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**The Role of Developing Empathy for implementing English Language Skills of EFL Learners: A case study of English ACCESS students in Pakistan**



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**Abstract**

This case study explores the role of developing empathy in the implementation and enhancement of English language skills among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners enrolled in the U.S. Embassy-sponsored English ACCESS program in Pakistan. The study is grounded in the premise that emotional and social competencies, particularly empathy, play a crucial role in language learning environments, especially for adolescents navigating linguistic and cultural challenges. Drawing on qualitative data collected through interviews, classroom observations, and student reflections, the research highlights how empathetic teacher-student and peer-to-peer interactions foster motivation, reduce language anxiety, and improve communicative competence. The findings suggest that integrating empathy into teaching methodologies not only supports cognitive development but also enhances learners' engagement and language proficiency. This study offers valuable insights for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers seeking to create inclusive and emotionally supportive language learning environments.

**Keywords:** Empathy, Efl Learners, English Access, Emotional Intelligence, Language Skills, Communicative Competence

**Background of the Study**

Language acquisition is a multifaceted process that extends beyond grammar and vocabulary, encompassing emotional, psychological, and social dimensions. In recent years, scholars and educators have emphasized the importance of affective factors—such as motivation, self-confidence, and empathy—in shaping language learning outcomes (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020; Arnold, 2011). Among these, empathy has emerged as a critical construct that influences learners' ability to connect, communicate, and collaborate in language classrooms.

Empathy, broadly defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, facilitates interpersonal relationships and social harmony. In the EFL context, empathetic interactions can create a classroom environment that is emotionally safe, inclusive, and conducive to language practice (Derakhshan, 2021). Particularly for adolescents, who are at a formative stage in both cognitive and emotional development, empathy plays a pivotal role in building self-esteem and reducing the anxiety often associated with language learning (Zembylas, 2007).

The English ACCESS program, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, offers underprivileged youth the opportunity to learn English and develop critical thinking and leadership skills. While the program is widely recognized for its linguistic and cultural benefits, limited research has been conducted on the emotional dynamics—specifically the role of empathy—influencing student outcomes.

**Statement of the Problem**

Despite growing awareness of the emotional dimensions of language learning, there remains a gap in understanding how empathy specifically contributes to the development of English language skills among EFL learners. Teachers may recognize the importance of being supportive, but empathy is often underdeveloped or

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overlooked in formal teacher training and curriculum design. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how the cultivation of empathy affects the learning experiences and language skill development of EFL learners within the ACCESS program.

## **Research Objectives**

This research aims to:

Explore how empathy is perceived and demonstrated in EFL classrooms.

Investigate the impact of empathy on the development of English language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing).

Analyze the role of teacher and peer empathy in shaping learner motivation, participation, and performance.

## **Research Questions**

How do English ACCESS students and teachers perceive the role of empathy in English language learning?

In what ways does the development of empathy influence EFL learners' English language skills?

How does empathetic behavior among teachers and peers affect student engagement and classroom dynamics?

## **Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to the evolving discourse on affective factors in language learning by foregrounding empathy as a key enabler of communicative competence and learner well-being. Its findings may inform teacher education programs, curriculum planners, and language policy developers, emphasizing the need for socio-emotional learning strategies in EFL instruction. Moreover, by focusing on a cohort of ACCESS students in Pakistan, the study offers culturally relevant insights that may benefit other language programs in similar socio-economic and educational contexts.

## **Scope and Delimitations**

The study is limited to students and educators participating in the English ACCESS program in urban centers of Pakistan. It employs a qualitative case study design, which allows for in-depth exploration but does not aim for generalizability. The focus is on empathy's role in language skill development rather than on broader socio-political factors influencing education.

## **Definition of Key Terms**

**Empathy:** The ability to understand, be aware of, and vicariously experience the feelings and thoughts of another person.

**EFL Learners:** Individuals learning English in a country where English is not the primary language.

**English ACCESS Program:** A U.S. State Department-funded initiative that provides English language instruction and cultural enrichment to disadvantaged youth.

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**Language Skills:** The core components of language competence—speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

**Emotional Intelligence:** The capacity to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions and those of others.

