

# *Enhanced Empathy for English Language Learners: How ESOL Teachers' Past Language Learning Informs Their Teacher Knowledge and Practices*

**ROHAN K. WILLIS** 

*Faculty of Business and Economics, The University of Auckland  
Auckland, New Zealand*

**SHARON HARVEY AND IRMENGARD WOHLFART**

*Faculty of Culture and Society, Auckland University of Technology  
Auckland, New Zealand*

## **Abstract**

While there has been a growing interest in teachers' empathy within TESOL, the various dimensions of empathy remain less explored compared to other fields such as anthropology, medicine, and psychology. Guided by the theoretical framing of "teacher knowledge" (TK), this paper reports on one key theme from a doctoral study concerning how ESOL teachers perceive the ways their instructed additional language (AL) learning experiences contributed to their teaching practices. Two stages of teacher empathy, rooted in participants' recollections of their past instructed AL learning, emerged from the data. This paper drew on responses from 10 New Zealand-based teachers across TESOL sectors, collected through focus groups and individual phenomenological interviews. Subsequent data analysis employing interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) described the theme of ESOL teachers' enhanced empathy for English language learners (ELLs). Findings suggest that such increased empathy is tied to teachers' personal experiences with AL learning. Consequently, participants reportedly made pedagogical decisions to incorporate empathetic teaching practices informed by their reflective insights. This paper contributes to the applied linguistics literature by introducing the notions of "reflective empathy" and "enacted empathy" in the context of instructed AL learning and

teaching while exploring their significance. Furthermore, it proposes that more attention should be given to ESOL teachers' instructed AL-learning experiences as a valuable resource of their TK.

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**E**mpathy has gained increasing attention in educational research (Aldrup, Carstensen, & Klusmann, 2022; Warren, 2014) and applied linguistics (e.g., Guerrettaz, Zahler, Sotirovska, & Boyd, 2020; Llurda & Calvet-Terré, 2022), particularly regarding additional language (AL) teachers' (including ESOL teachers') empathy for students (e.g., Mercer, 2016; Zhang, 2022). Broadly defined as the capacity to understand others' emotions and experiences (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007), empathy is recognized as key to effective teaching (e.g., Guerrettaz et al., 2020; Zhang, 2022). Research on AL teachers emphasizes a strong connection between their empathy for learners and their pedagogical knowledge, which is shaped by teaching experiences, teacher education and training, and language learning (e.g., Daniel, 2015; Wright-Maley & Green, 2015), all contributing to their teacher knowledge (TK). Despite empathy's acknowledged importance, it is often treated as a singular, uniform construct in applied linguistics, with studies such as Linville (2016) and Moodie (2016) making brief references to empathy in the context of teachers' instructed AL-learning experiences, and limited focus given to how ESOL teachers develop and apply it in their teaching (e.g., Guerrettaz et al., 2020; Zhang, 2022). To address this gap, this paper uses interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to examine how New Zealand-based ESOL teachers' past instructed AL learning contributes to their TK and informs their empathetic practices. By doing so, we aim to deepen understanding of how ESOL teachers perceive their AL-learning experiences as informing their empathy for English language learners (ELLs), introducing the terms "reflective empathy" and "enacted empathy" to the field of applied linguistics, particularly in the context of instructed AL learning and teaching.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMING**

### **Teacher Knowledge**

Drawing on the theoretical framing of "teacher knowledge" (TK), this paper examines how New Zealand-based ESOL teachers perceive their past instructed AL learning as informing their teaching practices, particularly how these experiences contribute to their empathy for ELLs. Grossman and Richert (1988) emphasize that a teacher's knowledge base must encompass pedagogical skills and a deep

understanding of the subject they teach. In the context of this paper, TK specifically refers to language teachers' (including ESOL teachers') understanding of their subject and teaching practices, emphasizing the dynamic link between their experiential knowledge as former AL learners and its application in their teaching.

Researchers have proposed various terms to capture different aspects of TK. Shulman (1986, 1987), for instance, proposed seven categories: content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, curriculum knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of learners and their characteristics, knowledge of educational contexts, and knowledge of educational ends, purpose, and values. While these terms (e.g., pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge) are general and not specific to AL teachers, they still offer valuable insights into how different forms of knowledge inform teaching. In applied linguistics, researchers have introduced further categories for AL teacher knowledge, such as knowledge about language (Borg, 2005) and linguistic knowledge for teaching (Reeves, 2009). Additionally, Basturkmen, Loewen, and Ellis (2004) distinguished between technical knowledge (gained through training) and practical knowledge (gained through teaching) for AL teachers. The diverse terminologies highlight the complexity of TK. Beyond subject-matter expertise and training, factors such as personal, educational, and professional backgrounds also contribute to AL teachers' knowledge (Basturkmen, 2012; Borg, 2011; Byrd, Hlas, Watzke, & Valencia, 2011). Among these factors, this study focuses on teachers' instructed learning experiences as former AL learners, examining how such experiences inform their TK and teaching practices.

The application of TK as a theoretical framing can help us identify how ESOL teachers' past instructed AL learning contributes to their empathy for ELLs. While studies have explored ESOL teacher knowledge, such as teachers' understanding of AL-learning processes (e.g., Ellis, 2006; Forman, 2015), the ways in which teachers' own experiences as former AL learners inform their teaching practices have been widely acknowledged (e.g., Borg, 2015; Ellis, 2016b) but remain less examined in the New Zealand TESOL context, particularly concerning empathy. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the link between teachers' instructed AL-learning experiences and their empathetic teaching practices.

TK (Shulman, 1986, 1987) also plays a pivotal role in shaping the research design of this study. This will be further elaborated in the methodology section, where we discuss how TK guided the selection of participants and the structure of the data collection process. By focusing on New Zealand-based ESOL teachers' perceptions of their past instructed AL learning, the study examines participants'

declarative knowledge (i.e., what teachers say they know about language learning) and procedural knowledge (i.e., how teachers apply declarative knowledge in the classroom). This framing helps reveal the connections between teachers' own past instructed AL learning and the practical choices they make in classrooms.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Empathy

Empathy broadly refers to the ability to understand and share others' feelings, a critical human attribute across all aspects of life. However, a primary challenge in studying human empathy arises from the lack of universally agreed-upon definitions. Cuff, Brown, Taylor, and Howat (2016), for instance, identified 43 distinct definitions, one being Coplan's (2011) view of empathy as "[a] complex imaginative process through which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation" (p. 40). However, most definitions identified by Cuff et al. (2016) pertain to philosophy, social sciences, and neurobiology, with none directly linked to teacher empathy or applied linguistics.

