

PAPER

Exploring Digital Empathy in Vietnamese Tertiary EFL Education: Perspectives of Teachers across Career Stages

Hua Hong Hieu()
Le Thanh Thao

Can Tho University,
Can Tho city, Vietnam

hhiieu@ctu.edu.vn

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the roles of learners' digital empathy in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, focusing on the perspectives of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers. Amidst the increasing integration of digital tools in education, understanding the impact of digital empathy—empathetic engagement facilitated by digital platforms—becomes crucial, especially in language learning contexts. The study utilized semi-structured interviews with nine Vietnamese EFL teachers, who represented different career stages (novice, mid-career, and near-end), from two tertiary institutions. Thematic analysis revealed that digital empathy significantly enhances student engagement and the effectiveness of language learning. Teachers at all career stages emphasized the importance of understanding and addressing students' emotional needs in digital environments. The study contributes to the existing literature by providing insights into the integration of digital empathy in EFL teaching, highlighting its importance across various teaching experiences.

KEYWORDS

career stages, digital empathy, Vietnamese tertiary EFL education

1 INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, especially within Vietnamese tertiary institutions, the integration of digital tools has led to a significant shift in teaching methodologies and learning experiences [1]. At the heart of this shift is the emergence of digital empathy, a concept that combines technological proficiency with empathetic engagement in digital environments [2]. This study focuses on understanding how Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers perceive the role of digital empathy in enhancing language learning and teaching. Digital empathy, recognized for its combination of digital literacy and empathetic communication, is increasingly viewed as a crucial element in the field of EFL education [3]. It involves learners' ability not only to navigate digital platforms effectively but also to engage in meaningful, empathetic interactions within these virtual spaces. In the specific context of

Hieu, H.H., Thao, L.T. (2024). Exploring Digital Empathy in Vietnamese Tertiary EFL Education: Perspectives of Teachers across Career Stages. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning (iJET)*, 19(4), pp. 58–70. <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v19i04.48061>

Article submitted 2024-01-18. Revision uploaded 2024-02-21. Final acceptance 2024-02-21.

© 2024 by the authors of this article. Published under CC-BY.

Vietnam, where there is a growing emphasis on English proficiency as a key to global integration, understanding the implications of digital empathy becomes crucial [4]. The tertiary level of education, a critical phase for language acquisition and professional preparation, presents a unique opportunity to explore how digital empathy can shape and enrich the EFL learning experience. This study seeks to explore the perceptions of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers regarding the impact of digital empathy on creating a more engaging and effective language learning environment. The insights gained from this exploration are expected to make a significant contribution to the field of EFL pedagogy, especially in digitally-enhanced learning environments. They offer valuable perspectives for educators and policymakers in similar educational contexts.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Digital empathy in education

Digital empathy represents an emerging and increasingly relevant concept in the realm of educational theory. It is defined as the ability to understand, empathize with, and appropriately respond to the emotions of others through digital communication channels [5]. This concept has gained prominence in the context of a rapidly digitalizing educational landscape, where interactions between educators, students, and peers are frequently mediated through screens.

The significance of digital empathy in online education was notably emphasized in a study by [6], which highlighted its critical role in fostering supportive and inclusive learning environments. This research suggests that digital empathy goes beyond mere technological proficiency; it involves cultivating an emotionally attuned virtual space conducive to learning. Similarly, Yu et al. [7] explored the dimensions of digital empathy in enhancing student engagement. They found that empathetic teacher-student interactions in online settings can lead to increased student motivation and a deeper connection to the learning material.

Carrier et al. [8] further expanded on these findings by examining the impact of digital empathy on both cognitive and affective learning outcomes. Their study underscored how digital empathy could act as a bridge, mitigating the emotional distance often experienced in online learning environments. This research suggests that when educators demonstrate digital empathy, students are more likely to actively participate, engage deeply with the content, and experience higher levels of satisfaction with their learning experience.

