

**Research Article**

Vietnamese EFL Teachers' Insights into the Impact of Their Emotional Maturity on Student Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the role of emotional intelligence in educational settings. This is particularly relevant in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching, where educators not only teach a language but also navigate cultural and emotional barriers. The concept of emotional maturity, as a component of emotional intelligence, has gained attention for its potential influence on teaching effectiveness and student outcomes. Therefore, the current qualitative study aimed to investigate Vietnamese EFL teachers' insights into the nuanced relationship between teachers' emotional competencies and their ability to engage students in the learning process.

Methodology: To gather data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine Vietnamese EFL teachers at varying stages of their careers, including novice, mid-career, and near-retirement stages. The study employed thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns within the data, focusing on the impact of teachers' emotional maturity on student engagement.

Results: The thematic analysis yielded three major themes. The first one was the significance of emotional regulation in promoting behavioral engagement in students. The second theme was the role of empathy as a key factor in fostering emotional engagement, and the third theme involved the influence of emotional support in enhancing cognitive engagement. These findings underscore the crucial role of teachers' emotional competencies in facilitating different types of student engagement.

Conclusion: The study concludes that emotional regulation, empathy, and emotional support are pivotal in enhancing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in students, respectively. It highlights the need for teacher training programs to include emotional intelligence training and emphasizes the importance of supporting teachers' emotional well-being in educational institutions. The research offers valuable insights into the intersection of teacher emotional maturity and student engagement, presenting significant implications for educational practices and policies.

1. Introduction

In the dynamic and interactive realm of the classroom, the emotional interplay between educators and learners significantly shapes the educational journey (Khassawneh et al., 2022). This relationship is particularly salient in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings where language barriers can amplify the importance of non-verbal communication and emotional cues. This is

particularly pronounced in the field of EFL education, where effective communication and emotional intelligence are paramount (Oz, 2015; Roohani et al., 2020). Among the various factors influencing the quality of education, the emotional maturity of teachers stands out as a key determinant of student engagement and, by extension, their learning success (Anand, 2017; Srinivasan

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& Pugalenthi, 2019). This study narrows its focus to investigate the perceptions of Vietnamese EFL teachers regarding the influence of their emotional maturity on student engagement within the classroom setting. The emphasis on the Vietnamese context is crucial, considering the unique cultural dynamics and educational traditions that shape the teaching and learning experiences in this region. By concentrating on this specific aspect, the research aims to uncover how emotional competencies among teachers can foster an environment conducive to active and meaningful participation from students.

Emotional maturity in educators, characterized by the ability to adeptly manage personal emotions and understand those of others, is indispensable for nurturing a supportive and responsive classroom environment (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The relevance of emotional maturity is further heightened in EFL settings where cultural differences can pose additional challenges in understanding and managing emotions. This aspect is especially critical in language education, where the essence of teaching and learning is rooted in effective interpersonal communication (Roy, 2016). However, the exploration of how emotional maturity impacts student engagement, particularly within the Vietnamese EFL context, has not been extensively covered in existing literature. This gap underscores the importance of this study's focus, aiming to illuminate the subjective experiences and perceptions of Vietnamese EFL teachers regarding the interplay between their emotional maturity and student classroom engagement.

Student engagement, a multifaceted construct, encompasses the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of students' participation in the learning process (Groccia, 2018). It is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of academic achievement and personal growth within the educational framework (Northey et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2024). Understanding how a teacher's emotional maturity can enhance these aspects of engagement in EFL classrooms is particularly vital. The role of the teacher, equipped with emotional maturity, becomes critically important in cultivating an environment where students feel motivated, valued, and connected to the learning material (Anand, 2017). This study, therefore, zeroes in on the following research question: In what ways do Vietnamese EFL teachers believe their emotional maturity impacts their students' engagement in the classroom?

Employing qualitative methodologies, this research seeks to delve into the nuanced perspectives of Vietnamese EFL teachers on the relationship between their emotional maturity and the level of student engagement in their classrooms. The qualitative approach allows for a deeper exploration of personal experiences and insights that quantitative methods may not fully capture. By focusing on this singular aspect, the study aims to contribute valuable insights into the complex dynamics of teaching and learning, emphasizing the critical role of teacher emotional maturity in enhancing

student engagement. This exploration is not only relevant but also crucial in the context of contemporary EFL education in Vietnam, where fostering effective learning environments is key to achieving educational excellence and positive student outcomes.

