

Integrating Empathy in EFL Education: A Study of Vietnamese Tertiary Teachers' Adaptive Responses

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Abstract—This qualitative study investigates the responses of Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to the integration of empathical practices in tertiary education. Focusing on a sample of nine teachers from two institutions, representing novice, mid-career, and near-end career stages, the study explores their reactions spanning resistance, negotiation, and acceptance of these practices. Employing semi-structured interviews, the research is underpinned by social constructivism and Lewin's (1951) three-stage model of change, providing a comprehensive framework for analysis. Thematic analysis revealed three key themes: the evolution of perception towards empathical practices, challenges in integrating these practices, and the negotiation of professional identity in their wake. Teachers at all career stages reported a dynamic shift in their perception of empathical practices, evolving from skepticism to acceptance. A significant finding was the universal challenge in integrating empathy into existing teaching paradigms and institutional frameworks. Additionally, the study highlighted how teachers navigate changes in their professional identity as they adopt these new practices. These findings contribute to the discourse on empathy in education, emphasizing the complexities of organizational change in educational settings. The study underscores the need for context-specific professional development and systemic support for empathical practices in teaching.

Index Terms—adaptive responses, EFL education, empathy, Vietnamese tertiary teachers

I. INTRODUCTION

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, the integration of empathical practices within organizational structures has emerged as a pivotal area of exploration. This is particularly pertinent in the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education at the tertiary level, where cultural diversity and linguistic challenges intersect (Spring, 2017). The study delves into this intersection, examining the myriad ways in which EFL educators respond to the incorporation of empathy-oriented approaches in their professional environment.

The impetus for this research stems from the growing recognition of empathy as a critical component in educational settings. Empathy, defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, has been increasingly acknowledged not only as a social-emotional skill but also as a fundamental aspect of effective teaching (Aldrup et al., 2022; Tettegah & Anderson, 2007). In the context of EFL education, empathy assumes a heightened significance due to the unique challenges faced by learners and educators alike. These challenges range from cultural misalignments to language barriers, all of which can profoundly impact the learning experience.

Organizational change, especially in educational institutions, is a complex and multifaceted process (Fullan, 2007). The introduction of empathical practices as a form of organizational change presents a unique set of dynamics within the EFL teaching community. This study specifically investigates how EFL tertiary educators react to such changes. Their responses are categorized into three distinct but interrelated themes: resistance, negotiation, and acceptance. These categories are not mutually exclusive but represent a spectrum of responses that reflect the complexities and nuances of adapting to organizational change.

The significance of exploring these responses lies in understanding the factors that facilitate or hinder the effective implementation of empathical practices in educational settings. By examining the experiences and perspectives of EFL teachers, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on empathy in education, particularly in the context of language teaching at the tertiary level. Furthermore, it seeks to provide insights into the process of organizational change in educational institutions, a topic of considerable importance given the rapid pace of change in contemporary educational landscapes.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Empathy in Educational Settings*

Empathical practices in the context of EFL teaching have garnered increasing attention, as educators recognize the profound impact of empathy on learning outcomes and classroom dynamics. The foundational role of empathy in creating effective learning environments, as posited by Meyer and Turner (2007), underscores its importance beyond mere interpersonal skills. This view is further supported by Rogers (1975), who highlighted the role of empathy in fostering supportive and understanding atmospheres in education, a necessity in the culturally and linguistically diverse settings of EFL.

Recent research, such as that by Tettegah and Anderson (2007), has empirically demonstrated the positive impact of empathy on student engagement and achievement, affirming its value in educational contexts. In EFL settings, where cultural and linguistic diversity is more pronounced, the significance of empathy is further amplified. Mercer et al. (2016) have specifically emphasized the need for empathical practices in these environments, acknowledging the unique challenges faced by both teachers and learners in navigating cultural and linguistic differences.