To define teacher empathy, Meyers, Rowell, Wells, and Smith (2019) drew on Batson's (2009) and Segal's (2011) frameworks of interpersonal and social empathy, which emphasize teachers' understanding of students' personal and social circumstances, their responsiveness to students' emotions, and how they express empathy through their actions (Meyers et al., 2019). Meyers et al. (2019) perceive teacher empathy as intrinsic to the teaching role, existing on a continuum rather than a fixed trait. Teachers demonstrate varying levels of empathy for their students, often finding it easier to empathize with particular students or learning situations than others (Meyers et al., 2019), likely due to differences in their lived experiences.

Current applied linguistics literature acknowledges the importance of teachers' empathy toward learners (e.g., Choi, Park, & Chan, 2022; Guerrettaz et al., 2020). For example, Guerrettaz et al. (2020) found that participating in an ESOL lesson helped American pre-service K-12 teachers deepen their understanding of language pedagogy and empathy toward minority language students. In AL teaching (including TESOL), although many studies highlight the positive impact of teacher empathy in classrooms (e.g., Olivares-Cuhat & Zimotti, 2023; Wang & Kang, 2023), the term has often been used loosely in applied linguistics literature (e.g., Ellis, 2004; Linville, 2016; Moodie, 2016). For instance, neither Linville's (2016) study on pre-service ESOL

teachers' advocacy for ELLs nor Moodie's (2016) research on South Korean ESOL teachers' beliefs and practices provides a clear definition of empathy within the AL-teaching context. This lack of clarity around the term "empathy" makes it challenging to describe and assess the role of empathy in AL teaching. While definitions of empathy from other fields like psychology and education exist, it would be useful to develop a field-specific definition in applied linguistics. Borrowing definitions without adaptation may overlook the diverse experiences and perspectives AL teachers bring, including their education, language learning, and linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

For this study, we conceptualize empathy as the ability to recognize, understand, and respond to both positive and negative experiences of others in AL-learning settings. This perspective aligns with the work of Batson (2009) and Segal (2011), who highlight empathy's significance in understanding others' experiences. Applied to AL teaching, empathy bridges teacher and learner experiences, complementing language teacher education and training and fostering effective teaching. In this study, empathy is viewed not simply as an emotional response but as a critical tool informing AL teachers' pedagogical decisions and practices. Given its often singular use in applied linguistics, we draw on literature from education and psychology, which distinguishes cognitive, emotional, and compassionate empathy, as outlined below.

Cognitive empathy involves using evidence or prior knowledge to intellectually infer others' mental states, particularly their suffering (Decety & Jackson, 2004; A. Smith, 2006). While cognitive empathy is well-researched in psychology (e.g., Decety, Meidenbauer, & Cowell, 2018; Gutiérrez-Cobo et al., 2021; Trent, Park, Bercovitz, & Chapman, 2015), few studies explore teachers' cognitive empathy toward students (e.g., Aldrup et al., 2022; Wink, LaRusso, & Smith, 2021). For example, Aldrup et al. (2022) found that teachers use cognitive empathy to recognize emotions like sadness, anger, or boredom based on students' facial expressions. However, no research specifically addresses AL teachers' (including ESOL teachers') cognitive empathy. Through the lens of TK, it can be speculated that ESOL teachers with cognitive empathy rely on their declarative and procedural knowledge, shaped by experience and education, to better understand ELLs' challenges in instructed language learning. Relying on evidence or prior knowledge, cognitive empathy allows ESOL teachers to understand students' struggles, enabling them to mentally step into their students' shoes even if they have not had similar experiences.

Emotional empathy refers to individuals experiencing a shared feeling, particularly in response to others' suffering, due to common experiences (Hodges & Myers, 2007). While teachers' emotional empathy for students has been explored, and the term "emotional empathy" is

recognized in psychology and educational psychology literature (e.g., Stojiljković, Djigić, & Zlatković, 2012; Wink et al., 2021), it remains relatively underexamined in applied linguistics. However, although applied linguistics researchers may not use this specific term, the concept of “empathy” discussed in some studies aligns closely with the definition of “emotional empathy” (e.g., Ellis, 2004, 2012; Guerrettaz et al., 2020; Wright-Maley & Green, 2015). For example, one of Ellis’s (2004) participants reflected that her experience learning Spanish provided valuable insight into what it feels like to learn an AL.

Compassionate empathy involves not only feeling concern for others but also taking deliberate actions to alleviate their suffering (Maxwell, 2017). Although the term is not widely recognized in applied linguistics, the concept is evident in AL teaching (including ESOL teaching) contexts, as shown in Moodie’s (2016) study of South Korean ESOL teachers. These teachers, reflecting on their negative experiences as former ELLs, enacted alternative teaching practices to shield their students from similar learning challenges. ESOL teachers’ compassionate empathy for ELLs might inspire specific practices that address both the academic and emotional needs of their students. Within the theoretical framing of TK, these practices may include tailoring lesson plans to better support their students, offering moral support, and adapting teaching practices to enhance students’ learning outcomes.

As mentioned previously, the term “empathy” is often used loosely in applied linguistics when referring to AL teachers’ (including ESOL teachers’) empathy for learners. Studies tend to focus on teachers’ empathy for learners’ negative experiences (e.g., Ellis, 2013; Wright-Maley & Green, 2015), leaving a gap in capturing the broader scope of empathetic teaching practices. Specifically, current literature overlooks teachers’ empathy toward and responses to students’ positive learning experiences. For example, Ellis’s (2013) study of 31 Australia-based ESOL teachers’ language biographies highlighted that teachers’ empathy often stems from recognizing students’ learning struggles. Similarly, some participants in Wright-Maley and Green’s (2015) study noted that unfamiliar content exposed language barriers that could hinder learners’ comprehension of class materials. However, viewing AL teachers’ empathy solely as a response to shared negative learning experiences may reduce our understanding of the role of empathy in language teaching. Empathy, in fact, encompasses a broader spectrum of emotional responses teachers may have. Researchers in psychology and applied linguistics show that empathy is multifaceted and can fluctuate depending on factors like the nature of learning experiences or outcomes (e.g., A. Smith, 2006; Drewelow & Finney, 2020). That is, language teachers’ empathy is dynamic, shifting

based on whether learners face challenges or achieve successes. Therefore, we argue that greater attention to the diverse ways ESOL teachers experience and express empathy toward learners, allowing for a deeper understanding of how it varies according to shared experiences with students.

Prior research has scrutinized the connection between ESOL teachers' experiences as language learners and their empathy for students (e.g., Ellis, 2016a; Moodie, 2016). For instance, Ellis's (2016a) study of 29 ESOL teachers in seven countries, including those with AL-learning experiences, suggests that such experiences enhance teachers' empathy for students by helping them better understand the challenges their students face. While the literature acknowledges how ESOL teachers' past instructed AL learning informs their teaching practices, little attention has been dedicated to how such learning contributes to the development and enactment of empathy toward ELLs. Our study seeks to address this gap.

