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Unpacking Undergraduate EFL Learners' Emotional Needs in the Classroom: A Qualitative Inquiry into Antecedents and Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Researching second and foreign language (L2) learners' emotions and inner states has recently been a contemporary line of inquiry. However, the exploration of L2 learners' emotional needs has not been given its deserved due diligence, especially at undergraduate levels. To fill this gap, this study took into consideration the cultural idiosyncrasies of Iran, to scrutinize the emotional needs of undergraduate L2 learners. It aimed to ascertain the factors that pertain to the specific emotional needs of undergraduates within a language learning context. A semi-structured interview, alongside a narrative frame, were conducted on 40 undergraduate Iranian English as foreign language (EFL) learners in order to identify the factors that shape their emotional needs. The data were analyzed qualitatively through the MAXQDA software. The findings revealed five major themes of students' emotional needs: instructor support, self-confidence, self-expression, motivation and peer support. The study has implications for establishing and encouraging an emotion-oriented L2 education.

1. Introduction

Positive Psychology (PP) has become an increasingly prominent line of inquiry in second language (L2) education given the emotional nature of the field (Ghasvand et al., 2024; Mercer, 2021; Richards, 2020). A number of seminal studies have explored this shift, notably

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MacIntyre, Gregersen, and Mercer's (2019) expansion of PP into second language acquisition (SLA) theory and practice, outlining how constructs such as positive emotions, character strengths, and positive institutional contexts have progressively shaped learner outcomes. This branch of psychology focuses on positive emotions, personal strengths, and virtues, aiming to understand how individuals thrive. According to MacIntyre (2016), PP examines "positive emotion, positive character traits, and institutions that enable individuals to flourish." Central to this approach is the belief that people possess an inherent capacity for growth, resilience, and happiness, and that fostering these qualities can enhance well-being. This view is supported by research showing that positive emotions foster resilience over time, and that resilience in turn predicts greater levels of flourishing, the two influencing each other in an upward spiral toward well-being (Gilchrist et al., 2023). This perspective is directly relevant to language learning, where emotions and affective factors influence engagement and learning (Seyri & Ghiasvand, 2025). While traditional SLA studies have focused primarily on cognitive and linguistic processes, growing evidence suggests that positive emotions broaden learners' cognitive engagement and foster long-term language proficiency (Fredrickson, 2001). A variable ingrained in PP is learner emotional needs, which is defined as psychologically rooted requirements for the cultivation of optimal learning, including self-efficacy, belonging, and emotional safety (Oxford, 2016). As PP expands the scopes of SLA research, scholars have begun to explore the emotional landscape of language learners. In particular, emotions such as anxiety, confidence, and belonging are now seen as key contributors to classroom engagement and achievement (Fredrickson, 2001; Gregersen, 2016). This calls for more deliberation on a systematic approach to identify and address these emotional dimensions in EFL contexts

Despite the growing interest, PP research in SLA with focus on learners' emotional needs, particularly in the classroom, remains underdeveloped, especially in non-Western contexts (Oxford, 2016; Seligman, 2011). The relationship between emotional well-being and language acquisition warrants particular attention, as evidence suggests emotional self-regulation training can significantly enhance learning outcomes (Kossakowska-Pisarek, 2016). Supporting this view, Gregersen (2016) demonstrated that P.P interventions improve student persistence, while Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory explains how positive emotions expand learners' cognitive and behavioral flexibility. Recent studies in Asian contexts (e.g., Huang & Zeng, 2023) confirm this relationship, highlighting the need to address emotional needs in academic settings. However, existing research like Dhillon's

(2019) study of U.S. English language Learners has focused primarily on Western populations, examining needs through the lens of factors like acculturation and racism. While valuable, such Western-centric approaches may not fully capture the emotional needs of learners in other cultural contexts. Moreover, the field of PP and SLA, the majority of studies examine broad constructs like motivation, grit, and resilience (Gregersen & Mercer, 2022), yet they seldom operationalize how these constructs intersect with the classroom-specific experiences of EFL learners. Research also rarely centers the voices of students themselves, relying instead on teacher perceptions or generalized measures of well-being (Komorowska, 2016). Furthermore, there is limited exploration of how emotional needs shift across the undergraduate trajectory, despite the unique pressures university students face, such as navigating advanced coursework, identity formation, and the transition into professional life (Oxford, 2016). This study extends PP in the field of SLA by centering the voices of Iranian undergraduates, identifying and proposing a hierarchical model of emotional needs in EFL classrooms.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Emotional needs in language learning have gained significant attention, with their application in SLA in particular (MacIntyre, 2016) being thoroughly examined. Although various frameworks exist today to explore learner well-being, this research focuses primarily on Oxford's (2016) EMPATHICS model due to its relevance to language learning contexts and emotional needs. Furthermore, EMPATHICS operationalizes emotional needs for classroom applications.

The EMPATHICS model was developed to address the lack of research on emotional factors that influence language learning success. Unlike broader frameworks such as PERMA (Seligman, 2011), which focus on general well-being, EMPATHICS specifically targets dimensions relevant to language learners. The model outlines nine interrelated components: (E) emotion and empathy, (M) meaning and motivation, (P) perseverance, (A) agency and autonomy, (T) time, (H) hardiness and habits of mind, (I) intelligences and identity, (C) character strengths, and (S) self-factors. Within this framework, emotional needs are defined as the psychological requirements necessary for optimal learning, including the need for emotional safety, self-efficacy, and meaningful engagement (Oxford, 2016; Kossakowska-Pisarek, 2016). These needs align with Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory, which posits that positive emotions expand learners' cognitive and behavioral repertoires, fostering

greater risk-taking, persistence in practice, and improved proficiency outcomes. One criticism of EMPATHICS is that despite its comprehensiveness, the interrelationship between the factors in each dimension has not been assessed adequately (Alrabai & Dewaele, 2024). This limitation makes the Iranian EFL context a valuable testing ground for exploring how these dimensions interact. EMPATHICS as an emotional system is multi-dimensional, requires further research and application in order to extract specific qualities of learners' emotional needs. This extends EMPATHICS in a non-Western context and attempts to identify dimensions directly relevant to SLA.

This study employed Oxford's (2016) EMPATHICS model as its primary theoretical framework due to its direct relevance to EFL learning contexts. Unlike broader positive psychology frameworks (e.g., PERMA), the EMPATHICS model specifically addresses language-learning challenges through its focus on emotions and empathy. These dimensions align particularly well with the broaden-and-build theory's emphasis on resource development while maintaining a clear focus on language acquisition contexts (Weisz & Zaki, 2017).

