
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Emotional Side of Teaching: Why Attitude and Empathy Matter More Than Method

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| ABSTRACT

This article explores the affective aspects of teaching and how a teacher's attitude and empathy is capable of impacting learning for the better to a greater extent, it argues, than a particular method of instruction. The purpose of this book is to shine a light on the often-ignored human side of education and to demonstrate that emotional intelligence in the classroom is a crucial ingredient for creating successful, caring learning communities. The results demonstrate that empathy and a teacher positive attitude exert a tremendous impact on students' engagement, self-efficacy beliefs, and motivation to learn. Instruction is less effective when teachers are patient, understanding and respectful. Students feel safer, more valued and comfortable communicating. There are equally inflexible or aloof methods that typically generate anxiety, silence, or withdrawal in the face of what might have been better teaching. The research also revealed that emotionally intelligent teachers are more flexible and able to bounce back in the face of classroom challenges with serenity and imagination. The article argues that, while methods and tools are necessary, they can be significantly enhanced only when there is sensitivity to emotion. It follows that teacher education should incorporate the need to establish empathy, self-reflection and interpersonal abilities as necessary aspects of their professional development. At its core, teaching is a human meeting — and the feelings behind it are what make learning real.

| KEYWORDS

Teaching attitude – empathy – emotional intelligence – EFL teaching – teacher-student relationship – motivation – affective domain – education

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Teaching has always been considered a science and an art. The science is what you do, methods and techniques and lesson structures. The heart is how the teacher is - attitude, empathy, connectedness with students. In classrooms around the globe, it is often not the strategy that a student recalls but rather the teacher who helped them feel confident, respected, and safe enough to learn. This feeling of connectedness is what provides the cornerstone for teaching and learning that matters.

Within many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, particularly in Morocco, the content of teacher education programs is often disproportionately centered on methodology—be it communicative-based or task-oriented or grammar-focused. But what really brings a classroom to life as a place of learning is the emotional presence of the teacher. Students are receptive not just to whatever a teacher teaches, but how they do so: the tone of voice used, patience, sense of humor and care brought on any particular day. These are small human things that can transform fear into curiosity and resistance into participation.

The emotional environment in a classroom can mean the difference between a student's flourishing or languishing. Empathetic teachers who maintain an upbeat attitude foster environments in which it's more acceptable to crack jokes because mistakes are part of the learning process and not something shameful. In these environments, students feel empowered to talk, share ideas

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and take risks with language. Conversely, learners remain uninspired in settings of emotional desolation or judgmentalism, and even the most contemporary methods are ineffective.

The purpose of this article is to consider the emotional dimensions of teaching and to suggest that empathy and attitude are not just “add-ons”, but core elements of good pedagogy. Standing on the shoulders of David Hawkins, Gregg Levoy poses and answers a compelling question: What do emotionally intelligent teachers (aware teachers) contribute to the motivation, resiliency, and safety in school life?—demonstrating that at its heart good teaching beats in the meeting between a teacher’s humanity against that of her students.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Emotional Intelligence in Education

Emotional intelligence (EI) is widely recognized as a central component of effective teaching. Goleman (1995) defines it as the ability to understand and manage one’s own emotions and to recognize and influence the emotions of others. In the field of education, this implies that emotionally intelligent instructors can react more intentionally to what comes their way and create an environment characterized by sympathy and respect. Jennings and Greenberg add that these teachers are also more competent in developing positive relationships with students while lowering tension.

Emotional intelligence is not a fixed trait; it grows through self-awareness, reflection, and experience (Brackett et al., 2019). Teachers who practice emotional regulation and empathy are often more patient and resilient, especially when facing large classes, mixed abilities, or behavioral challenges. This emotional stability enhances students’ sense of safety and belonging, which contributes directly to better academic outcomes (Pishghadam & Karami, 2017).

2.2 The Role of Empathy and Teacher Attitude

Empathy is what it’s all about for good teaching. Rogers (1969) defined empathy as learning to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and without losing the “as if” metaphor. Meaning that it is possible to respond with sensitivity, as opposed to authority. “Teachers get confused — they can’t tell if you’re saying things because you are misbehaving or maybe something bad is happening at home,” Stenekes said.

A teacher’s attitude is equally influential. A positive, supportive attitude helps students take risks, ask questions, and engage freely (Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). Conversely, negative or judgmental attitudes can lead to withdrawal and silence. In language classrooms, especially EFL contexts, empathy and encouragement have been shown to reduce anxiety and enhance motivation (Arnold & Brown, 1999).

