RESEARCH ARTICLE

Empathy as a Pedagogical Competence: Cross-Cultural and Linguistic Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, empathy is increasingly recognized as a vital pedagogical competence that enhances teacher–student relationships, classroom inclusivity, and intercultural understanding. However, most existing research conceptualizes empathy as a universal skill, overlooking its cultural and linguistic variability. This article examines empathy as a culturally and linguistically situated pedagogical competence through a narrative review of recent interdisciplinary literature drawn from education, psychology, and applied linguistics. The analysis identifies three key dimensions: the professionalization of empathy as a teachable competence, the influence of cultural norms on empathic behavior, and the linguistic strategies through which empathy is communicated in educational contexts. Results highlight that empathy is not only emotional but also communicative and contextually mediated, suggesting that teacher education should integrate culturally responsive and language-aware empathy training. These findings contribute to the development of a more holistic framework of pedagogical empathy suited to globalized and multilingual learning environments.

Keywords: Empathy, Pedagogical competence, Cross-cultural education, Intercultural communication, Teacher professional development.

INTRODUCTION

Empathy is broadly understood as the capacity to grasp and resonate with another person's emotional or cognitive state, it allows teachers to form authentic connections with students, foster inclusion, and sustain emotionally safe learning environments (Demetriou, 2018). In today's classrooms—characterized by unprecedented cultural and linguistic diversity—empathy functions not merely as a personal trait but as a vital pedagogical skill that shapes communication, instructional design, and responsiveness to learner needs (Posokhova, Izotova, & Zemlyanykh, 2020).

As education becomes increasingly globalized, the notion of empathy must be reconsidered through cultural and linguistic perspectives. Cultural conventions deeply influence how empathy is demonstrated and interpreted; an expression of concern considered empathetic in one culture may be perceived as intrusive or distant in another (Wang, Zhang, & Zheng, 2023). Language, too, mediates empathetic interaction: choices in pronouns, tone, or politeness strategies can subtly convey care, solidarity, or authority in classroom discourse (Piller, 2017; Linguistic Empathy, 2023). Despite these insights, much of the existing scholarship on empathy remains Western-centric and primarily emotional in focus, often overlooking the complex linguistic and cultural dimensions that shape empathetic practice (García Ochoa & McDonald, 2020).

Existing evidence shows that empathetic teachers enhance students' motivation, social adjustment, and academic performance while reducing classroom conflict (Hanley, 2021). Yet, there are still notable gaps in understanding how empathy operates within multilingual and multicultural classrooms and how teacher education programs

can explicitly nurture this competence. Many studies emphasize affective attunement but rarely address the communicative and intercultural processes through which empathy is enacted (O'Grady, 2022). Consequently, the ways empathy is linguistically performed and culturally framed remain underexplored, limiting its practical application in diverse educational contexts.

This article aims to bridge these gaps by integrating insights from education, psychology, and applied linguistics to conceptualize empathy as a culturally and linguistically grounded pedagogical competence. Specifically, it seeks to examine how empathy is constructed, communicated, and developed across different cultural contexts and to propose an integrated framework that links emotional, communicative, and intercultural dimensions of teacher professionalism.

Accordingly, the study pursues three objectives:

To examine how empathy is conceptualized as a pedagogical competence in current educational discourse;

To investigate cultural and linguistic differences in how empathy is expressed and perceived; and

To outline implications for teacher education and intercultural pedagogy.

Based on these aims, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How is empathy conceptualized as a pedagogical competence across diverse cultural and linguistic contexts?

RQ2: What communicative and linguistic strategies do teachers employ to convey empathy in multicultural or multilingual classrooms?

RQ3: How can understanding the cultural-linguistic dimensions of empathy enhance teacher training and professional development?

Grounded in prior research that frames empathy as a dynamic and learnable skill shaped by context (Demetriou, 2018; Posokhova et al., 2020), this study hypothesizes that pedagogical empathy is a culturally and linguistically mediated competence that can be intentionally cultivated through

reflective and intercultural teacher education practices.