EFL teachers, in response to the need for empathical practices, often employ strategies that foster an inclusive and understanding classroom environment. These strategies may include culturally responsive teaching, where teachers actively acknowledge and integrate students' cultural backgrounds into their teaching methods (Zhao et al., 2009). Additionally, language teaching methodologies that prioritize student experiences and perspectives, such as student-centered learning and communicative language teaching, are often adopted to enhance empathy in EFL classrooms (Eisenring & Margana, 2019).

B. *Organizational Change in Educational Institutions*

Literature on organizational change within educational settings provides a framework for understanding how new practices are adopted and adapted. Fullan (2007) detailed the complexity of educational change, emphasizing the role of individual and collective responses in the success or failure of these initiatives. Armenakis and Harris (2009) explored how educators' attitudes towards change can significantly influence the process, noting that resistance is often rooted in a lack of understanding or perceived threats to established norms. Recent studies, such as those by Kotter and Cohen (2012), have highlighted the importance of leadership and clear communication in navigating these changes effectively.

C. *EFL Teachers' Responses to Change*

Focusing more specifically on EFL teachers, several studies have examined their responses to changes within their teaching environment. Karabenick and Noda (2004) found that EFL teachers often face unique challenges due to the linguistic and cultural barriers inherent in their work, which can influence their response to organizational changes. Izadinia (2014) highlighted that EFL teachers' professional identities and beliefs play a crucial role in how they perceive and engage with new practices. Additionally, research by Hoff (2019) pointed out the importance of considering the socio-cultural context of EFL teaching, as responses to change can be significantly influenced by local educational cultures and practices.

D. *Resistance, Negotiation, and Acceptance as Response Categories*

The categorization of responses into resistance, negotiation, and acceptance is grounded in the change management literature. Piderit (2000) suggested that resistance to change is a natural initial response but can evolve into more nuanced negotiations as individuals seek to reconcile new practices with existing beliefs and routines. Elrod and Tippett (2002) discussed the process of moving from resistance to acceptance, emphasizing the role of individual agency and contextual factors in this transition. In the context of EFL education, this transition can be particularly complex due to the interplay of language, culture, and pedagogical traditions.

The literature review underscores the relevance and complexity of implementing empathical practices in EFL tertiary education. It highlights the significance of empathy in educational settings, the dynamics of organizational change in education, and the specific challenges and responses of EFL teachers in such environments. This theoretical backdrop sets the stage for an in-depth exploration of how tertiary-level EFL teachers respond to the integration of empathical practices, providing a rich context for the ensuing qualitative analysis.

III. METHODS

A. *Research Design*

The research design is anchored in a qualitative methodology, utilizing semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection tool. This approach was chosen to capture the depth, complexity, and personal nature of teachers' responses to the integration of empathical practices in their professional settings.

The theoretical frameworks underpinning this study are twofold. First, the concept of empathy in educational settings is viewed through the lens of social constructivism, as posited by Vygotsky (1978). This perspective highlights the importance of social contexts in the construction of knowledge, positioning empathy as a crucial tool for understanding and navigating these social realities. In applying this framework, the study aims to explore the influence of empathical

practices on the social dynamics within EFL classrooms and the broader educational community, providing insights into how empathy is interwoven with the process of teaching and learning in these settings.

Secondly, the study incorporates Lewin's (1951) three-stage model of change to frame the process of adaptation to new practices among EFL teachers. This model, comprising the stages of unfreezing, change, and refreezing, serves as a foundational tool for understanding how individuals and organizations navigate through the introduction and acceptance of change. In the context of this research, the model is particularly relevant for examining how EFL teachers initially respond to, negotiate with, and eventually accept or reject the integration of empathical practices. This framework offers a structured approach to understanding the dynamics of change and adaptation in educational settings, especially in the context of introducing innovative teaching practices.

B. Participants

The participants of this study comprised nine Vietnamese EFL teachers, selected from two distinct tertiary education institutions in Vietnam. This selection was intentional, aimed at encapsulating a broad range of experiences and perspectives within the Vietnamese EFL teaching context. The participant group was stratified to ensure a balanced representation across different stages of teaching careers, with three novice teachers (those with less than five years of experience), three mid-career teachers (with five to twenty years of experience), and three near-end career teachers (with over twenty years of experience). This stratification was crucial for examining how experience and career stage might influence teachers' responses to the integration of empathical practices in their professional settings.