2.2. PP and L2 Education

Learners' emotions have long been recognized as an important factor in second language learning. With the emergence of positive psychology (PP), attention to emotional experiences has become even more important, shifting the focus from deficit-oriented perspectives to the cultivation of positive emotions and strengths in educational contexts (Seyri & Ghiasvand, 2024). As a growing field, PP in second language education has been subject to both enthusiasm and criticism. Whereas earlier SLA research primarily investigated negative emotions and their effects on learning, contemporary research emphasizes positive emotions and their roles in the L2 classroom (Wang & Derakhshan, 2021).

Within this framework, PP can be broadly defined as an approach that seeks to understand and promote positive emotions. It contains both positive and negative emotions, with an emphasis on the positive. MacIntyre (2016) highlights four primary applications of PP in L2 education: the renewed focus on positive emotions, character strengths, the shift from the PERMA model to the EMPATHICS framework, and the concept of flow, which refers to a state of positive well-being that facilitates optimal engagement. This paradigm shift has allowed for deeper exploration of learners' emotional factors in the learning environment.

Accordingly, many studies have examined emotional variables among EFL learners, such as enjoyment, engagement, endurance, perseverance, and resilience. Studies grounded in PP have demonstrated the role of emotional regulation and positive affect in supporting learners' capacity to cope with challenges and sustain effort in the language learning process (e.g., MacIntyre, 2016; Oxford, 2016). However, scholars have also cautioned against simplistic applications of PP. Komorowska (2016) highlighted common misinterpretations in foreign language teaching, noting that PP is sometimes applied with unrealistic expectations, such as assuming learners can consistently maintain peak engagement and self-regulation. Similarly, Kossakowska-Pisarek (2016) found that PP-based strategy training supported emotional regulation and stress reduction, although its long-term effects were limited. Together, these studies suggest that PP must be applied in a context-sensitive and realistic manner.

Despite the rapid growth of PP research in L2 education, relatively little attention has been given to learners' emotional needs as they relate to their lived classroom experiences. Much of the existing research focuses on broad constructs such as PERMA, EMPATHICS, engagement, and well-being (Seligman, 2011; Oxford, 2016; MacIntyre, 2016), rather than examining specific emotional needs shaped by cultural and contextual factors. Moreover, PP research has largely concentrated on younger learners or general populations, leaving undergraduate EFL learners' emotional pressures underexplored (Ghiasvand & Sharifpour, 2024). This gap underscores the need for studies that focus on emotional needs within specific educational contexts, such as undergraduate EFL classrooms, which the present study seeks to address.

2.3. Students' Emotional Needs

While PP examines the significance of emotions and well-being in education, emotional experiences are not uniform across all ages, backgrounds and educational levels. It is widely acknowledged that undergraduates go through a shift as they transition into adulthood and higher education. This shift is accompanied by new societal, academic and personal challenges that can lead to emotional fluctuations (Asif et al., 2020). These unique pressures make undergraduates a relevant demographic for investigating the effects of emotions on classroom performance.

In general psychology, a useful framework for understanding the needs of learners is Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, proposing the notion that motivation revolves around five ascending levels of physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-

actualization. Applying the model to education, learners must feel they belong, are secure and accepted before they can achieve confidence, autonomy and fulfilment in their learning environment. Although, as a psychological framework, Maslow's framework expounds a foundational assessment of human motivation, it does not directly account for the unique emotions and feelings encountered in the field of education.

In SLA, Oxford's EMPATHICS model clearly outlines categories of learners' emotional needs. Pride and self-satisfaction are mentioned as beneficial to student self-regulation and autonomy or control (Schunk & Ertmer, 2000, as cited in Oxford, 2016; Benson, 2011, as cited in Oxford, 2016). Meaning and motivation are also mentioned, with motivation being defined as conscious wanting (Dörnyei, 2009, as cited in Oxford, 2016). The model also encompasses perseverance, resilience and hope Agency is highlighted as another core need, understood as the volition to affect outcomes (Ryan & Irie, 2014, as cited in Oxford, 2016), while self-efficacy is described as closely linked to effort and persistence (Maddux, 2011, as cited in Oxford, 2016).

Exploring these emotional needs is central to the purpose of this study because it moves beyond broad constructs and directs attention to context-specific dimensions of learner experience. To capture these nuances, emotions and their dimensions were taken into account when the interview and narrative framework were deliberately designed around the categories outlined in EMPATHICS, enabling participants to articulate how these needs manifest in the classroom. This approach situates the study within an established framework while also extending it by centering learner voices in a non-Western undergraduate context.

2.4. Empirical Studies

Having reviewed the theoretical foundational needs of learners, this section explores empirical research that have investigated emotional factors. Shakki (2023) examined the relationship between EFL learners' engagement and their achievement emotions. The findings revealed a significant association between learners' engagement and achievement emotions, with enjoyment positively influencing engagement. However, emotions such as anger, anxiety, and hopelessness were found to have an insignificant effect on engagement. Although it explored and found a significant association between engagement and achievement, the study did not explore the specific emotional needs underlying these achievement emotions. Moreover, While the study linked emotions to engagement, the

study's quantitative design limited understanding of how learners experience or articulate those emotions.

Gregersen (2016) attempted to illustrate the effect of emotions in the FLT context by “tapping into them through powerful true-life accounts” and verify a number of positive interventions. By using those accounts and positive interventions, the study concluded that positive interventions in line with PP improve educational endurance and enjoyment. However, the research did not examine specific emotional needs or the underlying psychological conditions that support sustained engagement and remained teacher-centered rather than learner-centered, leaving the perspectives of learners themselves unexplored.

Although Dhillon's (2019) research focused on a Western ELL context and did not directly explore emotional needs, it identified five core socio-emotional competencies: Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. These competencies are closely related to learners' emotional needs, as they reflect the psychological conditions that support engagement, motivation, and persistence in language learning. While valuable, Dhillon's findings, which are grounded in Western educational contexts and are skewed toward socio-economic factors, may not fully capture the emotional needs of learners in other cultural settings. This limitation highlights the necessity of the current study's focus on Iranian EFL learners, whose needs may differ due to distinct educational norms and social frameworks.