## **Empathy as a Component of AL Teacher Knowledge**

Empathy is a crucial and extensively discussed component of TK, especially in AL teaching (including TESOL), as it shapes how teachers understand and respond to language learners' needs (e.g., Ellis, 2004, 2012; Guerrettaz et al., 2020; Moodie, 2016). These discussions often center on identifying the sources of TK, including empathy, to better understand their role in enhancing teachers' practices for effectively supporting learners.

As the literature shows, AL teacher knowledge can stem from various sources, including teaching experiences, AL teacher education and training, and past instructed AL learning (e.g., Kiely & Askham, 2012; Moodie, 2016; Rahimi & Zhang, 2015), all of which are interconnected. Teachers' hands-on engagement in practices and immersion in social and institutional environments enhance their ability to understand and respond to students' learning challenges and needs (Demir & Özmen, 2017; Rahimi & Zhang, 2015; Reeves, 2009). For example, Rahimi and Zhang (2015) found that ESOL teaching practices heightened teachers' awareness of essential factors for providing effective corrective feedback (CF), like guiding learners to recognize errors and supporting interlanguage development. Complementing this practical knowledge, AL-teacher education and training provide both theory-based and practice-based knowledge, equipping teachers with the necessary skills to refine their teaching (Larzén-Östermark, 2009; Richards, 2010). Forman's (2015) study similarly emphasized the value of practical knowledge, as 60 Australia-based

ESOL teachers positively evaluated a Thai-language learning experience in their TESOL program, which made them more mindful of their teaching, particularly when working with beginner learners. This finding suggests that AL teachers may sometimes draw on their own AL-learning experiences to foster empathy for their students' challenges, a connection also noted by Ellis (2013) and Moodie (2016). Therefore, empathy, which emerges from the interconnected sources of TK, including teaching experiences, AL teacher education and training, and past instructed AL learning, is vital for understanding and addressing students' diverse needs and enhancing teaching effectiveness.

## METHODS

In order to examine ESOL teachers' TK, a qualitative research design was employed to capture how this knowledge informs teaching. Given that TK is shaped by subjective experiences, qualitative research is appropriate for examining the diverse perspectives and interpretations that emerge from participants' lived experiences. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), originating in qualitative psychology (J. Smith, 2004), was selected as the analytical method for this study because it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions of specific experiences (J. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The data for this study were derived from doctoral research aimed at exploring New Zealand-based ESOL teachers' TK, particularly their perceptions of how their instructed AL-learning experiences contribute to their TK and teaching practices. The analysis was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do New Zealand-based ESOL teachers' instructed additional-language (AL) learning experiences inform their teacher knowledge (TK) and practices in regard to empathy toward their students?
2. How does teacher empathy for learners contribute to ESOL teaching knowledge and practices?

## Participant Recruitment and Participant Profiles

Purposive sampling was used during participant recruitment, as recommended by J. Smith et al. (2009). Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- Experience learning at least one AL in formal instructional settings, either in New Zealand or abroad;
- Self-reported bilingual or plurilingual proficiency;
- TESOL certification (e.g., CELTA or a TESOL-related certification/diploma); and
- At least three years of ESOL teaching experience in New Zealand or internationally.

TK guided the establishment of these criteria to ensure participants could provide meaningful insights into how their past instructed AL learning contributes to their TK and teaching practices. Since this study examines teachers' perceptions of how their AL-learning experiences contribute to their empathetic responses, it was important for participants to have experience in both AL learning and teaching. We also recognize that the recency and context of teachers' past instructed AL learning, whether as adults or younger learners, may impact how vividly they recall these experiences, potentially influencing their empathy for learners. Teachers with recent instructed AL-learning experiences, even as adults, may still relate directly to the challenges and successes their students face. In contrast, those with more distant learning experiences may not recall their own struggles as vividly. This variation in memory recall and learning context suggests that empathy may manifest differently, depending on how teachers draw on their past learning to support students in ESOL contexts.

The proficiency in participants' formally learned AL(s) was self-reported. Self-reported proficiency was appropriate in this research because the study sought to explore participants' subjective perceptions of how their instructed AL-learning experiences informed their TK, not their proficiency in their AL per se. Moreover, Marian, Blumenfeld, and Kaushanskaya (2007) found that self-reported AL proficiency can reliably indicate linguistic skills, even without specific proficiency descriptors.

The TESOL qualification requirement ensured that participants possessed the necessary subject-matter, pedagogical, and practical knowledge, which was important for maintaining consistent understanding among participants. Additionally, requiring at least three years of TESOL experience ensured participants had a reasonable understanding of the profession. Factors like teachers' level of TK, length of teaching, and familiarity with diverse student needs can inform how empathy is applied in the classroom. While these differences in TESOL experience might contribute to how empathy manifests in teachers' practices, this study does not address such variations.

The data describing enhanced empathy for ELLs draw on responses from 10 New Zealand-based teachers across both public and private TESOL sectors. A total of 14 participants were recruited for the main study, which was deemed a sufficient number for qualitative doctoral research. IPA studies vary widely in sample size, with participant numbers ranging from one to over fifteen (J. Smith & Osborn, 2008). While J. Smith et al. (2009) recommend three to six participants for undergraduate and graduate-level studies, they acknowledge that PhD research, conducted on a larger scale, is harder to define. They caution that a sample “too large” complicates adherence to IPA’s methodological commitments more than one “too small” (J. Smith et al., 2009, p. 51).

## Data Collection

The data collection process, which included face-to-face focus-group discussions and individual phenomenological interviews, was structured to capture participants’ reflections on how their TK is informed by their past instructed AL learning and applied in their teaching practices. With the participants’ consent, all sessions were audio-recorded, and notes were taken. Seven of the 10 participants contributing to this main theme (i.e., enhanced empathy for ELLs) joined two focus groups, lasting 70 and 120 minutes, respectively. The others were unavailable or unwilling to participate. The focus group questions elicited participants’ teaching practices and TESOL experiences (e.g., years of TESOL experience, teaching challenges), with follow-up questions emerging from the discussions. Although empathy was not the explicit focus, IPA’s data-led approach allowed themes to emerge through analysis. One of the discussion questions, “*What do you think are some of the most challenging aspects of being an ESOL teacher? Why?*” prompted teachers to reflect on their challenges, drawing on their past AL learning to explain why particular aspects are challenging. Their responses illustrate how these challenges may be more relatable due to their experiences as former AL learners, highlighting how these experiences contribute to their empathy for ELLs. While rare in IPA research, the focus groups allowed participants to build on each other’s reflections, deepening their insights into how past AL learning informs their teaching.

