

2018

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### Recommended Citation

McAlinden, M. (2018). English Language Teachers' Conceptions of Intercultural Empathy and Professional Identity: A Critical Discourse Analysis. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(10). <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2018v43.n10.3>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.  
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol43/iss10/3>

## English Language Teachers' Conceptions of Intercultural Empathy and Professional Identity: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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*Abstract: English language teaching is intercultural in nature, and like all human activity, involves emotion and emotional understanding. Empathy is a means through which people can understand and express concern and care for one another. This article focuses on findings from a qualitative study that explored intercultural empathy in a culturally and linguistically diverse educational setting in Australia. A constructivist grounded theory research design was combined with Critical Discourse Analysis to develop theory inductively. An interpretation of the data as Discourse found connections and tensions in participants' conceptions of themselves as empathic, interculturally effective teachers.*

### Introduction

Intercultural competence is essential in English language teaching, and English language teachers develop intercultural empathy through interacting with English language learners. Researchers define and research intercultural competence differently across and within disciplines and cultures (Deardorff, 2011). The current study adopted a definition of intercultural competence as relational, and as a mediator of communication at the boundaries between cultures, not as a means to create bridges across cultures (Kramsch, 1993, 2011). At these boundaries, ideological divisions and differences are revalued and irreducible differences explored. Meaning is renegotiated beyond national identity and language, as Kramsch (1993) explains:

*Through dialogue and the search for each other's understanding, each person tries to see the world through the other's eyes without losing sight of him/herself. The goal is not a balance of opposites, or a moderate pluralism of opinions but a paradoxical, irreducible, confrontation that may change one in the process. (p. 231)*

Layperson and academic conceptions of empathy subsume the idea that through empathy we can know what others feel and think – somehow we can temporarily *become* others (Min, 2001, Deardorff, 2011). In contrast to this, the current study adopted the Russian concept *vzhivanie* (living into) (Bakhtin, 2004). Through *vzhivanie*, one retains one's "outsidedness" in intercultural encounters; one remains distinct from others; "the place of another is entered while maintaining our own place and outsidedness; the self is not abandoned nor its viewpoint" (Bakhtin, 2004, p. 7).

Empathy is commonly included as a core element of intercultural competence (Witte, 2014; Deardorff, 2011), and teacher empathy is a growing and important focus of research in

multicultural education (Dolby, 2012, Tettegah, 2016). Yet there is limited discussion or research on the role and significance of empathy in English language teaching or other educational settings. Likewise, the fields of education and English language teaching pay limited attention to empathy and its meaning and significance in intercultural competent teaching. The study discussed in this article responded to this gap. The study was the first of its kind to explore intercultural empathy in English language teaching. This article presents findings derived from a core category that connects empathy, intercultural competence, and identity. The study methodology of grounded theory included a preliminary and concurrent literature review. The preliminary review found that empathy was under-researched in education and that there were no studies on empathy in English language teaching. As the data collection and analysis commenced, a concurrent literature review formed a secondary source of data to explore the theoretical direction of the study. At this stage, teacher empathy and teacher identity emerged as significant.

This article begins by discussing key ideas from the preliminary and concurrent literature reviews, and introduces the concepts of empathy, teacher empathy, and teacher identity. It then explains the research approach and processes. A presentation and discussion of findings follow and the article concludes with implications, insights and limitations.

## Empathy in Psychology

From its earliest inception, empathy has been central to one of the great puzzles of 20<sup>th</sup> century Western philosophical and psychological thought; that is, how we can understand others. Desire to solve this puzzle, brought the concept of *emfühlung* (feeling with) (Verducci, 2000; Jahoda, 2005) from near-obscurity in German aesthetics into mainstream Western psychology and education. *Emfühlung* made its transition into English via the Greek *empathia* (in suffering or passion) (Jahoda, 2005). In English, the term empathy was used to describe a natural capacity to feel what we perceive or imagine; empathy was a “process of humanising objects, of reading or feeling ourselves into them” (Tichener, 1924, p. 417). This theory of aesthetic appreciation was adopted by Sigmund Freud (Freud, 1921), Carl Rogers (1957) and Heinz Kohut (1978) who saw empathy as central to the psychoanalyst’s capacity to understand clients. At this time, although it was widely accepted that empathy included feeling and understanding emotion, psychotherapists privileged cognitive conceptions of empathy over affective ones.

In cognitive and social psychology, research has focussed primarily on how empathy varies in individuals. This research approached empathy from within a positivist model of research (Verducci, 2000; Wispé, 1987). In this domain, experts have been unable to agree on a single definition of empathy (See Zickfeld, Schubert, Seibt, & Fiske, 2017, Cuff, Brown, Taylor, & Howat, 2016). As a result, a large number of instruments, including the Hogan Empathy Scale (HES) and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 2018), have been developed to measure empathy. Despite a number of key reviews in psychology calling for a new approach to the study of empathy, including the study of various kinds of empathy (Duan & Hill, 1996; Gladstein, 1987; Verducci, 2000), the trend to divide and measure empathy continues to date.