Empathetic teachers are also more likely to adapt lessons to their students’ needs. They use tone, gestures, humor, and personal warmth to humanize the learning space. Hargreaves (1998) argues that emotions are not a distraction from teaching but a core element of the professional identity of educators.

2.3 The Affective Side of Language Learning

Language learning is an emotional experience. According to Krashen’s 1982 Affective Filter Hypothesis, fear or embarrassment can act as a filter that blocks the language input, while self-esteem and motivation lower this affective filter. The latter condition makes language input accessible. This is why an emotionally safe environment is paramount for language.

Secondly, according to Dörnyei, motivation in second language learning cannot exist without emotional engagement. In other words, students must have support and respect to develop their intrinsic motivation to learn. An emotionally intelligent teacher can identify internal signs of anxiety or tiredness and regulate learning activities to keep the balance between challenge and comfort.

The emotional aspects of teaching, in other words, are not extrinsic but intrinsic. It has to be that way. The most engaging pedagogical methods can seem mechanical, if devoid of empathy. Caring, or emotional connection, humanizes the classroom, making it a safe and nurturing environment where teachers and students grow from one another.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This paper is a qualitative and reflective design study, which deals with the emotional side of teaching in an EFL classroom. The purpose is to explore how teacher empathy and attitude affect students' motivation, engagement, and participation. Instead of attempting to verify a predetermined hypothesis, the aim of the study is to interpret classroom reality with an observation that helps us understand how emotional awareness shapes space in learning.

A qualitative methodology was selected because it gives the researcher an opportunity to delve into emotions, relationships and classroom interactions which are not conveyable with numerical data. The study is based on the teacher-researcher method of reflective practice, in which the teacher-researcher observes, records and interprets her personal teaching over a sustained period of time as well as the emotional reactions of her students.

3.2. Context and Participants

The research was carried out at a High School, located in Casablanca Morocco, over the course of one semester. The sample was made up of thirty seven 15-17 year-old students from Common Core and First Year Baccalaureate classes. English is a foreign language in this setting and the level of proficiency of the students was mixed, between pre-intermediate and intermediate.

As a teacher-researcher I investigated my own classes. This inner perspective allowed first-hand witness to the emotional and behavioural content of classroom communication. The attention was on daily teaching scenarios where there is a place for empathy, attitude and relationships to come into play in learning.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were gathered over the semester using three main tools:

1. **Reflective Journal:** After each class, I wrote short reflections on my emotional state, classroom atmosphere, and notable student reactions. These reflections helped trace patterns of empathy, motivation, and teacher attitude over time.
2. **Classroom Observation:** Lessons were observed continuously throughout the semester, focusing on verbal and non-verbal communication, teacher-student interaction, and the general emotional climate.
3. **Informal Student Feedback:** Occasional open discussions and anonymous written comments from students were collected to understand how they perceived empathy, care, and emotional support from the teacher.

This combination allowed for triangulation—cross-checking information from different perspectives to ensure the accuracy and depth of the findings.

3.5. Data Analysis

All notes and reflections were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves identifying recurring themes and patterns. The data were reviewed several times to extract meaningful categories related to emotional teaching. Four major themes emerged:

- Teacher empathy as a source of student motivation
- Positive attitude and emotional climate
- Building trust through communication
- Emotional awareness as professional growth

These themes formed the basis of the discussion in the Results and Findings section.

3.6. Ethical considerations

Students were told that their class was being observed for academic research and participation was voluntary. No implicating information was revealed and all feedback was maintained in confidence. The goal of the study was to focus on teaching practice and not to assess students, thereby maintaining a supportive and non-threatening ambiance.

4. Results and findings

The analysis of observations, reflective journals, and student feedback revealed that emotions play a decisive role in shaping the classroom atmosphere and learning outcomes. Four major themes emerged: teacher empathy as a source of motivation, positive attitude and emotional climate, building trust through communication, and emotional awareness as professional growth. These themes demonstrate that what students feel in the classroom can be as important as what they learn.

4.1. Teacher Empathy as a Source of Motivation

Empathy was one of the most potent emotional forces in the classroom. Students were more motivated after interacting with a teacher who they believed really knew them and their struggles. It was clear during the semester that small acts of personal encouragement, like asking after a struggling student or celebrating small successes, as well as working with patience at explaining a difficult point, brought increased participation.