Following the focus-group discussions, we conducted semi-structured, individual phenomenological interviews with all 10 participants contributing to this main theme (i.e., enhanced empathy for ELLs). For the seven participants involved in the focus groups, the interviews centered on their experiences as former AL learners (e.g.,

AL(s) learned, former AL teachers' practices). One question, for instance, asked: "*What were some of the methods that your language teachers used?*" This prompted participants to reflect on the teaching practices they experienced as AL learners, potentially revealing insights into how those practices shaped their understanding of (in)effective teaching. By recalling these experiences, participants were able to articulate how such practices helped or hindered their learning, demonstrating how their experiences inform their empathy for ELLs. The interviews also included follow-up questions on topics discussed during the focus groups. For the three participants who did not join the focus groups, the interviews explored both their instructed AL-learning and ESOL teaching experiences.

Table 1 presents the participants' profiles and the data collection method(s) each participant participated in, reflecting the diversity of New Zealand's ESOL teacher population. Pseudonyms were used throughout to ensure confidentiality.

## Data Analysis

The analytical approach utilized in this study was IPA, which is explicitly idiographic, prioritizing each participant's unique

**TABLE 1**  
**Participant profiles and data collection methods**

	Participant (pseudonym)	L1(s)	Formally learned AL(s) and stage of life when AL(s) was/were learned	Focus-group discussion	Individual interview
1	Catherine	Hokkien, Tagalog	English (child), Mandarin (child)	Yes	Yes
2	Deborah	Dutch	English (child), French (adult), German (adult)	Yes	Yes
3	Enna	Cantonese, Mandarin	English (child-adult)	Yes	Yes
4	Fang	Cantonese, Mandarin	English (child-adult), Japanese (adult)	Yes	Yes
5	Hunter	English	French (child), Japanese (adult)	Yes	Yes
6	Isabella	English	French (child-adult)	Yes	Yes
7	Jasmin	Farsi	English (child-adult)	Yes	Yes
8	Lawrence	English	French (child-adult), Spanish (adult)	No	Yes
9	Naifa	Malayalam	English (child), Hindi (child)	No	Yes
10	Oliver	English	Japanese (child), Mandarin (adult)	No	Yes

**TABLE 2**  
**Analytical steps in IPA (adapted from J. Smith et al., 2009)**

Step 1:	Transcribing audio files to texts
Step 2:	Reading and re-reading each transcript and interview notes
Step 3:	Analyzing texts through a three-stage process Stage 1: Describing the content of what was being said by the participant Stage 2: Commenting on the participant's specific use of language Stage 3: Connecting and commenting on the participant's overarching understanding of their experiences
Step 4:	Searching for emergent sub-themes within each transcript
Step 5:	Searching for connections across emergent sub-themes
Step 6:	Moving to the next transcript and repeating Steps 2–5
Step 7:	Looking for patterns across all emergent themes

perspective over generalizable findings. To better suit this study, J. Smith et al.'s (2009) six-step analytical process was adapted, expanding it to seven steps and modifying descriptions to enhance clarity and relevance. Table 2 outlines the seven analytical steps of IPA.

The analytical process began with transcribing the audio files (Step 1). Each transcript was formatted in two columns, with the transcript text on the left and the right column initially left blank. Each transcript and accompanying interview notes were then thoroughly read and re-read (Step 2). The analysis (Step 3) followed a three-stage process: (1) describing the participant's statements; (2) commenting on their language use; and (3) interpreting the participants' overarching understanding (Table 3 illustrates these stages). Next, emergent sub-themes were identified within each transcript (Step 4), followed by finding connections across sub-themes (Step 5). Steps 6 and 7 involved repeating the analysis for each transcript and identifying patterns across all emergent themes. These steps resulted in three main themes and eight sub-themes for the doctoral study, providing comprehensive insights to address the research questions. This article presents one of the main themes: enhanced empathy for ELLs, and its two subthemes: reflective empathy and enacted empathy.

## Research Trustworthiness

We ensured the rigor of this study by adhering to J. Smith's (2011a, 2011b) quality evaluation guidelines for IPA research. The study aligned with IPA's theoretical principles by focusing on participants' lived experiences (phenomenological), interpreting their meaning (hermeneutic), and analyzing each participant's unique perspective in

**TABLE 3**  
**Sample three-stage text analysis**

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Researcher: How has learning Japanese influenced your perspective as an ESOL teacher?

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<p>Hunter: <i>That's a very good question. It made me more empathetic to the role of an adult student. Having learned French as a teenager was quite different. So, it made me more empathetic to what it's like as an adult to learn in that situation. It gave me an understanding of Japanese pronunciation and grammar that helped a lot with teaching Japanese students later in my career. And then, I understood why they were making (pause) or you know, having issues that they did have</i></p>	<p>Stage 1: Describing the content of what was being said by the participant</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning Japanese as an adult increased his empathy for adult learners, compared to his teenage experience with French</li> <li>• It deepened his understanding of Japanese pronunciation and grammar, aiding his teaching of Japanese ELLs</li> <li>• It also helped him better understand the struggles Japanese ELLs face</li> </ul> <p>Stage 2: Commenting on the participant's specific use of language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Empathetic": indicates empathy's importance in his ESOL teaching role</li> <li>• "Quite different": contrasts learning French as a teenager with Japanese as an adult, noting the shift in understanding AL learning with age</li> <li>• "Helped a lot": shows how learning Japanese has informed his teaching</li> </ul> <p>Stage 3: Connecting and commenting on the participant's overarching understanding of their experiences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He frequently reflects on his own AL learning</li> <li>• This reflection plays a key role in how he understands his ESOL teaching role</li> <li>• He uses his past struggles as an adult AL learner to better support ELLs, showing how his past AL learning has shaped his TK and practices</li> </ul>
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depth (idiographic) (J. Smith, 2011a, 2011b). Transparency was maintained by clearly documenting the research process, allowing readers to understand how the data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted. The analysis was coherent, plausible, and engaging, providing meaningful insights. Sufficient sampling was ensured by including extracts from at least three participants for each sub-theme (i.e., reflective empathy ( $n = 8$ ), enacted empathy ( $n = 6$ )), demonstrating the prevalence of themes and the density of evidence, thereby reinforcing the study's credibility.

## FINDINGS

### Main Theme: Enhanced Empathy for ELLs

When asked about the benefits of their past instructed AL learning, participants reported that their experiences enhanced their empathy toward ELLs. Interestingly, “empathy” arose without any explicit questions on the topic, highlighting its salience in the participants’ reflections. Framed within the broader concept of TK, empathy contributed to how participants understood and responded to their students’ language learning needs.