These studies collectively establish a foundational understanding of the pivotal role of digital empathy in educational contexts, particularly where digital interaction is the primary mode of communication. In the digital era, it is suggested that the ability to convey and interpret emotional cues effectively in a virtual setting is just as important as traditional pedagogical skills. As such, digital empathy is not merely a supplementary skill but a core component of effective teaching and learning in modern educational environments. This evolving understanding of digital empathy signals a paradigm shift in educational theory, placing greater emphasis on the emotional and relational aspects of learning in digital spaces.

2.2 EFL education and empathy

Empathy plays a crucial role in language education, especially in EFL settings, going beyond mere linguistic competence. It involves gaining a deeper understanding

and appreciation of cultural nuances and differences, which are essential for effective learning and communication in a foreign language. The works of [9, 10] have been instrumental in highlighting how empathy facilitates not only language acquisition but also intercultural understanding.

Drewelow and Finney's [9] study explored the dynamics of empathy in multicultural classroom settings. They found that EFL teachers who demonstrated higher levels of empathy towards their students' cultural backgrounds were more successful in creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment. This environment, in turn, fostered better language comprehension and communication skills among students, as they felt more understood and valued in their linguistic journey.

Patel et al. [10] expanded this discussion by exploring the role of empathy in overcoming language barriers. The study indicated that empathy enables learners and educators to transcend the basic mechanics of language learning, such as grammar and vocabulary, and to engage more deeply with the cultural and emotional contexts of language use. This deeper engagement not only enhances linguistic proficiency but also fosters a greater appreciation for the cultural diversity inherent in language learning.

These insights are particularly relevant in the digital era, where EFL education often takes place through online platforms. The concept of digital empathy becomes even more critical in this context, as it can bridge the physical distance and foster a sense of connection and understanding between teachers and learners in virtual classrooms. Thus, empathy, in both its traditional and digital forms, is emerging as a key component in effective EFL education. It plays a vital role in not only improving language skills but also in nurturing global citizens who are culturally sensitive and empathetic communicators.

2.3 Vietnamese tertiary EFL education

The landscape of EFL education in Vietnam, particularly at the tertiary level, has undergone significant transformations in recent years, largely influenced by the country's rapid economic development and global integration. This evolution has been marked by an increasing emphasis on English language proficiency as a key to unlocking global opportunities. Research in this area, notably by scholars [11, 12], sheds light on the current dynamics and future trajectories of Vietnamese tertiary EFL education.

Gruba and Chau Nguyen [11] provided a comprehensive overview of the state of EFL education in Vietnamese universities and colleges. They highlighted the dual nature of the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating digital tools into language learning. On the one hand, digital technologies have opened up new avenues for interactive and flexible learning experiences, making language education more accessible and engaging. On the other hand, the study highlighted issues such as the digital divide, the varying quality of online teaching resources, and the necessity for teachers to undergo professional development in digital pedagogies.

Phuong [12] further elaborated on these themes by focusing on the technological advancements within Vietnamese EFL classrooms. The research emphasized how these advancements have reshaped teaching methodologies, moving away from traditional, lecture-based approaches to more interactive, student-centered learning experiences. The study also highlighted the positive impact of these technological integrations on student engagement, noting that interactive digital tools and platforms have facilitated more active participation and deeper involvement

from students in their language learning process. However, Phuong [12] also cautioned against the uncritical adoption of technology, underscoring the need for pedagogical strategies that effectively harness technological tools to enhance language learning without compromising the quality of education. This includes addressing challenges such as ensuring equitable access to technology, providing adequate training for teachers, and fostering digital literacy among students.

These insights into Vietnamese tertiary EFL education underscore the critical role of technology in modern language teaching and learning. They also highlight the need for a balanced approach that maximizes the benefits of digital tools while mitigating their potential drawbacks. As Vietnam continues to navigate its path in the global educational landscape, these studies offer valuable guidance on leveraging technology to enhance the quality and effectiveness of EFL education, preparing students not only linguistically but also culturally for the demands of a globalized world.

