

# The Empathetic EFL Classroom: a Path to Creative Thinking

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## Abstract

Contributing to a student's ability to successfully cope with difficulties depends on several factors. The purpose of this study is to examine the connection between creativity and empathy as the main factors to achieve wellness inside the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. The ability of students to engage in a successful learning process is accomplished by meeting their needs and creating a relaxing, motivating, and friendly environment. In order to analyze the concept of wellness in regards to the way EFL students feel when they are in class, a survey is generated to examine the perceptions and opinions of two groups of university students from different levels: a group of freshmen and a group of students in the third year of the major Bachillerato en Inglés from Universidad Nacional in Costa Rica. By exploring the participants' attitudes and responses, the encouragement of creativity and empathy is promoted in the classroom. Consequently, students who feel free and get along with both, classmates and professors, assure that self-expression in a comfortable environment creates a wellness practice, and that it brings plenty of positive consequences to their EFL learning process as well as to their own individual lives.

**Keywords:** wellness, creativity, empathy, learning strategies, foreign language learning, creative self-expression, sense of community, compassionate communication

## Resumen

Contribuir a la capacidad del estudiante para afrontar sus dificultades exitosamente depende de muchos factores. El propósito de este estudio es examinar la relación entre la creatividad y la empatía como los principales factores para lograr el bienestar dentro de la clase de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL). Para que los estudiantes participen en un proceso de aprendizaje exitoso, sus necesidades se deben satisfacer dentro de un ambiente relajante y agradable. Con el propósito de analizar el concepto de bienestar en la clase, un instrumento examina las percepciones y opiniones de dos grupos de estudiantes universitarios de diferentes niveles: el primero, un grupo de estudiantes de primer año, y el segundo, un grupo de estudiantes de tercer año, ambos de la carrera Bachillerato en Inglés de la Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica. El estudio de las actitudes de los participantes fomenta las prácticas de la creatividad y la empatía. Como consecuencia, los estudiantes que se sienten libres y tienen una buena relación con sus compañeros y profesores aseguran que la autoexpresión creativa en un ambiente cómodo propicia una práctica saludable y armoniosa que trae consigo consecuencias positivas, tanto para su proceso de aprendizaje como para sus propias vidas.

**Palabras clave:** bienestar, creatividad, empatía, estrategias de aprendizaje, aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras, autoexpresión creativa, sentido de comunidad, comunicación compasiva

## Introduction

Foreign language education needs learning environments which foster communication skills that are useful to build satisfying, healthy, and respectful relationships. By examining students' opinions and behavioral responses, this study pretends to establish a connection between creativity and empathy for accomplishing learning goals in the EFL class based on the responses and perceptions of two groups of students from the Universidad Nacional in Costa Rica. Being immersed into a comfortable atmosphere intensifies and reinforces confidence and respect between students and professors. Thus far, this immersion, along with activities which require creative expression, leads learners to an effective state of wellness and therefore, to their own successful learning.

The concept of wellness in the EFL classroom is defined as an approach to engage teaching methods that actively involve students in interacting throughout creative practices while they are feeling comfortable towards learning (Myers & Sweeney, 2005; Baesler, 2014; UCDavids, 2015). Likewise, the impact of getting positive feedback from professors contributes to create an empathetic learning bond in this process. To understand wellness in the class as defined by students themselves, this study has the purpose to achieve individual and community wellness in the EFL class by empowering this connection between creativity and empathy into the existing relationships between students, classmates, and professors.

Nowadays, the effects of mindfulness, awareness practices, and the changes in students' behaviors have shown remarkable improvements in

their social responses by promoting empathetic interaction as an effect of compassionate and communicative activities. In this sense, Rosenberg (2007) affirms that the use of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), that means compassionate communication, leads individuals to give from their hearts with the one intention of clearly expressing themselves while hearing others with respect and attention. Hence, supporting compassionate communication through the target language is a powerful tool that indubitably benefits students to help them discover their own talents as well as appreciate, and respect others.

