

Empathy through reflection: Exploring the Impact of reflective practices on Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers' empathy development

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Abstract: This study investigates the role of self-reflection in enhancing empathy among Vietnamese tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. Adopting a narrative inquiry approach, the research explores the experiences and perceptions of nine EFL teachers from various career stages in two Vietnamese institutions. The theoretical framework is grounded in the theory of reflective practice and transformative learning theories, offering a comprehensive lens to examine the interplay between reflective practices and empathy development in teaching. Through semi-structured interviews, the study uncovers several key themes: enhanced empathetic understanding through reflective practice, the facilitation of cross-cultural sensitivity, the intersection of self-reflection and empathy in pedagogical evolution, the enhancement of emotional intelligence, and the bridging of cultural and emotional gaps through reflective empathy. These findings suggest that reflective practices are instrumental in developing a deeper sense of empathy, which positively impacts teaching approaches, cultural awareness, and emotional intelligence.

Keywords: *empathy development, empathy, reflection, Vietnamese tertiary teachers*



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INTRODUCTION

Empathy, often regarded as the cornerstone of effective teaching and learning environments, plays a pivotal role in the educational domain. It extends beyond the mere understanding of students' emotions, encompassing a teacher's ability to resonate with and adapt to the diverse emotional and cultural landscapes of their learners (Kianinezhad, 2023). This study delves into the realm of empathy within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in Vietnam, a setting characterized by unique socio-cultural and educational dynamics.

Vietnam's EFL teachers operate in an environment where cultural nuances, language barriers, and linguistic challenges, which are not always explicitly addressed in mainstream educational research, converge (Phan, 2018). In such a setting, the cultivation of empathy is not just beneficial, but essential for bridging the gaps between teachers and learners from varied backgrounds. This study aims to explore how self-reflection, a critical and introspective practice (Virtue, 2021), serves as a tool for enhancing empathy among Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers.

Self-reflection, in this context, is defined as the process by which individuals examine their own teaching practices, beliefs, and interactions with students, thereby gaining insights

into their professional and personal growths (Hollingsworth & Clarke, 2017; Pedrosa-de-Jesus *et al.*, 2017). It is posited that through reflective practices, teachers can develop a deeper understanding of their students' perspectives, challenges, and cultural backgrounds, leading to more empathetic and effective teaching approaches (Kirpalani, 2017).

The research question guiding this inquiry is: "How do self-reflections contribute to enhancing empathy among Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers?" This question seeks to unravel the narratives of these educators as they are engaged in reflective practices and how these practices influence their perceptions and applications of empathy in their teaching.

This study adopts a narrative inquiry methodology, centering on the personal experiences and stories of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers. Narrative inquiry, with its emphasis on storytelling and personal experiences, provides a rich and nuanced understanding of how teachers perceive and integrate empathy into their professional lives. Through this approach, the study aims to offer insights into the transformative power of self-reflection in fostering empathy, thus contributing to the broader discourse on teacher development and emotional intelligence in education. In exploring these narratives, the study also addresses the broader implications of empathy in EFL teaching. It specifically illuminates the under-represented topic of linguistic challenges within the language teaching fields, emphasizing how empathy can be a crucial element in overcoming these inherent challenges in language education. It examines how empathetic teaching practices can enhance student engagement, learning outcomes, and cross-cultural understanding in the Vietnamese tertiary EFL context. This investigation, therefore, not only contributes to the field of teacher education but also provides practical implications for EFL teaching practices in culturally diverse settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empathy in Education

Empathy, in the educational context, has been increasingly recognized as a crucial component for effective teaching and learning. Jaber (2021) highlighted that empathy in teaching goes beyond cognitive understanding; it involves emotional engagement with students. Rogers (1975, 2007) earlier emphasized the importance of empathy in creating a conducive learning environment, where students feel valued and understood. This sentiment is echoed in recent studies (Arnold, 2005; Warren, 2018), which argue that empathetic teachers are better equipped to create meaningful connections with students, thereby enhancing learning outcomes.

Empathy in Language Teaching

Specific to language teaching, empathy assumes a unique dimension. Lucas and Villegas (2013) posited that language teachers need to be empathetic towards the linguistic challenges faced by learners, especially in EFL con-

texts. Daniel (2015) extended this view by suggesting that language teachers need to be culturally empathetic, given the diverse backgrounds of the EFL learners. This perspective is particularly relevant in the Vietnamese context, where cultural diversity is a significant aspect of the classroom environment (Truong & Tran, 2014).