The aforementioned studies all have valuable contributions to the field, however there exists a trend within these studies, and that is the lack of direct focus on the student. None of them explicitly target learners' accounts of emotional needs in the classroom. Together, these studies suggest that while emotional constructs are widely recognized, learners' self-identified emotional needs remain undertheorized. Moreover, the majority of the studies rely on the perception of instructors or Western contexts, leading to learners' needs in non-Western undergraduate EFL settings being largely unexamined. This study aimed to explore the multi-faceted emotional needs of undergraduate Iranian EFL learners in undergraduate classrooms and to examine how these needs influence their language-learning experiences. Using the EMPATHICS model, this study sought to elucidate the factors that affect those emotional needs and to assess the possible outcomes of emotional support on language education. In other words, this study aimed to find answers to the following questions:

1. What are the primary emotional needs of undergraduate Iranian EFL learners in undergraduate classrooms?
2. What factors influence the emotional needs of these learners?

3. What is the perceived impact of addressing emotional needs on learners' performance, motivation, and engagement?

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and Research Setting

Using convenient sampling (Mackey & Gass, 2015), we recruited a sample of 40 Iranian undergraduate EFL students from an Iranian university. These students were enrolled in English Language and Literature and English Translation programs. The sample included 22 females (55%) and 18 males (45%), ranging in age from 18 to 26 years. Participants were primarily in their 2nd and 3rd years of study and had completed core courses in linguistics, grammar, and academic writing. All participants had achieved a B2 or higher level of English proficiency, consistent with the departmental admission requirements. Prior to the interview process, the objectives of the study and the procedures relating to the interviews were clearly and thoroughly explained to all participants to ensure their informed consent before data collection began.

Table 1

Demographic Information Table

Characteristic	Category	n	%	Range / Mean
Gender	Female	22	55	—
	Male	18	45	—
Age (years)	—	—	—	18–26

3.2. Methods of Data Generation

3.2.1. Semi-structured Interview

To explore participants' perspectives on emotional needs in the classroom, the researchers conducted a semi-structured interview in English. Consisting of eight questions, the interview delved into learners' perceptions of classroom emotions and their impact on second language (L2) acquisition. The questions prompted respondents to identify factors influencing language learning, consider the role of positive emotions, reflect on the importance of self-confidence and self-expression, and assess their effects on EFL learning (Appendix A). There was no particular time limit; however, each participant took approximately 20 minutes to answer all questions.

3.2.2. Narrative Frame

In the pursuit of thoroughly examining learners' subjective experiences within EFL classrooms, the researchers designed and employed a written narrative framework as a methodological tool. This qualitative instrument served as a crucial mechanism for navigating the intricate terrain of participants' experiential landscapes and unspoken narratives. As outlined by Barkhuizen (2011), the fundamental principle of this framework lies in its ability to prompt participants to construct personalized narratives, identifying their emotional dimensions and engaging in reflective discourse rooted in their lived experiences. Tailored to align with the overarching objectives of the study, this narrative structure guided EFL learners in articulating their individual narratives, elucidating their emotional needs, outlining strategies for addressing these needs, and expounding upon the consequential significance of addressing these needs within the pedagogical context.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected using the two qualitative instruments mentioned, both designed to align with the research objectives and subjected to rigorous content validation. The interview questions were refined through trial runs with experienced researchers and expert feedback from two specialists in qualitative EFL research, resulting in improved clarity, relevance, and depth. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in English with 40 undergraduate EFL students, averaging 20 minutes each and following eight sequential questions. Researchers maintained attentive silence, intervening only to clarify or explain questions when needed. All sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

In addition, participants completed a written narrative frame within ten days of receiving clear instructions. Like the interviews, the narrative frame underwent review by two psycholinguistics scholars to ensure its validity and methodological soundness. Recognizing the unfamiliarity of this task for some students, researchers provided support and guidance to facilitate meaningful engagement. Completed narratives were checked for omissions or typographical errors before undergoing content and thematic analysis alongside the interview transcripts, ensuring the integrity and accuracy of the data collected.

3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), is a qualitative method used for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within data. It is widely employed in social sciences and psychology to interpret meaning from qualitative data, such as interview

transcripts or textual responses. In this study, we applied both content and thematic analysis to the data collected through our instruments, semi-structured interviews and narrative frames. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. The process began with a content analysis of the narrative frames completed by undergraduate EFL learners. Various codes were generated, and these coded segments significantly aided several stages of analysis. Initially, the data underwent a quantitative assessment to determine the frequency of each code. We then conducted a thematic analysis to explore the narratives in greater depth. As noted earlier, participants' responses were transcribed with particular care, and additional codes were developed during this phase. Memo writing in MAXQDA was used to document codes alongside illustrative quotations and interpretative notes. Codes were compared systematically to prevent duplication, and similar codes and themes were merged to condense and clarify the dataset. This process continued until data credibility and thematic saturation were achieved, after which the two codebooks were integrated to draw final conclusions.

To ensure the study quality, we applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative rigor. In terms of credibility, two expert researchers in PP and English teaching cross-checked sections of the data, with statistical calculations revealing a strong Cohen's Kappa coefficient of 0.83 for inter-rater reliability. For dependability, a third researcher independently examined the entire analytic process. Detailed descriptions of every step were also provided to facilitate transparent presentation of the findings. Finally, to achieve confirmability, ample descriptions and representative participant quotations were added, establishing a clear chain of evidence from raw data through to the final themes. We also took an outsider positionality in collecting and analyzing the data by self-bracketing personal beliefs and experiences of emotional needs in L2 education.