### **Wellness and Creativity: Establishing Meaningful Objectives**

“Creativity is the act of turning new and imaginative ideas into reality.” According to Naiman (2014), founder of Creativity at Work, the concept of creativity is characterized by the ability to perceive the world that surrounds us in different ways, to discover new patterns by making connections between facts, and finally to be able to come up with solutions. In fact, when students feel comfortable enough, they are capable of engaging in activities that permit them to be themselves and express freely; they respond by active participation while working in small groups, individually, or with the whole class. In fact, those learners who feel good when they actively participate in class are the ones who develop their tasks and resolve conflicts more easily. At the same time, by taking action in activities that make them feel relaxed, they release tension at a higher degree, which allows them

to control their attention, and this can be achieved by thinking creatively. Creativity improves self-esteem, and it has the power to lead to genuine communication and cooperation.

### **Shifting Judgments to Empathy: Connecting across Differences**

According to the scholar Rosenberg, empathy is defined as a respectful understanding of what other individuals are experiencing: “[e]mpathy with others occurs only when we have successfully shed all preconceived ideas and judgments about them.” (2003, p. 91) During the acquisition of a second language, several students experience feelings of embarrassment, fear and shame when they are not consistent with the demands of the learning process. For instance, if students make grammar mistakes, mispronounce words, or feel nervous in an oral presentation in front of the class, they immediately feel exposed and somewhat vulnerable to any kind of judgments from their classmates and especially from their professors.

Students feel prone to fear or shame when they are judged and criticized. Feelings of sadness, disappointment, uncertainty and discouragement appear when there is a lack of empathy. By looking at others’ needs as a reflection of oneself, students learn to look at actions and those needs unmet with different eyes, avoiding judgments and negative evaluations (Connor & Killian, 2005). The responsibility to support personal wellness and good environments in the classroom depends enormously on the way professors strengthen the relationships between

themselves, their students and their classmates build up empathy-related feelings and creative expressions to lower anxiety and avoid stress.

### **Creativity + Empathy = Students' Wellness**

When Introducing wellness practices into the classroom, it is important to consider that empathic relations contribute to increase emotional, social and intellectual wellness through the activities that students perform in class. Wellness takes on numerous factors related to mental and physical habits on a daily basis. Students are human beings with their own priorities, interests and personal issues. However, Walker (2010) establishes that professors can try to facilitate and guide learners and shape a part of their daily environment which is mostly the one set up inside the classroom. Walker challenges the widely held view that "our courses represent only a small part of our students' activities, but we can examine that our part promotes healthy approaches that encourage constructive behaviors." (p. 27) In fact, wellness practices stimulates positive attitudes and creativity in the language setting.

When promoting awareness about wellness practices to reach positive changes in the students' performance, it is important to establish a connection between creativity and empathy for accomplishing learning goals in the EFL class. Furthermore, professors must bring strategies for enhancing creative-thinking skills that make students feel good by providing positive feedback as part of their ongoing assessment. Those classroom

materials that promote creativity and teamwork are the fundamental tools to help students develop language skills as well as their abilities to work in harmony with both, their classmates and teachers.

How empathetic and creative characteristics manifest themselves in their daily activities lead students to respond positively while reaching a high degree of wellness which therefore helps and nurtures their learning. By Promoting attitudes that build a relaxing environment, students do not only learn a language itself, but also communicate and get to learn from each other enthusiastically.

### **Methodology**

The methodology selected through this study corresponds to a qualitative case study research design. A detailed account of the perceptions of students towards teachers' teaching strategies is analyzed as well as the students' attitudes about the importance of including creative activities to socialize empathically. For this purpose a survey was designed and applied in 2015 to two study groups of students of the first and third year of the major *Bachillerato en Inglés* from Universidad Nacional in Costa Rica. The questions in this survey elicit responses from 41 students from these two groups of students about their perceptions, opinions and experiences as language learners and the role of their teachers in the process of acquiring a second language. The survey is divided in two sections; the first section corresponds to closed ended questions and the second one to open ended questions to prompt anonymous and authentic responses.

As a result, the data collected through the answers provided by the 41 students of both groups clearly defined the concept of wellness stated by the students themselves, which referred directly to the ways in which empathy and creativity are the two essential factors for achieving a sense of both, individual and community satisfaction. The results of the instrument focus on measuring the individual needs of the students and their overall satisfaction in the classroom scenario. These insights provide the fundamentals for the implementation of a wellness action plan to create a supportive classroom environment and to actively engage students in the learning process.