The study identified two stages of empathy from participants’ recollections of their past instructed AL learning and current ESOL teaching: “reflective empathy,” which involves drawing on their own instructed AL-learning experiences to understand students’ ESOL learning, and “enacted empathy,” where this understanding informs everyday classroom teaching. This finding can offer insights into the link between ESOL teachers’ instructed AL-learning experiences, TK, and practices, a connection perhaps previously overlooked (e.g., Ellis, 2013; Wright-Maley & Green, 2015).

The first stage of participants’ enhanced empathy for ELLs, termed “reflective empathy,” emerged from these teachers’ reflections on their experiences as former AL learners. These reflections included insights into AL-learning processes, evaluations of former AL teachers’ practices, and learning challenges or successes. The term “reflective empathy” was coined to capture how participants’ past instructed AL learning informed their empathetic understanding of students. This directly addresses the first research question by demonstrating how participants’ experiences as former AL learners contributed to their TK and practices. Reflective empathy provided valuable reference points for understanding the diverse perspectives of students and relates to the second research question, as it played a crucial role in shaping the participants’ ESOL TK. This concept builds on, yet differs from “emotional empathy,” which in the literature refers to the ability to resonate with another’s feelings (Hodges & Myers, 2007), particularly their struggles. While both types of empathy involve understanding others’ challenges, reflective empathy extends to both positive and negative experiences. This reflective process allowed participants to better comprehend the academic and emotional factors impacting their students’ learning, contributing to their TK. By expanding beyond the emotional focus of existing empathy definitions in other fields (e.g., psychology, medicine), reflective empathy offers a broader

perspective for understanding how past instructed AL learning informs teaching practices and empathy in the TESOL context.

Participants' accounts show that their reflective empathy sometimes transitioned into a subsequent stage, which we coined "enacted empathy." This term captures how participants converted their reflective understanding, gained from past instructed AL learning, into concrete teaching practices. This finding directly addresses the first research question by illustrating how participants' instructed AL-learning experiences informed their TK and teaching practices. In this stage, participants reported employing empathetic responses to their students' specific learning needs. While "enacted empathy" shares similarities with "compassionate empathy," which involves taking action to alleviate others' suffering (Maxwell, 2017), it differs in key ways. Compassionate empathy can stem from either "cognitive empathy" (understanding others' feelings without shared experience) or "emotional empathy" (relating through shared experiences), whereas enacted empathy arises directly from "reflective empathy," grounded in shared experiences. This relates to the second research question, as enacted empathy, grounded in teachers' shared experiences with students, contributes to TK and the implementation of empathetic teaching practices. Enacted empathy extends beyond alleviating struggles by proactively adjusting teaching to prevent students from facing similar challenges. Since enacted empathy originates from reflective empathy, it addresses both positive and negative learning experiences. This new categorization highlights the distinct role of shared instructed AL-learning experiences in shaping action-oriented teaching practices, a connection that has been underexplored in applied linguistics literature.

### **Subtheme: Reflective Empathy**

The initial stage of participants' enhanced empathy for ELLs, "reflective empathy," involved reflecting on both their academic and emotional understanding of AL learning as former learners. While overlapping with "emotional empathy," reflective empathy extends to both positive and negative experiences, providing a deeper understanding of ELLs' overall learning experiences, including their learning needs.

The connection between participants' instructed AL-learning experiences and their enhanced empathy for ELLs is evident in their accounts, as shown in the following extracts.

So, language learning, it's emotional, and we have to always empathize with our students, and learning a second language is one very effective way of relating to your students.

(Catherine)

Because you have been through learning another language and using another language, so you are thinking about: "Oh, how was it for me." You are more attuned to [ELLs'] needs and more empathetic, and more inclusive.

(Naifa)

Catherine and Naifa emphasized that their instructed AL-learning experiences were key to developing their empathy for ELLs. Their extracts also reveal their perspectives on the importance of empathy in ESOL teaching. For example, Catherine regarded past instructed AL learning as essential for ESOL teachers to understand their students' learning experiences.

Furthermore, Catherine and Naifa stressed that effective teaching requires empathy rooted in ESOL teachers' reflections as former AL learners. Naifa, for instance, noted that ESOL teachers with past instructed AL learning tend to be more perceptive, sensitive, and responsive, drawing on their experiences to understand ELLs' perspectives. She consistently used the quantifying determiner "*more*" to describe these teachers, indicating her belief in their higher competence compared to those without such learning experiences. This higher competence, as she described it, stemmed from these teachers' ability to use their AL-learning experiences to better perceive and address the educational and emotional needs of ELLs.

Findings show that participants' reflective empathy primarily stemmed from five factors associated with participants' instructed AL-learning experiences, which were the following:

- Age of AL learning;
- Shared linguistic background and understanding;
- Experiential knowledge of instructed AL learning;
- Learning achievements and challenges experienced as former AL learners; and
- Unfavorable teaching practices of former AL teachers.

**Age of AL learning.** Hunter, a young learner of French and an adult learner of Japanese, explained how learning an AL as an adult enhanced his empathy for adult ELLs, as highlighted in the following excerpt.

I married a Japanese woman, and so I wanted to learn her language and culture. [...] It made me more empathetic to the role of an adult [ELL]. Having learned French as a teenager was quite different. So, it made me more empathetic to what it's like as an adult to learn in that situation. [...] A lot of adults, and this includes me, at times struggle because you have to go back to being a dummy, you know, somebody who doesn't know something, you know, put yourself in that lower position. (chuckles) [...] And that's (pause) that's kind of challenging, I think, sometimes for some older people when they've got a young whiz kid in the class that's showing them up.

(Hunter)

Hunter stated that formally learning an AL as an adult was more challenging than in his youth. Despite being motivated by his spouse's language background, his account shows potential demotivating factors in adult AL learning, such as low self-esteem and vulnerability. This perspective is evident in his use of self-deprecating language, like calling himself a “*dummy*,” reflecting his view of his progress as suboptimal rather than supplementary to his L1 (i.e., English). He also noted that learning Japanese allowed him to empathize with other adult AL learners, particularly their embarrassment when progressing slower than younger learners.

**Shared linguistic background and understanding.** Participants noted that sharing a common linguistic background (L1 or AL) with ELLs enhanced their ability to connect with and understand students' learning experiences. The following excerpts exemplify participants' reflective empathy from a linguistic standpoint.

With the [Japanese learning] experience, you've got a better understanding of the problems that [Japanese ESOL] students are facing because you know what their pronunciation issues are.

(Hunter)

I think I would understand Chinese [ELLs'] struggles and problems more than I understand students from other [language] backgrounds and cultures. For example, like, in terms of [English] pronunciation and grammar, I would understand better in which particular area they would struggle more.

