

Impact of Teachers' Empathy towards Adult Learners' Struggles in Acquiring EFL

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the role of empathy, one of the vital traits teachers are expected to possess, in the language acquisition process of Bangladeshi adult learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). It tries to assess if the presence of empathy in teachers' approach has any significant impact on the pace of EFL acquisition of learners. This also investigates if the effect of empathy and associated emotions—such as sympathy and patience towards the struggle of learners—add positive and substantial speed to the learners' progress. The study also tries to find out if the absence of a significant amount of empathy or complete absence of empathy slows down the acquisition process. A qualitative research conducted by applying multiple methodologies established the idea that the presence of empathy in teachers positively affects the performance of learners. The results also show that empathy in teachers may not always be very apparent while observing classes, but can be measured by considering the presence of other aspects that are crucial for effective teaching.

Keywords: *Motivation, empathy, teacher attributes, teaching English, second language acquisition.*

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh comprises one of the largest populations in the non-native English sphere who learn English through formal education (Hamid 2010). Though Bangladesh produces countless 'proficient English using' graduates every year (Islam 2013), the white-collar local job markets are dominated by 'English-knowing' foreign workforces. Bangla, being the first language (L1) of the majority of the nation, still affects the use of English in most cases related to the academic and professional development of individuals. Therefore, the importance of developing English language skills is usually realized in the latter part of life (Hossain, 2013). Thus, Bangladeshi English-fearing graduates (Hamid and Honan 2012), given their full-semi-zero proficiency in English, fail to take proper advantage of the jobs in the booming private and multinational sectors where English is desirable. It is in this backdrop that the number of adult learners of English has been strikingly on the rise.

Background and Context

A literature review consists of an overview, a summary, and an evaluation (“critique”) of the current state of knowledge about a specific area of research. If we keep in mind Lenneberg’s (1967) emphasis on introducing a language within a certain age, we see that in Bangladesh the need for mastering English language skills is not clarified to the learners during that age limit. Though English is acknowledged as a compulsory subject to study from Grade 1 to 12 in the national curriculum (Hamid & Honan, 2012), students display a sort of ‘resentment motivation’ towards learning English (Shahed, 2001) as it is taught without any identifiable ‘need’ (Jordan, 1997). Abbot (1981) termed this as TENOR (the Teaching of English for No Obvious Reason). Even after 12 years of schooling and four years of tertiary education, most of the learners fail to equip with the necessary language skills (Hamid, 2010). When Bangladeshis enter their professional lives, be it working for someone else or proceeding with their own businesses, they realize the exigency for English proficiency. So the questions arise: what happens when adults decide to invest in enhancing their English language skills? If the process is difficult for them, what are the factors that support their learning process? Amid the presence of numerous factors, it was required to investigate if teachers’ ability to understand the struggle of others could be a crucial factor in this regard and also if teachers’ similar experiences or struggles with EFL learning contributed to the development of empathy in them.

As students undergo clueless English learning throughout their secondary life, the time unutilized in the secondary and higher secondary levels with English forces them to invest money, time, and effort at a later age by enrolling in different ESP courses for increasing their proficiency levels to suit the job market (Rahman, 2019). Uncountable training centers and freelance trainers are hired by various organizations to develop the English skills of their employees without much consideration if expected language skills are achievable by the adult learners. The training institutes and trainers also portray their images to make the clients (organizations, their employees, or individual learners) believe that it is possible to enhance learners’ abilities at any stage of their lives regarding their English skills. It is to see if the trainers’ understanding of the learners’ circumstances significantly influences the designing, conducting, and assessing sessions that ensure learners’ enhanced performance in communicating with stakeholders in English.

Multiple questions and choices may arise as regards the type of teachers the learners consider as capable of helping them. The major types are: (a) teachers with native-like proficiency whose L1 is preferably English and who use trendy words/expressions accompanied by ‘smart’ body languages or (b) teachers with non-native fluency who had undergone similar experiences/ struggles in their student lives while learning English. It is the latter group of teachers who are assumed to possess empathy which can add an extra quotient to learners’ process of acquiring English.