The current study responded to the need to understand empathy in new and different ways. In particular, a decision was made to use a qualitative approach to explore teachers’ subjective experiences and conceptions of intercultural empathy and to build theory from this. The preliminary literature review uncovered a range of theoretical perspectives on empathy from

the fields of psychology and education that informed the research design. This provided insight into why and how empathy had been studied and theorised historically. It also highlighted issues with the conceptualisation and study of empathy. The concurrent literature review supported the interpretation and discussion of the emerging findings. This process led to a focus on teacher empathy and teacher identity, which I discuss next.

## **Teacher Empathy in Education**

Research into empathy in education has mainly explored the significance of empathy in relationships and individual child morality. Within early childhood education, for example, empathy is linked to the social development of children and is believed to be central to the foundation of children's relationships with others (Sullivan, 1962, Klein, 1986, Feshbach, 1982). Quantitative studies of empathy in primary and secondary education have focussed on moral education (Hoffman, 2001), and have been concerned mainly with exploring how children learn empathy. Surprisingly, there is very limited research on teacher empathy in education and no studies of teacher empathy in English language teaching. However, studies of teacher empathy in teacher education point to the potential and significance of teacher empathy in interculturally effective teaching (Cooper, 2004, Tettegah & Anderson, 2007, McAllister & Irvine, 2002).

In teacher education, multicultural education is associated with empathy, social justice and civil rights, particularly in the United States. Educational researchers in the US argue that retaining empathy when teaching students from cultural and linguistic backgrounds that differ from their own is a challenge for both novice and experienced teachers (Tettegah, 2016, Dolby, 2012). Tettegah (2016) argues that low empathy has been shown to reflect prejudice and is associated with group membership. She argues that people may be unable to extend empathy to those who they perceive as belonging to a different racial group. A 2007 study (Tettegah & Anderson, 2007) explored bias among trainee high school teachers using The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 2018). The study involved recording teachers' responses to a simulation that involved an African American child being victimised by a White child. The study found that White trainee teachers expressed more empathy for the White child than they did for the Black child. The study uncovered an inherent empathy bias among the trainee teachers. Other related research suggests that even when teachers have the best of intentions, they may resort to reduction and stereotyping of students when their understanding and experience is limited (Dolby, 2012).

Another significant US study (McAllister & Irvine, 2002) explored teacher empathy in a multicultural professional learning program that assisted high school teachers to work effectively with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The participants believed that participation in the program, which involved a simulation activity, had enabled them to further develop cultural sensitivity and increased their empathic behaviours in the classroom. While the study found empathy helped the teachers to be caring, supportive and culturally responsive, very few of the teachers were active in addressing institutional inequality and racism. However, the study highlighted effective strategies to foster teacher empathy and suggested that empathy may be more evident in the practices and beliefs of interculturally experienced teachers.

Cooper (2004) conducted a qualitative study of the role of empathy in teacher-pupil relationships and its relevance to moral modelling in the UK. According to Cooper, teacher empathy involves a high level of human concern for others, which enables teachers to care for

and help students. Cooper's study used a combination of in-depth interviews and observations to find that empathy had powerful effects on relationships and behaviour and was fundamental to high quality learning. However, the economic and commercial considerations in the setting subverted and constrained the high moral aims of the teachers.

These studies foreground the potential of intercultural teacher empathy, but show how societal and individual factors such as group membership and institutionalised racism can reduce empathy in diverse settings. They also suggest that teacher empathy can be problematic if teachers assume that they know and understand students and equate their own experiences with those of students. In addition, the studies indicated that a qualitative research approach might be useful in exploring empathy in new and different ways.

## Teacher Identity

The initial data analysis indicated that teachers' conceptions of themselves as empathic was associated with professional identity. Thus, the concurrent literature review explored this connection. Within the Australian educational context, the construct of teacher professional identity is ambiguous (Sachs, 2001, p. 124). Definitions vary according to the underpinning ontological and epistemological assumptions (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Orthodox understandings of teacher identity often refer to it as a set of qualifications, attributes and competencies (Sachs, 2001). The belief that one becomes a professional teacher when one acquires a qualification and learns a new set of rules for behaviour does not account for the complex process of being a teacher. It would have been incongruent with the design of the current study to define or describe teacher identity in terms of a set of constituent parts. Nor would it be consistent to conceptualise teacher identity as a stable, singular construct (Alsup, 2006); individual teachers can and do have more than one professional identity that changes over time (Chong & Low, 2009). Therefore, a conceptualisation that aligned with the study design proposed by Mockler (2011) was adopted. Mockler follows three key characteristics common to interpretive or qualitative research in defining teacher identity. First, it is "shifting and multiple" (p. 126) and it is constructed and negotiated through conversation and interpretation. Second, it is "framed through narrative" (p. 127). It is expressed and shaped through language within social interaction. Third, it is constructed and constituted through the interaction of personal histories and experiences within the professional context (p. 128).