2.4 Teachers' role and career stages in fostering digital empathy

The crucial role of teachers in fostering digital empathy within the context of Vietnamese EFL education has been the subject of significant research, particularly in the works of [13, 14]. Their studies have delved into the strategies and practices adopted by teachers in online and blended learning environments, highlighting how the effective nurturing of digital empathy is closely tied to the teachers' skills and methodologies.

García-Pérez et al. [13] emphasized the importance of teacher training in digital empathy. The study revealed that many teachers, while adept at traditional teaching methods, often faced challenges in translating their empathetic skills to digital platforms. This gap underscored the need for targeted professional development programs that focus not just on technological proficiency but also on the emotional aspects of online teaching. The authors suggested that such training should include modules on understanding and interpreting digital communication cues, strategies for building rapport in virtual settings, and methods to create emotionally supportive online learning communities.

Wallin et al. [14] took this concept further by examining how teachers at different career stages approach the development of digital empathy. The findings indicated that novice teachers, being more native to digital technologies, adapted more quickly to online empathetic engagement. However, they sometimes lacked the depth of pedagogical experience required to fully leverage this empathy for educational purposes. Mid-career teachers, on the other hand, showed a balance of technological savvy and pedagogical depth but often required support to update their digital skills. Near-end teachers possessed rich pedagogical insights but faced the steepest learning curve in adapting to digital tools. This study highlighted the need for differentiated professional development programs that cater to the specific needs and strengths of teachers at various career stages.

Together, these studies illuminate the multifaceted nature of fostering digital empathy in EFL education, emphasizing that teacher training should be a nuanced process, considering both technological and emotional intelligence aspects. They advocate for a comprehensive approach to professional development, one that equips teachers with the necessary skills to navigate the digital landscape empathetically and effectively, regardless of their career stage. This focus on teachers' professional growth is pivotal for the successful integration of digital empathy in

EFL education, ultimately enhancing the quality and effectiveness of language teaching in an increasingly digital world.

3 METHODS

3.1 Research design

In this study, we adopted a qualitative approach to explore the perspectives of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers on the role of digital empathy in language teaching and learning. The choice of a qualitative methodology was driven by the aim of gaining in-depth, contextualized insights into the experiences and perceptions of teachers, which quantitative methods might not fully capture.

This study is underpinned by two primary theoretical frameworks, each of which contributes a distinct perspective to our understanding of digital empathy in the context of Vietnamese tertiary EFL education. The first framework centers on the concept of digital empathy, which is integral to this research. Digital empathy is examined through the lens of broader theories of empathy in education and digital communication [5, 6, 7, 8]. This approach is particularly relevant in the field of language education, where understanding and effective communication are paramount. The framework explores how empathetic understanding and interactions, crucial in traditional educational settings, are facilitated or transformed within digital learning environments. It addresses the nuances of conveying empathy through digital channels, which is a relatively new and evolving aspect of educational interaction.

The second theoretical foundation of the study is rooted in sociocultural theory, particularly the ideas proposed by [15]. His notion of learning as a socially mediated process is particularly pertinent. This perspective underscores the significance of social interaction and the cultural context in the process of learning. It aligns seamlessly with the study's focus on exploring how digital tools and empathetic engagement in EFL teaching are shaped by and responsive to the specific socio-cultural milieu of Vietnamese tertiary education. By integrating this theoretical lens, the study acknowledges the influence of social and cultural factors not only on language learning but also on how digital empathy is expressed and perceived in an educational setting. Thus, these two frameworks together provide a comprehensive theoretical base, facilitating a deeper understanding of the roles and dynamics of digital empathy in the specific context of Vietnamese EFL education.

3.2 Participants

In the Participants section of this study, we focused on a purposive sample of nine Vietnamese EFL teachers. These participants were selected from two distinct tertiary education institutions in Vietnam, ensuring a diverse range of insights and experiences. To capture a broad spectrum of teaching experiences and perspectives, the participants were categorized based on their career stage: three novice teachers, who were in the early years of their teaching careers; three mid-career teachers, who had a substantial amount of teaching experience but were not yet in the later stages of their careers; and three near-end career teachers, who had extensive experience and were approaching the end of their professional teaching careers.

