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## Empathy in the EFL Lesson: An Antidote to Anxiety Affecting Language Learning

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### Abstract

There is much research that highlights the connection between emotions and learning. The emotion of anxiety, especially in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, is prominently felt among students due to the vulnerability that they experience as they struggle to make themselves understood in a new language. Social processing, i.e., how students feel about themselves amongst their peers, further contributes to students' feelings of anxiety in the EFL classroom (Gregersen, 2023; Horwitz et al., 1986). This article focuses on empathy in the EFL lesson as an antidote to alleviate students' anxiety and to facilitate effective language learning. Teacher strategies are presented to foster empathy between the teacher and the students, as well as among the students, in both the classroom and online lessons. Furthermore, the importance of teacher empathy during assessments and the evaluation of students' work is emphasized.

**Keywords:** *empathy, language learning, anxiety, EFL, virtual classroom*

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## **Emotions and Learning**

There is a lot of research that focuses on the connection between positive emotions and learning, as well as the harmful effects of negative emotions, such as anxiety, on memory. The cognitive scientist Damasio (1999) points out that emotion is not the opposite of reason but rather essential to reason as emotions assign meaning to things: "...emotion probably assists reasoning, especially when it comes to personal and social matters involving risk and conflict..." (pp. 41-42). The importance of emotions is seen in Social and Emotional Learning programs, which highlight the effectiveness of learning processes when students maintain positive relationships with teachers and other students (Mahoney et al., 2019). Concurring with this idea Brooks' (2019) article "Students Learn from People They Love" highlights the importance of positive emotions in the learning process, yet at the same time, he points out how extreme negative emotions, like fear and anxiety, can have a devastating effect on a student's ability to learn.

The roots of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), with its humanistic approaches, lie in the field of positive psychology. This has led to the integration of affect and cognition, which has become important to the teaching of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) models. Positive psychology focuses on three main ideas: positive internal experiences such as emotions, characteristic individual traits such as well-being, and finally institutions which allow for people to flourish (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014). For example, Gardner (2010) believes that positive attitudes towards learning enable language learning, and he emphasizes the importance of the social milieu of the learning experience, where students absorb both positive and negative ideas in the context in which they live. A criticism of this emphasis on feelings, rather than the cognitive and linguistic aspects of language learning, has been mentioned by Gadd (1998). Furthermore, Lazarus (2003) focused on the tendency to over-simplify emotions aside from a myriad of other problems associated with the emphasis on positive psychology. However, the roots of positive psychology lie at the heart of SEL and have enabled a far more nuanced and complex approach to teaching English as a foreign language.

A prime example of a challenging learning environment is the university EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom. In the university EFL classroom, students may experience fear

and anxiety as their limited fluency reduces them to stumbling over words, evoking feelings of infantilization. While confident in their mother tongue, students feel particularly vulnerable in this pressured situation, which affects their ability to learn English. Indeed, there is much research on anxiety and cognition (Dux et al., 2008; Gullo et al., 2025; Maloney et al., 2014) that gives scientific reasons for the inhibiting effect of anxiety on the acquisition of language. Krashen (1993) notes that low anxiety is correlated with more success in language acquisition; that is, anxiety inhibits language learning. Luu et al. (1998) uphold Krashen's hypothesis by pointing out that "anxiety constrains cognition by biasing attention towards the anticipation of the threat" (p. 577).

In addition to research on the negative influence of emotions like anxiety on the learning process, there is research that highlights the impact of social processing and the self as an added hindrance to learning. In short, social processing is the awareness of the social environment surrounding the self in the classroom. As Gregersen (2023) asserts, speaking in a foreign language exposes students to criticism about their performance in another language. Students are concerned and anxious about their peers' evaluation of their language competence. For example, a student won't ask a question because s/he observes that fellow students understand, and s/he doesn't want to look foolish. Or, instead of focusing on the lesson, the student agonizes about not understanding and worries about feeling incompetent. When this anxiety is unaddressed, it can limit the attention and cognition required for language production (Fredrickson, 2004; Gregerson, 2023).

### **The Need for Empathy in Learning**

Immordino-Yang (2011) notes that neuro-scientific evidence links emotion, social processing, and self, proposing a new approach to understanding teaching. She says that "Neuro-scientific evidence suggests that we can no longer justify learning theories that dissociate the mind from the body, the self from social context" (p. 101). According to Immordino-Yang, for effective learning to occur, students must experience harmony within themselves, as well as experience harmony among their peers.