Self-Reflection in Teacher Development

Self-reflection has been identified as a key component in teacher professional development. Dewey (1933) was among the first to advocate for reflective thinking as a means for educators to evaluate and improve their teaching practices. Schön (1983, 1987, 2017) later expanded on this idea, introducing the concept of the reflective practitioner, who continually assesses and adapts their teaching methods. More recently, Farrell (2013, 2015) has emphasized the role of reflective practice in language teacher education, arguing that it allows teachers to critically examine their pedagogical choices and classroom interactions.

Linking Self-Reflection to Empathy

The connection between self-reflection and the development of empathy in teachers has been explored, albeit not extensively. Mezirow (1991) suggested that transformative learning, which often occurs through critical reflection, can lead to greater empathy as teachers reassess their assumptions and perspectives. For language teachers, this transformation can be crucial in understanding and addressing the linguistic and cultural needs of their students (Borg, 2011). In the Vietnamese context, where cultural and educational reforms are on-going, this connection between self-reflection and empathy becomes even more significant (Tuan, 2021).

Empathy in the Vietnamese EFL Context

Research on empathy in the Vietnamese EFL context is still emerging. Chau and Truong (2019) highlighted the challenges faced by Vietnamese EFL teachers in understanding the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students. Tran and Nguyen (2021) further explored how these challenges impact teaching methods and student engagement. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding how Vietnamese EFL teachers develop and utilize empathy, particularly through self-reflection.

While the importance of empathy in education and the role of self-reflection in teacher development are well-established, there is a paucity of research exploring the intersection of these two areas, especially in the context of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how self-reflection practices among these teachers contribute to the development of empathy, thereby offering new insights into teacher professional development and empathetic teaching practices in a culturally diverse and evolving educational landscape.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a narrative inquiry approach, aligning with the constructivist paradigm, which posits that reality is socially constructed through individual experiences and interactions. Narrative inquiry, as conceptualized by Clandinin (2022) and Wells (2011), is particularly suited for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of personal stories and experiences, offering rich, contextual insights into the phenomena being investigated. By focusing on the narratives of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers, this study aims to understand how their reflective practices influence their perceptions and application of empathy in the classroom.

The theoretical foundations of this study are deeply anchored in Dewey's (1933) theory of reflective practice and Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory, both of which are instrumental in understanding the dynamics of self-reflection and empathy in teaching. Dewey's (1933) theory of reflective practice is pivotal in this context. It posits that teachers, through deliberate and critical examination of their experiences, can achieve profound insights into their pedagogical practices. This reflective practice is not merely a passive recollection of past events but an active, contemplative process that enables educators to evaluate and refine their teaching strategies and approaches. Dewey's (1933) perspective underscores the importance of reflective thinking as a tool for continuous professional development and informed decision-making in educational settings.

Complementing Dewey's (1933) concept is Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory, which adds a deeper layer to the understanding of the impact of reflection. Mezirow (1991) argues that critical reflection can catalyze significant changes in how individuals perceive themselves and their world. In the context of teaching, this theory suggests that, when educators are engaged in critical self-reflection, they are not only reassessing their teaching methods but also challenging their underlying assumptions and beliefs. This process can lead to transformative shifts in their viewpoints, particularly regarding empathy. By critically reflecting on their interactions and experiences with students, teachers can develop a more profound empathy, enhancing their ability to connect with and understand their students' diverse perspectives and needs. Together, Dewey's (1933) and Mezirow's (1991) theories provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for this study, elucidating how self-reflection can foster a deeper, more empathetic approach to teaching, particularly in the complex and culturally diverse field of Vietnamese tertiary EFL education.

Participants

The participants of this study comprise a purposively selected group of nine Vietnamese EFL teachers, representing a cross-section of professional experience within two distinct tertiary education institutions in Vietnam. This diverse cohort includes three novice teachers, who have embarked on

their teaching careers within the last three years, offering fresh perspectives and recent experiences of transitioning into the educational sector. Another three participants are mid-career teachers, who have been teaching for between four and ten years. This group provides insights into the evolving challenges and adaptations experienced by educators as they advance in their careers. The final three participants are near-the-end of their teaching careers, with over a decade of experience. Their long-standing involvement in the field offers a depth of understanding and reflection on changes over time in teaching methodologies, student dynamics, and the educational system in Vietnam. The selection of participants from two different institutions aims to ensure a broader representation of the Vietnamese tertiary EFL teaching contexts. This diversity aids in capturing varied institutional cultures, teaching approaches, and student demographics, thereby enriching the study's findings.