## **Literature Review**

### **Empathy**

To know emotionally what other people feel and see while imagining you at their place is called **Empathy**. Additionally, it is **placing yourself in someone else's position and feeling exactly what they feel**. Furthermore, Empathy is envisioning yourself going through the same situation of suffering where a victim may feel himself after losing some precious thing of a beloved one. However, it is easy to understand a person's own feeling and emotions rather to get into someone else's head. Empathy can develop an ability to walk with another person's shoe for a mile or more. It paves the way to understand others emotions and feelings.

### **Emotion**

Emotions on the other hand, are reactions of different situations and events and responses towards them by the people who face these. Every emotion experienced by different people has a specific type and every type justifies by the circumstances behind it. For example, when a person receives good news, they experience joy and at the same time they feel threatened if they receive something fearful. Our daily lives are strongly influenced by our emotions. Our decisions are directly affected by our feelings i.e., happy, sad, angry, bored or stressed. Moreover, activities and hobbies of our daily routine are also affected by our emotions. To maintain ease and stability in our lives, a proper understanding of emotions can help us better.

### **Importance of emotions in English language development**

Emotions and learning are intimate with each other. Learning experience may drive or color the emotions both in enhancement and interference. Emotions can be infectious too and may affect the others in both positive and negative way while learning. No matter learning process is synchronous or asynchronous, the emotional state of teachers and learners influenced equally. To design more effective learning experiences and lesson plans, the role that emotions play during learning is important to understand for the educators. They also need to realize that how emotions can influence individual and shared dynamic of learning environment.

There is a list of positive learning emotions and top among that list are interest, curiosity, creativity, wonder, passion, motivation and engagement. To build focus and attention however, these play vital role. These also activate the reward system of brain that ultimately makes the experience desirable. Positive emotional state aids students to envision their perception, creating favorable substitutes, tackle the challenges and respond criticism and failure effectively. Positive emotions also directly influence learner's motivation level. There is no doubt that motivation is like a drive and energy behind learning. This motivation can be for both internal goals and for external achievement i.e., grade distinction etc. Internal goals are also known as "mastery goals" and are often compelled by curiosity, relevance, personal interest and effective learning directive process. Students who establish mastery of goal alignment have

been shown to have a more prolific outlook towards erudition. It paves the way to results of unremitting proficiencies of learning attainment.

### **Prior studies**

Van den Bedem et al. (2019) concluded that “empathy helps students develop stronger relationships and vice-versa; good friendships support the development of empathetic skills. So not only is empathy important, but it is also necessary for students to connect with those around them”. They additionally were of the view that empathy has three major types which included; affective empathy, which is “sharing the emotions of others,” cognitive empathy, which is “to understand the thoughts and emotions of others,” and pro-social motivation, which is “the urge to act on these empathetic feelings” (p. 600). These all develop positive relationships but cognitive empathy and pro-social motivation they argue are significant regarding friendship development.

Chen, C. (2011) argues that empathy is a mutual act and our communication with our partner must be expressive. However, this norm of expressionism exempted for restraint interpersonal cultures and values. In this context, if our behavior will not be in cycle with the efforts of individuals from other cultures, we could not expect them offer us verbal and nonverbal massages about their internal state. Further, we can enhance empathy among the members of a particular co-culture through an awareness of specific behaviors which they considered brazen. He additionally is of the view that we can also enhance empathy to discourage the trend to mitigate influence of our cultural orientation regarding others verbal and nonverbal actions. In order to be more effective, what we need to do is to make a conscious decision regarding balanced relationship among us and others. This balanced relationship will make positive attitudes too. He again reiterates that “a cultural perspective that is unique in our experiences should be checked or suspended if needed”(2011). To know the exact meaning of the words and actions of others, the difference should be understandable for us. To elaborate it he puts an example from Chinese culture where meaning of “saving face,”(2011) are something different in connotation and denotation.