4. Findings

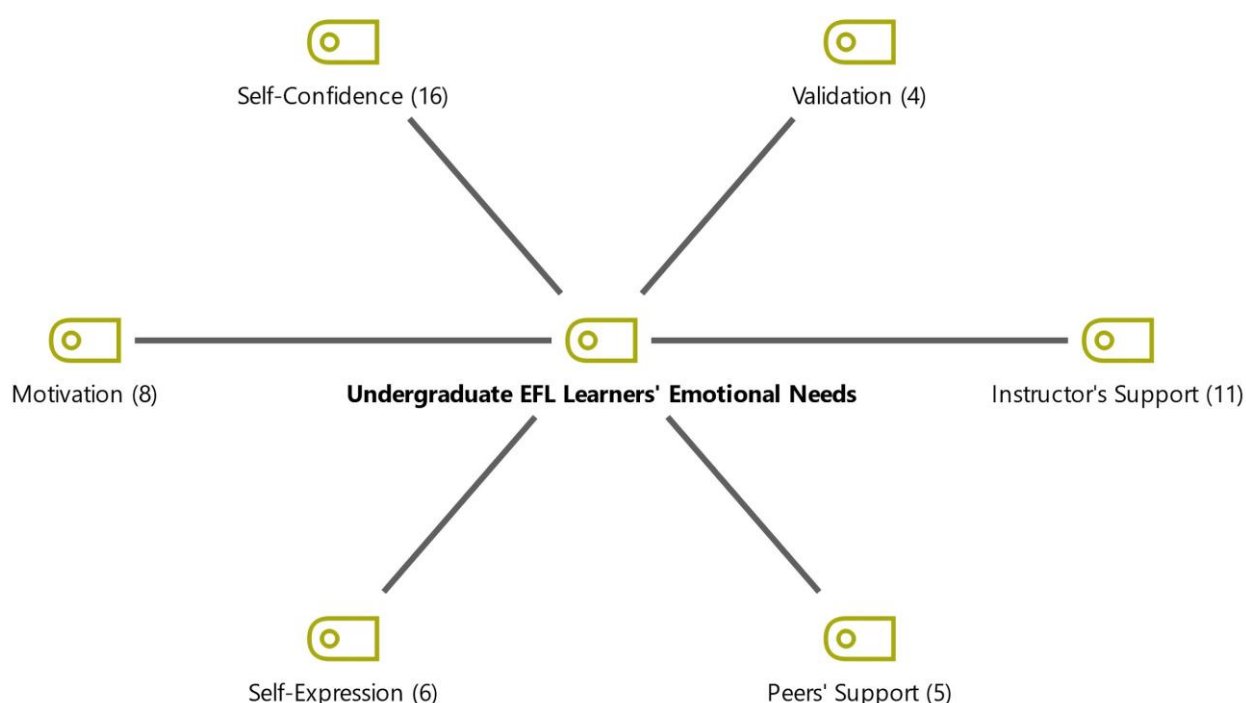
In light of the questions posed, the findings section presents five comprehensive code-theory figures, thoroughly expanded upon in the ensuing paragraphs. These figures illustrate the emotional needs of undergraduate EFL learners, the pertinent factors influencing these needs, strategies for addressing them, the significance of such interventions, and ultimately, the profound impact they can have on learners.

4.1. Undergraduate Learners Emotional Needs

Figure 1 portrays the undergraduate EFL learners' emotional needs. The six themes represented are self-confidence, validation, motivation, instructor and peer support, and self-expression. The predominant theme in this figure is the instructor's support, with self-confidence coming in second. The weakest theme is validation, with only 4 instances of it being mentioned. This figure effectively illustrates the importance of instructor's support and further validates the need for motivation and self-confidence, emphasizing the notion of mental health being a focal point of learning and acquiring language.

Figure 1

Undergraduate EFL Learners' Emotional Needs



To understand the emotional needs of undergraduate EFL learners, the first interview question as well as the first blank of the narrative frame were examined. The outcomes indicate that many of the participants (%40) believe self-confidence to be a vital need in the classroom (shown in figure 1). The most frequent themes were as followed: “emotional needs include factors such as feeling safe and confident to communicate”, “emotional needs of EFL learners can be defined by several factors like the learners' self-confidence in their ability”, and “I think learning is influenced by many factors including self-confidence”. Students #15 argued that “In my opinion, undergraduate learners' emotional needs include several factors, but the most important one is self-confidence, because without self-confidence students withdraw from the classroom and may not participate at all” (Narrative Frame). Furthermore,

one of the participants (Student #4) claimed that self-confidence affects not only classroom engagement, but also overall performance by saying “I am an active learner of the English language and whenever I have more self-confidence, I talk more in the class and I get better grades” (Interview).

The boldness of support, specifically instructor’s support, backed by this and the following figures, illustrates its importance to learners of language and the participants, through their answers, intensify this boldness. As one participant states, “(learners) need validation and positive feedback to feel supported and encouraged in their language acquisition journey.” This quote, adequately surmises the cruciality of support in language acquisition spheres. Another participant quotes the need for a “friendly and welcoming environment”. Learners indicate a great need for this factor, and it is reflected in their behavior in the classroom. Students who report greater results and grades link their improvements to the support of their instructors, and peers. In relation to the linkage between support and performance, or improvement, one participant states that “I believe when learners feel supported and valued, they are more likely to participate actively in the learning process and achieve their full potential.” Some of the participants also emboldened the need for peer-support, with one of the participants saying “factors such as peers and instructors’ support...” and following that in the next question with “affect a student’s language acquisition and learning levels.”

Self-expression was another frequently-mentioned theme, with six participants alluding to it. As quoted by three participants, “being heard”, “freedom of expression” and “feeling safe and confident to communicate” are vital factors in relation to the emotional well-being of students. Another participant further delves into the matter at hand by saying “self-expression forms an integral aspect of a person’s development. It paves the way for the students to voice their emotions, thoughts, experiences, ideas, and viewpoints”. As a testimonial for the importance of self-expression, a participant shares their opinion by saying “self-expression plays a vital role in satisfying the emotional needs of undergraduate learners in the classroom.” Furthermore, a participant suggests that “when the classroom is such that learners can speak without fear of being judged, it is obvious that they can safely focus on learning.” It is quite evident that many participants saw this factor as a vital one, with another participant saying “leaving the classroom feeling like you have successfully expressed yourself is one of the most important feelings to create for any EFL learner.” Self-expression is a substantial part of any language, and it requires its learners to be adequately experienced