The ethical considerations of the study were given paramount importance. All participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, the nature of their involvement, and the ways in which their data would be used. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring that they understood their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences. To maintain confidentiality, all identifying information was removed or altered in the transcription process, and pseudonyms were used in any resultant publications or presentations. Special attention was paid to the cultural and social sensitivities inherent in the Vietnamese educational context, ensuring that the research process respected local norms and values.

The selection of Vietnamese EFL teachers from two different institutions also aimed to provide a comparative perspective, considering how institutional culture and environment might impact responses to empathical practices. This diversity in the participant pool was essential for attaining a rich and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under study, allowing the research to capture a wide spectrum of experiences and viewpoints. The inclusion of teachers at various career stages further enriched the data, providing insights into how teachers' perceptions and responses might evolve over time and with increased professional experience.

C. Data Collection

The primary method of data collection in this study involved conducting semi-structured interviews with the nine Vietnamese EFL teachers. Prior to the main data collection phase, a pilot study was conducted with two EFL teachers who were not part of the main study. The purpose of the pilot study was to test the interview protocol, ensuring the clarity and relevance of the questions and to refine the interviewing technique. Based on feedback from the pilot, minor revisions were made to the interview questions to enhance their comprehensibility and relevance to the Vietnamese EFL context.

The revised interview questions included prompts such as, "Can you describe your initial reactions to the introduction of empathical practices in your teaching environment?" and "How have your views on these practices evolved over time?". These questions were designed to elicit detailed responses about the teachers' experiences and perceptions of the change process. Additionally, questions like "What challenges have you faced in adapting to these practices?" and "In what ways have you negotiated these challenges?" were included to understand the dynamics of resistance and negotiation.

Each interview was conducted in Vietnamese, the native language of all participants, to ensure comfort and clarity in communication. This choice was crucial in obtaining authentic, nuanced responses. The interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes in length and were conducted in locations chosen by the participants for their convenience and comfort, often in quiet, private spaces within their respective institutions or in a nearby café. The use of familiar and comfortable settings was intended to put participants at ease, facilitating open and candid discussions.

In addition to audio-recording the interviews, field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and the context of each interview, which proved valuable during data analysis. To ensure the accuracy of the data, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. In cases where participants used English terms or phrases, these were retained in the transcription to preserve the original intent and emphasis of the speaker. The transcriptions were then translated into English for analysis, with careful attention paid to maintaining the integrity of the participants' responses. This multi-layered approach to data collection and transcription ensured a rich, detailed dataset that was essential for the in-depth analysis that followed.

D. Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study was conducted using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. This approach was guided by the six-phase process outlined by

Braun et al. (2023), which includes familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

The first step involved a thorough familiarization with the data, where the researcher immersed themselves in the details and nuances of the transcribed interviews. This stage was crucial for gaining an in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives. Following this, initial codes were generated. This process entailed systematically coding the entire data set, segment by segment, labeling aspects of the data that were relevant to the research questions. The coding was done manually, which allowed for a more intimate engagement with the data. The next stage involved searching for themes among the codes. Codes were sorted into potential themes, with relevant data extracts collated under these thematic headings. This process was iterative and reflexive, with the researcher constantly moving back and forth between the dataset, the coded extracts, and the developing themes, ensuring a coherent and accurate representation of the data.

After identifying potential themes, the next step was to review these themes. This involved a careful examination of each theme in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, ensuring that they accurately reflected the meanings evident in the data. Themes were refined, which sometimes involved splitting, combining, or discarding them. The penultimate stage was defining and naming the themes. This step required a detailed analysis of each theme, determining the essence of what each one captured about the data and deciding on an informative name for each theme. The final stage involved weaving the analytic narrative, where the researcher interlinked the analysis with the research questions and the literature, producing a coherent and insightful narrative of the findings.

