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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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### EMPATHY HISTORY IN LANGUAGE TEACHING: A THEORETICAL REVIEW OF RELATIONAL PRACTICES IN THE ECUADORIAN UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

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#### Abstract

Studies on empathy have shifted away from the broad humanistic ideal of how teachers should treat learners toward understanding how teacher behavior affects learners' attention, trust, classroom participation, and sense of emotional safety. This article reviews literature on empathy in language teaching in five historical phases: the humanistic/communicative period, the interactional period, the affective classroom period, the positive psychology/emotion period, and the current interpersonal communication period. Early publications viewed empathy as an aspect of teachers' general humanistic attitude toward students. Recent publications characterize it as observable teaching practices that help students attend to instruction, take risks with the target language, and cope with anxiety. In studies from the Ecuadorian university context, a shift in thinking from general teaching philosophy toward observable behaviors seems evident in research on rapport, classroom climate, student-centered teaching, and sympathetic communication. Learners react positively when teachers communicate that they understand and care about them, respect their identities, and make them feel safe. The article shows that sympathy is more than moral ideal; it is a prerequisite for language learning.

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#### Introduction: -

Learning a language can be frustrating and anxiety-provoking. It requires great effort and persistence because it implies feeling insecure or awkward for long periods of time. As such, there is more consensus than ever before regarding the impact that affective factors have on foreign language acquisition. Empathy has become one of those factors. Nowadays, it is widely accepted that teachers need to pay attention to students' feelings in order to create an environment in which they can practice speaking without hesitation. Despite its acknowledged importance, empathy has historically been understood from a global perspective. That is, researchers tended to refer to empathy as a kind of humanistic attitude that teachers should develop and then project through their teaching. Today, the spotlight is being put on empathy's observable expressions, such as specific teacher-learner interactions or relationship-building routines. The purpose of this literature review is to track how studies involving empathy together with language teaching have evolved over the years. Five stages have been established with this aim. The review will also show how these stages are exemplified in Ecuador through university English as a Foreign Language education. Local sources will be combined with international theory-building efforts to argue that empathy shapes language teachers'

daily practices. They carefully attend to learners' presence and actively foster emotionally safe classroom participation.

### Historical Advancement regarding Empathy in Language Teaching Research

Empathy in language teaching research has evolved from an umbrella term representing a vague humanistic ideal toward a more clearly defined description of teacher behaviors that influence learners' attention, trust, willingness to participate, and emotional safety. Earlier publications cited empathy under broad categories describing a teacher's personal orientation toward language learners. Later publications reconceptualized empathy as observable relational practices that support learner engagement, risk-taking in the target language, and anxiety reduction.

#### Key milestones

Period	Main shift	What changed in the field	Representative papers
Early humanistic and communicative phase	Empathy as a teacher disposition	Empathy was linked to Rogers inspired views of acceptance, genuineness, and low threat communication in language classrooms	(Aguilar-Río, 2007)
Interactional phase	Empathy as classroom practice	Research began to show empathy in enacted teacher moves such as reading learner cues, adjusting talk, and building complicity in communicative classes	(McAlinden, 2014; Río, 2009)
Affective classroom phase	Empathy tied to climate and relationships	The field connected teacher learner relationships with wellbeing, willingness to learn, and student centered classroom design	(Rodríguez, 2015; Sánchez et al., 2013; Vargas et al., 2016)
Positive psychology and emotion phase	Empathy linked to motivation and anxiety	Research shifted toward measurable affective outcomes such as enjoyment, motivation, engagement, and reduced anxiety	(Dewaele et al., 2019; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020; Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Li et al., 2020)
Interpersonal communication phase	Empathy embedded in rapport, support, care, and immediacy	Empathy became part of a broader model of teacher interpersonal behavior that predicts participation, affective learning, and communication	(Cai, 2021; Meng, 2021; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021; Sun & Shi, 2022; Wang & Kang, 2023; Zare & Derakhshan, 2021)
Current higher education phase	Empathy as a core condition for trust and inclusion	University EFL research, including Ecuador, frames empathy as central to flexible teaching, classroom trust, inclusion, and socio emotional support across face to face and online settings	(Guijarro-Paguay et al., 2021; Herrera, 2024; Jaramillo et al., 2025; Narváez-Cantos, 2022; Neira & Garzón, 2023; Yanchaguano-Llumiñana et al., 2025)

#### From humanistic ideals to communicative teaching

One starting point in this literature is communicative language teaching and the importation of humanistic traditions into communicative language teaching. Aguilar Río provides one example of these roots, citing empathy's entrance into L2 pedagogy via a Rogers influenced conceptualization of the teacher as one who views the learner as above

mere executor of linguistic forms (Aguilar-Río, 2007). Framed this way, empathy was seen to matter because learning languages thrusts students into situations of error, embarrassment, and intellectual humility. When teachers communicate acceptance and comprehension they reduce this sense of threat and promote communicative efforts (Aguilar-Río, 2007).