(Fang)

Hunter and Fang explained that their empathy for some ELLs came from their knowledge of the learners' L1s. They specifically discussed how this knowledge helped them anticipate challenges faced by learners, such as English pronunciation (noted by both), syntax rules

(mentioned by Fang), and script (also mentioned by Fang). However, from a TK perspective (Shulman, 1986, 1987), having learned students' L1s is not essential for ESOL teachers to identify common struggles among ELLs from specific language backgrounds, as teaching experiences can increase their awareness of these challenges, contributing to their TESOL knowledge and practices (Demir & Özmen, 2017). Therefore, it can be assumed that Hunter and Fang's understanding of learning challenges they observed among their students was informed by their own past instructed AL learning, drawn from their shared linguistic backgrounds (L1 or AL) with their students. These challenges may be less evident to ESOL teachers without similar AL-learning experiences.

**Experiential knowledge of instructed AL learning.** Participants reflected on their experiential knowledge of instructed AL learning to empathize with ELLs' learning, as shown in the following quotes.

Because there were other [Japanese-language learners] who were really struggling, and there were students who were much better than I was. And I think that THAT helped my teaching, too, to have more of a perspective from the students' side of what it's like to have a range of learning styles and speeds in the same class.

(Hunter)

I think [having learned an AL] definitely gives an understanding of what it's like for the students. Yeah, a lot more than teachers who don't speak another language. [...] I think it gives you a better understanding of how long it takes and how many explanations of the same thing that you need.

(Isabella)

Hunter and Isabella's accounts suggest that their experiential knowledge of instructed AL learning contributed to the development of their reflective empathy for ELLs, enhancing their ability to understand and address ELLs' language learning needs more effectively. Isabella emphasized how her language-learning experience offered valuable insights into the amount of effort required by learners and perhaps the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of particular teaching practices.

**Learning achievements and challenges experienced as former AL learners.** Participants' past achievements and challenges as AL learners helped them develop what we have termed reflective empathy for ELLs, as exemplified in the following extracts.

I know exactly where they're [i.e., ELLs] coming from. I know exactly what they're thinking, and I know exactly what it's like when you figure it out. So, I can really relate to that.

(Lawrence)

You know, I was struggling to learn, so I understand the struggles, I understand the lack of confidence, I understand why often it's too hard to elicit from [ELLs].

(Catherine)

Lawrence and Catherine explained that their empathy stemmed from their reflections on positive (Lawrence) and negative (Catherine) experiences as former AL learners. Their accounts suggest that they believed these experiences provided deeper insights into the emotional and cognitive factors impacting their students' ESOL learning, whether positive or negative. Lawrence, reflecting on positive experiences, mentioned empathizing with ELLs' moments of realization, which can be pivotal in effective learning. Such positive empathy involves comprehending another individual's positive feelings and experiences by connecting with them (Andreychik & Migliaccio, 2015). In contrast, Catherine reported relating to her students' struggles answering questions, drawing from her speaking challenges as a language learner.

**Unfavorable teaching practices of former AL teachers.** Oliver shared how a former AL teacher's unfavorable practices contributed to his empathy for ELLs. The quote below outlines the incident and how reflecting on it informed Oliver's TK.

I remember one [Mandarin-Chinese] teacher, a casual teacher, who laughed at one of my mistakes, and I (pause) well, I could not concentrate for the rest of the lesson. [...] Talking about humility (pause) well, being laughed at (pause) for your mistakes [as a learner] makes you [i.e., the ESOL teacher] very aware of how important it is to be sensitive around these areas. So (pause) like compassionate and empathetic.

(Oliver)

Oliver described how a former AL teacher derided a language mistake he made in class, which negatively impacted his concentration and led him to realize the importance of empathy in AL teaching, including TESOL. His memory of the teacher's laughter reminded him of the crucial role sensitivity plays when working with ELLs.

## Subtheme: Enacted Empathy

The second stage of enhanced empathy for ELLs, termed “enacted empathy” in this study, examined how participants’ teaching practices were shaped by their reflective empathy. While reflective empathy sometimes led to enacted empathy, this was not always the case, suggesting a complex relationship between empathetic reflections and teaching practices. This highlights the need to further explore factors that determine whether reflective empathy translates into enacted empathy in practice.

Participants’ accounts show that they applied their enacted empathy for ELLs by the following:

- Giving oral feedback with caution;
- Employing extended patience;
- Facilitating learning based on ELLs’ individual personality differences;
- Applying mindful instructional pacing;
- Creating a positive learning environment; and
- Sharing stories of struggles as former AL learners.

**Giving oral feedback with caution.** Deborah reportedly exercised caution when providing oral feedback to her students, based on her reflections as a former AL learner. The following excerpt illustrates her enacted empathy in offering feedback to ELLs.

(Reflecting on a former teacher’s oral feedback practices) I think there are other ways of teaching the ‘th’ sound. [...] Not jumping down the student’s throat if they make a mistake but repeating what mistake they made correctly and see if they can pick it up. So, doing it in sort of a round-about way.

(Deborah)

Deborah recognized the potential harm specific oral feedback practices could have on ELLs’ learning. Drawing from her past AL learning, she emphasized the importance of providing non-confrontational feedback.

**Employing extended patience.** Catherine and Jasmin reported showing greater patience with students after reflecting on their instructed AL-learning experiences. The extracts below exemplify their enacted empathy for ELLs.

I'm more empathetic to [ESOL] learners (pause) um (pause), especially at the beginning stage. So, that allows me to extend my patience more and always allows me to recall how I was learning.

(Catherine)

[A former ESOL teacher] was really nice, and I think (pause) when I look back, when I think about her, the most important thing about her was (pause) she was really patient. So, every time when I have the same problem in my class as students ask something over and over and over again, I really do my best to be patient.

(chuckles) (Jasmin)

Both Catherine and Jasmin highlighted the importance of patience in ESOL teaching, noting that their instructed AL-learning experiences made them more patient with ELLs. For example, Jasmin learned the value of patience by observing a former ESOL teacher, shaping her teaching practices repetitive student questions by consciously practicing patience to support her students.

**Facilitating learning based on ELLs' individual personality differences.** Fang described how her empathy for students prompted her to adapt her teaching practices to accommodate individual personality differences. The following extract illustrates the link between her past instructed AL learning and her empathetic responses to ELLs.

When I was a student in university, I was very shy. I was VERY, very shy. I was NEVER willing to open my mouth to talk [in class]. [...] (Describing a situation she encountered as a teacher) So, both of them [i.e., ELLs paired together in class] were shy, quiet people. [...] I would try to jump in to understand what was going on. And, if it didn't work between these two students, I would usually swap partners so that they can work with someone different.