Immordino-Yang further states that students in the classroom should feel accord with the teacher: “To learn, students empathically recognize the educator’s actions, thoughts, and goals, a process that reflects each student’s own social and cognitive experiences and preferences” (p. 101). Students should feel that they can trust their teacher and be confident that the teacher acknowledges them as individuals and learners. This trust is created through mutual empathic recognition between the teacher and each student individually, and between the teacher and the class collectively. Palmer (1993) sums up the importance of empathic social relationships between the teacher and students, and among the students, when he writes that authentic learning occurs when students are in synchrony with each other, the teacher, and the subject. This learning process is further enhanced by Goleman's (1995) view of empathy, which he defines as the ability to understand and relate to others' feelings. Empathic connections between teachers and students, as well as among peers, can alleviate anxiety due to learning and the social context of the classroom, especially in an EFL classroom. Empathy facilitates the learning process, thereby enabling effective learning to occur.

To address the complexities of learning and its associated anxieties, this paper explores empathy as a key factor in the EFL lesson and proposes that an empathic classroom atmosphere, created through teacher behavior and student activities, promotes student confidence and facilitates learning. This paper offers practical strategies for fostering empathy between teachers and students, and between students in the class, to create a low-anxiety environment that encourages learners to confidently engage with the target language. The first part of the paper focuses on creating empathy in the classroom and in online lessons, and the second part focuses on empathic teacher evaluation and responses to students’ contributions.

## **Student Activities to Create Empathy in the Classroom**

### ***Breaking the Ice***

In their article “Inclusive Teaching,” Dewsbury and Brame (2019) reference Freire’s (1970) educational philosophy arguing that instructors -develop empathy in students when they

include students' voices in the learning process. They further contend that fostering empathy among students requires instructors to engage meaningfully with learners to gain insight into their experiences and support authentic learning. The following activities promote student dialogue, reflection, and empathy between students and the instructor, thereby enhancing the learning process. In one activity, students are paired for interviews and then introduce their partners to the class. This process encourages students to connect over shared interests and personal experiences, fostering interpersonal bonds. It also allows both peers and the teacher to gain insight into each learner's inner voice, enabling deeper connections, thereby facilitating the authentic learning experience that Dewsbury and Brame refer to in their article.

An additional activity that fosters empathy and a sense of belonging involves students writing a brief paragraph titled *'What I Have Learned'*, in which they describe a life-changing experience. With students' permission, the teacher reads the texts aloud. By reading these texts, the teacher and class gain insight into a meaningful personal experience, allowing the teacher and class to learn about each student more profoundly. This sharing of meaningful experiences deepens mutual understanding and creates feelings of empathy and unity, resulting in what Freeman et al. (2007) refer to as "a positive classroom climate." They theorize that a "positive classroom environment" is a crucial element of a successful learning environment. It is within this kind of learning environment that anxiety surrounding language learning can be alleviated, allowing effective language learning to occur.

### ***Group Work as an Ice-Breaker***

Group activities are an effective means of fostering empathy among students by promoting collaboration and interpersonal connection. The impact of such interactions is supported by Dikker et al. (2017), who simultaneously recorded the brain activity of 12 students over 11 school days and found that brain-to-brain synchrony reliably predicted classroom engagement and social dynamics. These findings highlight the influence of the 'social brain' on learning and underscore the importance of creating socially supportive and empathic classroom and online environments to enhance student well-being and learning outcomes.

Collaborative writing tasks, such as opinion papers or letters of complaint, promote empathy and cooperation by encouraging students to contribute their strengths toward shared goals. As these assignments are graded, students are motivated to support one another in achieving successful outcomes. Lin (2022) describes collaborative writing as a process that fosters active engagement through role distribution, which reduces anxiety and enhances motivation. Peer encouragement, she notes, serves as a powerful incentive for continued participation. Furthermore, drawing on their individual strengths not only produces positive learning experiences, but also increases students' sense of control, reduces stress, and facilitates more effective task performance (Gregersen, 2023; Seligman et al., 2005). From another perspective, Watanabe and Swain's (2007) study on collaborative learning among L2 students found that participation in group activities was associated with higher post-test performance. Collaborative writing tasks enable students to recognize and benefit from the strengths of their peers, fostering mutual respect and interdependence. Such activities, grounded in connection, respect, and cooperation, not only reduce language learning anxiety, but also promote empathy and a sense of empowerment among learners.

An additional group activity that cultivates empathy and respect among students involves eliciting their interpretations of artwork, images, or literary texts. Specifically, within small groups, students are presented with a thought-provoking visual stimulus and tasked with either constructing a narrative around the image or articulating its significance from their individual perspectives. The diversity of interpretations generated in response to the same stimulus fosters dynamic interactions within the group, which may subsequently be shared in a broader classroom discussion. Such processes align with Phillips' (2020) concept of empathic capacity, defined as the recognition of shared humanity and the experience of others' emotions through a "vicarious emotional response" (p. 89). Consequently, by engaging in dialogue about their varied interpretations, students are invited to explore and appreciate differing viewpoints. These exchanges provide valuable insight into the lived experiences and emotional states of their peers, thereby promoting the development of empathy and establishing a supportive environment conducive to effective language learning.