This action plan aims at disclosing the meaning-making practices of wellness in the EFL classroom by means of recommending a series of activities and exercises to promote creativity and empathy as a vehicle to generate observable outcomes in the students' language performance. For this purpose, during 2015, the researchers implemented wellness practices through a period of four months to two groups of university students from two different levels: a group of freshmen, and a third year students of the major *Bachillerato en Inglés* from Universidad Nacional in Costa Rica. Finally, the outcomes were carefully interpreted to provide tools for language teachers to implement creativity and empathy as a wellness practice.

### **Data Analysis**

Upon completion of the four month period of wellness practices, the students were surveyed individually. The following data was analyzed in order to examine the concept of wellness in the EFL class in terms of

their language performance provided by students of the first and third year of the major *Bachillerato en Inglés* from Universidad Nacional in Costa Rica.

### **Research Instrument and Administration**

A survey instrument was designed to collect the data for this research study. This survey is divided into two sections. The first section consists of ten close ended statements for students to rank each on an agreement Likert-type scale. This scale pursues to measure to what extent students agree to a series of statements about their point of view of their teachers' teaching practices. For this purpose the following rating criteria were used: completely true, true, somewhat true, slightly true and completely false. For this purpose, "completely true" is the highest in rank and "completely false" the lowest in rank. The second section consists of six open-ended questions that seek to elicit supplementary written perceptions and attitudes. As previously mentioned, the survey was administered to two study groups of students of the first and third year of the major *Bachillerato en Inglés* from Universidad Nacional.

### **Presentation of Findings**

Data collected from the students of the first year was compared with the data collected from the students of the third year of the major *Bachillerato en Inglés* from Universidad Nacional in Costa Rica. The results are presented in the form of graphs and tables in the following appraisal analysis.

### Analysis of the Close Ended Statements

The following tables 1 and 2 summarize the point of view of the students

towards teachers' teaching practices. The first column abbreviates the statements ranked by students and the following columns record the number of responses.

**Table 1. Summary of first year students' responses.**  
**Wellness in the EFL classroom: students' perceptions and attitudes towards teachers' teaching practices**

Items	Completely true	True	Somewhat true	Slightly true	Completely false
Students' enjoyment of the English class.	9	8	2	2	-
Help provided by professors.	3	5	9	4	-
Judgmental comments.	6	-	8		7
Time provided.	6	-	3	3	9
Variety of learning activities and strategies.	5	9	-	7	-
Learning motivation.	2	7	-	11	2
Level of professors' passion for teaching.	3	4	5	6	3
Contribution to students' self-creative expression.	4	3	-	8	6
Encouragement to express and share opinions.	6	7	4	3	1
Motivation given to appreciate and respect each other.	9	10	2	-	-

It can be deciphered from table 1 that a positive consensus is reached among students in the following areas which were ranked as as "completely true" and "true": students' enjoyment of the English class, help provided to understand the subject matter, variety of learning activities and strategies, encouragement to express and share opinions in class and motivation to

appreciate and respect each other. Even though the results are satisfactory in the previous areas, improvement needs to be done in the following areas: judgmental comments, time to explore and understand new contents, motivation towards learning, level of professor's passion for teaching and contribution to students' self-creative expression.

**Table 2. Summary of third year students' responses.  
Wellness in the EFL classroom: students' perceptions and attitudes towards  
teachers' teaching practices**

Items	Completely true	True	Somewhat true	Slightly true	Completely false
Students' enjoyment of the English class	9	4	7	-	1
Help provided.	5	5	7	4	-
Judgmental comments.	-	-	6	5	10
Time provided.	5	8	4	3	1
Variety of learning activities and strategies.	6	9	3	-	3
Learning motivation.	6	-	3	12	-
Level of professors' passion for teaching.	10	-	1	10	-
Contribution to students' self-creative expression.	8	-	3	11	-
Encouragement to express and share opinions in class.	13	2	4	-	2
Motivation given to appreciate and respect each other.	16	4	1	-	-

Correspondingly, in table 2, third year students pinpoint their enjoyment of the English class, help provided to understand the subject matter, variety of learning activities and strategies, encouragement to express and share opinions in class and motivation to appreciate and respect each other as the high rating areas where professors need to improve. Although there were subtle differences in the rating scores of agreement, this data reveals that both first and third year students show similar perceptions towards teachers' teaching practices and the encouragement of strategies to interact with each other and express their ideas and knowledge through creative activities.