This stratification allowed for a comparative analysis across different stages of teaching careers, providing a more nuanced understanding of how perceptions and implementations of digital empathy in EFL teaching might evolve over time.

Ethical considerations were paramount in this study. Prior to conducting the interviews, all participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the nature of their involvement, and how the data would be used. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, ensuring that no personal identifiers would be included in any publications or presentations arising from the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with the assurance that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any adverse consequences. Additionally, ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional review boards, ensuring that all research activities were conducted in accordance with ethical standards and guidelines for research involving human subjects. This careful attention to ethical issues was crucial in maintaining the integrity of the research and ensuring the welfare and rights of all participants were respected throughout the study.

3.3 Data collection

In this study, we employed semi-structured interviews as the primary method for gathering data. This approach was chosen for its flexibility, allowing for in-depth exploration while providing a structured framework for consistency across interviews. Prior to the main data collection phase, a pilot study was conducted with two Vietnamese EFL teachers who were not included in the final sample. The purpose of the pilot study was to test the interview protocol, ensuring the clarity and relevance of the questions. Based on the feedback and observations from this initial phase, necessary revisions were made to the interview questions to enhance their effectiveness and pertinence to the study's objectives. Some of the refined interview questions included inquiries such as, "How do you perceive the role of digital empathy in your EFL teaching practice?" and "Can you share examples of how you integrate digital empathy into your teaching strategies?" These questions were designed to elicit detailed responses about the participants' experiences and perceptions regarding digital empathy in the EFL context.

The interviews, conducted at a time and place convenient for the participants, varied in length, typically ranging from 45 to 60 minutes. This duration was deemed sufficient to delve into the subject matter deeply without causing fatigue or disengagement. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, the native language of both the participants and the interviewer, to ensure comfort and fluency in communication. This choice was crucial for capturing nuanced responses and facilitating a more natural and open discussion. For participants who were more comfortable or expressive in English, the option to respond in English was available, although none of the participants chose this option. To ensure accuracy and thoroughness in data analysis, all interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Subsequently, these recordings were transcribed verbatim. The use of the participants' native language in the interviews necessitated careful translation of the transcripts into English for analysis purposes. This translation was done by bilingual researchers, ensuring that the nuances and subtleties of the participants' responses were accurately captured in the English translations. This meticulous approach to data collection and preparation was essential for ensuring the reliability and validity of the findings derived from the interviews.

3.4 Data analysis

For the data analysis process, we utilized thematic analysis to systematically examine the data collected from the semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen for its effectiveness in identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data [16, 17]. The process of thematic analysis began with a careful and thorough reading of all the transcribed interviews to gain an initial understanding of the depth and breadth of the content. Following this, the data was meticulously coded. Coding involved identifying segments of text that represented distinct ideas or concepts relevant to the study's research questions. These codes were then collated into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined in an iterative process.

This review process involved two main steps: firstly, checking the coded extracts against each theme to ensure consistency and coherency; and secondly, considering the validity of individual themes in relation to the entire data set. This rigorous approach ensured that the themes accurately reflected the nuances and complexities of the participants' perspectives on digital empathy in EFL teaching. Once the themes were established, the next step involved defining and naming them. This phase was critical in interpreting the significance of the patterns and their broader implications in relation to the research questions and the theoretical framework of the study. The final thematic map comprised a set of interrelated themes that provided a detailed and nuanced understanding of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers' perceptions of digital empathy.

To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the analysis, a peer review process was employed. Colleagues with expertise in qualitative research and EFL education were invited to review the coding scheme and the derived themes. This peer review process helped validate the analysis and ensure that the findings were grounded in the data. Throughout the data analysis phase, we maintained a reflexive approach, being mindful of our own biases and perspectives as researchers. This reflexivity was critical in ensuring that the analysis remained focused on the participants' views and experiences rather than our interpretations or preconceptions.

