompass the first principles that shape individuals' understanding of themselves and others. Within the context of empathy development among EFL pre-service teachers, this theme explores how their belief and value systems influence their capacity to empathize with students. For Alex, it is his belief in the uniqueness of each individual's life journey that motivates him to understand and share with the behaviors of others. Meanwhile, Victor emphasized the significance of recognizing the inherent vulnerability of human beings, explaining how this acknowledgment fosters a deeper level of empathy within himself.

"Everyone has their own story. When I think like that, I will have the motivation, curiosity and empathy to learn more about the behaviors of others." (Alex)

"That is "Humans are vulnerable". It means human existence is already a vulnerability. When we think that vulnerability is universal, it is shared across humans, each person is vulnerable in a certain way. [...] When I think that every person has the same characteristic of vulnerability, I will be much more empathetic." (Victor)

The capacity for emotion awareness and management abilities is another factor contributing to empathy. Several pre-service teachers mentioned how the EISC course has equipped them with the necessary skills to recognize and manage their own emotions. This has resulted in heightened sensitivity towards the emotions of others and has nurtured empathetic responses in their teaching and daily practices.

"After completing the EISC course, I have gained a better understanding of myself. This self-awareness has also enhanced my ability to understand others." (Mia)

"I think the most important takeaway is that I understand emotions and I learn how to control them. [...] During my teaching, I often face situations when my students' behavior is not what I expect them to do. There are days when my students talk excessively, and it can be frustrating. Yet, reacting with anger will only intimidate them. So I try to remain calm and adjust my emotional response." (Nancy)

The third dominant factor that emerged from the data analysis is cultivating a mindful lifestyle. Many participants described how mindfulness can be integrated into everyday moments through simple practices such as slowing down to focus on the breath.

"Meditation doesn't always entail sitting down for a dedicated 15-20 minutes. Instead, I

meditate right in the moment I'm doing something else. That means I take a step back to assess whether my emotions are reasonable." (Alex)

"Breathing exercises are very important in that it makes people less overreact. When I'm about to say something that's important, I take a breath first. It's not too time-consuming for others, but it helps slow me down." (Victor)

Meanwhile, Anne and Taylor commented on the impact of active listening and listening without judgment in fostering empathetic connections and promoting mutual understanding within interpersonal interactions.

"After the EISC course, I have the ability to listen better as I am more active when listening to others. [...] By actively listening, I immerse myself in the other person's experience, imagining how I would feel if I were in their shoes. This enables me to share with their emotions or have my own, fostering deeper connections with others." (Anne)

"When I hear stories from others, I delay my judgment to view things from their perspective, so that I can understand the motivations behind their behaviors." (Taylor)

Fourth, regarding professional practice, most EFL pre-service teachers joining the interviews revealed that they often engage in reflection after classes. Reflection offers teachers valuable insights into their own practice and those of their students, thus facilitating more empathetic interactions within the classroom.

"The habit of writing reflections at the end of each lesson has proven effective for me. I believe we should reflect not only on teaching methods but also on students' reactions. The key is to make reflection an ongoing process, immediately following each lesson." (Tracy)

"Through reflection, I can identify what I can do better. I know whether I have interpreted the emotions of others correctly or whether I need to look at myself again. So reflection is a very good habit to develop empathy." (Alex)

"Reflection enables me to review the way I interacted with students as well as how they interacted with me. [...] If I have the habit of reflecting regularly, I will understand my students better, thus achieving better solutions for them." (Anne)

In addition, Tracy and Heidi referred to building meaningful conversations with students as a way to foster empathetic connections between teachers and learners.

"Empathy can be built gradually by having more conversations with students." (Tracy)

"Teachers can create more space for students to share. More conversations between teachers and students allow both sides to understand each other better." (Heidi)

Finally, past educational experience also plays a significant role in shaping empathy development among EFL pre-service teachers. Two main categories emerge under this theme, namely role models and personal challenges encountered when learning foreign language. First, experiences with empathetic teachers serve as powerful influences in nurturing empathy among EFL pre-service teachers. Alex, Mia and Nancy expressed admiration and respect for teachers who demonstrated empathy, describing them as role models who left a lasting impression on their professional lives:

"As a student, I have studied with many teachers who possess this characteristic. I respect them, feel close to them, and remember that the most after I finish studying." (Alex)

"I think about the experience I had studying with my teacher. For example, my form teacher was someone who had high EQ and empathy [...] when I feel the teacher's empathy towards me, I feel even more motivated to study. Or at least I want to become better in the eyes of my teacher." (Mia)

"I think one of the factors contributing to my empathy development is the chance to be taught by dedicated and empathetic teachers. A few years ago, I studied with an English teacher who

was very enthusiastic. [...] She was also a good advisor who provided me with valuable guidance on choosing the appropriate high school. Her encouragement has been a significant source of motivation for me to pursue the teaching profession." (Nancy)

Meanwhile, some other pre-service teachers reflected on their personal challenges during language learning. Tracy recounted feeling uncertain and anxious during Chinese lessons due to a lack of knowledge, while Victor shared his struggles with Korean.