Such as shy or tentative learners make themselves more active when they perceive that making mistakes is a part of learning. Some students, speaking informally to me during class discussions, brought a sense of emotional satisfaction from the opportunity to “feel ‘safe’ when expressing themselves in English” meaning that teacher “did not make fun of us for wrong answers,” several said. This emotional security led the students to be more willing to take risks, a crucial part of language acquisition.

Such observations suggest that not only does empathy allay personal connections but it also undergirds students’ own engagement and confidence.

4.2. Positive Attitude and Emotional Climate

The mood of the classroom was linked more to its teacher's attitude than to any one teaching technique. Reliability of the teacher: A relaxed, friendly and encouraging tone set a mood for peaceful learning environment, whereas tiredness or aloofness spread from the teacher adjusted students’ behavior in no time.

Throughout the semester, classes that opened with positive energy, whether it was to exchange greetings, share a joke or express real concern for the welfare of students—were more engaging and productive. Conversely, when class began with a tense or even rushed approach, participation suffered significantly.

Students’ feedback supported this pattern. Most of them used the words “comfortable” and said they liked to study because “the teacher smiled and listened.” These results imply that attitude serves as a sort of hidden signal: If the teacher generates warmth and patience, students follow suit by working together eagerly.

4.3. Building Trust Through Communication

Trust was also identified as one of the key emotional aspects. If asked a question, students were more likely to respond when they knew their answers were valued. Promoting partner work, extensive listening and providing the opportunity for personalisation further developed this level of trust.

Throughout the semester, tiny acts of recognition using students’ names, thanking them for effort or letting them express frustration had added up to an emotional connection. This rapport turned the classroom from a place of hierarchy into one of cooperation.

It was then that things started loosening up, communication-wise, with the semester gradually kicking into gear. Students soon started contributing their own personal thoughts on learning languages, often bringing it back to their relationship with English. This shift suggested that social trust served as a link between the academic and personal dimensions of learning.

4.4. Emotional Awareness as Professional Growth

The third was that of the teacher's emotional capacity in terms of himself. Reflective journaling after each lesson was a valuable way to pick out emotional patterns (frustration, pride or anxiety), and how these emotions affected the decisions about what to teach. Learning to integrate these various emotions was part of personal development.

The case studies demonstrated that when the teacher entered the classroom with high levels of positive energy, lessons went more fluently and student energy generally matched this level. The days of fatigue and stress, on the other hand, it was harder to maintain motivation and control of the class. This realization underscored the fact that emotional control is not just individual, it's also pedagogical: a teacher's emotional balance impacts instruction.

With reflection came more empathy, more patience and intentional positivity in practice, showing that emotional intelligence can also be built through self-observation and conscious effort.

4.5 Summary of Findings

These findings can largely be summarized as saying empathy, sentiment and emotional awareness are central to being an effective teacher. Students do best in environments where they feel understood, respected and emotionally safe. The study also underscores that teaching is not just about imparting content, but also about managing the emotions of the teacher's and the students'. The results show that the emotional bond makes the classroom a place of respect, motivation and shared progress.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate how a teacher's empathy and attitude can significantly affect students' motivation, engagement, and learning experiences over and above instruction. Our one semester research in the High School in Casablanca, proved to me that teaching is not cognitive or technical it is profoundly emotional. Affective teacher-student relationship appeared to be the real driving force of learning.

Results indicate that empathy provides a sense of security but also the courage to enter classroom life, positivity generates a comfortable relationship with others in the classroom and trust is developed based on open information exchanges. These affective aspects resulted in increased motivation, enhanced confidence to speak English, and a closer student-teacher relationship. Just as vital, the results showed that emotional awareness allows teachers to comprehend their own behavior and its effects on students which in turn, promotes personal and professional development.

Methods give form, but attitude vitalizes the teacher. Even the best tool is worthless without warmth and caring. Arlene is such a caring teacher and how those children loved her. These findings imply that emotional intelligence is an important skill in education and not just a positive attribute.

For teacher training programs, this means that professional development should include components of self-reflection, emotional regulation, and empathy training. Teachers should be encouraged to observe not only how students learn but also how they *feel* while learning. Building emotional awareness can improve classroom management, reduce stress, and create a stronger sense of community among learners.

Subsequent studies could extend this line of research by involving several schools or comparing male and female teachers' emotional caring. Quantitative information could have been utilised to complement the qualitative results in order to quantifiably determine motivation and engagement.

In the end, this study reiterates a basic premise: school is a human relationship before it is an academic endeavor. Teachers who teach from their hearts not only impart knowledge, but they also impact lives, instill confidence and motivation for students to believe in themselves.

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