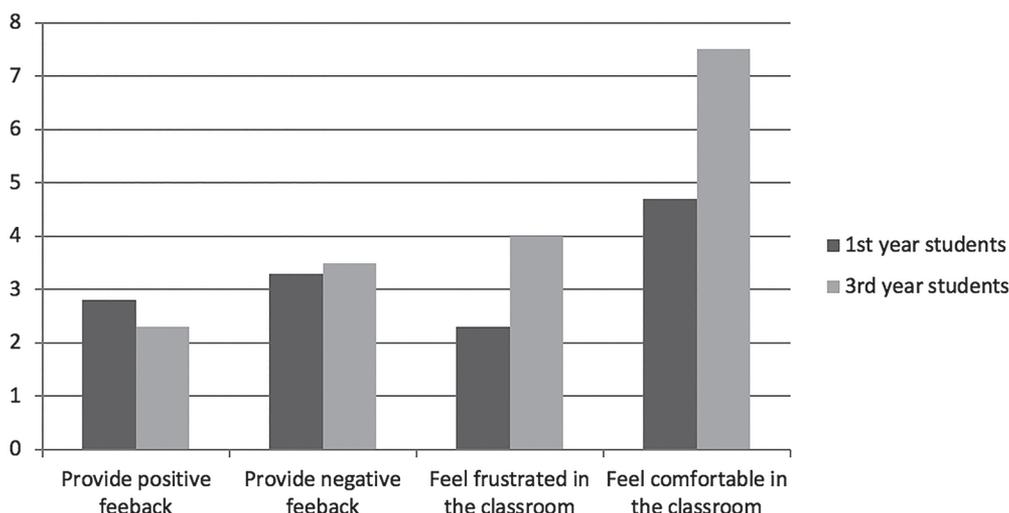
Together, this summary of first and third year students' perceptions depicts that professors play a noteworthy role in impacting positively on students' academic training. Nevertheless, teaching practices should be supported and complemented with more creative and empathetic approaches to achieve a wellness environment in the language classroom.

### **Analysis of the Open Ended Questions**

Students' responses to the open ended questions are reported and analyzed in the following graph and findings.

**Graph 1. Students' written responses to open ended questions 1, 2, 3 and 4**

**How often do professors provide positive/negative feedback?  
How often do you feel frustrated/comfortable in the classroom?**



In regards to the frequency of positive and negative feedback provided in class by the professors, figure 3 depicts that 28% of positive feedback is given to first year students while 23% is given to third year students. On the other hand, 33% and 35% of negative feedback is often provided to first and third year respectively. These results imply that there is only a slight difference between the amount of positive and negative feedback offered in class.

With regard to how often students feel frustrated and comfortable in the classroom, data reveals that 23% and 40% of the first and third year of students correspondingly feel often frustrated in class. Contrastingly, 47% and 75% of the students recurrently feel comfortable in class. These numbers suggest that more activities and exercises focused on promoting wellness in

the classroom need to be implemented.

Moreover, question 5 condenses students' own interpretations of wellness where students agreed on these opinions: "when I know that I am doing well in class," "when I understand and I learn new things," "when I feel relaxed and comfortable," "when I am able to critically analyze new content," "when I'm interested in the subject matter," "when I understand and enjoy learning," "when my ideas are heard and respected," "when I feel moved to participate more in class" and "when the professors bring creative activities." The students' opinions suggest that professors should examine their teaching practices in order to develop a close bond between creativity and empathy through a wellness approach.

Lastly, question 6 demands students to suggest professors ways of making them feel comfortable when learning English. Students' recommendations are stated in the following list:

1. provide extra practice to improve students' weaknesses,
2. set out individual meetings to discuss students' performance,
3. ask students periodically how they are performing and feeling in class,
4. develop challenging but enjoyable activities in the class,
5. be patient when students do not understand the subject matter.

