

## EFL Learners' Classroom Involvement: Does Teacher Compassion and Empathy Matter?

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### Abstract

Learners' classroom involvement is thought to be highly influential in their academic success in that highly involved learners typically invest more time and energy in acquiring course content. For this reason, the predictors and determinants of learners' classroom involvement have been highly attended to by educational researchers. Nonetheless, the predicting role of teachers' emotional competencies like compassion and empathy has rarely been researched. Furthermore, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no theoretical review has looked into the concurrent impacts of teachers' compassion and empathy on EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' classroom involvement. To address this lacuna, the current theoretical review aimed to explicate the effects of these two emotional competencies on EFL learners' classroom involvement. The desirable effects of teachers' compassion and empathy on EFL learners' involvement were demonstrated using theoretical and empirical evidence. The implications of the present review's findings are thoroughly discussed.

**Keywords:** classroom involvement, teacher compassion, teacher empathy, EFL learners, teachers' emotional competency

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## **1. Introduction**

Language learners' classroom involvement is the key to successful language learning (Carver et al., 2021; Dai & Wang, 2024; Shakki, 2022; Tao et al., 2022). Put differently, the academic success of language learners largely depends on their involvement in classroom contexts (Mercer, 2019; Wang et al., 2024; Wang & Xue, 2024). Learner classroom involvement, also known as learner engagement, generally refers to "the physical and psychological energy that they put into coursework" (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010, p. 166). In the realm of language learning, learner involvement pertains to the amount of energy that learners willingly devote to the language learning experience (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Qu & Wang, 2024). As noted by Sinatra et al. (2015), highly involved learners dedicate a lot of energy to studying, spend a great deal of time in educational environments, regularly take part in learner organizations, and constantly interact with instructors and classmates. Likewise, language learners with high levels of involvement devote a significant amount of time and energy to learning a new language and continually communicate with teachers and other language learners (Sang & Hiver, 2021; Li, 2023). On the significance of learner involvement in language classes, Hiver et al. (2021) maintained that "language learning requires active involvement on the part of the learner, and without active involvement, meaningful language learning is unlikely" (p. 2). The value of learner involvement in the quality of language learning has made it one of the most prominent research areas in the language education domain. That is, a great deal of attention has been devoted to learner classroom involvement and its relationship with student-related factors (e.g., Chen et al., 2021; Derakhshan, 2022a; Ding & Wang, 2024; Huang et al., 2017; Liu, 2021; Yin & Wang, 2016; Wang, 2022; Xie & Derakhshan, 2021, among others) and teacher-related factors (e.g., Gao, 2021; Lu & Mustafa, 2021; Luan et al., 2020; McCallum et al., 2015; Peng, 2021; Wanders et al., 2020; Wang & Ye, 2021; Zhang & Yang, 2021; Zhou, 2021, among others). Nonetheless, the relationship between learner involvement, teacher compassion, and teacher empathy has received little attention.

Teacher compassion is an important emotional competence that can empower teachers to increase their pupils' classroom involvement has been conceptualized by Tsing (2008) as "teachers' sensitivity to suffering in their learners, with an endeavor

to alleviate it" (p. 55). Later, Arnot et al. (2009) defined this concept as expressing care, kindness, and affection toward learners without expecting particular institutional rewards. As noted by Singer and Klimecki (2014), teacher compassion encompasses three phases of "noticing", "feeling" and "responding". Noticing entails being aware of the learners' pains and problems. The second phase of teacher compassion, feeling, comprises a fellowship of suffering. The third phase of teacher compassion, which is called responding, includes an active response to learners' pain and distress. Even if the learners' problems might not be resolved or the cause of their pain might not be eliminated, teacher compassion makes suffering more tolerable (Harris, 2017). Compassionate teachers are believed to be more empowered to carry out their responsibilities and respond to their learners' emotional needs (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2019; Willis, 2021). They are also more capable of building warm and intimate relationships with their learners (Jennings, 2015; McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015).