Addressing ethical issues is a cornerstone of this study. Prior to participation, all teachers were provided with detailed information about the study's objectives, the nature of their involvement, and the confidentiality measures in place to safeguard their identity and personal information. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring their understanding of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any adverse consequences. To maintain confidentiality, all identifying information was removed or anonymized in the research data and subsequent publications. The ethical considerations in this study are not only a legal and professional obligation but also a reflection of the respect and value accorded to each participant's experiences and contributions to this study.

Data Collection

The primary method of the data collection in this study involved conducting semi-structured interviews with the selected Vietnamese EFL teachers. To ensure the effectiveness and relevance of the interview questions, a pilot study was initially conducted. This preliminary phase involved interviewing two EFL teachers who did not form part of the main study. The feedback and insights gained from this pilot study were instrumental in refining the interview questions, ensuring they were comprehensively aligned with the research objectives while remaining open-ended enough to elicit detailed, personal narratives.

After revisions, the interview questions were designed to explore various facets of the participants' experiences and perceptions. Some of the key questions included: "Can you describe a situation where you felt your empathy significantly impacted your teaching?" and "How do you think reflective practices have influenced your understanding of your students?" These questions aim to delve into the experiences of the teachers in developing empathy through reflective practices and the impact of such development on their teaching.

The interviews were planned to last approximately 60 to 90 minutes each, allowing enough time for in-depth discussions. They were conducted in environments where the participants would feel most comfortable; this could be their offices, a quiet area within their institutions, or any other agreed-upon location that ensured privacy and minimized distractions.

Considering the cultural and linguistic contexts of the participants, all interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. This choice was crucial to ensure that participants could express themselves freely and comfortably, thereby enhancing the authenticity and depth of the responses. Additionally, it acknowledged and respected the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the participants, which was integral to the research's ethos of the study.

For participants who were not proficient in Vietnamese or preferred to communicate in another language, arrangements were made to accommodate their needs. This included the use of interpreters or conducting interviews in a language in which the participant was fluent. The inclusion of such provisions was essential to ensure that all participants had equal opportunities to contribute meaningfully to the study, irrespective of their language preferences or abilities. This approach did not only enrich the data collected but also was aligned with the inclusive and empathetic spirit of the study.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data collected from the semi-structured interviews with the Vietnamese EFL teachers was conducted using thematic analysis, a method that allows for the identification, analysis, and reporting of themes within data. This approach is particularly suited for narrative inquiry as it facilitates the extraction of rich and detailed insights from qualitative data. In line with Braun *et al.*'s (2023) guidelines for thematic analysis, the process began with a meticulous reading of the interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the depth and breadth of the contents.

Following this initial familiarization phase, the process of generating initial codes was done. This involved systematically coding interesting features of the data across the entire dataset, noting patterns and ideas that emerged. Coding was conducted manually to ensure a close engagement with the data, which was crucial for an in-depth understanding of the participants' narratives and experiences. Once coding was completed, the next step involved searching for themes. This required collating codes into potential themes and gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. This stage was iterative and dynamic, involving a constant movement back and forth between the dataset, the coded extracts, and the developing themes. It was during this phase that the overarching themes, which were central to the participants' experiences and perceptions of empathy and reflective practice, started to emerge.

The subsequent phase entailed reviewing and refining these themes. This involved checking the themes against the dataset to determine if they formed a coherent pattern and told a convincing story about the data.

Themes could be split, combined, or discarded during this phase to ensure that they accurately reflected the data. Finally, the analysis culminated in defining and naming the themes. This involved developing a detailed analysis of each theme, identifying the essence of what each theme captured about the data, and determining what aspect of the research question it related to. The findings were then written up, with compelling extract examples from the dataset, providing a narrative that wove together the analytic narratives and data extracts.

This thematic analysis approach was expected to allow for a nuanced understanding of how Vietnamese EFL teachers perceive and utilize empathy in their teaching, as well as how reflective practices influence this process. The findings, then, are expected to provide valuable insights into the complex interplay between self-reflection, empathy, and teaching practices in the context of the Vietnamese tertiary education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Enhanced Empathetic Understanding through Reflective Practice

One of the prominent themes that emerged from the data was the enhanced empathetic understanding achieved through reflective practice. This theme was highlighted by all the nine participants, encompassing the three novice teachers, three mid-career teachers, and three near-end teachers, indicating its significance across different stages of teaching careers.