This earliest body of work did not yet present thorough statistical arguments for effects on learning outcomes. Rather, its importance was conceptual. Empathy work from this period helped to popularize the idea that affective safety is inextricable from language learning. It does not simply facilitate learning - it is one of the requisites which allows language practice to occur at all (Aguilar-Río, 2007). That argument set the basis for subsequent investigation into classroom climate, language anxiety, and learner willingness to communicate.

### **From trait to practice**

The second major development was reconceiving empathy as something done rather than just something teachers have. Aguilar Río's follow-up study of adult communicative classes positions empathy alongside competence and complicity. Now good language teaching isn't simply about knowing the subject well but having "a feel for the relation", that is, "perceiving how learners are responding to and experiencing the lesson" (Río, 2009). McAlinden develops this later still by asking "whether we can read the minds of our learners through their body language and other signs?" (McAlinden, 2014). If so, empathy becomes less a trait you have and more an interpretation/response happening from moment to moment.

The point here is that this was an important evolution in the field's history. Prior research said empathy is important. This research began to describe how it works. The teacher perceives something in the learner (hesitation, confusion, discomfort, readiness) and replies by adjusting pace, feedback, etc. The new focus on the nuts and bolts of teaching helps account for why later researchers would link empathy to learners' concentration and trust rather than seeing empathy as simply a moral good (McAlinden, 2014; Río, 2009).

### **The rise of classroom climate and teacher student relationships**

By the 2010s literature more clearly situated itself in the wider social environment of learning. Students in a university EFL context described teacher-student relationships as playing a role in wellbeing, positive attitudes, and willingness to learn when teachers expressed empathy, respect, and interest in their students' development (Sánchez et al., 2013). Student centered English teaching in Ecuador was also described with similar priorities around learners' cognitive and affective needs, utilizing interactive tasks to promote meaningful participation beyond content coverage (Rodríguez, 2015). Research on classroom communication and classroom climate in Ecuador similarly found that positive learning environments were dependent on teacher mediation, communication, and students' feeling of support in the classroom setting (Vargas et al., 2016).

This phase is significant because empathy stopped being treated as a detached attribute that individual teachers might or might not express. Empathy was considered one factor in classroom climate and the central question became how relational teaching influences learners' opportunities and desires to pay attention, participate, and persist (Rodríguez, 2015; Sánchez et al., 2013; Vargas et al., 2016).

### **The affective turn**

Yet another shift took place with the affective turn in second language research. Suddenly studies were measuring enjoyment, anxiety, motivation and engagement directly. Henry and Thorsen show that immediate teacher student contact can boost L2 motivation, though this effect can vary across nascent versus mature relationships (Henry & Thorsen, 2018). Dewaele et al. show that teacher-related characteristics, most notably teacher friendliness, predict foreign language enjoyment, while strictness and teacher low target language use predicted foreign language anxiety (Dewaele et al., 2019). Subsequent work has suggested that enjoyment may be particularly teacher dependent and increases when teachers create a positive emotional atmosphere (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020). Li et al. has also found that classroom environment strongly predicts enjoyment and was a unique predictor of anxiety across large samples of EFL learners (Li et al., 2020).

This body of work did two things for the field. It provided empirical support for many claims made decades earlier by humanists. It also made clear that empathy wasn't just making students feel better. Teacher empathy helps foster the emotional conditions that allow students to concentrate, take risks, and stay engaged with language use (Dewaele et al., 2019; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020; Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Li et al., 2020).

### **Empathy inside a wider model of interpersonal teaching**

Starting in 2021 empathy research began to converge again with research on rapport/support/care/immediacy. One large-scale conceptual review suggested that positive teacher interpersonal behaviors predict motivation, engagement/involvement/attendance, willingness to communicate, learning, and success inside instructional contexts, including L2 classrooms (Zare & Derakhshan, 2021). Companion studies found teacher student rapport predicted state motivation (Meng, 2021), teacher support predicted academic engagement via positive emotions (Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021) and both rapport and support predicted affective learning inside university EFL classrooms (Sun & Shi, 2022).