Another emotional competence that may enable teachers to improve their learners' classroom involvement is empathy. Teacher empathy, according to Stojiljković et al. (2012), pertains to the extent to which "teachers are preoccupied by the thoughts and feelings of their learners, put themselves in their place, and try to think like them" (p. 961). As noted by Segal (2011), teachers high in empathy typically outperform their colleagues who cannot easily empathize with their pupils. Further, Lam et al. (2011) mentioned that those teachers who can readily empathize with their students are more successful at establishing emotional bonds with them. It is because teachers who exhibit high levels of empathy in educational settings are aware of their learners' emotions, needs, and expectations (Rastegar et al., 2011). Recently, on the significance of teacher empathy, Zhang (2022) also articulated that the more teachers empathize with their learners, the more they can involve them in the learning process.

Inspired by the importance of compassion and empathy in instructional-learning contexts (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2019; Willis, 2021; Zhang, 2022), several scholars have investigated the consequences of these two emotional competencies in both general and language education domains. Some inquiries have probed the impacts of teacher compassion and teacher empathy on teachers themselves (e.g., Eldor & Shoshani, 2016; Huang et al., 2020; Rieckhoff et al., 2020; Tarrasch et al., 2020;

Warren, 2018; Wink et al., 2021; Zohoorian & Faravani, 2021, among others); others have looked into the effects of these two emotional competencies on students and their academic outcomes (e.g., Aldrup et al., 2022; Huang, 2022; Meyers et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2022; Willis, 2021, to cite a few). Notwithstanding this, the influences of these emotional factors on learners' classroom involvement have been rarely inspected (Bockmier-Sommers et al., 2017; Zhang, 2022). Moreover, as the review of previous inquiries revealed, no conceptual or theoretical review study has been conducted on this subject. To answer this gap, the current conceptual review strives to explicate the role of teacher compassion and teacher empathy in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' classroom involvement based on theoretical and empirical evidence.

## **2. Review of the Related Literature**

### **2.1. Teacher Compassion**

Compassion has been generally characterized as "a kind of sensitive love, with an emotional, cognitive, and behavioral motivation to support and help others in times of distress and suffering" (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005, p. 631). In a similar vein, teacher compassion has been described as an individual teacher's sensitivity to the suffering of students, along with his or her intention to alleviate them of pain and distress (Gao & Wang, 2022; Gill & Ursuleanu, 2017; Singer & Klimecki, 2014). As Goetz et al. (2010) mentioned, teacher compassion is a multifaceted element with four different dimensions, including the cognitive dimension (i.e., being aware of learners' pain and distress), the affective dimension (i.e., caring about learners' pain and distress), the motivational dimension (i.e., demonstrating a desire to reduce learners' pain and distress), and the behavioral dimension (i.e., taking some steps to improve the conditions for learners). According to Huang (2022), noticing, feeling, and responding to learners' suffering enables teachers to cultivate positive feelings in classroom contexts that are of great help in developing close and favorable relationships with learners.

The importance of teacher compassion in educational environments has motivated many researchers around the world to study this emotional competence and its

consequences in instructional-learning contexts (e.g., Eldor & Shoshani, 2016; Huang, 2022; Shakki, 2023; Tarrasch et al., 2020; Willis, 2021). Eldor and Shoshani (2016), for example, probed the effect of teachers' compassion on their engagement. To do this, 226 teachers were invited to answer two surveys developed to measure teachers' perceived compassion and work engagement. The analysis of teachers' responses uncovered the significant role of compassion in improving teacher work engagement. In their study, Tarrasch et al. (2020) delved into the function of teachers' compassion in their psychological well-being. To accomplish this, 44 middle school teachers were recruited to fill out two web-based surveys. Participants' answers to the surveys indicated that teachers' compassion can positively and dramatically contribute to their psychological well-being. Additionally, Willis (2022) examined the role of teacher compassion in predicting student confidence. To do so, 11 students were interviewed about the role of teacher compassion in improving student confidence. The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts showed that teacher compassion can strongly predict student confidence.