## **Ways to Create Empathy and Trust in the Virtual Classroom**

### ***Embodied Learning***

As mentioned, Immordino-Yang (2011) notes that neuroscientific evidence links emotion, social processing, and self, suggesting that effective learning depends on harmony between the mind, body, and environment. In virtual classrooms, however, this harmony is harder to achieve, as students are physically “cut off” from peers and the learning space. This disconnect reduces opportunities for embodied learning, which Jusslin et al. (2022) define as fully utilizing bodily faculties to connect with the learning environment. Online lessons therefore limit engagement, weaken the mind–body–self connection, and restrict the social interaction needed for empathy. Students thus require intentional opportunities for embodied learning to foster connection and mitigate the isolating effects of virtual instruction.

Research also shows that reasoning itself is an embodied process, rooted in our sensorimotor systems (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). In this context, teacher movements, body language, and facial expressions are integral to the virtual learning experience, as the stimulation of students’ visual, auditory, and kinetic senses can enhance retention (Cesari et al., 2021; Jusslin et al., 2022; Shams & Seitz, 2008), foster positive affect (Lee et al., 2012), and build an empathic learning climate. To address the inherent limitations of online instruction, teachers should deliberately incorporate sensory elements that strengthen interaction, reduce anxiety, and create a more positive virtual learning environment.

One strategy for reducing anxiety in virtual classrooms, while acknowledging the significance of the body-mind connection, is to incorporate physical gestures in place of digital responses. For example, rather than clicking an icon to indicate agreement, students can be encouraged to use a physical thumbs-up gesture. Similarly, collective vocal responses such as

shouting “yay” or “nay” in unison can foster a greater sense of participation. These embodied actions promote a sense of camaraderie among students and help mitigate feelings of isolation and anxiety in the online learning environment.

Another effective approach to enhancing embodied, aural, and visual engagement in virtual settings is to use breakout rooms in platforms such as Zoom. Smaller group settings enable students to interact more personally with one another, and the teacher can have more meaningful conversations with students in her class, thereby fostering social connectedness and psychological safety. Additionally, the larger display of participants’ video feeds in breakout rooms, compared to the smaller images typical of the main session, supports visual and auditory learning by making social cues more accessible and interpersonal communication more effective.

A key factor in fostering a more embodied experience for students in virtual classrooms lies in the teacher’s communicative competence. The quality of teacher communication is central not only to student learning but also to cultivating an environment of empathy and social connection. As dramaturg Poblete (2021) notes, video conferencing environments inhibit the brain’s ability to detect many of the non-verbal cues that typically support face-to-face interactions. In light of this limitation, it becomes essential to enhance students’ visual and auditory engagement during online instruction. To this end, teachers should employ greater vocal modulation, varying pitch, tone, and rhythm to sustain students’ attention, particularly important given the increased susceptibility to distraction in home learning environments. Monotony, already detrimental in physical classrooms, is exacerbated in virtual contexts, where external distractions such as family members or pets are more immediate.

Although physical mobility is constrained in virtual settings, teachers can still incorporate gestures by intentionally bringing their hands into the camera frame to emphasize key points. Fresacher et al. (2016) advocate for discussing body language with students before lessons as a means of promoting active listening. They recommend gestures such as leaning forward, nodding, taking notes, or requesting clarification. These embodied responses support student engagement in virtual settings and, in doing so, contribute to a richer, more empathetic learning experience.

It is also widely observed that students in virtual classrooms often exhibit greater inhibition and are less inclined to participate freely compared to their engagement in physical classroom settings. Consequently, a critical component of embodied and empathic learning in online environments involves creating opportunities to foster interpersonal dynamics, an essential foundation for effective communication (Fresacher et al., 2016). Research highlights the value of “active constructive dialogue,” which entails attentive listening and the strategic use of follow-up questions to encourage elaboration and deepen understanding (Fresacher et al., 2016; Gable et al., 2004).

In virtual lessons specifically, active constructive dialogue can be cultivated through explicit teacher instruction. For instance, the teacher can structure student interactions by assigning turns in a sequence, e.g., “Student X shares first, followed by a response from Student Y,” or by inviting specific students, such as those in the top row of the Zoom interface, to respond to their peers. These practices help students internalize the expectation that their engagement may be solicited at any moment, reinforcing the sense that their presence and contributions are valued components of the learning process. Beyond enhancing communicative competence, active constructive dialogue fosters an empathic and inclusive classroom climate, both of which are essential for effective language acquisition in online settings.