A novice teacher shared an insightful excerpt, *“In my first year of teaching, I struggled to connect with my students. However, through reflecting on my daily interactions, particularly their use of language and expressions in class, I realized I was not fully understanding their challenges. This reflection led me to adjust my approach, becoming more patient and attentive to their needs.”* This experience is aligned with the theory of reflective practice, which suggests that critical reflection on experiences can lead to better-informed decisions in teaching. It also resonates with the transformative learning theory, as the teacher’s reflection led to a transformation in her understanding of her students, fostering deeper empathy.

From a mid-career teacher’s perspective, the reflection-empathy connection was equally evident. *“After several years of teaching, I thought I knew it all. But through reflective practices, especially peer discussions, I began to see my students’ perspectives differently, which made me more empathetic towards their struggles with language learning. I became more aware of the nuances in their language use and the underlying linguistic barriers they faced.”* This narrative demonstrates the concept of reflective practice which is an on-going process, essential for continuous professional growth. Moreover, it illustrates the transformative learning theory, where transformative learning through reflection can lead to a shift in perspectives, in this case, leading to a more empathetic approach towards students’ learning difficulties.

A near-end teacher reflected, “*Over my teaching career, I have seen many changes in students’ behaviors and expectations. Regular self-reflection has helped me not just adapt to these changes but also develop a deeper sense of empathy for my students. In particular, reflecting on the language and communication barriers my students encounter has enabled me to tailor my instructional methods to better meet their linguistic needs.*” This statement encapsulates the essence of reflective practice, emphasizing its role in adapting to evolving teaching contexts. It also supports the transformative learning theory, suggesting that long-term engagement in reflective practice can lead to profound, transformative changes in a teacher’s approach, particularly in developing empathy.

On the one hand, reflective practice theory posits that teachers, through reflective practice, can critically evaluate their own teaching methods and interactions with students. Reflective practice is not a one-time event but a continuous process that contributes to professional growth and better teaching practices. The experiences shared by the novice and mid-career teachers illustrate how reflecting on their daily interactions and peer discussions helped them recognize and address the challenges faced by their students. This acknowledgment leads to a transformation in their teaching approach, highlighting the dynamic nature of reflective practice. Transformative learning theory, on the other hand, focuses on the process of change in individuals through critical reflection. It suggests that when teachers reflect on their experiences, they may undergo a transformative learning process, leading to a shift in their understanding, perspective, and approach. In the cases of the novice and the mid-career teachers, their reflections lead to a transformation in their understanding of students’ challenges, fostering deeper empathy and more effective teaching strategies. For the near-end teacher, the long-term engagement in reflective practice does not only help in adapting to changing students’ behaviors and expectations but also in developing a more empathetic understanding of students.

Reflective Practice Facilitating Cross-Cultural Sensitivity

A significant finding of this study is the role of reflective practice in facilitating cross-cultural sensitivity among Vietnamese EFL teachers. This theme was noted by seven of the participants, including two novice teachers, all three mid-career teachers, and two near-end teachers, illustrating its relevance across different career stages.

A novice teacher described her experience, “*Initially, I overlooked the cultural differences in my classroom. But through reflection, especially after a challenging incident with a student from a different cultural background, I became more aware of these nuances, including the linguistic challenges that accompany these cultural differences. This awareness has made me more sensitive and adaptable to diverse cultural needs.*” This narrative is aligned with the theory of reflective practice, highlighting how critical self-examination

leads to improved teaching strategies that are more culturally responsive. It also echoes the transformative learning theory, where the teacher's reflection on a specific incident led to a transformation in her cultural awareness and sensitivity.

A mid-career teacher shared, *“Over time, I have encountered students from various cultural backgrounds. Reflecting on my interactions with them has been eye-opening. I have noticed how language both influences and reflects cultural identities, which has made me rethink of my approach to language teaching. I have learned to not only acknowledge but also embrace cultural differences, which has greatly enhanced my teaching effectiveness.”* This insight exemplifies the concept of reflective practice as a tool for continuous learning and adaptation. Furthermore, it demonstrates the transformative learning theory, as the teacher experiences a shift in perspectives, leading to a more inclusive and empathetic approach to teaching in a culturally diverse environment.