## 2.2. Teacher Empathy

The concept of empathy generally refers to the affective reaction that arises from the recognition or apprehension of another's emotional condition (Arghode et al., 2013; Eisenberg & Liew, 2009). For Brown (2007), it pertains to "a process of comprehending in which a temporary fusion of self-object boundaries permits an immediate emotional apprehension of the affective experience of another" (p. 166). With respect to this definition, empathy comprises two main facets (Tettegah & Anderson, 2007): a) cognitive empathy (i.e., awareness of others' thoughts and feelings); and b) emotional empathy (i.e., identification with others). Accordingly, teacher empathy in educational environments has to do with the degree to which teachers are aware of their learners' emotions and identify with them (Bozkurt & Ozden, 2010; Goroshit & Hen, 2016). For Barr (2011), teacher empathy is "the ability to express concern and take the perspective of learners" (p. 365). As put by Zhang (2022), an empathetic classroom atmosphere prompts learner to put more physical and psychological energy into learning activities, which adds up to their academic

achievements. In this respect, Aldrup et al. (2022) also stated that teacher empathy is the key to increased learning outcomes. According to them, in empathetic learning environments, learners experience a wide variety of positive feelings that inspire them to attain more desirable outcomes.

The prominent role of teacher empathy in instructional-learning environments has prompted several scholars to delve into this emotional variable and its potential outcomes (e.g., Goroshit & Hen, 2016; Huang et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022; Warren, 2018; Wink et al., 2021). For instance, Huang et al. (2020) inspected the role of Chinese teachers' empathy in their mental health. To this end, a large sample of 4348 preschool teachers was selected from various schools in China. To obtain the needed information, two questionnaires were given to participants. The results demonstrated that Chinese teachers' mental health is tied to their empathy, and empathy can noticeably predict their mental health at work. Subsequently, Wink et al. (2021) measured the impact of teacher empathy on teacher-student relationships and job burnout. To do this, a sample comprising of 178 elementary school teachers was chosen. Then, three reliable scales developed to assess teacher empathy, teacher-student relationships, and job burnout were distributed among participants. The results of data analysis represented that teacher empathy can contribute to close teacher-student relationships. The results also revealed that empathy can reduce the amount of job burnout among teachers. In a recent study, Wang et al. (2022) examined the impact of perceived teacher empathy on learners' positive emotions. For this purpose, the questionnaires of "Perceived Teacher Empathy" and "Positive Academic Emotions" were given to 775 Chinese learners. Data analysis indicated that learners who perceive their teachers to be empathetic are more likely to experience positive emotions in educational environments.

### **2.3. Learner Classroom Involvement**

Classroom involvement, also called classroom engagement or academic engagement, generally pertains to "the constructive, enthusiastic, willing, emotionally positive, and cognitively focused participation with learning activities in classrooms" (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012, p. 22). According to Reeve (2012), learners' classroom involvement is dealt with their regular and active involvement in classroom activities. Language

learners' classroom involvement, in particular, is concerned with their in-class engagement with language learning tasks and activities (Al-Obaydi et al., 2023; Han, & Gao, 2021; Pourgharib & Shakki, 2024; Svalberg, 2021). As noted by Philp and Duchesne (2016), learners' involvement in language classrooms entails three major dimensions: behavioral involvement, emotional involvement, and cognitive involvement. Behavioral involvement concerns the quality and quantity of learners' classroom participation and the amount of time and energy spent on language learning tasks (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). Emotional involvement, as the second dimension of classroom involvement, deals with the affective aspect of learners' participation, namely interest, joy, and enthusiasm (Baralt et al., 2016). Finally, cognitive involvement has to do with learners' intellectual effort and conscious attention to the language learning process (Fredricks et al., 2016).

It is believed that learners who demonstrate a high level of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in classroom settings are more likely to succeed than their uninvolving counterparts (De Villiers & Werner, 2016; Lei et al., 2018). This premise has inspired educational researchers to study learner classroom involvement and its internal and external predictors (Derakhshan, 2021; Li, 2021; Thornberg et al., 2020; Wang, 2022). In their study, Thornberg et al. (2020) looked into the external predictors of learners' classroom involvement by scrutinizing the impact of teacher-student relationships on Swedish students' involvement. To accomplish this, 234 Swedish students received two valid questionnaires designed to evaluate the quality of teacher-student relationships and student involvement. The examination of students' responses uncovered the favorable effects of positive teacher-student relationships on students' involvement. By the same token, Derakhshan, Doliński, et al. (2022) probed the influences of teacher-student rapport and teacher care on Polish and Iranian learners' involvement. To meet the objective of the study, three reliable scales were employed to gather Iranian ( $N = 223$ ) and Polish ( $N = 208$ ) learners' viewpoints. The analysis of data obtained through questionnaires revealed that teacher-student rapport and teacher care had significant impacts on Iranian and Polish learners' academic involvement. In an attempt to discover the internal predictors of learner classroom involvement, Wang (2022) evaluated the effects of academic motivation and enjoyment on Chinese English learners' academic involvement. For