1.1. Teacher emotional maturity

Emotional maturity in educators encompasses a broad range of emotional skills and competencies, including self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and social skills. According to Mayer et al. (2001), emotional intelligence is the foundation of emotional maturity, enabling individuals to recognize, understand, manage, and use emotions effectively in interpersonal interactions. Specifically, Mayer et al. (2001) explained that the ability to manage one's emotions contributes to creating a consistent and calm learning environment, while understanding and empathizing with students' emotions can foster a more personalized and engaging teaching approach. For teachers, these competencies are critical for creating a positive learning environment, managing classroom dynamics, and responding to students' emotional and educational needs (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Research has shown that teachers with higher levels of emotional maturity are better equipped to foster a supportive classroom atmosphere, which is conducive to learning and student well-being (Brackett et al., 2012; Rahim, 2023; Sabeena & Rathi, 2015).

1.2. The Role of emotional maturity in education

The role of emotional maturity in education extends beyond classroom management to influence teaching effectiveness and student outcomes. An emotionally mature teacher is more likely to implement pedagogical practices that are responsive to students' emotional states, promoting a sense of belonging and safety in the classroom (Pianta, 1999; Strayhorn, 2018). For example, Strayhorn (2018) highlighted that understanding students' emotional needs can lead teachers to adapt their teaching methods, thus better engaging students who might otherwise feel disinterested or disconnected. Furthermore, such teachers can model emotional regulation strategies, teaching students' valuable life skills that extend beyond academic learning (Denham & Bassett, 2019; Morris et al., 2013). Studies have also indicated that the emotional climate set by the teacher can affect students' motivation, attention, and engagement (Joe et al., 2017; Liukkonen et al., 2010; Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

1.3. Impact on student engagement

Student engagement, a critical determinant of academic success and personal development, is profoundly influenced by the emotional and interpersonal aspects of the classroom environment. Fredricks et al. (2004) categorized engagement into three interconnected components: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. This

categorization is pivotal as it elucidates how teachers' emotional maturity specifically influences each component: behavioral engagement through the management of classroom conduct and involvement in learning activities, emotional engagement through the creation of a supportive and empathetic classroom atmosphere, and cognitive engagement through the presentation of material in a manner that is both understandable and relevant to students' lives (Fredricks et al., 2004). Teachers' emotional maturity directly impacts all three areas by shaping the classroom climate, the teacher-student relationship, and the relevance of the learning material (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). Emotionally mature teachers are adept at engaging students in learning activities, facilitating positive emotions towards learning, and encouraging deep cognitive investment in educational tasks (Fredricks et al., 2019).

1.4. EFL classroom context

In the context of EFL education, the emotional aspect of teaching and learning gains additional prominence due to the challenges and anxieties often associated with language learning. Frisby et al. (2014) and Horwitz et al. (1986) highlighted the unique stressors present in the language learning process, such as fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension, which can significantly hinder student engagement. Teachers' emotional maturity can play a vital role in mitigating these anxieties, creating an atmosphere of trust and encouragement that fosters language acquisition and participation (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Kuhzad & Zarfsaz, 2023).

Despite the recognized importance of emotional maturity in education, there remains a paucity of research specifically exploring its impact on student engagement in the Vietnamese EFL context. This gap in the literature underscores the need for focused studies that investigate how Vietnamese EFL teachers perceive the role of their emotional maturity in enhancing or impeding student engagement.

2. Methodology

2.1. Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions of how their emotional maturity impacts student engagement in the classroom. This choice was informed by the nature of the research questions, which sought to delve into subjective experiences and perceptions rather than quantify variables. The qualitative approach, characterized by its focus on rich, detailed descriptions and thorough in-depth analysis, is particularly suited to exploring the intricate ways emotional maturity is expressed in teaching practices and influences student engagement. The reason for choosing the qualitative approach was its strength in uncovering the depth, complexity, and context of individual experiences and

perceptions, which allows for a nuanced understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Jackson et al., 2007). Moreover, this method allows for flexibility in data collection and analysis, facilitating a richer and more holistic exploration of the topic within the specific cultural context of Vietnam.