In summary, the thematic analysis of the interview data provided rich, detailed insights into the role of digital empathy in Vietnamese tertiary EFL education, as perceived by the teachers themselves. This methodological approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the complex and multifaceted nature of digital empathy in the context of language teaching and learning.

4 FINDINGS

The impact of digital empathy on creating a more engaging and effective language learning environment was discussed by all participant groups, including novice, mid-career, and near-end teachers, highlighting its universal relevance across different stages of teaching experience.

One novice teacher emphasized the role of digital empathy in enhancing student engagement: "I have noticed that when I acknowledge students' emotions and struggles in online settings, their engagement levels rise." "They participate more actively in discussions." Digital empathy refers to the ability to recognize and respond to emotional cues in digital communications. In the context of the novice teacher's observation, this concept becomes particularly significant. The teacher notes an increase in student engagement when acknowledging their emotions and struggles in an online

setting. This is a prime example of digital empathy in action. By recognizing and responding to the emotional states of students, the teacher creates an environment where students feel understood and valued, even in a virtual space. This emotional connection, facilitated through digital empathy, encourages students to participate more actively in discussions because they perceive the online environment as safe and empathetic. The sociocultural theory emphasizes the fundamental role of social interaction in cognitive development. According to this theory, learning is deeply embedded in social contexts and is often mediated through social interactions. Applying this perspective to the novice teacher's observation, it becomes evident that acknowledging students' emotions and struggles is not just a matter of empathy but also a crucial component of the learning process. When students feel emotionally supported and understood, they are more likely to engage in social interactions, which are essential for learning, especially in language acquisition. From this perspective, the teacher's approach improves the quality of social interaction in the learning environment, thus enabling more effective learning experiences.

A mid-career teacher shared insights on the effectiveness of empathy-driven teaching: "Empathy in our digital classrooms helps us tailor our lessons more effectively to students' needs. It is about understanding them beyond the screen." The teacher's statement emphasizes the role of digital empathy in creating more personalized and effective teaching strategies. Digital empathy in this context goes beyond mere emotional recognition; it involves a deeper understanding of the students' needs, preferences, and challenges in a digital classroom setting. By acknowledging and addressing these aspects, teachers can tailor their lessons to be more in tune with their students' requirements. This approach is crucial in online education, where physical cues are absent and understanding the student often relies on subtle digital interactions. Empathy-driven teaching, therefore, becomes a critical skill, enabling educators to bridge the gap imposed by the digital medium and connect more profoundly with their students. The sociocultural theory framework further enriches our understanding of the effectiveness of empathy-driven teaching. According to this theory, learning is a social process that is significantly influenced by cultural and emotional contexts. When teachers incorporate empathy into their teaching methods, they acknowledge and respect the cultural and emotional backgrounds of their students. This approach aligns with the sociocultural emphasis on the importance of context in learning. By understanding the cultural and emotional contexts of learners, teachers can create learning experiences that are not only more engaging but also more meaningful and relevant to students' lives. This relevance is crucial to motivating students and improving their learning outcomes.

From a near-end teacher's viewpoint, the long-term impact of digital empathy is evident: "In my years of teaching, incorporating empathy into digital platforms has consistently improved language learning outcomes." Students seem to grasp concepts better when they feel understood and supported. The experience highlights the sustained benefits of digital empathy in teaching, especially in the context of language education. Over the years of teaching, the integration of empathy into digital platforms has been observed to consistently enhance learning outcomes. This is primarily because empathy allows educators to connect with students on a more personal level, fostering a supportive and understanding environment. In language learning, where expression and comprehension are key, the role of empathy becomes even more significant. When students feel that their linguistic efforts and challenges are acknowledged and understood, they are more likely to engage actively and take risks in their language use, which is essential for language acquisition. From a sociocultural theory perspective, the teacher's reflection near the end

emphasizes the significance of empathetic teacher-student interactions in language learning. Sociocultural theory posits that learning is a socially mediated process and is strongly influenced by interaction with more knowledgeable individuals. In the context of language education, empathetic interactions have become a powerful tool for teachers. These interactions provide a safe and nurturing environment that encourages students to explore and experiment with the language. This supportive setting is vital for language learners as it helps them internalize language concepts more effectively, facilitating deeper understanding and retention.