From a near-end teacher's viewpoint, *“Years of teaching have shown me the importance of being culturally attuned. Regular reflection on my teaching experiences including how language barriers affect student interaction and learning, has helped me better understand and connect with students from different cultures.”* This experience reflects the role of reflective practice in adapting to changing educational contexts. It is also aligned with the transformative learning theory, suggesting that sustained reflective practice over a career can lead to profound changes in how teachers perceive and interact with culturally diverse student populations.

The novice teacher's experience highlights the role of reflective practice in becoming aware of and sensitive to cultural differences in the classroom. By reflecting on a specific challenging incident, the teacher gained insights into the importance of understanding and respecting cultural nuances. This process of critical self-examination, a core aspect of the reflective practice, leads to the development of more culturally responsive teaching strategies. Similarly, the mid-career teacher's experience of learning to embrace cultural differences through reflection underscores the continuous nature of learning and adaptation in teaching. Reflective practice in this context serves as a tool for educators to evaluate and enhance their approach to culturally diverse classrooms, ensuring that their teaching methods are inclusive and effective. The transformative learning theory is evident in the way these teachers' reflections lead to a fundamental change in their understanding and approach to cultural diversity. For the novice teacher, reflecting on a particular incident was a transformative experience, altering her awareness and sensitivity towards cultural differences. The mid-career teacher's shift in perspectives, from merely acknowledging to actively embracing cultural diversity, demonstrates how transformative learning can lead to a more inclusive and empathetic teaching approach. For the near-end teacher, sustained engagement in reflective practice throughout their career has facilitated a

deep understanding and connection with students from various cultural backgrounds, indicating that transformative learning can have a long-term impact on a teacher's ability to effectively interact with a culturally diverse student population.

Intersection of Self-Reflection and Empathy in Pedagogical Evolution

An insightful finding from the study is the intersection of self-reflection and empathy in the evolution of pedagogical approaches among Vietnamese EFL teachers. This theme emerged consistently across the interviews, highlighted by all participant groups – the three novice teachers, three mid-career teachers, and three near-end teachers, illustrating its universal relevance.

A novice teacher described, *“Initially, my focus was more on content delivery than understanding student needs. Through reflective practice, I began to empathize more with my students’ language learning challenges, specifically their struggles with English vocabulary and grammar, leading me to adopt more flexible and student-centered teaching methods that cater to their linguistic needs.”* This change in the teaching approach, influenced by enhanced empathy through reflection, is aligned with the theory of reflective practice. It also resonates with the transformative learning theory, where the teacher's reflective process leads to a transformation in her understanding of students' needs, fostering deeper empathy.

From a mid-career teacher's perspective, *“My reflection on classroom interactions made me realize that being an effective teacher is not just about expertise in the subject matter; it is about understanding and empathizing with students. Particularly, I saw how my assumptions about their language proficiency impacted my teaching. This realization has transformed my approach to be more empathetic and engaging, paying closer attention to language barriers and adjusting my communication accordingly.”* This narrative demonstrates the concept of reflective practice as an on-going, evolving process, essential for continuous professional growth. It also embodies the transformative learning theory, where, through reflection, there is a paradigm shift in the teacher's perception of their role, emphasizing empathy in their teaching methods.

A near-end teacher shared, *“Over the years, reflective practice has not only sharpened my teaching skills but also deepened my empathy for students. Reflecting on how students’ language backgrounds affect their learning has been particularly enlightening. This dual growth has been crucial in adapting my teaching to better suit the diverse needs of my students, especially in tailoring language instruction to be more inclusive and accessible.”* This statement encapsulates the role of reflective practice in enhancing teaching methods. It also supports the transformative learning theory, suggesting that long-term engagement in reflective practice can lead to profound changes in a teacher's approach, especially in developing empathy towards students.

The novice teacher's journey from focusing primarily on content delivery to understanding and addressing student needs illustrates the power of

reflective practice in teaching. This reflective process enabled the teacher to empathize with students' learning challenges and adapt their teaching methods accordingly. The mid-career teacher's realization, brought about by reflecting on classroom interactions, that effective teaching goes beyond subject matter expertise to understanding and empathizing with students, further underscores the significance of reflective practice. It highlights how on-going self-reflection helps teachers evolve and become more student-centered in their approach. Besides, the experiences of these teachers demonstrate how reflective practice can trigger transformative learning. For the novice teacher, reflection leads to a transformation in understanding students' needs, fostering deeper empathy. The mid-career teacher experienced a paradigm shift in their perception of the teacher's role, placing greater emphasis on empathy and engagement in their teaching methods. The near-end teacher's statement reflects how long-term reflective practice enhances both teaching skills and empathy for students. This dual growth is vital for adapting teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of students. The transformative learning theory, in this context, suggests that through reflection, teachers can fundamentally change their approach to be more empathetic and responsive to student needs.