2.2. Participants

The participant group for this study comprised nine Vietnamese EFL teachers, selected from two educational institutions in Vietnam to ensure a diverse representation of teaching experiences and contexts. This strategic selection was influenced by the understanding that teachers at different stages of their careers would likely have varied experiences and perspectives on emotional maturity and its impact on student engagement. By encompassing a broad spectrum of teaching tenures, the study aimed to capture a more comprehensive and representative set of insights. The selection was strategically designed to include teachers at various stages of their careers, with the aim of capturing a wide range of perspectives on the impact of emotional maturity on student engagement. Specifically, the participant pool consisted of three novice teachers, who had been teaching for less than five years; three mid-career teachers, with 5 to 15 years of teaching experience; and three near-end career teachers, who had over 15 years of experience in the field of EFL education. The rationale for this varied grouping was to explore potential differences in the understanding and application of emotional maturity in teaching among educators at different career stages. This deliberate composition allowed the study to explore the nuances of how emotional maturity and its perceived impact on student engagement might evolve or manifest differently across different career stages. [Table 1](#) briefly describes the information of the participants.

The recruitment and engagement of participants in the study involved stringent ethical considerations to maintain the integrity of the research and protect participant welfare. Detailed information about the study's objectives, methods, impacts, and confidentiality protocols was provided to ensure participants fully understood their involvement. Informed consent was secured, with assurances of confidentiality and the right to withdraw without repercussions. The study also prioritized minimizing psychological discomfort, offering a respectful interview environment and allowing participants to omit uncomfortable questions. An institutional review board ensured compliance with ethical standards. The selection of participants across various teaching experiences aimed to enrich understanding of the relationship between teacher emotional maturity and student engagement while upholding participant dignity and rights.

2.3. Theoretical backgrounds

The theoretical underpinnings of this qualitative study

Table 1.
Participants

Categories	Pseudonyms	Descriptions
Novice teachers	Anh	Anh is a 25-year-old female teacher working at a public high school. With two years of teaching experience, Anh represents the novice group of EFL teachers. She holds a Master's degree in English Language Teaching and is enthusiastic about integrating technology into her teaching practices. Anh expresses a keen interest in developing her emotional intelligence to better connect with her students and enhance their engagement in the classroom.
	Binh	Binh is a 28-year-old male teacher at a language center, with four years of experience in teaching EFL to a wide age range of students. Binh has a Master's degree in TESOL and is particularly interested in exploring how teacher-student relationships affect learning outcomes. As a novice teacher, Binh seeks to understand how his emotional maturity can impact the classroom atmosphere and student motivation.
	Chi	Chi is a 27-year-old female teacher, also teaching at a public high school, with three years of teaching experience. She has a Master's degree in English and has recently begun her professional teaching career. Chi is curious about the role of teachers' emotional maturity in managing classroom dynamics and fostering a positive learning environment for her students.
Mid-career teachers	Danh	Danh is a 35-year-old male teacher with 10 years of teaching experience, currently working in a private language institution. Holding a Master's degree in English Linguistics, Danh has a solid background in EFL teaching and a deep interest in the psychological aspects of language learning. He aims to leverage his emotional maturity to better engage his students and address the diverse needs of learners.
	Eva	Eva is a 40-year-old female teacher at a university language department, with 12 years of teaching experience. Eva holds a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics and has a strong focus on research in EFL education. She is particularly interested in how emotional intelligence among teachers can enhance student engagement and academic performance.
	Fong	Fong is a 38-year-old male teacher with 14 years of experience, currently teaching at a public secondary school. Fong has a Master's degree in Education and is passionate about innovative teaching methodologies. He believes that understanding and applying emotional maturity in teaching practices can significantly influence student engagement and learning outcomes.
Near-end career teachers	Giang	Giang is a 50-year-old female teacher with over 20 years of teaching experience, currently working at a university. Giang holds a Ph.D. in English Language Teaching and has extensive experience in both teaching and teacher training. She is interested in mentoring younger teachers on the importance of emotional maturity in the teaching profession.
	Hieu	Hieu is a 55-year-old male teacher with 25 years of experience, teaching at a high school. Hieu has a Master's degree in TESOL and has dedicated his career to EFL teaching. He values the role of emotional maturity in creating an engaging and supportive classroom environment for his students.
	Ivy	Ivy is a 48-year-old female teacher with 22 years of experience, currently teaching at a language center. Ivy holds a Master's degree in English Language Teaching and has a keen interest in adult education. She explores how her emotional maturity affects not only student engagement but also adult learners' motivation and confidence in learning a new language.