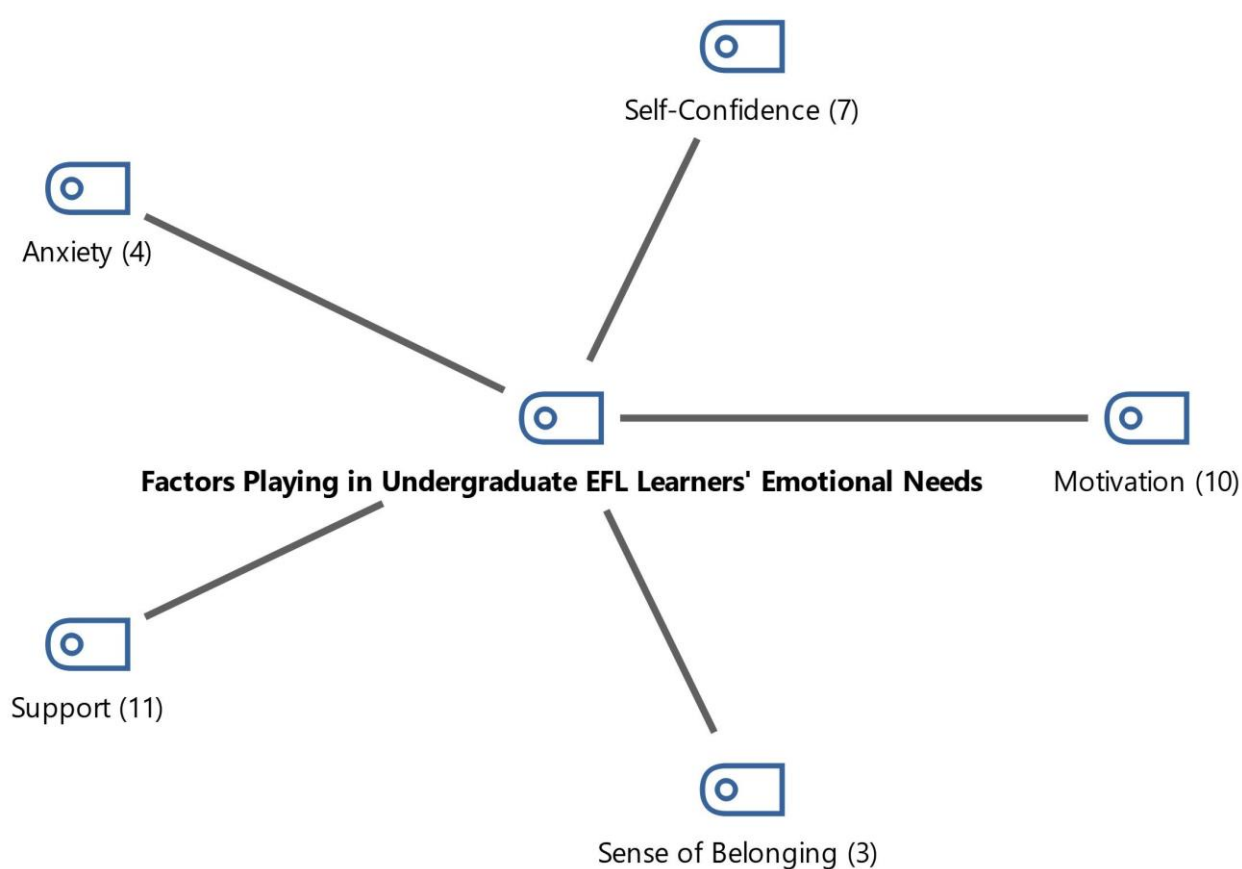
in doing so. As one participant shares, “self-expression plays a substantial role in any language learning classroom. Firstly, it will benefit a student’s speaking capabilities and secondly, the positive feedback from peers and instructors motivates a student to be more active in the classroom.” All of these testimonies lead to the assumption that self-expression plays a great part in increasing the emotional well-being of learners, enabling them to perform better and improve their language-learning capabilities.

4.2. Factors Influencing Undergraduate EFL Learners’ Emotional Needs

The figure below (figure 2) illustrates the different factors influencing undergraduate EFL learners’ emotional needs. Support is the primary factor affecting learners’ emotional needs with 11 instances of it being mentioned. Concurrently, support is the leading factor in the previous chart in fig 1.1. Motivation follows second with 10 instances of mention, also covered by the previous chart in fig 1.1. self-confidence is third in the chart, with 7 mentions. Anxiety and sense of belonging come in at last, respectively with 4 and 3 instances.

Figure 2

Factors Influencing Undergraduate EFL Learners’ Emotional Needs



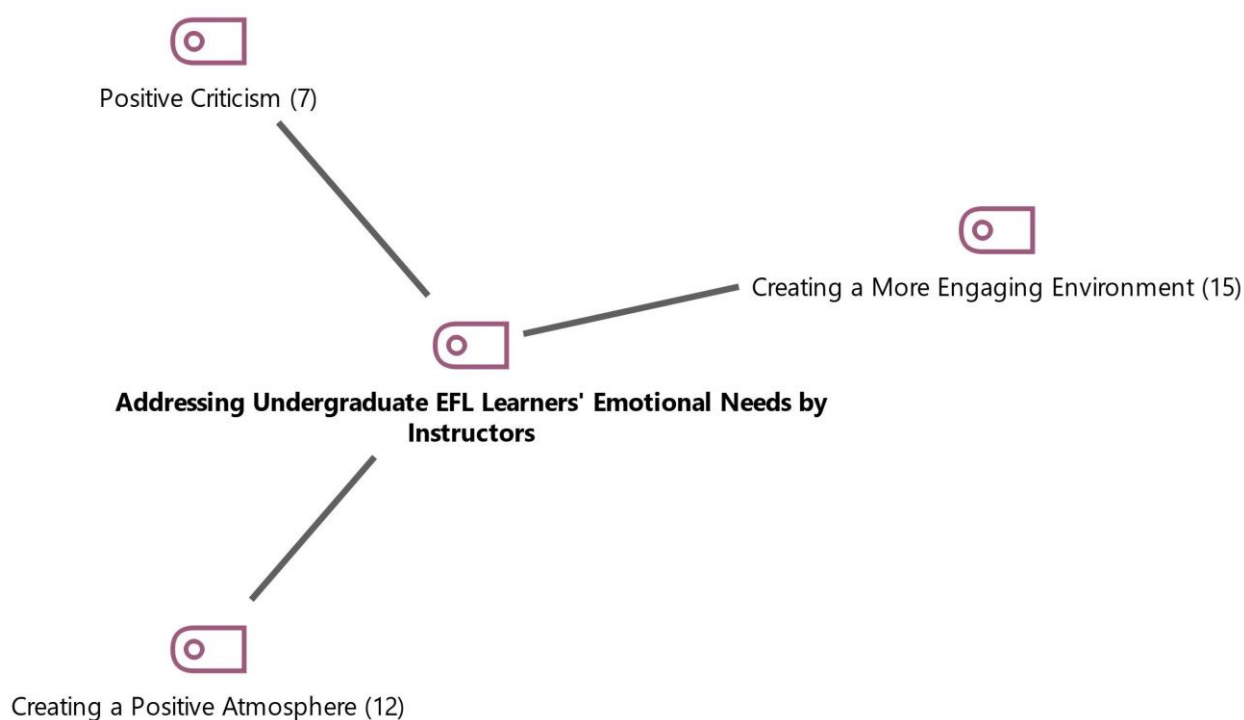
Furthermore, learners also indicate a need for motivation as a primary factor playing a role in their emotional needs. One participant suggests that “EFL students’ motivation to learn the language is of utmost importance because little or no practical progress is made without an incentive.” As a linkage between support, anxiety and motivation, one participant states that “Supportive environments may encourage learners and reduce their anxiety by motivating them.” These quotes suggest a further vitalness in the aforementioned factor of motivation, as it connects and leads to different themes in the chart.