"Recently I've been learning Chinese. As someone who knows absolutely nothing about Chinese, or knows very little [...] I understand how I feel when the teacher asks me to answer or do something. I am uncertain and anxious. Sometimes I think about how I would feel if I were the teacher teaching this class. Well, that's something that has a pretty big impact on my ability to empathize lately." (Tracy)

"When I think about the difficulty of learning a new language, I can empathize more deeply with my students. For example, I think about my experience of learning Korean. Reflecting on my own struggles and limitations in grasping the language, I become more tolerant and patient towards my students." (Victor)

5. Discussion

Overall, the pre-service teachers in this study hold mixed views on empathy, viewing it both positively and negatively. Most participants are aware of the important role of empathy in their teaching profession. Some highlighted teachers' ability to empathize as a defining characteristic that distinguishes human educators from automated ones. This observation resonates with broader societal concerns about the potential depersonalization of education in an increasingly technology-driven era (Laura & Hannam, 2017). The interviews reveal four main contributions of empathy to positive outcomes in teaching and learning, that is improved teacher-student relationships, supportive learning environment, effective instructional support, and enhanced job satisfaction.

Regarding the role of empathy in teacher well-being, the interviews yielded contrasting findings. Most participants reported feeling content when recognizing the importance of empathy. Because they know what students need, empathetic teachers can set achievable learning objectives to help the students accordingly instead of striving to meet excessively high expectations. In case of student misbehaviors like excessive talking or neglecting homework, some participants mentioned that grasping the reasons behind these behaviors lessens their disappointment. Understanding why students misbehave can help the pre-service teachers refrain from blaming themselves for their students' misconduct. Nevertheless, one pre-service teacher shared a negative experience where his perceived empathy towards students led to uncomfortable feelings. Alex recounted his student repeatedly failing to complete homework, and at the time, the thought of having to empathize again caused him to feel annoyed. In line with this, Meyers et al. (2019) advocated for a balanced approach to empathy in teaching. They propose that while teachers should show understanding and flexibility, such as by extending due dates or offering support, it is equally important to uphold the requirement for students to complete their work. This stance contrasts with simply letting students skip the homework.

The participants in this study expressed both shared and unique perspectives regarding the factors contributing to their empathy development. Each participant's empathy is shaped by many factors, and no participant's experience is completely identical to another's. Findings from the interviews suggest that these factors can be categorized into five big groups, namely personal beliefs and values, personal skills, mindful lifestyle, professional practice, and past educational experience.

Personal beliefs and values refer to the set of thinking within each individual. It can be either inherent or be accumulated over time. In this study, two participants mentioned the role of maintaining an open mindset and acknowledging vulnerability as driving forces that motivate them to empathize with others' behaviors and situations. Scholars in the field increasingly focus on the correlation between beliefs and empathetic motivation (Ge et al., 2021). As with prior research, this finding suggests that individuals' underlying belief and value systems can be a motivational factor that either encourage or discourage them from engaging in empathic responses (Weisz et al., 2021).

The pre-service teachers in this study also mentioned personal skills, particularly emotion awareness and management abilities, as another contributor to their empathy development. By recognizing the impact of their own emotional expressions and considering how others may feel, participants strive to manage their emotions more effectively, thereby fostering empathetic responses. It is noteworthy that all the EFL pre-service teachers who discussed emotion awareness and management abilities attributed their acquisition of these skills to the EISC course. Despite having completed the course two years ago or longer, they emphasized its enduring impact on their emotional competence. This underscores the crucial role of emotional intelligence training programs in equipping pre-service teachers with enhanced emotion recognition and coping strategies. This finding resonates with Castillo et al. (2013), who advocated for the effectiveness of emotional intelligence training in improving empathic abilities.

Adopting a mindful lifestyle is another factor that was mentioned by the participants. The pre-service teachers shared their mindfulness practices, including focusing on the breath, slowing down thinking, and engaging in active listening without judgment. Focusing on the breath and slowing down attune individuals to the present moment, laying the foundation for heightened awareness of their own emotions and those of others. And by immersing themselves in others' experience through deep listening, participants reported imagining how they would feel in similar circumstances. This deepened understanding can allow for more empathetic responses, as individuals can appreciate the feelings and needs of others. This finding is consistent with results from Benn et al. (2012) and Hwang et al. (2019) regarding the impact of mindfulness on empathy cultivation among teachers.

