




Article

Teaching with Ears Wide Open: The Value of Empathic Listening

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Abstract: There are several moments in the school context when students share their experiences and concerns with teachers. Empathy is essential to provide quality listening in order to understand and give students a voice. Consequently, teachers' perceptions of how they listen to their students and the benefits of empathetic listening in the classroom are studied. The analysis involves 38 responses from primary school teachers, responding to six questions based on a review of the concept of empathic listening in primary education. Data analysis was carried out using Iramuteq software. The findings indicate that teachers engage in empathic listening with students, recognizing their role in the process, identifying the characteristics and phases of such listening, highlighting the most recurrent topics, and mentioning the moments and places where it occurs and the benefits it brings. Empathetic listening is fundamental to establishing a quality teacher–student relationship. It fosters a safe environment in which students feel free to be and express themselves, helping them to manage different day-to-day situations.

Keywords: empathetic listening; interaction; communication; empathy; primary education; teachers



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1. Introduction

The emergence and development of a community does not only occur through speech but also through listening, thus fostering a collective sense of belonging and solidarity (Dobson, 2012; Lipari, 2010; Welton, 2002). Listening requires being present and aware (Lipari, 2010). Listening, therefore, requires paying attention to the other person, sharing the experience, without the need to agree or understand things in the same way (Walker, 1997).

The different forms of listening vary according to the context and the specific expectations of individuals (Imhof, 2004). A particular modality of listening, called empathic listening, emerges within this variety. This listening often requires putting oneself in the place of others by accepting and understanding that there are ways of thinking that are different from one's own (Codina, 2004; Pence & Vickery, 2012; Walker, 1997). Some approaches emphasize that speaking, hearing, and listening produce or prevent inequality and injustice (Motzkau & Lee, 2022) since they may alter our understanding of day-to-day life and our way of thinking (Lipari, 2010). This, in turn, leads to a change in the actions and consciousness of the listener (Welton, 2002). Consequently, listening has the capacity for empowerment and inclusion, and for creating an environment of diversity, heterogeneity, and tolerance (Dobson, 2012).

There are several moments in which students share their experiences, ideas, and feelings with teachers in the classroom. In this sense, Bae (2010) explains the current need to understand students as active people who have diverse interests, intentions, and potentialities, as well as a capacity for action and decision. Thus, teachers need to employ

empathetic listening in order for students to be given a voice and be taken into consideration in the issues that affect their lives, as shown by [Ghirotto and Mazzoni \(2013\)](#).

However, empathic listening is considered one of the most difficult skills to develop ([Codina, 2004](#)). Moreover, the person receiving the message in verbal interactions usually looks for the moment to express their point of view or contrast it with that of the sender ([Shotter, 2009](#)). This means that in several occasions, the listener's attention is focused on what they will say when the speaker finishes speaking instead of trying to understand what they have heard or to recognize the tone or emotions ([Robertson, 1994](#)).

Although empathic listening has several benefits ([Andolina & Conklin, 2021](#); [Gearhart & Bodie, 2011](#); [Manusov et al., 2020](#)), the phenomenon has not been explored much in educational research ([Andolina & Conklin, 2021](#); [Tamayo et al., 2023](#); [Weger, 2018](#)). Most research on listening in the educational setting has focused on improving student listening rather than analyzing teacher listening skills ([Beall et al., 2008](#)). Other studies have analyzed the impact of empathic listening on behaviors and relationships between students, teachers, and/or both groups in the school setting ([Andolina & Conklin, 2021](#)), or have focused on validating instruments that measure listening ([Drollinger et al., 2006](#); [Guo et al., 2022](#); [Kourmoussi et al., 2017](#); [Mickelson & Welch, 2013](#); [Spies, 2023](#)). However, conducting research focusing on analyzing how teachers listen to their students turns out to be necessary. Therefore, this research had the following objectives: to analyze teachers' perceptions of how they listen to their students, along with the benefits of promoting empathic listening in the classroom.