are deeply rooted in two pivotal frameworks that collectively guide the exploration of the nuanced relationship between teacher emotional maturity and student engagement in the context of Vietnamese EFL classrooms. The first, Mayer et al.'s (2001) model of emotional intelligence, lays the groundwork for understanding emotional maturity by delineating it into four integral components: perceiving emotions, using emotions to facilitate thought, understanding emotions, and managing emotions. This model is paramount in defining emotional maturity for the purposes of this study, offering a structured lens through which to view and assess the emotional capabilities that teachers bring to their educational environments. It emphasizes the importance of not only recognizing one's own emotions and those of others but also the ability to use this emotional awareness to guide thinking and behavior, understand emotional variations, and regulate emotions to foster personal growth and social harmony. Such a comprehensive view of emotional maturity informs the development of interview questions, aiming to delve into teachers' self-awareness regarding their emotional states, their capacity to regulate these emotions, and their adeptness at leveraging emotional understanding in pedagogical settings to enhance student engagement.

Complementing Mayer et al.'s (2001) model, Fredricks et al.'s (2004) framework of student engagement provides a multifaceted perspective on engagement, categorizing it into behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. This

framework is indispensable for dissecting the complex construct of student engagement, allowing for an examination of how students' participation in learning (behavioral engagement), emotional involvement in the classroom (emotional engagement), and investment in understanding and mastering the content (cognitive engagement) are influenced by the emotional maturity of their teachers. The emphasis on these three dimensions of engagement underlines the significance of addressing student engagement holistically, recognizing that effective learning environments cater not only to the intellectual and physical participation of students but also to their emotional and psychological investment in the educational process.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the study aims to illuminate the complex interplay between teacher emotional maturity and student engagement. It hypothesizes that teachers' abilities to perceive, understand, manage, and utilize emotions effectively can have profound effects on all facets of student engagement. This holistic approach acknowledges the interdependence of emotional intelligence and engagement in the educational sphere, positing that a teacher's emotional maturity is not merely a personal attribute but a critical component of the teaching-learning dynamic that can significantly enhance the quality of student engagement and, consequently, the overall educational experience. Through the lens of these frameworks, the study seeks to uncover the specific ways in which emotional maturity

among Vietnamese EFL teachers influences their students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, offering insights that could inform practices aimed at fostering more engaging and effective learning environments.

2.4. Data collection

The data collection process for this study was meticulously designed to capture the nuanced perspectives of Vietnamese EFL teachers regarding the impact of their emotional maturity on student engagement. To achieve this, semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary method of data collection, chosen for their flexibility in allowing both the researcher and the participants to explore the research questions deeply (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The number of participants, set at nine, was determined based on the principles of qualitative research saturation. This concept, as outlined by Francis et al. (2010), suggests that data saturation in qualitative interviews often occurs around 6-12 interviews. Considering the specific scope of our research and the depth of the information required, nine participants were deemed sufficient to reach a point where no new themes or insights were emerging. Before the main data collection phase, a pilot study was conducted with two EFL teachers who did not participate in the final study. The purpose of the pilot study was to test the interview protocol for clarity, relevance, and length, ensuring that the questions were comprehensible and effectively elicited information pertinent to the study's aims.

Based on feedback from the pilot study, several revisions were made to the interview questions to enhance their clarity and focus. The revised questions aimed to facilitate a deeper exploration of teachers' perceptions and experiences related to emotional maturity and its influence on student engagement. Some of the key questions included in the final interview guide were: "Can you describe a situation where you believe your emotional maturity positively impacted your students' engagement in the classroom?" and "How do you manage your emotions in challenging classroom situations to maintain a conducive learning environment?"

Interviews were conducted in person or via video conferencing, depending on the participants' preferences and availability. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, providing ample time for participants to share their experiences and reflections in depth. The interviews were conducted in various settings, including quiet classrooms, office spaces, and online platforms, chosen for their convenience to participants and suitability for private, uninterrupted conversation.

To ensure the comfort of the participants and the authenticity of their responses, all interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, the participants' first language. This choice facilitated a more natural and open dialogue, allowing participants to express their thoughts and experiences more freely and accurately. The use of Vietnamese also ensured that nuanced cultural and

contextual factors influencing teachers' perceptions and experiences were accurately captured and understood.