Research Questions

The two questions that guided the research were:

1. Does empathy of teachers have any impact on the adult learners’ struggles while they acquire English in the context of Bangladesh?
2. Does this empathy in the classroom influence the progress of adult learners’ learning of English?

Measuring the Presence of Empathy

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines Empathy as "the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in their situation" (3rd edition, 2008). An in-depth understanding of empathy by researchers (Deutsch & Madle, 1975; Gladstein; 1983) described it as a sense of understanding between people, an area of common ground, a sharing of feeling and emotion, and an ability to feel and see things through the eyes of others which is too important for human relationships to ignore simply because it is hard to define and measure. Riess (2017) explained how empathy enables the sharing of experiences, needs, and desires between individuals and provides an emotional bridge that promotes pro-social behavior.

In a study done by McAllister & Irvin (2002), teachers described how empathy helped them to become more effective teachers with their students. These teachers believed that empathy was an implicit part of being a caring, supportive, and responsive teacher with their culturally diverse students. In that same study teachers also reported that empathetic disposition helped increasing more positive interactions with their students and created supportive classroom climates.

Researchers note that it is difficult to measure empathy. Noddings (1986) questioned: How can we emphasize the receptivity that is needed for both when we have no way of measuring it? Here we may ultimately decide that some things in life and in education must be undertaken and sustained by faith, and not by objective evaluation. But Cooper (2002) has classified features that can be considered as characteristics of empathy. Some of the positive features/emotions acted out by teachers which created empathetic relations with their students are fun/humor, liking/seeing the good, masking negative emotions, mutual respect, physical contact, relaxed, comfortable and informal climate. Presence of these actions resulted into developing positive emotions and interactions, understanding of self and others and appreciation of all relationships.

If the presence of empathy is measured in classrooms and the significant impact of empathy is recognized, the consecutive crucial questions arise: what to do with the teachers who do not show any significant sign of empathy and whether it is possible to train teachers to practice empathy in the classroom. But to answer that, it is important to find if empathy is an innate quality or it can be developed.

Cooper (2002) suggested that every human being has potential for empathy which can be nurtured or repressed. According to him, having people around us who model this quality, including teachers, seems to support positive interaction and allows us to be valued and enable us to value others. But it is undeniable that any human qualities take time to develop. Noddings (1986) suggested that time is needed for real caring relationships to develop, not only through the taught curriculum but through the normal conversations and interactions which take place between people. And even more than objectively measuring the presence of empathy in teachers in the classroom, it is important to find out if an introduction to empathetic behavior of teachers can be embraced by adult learners after their personality is already shaped up.

METHOD

Design Strategy

A qualitative inquiry was needed to address the research questions of this study as it allowed us to approach a problem from a critical, in-depth perspective that eventually enabled us to understand the phenomenon of teachers' empathy from the perspectives of the participants (Cresswell & Poth, 2017). The research questions that guided the current study were explorative

and interpretive, and they familiarized the researchers with the phenomenon under investigation, yielding a better understanding of the role of teachers' empathetic approach (Babbie, 2013).

Sample

16 classes of 8 different teachers (with different training institutions) with learners belonging to 21–55 age groups were observed. Two sessions of each trainer were observed, one at the beginning and one at the end of courses. At a minuscule level, this was the maximum that we could achieve as we also had to ensure the presence of both the teacher and the learners after each observation. As most of the learners were corporate employees, giving additional time after office hours for classes were a tough decision to take.