Throughout the analysis, a reflexive approach was maintained, with the researchers being mindful of their own biases and preconceptions. This reflexivity was crucial in ensuring the integrity and authenticity of the analysis. The thematic analysis process, thus, allowed for a nuanced and in-depth understanding of the complex experiences and perspectives of the Vietnamese EFL teachers in relation to the introduction of empathical practices in their teaching environments.

IV. FINDINGS

A. *Evolution of Perception Towards Empathical Practices*

One prominent theme that emerged from the data was the evolution of perception towards empathical practices. This theme encapsulates how teachers' understanding and attitudes towards empathical practices in teaching changed over time, influenced by their experiences and reflective practices. Notably, all three novice teachers, two of the mid-career teachers, and one near-end career teacher vividly described this evolution.

A novice teacher, Phuong, described her initial skepticism: "At first, I thought focusing too much on empathy would detract from actual language teaching. But over time, I have seen how understanding students' emotions actually helps in language acquisition." This reflection aligns with the social constructivist framework, highlighting how the social and emotional contexts of learning are integral to knowledge construction. Phuong's journey from skepticism to acceptance mirrors the 'unfreezing' stage in Lewin's (1951) model, where previous beliefs are questioned. Mid-career teacher, Anh, expressed a more immediate acceptance but noted a deepening understanding over time: "I always agreed with empathical approaches, but it is only with experience that I have learned how to really implement them effectively." Anh's experience reflects the 'change' stage, where new practices are understood and integrated into teaching. Her initial acceptance paired with evolving practical application underscores the dynamic nature of empathy in educational settings. The narrative of Minh, a near-end career teacher, offered a different perspective: "I have been teaching for over 20 years, and only recently have I realized the importance of empathy in teaching. It has changed how I interact with my students and understand their challenges." Minh's late-career realization and adaptation exemplify the 'refreezing' stage, where new methods and attitudes become solidified into practice.

These narratives underscore a key finding: irrespective of their career stage, teachers tend to evolve in their perception and implementation of empathical practices. This evolution is influenced by both individual experiences and broader pedagogical insights, aligning with the principles of social constructivism. Additionally, Lewin's (1951) three-stage model of change provides a useful lens for understanding this evolution, with teachers at different career stages reflecting various phases of this model in their professional development and acceptance of empathical practices. This finding highlights the fluidity and complexity of incorporating empathical practices in educational settings, influenced by personal, professional, and contextual factors.

B. *Challenges in Integrating Empathical Practices*

Another significant theme that emerged from the data was the teachers' challenges in integrating empathical practices. This theme reflects the difficulties and resistance teachers faced while trying to incorporate empathy into their teaching methods. Interestingly, this challenge was unanimously reported by all three novice teachers, two mid-career teachers, and two near-end career teachers, indicating its prevalence across different career stages.

Novice teacher, Linh, shared, "Implementing empathy in a structured curriculum was harder than I expected. Balancing it with the academic goals is challenging." Linh's experience resonates with the 'unfreezing' stage in Lewin's (1951) model, where new concepts challenge existing practices, creating a sense of disequilibrium. A mid-career teacher, Bao, highlighted a different aspect: "Sometimes, the institutional focus is more on grades and results. It feels like there is little room for empathical practices within this framework." Bao's struggle represents the 'change'

stage, where the integration of new practices (empathy in this case) clashes with established institutional norms and expectations. From the perspective of a near-end career teacher, Hoa remarked, “Over my years of teaching, I have seen the value of empathy, but altering my long-standing teaching style to include it is not easy.” Hoa’s statement illustrates the ‘refreezing’ stage, where the challenge lies in solidifying new practices into well-established teaching methods.