Clark (2008) and Sachs (2001) adopt a Foucauldian perspective of teacher identity. They view it as constructed within the hegemony of dominant discourses. Discourse is discipline or practice. Alsup (2006), however, draws on the work of Gee (2000) to offer a less totalising view of the role of discourse in shaping teacher identity. Alsup (2006) argues that individual teachers bring their own subjectivities to the profession and are actively engaged in the construction of their identities as teachers. The current study adopted Gee's (2000) definition of identity and Discourse (with a capital). Gee states that "Discourses are ways of being certain kinds of people" (p. 110); identity is created and sustained through the process of recognition, and that through Discourse, one's identity as a certain kind of person is constructed:

*Discourses are particular ways of behaving, valuing, interacting, believing, thinking, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities (or types of people) by particular groups. (Gee, 2008, p. 3)*

Teacher educators and researchers such as Alsup (2006), Mockler & Sachs (2006), Trent, (2010), and Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson (2005), create a case for a critical perspective of teacher identity formation and construction. Regardless of the perspective adopted, there is agreement that teachers and researchers ought to engage with a critical approach that encourages them to challenge their beliefs and alignments (Trent, 2010). This perspective views teachers as being either consciously or unconsciously “in the process of fashioning and refashioning [their] identities by patching together fragments of the Discourses to which [they] are exposed” (Clark, 2008, p. 9). Within this critical conception of teacher professional identity, the role of researchers and educators is to explore and question uncritical acceptance and adoption of the norms and values of the profession (Clark, 2008; Mockler & Sachs, 2006).

## **Study Design and Methods**

After the preliminary review of the literature revealed an absence of research on empathy in English language teaching, I designed a study that would provide insight into an important, but neglected phenomenon that would be relevant, resonant, and useful to teachers and researchers in multicultural, multilingual educational settings. The study focussed on what was important to the participants; it aimed to render teacher empathy visible as well as to acknowledge the value of subjective understanding and experience. To achieve these aims I used a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) offered a set of guidelines, practices and analytic tools, and a methodology that was aligned with the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the qualitative research paradigm. The stated aim of constructivist grounded theory is to reformulate original grounded theory methodology to match the conceptions of knowledge and reality that are predominant within the qualitative paradigm (Charmaz, 2006). While applying many of the strategies of original grounded theory, constructivist grounded theory is underpinned by a view of knowledge as relative to a particular conceptual framework; that is, there is no objective reality. Truths are relative, multiple and subject to redefinition (Charmaz, 2004). The data are constructions that are formed from reconstructions of lived experience.

The study adhered to a set of guidelines, general principles and practices for employing a constructivist grounded theory as recommended by Charmaz (2006). This includes the way in which theory is understood and evaluated. An interpretive perspective of theory acknowledges the subjectivity of the act of theorising, and emphasises theory building as a process of imaginative understanding (Charmaz, 2006). This conception of theory defers to the co-constructed nature of reality; theorising is an activity that is shaped by the data, the researcher and the research issue. Theory can be judged according to the extent to which it conforms to the tradition within which it is created (Charmaz, 2006).

## **Research Questions**

The research approach allowed for the formulation and revision of research questions during the study. The questions were not answered in the traditional sense by separating data sets; rather they served to guide the theoretical direction of the study and support the aim of the study to develop a constructivist grounded theory. The initial guiding research questions took

into account the multiple, competing definitions of the term ‘empathy’ and explored the meaning and significance of this term by asking:

*How do English language teachers define and conceptualise empathy?*

*What do English language teachers believe about the role of empathy in English language teaching?*

*What meanings do English language teachers give to empathy and examples of empathic practice in their daily working lives?*

As data collection commenced, the ideas of teacher empathy and teacher identity were not a focus. Had the participants responded by focussing on student empathy for example, the study would have taken an entirely different turn. A further question explored the factors that influenced the participants’ conceptions of empathy:

*What factors, if any, influence English language teachers’ conceptions and experiences of empathy?*

And a final question that focussed on teacher empathy and identity was added after the data revealed that teacher identity was important to the participants’ understanding of empathy:

*What does the data reveal about the teacher identity of the study participants?*

Although the findings presented in this article were derived from data collected and analysed in response to all of these questions, they relate particularly to the final question.

## **Participants**

English language teachers working on an accredited ELICOS (English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students) program located in a public education institution were recruited to take part in the study. The participants were viewed as members of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) both in terms of the single study site and in terms of the English language teaching profession, so the data were explored for both individual and shared understandings. The participants were grouped for initial group interviews according to their teaching experience, knowledge of a second language, and experience living and working overseas. By the end of the data collection and analysis process, ten teachers had participated in the study. The groupings were theoretically driven, and served to produce rich data as well as enabling the researcher to explore divergences and convergences in the data. However, the groups were not compared systematically. Ethics clearance was granted by the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Western Australia and steps were taken to ensure confidentiality. In a study of a single setting, confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed, but recruitment of participants was discreet, participants’ real names were not used, and information pertaining to the institution has been changed or omitted. Issues relating to power and equality were addressed through the methodology and through the positioning of the researcher as a co-creator of data; no position of privilege was assumed.