Following the interviews, the recorded data were transcribed verbatim and, when necessary, translated into English for analysis. This process involved careful attention to maintaining the integrity and meaning of the participants' statements, ensuring that their insights were accurately represented in the subsequent analysis. The combination of semi-structured interviews, a pilot study for refining the interview protocol, and the strategic choice of language for the interviews provided a robust methodological framework for collecting rich, insightful data on the impact of teacher emotional maturity on student engagement in Vietnamese EFL classrooms.

2.5. Data analysis

The data analysis for this study was conducted through thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun et al., 2023). The decision to use thematic analysis was based on its suitability for qualitative data, particularly in studies like ours that aim to capture the depth and variety of human experiences and perceptions. It is a flexible approach that accommodates the rich, narrative data collected from interviews, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the complex themes related to emotional maturity and student engagement. In total, the analysis was based on 9 hours of interview data, with each of the nine interviews averaging an hour in length. This volume of data provided a substantial and rich basis for a thorough thematic exploration. During the analysis, the theoretical frameworks of emotional intelligence and student engagement were employed as lenses through which the data were interpreted. This involved aligning the emerging themes with the key components of Mayer and Salovey's (1997) model of emotional intelligence, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills, and Fredricks et al.'s (2004) framework of student engagement, which includes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. This approach allowed for a flexible and detailed exploration of the dataset, facilitating a deep understanding of the complex phenomena under study—namely, the perceptions of Vietnamese EFL teachers on the impact of their emotional maturity on student engagement. Following the transcription of the interviews, the analysis commenced with a thorough reading and re-reading of the data, ensuring a comprehensive grasp of the depth and breadth of the content. This immersive initial phase was critical for becoming intimately familiar with the participants' experiences and perspectives.

Subsequently, the data were systematically coded in an iterative process. Initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful segments of text that captured key ideas relevant to the research questions. These initial codes were applied across the dataset, with constant comparison to ensure consistency and to refine the coding

scheme as new insights emerged. This coding process, essential in thematic analysis, was chosen for its ability to distill complex narratives into coherent, analyzable segments. It allowed us to remain close to the data while also starting to construct a higher-level understanding of the themes present. This inductive approach allowed themes to be developed directly from the data, grounded in the participants' own words and experiences rather than preconceived categories.

As the coding process progressed, codes were grouped into potential themes, and data relevant to each potential theme were gathered together. This phase involved a careful balancing act between the data and the emerging analytical insights, ensuring that themes accurately reflected the coded data while also resonating with the broader research questions and theoretical framework. In this context, the themes were critically evaluated for their alignment with the principles of emotional intelligence and their implications for the dimensions of student engagement. Themes were then reviewed and refined, which involved a critical evaluation of how well they captured the nuances of the dataset and whether they formed a coherent pattern. The review and refinement of themes is a crucial stage in thematic analysis, ensuring that the final themes not only resonate with the raw data but also cohesively address the research questions and objectives. This review process sometimes led to the merging, splitting, or discarding of themes to better reflect the data's complexities.

The final stage of the analysis involved defining and naming the themes, clarifying the essence of what each theme captured about the data and the overarching story they told about Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions of emotional maturity's impact on student engagement. This culminated in a detailed analysis, weaving together the thematic insights with quotes from participants to illustrate and support the findings.

Throughout the thematic analysis process, reflexivity was maintained by the researchers, acknowledging and reflecting on their own biases and perspectives and how these might influence the analysis. This reflexivity was critical for ensuring the integrity and trustworthiness of the analysis, aiming to present a nuanced, comprehensive understanding of the study's complex research questions.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study on the role of emotional regulation in facilitating behavioral engagement, empathy as a catalyst for emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement through emotional support contribute significantly to the existing body of literature on teacher emotional intelligence and student engagement. While previous studies have established a general understanding of the positive effects of teacher emotional intelligence on student outcomes (Alam & Ahmad, 2018; Iacolino et al., 2023; Sekreter, 2019), this study provides a nuanced exploration of these dynamics within the Vietnamese EFL context, highlighting specific ways in which emotional maturity influences student engagement.