4.3. Addressing Undergraduate EFL Learners’ Emotional Needs by Instructors

The following figure (figure 3) delves into the different ways of addressing the learners’ needs by instructors, namely the predominant theme of engagement and creating a more engaging environment. This theme is followed by ‘creating a positive atmosphere’ as a close second, with positive criticism coming in at third. All three require extensive exploration and we will be attempting to do so by quoting some of the participants.

Figure 3

Addressing Undergraduate EFL Learners’ Emotional Needs by Instructors



In terms of creating a more engaging environment, participant #27 speaks of addressing emotional needs by “encouraging participation and collaboration, initiating

discussions about emotion regulation, and providing clear rules in the classroom.” Other characteristics of an engaging environment include being “interactive” and “inclusive”, as mentioned by two other participants. Secondly, the matter of atmosphere comes into discussion. “Product-oriented”, “supportive”, “safe” and “peaceful” are the adjectives mentioned in relation to the subject of positive atmosphere. All these lead into the conclusion that EFL learners perceive engaging and positive atmospheres and environments as highly critical to their language acquisition and lingual performance. As far as positive criticism is concerned, the last theme in the aforementioned graph comes in with 7 instances of mention. Positive criticism, or feedback, although not strongly mentioned, held a discernible importance in the eyes of the participants. In regards to how it might be accomplished, one participant explains how to implement positive criticism by saying “Language instructors can address those emotional needs by praising the student in front of others and correcting their error without using the word ‘error’ in the class. They can use some suggestions like ‘I have suggestions for you to enhance your speaking.’”

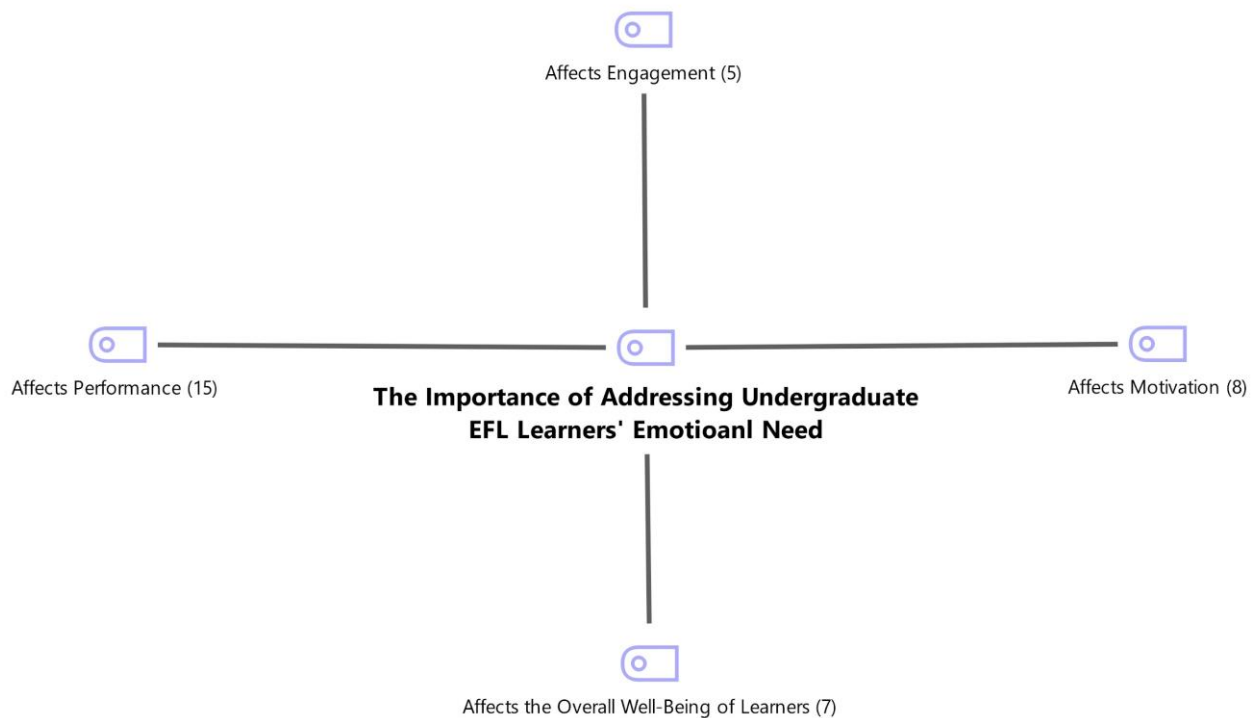
4.4. The Importance of Addressing Undergraduate EFL Learners’ Emotional Needs

Figure 4 is the quintessential answer to the questions raised earlier in this manuscript, with it being the focal point of the research. Some speculations were made early on in the research, with the main effect of addressing learners’ needs being improved performance. Reflected in the data analysis, performance is the most significantly mentioned item in the figure below with the effect on performance, motivation, overall well-being and engagement following it. To begin with, the following paragraphs will delve heavily into performance. Secondly, the following themes will be discussed and analyzed as needed.

In terms of the importance of addressing such needs, one participant is quoted by saying “It can better their academic experience in all aspects”. Another participant adds to the discussion by saying “It directly affects their language-learning process.” Other participants chime in by adding “it helps the language-learning process move a lot faster and better.”, “It affects students’ language acquisition and learning levels.”, “It affects their learning process and can change their studying quality.” The similarity in the aforementioned comments seem to suggest an underlying consensus in regards to the importance of addressing emotional needs when it comes to performance and ways in which performance might be affected. One of the participants goes as far as to say “These critical abilities are necessary for maintaining successful relationships with others, gaining meaningful employment, navigating daily life skills, and problem-solving issues that arise in life”.