METHOD

Research Design

In order to conclude the research we have analyzed scholarly works in the fields of education, psychology, applied linguistics, and intercultural communication published in the period from 2006 to 2025. The works were chosen for an explicit and throughout discussion of Empathy as a base construct for the mentioned fields. The criteria for the works to be selected for the research work were the following: (1) works which were published from 2006 to 2025, (2) analyzing and addressing empathy in the context of education or communication, (3) were peer-reviewed and are accessible in English.

Data Collection Strategy

Data were collected through systematic searches of academic databases including Google Scholar, ERIC, SpringerOpen, MDPI, and OAPEN using the following keywords and Boolean combinations: "pedagogical empathy," "cross-cultural empathy," "teacher competence," "linguistic empathy," "intercultural communication." Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to refine results. A PRISMA-inspired flow ensured systematic screening and relevance verification.

The selected studies were organized and coded manually through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), identifying recurring definitions, strategies, and implications of empathy in education.

Data Analysis

Thematic synthesis was applied to integrate conceptual and empirical insights across studies. Codes were categorized into three themes aligned with the research questions:

(1) empathy as a culturally and linguistically mediated competence;

(2) communicative and linguistic strategies for expressing empathy; and

(3) implications for teacher education and professional development.

Reliability was strengthened by iterative coding and cross-checking thematic consistency.

RESULTS

1. Empathy as a Pedagogical Competence Across Cultural and Linguistic Contexts (RQ1)

Addressing Research Question 1, the analysis revealed that empathy is generally described as an individual's ability not only to deeply understand another person's feelings and show compassion, but also to adopt another's perspective—relating to their decisions, emotions, and opinions. The term was studied by prominent scholars such as S. Freud, T. Lipps, C. Rogers, V.V. Labunskaya, V.V. Boyko,T.P. Gavrilova, I.M. Yusupov, Yu.A. Mengeritsky and considering that empathy correlates to different scientific fields, creating various definitions and terms – it is not surprising that it has multiple meanings even within those research areas.

Across educational settings, empathy is conceptualized as a multidimensional competence encompassing affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions (Noddings, 2012; Mercer, 2016). It enables teachers to understand learners' perspectives and respond to their needs in culturally appropriate ways. However, empathy is not a universal construct—it is shaped by cultural norms, values, and communicative expectations (Hanley, 2021). For instance, research comparing collectivist and individualist cultures has revealed striking contrasts. People in collectivist societies such as Iran tend to exhibit higher levels of cognitive empathy—the ability to comprehend another's perspective—while individuals in Western societies such as the United States often demonstrate stronger emotional empathy, or the capacity to share another's feelings directly (Yaghoubi Jami, P., & Walker, D. I., 2022). This difference reflects broader cultural orientations: collectivist communities prioritize interdependence, social harmony, and indirect communication, whereas Western societies often encourage individual expression and direct emotional sharing.

Philosophical and religious traditions further shape these empathic orientations. Buddhism and Confucianism, influential across much of East Asia, promote self-discipline, self-criticism, and a communal sense of compassion, often resulting in a more context-sensitive expression of empathy. Conversely, Christian traditions in Western contexts emphasize open emotional expression and moral responsibility toward others (Barrett et al., 2021). These variations demonstrate that empathy is embedded within socio-cultural frameworks and expressed through culturally specific linguistic and communicative patterns.

In the context of pedagogy, this means that teachers' empathic practices are deeply influenced by their cultural backgrounds. For example, in collectivist cultures, empathy may manifest through relational awareness and implicit sensitivity to group dynamics, while in individualistic settings, it may appear as explicit emotional validation or personal encouragement. Understanding these distinctions is vital for developing culturally responsive pedagogical models that view empathy not as a fixed psychological trait but as a dynamic, culturally situated competence.