The study comprised teachers of Bangladeshi origin, except one whose family came from outside Bangladesh though he was born and brought up here. 60% of the teachers were fluent in English. The rest belonged to the intermediate level considering their speaking skills and the upper intermediate level considering their writing skills. All fluent teachers belonged to English medium schools and are addressed here as Group A teachers. Teachers with mixed backgrounds were mostly from Bangla medium schools with one coming from a Middle East country where English was not the medium of instruction; these teachers are addressed as Group B teachers. All teachers had extensive experience in teaching English at the tertiary level and to adult learners. Six of them taught at schools as well. These six teachers were able to discuss the differences between the attributes of teachers that are required at the two levels.

Data Collection, Instruments and Procedures

The sources of our data were both primary and secondary. Primary sources were: (a) the teachers conducting training for adult learners aging from 21 to 55, and (b) the learners of those teachers. Research work focusing on the impact of the attitude of the teachers on the motivation of the learners in the language acquisition process was the secondary data source.

The qualitative research approach assisted us in drawing a conclusion based on class observation and focus group discussions (FGD) with learners and teachers. The observation and FGDs provided information on teachers' and learners' experiences and opinions regarding their roles in the English acquisition process. The set of questions is shared in Annex 1 and 2 that guided the interview with teachers and learners. The second instrument of collecting data was observing the language classes of the teachers who took part in the FGDs. An observation rubric used is shared in Annex 3.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Learners' Involvement in Language Development Program

Data from the survey and FGDs revealed that most of the learners in language development courses had Bangla as their medium of education at least till their higher secondary level and the need for EFL development was identified mostly by the authorities in their professional lives. This had brought additional distress in them as the learners believed that this assumption about their ability would impact their career graphs. Teachers believed that this slowed down learners' progress. This anxiety also added to the attitude of the learners to the whole learning process in a slightly negative way and learners constantly looked for loopholes to blame on for the slow progress.

The exact opposite scenario was also witnessed by teachers of these courses. Teachers shared that if learners were confident irrespective of the level of their language skills, they

acquired English faster, and their growth was usually noticed by their office authorities. Teachers also shared that some learners, who had not been selected by their management on the basis of their English skills but had joined through self-initiation, performed much better than those who had been selected by management. These learners showed a favorable attitude towards learning which resulted in better performance in the final assessment. So teachers needed to apply their quotient of empathetic nature which was required more for the learners with added anxiety and negative attitude towards the development process.

The attitude of the learners who self-financed their enrolment in the language development programs could not be categorized under any group considering their attitude towards the process of learning. Every individual who sponsored their own admission usually behaved according to their own personalities, individual circumstances, and demands of the situation. The more urgent the need was, the more sincere they were which sometimes backfired due to the anxiety that got added. Surprisingly, even the amount they invested could not guarantee constant sincerity. Teachers shared frustration with these types of learners because no matter how much teachers tried to design additional support for them, very rarely the involvement had improved. The only exceptions that the teachers mentioned were from their involvement with other courses (courses that were not a part of observation for this research) where learners enrolled before sitting for an international test for language assessment. Learners of those courses were usually more sincere, regular, participative, and enthusiastic about their progress. Even though anxiety played a role in their performance during the actual test, the learning process was met with sincere learners who invested both money and time of their own. The empathy of teachers to surpass their limitations was in most cases acknowledged through appreciation from learners.

Teachers strongly believed that the dynamics of teaching at an adult learners' class was completely different from teaching any class below tertiary level; so were the needs for attributes of teachers. The quality of good teachers at both levels did not necessarily had to be similar. For example, being a teacher with strict rules and policies might bring wonders with students at schools but would generate distressing results in adult learners' classes. Sensitivity towards learners' self-esteem should be put at a higher rank than any other aspect in terms of importance.

Relationship between Teachers' Profiles and Their Attitude towards Learners' Struggles

All the teachers mentioned that their passion for teaching and helping people in achieving goals was what had brought them to this profession. Except for one teacher, all teachers were conducting classes as their part-time jobs. Both Group A and Group B teachers claimed that they understood the struggle that their learners had been going through in acquiring English at such a late age where they already had left their best time to acquire a new language. This understanding was the driving factor behind modifying the methodology, plan, and resources after the learners' backgrounds were recognized. Aged teachers were assessed as hard-working while younger teachers were assessed as creative and spontaneous. Some Group A teachers claimed that in most cases they felt that the struggles were more with the limitation of time and span of attention whereas Group B teachers felt it was with the age of the learners.