The prospective teachers in this study also underscored professional practice as a means to enhance empathy. One prevalent practice they mentioned is reflective teaching, which involves reviewing their teaching methods and discussions with fellow EFL teachers. Prior research by Rieckhoff et al. (2020) also reported the benefits of using reflective practice to build empathy among teachers. Another professional practice highlighted by the participants is the fostering of personal conversations with students. Through these personal conversations, both teachers and students gain deeper insights into each other's perspectives and emotions.

Lastly, the participants indicated that their past educational experience has profoundly influenced their perception and practice of empathy. The participants expressed appreciation for empathetic and caring teachers who had taught them and left a deep impression on them. These teachers not only inspired them to pursue teacher education but also served as role models for their careers in teaching. In line with past research, the influence of role models within professional contexts has been found to shape individuals' empathy (Yu et al., 2022). Additionally, some pre-service teachers recounted their recent experiences of learning a new language, highlighting the struggles and anxieties they faced. Participants indicated that these experiences had deepened their empathy with students as they could relate to the difficulties of learning.

Overall, the findings suggest that there are various factors contributing to empathy development of pre-service teachers. As can be inferred from the findings, certain factors perceived by the participants (including better emotion awareness and management abilities, mindful lifestyle, reflective practice) are outcomes of the EISC course. These findings confirm the hypothesis proposed by Swan and Riley (2015) that empathy could be taught to teachers. Additionally, it is essential to recognize that empathy cannot be acquired through a few quick techniques but requires ongoing effort and commitment (Cameron et al., 2019). Several pre-service teachers acknowledged the importance of this ongoing process during the interviews, emphasizing the need to sustain efforts towards empathy development over time.

6. Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions of empathy, focusing on its role and development. Regarding the role of empathy, participants had both positive and negative comments. A majority emphasized its importance in the teaching profession, indicating its positive impacts on teacher-student relationships, learning environments, instructional support and job satisfaction. However, one participant noted negative feelings when faced with repeated student mistakes as a potential drawback.

In terms of empathy development, the findings revealed five contributing factors that were perceived by the pre-service teachers. These include personal beliefs and values encompassing an open mindset and vulnerability acknowledgment; personal skills such as emotion awareness and management; mindful lifestyle involving practices like focused breathing and deep listening; professional practice such as writing reflections and having personal conversations with students; and past educational experience with role models and personal difficulties in language learning journeys. These findings underscore the complex nature of empathy development.

These findings carry several implications for teachers, teacher educators and researchers. Firstly, concerning both pre-service and in-service teachers, the findings suggest that they should integrate empathy into their teaching practices while at the same time maintaining professional boundaries with students to avoid being overly accessible or lenient (Meyers et al., 2019). To reinforce empathy development, one effective method involves organizing sharing sessions where teachers and students who have undergone empathy training can share their experiences and offer guidance to their peers. Aligning with this approach, teachers from University A in this study organize monthly events called The Calm Café. These gatherings provide participants with opportunities to practice various concepts and techniques acquired from the EISC courses, such as meditation and collaborative sharing that aim at enhancing happiness and mental well-being. By facilitating such activities, University A actively promotes the practical application of empathy as well as other social-emotional skills within its community of practice.

Secondly, for teacher educators, the findings imply the necessity of incorporating empathy training into teacher education programs alongside courses on subject-matter knowledge and teaching skills. This can help prepare future educators for their professional roles (Swan & Riley, 2015). Insights gained from the factors shaping empathy development can inform the design of these programs, ensuring they adequately address the complex nature of empathy in teaching. Moreover, the confirmation of the lasting impacts of SEL courses like EISC suggests that other teacher education institutions can benefit from similar initiatives. An examination of the curriculum for students studying English Language Teacher Education at

University A reveals the incorporation of empathy training in several subjects, in addition to just a single EISC course. For example, students explore design thinking in "Design Your Life" and "Innovative and Entrepreneurial Mindset" courses, where empathy serves as a crucial initial step in understanding themselves and others. This approach will not only cultivate a deeper sense of empathy among students but also encourage interdisciplinary studies.

Thirdly, the study seems to be one of the first attempts to specifically examine teacher empathy in the context of Vietnam. By shedding light on the perceptions of EFL pre-service teachers regarding empathy, this research contributes valuable insights to the existing literature on teacher education and empathy development. Future studies can build upon these findings to further explore the nuances of empathy in different educational contexts and its implications for teacher effectiveness and student learning outcomes.

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