3.1. Role of emotional regulation in facilitating behavioral engagement

This theme was highlighted by all nine participants, reflecting a universal belief in the importance of teachers' ability to manage their emotions effectively in promoting active student participation in the classroom. Specifically, seven out of the nine teachers—comprising two novice teachers, all three mid-career teachers, and two near-end career teachers—provided detailed accounts of how emotional regulation played a pivotal role in managing classroom dynamics and fostering an environment conducive to student involvement.

An excerpt from Anh, a novice teacher, illustrates this point well. She described a situation where she had to maintain composure and positivity despite feeling frustrated with students' lack of participation. "I realized that showing my frustration would only make them withdraw more. By staying calm and positive, I slowly saw a change in their behavior—they started participating more actively." This experience underscores the aspect of the emotional intelligence model that pertains to managing emotions, suggesting that teachers' ability to regulate their own emotional responses can directly influence students' willingness to engage behaviorally in class activities. From the perspective of the student engagement framework, Anh's approach effectively fostered behavioral engagement by creating a more welcoming and positive classroom atmosphere that encouraged participation.

Danh, representing the mid-career teachers, shared a reflective observation on the impact of his emotional regulation on student engagement. "When I handle my emotions well, especially in stressful situations, it not only helps me stay focused but also sets a tone of resilience and determination in the classroom." Danh's account aligns with the "using emotions to facilitate thought" component of emotional intelligence, demonstrating how a teacher's emotional regulation can model problem-solving attitudes and resilience for students. This modeling can enhance students' behavioral engagement by providing a clear example of how to approach challenging tasks with determination, an element strongly supported by the emotional dimension of student engagement.

Finally, Giang, a near-end career teacher, highlighted the long-term impact of emotional regulation on building a classroom culture that supports engagement. "Over the years, I have learned that my emotional steadiness not only helps in the immediate management of classroom incidents but also in building a trusting relationship with my students." Giang's experience reflects the "understanding emotions" component of emotional intelligence, suggesting that an in-depth understanding and management of one's emotions can cultivate a classroom environment where students feel safe and supported, thereby enhancing their behavioral engagement. This idea resonates with the emotional and behavioral dimensions of student engagement, emphasizing the role of teacher-student relationships in

motivating students to participate actively in the learning process.

The emphasis on emotional regulation aligns with previous research indicating that teachers' ability to manage their emotions positively affects students' classroom behavior and participation (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). However, this study extends these findings by illustrating concrete instances of how emotional regulation within the EFL classroom can directly foster a conducive learning environment, as experienced by teachers at different career stages. Unlike prior studies, which often generalized the impact of emotional regulation across educational contexts (Harley et al., 2019; Schutz et al., 2006), this research offers a detailed account of its significance in the specific setting of Vietnamese EFL education, thereby enriching the understanding of cultural and contextual influences on the teacher-student emotional dynamic.

3.2. Empathy as a catalyst for emotional engagement

This finding was notably discussed by eight of the participants, including all three novice teachers, two of the mid-career teachers, and all three near-end career teachers, highlighting a widespread acknowledgment of the importance of empathy in fostering students' emotional connection to the learning process.

Chi, a novice teacher, provided a poignant example of how empathy enabled her to connect with a student who was struggling emotionally, which in turn improved the student's engagement in class. "I noticed one of my students was consistently disengaged, so I took a moment to ask her privately about her well-being. It turned out she was dealing with personal issues. Showing her that I cared and understood made a huge difference; she became more open and engaged in my classes." Chi's experience illustrates the perceiving and understanding emotions components of the emotional intelligence model, demonstrating how recognizing and empathizing with students' emotional states can create a supportive classroom environment that enhances emotional engagement. According to the student engagement framework, Chi's empathetic approach directly contributed to the student's emotional engagement by fostering a sense of belonging and significance within the classroom.

From the mid-career group, Eva shared an insight into how empathy towards her students' learning challenges led to increased engagement. "Understanding their frustrations with learning a new language and showing genuine concern helped me tailor my approach to meet their emotional needs, resulting in a more motivated and engaged classroom." Eva's approach aligns with the understanding emotions component of emotional intelligence, where the teacher's empathy towards students' struggles enhances the learning experience by addressing emotional barriers to engagement. This empathetic understanding supports the emotional dimension of student engagement by creating an

emotionally supportive learning environment that encourages students to invest emotionally in their learning.