(Fang)

Fang's extract suggests that her enacted empathy for ELLs stemmed from her past shyness as a former ELL, shaping her understanding of how individual personality differences can impact learners' behavior. Recognizing that shy ELLs might feel uncomfortable during pair work, she adjusted pairings to ease their discomfort, demonstrating how her reflective empathy translated into specific teaching practices (i.e., enacted empathy). Unlike practices based on other forms of TK (e.g., teacher education and training, teaching experiences), enacted empathy stems from reflecting on a personal connection to learners' experiences. In Fang's case, her past instructed ESOL learning likely

contributed to her enacted empathy, while her TESOL training and experience informed her broader teaching practices.

**Applying mindful instructional pacing.** Catherine reportedly enacted her empathy for students by consciously adjusting her instructional pacing, specifically the speed at which ESOL teachers speak and teach. The quote below illustrates her enacted empathy.

When I was in primary school and stuff, my [Mandarin-Chinese] teachers failed to take [into] account that probably half of the class wasn't understanding enough of what they taught. [...] They did not adjust their teaching in our situation. [...] When I feel that there's a struggle to learn something, then I feel like (pause) I'm able to go down to their [i.e., ELLs'] level and slow down and (pause) these things come because I have more empathy.

(Catherine)

Catherine drew on her experience with former Mandarin-Chinese teachers who did not accommodate her learning needs, shaping her understanding of effective versus ineffective language teaching. While her past instructed AL learning enhanced her empathy for ELLs, other life experiences and TESOL training likely informed her teaching practices as well. Her use of “*more*” before “*empathy*” and “*desire*” reflects her self-perceived ability and willingness to understand language learners, contrasting with her Mandarin-Chinese teachers.

**Creating a positive learning environment.** Participants explained how their past instructed AL learning allowed them to reflect on these experiences and cultivate positive learning environments for their students, as evident in the excerpts below.

What put me off was the method in which [Hindi] was taught. [...] Hindi is kind of the national language. It was kind of imposed on us. And [we] South Indians, kind of tend to resent that. [...] As a teacher, I do try my best to make sure that the students feel comfortable in my class, and I always try and make them feel welcomed. Because if they're not happy, it's like pouring water down the drain. What's gonna happen?

(Naifa)

My [Mandarin-]Chinese teachers, they always set this learning environment that's so strict and so stiff, you know, you're not free at all. So, there's that fear factor. And that's one thing I really don't want to happen in my classroom environment.

(Catherine)

Naifa and Catherine described how their past negative AL-learning experiences contributed to their enacted empathy for ELLs. Naifa used the passive verb “*imposed*” to express the unpleasantness of learning Hindi, suggesting that her former teachers did not prioritize enjoyable learning. Reflecting on this, she now creates positive learning environments for her students. Her expression “*pouring water down the drain*” indicates her belief that negative environments could lead to failure for ELLs or make teaching ineffective if students lose interest.

Catherine employed terms like “*strict*,” “*stiff*,” “*not free at all*,” and “*fear factor*” to describe her past Mandarin-Chinese learning environments. Reflecting on these negative learning experiences, she explained that her aim as an ESOL teacher was to establish learning environments that contrasted with her own AL learning, likely fostering comfort for students to ask questions, make mistakes, and share their thoughts.

**Sharing stories of struggles as former AL learners.** Participants stated that their empathy for ELLs motivated them to share stories of their struggles from their past instructed AL learning, as shown in the following excerpts.

When [my students] are so afraid of making mistakes or when they’re struggling with grammar, and then, I’ll say: “Well, even now I am still confused with some grammar [points]”. [...] We need to help them to encourage them to stay positive.

(Enna)

You can have a bit of a laugh about that and to be able to say: “You know, I’ve found prepositions particularly difficult when I was learning English. Do you use ‘to’ or ‘at’ or ‘from’ or ‘of’ or . . .” (chuckles) And, if you say that to the ESOL class: “This is something I had trouble with”. Then, they can: “Yes! We’re having trouble with it, too!”

(Deborah)

Enna and Deborah shared their past ESOL learning challenges with students to address similar struggles. For instance, Enna’s openness about her English-learning difficulties may have helped build trust through vulnerability and also helped her motivate students by normalizing the challenges. Enna and Deborah’s success as former ELLs turned ESOL teachers likely positioned them as role models for their students.

## DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that participants’ TK from instructed AL learning contributed to these New Zealand-based ESOL teachers’ empathy

for ELLs and, in some instances, informed their empathetic responses to students' learning needs. The study identified two stages of empathy: "reflective empathy" and "enacted empathy," both stemming from participants' past instructed AL learning. In applied linguistics, empathy is often treated broadly, without distinguishing its dimensions. By identifying these stages, this study highlights an overlooked aspect of ESOL teachers' empathy for ELLs, contributing to a more holistic understanding of how empathy develops through instructed AL learning.

The initial stage, "reflective empathy," arose from participants' reflections on their instructed AL-learning experiences, providing insights into AL learning processes and evaluations of former AL teachers' practices. Both negative and positive experiences contributed to participants' TK. This finding broadly aligns with existing applied linguistics literature, indicating that ESOL teachers with instructed AL-learning experiences often empathize with students by reflecting on their own past AL learning (e.g., Ellis, 2016a; Moodie, 2016). However, prior studies have discussed teachers' empathy for AL learners in a more generic way, suggesting uniformity. We propose the term "reflective empathy" to better define this specific type of empathy.

This study found two factors that fostered the formation of participants' reflective empathy for ELLs:

- Participants' experiential knowledge gained from their past instructed AL learning; and
- Their reported positive and negative AL-learning experiences with particular teaching practices.

Some findings in this study align with earlier research on TK related to empathy in applied linguistics (e.g., Ellis, 2004, 2012; Guerrettaz et al., 2020; Wright-Maley & Green, 2015), as discussed below.

Participants reported that reflecting on their past instructed AL learning heightened their empathy for ELLs, suggesting that these experiences helped ESOL teachers understand their students' perspectives. Naifa's account exemplifies this, emphasizing how instructed AL learning makes ESOL teachers more sensitive to ELLs' needs: *Because you have been through learning another language and using another language, so you are thinking about: "Oh, how was it for me." You are more attuned to [ELLs'] needs and more empathetic, and more inclusive.* This perspective aligns with Ellis (2004, 2012) and Wright-Maley and Green (2015) who found that ESOL teachers' past instructed AL learning enhanced their understanding of learners' experiences and informed their teaching practices. Ellis (2004) concluded that such experiences provided an insider perspective, enriching teachers' TK.