2. Communicative and Linguistic Strategies for Expressing Empathy in multicultural or multilingual classrooms (RQ2)

In classrooms where multiple languages and cultures meet, empathy is often communicated through the way teachers use language and interact with their students. Intercultural language teaching and learning, as described by Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), views language not only as a tool for communication but also as a way of making meaning and connecting with others. This perspective places culture at the center of language education. It reminds us that teaching is never just about grammar or vocabulary—it's also about understanding how people from different backgrounds express, interpret, and share experiences.

When teachers adopt this intercultural stance, they become more aware of how their language choices affect students' sense of belonging. Simple strategies, such as rephrasing an instruction,

slowing down speech, or using examples that reflect students' cultural experiences, can make learners feel understood and valued. In multilingual classrooms, teachers might switch briefly to a student's first language to clarify a concept or offer reassurance. These small adjustments show empathy not just emotionally but linguistically they signal care through accessibility and respect.

Importantly, this approach moves away from seeing languages as separate systems that should never mix. Students bring their whole linguistic and cultural identities into the classroom, and teachers who acknowledge this are better able to connect with them. By drawing on students' full repertoires, educators act as mediators who bridge differences and build mutual understanding.

In this sense, empathy in communication is less about "being nice" and more about being aware listening carefully, recognizing cultural nuances, and responding in ways that make learners feel seen and supported. Language becomes a bridge rather than a barrier, and empathy becomes something teachers do through everyday interaction, not just something they feel.

3. Implications for Teacher Training and Professional Development.

Developing empathy as a pedagogical competence requires more than simply understanding others' emotions it involves an awareness of how language and culture shape our perceptions of human experience. Teachers working in culturally and linguistically diverse settings must learn to recognize how communication patterns, expressions of care, and even silence are interpreted differently across communities. As Barrett et al. (2021) suggest, intercultural competence is not a single skill but a constellation of attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors that enable meaningful engagement across difference. When empathy is framed through this intercultural lens, teacher education becomes a space for both professional and personal growth.

Formal teacher training programs can play a key role in nurturing these capacities. Deardorff's (196) process model of intercultural competence emphasizes the cyclical development of attitudes

(such as openness and curiosity), knowledge (about cultures and communication), and skills (such as listening and interpreting meaning). Applied to pedagogy, this model implies that empathy training should move beyond theoretical discussions and involve experiential, reflective learning such as role plays, peer dialogues, and intercultural simulations. Teachers who reflect on their own biases and communicative habits are better equipped to respond to their students' emotional and cultural realities in authentic ways (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Furthermore, understanding empathy's linguistic dimensions can transform classroom interaction. In multilingual environments, empathy often manifests through language choices whether a teacher validates a student's home language, adapts speech for clarity, or uses culturally resonant metaphors. These micro-level communicative acts signal respect and inclusion. Research on intercultural teaching underscores the power of "empathic communication," which includes active listening, careful feedback, and the ability to interpret emotional tone across languages (Gkonou & Mercer, 2017). When teacher education programs explicitly train these communicative sensitivities, they help educators foster classroom environments where all learners feel seen and valued.

Finally, professional development initiatives should treat empathy not as a fixed trait, but as a reflective and adaptive practice. Workshops that integrate intercultural dialogue, reflective journaling, and mentoring can encourage teachers to continually refine their empathic understanding. Barrett et al. (2021) highlight that intercultural education depends on both structured and informal learning teachers develop empathy not only through courses but also through everyday interactions with colleagues, families, and students. Embedding this awareness into teacher training creates a more responsive, humane pedagogy one that equips educators to bridge differences and cultivate belonging in diverse learning communities.