## **Processes and Procedures**

The data collection included intensive group and individual in-depth interviewing. Data were coded and categorised through open coding, selective coding, and constant comparison of

the data. This process also involved concurrent reviewing of the literature, memo-writing, theoretical sampling, theoretical sorting, and theoretical writing (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). NVivo, a qualitative research software, was used to maintain an audit trail, and to code, organise and manage the data. This process led to the emergence of 15 sub-categories that generated five theoretical propositions based on five core categories: *thinking*, *feeling*, *observing*, *knowing*, and *relating* that together formed the basis of the theory.

### Data Collection

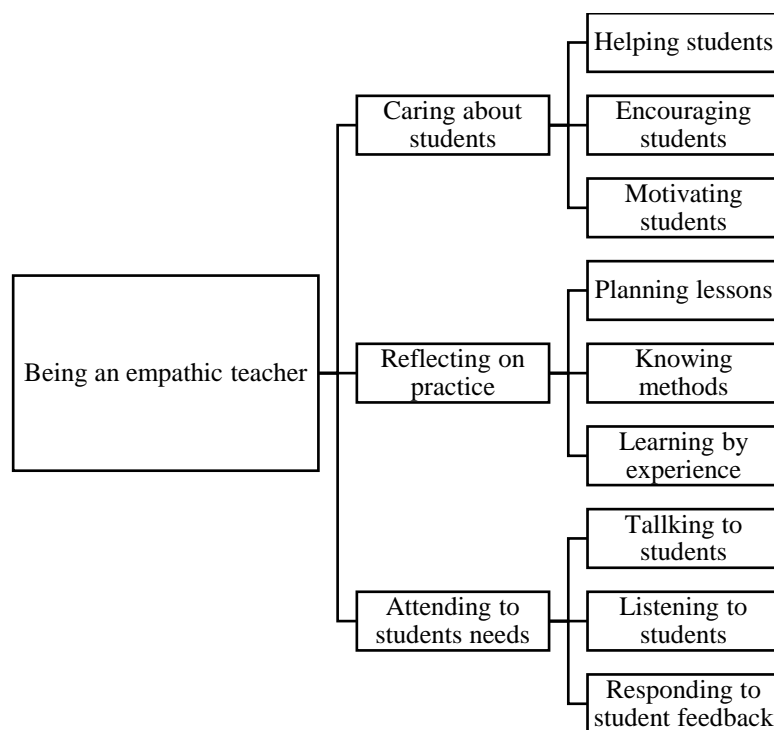
*Interviewing is rather like a marriage: everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed door there is a world of secrets. (Oakley 1981, p. 41).*

Interview techniques underpinned by a feminist-constructivist perspective guided the interview processes (Oakley, 1981; Reinharz & Chase, 2001). Techniques from many types of interviews were used including structured, semi-structured and unstructured group and individual interviews with the individual interviews being mostly unstructured. This allowed for a mutually negotiated control of the interview process that would generate a range of responses. An initial structured interview was held with each participant to collect demographic and background information before the data collection commenced with a group interview that explored the question: *What is empathy?* During the initial group interviews, I provided each group with an interview schedule and asked them to respond to the questions while I sat close to the group, took notes and listened. I then interviewed each group member individually followed by further in-depth group and individual interviews. Each individual interview started with a discussion and clarification of ideas from the group interview. Group interviews allowed data to be collectively constructed and enabled access to a range of viewpoints in one interview while individual interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of ideas. All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and notes were taken. The interview data were transcribed, reviewed and coded before each subsequent group or individual interview. Interviews took place in the workplace of the participants at their request.

### Data Analysis

The data were analysed and gathered concurrently with the resulting analysis guiding further data collection and analysis. This was an iterative, non-linear process to reduce the data. Open coding involved labelling initial data word by word, line by line to explore participants' understanding of empathy. These coded data were then compared to explore their theoretical potential. As the coded data were compared, the coding became more selective and analytical and was supported by memoing. Memos included analytic and reflective notes as well as critical and theoretical rendering of the coded data. This process developed a core category and a range of descriptive codes illustrated in Figure 1.





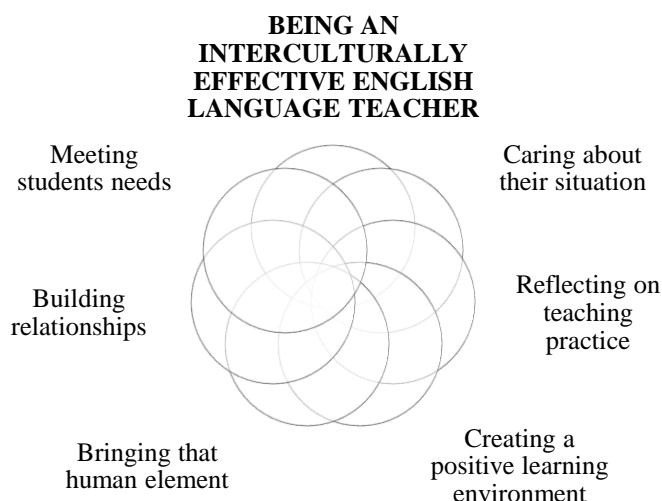
**Figure 1: Core category, initial sub-categories and codes of proposition five**