These findings suggest that regardless of their experience, EFL teachers face significant challenges in incorporating empathical practices into their teaching. These challenges are not just personal but are also influenced by institutional cultures and expectations, as highlighted by Bao. The social constructivist framework helps in understanding these challenges, as it underscores the importance of the social context in shaping learning and teaching practices. Teachers are not just dealing with individual internal resistance but are also navigating the broader educational environment and its inherent constraints. Lewin’s (1951) three-stage model of change offers a lens through which to view these challenges as part of the transition process in adopting new practices, with each stage presenting its own set of obstacles. This theme highlights the complexity involved in integrating empathical practices into existing educational structures and the multifaceted nature of change in educational settings.

C. *Negotiation of Professional Identity in the Wake of Empathical Practices*

A third critical theme identified in the study was the negotiation of professional identity in the wake of empathical practices. This theme captures how teachers negotiate their professional identities as they incorporate empathical practices into their teaching. This was a recurrent theme among two novice teachers, all three mid-career teachers, and two near-end career teachers.

Novice teacher, Dung, described this negotiation process: “As a new teacher, I am still shaping my teaching identity. Integrating empathy feels like an essential part of who I want to be as a teacher, but it is a learning curve.” Dung’s experience aligns with the ‘unfreezing’ stage, where new ideas are assimilated into an evolving professional identity. For mid-career teacher, Hai, the negotiation was more about reconciling new practices with established beliefs: “I have always seen myself as a results-driven teacher. Adapting to a more empathetic approach required me to rethink my teaching philosophy.” Hai’s narrative reflects the ‘change’ stage in Lewin’s (1951) model, illustrating the process of modifying one’s professional identity to include new methodologies. Bien, a near-end career teacher, expressed a different challenge: “After years of teaching, embracing empathy meant re-evaluating my long-held beliefs about teaching and learning. It has been a journey of personal and professional growth.” Bien’s experience represents the ‘refreezing’ stage, where new elements of professional identity become integrated and solidified.

These findings highlight the profound impact that the integration of empathical practices has on teachers’ professional identities across different career stages. From the perspective of social constructivism, this negotiation process can be seen as a social and collaborative construction of professional identity, influenced by interactions within the educational environment and broader societal norms. Lewin’s (1951) three-stage model of change provides a framework for understanding the different stages of this identity negotiation. Novice teachers like Dung are in the early stages of forming their professional identities, making the integration of new practices like empathy a foundational part of their identity development. For mid-career and near-end career teachers like Hai and Bien, the challenge lies in altering or expanding their established professional identities to incorporate these new approaches. This theme underscores the dynamic and ongoing nature of professional identity formation in teaching, particularly in the context of adopting empathical practices.

V. DISCUSSION

A. *Evolution of Perception Towards Empathical Practices*

Previous studies have often emphasized the initial resistance or skepticism teachers may exhibit towards new methodologies or changes in their teaching environment (Karabenick & Noda, 2004; Borg, 2010). This aligns with the experiences of some of our novice teachers, like Phuong, who initially viewed empathical practices with skepticism. However, a notable divergence in our findings is the speed and depth of this perception shift across different career stages. While existing literature suggests a more gradual and often challenging shift in teacher perceptions (Fullan, 2007), our study indicates a more dynamic and rapid evolution, particularly among novice and mid-career teachers. This could be reflective of the growing emphasis on social-emotional learning in contemporary educational discourse, which might be influencing newer generations of teachers to be more receptive to empathical practices.

Another interesting aspect is the proactive adaptation of empathical practices by teachers at different career stages, as noted in the narratives of both Anh (a mid-career teacher) and Minh (a near-end career teacher). This differs from some previous studies, which have shown that more experienced teachers tend to be more set in their ways and resistant to change (Smith, 2011). The willingness of near-end career teachers in our study to embrace and integrate these practices into their long-established teaching styles highlights a significant shift, suggesting a broader evolution in the teaching profession’s response to pedagogical changes.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the existing literature by applying Lewin’s (1951) three-stage model of change in a novel context. While this model has been extensively used to understand organizational change, its application in understanding individual teacher responses to pedagogical change, particularly in the context of EFL teaching in

Vietnam, offers new insights. It underlines how teachers at different stages of their career can be at different points in the change process, yet are all moving towards a more empathetic approach to teaching.