Chen, L. (2008) debates on the development of empathy that teacher can build empathy in his/her classroom with the help of specific teaching techniques. So, in a language class teacher needs to do a lot. Only knowledge of language cannot be enough for being a good teacher however, how corresponding core techniques and effective professional ethics to students is also very much necessary. No doubt that for a good teacher, rich academic knowledge and experience is necessary but that is not all. Academic theories are also much needed that can guide him/her in teaching practice. He added an example to comprehend more that “without the guidance of the Affective Filter Hypothesis, a teacher may not notice the existence and increase of empathy and of course will not take any measures against it”(2008). And we contend that a teacher may not know how to manage empathy until he/she clearly understand helpful methods such as community language learning etc. The successful transfer of rich knowledge through teaching techniques is only possible with the help of successful theories. Learners and speaking are the archetypal fragment in English leaning. That’s why a teacher is considered responsible for creating a highly empathizing milieu in classroom to inculcate high motivations for speaking and favorable language capacity building among students. In favor of this, teaching

methods are completely transformed from traditional test oriented or teacher centered to student centered.

Zhang, Z. (2022) showcased some effective instructional frameworks i.e., “teacher empathy, sympathy, tolerance, teacher kindness, and justice as a bridge” to understand teacher-learner relationship deeply. Frisby et al., (2016) reasons that “constructing a positive emotional relationship with learners in educational contexts is crucial for educators, since their positive emotional behaviors like compassion, empathy, sympathy can engage learners in academic contexts to achieve their purposes”. We claim that to create an influenced personal interaction such as empathy, is ominously interrelated with learning achievement, teaching quality, learner engagement in educational milieus. Cooper, B. (2002) further reasons that an effective positive environment helps the brain maintain a finest state for learning. However, we maintained that empathy developed in positive teacher-learner affinity can considerably shrink angst and ultimately help improve engagement.

We auxiliary itemized that ESL instructors should act as facilitator models who can use empathy, respect and truthfulness during interaction with learners in the classroom. They should also build an environment of engagement, emotional safety, inquisitiveness and autonomy which initiate learners to be contextually involved in classroom. Additionally, the weighty relationship between teacher-learner bond and learner engagement is mandatory to build a fruitful learning atmosphere in the classroom. ESL teacher’s empathy and love towards their students can play a vital role for their wellbeing and trend to participate in all activities. Similarly, Wang et al. (2022) also quantified that “instructors should incorporate positive emotional behaviors, such as honesty, appreciation, empathy, and sensitivity to learners’ requirements”. In our instructional practices however, we can generate the essential behaviors of our students regarding motivation and engagement.

Yang, Y. (2000) likewise stated that “teacher empathy not only increases learner engagement, but also contributes to teachers attaining social justice across different contexts”.

Karimian M. (2022) also discusses that language proficiency has a strong relationship with empathy. For this, he made two groups; control group and experimental group. Control group received traditional instruction method but experimental group received empathy based activities. After the deep analysis he found that the experimental group of language learners successfully improved empathy and enhanced language proficiency as well. However, control group on the other hand, produced no effects. The further results attained by the analysis highlighted that unlike the case of control group, there was not a resilient relationship between level of empathy and proficiency mark. But on the other hand, there was a vivid relationship between all levels of empathy and proficiency in experimental group. For more instance, the outcomes seemed evident about the performance of language learners which was directly affected by empathy. And it was quite evident that utilization of some techniques in experimental group to enhance participants’ empathy affected their class activity. In this perspective, we argue that activities regarding improvement of empathy and language proficiency are highly beneficial for the ESL learners.

To advocate these arguments, Bearman et al., (2015) further reiterates that when student affianced in learning process, number of simulation practices are recurrently used to ripen empathetic behaviors and empathy among them. “In simulation-based

education, professional education contains various approaches, such as role-playing, games, and virtual reality, in which students learn to act empathetic”.

That is why Mortiboys (2005) emphasizes the relationship between teachers and learners and believes that “a well-developed self-awareness is the first step in being emotionally intelligent, which is the first effect on students and colors their view of their classroom environment”.

In a recent study, Rodriguez, E. (2022) found that “the development of empathic skills helped students obtain more positive relationships and maintain positive interactions with peers”. To execute this, she provided a questioner to the students consisted on empathy, friendship and peer interactions etc. She further is of the view that all the information was self-reported which resulted that “the correlation between empathy and friendship was positive”.