Participants' negative experiences with instructed AL learning prompted reflection on their learning journey, leading them to explore how these experiences informed their TK and teaching. Catherine, for instance, stated: *language learning, it's emotional, and we have to always empathize with our students, and learning a second language is one very effective way of relating to your students.* This aligns with existing research linking ESOL teachers' past instructed AL learning to empathy for students (e.g., Linville, 2016; Moodie, 2016). In Moodie's (2016) study, South Korean ESOL teachers reflect on how, as former ELLs, they found teacher-centered and grammar-focused lessons unengaging, which helped them empathize with ELLs who shared similar dislikes. Moodie's (2016) findings suggest that negative AL-learning experiences inform ESOL teachers' TK. However, Catherine and Moodie's participants may have experienced an "illusion of sameness" (Pitman, 2002, p. 285), as ELLs' perceptions of their learning experiences can be impacted by diverse factors like personality, culture, or interest.

While existing literature often links ESOL teachers' empathy to learners' negative experiences in ESOL learning (e.g., Ellis, 2004, 2012; Linville, 2016; Wright-Maley & Green, 2015), this study shows that positive empathy can also arise from teachers' past instructed AL learning. Although empathizing with positive experiences was minimally reported in the findings, positive empathy remains significant, as instructed language learning encompasses more than just negative experiences. Positive empathy involves understanding another person's positive feelings through shared experiences (Andreychik & Migliacchio, 2015). For instance, Lawrence's reflection on his AL-learning accomplishments exemplifies his positive empathy for students who share similar accomplishments: *I know exactly what it's like when you figure it out. So, I can really relate to that.* To our knowledge, however, prior studies mainly focus on ESOL teachers' empathy for ELLs stemming from shared negative AL-learning experiences. Positive AL-learning experiences can also foster reflective empathy, offering new insights into TK. While exploring how teachers' learning struggles contributed to their empathy for ELLs is crucial, future research should give greater attention to how positive AL-learning experiences contribute to positive empathy.

After reflecting on their past instructed AL learning (i.e., reflective empathy), participants sometimes demonstrated enacted empathy by addressing their students' specific learning needs. Reflective empathy informed their enacted empathy, which was expressed through teaching practices. However, what prompted participants to enact empathy in some instances, but not others, remains unclear, suggesting a need for further investigation into factors contributing to the transition

from reflective to enacted empathy. Findings indicate that participants' enacted empathy often derived from their AL-learning struggles. Reflecting on inadequate AL-teaching practices they experienced, such as insensitive oral feedback, participants adopted other practices to prevent students from facing similar negative experiences. For instance, Deborah reported employing non-confronting oral feedback: *Not jumping down the student's throat if they make a mistake but repeating what mistake they made correctly and see if they can pick it up.* This aligns with Ellis's (2004, 2012) and Cancino et al.'s (2020) research. For example, Ellis's (2004) study described a similar pattern, where ESOL teachers reflected on their AL-learning experiences and adjusted their teaching practices accordingly, though her study lacked specific details of enacted empathy explored here.

This paper has explored the connection between New Zealand-based ESOL teachers' past instructed AL learning and their reflective and enacted empathy for ELLs. While empathy can be transferable across disciplines, this study focuses on teachers with firsthand AL-learning experiences. However, this emphasis may risk overlooking ESOL teachers without such backgrounds, who can also develop empathy for ELLs through shared experiences, such as struggling with other subjects like mathematics. Although participants often tied empathy to discipline-specific experiences, this assumption might warrant re-evaluation. Empathy can also be consciously developed through teacher education and training. Resources like empathy-focused courses, diversity training, and structured language-learning experiences (SLLE) (Ellis, 2006) offer pathways for all teachers, regardless of their L1, to cultivate reflective and enacted empathy. By integrating education/training with instructed AL learning, ESOL teachers can further enrich their empathy and teaching (Ellis, 2012; Cancino et al., 2020).

While other learning experiences and education/training can inform ESOL teachers' TK and empathy for ELLs, firsthand instructed AL learning may have a greater impact. It provides direct insight into the learner's perspective, including adapting to new linguistic contexts, leading to a deeper understanding of the academic and emotional demands of language learning. Teachers with instructed AL-learning experiences may be better equipped to develop empathy attuned to students' specific learning needs, enhancing the relational quality of their teaching. Recognizing past instructed AL learning as a key component of ESOL teachers' TK is essential, and those without such experiences are encouraged to pursue AL learning as part of their professional development to deepen their empathy for ELLs.

## CONCLUSION

This study underscores the pivotal role of instructed AL-learning experiences in shaping New Zealand-based ESOL teachers' enhanced empathy for ELLs, revealing two key stages: reflective empathy and enacted empathy. Reflective empathy, grounded in teachers' AL-learning reflections, leads to a deeper understanding of ELLs' experiences, while enacted empathy transforms this understanding into practical teaching practices that support students' learning needs. The findings highlight the importance of these empathetic capacities for all ESOL teachers, regardless of their L1 backgrounds, suggesting that empathy is a dynamic, valuable component of TK, informed by past instructed AL learning.

The study contributes to theoretical, empirical, and practical dimensions. Theoretically, it challenges conventional views prioritizing ESOL teachers' countries of origin and L1, instead emphasizing past instructed AL learning as a key source of TK that informs their teaching. This shift calls for reexamining teacher frameworks and expanding TK through experiential learning. Empirically, the study provides insights specific to New Zealand's ESOL sector, enriching global understandings of AL education and underscoring the value of experiential knowledge. Practically, it emphasizes the importance of instructed AL-learning experiences in TESOL, guiding teacher training and professional development to integrate experiential learning as a core component.

Valuable insights have been gained into how ESOL teachers' past instructed AL learning contributes to their TK and practices, yet several limitations remain. While the study emphasizes the importance of experiential knowledge, it does not examine its interaction with formal pedagogical knowledge in ESOL teaching. Future research could explore the combined impact of past instructed AL learning and TESOL training to understand their interplay. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to examine how instructed AL-learning experiences evolve over teachers' careers, particularly regarding changes in TESOL knowledge and practices. Additionally, this study may not adequately address how the time since participants' instructed AL learning shaped their perceptions, a factor future research should address through more targeted recruitment and questioning.

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We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

## THE AUTHORS

Rohan K. Willis is an experienced TESOL educator with teaching experience in multiple Asian countries and New Zealand since 2002. His research interests encompass language teacher knowledge, perceptions, and their practical application, as well as plurilingualism, linguistic identities, and the impact of personal, educational, and professional experiences on ESOL teachers' roles.

Sharon Harvey is an associate professor who has extensive experience in teaching English as a second and foreign language and applied linguistics, and in educating pre- and in-service teachers. Her research interests include intercultural communication and competency, multilingualism and flexible languaging practices, language planning and policy, and refugee and migrant resettlement.

Irmengard Wohlfart was actively engaged in teaching English to speakers of other languages and translation prior to her retirement. Her research interests are in the translation of New Zealand literature, sociolinguistics, multigenerational migration consequences, and ESOL teaching.

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