In conclusion, the impact of digital empathy on creating a more engaging and effective language learning environment emerged as a key theme across all teacher groups. However, teachers at different stages of their careers offer unique perspectives and applications of digital empathy and sociocultural theory in education. While novice teachers might focus on the immediate impacts of empathy in digital settings, mid-career educators tend to develop more sophisticated and personalized approaches. In contrast, teachers nearing the end of their careers provide insights into the long-term effectiveness of empathetic teaching strategies. This progression reflects a deepening understanding and increased application of these theoretical frameworks in educational settings, highlighting the dynamic nature of teaching and learning.

5 DISCUSSION

Our finding that digital empathy enhances student engagement and participation aligns with existing studies that emphasize the importance of emotional connection in online learning environments [18, 19]. However, our study extends this understanding by specifically focusing on the EFL context and highlighting the role of teachers at different career stages. This provides a more nuanced understanding of how digital empathy operates across different levels of teaching experience, an aspect less explored in previous research.

The insights from a mid-career teacher about empathy-driven teaching contributing to more effective lesson tailoring resonate with the findings of previous studies [20, 21], which emphasized the importance of teacher empathy in understanding student needs. However, our study's emphasis on digital contexts adds a new dimension to this understanding, highlighting the specific challenges and strategies relevant to online EFL teaching environments. This contribution is significant in the current era of digital education, where understanding the nuances of digital empathy is essential. From the perspective of near-end teachers, our study echoes the findings of previous studies [22, 23], which found that experienced teachers often use empathy to enhance learning outcomes. However, our study differs by demonstrating how this leverage is adapted to digital platforms, providing a new perspective on the application of empathy in evolving teaching contexts.

Furthermore, the observations of novice teachers regarding the impact of digital empathy on improving student engagement in online environments can be viewed as an expansion and intensification of the conclusions drawn from previous research. The novice teachers' focus on acknowledging students' emotions and struggles in online settings and its positive impact on engagement levels adds a foundational layer to our understanding. This aligns with the studies [20, 21] that emphasize the importance of teacher empathy in understanding student needs. However, the novice teachers' emphasis on the digital context specifically addresses the unique challenges of online EFL teaching environments. This perspective is vital in today's digital

education landscape, where the nuances of digital empathy become increasingly significant. The ability of novice teachers to quickly adapt to and leverage digital platforms for empathetic teaching reflects a growing trend and necessity in modern education. Moreover, this understanding from the viewpoint of novice teachers complements the insights derived from mid-career and near-end teachers. While mid-career teachers demonstrate a more advanced application of empathy in lesson customization and experienced teachers exhibit a sustained integration of empathy in education, novice teachers offer a fresh perspective on the immediate impact of digital empathy. This is particularly relevant in light of the findings of [22, 23], which highlighted the use of empathy by experienced teachers to enhance learning outcomes. Our study expands on this by illustrating how empathetic approaches are uniquely adapted and applied in digital teaching contexts.

Our findings also intersect with the broader theoretical frameworks of digital empathy and sociocultural theory. While previous studies have acknowledged the role of empathy in educational settings [24, 25], our research provides specific insights into how digital empathy is implemented and perceived by EFL teachers in the Vietnamese context. This focus on a specific cultural and educational setting adds depth to the existing literature, offering a unique contribution by contextualizing digital empathy within the sociocultural dynamics of Vietnam.

6 CONCLUSION

The study aimed to investigate the roles of learners' digital empathy in EFL education, particularly from the viewpoints of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers. This exploration was grounded in the recognition of the increasing significance of digital platforms in education and the crucial role empathy plays in effective teaching and learning processes. The study was conducted against the backdrop of the rapid integration of digital tools in Vietnamese tertiary education, with a focus on understanding how these tools are used to foster empathetic engagement in the EFL context.