During this process, the literature formed a secondary source of data to develop and enhance the theoretical direction of the data collection and to further formulate questions and explore the relationship between the emerging codes and categories. Through this process, the data analysis uncovered some common understandings of empathy and its significance in English language teaching. In order to explore this data further, I adopted an analytic lens (Gee, 2000) that included elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992, 2003) and incorporated the key concepts of Discourse and identity. Critical Discourse Analysis of the data as language in use enabled me to uncover and explore ideologies and assumptions that were implicit in the data related to teacher identity. This process was guided by the final research question: *What does the data reveal about the teacher identity of the study participants?*

A significant element of language in use is ‘modality’. Modality refers to the degree of certainty or confidence that a speaker has about a belief or proposition (Wesson & Pulford, 2009) and is linguistically expressed in a number of ways. Most commonly, modality is expressed through modal verbs such as *could*, *might*, and *should*. For example, the use of the word *should* expressed a high affinity or obligation whereas the use of *might* suggests a lower affinity with a belief. Modality is also expressed through adverbs such as *probably*, *maybe*, or *possibly* as well as through expressions such as *I think* or *sort of*. Modality may also include the use of verb forms and verb tenses and the repetition of particular words. For example, the present simple tense can be used to express an idea as a universal truth (Clark, 2008).

This process also included a focus on lexical exponents of epistemic modality following Fairclough (1992, 2003). Epistemic modality refers to speakers’ expressions of doubt and certainty (Fairclough, 1992) and can be explored in relation to its importance, type and frequency of occurrence in texts. Analysis of repetitions of words and phrases helped to explore the identities that were assigned, adopted, claimed or rejected by the participants. This analysis provided critical insight into the participants’ conceptions of teacher empathy. During this

process, theoretical writing commenced. The writing process was as much a part of the theory construction as the data analysis; the resulting interpretation is not intended to be judged as truth, but rather as a plausible and adequate rendering of the data as language in use (Fairclough, 2003). New conceptual codes and interpretations of the data emerged from this process. A core category illustrated in Figure 2, emerged to explain the role and significance of teacher empathy in English language teaching.



**Figure 2: Key categories associated with teacher empathy**

## Findings and Discussion

The study developed five overlapping theoretical propositions that together formed a tentative theory of intercultural teacher empathy in English language teaching (see McAlinden, 2014). This section presents and discusses proposition five which states that the teachers positioned themselves as being, or in the process of becoming, interculturally effective teachers, and that they viewed teacher empathy as central to this professional identity.

### Empathy and Effective Teaching

Being an empathic and effective teacher was an ideal subject position for the study participants. They expressed this identity uncritically and wholeheartedly:

*Being an effective teacher is the most important thing. (Harris, group C)*

When discussing the role of empathy in his teaching approach, Niren associated empathy with being a good teacher and explained how it motivated him:

*I look at the students and I always think: That could be me sitting there [...], it makes you do better than you would do, you don't just go through the motions. I better do this well, because if I was there I would want to, you know, to learn [...] so you put yourself in their shoes and then everything becomes easy. (Niren, group B)*

Another teacher used her own experiences as a student to activate her empathy so that she could be a more effective teacher:

*I know what I would like a good teacher to do in a classroom, so I suppose that sort of moulds who I am now. (Nadia, group A)*

Unlike Clarke's (2008) study, which found a new and progressive teacher identity as well as an old and traditional one, there was no evidence in the current study of an oppositional teacher identity. Nor was there evidence of self-criticism in relation to the practices and beliefs associated with the particular teacher identity that emerged. However, the participants expressed various degrees of certainty when talking about being an empathic teacher. At times, they identified strongly with this notion, presenting ideas as fact or truths through unmodalised statements while at other times they expressed a striving towards the goal of being empathic, interculturally effective teachers. An example of which is illustrated by the unmodalised and modalised use of language in the following extract and the use of the present simple and the present progressive tenses:

***We are** empathic; **we try** to get everyone settled. **We are** always planning, trying to make our lessons interesting. (Harris, group C)*

The present simple tense denotes universal or timeless truths about the nature of the world (Langacker, 2001), while the present progressive has modality at its semantic core (De Wit & Brisard, 2014). The meaning and use of the verb "try" in the extract above also reinforces the emphasis on striving, effort and the desire to want to do something. While both tenses, as present tenses, locate a situation in the immediate reality of the speaker, the present simple form indicates something that the speaker perceives as always true while the present progressive expresses a view of the situation as a contingent part of the speaker's immediate reality (De Wit & Brisard, 2014). In this case, indicative of the temporality of striving towards the goal of being an empathic teacher as opposed to the certainty of being one.