DISCUSSION

The discussion of empathy as a pedagogical competence shows that it is not a single or fixed trait, but a complex and evolving skill shaped by both cultural and linguistic influences. Rather than existing only as an emotional response, empathy in education involves the ability to understand, interpret, and communicate across diverse experiences (Noddings, 2012; Mercer, 2016). Teachers use empathy to recognize how students think and feel, adapting their communication styles to suit cultural expectations and classroom dynamics. Studies have shown that these expressions of empathy can vary significantly between societies. For example, in collectivist cultures, such as Iran, empathy often takes the form of awareness and sensitivity to group harmony and indirect communication. In contrast, teachers in more individualistic settings, such as the United States, may express empathy through open emotion and personalized feedback (Yaghoubi Jami, P., & Walker, D. I., 2022). These differences highlight how empathy reflects broader social values—what it means to show care or respect is learned within a particular cultural context.

Language plays a crucial role in how empathy is expressed. As Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) note, language is more than a communication tool—it is a way of shaping meaning and relationships. In multilingual and multicultural classrooms, teachers communicate empathy through everyday linguistic choices: repeating or rephrasing explanations, using examples familiar to students' cultural backgrounds, or validating their home languages. Even small adjustments—such as a slower pace of speech or checking understanding gently—can make learners feel supported. Gkonou and Mercer (2017) argue that these micro-interactions, though subtle, are powerful acts of care that create emotional safety and belonging. They remind us that empathy is not just about feelings but about how we use language to show understanding and respect.

Empathy also plays an essential role in teacher development. It can be strengthened through practice, reflection, and exposure to diverse perspectives. Deardorff (2006) describes intercultural competence as a continuous process that involves curiosity, openness, and self-

awareness. When teacher education programs include reflective discussions, role plays, and intercultural simulations, teachers become more conscious of their own cultural assumptions and communication habits (Barrett et al., 2021). This awareness allows them to respond more thoughtfully to the needs of their students. Empathy, then, becomes both a teaching skill and a professional attitude—one that supports respectful, inclusive, and effective learning environments.

Overall, this discussion suggests that empathy should be viewed as a dynamic and culturally grounded practice. It develops through interaction, reflection, and engagement with diversity. Teachers who approach empathy as an active, communicative, and adaptive process are better equipped to foster meaningful relationships and promote understanding in increasingly diverse classrooms.

CONCLUSION

Although this study provides a comprehensive synthesis of existing literature, several limitations should be noted. First, the review focused primarily on English-language publications, which may exclude valuable perspectives from non-English academic contexts. Second, as a narrative review, the study does not provide empirical data or cross-cultural comparisons drawn from classroom observation. Future research could address these gaps by conducting qualitative or mixed-method studies that explore how empathy is enacted linguistically and culturally in specific educational settings. Comparative investigations across different teacher education systems may also reveal how empathy training can be adapted to local pedagogical traditions and language practices.

Empathy lies at the heart of meaningful and inclusive education. It allows teachers to connect with their students' emotions, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds in authentic ways. However, empathy is not expressed in the same manner everywhere—it is shaped by social norms, cultural traditions, and communicative habits. Recognizing these differences helps educators move away from a universal model of empathy and instead view it as

a flexible competence that adapts to different contexts and learners.

In multicultural and multilingual classrooms, empathy is often shown through the ways teachers use and respond to language. Small communicative choices listening carefully, rephrasing with sensitivity, or acknowledging students' home languages can make a significant difference in how supported and valued learners feel. These interactions demonstrate that empathy is not only an emotional quality but also a practical, linguistic one.

For teacher education, this means that empathy should be developed intentionally. Training programs can help teachers reflect on their own communication styles, understand cultural patterns of interaction, and practice empathic strategies through experiential learning. As Barrett et al. (2021) note, such growth happens both formally, through structured learning, and informally, through everyday engagement with diverse communities.

In the end, empathy as a pedagogical competence represents both a professional skill and a moral commitment. It calls on teachers to approach their students with openness, patience, and genuine curiosity. In doing so, they create classrooms where difference is not a barrier but an opportunity for learning and connection—a foundation for education that is truly human, inclusive, and transformative.

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