B. Challenges in Integrating Empathical Practices

The experiences of novice teachers like Linh, who struggled to balance empathy with academic goals, resonate with the broader challenges documented in integrating new pedagogical approaches within rigid curricular structures (Fullan, 2007). This aligns with the ‘unfreezing’ stage in Lewin’s (1951) model, where the introduction of new concepts creates a state of flux and uncertainty. The similarity here lies in the universality of such challenges across educational contexts, highlighting a persistent barrier in educational reform.

However, a notable aspect where our findings diverge from some existing studies is in the institutional resistance noted by mid-career teachers like Bao. While existing literature often emphasizes individual resistance to change, the institutional barriers identified here highlight a systemic challenge in educational settings (Armenakis & Harris, 2009; Babajide & Smith, 2022). This finding extends the conversation around empathy integration, suggesting that the challenges are not only personal or pedagogical but are also deeply rooted in institutional cultures and priorities.

Additionally, the experiences of near-end career teachers like Hoa, who find it difficult to alter their long-established teaching methods, align with the ‘refreezing’ stage of Lewin’s (1951) model. While the literature acknowledges the challenge of change for more experienced teachers (Smith, 2011), our study provides a nuanced understanding of how these teachers perceive and negotiate this change. This is particularly significant as it suggests a willingness among veteran teachers to adapt, albeit with difficulties, which counters the narrative of inflexibility often associated with more experienced educators. The incorporation of the social constructivist framework further deepens our understanding of these challenges. It suggests that the negotiation of empathical practices is not only an individual journey but is also influenced by the social dynamics within the educational community. This perspective brings a holistic view of the challenges, encompassing personal, professional, and institutional dimensions.

C. Negotiation of Professional Identity in the Wake of Empathical Practices

In comparing with existing literature, it is evident that the negotiation of professional identity is a well-established concept in teacher development studies (Beijaard et al., 2004; McCall et al., 2021). However, the specific focus on empathical practices in our study offers a novel perspective. For instance, Dung’s experience as a novice teacher, who views the integration of empathy as foundational to her emerging professional identity, aligns with the idea of ‘unfreezing’ in Lewin’s (1951) model. This is consistent with literature that emphasizes the formative nature of early teaching experiences in shaping professional identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Toom, 2019). However, the explicit connection to empathical practices as a core element of this identity formation represents a unique contribution of our study.

Similarly, the experiences of mid-career teachers like Hai, who undergo a process of rethinking and reshaping their established teaching philosophies to include empathy, resonate with the ‘change’ phase in Lewin’s (1951) model. While previous research has acknowledged the malleability of teacher identity over time (Day et al., 2007; Lutovac & Assunção Flores, 2021), our study further elucidates how this malleability is influenced by the integration of specific pedagogical approaches like empathical practices.

Moreover, the experiences of near-end career teachers like Bien, who integrate empathical practices into their long-standing teaching identity, align with the ‘refreezing’ stage of Lewin’s (1951) model. This finding contrasts with some literature that suggests a more static professional identity in later career stages (Kelchtermans, 2005; Schaible, 2018). Our study suggests that even experienced teachers are capable of significant professional growth and adaptation, particularly in response to the perceived value of empathical practices.

The incorporation of the social constructivist framework in interpreting these findings is pivotal. It suggests that the development of professional identity is not only an individual endeavor but also a socially situated process. This aligns with and extends the current understanding of teacher identity as being influenced by interactions within the educational environment and broader societal norms (Teng, 2017; Van Lankveld et al., 2017).

VI. CONCLUSION

The study aimed to explore the multifaceted responses of EFL teachers in Vietnam to the integration of empathical practices in their teaching. Set against the backdrop of an evolving educational landscape where empathy is increasingly recognized as crucial in effective teaching, this study delved into how such pedagogical shifts are perceived and navigated by teachers at various stages of their careers.