Unsurprisingly, given the personal nature of in-depth interviewing, participants frequently used "I"; the exclusive first person singular that is commonly understood to denote a singular unambiguous point of view. In the following extract, Katie, associated empathy with being an effective teacher and was very motivated to be a good teacher. She explains how empathy was associated with her strong desire to be a good teacher. She used the exclusive "I", in combination with the word "need":

***I need** to be a **really** effective teacher **for** these students who have **really** high stakes. (Katie, group C)*

Combined together with the meaning of the word "need", this use of language creates the impression that the speaker has a strong personal affinity with the beliefs and desires being expressed. The students that Katie refers to were on a direct entry course to a degree course. There is a distinct absence of uncertainty in Katie's choice of vocabulary and grammar as well as in her repetition of key words highlighted in bold. This denotes certainty, urgency and the importance of the ideas she expresses. For example in the extract the verb "need" is used in conjunction with the modifying adverb "really" denoting the high degree of affinity that she has with the idea of empathy being an important element of being an effective teacher. In addition, the use of the preposition "for" reinforces the notion that she has to be an interculturally effective teacher in order to support her students. Through her choice of words and repetition of ideas, Katie expresses a strong sense of urgency, possibly mirroring the urgency that her students may experience about achieving their study goals.

## Student Feedback

When talking about being interculturally effective teachers, some participants talked about the significance of student feedback. Participants said that student reactions helped them to evaluate their practice; they considered student feedback to be evidence of effective teaching practice. Niren, for example, talked about how his students reacted to him; for him, the students liking his way of teaching was an indicator of his effectiveness as a teacher:

*I get very good reactions from the students. The students always seem to like being in my classes, I seem to get very few students who don't like what I do and to me, I am happy. (Niren, group B)*

Participants also believed that student requests to be in a particular teacher's class were evidence of teacher effectiveness. It is common practice in English language teaching for adult students to request particular teachers. While there is no evidence that such requests are related to effective teaching, it is commonly understood that this relationship exists as illustrated:

*I have always had good feedback and I frequently have students asking to come into my classes. (Anthony, group C)*

Participants also associated negative feedback with not being a sufficiently empathic teacher and that this motivated them to improve their teaching practice:

*If I am not being an effective teacher, and I've got students giving negative feedback; you want to do a good job, you want to be effective, and if you don't, I think it does come around. (Katie, group C)*

Although there is no research evidence to support an association between empathy, effective teaching, and students liking teachers, this is a commonly held belief among English language teachers. To sum up, student feedback served to affirm and assign the participants' identities as empathic, and motivated them to be better teachers. This was a challenge in the research setting as teachers typically taught groups of students from a wide variety of backgrounds who often had quite different learning needs and expectations.

## Student Needs

Being an empathic teacher was strongly associated with attending to student needs. According to one participant, empathic practice included identifying and addressing the learning needs of students:

*I think all teachers have to look at the makeup of their class and make judgements about the students that you have, and you have to think not only what their actual needs are, but what they perceive their needs to be. (Leena, group B)*

Addressing the needs of students also meant methodological flexibility and compromise:

*I know there is no point explaining the grammar to them, but they value this and believe that it helps them, so I do it, and then we practise. (Poppy, group A)*

Poppy believed that a deductive approach to the teaching of grammar was not as effective as an inductive approach. In a deductive approach, the teacher presents a grammar point that is then practiced by students, whereas in the inductive approach, learners engage with examples of the target language to identify patterns and work out the meaning prior to practice (Ellis, 2006). Research has found that neither of these approaches is conclusively more effective (Ellis, 2006), but the practice in the research setting was to favour an inductive approach over a deductive one.

When Poppy's students wanted her to explain grammar points explicitly, she was willing to do this even though she believed that it did not facilitate language acquisition effectively.

Participants associated empathy with being sensitive to students' needs. For example, addressing students' needs also meant diverging from the prescribed syllabus:

*We have to cover Australian life and culture every Friday afternoon, but a lot of the students don't want to do that; they don't value that...so that influences me, so we rarely do that. (Katie, group C)*

However, they believed that determining needs was difficult and unpredictable and that their judgements may not always be correct:

*There is no one way to do it and a lot of it is guesswork, sometimes you are wrong. You might think they need this and they need that and they are not vaguely interested, they don't want any of it. (Niren, group B)*

Although determining students' needs was associated with interculturally effective teaching, participants believed that it was unrealistic to think they could meet the expectations and needs of every student:

*Everyone has different expectations and different needs; you have eighteen different expectations and individuals that you are dealing with...You try and meet most of their needs, but you can't be everything to all students and some students are going to be disappointed. (Katie, group C)*

Participants also had expectations of students and believed that clarification of these expectations was also part of being an empathic teacher:

*The good teachers make their expectations clear; it doesn't really matter what the expectations are. (Silvia, group B)*

To summarise, being empathic meant predicting students' needs. It meant attending to those needs even though it sometimes required teachers to diverge from the syllabus. It also meant that teachers set aside their own beliefs about effective teaching in order to meet students' expectations.