Reflective Practice Enhancing Emotional Intelligence in Teaching

A novice teacher reflected, *"Starting out, I was primarily focused on linguistic aspects of teaching. However, through reflective practice, I began to see how my communication style and language choices affected the emotional climate of the classroom. I have become more attuned to the emotional dynamics of my classroom. This awareness has helped me respond more empathetically to my students' needs."* This growth in emotional intelligence, facilitated by reflective practice, is in line with the theory of reflective practice, which advocates for a critical examination of experiences for professional improvement. It also is aligned with the transformative learning theory, where the process of reflection leads to a transformation in the teacher's emotional understanding and responsiveness.

A mid-career teacher expressed, *"Over the years, reflecting on my classroom experiences has helped me better understand and manage not just my emotions but also those of my students. This reflection often involves the language barriers they face, which can affect their emotional responses in class. This emotional insight has made my teaching more empathetic and effective."* This experience illustrates the dynamic nature of reflective practice, where continuous self-assessment leads to emotional growth. Additionally, it exemplifies the transformative learning theory, as the teacher experiences a paradigm shift in emotional intelligence, enhancing their empathetic engagement with students.

From the perspective of a near-end teacher, *"Through years of reflective practice, I have learned the importance of being emotionally present and sen-*

sitive in my teaching. I have also recognized the crucial role language plays in shaping these emotions, especially for EFL students grappling with a second language. This has not only improved my relationship with students but also made me a more empathetic educator.” This progression underscores reflective practice as a means for on-going professional and personal development. It also resonates with the transformative learning theory, suggesting that sustained reflective practice can lead to significant changes in a teacher’s emotional intelligence.

The novice teacher’s shift from a linguistic focus to being attuned to the emotional dynamics of the classroom exemplifies the impact of reflective practice on developing emotional intelligence. This process of reflection allows teachers to become more aware of and responsive to the emotional needs of their students. Similarly, the mid-career teacher’s reflections on classroom experiences lead to a better understanding and management of both personal and students’ emotions, illustrating how continuous self-assessment through reflective practice contributes to emotional growth in teachers. These experiences show that reflective practice is not just about improving teaching strategies but also about developing a deeper understanding of the emotional aspects of teaching and learning. The transformative learning theory is evident in how these teachers’ reflective processes lead to a transformation in their emotional understanding and responsiveness. For the novice teacher, reflection facilitated a growth in emotional intelligence, enhancing their ability to respond empathetically to students’ needs. The mid-career teacher experienced a shift in emotional intelligence, which improved their empathetic engagement with students. For the near-end teacher, years of reflective practice have underscored the importance of emotional presence and sensitivity in teaching, indicating that sustained reflection can profoundly influence a teacher’s emotional intelligence. This transformation goes beyond professional development to include personal growth, leading to a more empathetic and effective teaching approach.

Bridging Cultural and Emotional Gaps through Reflective Empathy

Another significant finding from the study is the role of reflective practice in bridging cultural and emotional gaps between Vietnamese EFL teachers and their students. This theme is echoed by all the three groups of teachers --novices, mid-career, and near-end-- highlighting its universal applicability across different stages of teaching careers.

One novice teacher shared, *“Reflective practice helped me realize how my cultural assumptions were affecting my teaching. By empathizing with my students’ cultural backgrounds, and understanding their language use within these cultural contexts, I have been able to create a more inclusive and understanding classroom environment that respects both their cultural and linguistic identities.”* This insight demonstrates how reflective practice enables teachers to critically examine and adapt their cultural perceptions. It is also aligned with

the transformative learning theory, as the teacher's reflective journey leads to a deeper empathy for students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

A mid-career teacher described, *"Through reflection, I have learned to navigate the emotional and cultural complexities of my classroom better. This includes recognizing the role language plays in expressing cultural identity and emotional states. I am now more adept at understanding and addressing the varied emotional needs of my students, which has been crucial in building stronger teacher-student relationships."* This narrative reflects the concept of reflective practice as a continuous, evolving process that enhances understanding and adaptability. Moreover, it exemplifies the transformative learning theory, where the teacher's shift in perspectives, facilitated by reflection, results in a more empathetic and culturally sensitive approach to teaching.