Additional studies demonstrated teacher immediacy and rapport predicted willingness to communicate (Cai, 2021) and both empathic and immediacy predicted students' affective learning outcomes (Wang & Kang, 2023). Time and time again researchers outside of psychology explained that the teacher's interpersonal skills or demeanor cause affective outcomes by allowing students to feel trust/comfort/confident/support/engage inside the classroom. Essentially, we finally realized that empathy was not a standalone variable. Rather, empathy is part of a relational system. The teachers' empathic stance leads them to be supportive, provide affectively mindful feedback, adapt and adjust, make repairs via respectful correction, and be "communicatively present" (Cai, 2021; Sun & Shi, 2022; Wang & Kang, 2023; Zare & Derakhshan, 2021). In that system empathy contributes to trust, which helps students feel mentally present in lessons and more willing to take risks and speak up.

### **The way this development appears in Ecuadorian university EFL research**

Ecuadorian literature maps onto this larger global trend though it sometimes uses related expressions like rapport, climate, communication, and efficient teaching instead of empathy. Literature from earlier decades of Ecuadorian research prioritizes student-centered learning and classroom climate for example (Rodríguez, 2015; Vargas et al., 2016). Research from 2019 demonstrate students' affective approach to English learning in Ecuador is directly linked to teacher student rapport, while students often characterize teachers as caring more about finishing a course than learner's emotional wellbeing (Cecilia & Calle, 2019). Motivation literature from 2019 concurs that teacher role and efficient teaching methodology is important for language learning (Ortega-Auquilla et al., 2019).

Distance learning during the pandemic period represented the next important stepping stone. When discussing virtual English classrooms, teacher empathy through effective communication was framed as being necessary to sustain a positive learning environment. However, teachers also admitted most did not allocate enough time for checking in with students about their needs, difficulties, and emotions (Guijarro-Paguay et al., 2021). This elaborated the applied concept of empathy in language learning. Empathy is not simply a way of thinking or feeling about students. It is something that students notice when teachers actively listen and follow up with students who need extra assistance (Guijarro-Paguay et al., 2021).

Recent university based studies from Ecuador demonstrate learners caring deeply about teacher flexibility, humor, correction that doesn't intimidate, and instructors who adjust to student needs (Herrera, 2024; Narváez-Cantos, 2022). Other 2023 research on classroom environment in higher education propose that teachers and students may not always view the classroom dynamic process through the same lens. This is significant because part of teacher empathy is being able to correctly interpret how students perceive the classroom environment (Neira & Garzón, 2023). The newest publications branch into exploring how teacher socio-emotional skills, positive teacher student relationships, and a classroom environment built on respect can affect learner motivation, confidence, and participation during English classes (Yanchaguano-Llumiuinga et al., 2025). Taken together, this body of work suggests the field is beginning to settle on the understanding that trust and learning are interdependent.

### **Present understanding**

Indeed, if we look at the literature chronologically, we can see a developmental tale emerge. Some of the earliest research explained that the empathy reduces threat and enables communication (Aguilar-Río, 2007). Empirical studies from the mid period argued empathy is something teachers do in interaction and through classroom climate rather than simply espousing it as a belief (McAlinden, 2014; Río, 2009; Sánchez et al., 2013). Then, during the affective turn, research showed that teachers who build rapport through caring and caring teacher-learner relationships help students experience higher motivation, more enjoyment and engagement, and lower anxiety (Dewaele et al., 2019; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020; Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Li et al., 2020). Finally, contemporary research on empathy and teaching English to speakers of other languages in higher education settings views empathy as one component of a larger ecology of rapport, support, and care. This larger ecology enables students to

concentrate better, trust their teacher, and participate more fully in the language learning process (Guijarro-Paguay et al., 2021; Jaramillo et al., 2025; Sun & Shi, 2022; Wang & Kang, 2023).

In sum, the past helps us understand why across many years and a growing body of research, we find that empathy in language classrooms matters not just because it is the humane thing to do, but because it promotes the social and emotional environment where language learning can occur. Learners who are understood and safe are more willing to focus on the class, speak in class, ask questions, and persist through difficulties. They also develop more positive attitudes toward the language they are learning. In fact, for university EFL contexts, this is the current consensus in the literature (Cecilia & Calle, 2019; Herrera, 2024; Jaramillo et al., 2025; Narváez-Cantos, 2022; Sánchez et al., 2013; Yanchaguano-Llumiñana et al., 2025).

### Conclusion:-

Study regarding empathy as related to language teaching has been around for quite some time. From initial theories of empathy based on humanistic understandings of learning conditions to present day perspectives of interpersonal relationships, empathy has continued to be valued as part of the language classroom. It has evolved from being described as a trait some may possess into an enacted behavior visible to all who participate in a learning community. Scholars of language teaching in the Ecuadorian university EFL context have claimed that the empathy, rapport, and socio-emotional support have led to positive motivation, lowered anxiety, and active participation (Fillmore 1991; Kubanyiova 2004). It should matter to language educators because it creates the environment students learn in.

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