Teachers whose efforts were more visible were also recognized by their learners, irrespective of the group they belonged to. Most of the teachers from both groups ignored grammatical mistakes during speaking activities but gave feedback on written works. Some rephrased sentences of learners. All Group B teachers mentioned that they incorporated differentiated activities in a structured way for weak learners while Group A teachers spontaneously made changes in their plans when required.

Most of the Group A teachers were very confident about their performances and not much concerned about their evaluation while all the group B teachers mentioned that they went through the evaluation filled up by learners in detail and kept notes for future refinement.

Admittedly, it was difficult to measure the empathy teachers had towards the learners in observed sessions, but the interaction between teachers and learners, the enthusiasm of learners in the classroom, the support for weak learners indicated the presence of teachers' empathy towards the learners' struggles. The FGDs also gave the opportunity to understand teachers' concept of empathy and its importance in the learning process. While group A teachers mentioned that it was not necessary to go through a very similar experience of acquiring L2 to have empathy towards learners' struggle and can be generated from interpersonal skill, knowledge, and experience of teaching, Group B teachers felt that sharing a similar experience had helped them design and conduct classes more effectively. Group A and B both groups of teachers mentioned that planning differentiated activities according to learners' needs and circumstances and sharing resources according to the same gave learners the support that they actually needed.

Teachers' Behaviors that Reflected the Presence or Absence of Empathy

In the FGD, learners commonly mentioned "respect", "appreciation", "good listening skills", and "patience", "positive behaviors" as teacher virtues (Cooper, 2002) that had contributed to their progress. The other behavior that learners found motivating was the acceptance of learners' limitations in acquiring English which ranged from time or effort to lack of energy or dedication due to their overwhelming responsibilities in professional and personal lives.

Some example of gestures that reflected empathy in teachers was putting hands on shoulders of the same sex learners (Cooper, 2002), giving time to the learners who came in late, allowing few extra minutes to nervous learners while they performed in front of everyone, giving additional time to learners who were late for valid reasons, etc. These indicated that teachers were aware of the situation that the learners faced. It was also noticed that these teachers were able to communicate their intended emotions to their learners through appropriate vocal tones and gestures.

Learners mentioned that the sarcasm their teacher used in the classrooms very seldom worked in creating a happy environment and usually backfired. Learners also felt strongly demotivated and offended when teachers portrayed any distrust in learners, even light-heartedly. Teachers' accusation regarding any kind of "failure" (like, incomplete assignments) added stress to the already difficult process of EFL acquisition.

Strategies that Reflected the Presence or Absence of Empathy

Giving attention to learners' struggling areas always guaranteed better performance of learners (Numanee, Zafar, Karim & Ismail, 2020). Some teachers mentioned how choosing the right strategy of addressing mistakes could positively impact the learning process. Similarly, they mentioned of the adverse impact due to the wrong strategy. Most of the teachers (mainly Group A) did not address the mistakes in speaking but did so with written work. Some teachers rephrased sentences. One particular teacher seemed to have a very cordial relationship with learners who graciously accepted their mistakes which he had addressed.

Asking for learners' opinions on resources (movies, books, articles) or activities, time, methodologies (pair or group activity, etc.) gave learners a sense of belongingness. One or two teachers mentioned, sitting with weaker learners to find out about what they liked to do in order

to design differentiated tasks for them made them feel intrigued to participate. Having a one-to-one discussion with different learners stimulated their motivation; this strategy or its slightly adjusted versions also brought positive results from insincere or de-motivated learners.