this objective, the “Classroom Enjoyment Questionnaire”, “Student Motivation Scale”, and “Utrecht Work Engagement Scale for Students” were handed out among 490 English learners. The results showed that both academic motivation and enjoyment positively affected Chinese English learners’ academic involvement.

#### **2.4. Theoretical Underpinnings**

Building upon the “broaden-and-build theory (BBT)” (Fredrickson, 2001), the role of teacher compassion and empathy in predicting learners’ classroom involvement can be clarified. In her conceptual theory, Fredrickson (2001) suggested that “positive emotions broaden learners’ momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources” (p. 220). She further argued that the positive feelings learners experience in instructional-learning contexts extend the scope of their behavioral, cognitive, and emotional involvement (Fredrickson, 2004). Simply said, experiencing desirable feelings motivates learners to engage with the educational environment and enthusiastically take part in educational activities (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). Accordingly, the positive feelings like pleasure, hope, and happiness that teachers may convey to their learners through positive interpersonal behaviors, including compassion and empathy, can lead them to a higher level of involvement in classroom settings (Derakhshan, 2022a, 2022b; Wang et al., 2021). It means that positive feelings derived from teacher compassion and empathy stimulate learners’ classroom involvement.

#### **2.5. Empirical Evidence**

Given the value of learners’ classroom involvement in their academic success (Carver et al., 2021; Mercer, 2019), a great deal of attention has been dedicated to the predictors of this construct (e.g., Derakhshan, 2021; Derakhshan, Fathi, et al., 2022; Dewaele & Li, 2021; Gan, 2021; Wang, 2022; Wang & Ye, 2021; Wu, 2019; Zhang & Yang, 2021, among others). Nonetheless, the role of teachers’ emotional competencies in learners’ classroom involvement has received scant attention. Among different emotional competencies, teacher compassion and empathy have been less attended to in both mainstream education and language education. That is,

few investigations have been carried out to unravel the role of teacher compassion and empathy in learners' classroom involvement (Bockmier-Sommers et al., 2017; Zhang, 2022). As an instance, Bockmier-Sommers et al. (2017) assessed the influence of teacher empathy on learners' course involvement. For this purpose, 185 learners were invited to fill out the surveys prepared to examine teacher empathy and learner involvement. The study' outcomes demonstrated that teacher empathy can remarkably enhance learners' course involvement. In another study, Zhang (2022) inspected the impact of teacher empathy on EFL learners' involvement. Analyzing data gathered through questionnaires and interviews, the researcher found that teacher empathy can dramatically increase learners' involvement in EFL classes.

### **3. Conclusion and Implications**

The present conceptual review was performed to offer a detailed description of teacher compassion, teacher empathy, and learner involvement, and to explicate the role of teacher compassion and empathy in EFL learners' classroom involvement. In light of the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) and previous investigations' outcomes, the prominent role of teacher compassion and empathy in enhancing EFL learners' classroom involvement was proved. Accordingly, it can be inferred that the compassion and empathy that teachers demonstrate in classroom settings can widen the breadth of EFL learners' cognitive, behavioral, and emotional involvement. This seems enlightening for language teachers and instructors in any educational context. Owing to the positive impact of empathy on learners' classroom involvement, teachers are required to establish an empathetic learning climate to promote their learners' academic involvement (Zhang, 2022). Moreover, given the significant role of compassion in learners' academic involvement, instructors who are struggling with their learners' insufficient involvement should pay attention to their feelings and alleviate their pain and distress. By doing so, they can dramatically improve their learners' cognitive, behavioral, and emotional involvement (Huang, 2022). Besides, due to the favorable effect of teacher empathy on learners' involvement, teacher educators are also required to teach their teacher students how to empathize with their learners.

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