Finally, a near-end teacher commented, *"Years of reflective practice have been instrumental in developing my ability to empathize with students from different cultural and emotional backgrounds. I have grown particularly sensitive to how their language barriers can further complicate their emotional experiences. This empathy has been key to my success as an educator in a diverse educational setting."* This progression underscores the role of reflective practice in facilitating long-term professional growth. It also resonates with the transformative learning theory, indicating that on-going reflective practice can lead to profound transformations in a teacher's ability to empathize with a diverse student population.

The novice teacher's experience of realizing the impact of their own cultural assumptions through reflective practice highlights the significance of self-awareness in teaching. By critically examining and adapting their cultural perceptions, teachers can create more inclusive and understanding classroom environments. This process is crucial for acknowledging and valuing the diverse cultural backgrounds of students. Similarly, the mid-career teacher's reflection leading to improved navigation of the emotional and cultural complexities of their classroom demonstrates the dynamic and evolving nature of reflective practice. It shows how on-going self-reflection enhances a teacher's ability to understand and address the varied emotional and cultural needs of their students, thereby strengthening teacher-student relationships. Additionally, these teachers' stories illustrate how reflective practice can trigger transformative learning, leading to a change in how teachers perceive and interact with students from diverse backgrounds. The novice teacher's journey towards empathy for students' cultural backgrounds, fostered by reflective practice, embodies a transformative learning experience. The mid-career teacher's shift to a more empathetic and culturally sensitive teaching approach, facilitated by reflection, is another example of transformative learning in action. For the near-end teacher, sustained reflective practice over the years has been instrumental in developing the ability to empathize with students from different cultural and emotional backgrounds. This long-term engagement in reflection indicates that trans-

formative learning can lead to significant changes in a teacher's approach, especially in their capacity to empathize and effectively educate in a diverse setting.

Discussion

The findings of this study on Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions of empathy and its development through reflective practice contribute significantly to the existing body of literature in several ways. The theme of enhanced empathetic understanding through reflective practice resonates with existing research, such as Aldrup *et al.*'s (2022) work, which highlights empathy as a crucial aspect of effective teaching. However, this study extends the understanding by demonstrating how empathy evolves across different career stages in teaching. The insights from the novice, mid-career, and near-end teachers reveal a continuous, reflective journey leading to empathetic growth, aligning with Dewey's (1933) theory of reflective practice. Unlike previous studies that often focus on empathy as a static trait (Cowan *et al.*, 2014), this study provides a dynamic view of empathy evolving through on-going reflective practices, a perspective strongly supported by Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory.

The study's findings on reflective practice facilitating cross-cultural sensitivity among EFL teachers are aligned with existing literature emphasizing the importance of cultural competence in teaching (Lindahl, 2019). However, the current study contributes uniquely by illustrating how reflective practices specifically lead to an increase in cultural sensitivity, particularly through the lens of language use and communication. While previous studies have examined the role of empathy in pedagogical approaches (Mercer *et al.*, 2019), this study's focus on the intersection of self-reflection and empathy adds a new dimension. It demonstrates that not only does empathy influence teaching methods, but also that this influence is mediated and enhanced through reflective practice, particularly in the context of language and literature instruction.

The finding on reflective practice enhancing emotional intelligence contributes a new perspective to the discourse on emotional intelligence in education (Goroshit & Hen, 2016). This includes examining how language expressions and understanding affect emotional dynamics in the classroom, which, in turn, influences teachers' emotional intelligence. While previous research has acknowledged the importance of emotional intelligence in teaching (Hen & Sharabi-Nov, 2014; Kaur *et al.*, 2019), this study provides empirical evidence of how reflective practice specifically fosters this attribute. It highlights a developmental trajectory where teachers become more emotionally attuned and responsive over time through reflection, a facet less explored in existing literature. The theme of bridging cultural and emotional gaps through reflective empathy is particularly salient, demonstrating how teachers apply these concepts within the context of teaching English as a

foreign language. While studies have separately addressed the challenges of cultural diversity (Szelei *et al.*, 2020) and emotional barriers in teaching (Wyness & Lang, 2016), this study uniquely integrates these aspects. It shows how reflective practice serves as a bridge, enhancing teachers' ability to empathize across cultural and emotional divides, facilitated by their deeper understanding of linguistic nuances and the role of language in cultural identities.