### **Strategies to Implement Creativity along with Empathy**

In order to provide tools for language teachers to employ creativity and empathy as a wellness practice, the activities and traits must bring out the best in students through strategies that make classrooms more engaging places for learning a foreign language. Such activities or methodologies need to include certain components to build up a comfortable environment. This classroom scenarios must require materials that allow students to learn by themselves including instructional activities that meet meaningful objectives. Students feel good when their needs are met, thus teaching and learning strategies should take into account the following components:

- **Meaningful objectives:** By establishing life-enriching purposes, professors must inform the students about the multiple benefits that they will get in their lives when the moment to communicate in real contexts comes up. Each activity must contain a life-enriching objective in this sense.
- **Partnership:** Developing a sense of community provides students the opportunity to listen attentively, paying attention to others without criticism and judgment. By helping each other, students connect empathically as they establish good relationships while collaborating, teaching, and learning from one another (Hart & Kindle, 2004).
- **Self-expression through elaboration:** Each student has his/her own learning styles. Along with the teacher's guidance and instructions, students need to feel free to produce their tasks with originality; letting them express their talents, intellectual curiosity, imagination, and creativity to their fullest.
- **Time and patience:** Be patient with all students. Provide them extended time to be involved in the giving and receiving of instructions as much as in the process of performing each task. Allow time for them to get to know each other better and, hence, learn to care for each other.
- **Creative thinking:** By developing students' own creative and divergent thinking, the process of their foreign language acquisition becomes engaging and effective. Challenges are taken with enthusiasm, creativity, and high expectations while their ability to communicate improves (Morris, 2006).
- **Innovative resources:** Materials play an essential role in learning. These need to be attractive, meet the students' needs according to their level and objectives, and they need to help learners

develop skills throughout interesting and entertaining activities to communicate empathically and creatively. It is highly recommended to include reflection questions for activities, so that these give professors the insights and perceptions of each student (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2010).

- Constant motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, positive feedback, and spaces to talk individually about every student's progress, give learners the feeling of being understood and equally appreciated (Bénabou & Tirole, 2003).

## Conclusions

The results of the present study confirmed that an increase in positive emotions, reduction in stress responses and active participation is reached via empathetic and creative classroom practices. On the flip side, after completing a series of activities and exercises focused on promoting empathy in the language classroom during a period of four months, students are more likely to demonstrate confidence and a clear improvement in their language performance is exhibited. Thereupon, this proposal presents a teaching approach where the following learning and teaching strategies are developed: providing positive feedback, encouraging creativity, avoiding judgmental comments, valuing students' needs, learning to appreciate others' opinions and building empathy towards other feelings. As a final point, the technique of wellness practice in the EFL classroom presented in this paper proposes activities and strategies that can be applied in other learning

environments as a vehicle to generate observable outcomes in the students' language performance.

As a final remark, the researchers advise all language instructors to embrace wellness practices as a way to connect creativity and empathy among learners. Continually construct a comfortable learning environment where students feel confident and respected and model this mindset even when others seem to be resistant. And this process may constitute a solid foundation for learners to better understand their professors' feedback, achieve individual empowering of learning and fuel wellness learning environments. All these will allow students to develop a stronger confidence, partnership and creative thinking.

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## Appendix

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### WELLNESS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS TEACHERS' TEACHING PRACTICES

**Objective:** to evaluate EFL students' perceptions and attitudes towards teachers' teaching practices in order to design an action plan to create a supportive classroom environment.

**General Instructions:** Your responses are voluntary and will be confidential. This survey is divided in two sections. The first section consists of close ended questions and the second part consists of open ended questions. Please read the questions carefully and provide complete answers.

**Part I.** Mark the answer that best answers the statements.

Statements	Completely true	True	Somewhat true	Slightly true	Completely false
1. Our professors look forward to making us enjoy the English class.					
2. Our professors help us to understand the subject matter, and not just to memorize it.					
3. Our professors judgmentally make obvious comments when our performance needs to be improved.					
4. Our professors give us time to explore and understand new contents.					
5. Our professors use a variety of activities and strategies to help us learn.					
6. Our professors motivate us in learning English.					
7. Our professors are passionate about teaching.					

8. Our professors contribute to our self-creative expression.					
9. Our professors hearten us to express and share our opinions in class.					
10. Our professors motivate us to appreciate and respect each other.					

**Part II.** Answer the following questions in as complete and thorough manner as possible.

How often do your professors provide positive feedback in class?

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How often do your professors provide negative feedback in class?

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On a daily basis, how often do you feel frustration in the classroom? Why?

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On a daily basis, how do you feel comfortable in classroom? Why?

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What does wellness in the classroom mean for you?

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If you could ask your professors to do something for you to feel good while learning, what would you ask for?

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Thank you very much for completing this survey!