Giang, representing the near-end career teachers, emphasized the role of empathy in building long-term emotional engagement. "I have seen how my empathy towards students not only helps in individual cases but also cultivates a classroom culture where students feel valued and understood." This reflects the managing emotions component of the emotional intelligence model, where Giang's consistent empathetic engagement with students contributes to a positive classroom climate, encouraging emotional engagement. This approach aligns with the emotional component of student engagement in the student engagement framework, illustrating how empathetic teacher-student interactions can nurture a sense of emotional well-being and connection to the classroom community.

While the importance of empathy in teaching has been recognized in the literature (Le & Le, 2022; Tettegah & Anderson, 2007; Tran et al., 2024), this study's exploration of empathy specifically in the EFL context sheds light on its critical role in overcoming language barriers and cultural differences that can hinder emotional engagement. The personal anecdotes from teachers across career stages provide empirical evidence of how empathy not only aids in individual student cases but also cultivates a classroom culture of understanding and support. This contributes to the field by offering a deeper insight into the mechanisms through which empathy operates to enhance student engagement in language learning environments.

3.3. Cognitive Engagement through emotional support

This theme was identified in the narratives of six participants, including two from each of the novice and mid-career groups, and all three near-end career teachers. These discussions highlighted a critical consensus on the role of emotional support in enhancing students' cognitive engagement with the learning material.

Binh, a novice teacher, shared an insightful example of how providing emotional support led to a deeper cognitive engagement among his students. "When my students feel emotionally supported, they are more willing to take intellectual risks and engage deeply with challenging material." Binh's observation aligns with the "using emotions to facilitate thought" aspect of the emotional intelligence model, indicating that emotional support can serve as a catalyst for cognitive engagement by encouraging students to apply themselves more fully to learning tasks. This perspective is further supported by the cognitive dimension of student engagement framework, suggesting that emotional support from teachers can motivate students to invest effort and persistence in their learning.

From the mid-career teacher's perspective, Fong highlighted the importance of creating an emotionally supportive environment to stimulate students' cognitive

engagement. "I have found that when I actively create a classroom atmosphere where students feel emotionally safe, they are more likely to participate in critical thinking activities and discussions." This reflects the "managing emotions" component of emotional intelligence, where Fong's ability to foster an emotionally stable classroom environment encourages students to engage cognitively. According to the framework of student engagement, such an environment promotes cognitive engagement by providing students with the emotional security necessary to explore complex ideas and participate actively in the learning process.

Ivy, a near-end career teacher, discussed the long-term benefits of emotional support for cognitive engagement. "For my whole career, I have seen how consistent emotional support not only helps students in the moment but also builds their confidence to engage with difficult concepts over time." Ivy's approach demonstrates the "understanding emotions" component of emotional intelligence, suggesting that a deep understanding of and response to students' emotional needs can lead to sustained cognitive engagement. This is reflective of the cognitive dimension of student engagement, where emotional support from teachers enhances students' willingness to engage deeply with the curriculum, fostering a persistent intellectual curiosity and a desire for mastery.

The students' cognitive engagement through emotional support extends previous findings on the relationship between emotional support and student achievement by detailing how such support specifically facilitates cognitive engagement in learning a second language (Han et al., 2022; Kashy-Rosenbaum et al., 2018; Roorda et al., 2011). The study's findings underscore the nuanced ways in which emotional support can encourage students to take intellectual risks and engage more deeply with challenging material. This aspect of the study highlights a significant contribution to the field, emphasizing the role of emotional support not just in general educational settings but within the unique challenges of EFL classrooms, where students may face additional cognitive and emotional hurdles.

4. Conclusion

This study explored Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions of their emotional maturity and its impact on student engagement within the unique cultural and educational context of Vietnam. The research employed qualitative methods, conducting semi-structured interviews with nine teachers at various career stages to understand how teachers' emotional competencies influence classroom dynamics and student participation. Key findings include the importance of emotional regulation, empathy, and emotional support in fostering behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in students. These insights suggest that integrating emotional intelligence training into teacher education programs could enhance classroom atmospheres and student learning outcomes. However, the study's small sample size and qualitative nature may limit the

generalizability of the results, emphasizing the need for future research with mixed methods and broader participant pools to validate and extend these findings.

Declarations

Competing interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Authors' contribution

All authors equally contribute to the research project.

Availability of data and materials

The manuscript contains all datasets generated and/or analyzed in the current study.

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