Figure 4

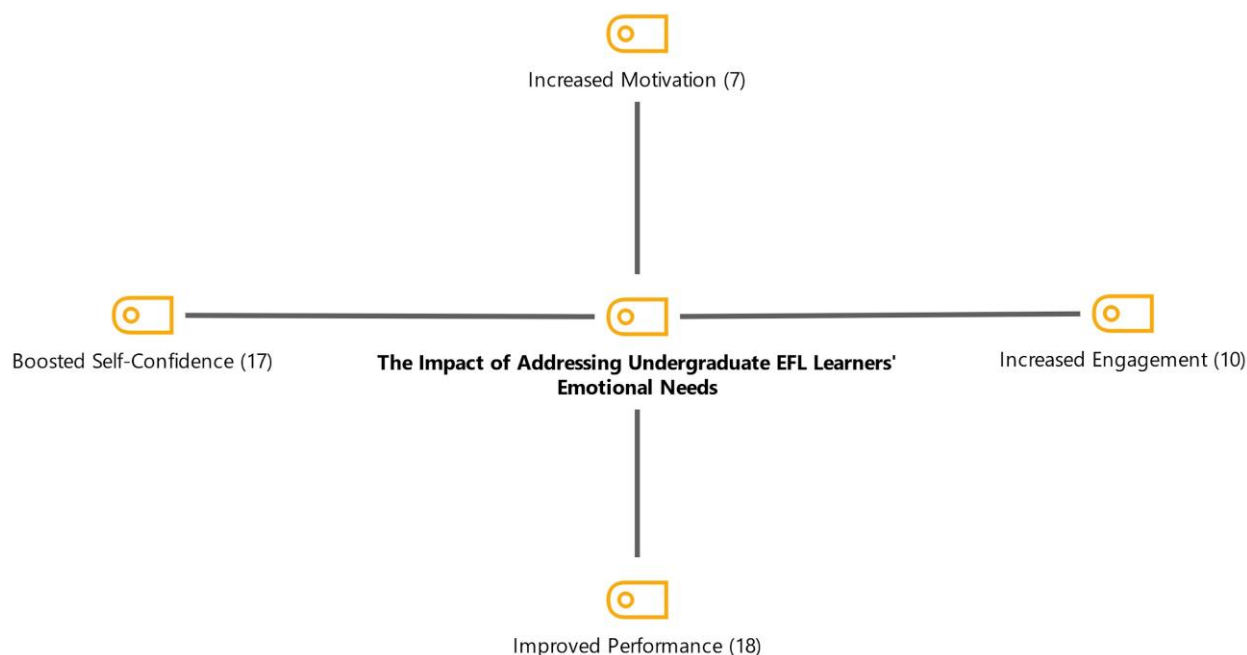
The Importance of Addressing Undergraduate EFL Learners' Emotional Needs



Engagement is the last theme in the illustration. Participants seemed to overlook the effects on engagement as it relates to the importance of addressing the emotional needs of EFL learners by instructors. Interestingly, in the participants' views, overall well-being and engagement are linked together, as participant #21 mentions "Addressing those emotional needs is paramount because it directly impacts the learners' motivation, engagement, and overall well-being".

4.5. The Impact of Addressing Undergraduate EFL Learners' Emotional Needs

The following figure (figure 5) illustrates the possible effects of addressing the previously-mentioned emotional needs in figures 1 to 4. Improved performance is the most-mentioned effect, with 18 instances of unique mentions from the participants. Boosted self-confidence also plays a significant role to the participants, as it was mentioned 17 times throughout the interviews. Engagement and motivation follow third and fourth, with each of the aforementioned themes being mentioned 10 and 7 times respectively. Moving on into the matter of performance, some further probing into its possible effects is required in order to maintain a fine grasp on the matter.

Figure 5*The Impact of Addressing Undergraduate EFL Learners' Emotional Needs*

Following a previous quote by participant #21, “When undergraduate learners feel emotionally supported, they are more likely to take risks, participate in class, and ultimately improve their language skills.” Other participants suggest that [the addressing of emotional needs] “impacts the process of learning”, “leaves great impacts on the way of learning”, “it affects their learning process and can change their studying quality”, “it can better their academic experience in all aspects, “it affects a student’s language acquisition and learning levels” and so on. A great number of participants seem to agree when it comes to the impact of addressing undergraduate EFL learners’ emotional needs and the possible effects it might have on performance in the language acquisition context.

5. Discussion

The study aimed to identify and examine the emotional needs of undergraduate EFL learners through the implementation of EMPATHICS and broaden-and-build theory. It further investigated the perceived effects of meeting the identified emotional needs from the learners’ perspectives. Moreover, the study focused on non-Western participants in order to address a cultural context that remains underrepresented in the literature, thereby extending existing work on emotional factors in language learning. In light of the questions raised by the study, the findings identified five core emotional needs through systematic analysis of the

data. The strongest need identified was instructor support, followed by self-confidence, motivation, self-expression and peer support. Instructor support emerged as the most prominent, functioning as the foundational layer upon which other needs developed. The triangulation between our empirical data, previous SLA research, and psychological theory suggests that emotional needs in EFL contexts may follow a hierarchical pattern, where external support possibly precedes and enables internal growth factors.

Instructor support was identified as the most significant perceived emotional need from the perspective of learners. Self-confidence was the second highest-rated factor in the hierarchy of perceived emotional needs. The third factor in the hierarchy was motivation. Self-expression was the fourth major factor in the hierarchy. Peer support emerged as the fifth major factor identified by the participants of the study. The predominance of instructor support aligns well with Al-Hebaish's (2012) findings on confidence-building in oral performance, yet expands upon this understanding by demonstrating how support systems operate as the foundational layer enabling other emotional factors to flourish. Specifically, participants reported that instructor validation created the psychological safety necessary for risk-taking in language production. This idea is a critical requirement for developing self-confidence and motivation, supported by Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory. Improving instructor support may be the first step for EFL instructors in order to foster a creative and engaging environment. The centrality of this factor also explains why the subsequent needs may depend on its cultivation and presence as explored in the following sections.

The findings on self-confidence are supported by Tridinanti's (2018) research suggesting that there is a strong correlation between self-confidence and speaking achievement. Similar to our participants, Tridinanti emphasized that confidence reduced speaking anxiety and increased willingness to participate, suggesting that this link may hold across diverse instructional contexts. The participants of our study mentioned that self-confidence is a catalyst for active learning and participation. This dynamic can be explained through the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), in which positive emotions expand learners' thought-action repertoires, thereby increasing language use opportunities. For EFL instructors, this implies that structuring confidence-building tasks into their curricula may be beneficial for sustaining engagement and improving skill development.

As stated by the participants, the fostering of instructor support and self-confidence improves learners' motivational factors. Similarly, Al-Munawwarah (2018) concludes that

motivation plays a significant part in learners being encouraged to participate and learn in the classroom. Our participants also attributed motivation to a willingness to communicate and participate in the classroom context, reinforcing its role as a key mediator linking emotional support to language use. Naturally, fostering motivation in learners by EFL instructors can lead to higher participation and language acquisition.