Employing a qualitative research design, the study utilized semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights from nine Vietnamese EFL teachers, encompassing novices, mid-career, and near-end career professionals. The methodological approach was underpinned by theoretical frameworks of social constructivism and Lewin’s three-stage model of change, providing a robust lens for interpreting the nuanced experiences of the participants. The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed key themes that encapsulate the teachers’ journeys in adapting to empathical practices.

The findings unveiled three significant themes: the evolution of perception towards empathical practices, challenges in integrating these practices, and the negotiation of professional identity in the wake of these changes. Teachers at all career stages exhibited a dynamic shift in their perception and acceptance of empathical practices, indicating a fluid and evolving understanding that transcends career longevity. Challenges were unanimously reported, highlighting both personal and institutional barriers in integrating empathy into the curriculum. Significantly, the study illuminated how teachers negotiate their professional identities in response to these new practices, a process that is ongoing and varies across different career stages.

The findings of this study on the integration of empathical practices in EFL teaching have several significant implications for the field of education, particularly in language teaching and teacher development. Firstly, the evolution of teacher perceptions towards empathical practices suggests a need for ongoing professional development programs that not only introduce such concepts but also support teachers through the stages of understanding and implementation. This indicates that professional development should be tailored to different career stages, recognizing that novice, mid-career, and near-end career teachers may have varying needs and responses to pedagogical changes.

The widespread challenges in integrating empathical practices into existing curricula and institutional structures highlight a crucial need for systemic change. Educational policymakers and institution leaders should consider how empathical practices can be more effectively incorporated into curricula and teaching standards. This might involve reevaluating assessment strategies, curriculum design, and institutional priorities to create an environment that supports and values empathy as a key component of teaching and learning.

Furthermore, the negotiation of professional identity in the wake of these practices calls for a supportive and flexible institutional culture. Institutions should foster an environment where teachers feel empowered to adapt and grow their teaching practices without fear of negative repercussions. This could involve creating platforms for sharing best practices, mentorship programs, and opportunities for collaborative learning, allowing teachers to explore and integrate empathical practices in a way that aligns with their evolving professional identities.

Another implication is the importance of context in the adoption of new teaching practices. As the study was conducted in the Vietnamese EFL context, it highlights the need for culturally and linguistically appropriate forms of empathy training and support. This points to the necessity of context-specific research and development in the field of empathical education, ensuring that practices are relevant and effective in diverse educational settings.

Lastly, the study underscores the need for a deeper understanding of how empathical practices impact student learning and outcomes. Future research could focus on the student perspective, exploring how these practices influence their learning experience, engagement, and achievement. This would provide a more holistic view of the effectiveness of empathical practices in educational settings.

VII. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

The study, while offering valuable insights, is not without its limitations. One primary limitation is the relatively small and specific sample size, consisting of nine Vietnamese EFL teachers from two institutions. This limitation restricts the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. The cultural and educational context of Vietnam, while providing a rich and unique setting for the study, also means that the results may not be directly applicable to other contexts, particularly those with different educational systems, cultures, and languages. Additionally, the study's reliance on self-reported data through interviews, while effective for gaining in-depth insights, may also be subject to biases such as social desirability bias, where participants might portray themselves in a more favorable light. Furthermore, the study focused solely on teacher perspectives, not incorporating the views of other stakeholders such as students, administrators, or parents, which might have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of empathical practices in educational settings.

Based on these limitations, several recommendations for future research can be proposed. Future studies could expand the sample size and include teachers from a broader range of cultural and educational contexts to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Comparative studies involving EFL teachers from different countries or educational settings could provide insights into how cultural and institutional factors influence the integration of empathical practices. To mitigate the limitations of self-reporting, future research could incorporate a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative measures such as surveys or observational data. Including the perspectives of other educational stakeholders, especially students, would also be valuable in assessing the broader impact and effectiveness of empathical practices in teaching. Additionally, longitudinal studies could offer deeper insights into how the integration of empathical practices evolves over time and its long-term effects on teaching and learning. Such comprehensive and varied research approaches would significantly contribute to the understanding of empathical practices in education and support the development of more effective and empathetic educational environments.

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