Employing a qualitative research design, the study utilized semi-structured interviews to gather data from nine Vietnamese EFL teachers at different points in their careers. These interviews were meticulously designed to elicit detailed insights into the teachers' perceptions and experiences with digital empathy in their teaching practices. The data collected was then analyzed using thematic analysis, which allowed for the identification and exploration of key themes related to digital empathy in EFL education.

The findings revealed that digital empathy plays a significant role in creating more engaging and effective language learning environments. Teachers at all career stages emphasized the significance of recognizing and addressing students' emotional needs in online environments, as this was observed to boost student engagement and participation. These findings have several important implications for the field of EFL education. Firstly, they underscore the need for teacher training programs to incorporate modules on digital empathy, equipping educators with the skills necessary to navigate the emotional landscape of digital classrooms effectively. Secondly, the study emphasizes the significance of creating technological platforms that facilitate empathetic interactions, proposing a partnership between educators and technology developers. Finally, the findings suggest that policymakers should consider the emotional dimensions of digital learning environments when designing curricula and educational policies. It is essential to ensure that the development of digital empathy is an integral part of language education.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the expanding body of literature on digital empathy in education, especially in the context of teaching EFL in Vietnam. By highlighting the perspectives of teachers at different stages of their careers, the study offers a comprehensive view of the opportunities associated with integrating digital empathy into language teaching. The insights gained from this research not only enrich our understanding of digital empathy in EFL education but also provide practical guidance for teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers to enhance the effectiveness of language teaching in the digital age.

7 LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

This study, while offering valuable insights into the role of digital empathy in Vietnamese tertiary EFL education, has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size of nine teachers, although diverse in terms of career stages, is relatively small and limited to two institutions in Vietnam. This limitation restricts the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of EFL teachers in various regions or educational contexts. Additionally, the study focuses exclusively on teachers' perspectives, which provides an incomplete picture of the digital empathy dynamic as it does not include the viewpoints of students who are the recipients of these empathetic practices. Lastly, the reliance on self-reported data through semi-structured interviews may also introduce biases, as participants might provide socially desirable responses or selectively recall their experiences.

Given these limitations, future research in this area could be significantly expanded. Studies involving a larger and more diverse sample of teachers from various geographical regions and types of institutions would provide a more comprehensive understanding of digital empathy in EFL education. Incorporating students' perspectives would also be invaluable, as it would provide a more comprehensive view of the effectiveness and impact of digital empathy in the learning process. Additionally, employing a mixed-methods approach, which combines qualitative insights with quantitative measures, could offer a more comprehensive analysis of the role of digital empathy in language education. Finally, cross-cultural studies comparing the manifestation and impact of digital empathy in different educational and cultural settings would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how digital empathy functions in various global contexts. These recommendations, if pursued, would significantly enhance the field's understanding of digital empathy in EFL education and inform more effective and empathetic teaching practices.

8 REFERENCES

- [1] L. A. T. Nguyen and A. Habók, "Digital literacy of EFL students: An empirical study in Vietnamese universities," *Libri*, vol. 72, no. 1, pp. 53–66, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1515/libri-2020-0165>
- [2] R. Hassan, "Digitality, virtual reality and the 'empathy machine'," *Digital Journalism*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 195–212, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2018.1517604>
- [3] N. Le, *Exploring refugee students' second language (L2) motivational selves through digital visual representations*. University of South Florida, 2020.
- [4] P. M. Tran and K. Tanemura, "English in Vietnam," *World Englishes*, vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 528–541, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12489>