Self-expression emerged as a crucial outcome of preceding needs such as motivation and self-confidence. Participants indicated that self-expression plays a vital role in learners' confidence and development, aligned with established theories of language acquisition and communicative competence. This factor ties into peer support, the final major need in this study. Participants highlighted the role of peer support, similarly to instructor support, cultivating a sense of belonging and reducing the judgement that learners may feel in a context that lacks peer support. This finding aligns with social constructivist theories emphasizing the importance of social interaction in language learning. For EFL instructors, facilitating peer collaboration and supportive group activities can enhance emotional wellbeing and promote sustained engagement.

The aforementioned needs and their interconnectedness lay the foundations for a hierarchical model of emotional needs. Our participants consistently expressed that external validation and encouragement from instructors were prerequisites for active participation. This positions instructor support as the foundational layer of the hierarchy of emotional needs. Confidence emerged as dependent on support, with learners expressing that they felt confident when instructors created safe spaces for risk-taking and discourse. Confidence then improved motivation, with learners describing more willingness to engage once they felt capable and supported in the classroom environment. Motivation and confidence in turn allowed for greater self-expression in learners. Finally, peer support was described as an outcome of this progression. Learners expressed that once they could express themselves, they could connect with peers more freely, in turn reinforcing belonging and resilience.

Figure 6

The Hierarchical Model of Emotional Needs in EFL Classrooms



6. Conclusion and Implications

In this study we sought to ascertain specific emotional needs that are exhibited by undergraduate EFL learners in the classroom context. The study also identified the most significant needs and explored the perceived effects of addressing them. Based on the study it can be concluded that fulfilling students' emotional needs requires a collective effort from different stakeholders and the consideration of multiple factors. Additionally, addressing these needs in EFL contexts may require context-sensitive strategies that align with learners' cultural backgrounds and expectations. Furthermore, this study contributes a hierarchical model of emotional needs in EFL classrooms, positioning instructor support as the foundational factor that enables confidence, motivation, self-expression, and ultimately peer support.

These findings extend PP in SLA by exploring the theoretical capacity of Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory and the EMPATHICS framework in a non-Western EFL context. The study reinforces the idea that strengthening learners' positive emotions can positively benefit their emotional capabilities and health within the classroom context. This study also contributes to the validation of frameworks such as EMPATHICS in culturally diverse settings, rather than being applied solely in Western educational contexts. Furthermore, this study demonstrates how external scaffolding precedes internal resources, reframing emotional needs as interdependent concepts rather than isolated needs.

On a practical level, the findings suggest several pedagogical priorities for instructors. Prioritizing emotional support before confidence-building is essential, as learners' self-assurance increases when they feel supported by the instructor and or peers. Fostering a positive atmosphere that encourages self-expression helps learners articulate their needs and engage more deeply with the classroom, while aligning feedback with learners' cultural and emotional backgrounds can sustain motivation and promote resilience. Together, these practices foster an emotionally responsive classroom that supports learners' well-being and language acquisition. This study advances our understanding of undergraduate EFL learners' emotional needs by proposing a hierarchical framework in which instructor support forms the foundation for self-confidence, motivation, self-expression, and peer support, highlighting the importance of culturally sensitive emotional scaffolding in non-Western contexts such as Iran. However, the cross-sectional design limits interpretations, calling for further longitudinal and comparative research to validate these emotional needs.

7. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Several limitations exist in this study. First, the use of convenience sampling technique may have limited the representativeness of the target sample leading to selection bias. Second, while the present research identifies and elaborates on core emotional needs, it does not empirically test pedagogical strategies for addressing those needs, echoing a broader trend in prior research where general well-being is often conflated with specific emotional needs (Komorowska, 2016). Third, the exclusive focus on Iranian EFL undergraduates limits the transferability of the findings to other cultural contexts or educational levels, and reflects a wider issue in the literature where English language learners are largely examined through Western-centric lenses. Fourth, positive psychology constructs are rarely tested against learner-reported needs (Gregersen, 2016). Finally, as with all qualitative research, the interpretative nature of thematic analysis may be co-constructed through researcher-participant interaction despite inter-coder reliability ($K = 0.83$), audit trails, and other safeguards taken to ensure the validity of the findings.

Building on these findings, future research could experimentally test targeted pedagogical interventions designed to address the specific needs identified throughout this study. Studies could also aim to test these findings and the applicability of the EMPATHICS framework by using broader and or different cultural contexts. Moreover, with an increasingly online and digital EFL learning sphere, future research could delve into how the discussed emotional needs manifest in the online EFL context and possibly how to address

those emotional needs. The emotional states of EFL teachers and learners can be explored in the context of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools as well (Seyri & Ghiasvand, 2025). Additionally, longitudinal studies could investigate the effects of sustained attention to learners' emotional needs on both well-being and language outcomes over time. Further studies can research teacher-focused interventions to explore the role of instructors in effectively fostering emotional support in EFL learners. Finally, emotional needs can be inspected in relation to L2 assessment practices, as learners may go through different emotions during tests and assessment practices (Ghiasvand & Banitalebi, 2023).

Declarations:

Ethical Approval:

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants. The participants provided their written informed consent to attend this study.

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Appendices

A) Semi-Structured Interview

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Field of Study: Literature/TEFL/Translation

1. What would you say are the factors that play into the emotional needs of undergraduate EFL learners in a language-learning context?
2. What do you think of the role of support and encouragement in addressing the emotional needs of undergraduate EFL learners?
3. What do you think of autonomy being a necessity for undergraduate learners in the classroom? How can instructors create a feeling of autonomy in undergraduate learners?
4. Can you describe a time when positive emotions such as excitement and pride stemming from an increase in confidence (in the classroom) have motivated your language acquisition? How do you feel about the role of self-confidence in language acquisition?
5. What do you think about the role of self-expression in the classroom as it pertains to satisfying the emotional needs of undergraduate learners? And as for language acquisition?
6. How do you think your emotional state affects your language-learning performance?
7. What is your opinion on the sense of belonging that an undergraduate learner might lack in the classroom?
8. How does the self-validation of undergraduate EFL learners, or lack thereof, affect the emotional well-being and language acquisition of undergraduate learners?

B) Narrative Frame

1. In my opinion, undergraduate learners' emotional needs include factors such as...
2. Addressing those emotional needs is paramount because...
3. Addressing those emotional needs affects learners in ways such as...

Language instructors can address those emotional needs by ... in the classroom.