Teachers' Opinions about Empathy's Influence on the Acquisition Process

All the teachers agreed that empathy was the key to creating connections with their learners and helped them achieve L2 skills. Group B teachers were able to quickly relate to the areas where learners in their classes struggled, and they time to time referred to their similar experiences. Some group B teachers discussed the learning strategies that failed them.

Learners could relate more to teachers with similar work experiences as they felt that teachers understood their limitations better. Teachers' flexibility and patience were often recognized by learners—especially toward Group B teachers. Some Group B teachers were seen to spend additional time during class breaks to help learners with activities which they could not match with others; one Group A teacher was seen to be doing the same thing.

Teachers' Empathy in Dealing with Learners' Ego

Ego played a crucial role in a classroom with adult learners. A full-proof lesson plan, or personality traits such as empathy, sincerity, respect, or being on alert could not sometimes 'fuse the time bomb of the chance of hurting the ego' of learners. Though Morris (2016) talked about various techniques that can make learners revise and revive their work in non-threatening, effective ways, teachers mentioned their interesting experiences about encountering learners' ego. They found that being too empathetic and giving too much attention could also provoke unpleasant responses. Some learners shut themselves down as an aftermath of this perception of their egos getting hurt. Since each learner's personality was uniquely shaped over time through experience, a learner might feel offended by a genuinely inoffensive action—despite a teacher's maintaining the general guideline of being respectful. No matter how empathetic the teacher was, it was difficult to be ultra-careful with learners which ultimately took away the spontaneity of a teacher.

Teachers who keenly observed the relationships in the classroom and also set ground rules focusing on respecting, helping, and motivating others were able to create a safe zone for learners, eventually achieving better learner progress.

Absence of Empathy in Classroom

Some classes did not show significant signs of empathy. The reason could be related to the profiles of Group A teachers with no prior significant struggles with language acquisition or to not having extensive experience of teaching adult learners. And the lower degree of empathetic features in those classes generated some signs of boredom and frustrations in learners (Cooper, 2002). But the absence could be an isolated episode and not a regular scenario. Also, there could be multiple reasons for the lack of empathetic signs. It could be either be a stressful day for the teacher or the past behavior of the learners might have provoked a nonchalant behavior from the teacher. So it would be unfair to consider that empathy was completely absent in that class.

Reflection of Teachers' Empathy on Learners' Behavior

Incorporating activities related to empathy might assist students to be more humanitarian in the learning process (Numanee, Zafar, Karim, Ismail, 2020). Some teachers from both groups A and B tried to instill manners in their students; sometimes in subtle ways and sometimes through

instructions. Group B teachers intensely motivated strong learners to work with their weaker peers.

Teachers' patience with learners was reflected in learners' behavior in some classes which resulted into a safe environment where learners could correct their peers' mistakes without offending them. Confident conversations were observed more in Group B teachers' classes. Group A teachers were more friendly with strong learners and comparatively formal with weak learners. In some classes within this group, the stronger learners were seen as more enthusiastic in performing activities which allowed the weaker learners to get away by not performing. Teamwork was not very visible in these classes and these dynamics among learners were possibly a reflection of the dynamics between teachers and weaker learners.

Whether Too Much Empathy was Bad for EFL Learning Process

Teachers were mostly undecided but agreed that empathy created a positive impact on English acquisition process but the extent of empathy was sometimes not well-defined. It depended on factors like knowing the learners and their personality traits. Understanding when to be strict or flexible was a teacher trait that helped teachers to set the scale for the extent of empathy they needed to administer.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Empathy, as predicted by researchers, will have a firm contribution to the development of the upcoming teaching strategies (Numanee, Zafar, Karim & Ismail, 2020). It was observed from this research that teachers' empathy played a major role in adult learners' EFL acquisition. The empathetic relationships created between teachers and learners through fun/humor, and other features had impact on the acquisition process of learners (Cooper, 2002). And this empathy, within and outside the classroom set up, did influence the progress of adult learners' L2 learning. Factors like access to resources, learning from peers, and learning from the environment were provided and supported by teachers. Learners' actions in learning played a strong role as well. At the same time, this could also be said that how much effort and time would be invested by learners could also be influenced by teachers' effort, time, dedication, and empathy. Understanding learners' circumstances could vastly contribute to how a teacher foresaw the path to learners' progress. An intrinsic and powerful factor in the quality of teacher learner relationships (Cooper 2002), empathy—along with a blend of behaviors, strategies, and approaches—could help learners in removing the obstacles that they faced while acquiring EFL after they had passed their critical learning age.