### Empathy and Caring

The findings also suggest that English language teaching was rewarding work and was a vocation for the participants; teachers need to care to be effective:

*You **actually care** what they think, how they feel, and I am sure that comes across to them. So that can only lead to positive feelings and **a positive environment** all round. (Nadia, group A)*

"Caring" was an important aspect of the teacher identity that emerged in the study, as Anthony forcefully stated:

*A teacher's job is **to care**. (Anthony, group C)*

Participants identified strongly with this identity and associated it with Humanism:

*Teaching is a humanistic job; it's not a job where you are working on a machine. Anything where you are working with people [...] and most people who go into teaching go into it because you care about people. (Katie, group C)*

Participants talked about being an empathic teacher in an idealistic, moral or virtuous sense. They mentioned qualities such as trustworthiness, patience, and understanding.

The language that participants used showed that they had a strong affinity with their subject position as caring, empathic teachers and viewed themselves as central agents in the learning

process of culturally and linguistically diverse students. This data also suggests that participants had a totalising view their identity as English language teachers and resisted self-reflection in order to represent themselves as caring, empathic teachers. This identity was expressed uncritically; there were no instances in the data that contradicted this identity.

A range of factors influenced these representations of identity including the discourse of Humanism. The language that participants used showed that they had a strong affinity with their subject position as caring, empathic teachers and viewed themselves as central agents in the learning process:

*A teacher's job is to give and to nurture. (Anthony, group C)*

Anthony's use of the *be* verb in its present simple form followed by the infinitive "to give" denotes fact, or general truth suggesting that he has a strong degree of certainty with the beliefs that he expressed.

Poppy described how she demonstrated empathy towards the female Muslim students in her classes by delaying her lunch break so that she could spend time getting to know students who wore a niqab. The niqab is a face and head covering that devout Muslim women wear in public spaces where men may be present:

*At lunchtimes, I would sit with them because I saw that as soon as the boys left the room at the end of the lesson, they would close the door, shut the blinds and take off their scarves, so I would join them and we would talk and laugh.*

*(Poppy, group A)*

Concern and care (empathy) towards learners is influenced by the communicative approach in English language teaching which in turn was influenced by the humanistic turn in education more broadly. Humanism encourages teachers to take the whole person into account when making methodological and pedagogical choices (Stevick, 1990). Communicative language teaching emerged in the 1960s to become the favoured method of English language teachers in Britain, Australia, North America and Canada and was influenced by the socio-cultural turn in the field of second language acquisition (Lantolf & Beckett, 2009). The approach favours certain pedagogical and methodological principles over others and is characterised by a humanistic, methodologically eclectic approach.

The focus on humanistic qualities in the current study reflects findings from other research studies (Brown, 2005; Boyer, 2010; Cowie, 2011). Brown's (2005) study found that English language teachers chose to be teachers in order to reinforce and reify their perceptions of themselves as helpful and caring people. Cowie's (2011) study of teacher emotion in Japan found that caring for students was "especially common" (p. 241) among participants who were English language teachers. Similarly, Boyer's (2010) study of empathy development in trainee language teachers also reflects this view of teacher identity as caring: "an ethos of caring deeply and empathically about children and their learning has been identified as being at the heart of purposeful teaching" (p. 313).

### **Empathy and Engagement**

Having empathy also meant encouraging and sustaining positive interaction, engagement, and relationships with students. An empathic teacher engages learners, and creates and sustains a positive learning environment. The participants were confident that they had a central role to play in the learning process and that their capacity to empathise was essential to this. For example, when discussing his classroom practice, Niren associates empathy with engaging

learners. The use of language in this extract emphasises the affinity that he has to the beliefs he is expressing:

*My job is to get people's attention, give them a message, whatever it is, and get them fully involved in what I am doing. (Niren, group B)*

The combination of the to-infinitive and present simple tense in the extract above denotes a strong sense of confidence, certainty and purpose in relation to the ideas expressed.

Participants believed that as teachers they were the central agents in the construction of a positive learning environment, which was characterised by positive energy and enthusiasm:

*If you are enthusiastic about it, it is much easier for them to be enthusiastic about it; they feed off that energy. (Anthony, group C)*

They believed that as teachers they had the power to change how students felt:

*But, if you can, why not make them feel better and lift up the energy in the classroom? (Nadia, group A)*

Empathic behaviour was associated with making lessons enjoyable in order to engage and motivate students. Participants wanted students to feel good and to enjoy their lesson:

*If people enjoy and they learn and they come back to you four or five years later and they say thank you, I think I must be doing something right. (Niren, group B)*

Humour and fun were also important in creating and maintaining engagement. Humour was used in different ways. For example, Harris used jokes as a way to help students relax after some hard work:

*To break it up, if you are going hard slog, a little bit of a laugh to break it up. (Harris, group C)*

Senior (2006) found evidence that teachers' views on the importance of "having fun" in lessons were not the same as learners. She concluded that a distinction must be made between having fun and effective teaching. She also explained the idea of the "party games syndrome" in which less experienced language teachers confuse fun over learning. A distinction needs to be made between having fun and effective teaching.