### **Research Gap**

Although selected previous studies have explored empathy, its types, its positive role and friendship development through empathy, nevertheless, this study is one of the first to explore the role of developing empathy for Implementing English language skills of EFL learners.

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the role of developing empathy in enhancing the English language skills of English ACCESS program students. The case study approach was appropriate due to its ability to provide an in-depth, contextualized understanding of complex human behaviors and experiences (Yin, 2018). Empathy, being an affective and cognitive phenomenon, was best examined through qualitative methods that allow for rich, descriptive data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

#### **Participants**

The participants consisted of 20 English ACCESS students aged between 13 and 17, enrolled in a U.S. Embassy-sponsored program in Pakistan. The selection was purposive to ensure that all participants had similar exposure to the curriculum and a foundational understanding of English. Additionally, four teachers and two program coordinators were interviewed to triangulate the findings.

#### **Data Collection Methods**

Data were collected using multiple qualitative instruments:

**Semi-structured interviews** with students, teachers, and coordinators to understand their perceptions of empathy and its influence on English language acquisition

**Classroom observations** to identify empathetic interactions and teaching practices that promote language learning

**Student journals** where learners reflected weekly on emotional experiences during English learning tasks

These instruments allowed for triangulation, enhancing the credibility and validity of the findings (Patton, 2015).

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## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the host institution. Informed consent was secured from all participants and guardians where applicable. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point.

## **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. NVivo 12 software was used for data organization and coding. Inter-coder reliability was ensured by involving a second coder who independently reviewed 25% of the data.

## **Data Analysis and Findings**

### **Emerging Themes**

The analysis revealed four major themes:

### **Empathy as a Motivator in Language Learning**

Students who experienced empathy from teachers reported increased motivation to participate in English language activities. Teachers who acknowledged students' emotional struggles created a safe space that encouraged risk-taking in language use. "When my teacher understands my fear of speaking, I try harder to talk in English," (Student A, interview data).

### **Peer Empathy and Collaborative Learning**

Empathetic peer interactions during group tasks were associated with better speaking and listening skills. Students supported each other in understanding tasks, correcting errors, and sharing feedback empathetically, which fostered language development.

### **Teacher Modeling of Empathetic Language**

Teachers who used empathetic language—through gestures, tone, and word choice—served as role models for students. This modeling led to the internalization of both emotional expression and nuanced English language usage.

### **Empathy and Increased Engagement with Language Materials**

When students could relate emotionally to the content (e.g., stories of perseverance or kindness), their engagement and comprehension improved. Emotional resonance made language content more memorable and meaningful.

### **Triangulated Perspectives**

Teacher interviews confirmed that empathy plays a role in managing classroom anxiety, promoting inclusivity, and encouraging active participation.

"When students know they won't be judged for mistakes, they open up more," (Teacher C, interview data).

Journal entries further supported these findings, with students often reflecting on how being understood or valued emotionally contributed to their enthusiasm for learning.



## **Conclusion**

### **Summary of Findings**

This case study illustrates that empathy—both as a teacher trait and as a learned student behavior—significantly enhances the acquisition of English language skills among EFL learners in the English ACCESS program. Empathy contributes to increased motivation, reduced anxiety, improved classroom dynamics, and more meaningful engagement with language tasks.

### **Implications for Practice**

**Teacher Training:** Educator preparation programs should integrate emotional intelligence and empathy development to improve instructional effectiveness in EFL contexts.

**Curriculum Design:** Language materials that resonate emotionally with learners can enhance comprehension and retention.

**Classroom Practices:** Peer collaboration and feedback mechanisms should be structured to encourage empathetic interactions.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The study's findings are limited to one program in a specific cultural context. Future research should explore empathy's impact across diverse EFL environments and employ mixed-method approaches to quantify language gains linked to empathetic practices.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Incorporating empathy into language education is not just a pedagogical choice but a humanizing one. As this study demonstrates, when empathy is embedded in instructional and interpersonal practices, EFL learners are more likely to thrive linguistically and emotionally.

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