- [5] L. Jiang and J. Gao, "Fostering EFL learners' digital empathy through multimodal composing," *RELC Journal*, vol. 51, no. 1, pp. 70–85, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688219898565>
- [6] A. Duarte, R. Surugiu, M. Moraru, and V. Marinescu, "Digital empathy in online education: A comparison study between Portugal and Romania," *Comunicar*, vol. 31, no. 76, pp. 105–115, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.3916/C76-2023-09>
- [7] J. Yu, G. S. Parsons, D. Lancaster, E. T. Tonkin, and S. Ganesh, "'Walking in their shoes': The effects of an immersive digital story intervention on empathy in nursing students," *Nursing Open*, vol. 8, no. 5, pp. 2813–2823, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nop2.860>
- [8] L. M. Carrier, A. Spradlin, J. P. Bunce, and L. D. Rosen, "Virtual empathy: Positive and negative impacts of going online upon empathy in young adults," *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 52, pp. 39–48, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.05.026>
- [9] I. Drewelow and S. Finney, "Developing intercultural empathy through a strategy-based simulation in intermediate Spanish," *The Language Learning Journal*, vol. 48, no. 6, pp. 754–767, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2018.1448433>
- [10] S. Patel, A. Pelletier-Bui, S. Smith, M. B. Roberts, H. Kilgannon, S. Trzeciak, and B. W. Roberts, "Curricula for empathy and compassion training in medical education: A systematic review," *PloS One*, vol. 14, no. 8, p. e0221412, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0221412>
- [11] P. Gruba and N. B. Chau Nguyen, "Evaluating technology integration in a Vietnamese university language program," *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, vol. 32, nos. 5–6, pp. 619–637, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2018.1527365>
- [12] H. Phuong, "Gamified learning: Are Vietnamese EFL learners ready yet?" *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning (IJET)*, vol. 15, no. 24, pp. 242–251, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v15i24.16667>
- [13] R. García-Pérez, J. M. Santos-Delgado and O. Buzón-García, "Virtual empathy as digital competence in education 3.0," *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, vol. 13, pp. 1–10, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-016-0029-7>
- [14] A. Wallin, P. Nokelainen, and M. Kira, "From thriving developers to stagnant self-doubters: An identity-centered approach to exploring the relationship between digitalization and professional development," *Vocations and Learning*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 285–316, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12186-022-09288-6>
- [15] L. S. Vygotsky, *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press, 1978.
- [16] V. Braun and V. Clarke, *Thematic analysis*. American Psychological Association, 2012.
- [17] V. Braun, V. Clarke, and N. Hayfield, *Thematic analysis: A reflexive approach*. SAGE Publications, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13942-0_2
- [18] M. Cleveland-Innes and P. Campbell, "Emotional presence, learning, and the online learning environment," *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 269–292, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v13i4.1234>
- [19] T. Park and C. Lim, "Design principles for improving emotional affordances in an online learning environment," *Asia Pacific Education Review*, vol. 20, pp. 53–67, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-018-9560-7>
- [20] C. Casale, C. A. Thomas, and T. M. Simmons, "Developing empathetic learners," *Journal of Thought*, vol. 52, nos. 3–4, pp. 3–18, 2018. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90026734>
- [21] D. Roy, *Empathy-driven school systems: Nature, concept and evolution*. Taylor & Francis, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003262268>
- [22] K. Aldrup, B. Carstensen, and U. Klusmann, "Is empathy the key to effective teaching? A systematic review of its association with teacher-student interactions and student outcomes," *Educational Psychology Review*, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 1177–1216, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-021-09649-y>

- [23] L. Z. Jaber, “ ‘He got a glimpse of the joys of understanding’ – The role of epistemic empathy in teacher learning,” *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 433–465, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2021.1936534>
- [24] L. Bialystok and P. Kukar, “Authenticity and empathy in education,” *Theory and Research in Education*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 23–39, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878517746647>
- [25] A. Zeyer and J. Dillon, “The role of empathy for learning in complex Science| Environment| Health contexts,” *International Journal of Science Education*, vol. 41, no. 3, pp. 297–315, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500693.2018.1549371>

9 AUTHORS

Hua Hong Hieu, Can Tho University, Can Tho city, Vietnam (E-mail: hhiieu@ctu.edu.vn).

Le Thanh Thao, Can Tho University, Can Tho city, Vietnam.