The participants' identity as empathic was also associated with their beliefs about their relationships and interactions with students. The participants saw empathy as central to the special relationships that they built with students, as Niren explains:

*There is an unstated understanding, which teachers use with their students; an idea, a relationship, something that goes on for which there is no word. (Niren, group B)*

Participants valued the relationships that they had with students and believed that empathy helped them to connect with students:

*You're a human being and you're valuable. Let's develop a relationship with them in the classroom. (Jane, group B)*

However, relationships needed to be mutual; teacher empathy mediated connections between students and teachers. It helped teachers as well as students:

*I think that it [empathy] is not only for the students, it is probably to help me as well because I need that common ground as well in order to function or operate more effectively as a teacher. (Leena, group B)*

Research reviews in education and educational psychology support the view of participants in the study that there is a positive association between humanistic, student-centred teaching approaches and student learning outcomes (Cornelius-White, 2007, p. 134). The review

found that positive relationships and empathy are above average compared with other educational innovations in influencing learning outcomes. While these findings converge with the findings of the current study, the absence of self-criticism and self-reflection on the data are concerning, especially when the teachers failed to identify how they may be reinforcing a totalising unitary view of English language teaching practice as empathic and culturally sensitive.

To summarise, the study identified a particular teacher identity that the data sustained. This section has shown some of the beliefs and values related to empathy that were inherent in the research setting. This interpretation argues that the study participants were confident about the significance of humanistic phenomena such as caring in interculturally effective English language teaching and that they positioned themselves as empathic, interculturally competent teachers. There was no evidence in the data of another, less totalising teacher identity or of self-criticism or self-awareness of this professional identity. Hence, these findings point to a common understanding that uncritically constructs, maintains, and reinforces a particular professional identity.

## Conclusion

The study revealed empathy to be a significant phenomenon in the daily working lives of the study participants and foregrounded the complexities and contradictions that characterised everyday intercultural interactions in a multilingual, multicultural educational setting. This article has provided insight into some of the systems of knowledge and beliefs associated with empathy and English language teaching that were evident in the data. Through producing and representing meaning, the data pointed to the values and practices that were inherent in the research setting. Common words and expressions in the data provided evidence that the participants had a shared understanding and provided insight into the norms and values adopted by participants as part of their professional identity.

The absence of any oppositional or alternative discourses in the data suggest that the participants may have been unaware of the dominant ideologies and pedagogies with which their teaching practices and conceptions of students were aligned. Moreover, they suggest that participants may have resisted self-reflection and self-criticism in order to represent themselves as empathic, interculturally effective teachers. Such uncritical positioning is a concern, but may also reflect the notion that “as teachers we are always, in part, invisible to ourselves” (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005, p. 32). While the adoption of an ideal subject position in identity construction may be problematic, this may also reflect the influence of Humanism in English language teaching which makes it difficult for teachers to represent themselves in ways other than as caring and empathic. Drawing attention to, and being aware of some of the ways in which language as Discourse may shape and inform English language teacher identity might be an important goal of teacher training programs and ongoing professional development that aims to uncover and change inequalities in educational practices. In this context, the potential and capacity of a critical approach to intercultural empathy to facilitate social justice and to mediate communication across cultures may serve to inspire and engage us. In particular, a critical conception of teacher empathy can raise awareness and give us hope that we have some agency to resist, challenge, and possibly even change the discourses with which we may disagree, but sustain unwittingly.



The findings contribute to a growing body of research by locating English language teacher identity as both practice and Discourse. In locating teacher identity in this way, a critical perspective on English language teaching has emerged, which may sustain and support English language teachers as “critical, proactive educators” (Ramanathan, 2002, p. 65). These findings open up a number of potential future areas of research into intercultural teacher empathy, teacher emotion and intercultural competence in English language teaching and other culturally and linguistically diverse educational settings. They suggest the importance of a critical pedagogical approach to teaching in diverse settings. A critical approach to pedagogy can support English language teachers in their desire to care about and understand culturally and linguistically diverse students by understanding educational practice in broader social, cultural, and political terms (Pennycook, 1990)

As diversity in Australian education increases, all teachers are increasingly teaching students from cultural and linguistic backgrounds that differ from their own. If teacher education programs fail to address this diversity, then disadvantage, inequality and racism may persist. As teachers, we can be encouraged to acknowledge we may unconsciously or consciously align ourselves to a favoured or dominant subject position. By critically exploring the socially valued ways of thinking, speaking, feeling, and acting with which we align ourselves as teachers, we may be able to uncover and challenge the values, beliefs, and practices that these Discourses are sustaining. A critical approach to teaching practice is not only appropriate when teaching students whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds differ from our own, but can also support us to confront other associated issues such as differences in gender, social status, religion and race.

Finally, I am not arguing that participants had the same or even similar subject positions in relation to this teacher identity, nor do these findings represent the collective meanings of the participants or of English language teachers in general. Instead, they represent an emic interpretation of empathy in relation to English language teacher identity. Readers can judge the authenticity of the resulting interpretation of data in relation to the extent to which the findings fit and resonate. However, a common Discourse that sustained a shared understanding among the participants is evident in the data. This Discourse foregrounds the role and significance of empathy in English language teaching.

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