### ***Using Media to Create Empathic Connections***

In addition to adopting a more embodied approach to teaching, cultivating trust and empathy in online learning environments also requires teachers to be visibly and meaningfully present across multiple digital platforms. Given the inherently disembodied nature of video conferencing tools such as Zoom, Themelis (2013) argues that teacher visibility and trust-building are essential for mitigating feelings of distance and alienation in virtual classrooms. Sime and Themelis (2020) further emphasize the importance of a teacher’s “visual identity” and the broader implications of their online presence for student engagement. That is, beyond participation in synchronous sessions, instructors must actively construct a digital identity that fosters a sense of community and connection.

To this end, teachers can utilize a range of online tools, such as social media, virtual learning environments (e.g., Moodle), blogs, and webpages, to facilitate ongoing interaction and connection among students and with the instructor. These efforts contribute to what Sime and Themelis (2020) refer to as a “tele-educator presence” (p. 70), enhancing the instructor’s capacity to support students empathically and effectively in online settings.

### ***Opening and Closing the Virtual Lesson***

Zhao and Li (2021) argue that “Love manifests itself through a caring environment, mutual rapport between the teacher and students, and classroom practices” (p. 1). Similarly, addressing students individually during virtual lessons is an effective way to build mutual rapport and trust with students and establish classroom practices that are effective for learning. In practice, at the beginning of an online lesson, teachers can greet each student, making sure to use their names. This communicates that the teacher has recognized each student's presence and has welcomed them to the session. Using students’ names when referring to comments made during class communicates praise and acknowledgment of their contributions, and encourages others to participate. According to Howells (2014), greeting students in this manner is a way to build gratitude practice that relates to (and improves) social interactions in the classroom. Additional strategies, such as taking attendance later in the session and requiring students to respond to their names, help sustain attentiveness and reinforce the value of each student’s presence. These seemingly minor practices collectively communicate to learners that their participation is both noticed and valued, key elements in fostering an empathic and effective online learning environment.

### **Praise and Empathic Assessment to Promote Positive Emotion and Learning in the Classroom and Online Lesson**

The effect of praise in creating an empathic learning environment cannot be underestimated (Cai et al., 2023; Cowie & Bell, 1999; Dinh & Pham, 2024; Robertson et al., 2015). The EFL lesson is no exception due to the anxiety that language learning can cause. Much of the anxiety felt among students results from their own feelings of insecurity, due to the inability to express themselves easily, as well as from the fear of judgment from their classmates for having shared a ‘wrong’ answer or for having used the new language inaccurately. The teacher’s response to students’ work and contributions, as well as the praise given, can alleviate students’ anxiety about using the new language incorrectly. In practice, when students contribute, instead of dismissing a wrong answer, teachers should find something positive in the answer given. For example, the teacher can show an understanding of the student’s reasoning and then gently focus the student’s thinking. The teacher can also thank the student for the wrong answer because it is an opportunity to teach something. Praising students’ contributions in this way encourages them to continue to participate in the lesson, rather than being afraid of making mistakes.

Empathic assessment and evaluation can be applied to written assignments as well. In their study, Zarinabadi and Rahimi (2022) argue that instructors should praise students’ efforts as opposed to focusing the praise on students’ intelligence. In other words, the teacher’s response to students’ writing can influence their willingness to apply themselves to future writing tasks – if students believe in their ability, they are more likely to try. Zarinabadi and Rahimi (2022) suggest that instructors praise their L2 students as a way to increase their class participation and reduce their anxiety. However, they stress that rather than focus the praise on the student’s intelligence, the teacher should acknowledge the students’ effort. By adopting these empathic actions, the teacher creates an atmosphere in which students feel safe, valued, and empowered to apply themselves further, rather than remain shy or inhibited.

The positive effect of praise on learning extends beyond the individual student to the collective classroom environment, fostering a sense of camaraderie among the students. This feeling of togetherness contributes to increased positive emotion in the classroom and in online lessons, and thereby enhances students’ receptivity to learning. One effective strategy to encourage students’ sense of belonging is to thank them all for sharing their personal experiences and ideas. In online lessons, the teacher could highlight noteworthy responses in the chat or on a shared digital

whiteboard and include the student's name in brackets. The recognition affirms the student's contribution, thereby encouraging others to participate as well. Finally, praising the class as a group also creates a sense of unity and belonging. If the class is particularly conscientious, tell them that they are an excellent group of students to heighten their feelings of belonging and pride in their work.

## Conclusion

To sum up, this article discusses the importance of creating an empathic learning environment to alleviate feelings of anxiety caused by learning a foreign language. Teachers in the EFL classroom and online lessons can create a comfortable classroom setting to facilitate effective language learning by developing a sympathetic connection with their students and by fostering connections among the students. By practicing mindful behavior that encourages empathy in the classroom and virtual setting, the EFL learning environment becomes a welcoming place in which students can participate, learn, and contribute to the lesson with confidence, ease, and satisfaction.

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