It would be a risky venture to assume that teachers will be always empathetic towards learners' struggles in acquiring EFL. Rather funds should be utilized, plans should be developed and time should be allowed to train teachers that will equip them to understand not only the needs of the learners but also their circumstances that add to the latter are struggles. To put empathy into practice, diverse institutional inputs induce an individual to inculcate empathy (Numanee, Zafar, Karim, Ismail, 2020). And repetitive training can also build up this crucial trait of teachers that will ensure that teachers are putting in the right blend of dedication, effort, intelligence, and empathy that best serves the learners' needs in acquiring EFL.

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Appendices

Basic questions and the ones for starting conversations were omitted. .

Annex 1: Observation rubric for language classrooms to assess the impact of teachers' empathy towards adult learners' struggle in acquiring EFL

Teacher attributes:	
Was the teacher friendly and approachable?	
What indicated the presence of teachers' empathy?	
What approach did the teacher take to attend to errors and mistakes?	
Did the teacher offer extra tutorial hours for weak learners?	
How was the teacher attending the nervous learners, if any?	
Activities:	
Were the activities catering to the different learning styles?	
Were the activities offering opportunities for weak learners to perform?	
Were the activities challenging enough for high performers?	
Orientation:	
If it was a learner-centric class then to what extent learners were taking a lead	
Learners' attributes:	
Were the learners respectful towards other learners, especially the weak ones?	
How was the teamwork among learners?	
Learner performance (at the 1st observation session):	
Were the learners motivated in the class?	
Were fellow learners answering their fellows' questions?	
Learner performance (at the last observation session):	
Was any learner nervous during the activities or lecture?	

How much the class have progressed in general	
Is there any behavioral change in learners	
Materials:	
Were the materials sensitive towards culture, race, and gender?	
Was there any extra material for the weaker or nervous learners, if there was any?	
Progress of learners:	
Was the progress of learners at par with the expectation of teachers?	
Did the learners seem more confident?	

Annex 2: FGD with learners of language classrooms to assess the impact of teachers' empathy towards adult learners' struggles in acquiring EFL

1. Why are you interested to learn English at this point of time?
2. Did you get enrolled in this course by own choice or by your management's selection?
3. Do you find this stressful? Why or why not?
4. What do you feel about the behavior and attitudes of your teacher?
5. Are your teachers approachable as regards any problems?
6. How does your teacher help you in correcting your mistakes?
7. Do you help other learners who are struggling in the classroom?
8. Does your teacher share ideas to apply outside the classroom in order to develop your English skills?
9. Does your teacher suggest you to take help from your classmates?

Annex 3: FGD with teachers of language classrooms to assess the impact of teachers' empathy towards adult learners' struggles in acquiring EFL

1. Do you find teaching adult learners as a stressful job?
2. Do you think it is difficult for learners to learn English at this level?
3. Did you yourself face any problems while learning English?
4. What are the main difficulties you face in ensuring progress in learners?
5. How do you appreciate the progress or the achievements of your learners?
6. What are you opinions about empathy's influence on learners' acquisition process?

7. Do you learners display egoistic attitudes inside classroom? If so, in what ways? How do you usually deal with it?
8. Do you find any reflection of your empathetic attitude on learners' behavior?
9. Do you feel if too much empathy was bad for EFL learning process?
10. What do you think what kind of supports they need in the classroom to develop their skill further?