Remarkably, the progression from awareness to active adaptation and inclusion of diverse cultural needs, the impact of teachers' self-awareness and reflective capacities on their empathetic engagement with students, and the role of reflective practice in teachers' personal and professional growth as well as inclusive and empathetic educational environment are novel aspects that highlight the practical implications of Dewey's (1933) and Mezirow's (1991) theories in a multicultural teaching context. This study enriches the discourse on the intersection of language, literature, and teaching, underscoring the importance of linguistic and cultural awareness in shaping empathetic and effective teaching practices.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the impact of self-reflections on enhancing empathy among Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers, a pertinent area in an increasingly interconnected and culturally diverse educational landscape. Through a narrative inquiry approach, the research delved into the experiences and perceptions of nine Vietnamese EFL teachers at different stages of their careers, utilizing semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. The theoretical framework was anchored in the theory of reflective practice and the transformative learning theory, which provided a lens for interpreting the teachers' narratives and understanding the interplay between reflective practice and empathy development. The findings revealed several key themes: enhanced empathetic understanding through reflective practice, reflective practice facilitating cross-cultural sensitivity, the intersection of self-reflection and empathy in pedagogical evolution, reflective practice enhancing emotional intelligence in teaching, and bridging cultural and emotional gaps through reflective empathy. These themes collectively underscored the transformative power of reflective practice in fostering empathy across various dimensions of teaching, from pedagogical approaches to cultural and emotional intelligence.

Based on these findings, the study has several implications for the field of teacher education and professional development. First, it highlights the necessity of integrating reflective practices into teacher training programs, emphasizing that reflection is not just a tool for professional growth but also for developing empathy, a critical component in effective teaching. This is aligned with the growing recognition of empathy as an essential skill in education, particularly in linguistically and culturally diverse settings. Sec-

ond, the study suggests that teacher education programs should explicitly address the development of cultural and emotional intelligence, recognizing that these competencies are as vital as pedagogical skills. This is particularly true in language teaching, where understanding the nuances of a foreign language can deeply influence how cultural and emotional contents are conveyed and perceived. As demonstrated by the findings, reflective practices can be instrumental in enhancing teachers' awareness and responsiveness to the diverse cultural and emotional needs of students, leading to more inclusive and effective teaching. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of encouraging on-going reflective practices throughout a teacher's career. As shown in the findings, teachers at different career stages experience continuous growth in empathy through reflection, indicating that professional development should be a lifelong process.

In conclusion, this study contributes valuable insights into the role of reflective practices in enhancing empathy among Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers. It does not only deepen understanding of the relationship between self-reflection and empathy, but it also provides practical implications for teacher education and professional development. By emphasizing the importance of reflective practices, the study advocates for a more empathetic, culturally sensitive, and emotionally intelligent approach to teaching, essential in today's globalized and diverse educational contexts. Furthermore, by integrating language and literature--specific elements into the discussion of empathy, the study enriches the understanding of how language shapes cultural and emotional interactions in the classroom, thereby supporting a more nuanced and contextually relevant approach to teaching English as a foreign language.

This study, while offering valuable insights, has certain limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the scope of the research was confined to nine Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The experiences and perceptions of these teachers may not fully represent the diverse range of teaching contexts and individual differences found in the broader population of EFL teachers in Vietnam or other cultural settings. Additionally, the study relied solely on qualitative methods, specifically narrative inquiry through semi-structured interviews. While this approach provides depth and richness to the data, the absence of quantitative measures means that the findings are more subjective and cannot be easily quantified or generalized. Furthermore, the study's focus on self-reported reflections might have introduced biases, as participants might reflect on their experiences in a manner they perceive as socially desirable or professionally acceptable, rather than providing an unfiltered account of their practices and perceptions.

In light of these limitations, several recommendations for future research can be proposed. Future studies could expand the sample size and include EFL teachers from different regions of Vietnam, or even from different countries,

to increase the diversity and representativeness of the sample. This would allow for a broader understanding of how reflective practices and empathy development manifest in varied cultural and educational settings. Additionally, incorporating quantitative methods, such as surveys or observational data, could complement the qualitative findings and provide a more holistic view of the impact of reflective practices on empathy development. Further research could also explore the longitudinal effects of reflective practices on empathy, examining how these evolve over a longer period and potentially in response to specific interventions or professional development programs. Finally, investigating the perspectives of students regarding their teachers' empathy and reflective practices could provide a valuable counterpoint to the teachers' narratives, offering a more rounded understanding of the impact of these practices in the classroom.

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