2. Theoretical Approach to Listening

Hearing and listening are words that are often used interchangeably. However, hearing refers only to the physiological process that occurs when sounds are detected and perceived ([Emanuel et al., 2009](#)) through the auditory apparatus; it is the first and necessary step for listening to occur ([Gilbert, 1988](#)). As [Ortiz \(2007\)](#) argues, listening requires (1) perceiving sounds; (2) giving meaning to sounds, that is, translating sounds into meaningful units; (3) structuring meaningful units into more complex sequences; and finally (4) interpreting the structured information. In addition, [Bentley and Bacon \(1996\)](#) and [Hsu et al. \(2008\)](#) add a last process: responding to oral and/or verbal messages.

It can be said that it is possible to hear without listening, but it is not possible to listen without hearing ([Lipari, 2010](#)). Therefore, it requires the cognitive ([Lipetz et al., 2020](#)), physiological (process of sound capture), affective (e.g., motivation to pay attention to the person, show empathy, etc.), and behavioral (e.g., verbal or nonverbal response) dimensions of the listener ([Halone et al., 1998](#)). In addition, one of the conditions for listening to occur is silence, as speech and silence need each other ([Welton, 2002](#)).

During communication, the listener may listen intermittently, selecting parts of the message according to interest ([Dugger, 2017](#)), interspersing moments of hearing with moments of listening. Some authors call this type of listening selective or distracted listening ([Bickel, 1982](#); [Covey, 1998](#); [Dugger, 2017](#)). Consequently, the message is received in a partial and superficial way, meaning that distorted and incomplete information is obtained ([Bickel, 1982](#)). Therefore, listening requires full attention from the listener, thus creating an active process ([Ortiz, 2007](#); [Hsu et al., 2008](#)).

2.1. Types of Listening

There are different types of listening (appreciative, discerning, critical or analytical, relational, and empathic) depending on the context or situation in which it occurs and its objective.

Firstly, there is appreciative listening (Kline, 1996; Ortiz, 2007), which is related to enjoyment and what it produces in the listener. As each person has their own tastes, what would be appreciative listening for someone may not be for another person (Kline, 1996).

Secondly, there is discerning listening (Ortiz, 2007) with which the most relevant details of the message are selected or decided, with the main ideas separated from the secondary ones, for example, taking notes during a class.

Thirdly, critical or analytical listening requires analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, comparing, assessing, and reflecting on what the speaker wants to communicate and how they do so (Bickel, 1982; Kline, 1996; Ortiz, 2007). Ortiz (2007) emphasizes that when the message is thus analyzed, it must be separated from emotions, i.e., it must be analyzed objectively.

Fourthly, relational listening aims to improve interpersonal relationships and can occur in situations of venting or advice (Dugger, 2017). In addition to listening to obtain information, this type of listening requires paying attention to support and empathize with the sender.

Finally, empathic listening (Covey, 1998; Ortiz, 2007) is based on listening without prejudging, placing oneself in the place of the speaker and interpreting the emotional charge of the message; the words are assimilated, and what lies behind them is reached.

2.1.1. Empathic Listening

As the name suggests, the defining characteristic that distinguishes empathic listening from the others is the empathic component that occurs in the process (Drollinger et al., 2006; Manusov et al., 2020). Empathy is the ability to perceive another person's internal context accurately, with emotional components and meanings, as if one were the other person (Rogers, 1959). That is, it is defined as the ability to understand another person's thoughts and feelings with some level of accuracy, which requires both intuitive and literal listening (Comer & Drollinger, 1999).

Some research (Bommelje et al., 2003; Comer & Drollinger, 1999) argues that feelings and empathy are personality traits conceptually linked to effective listening. However, these authors conclude that empathy does not guarantee effective listening, despite being an indispensable factor. Thus, more recent studies (Pence & Vickery, 2012) have determined that emotions and affective states also play a fundamental role in the listening process, especially in empathic and supportive listening. Along these lines, research such as that of Mongrain et al. (2011) affirms that life satisfaction increases when a person listens, connects with others, establishes positive relationships, and engages in expressions of empathy, sympathy, compassion, and care that, in turn, have positive effects on the person's well-being. Thus, the benefits of empathic listening include helping the person seeking support, coping with emotional stress, and increasing the life satisfaction of the sender (Pence & Vickery, 2012).

Therefore, the conscious, active, and emotional involvement of the listener is necessary, and such involvement should be perceived by the speaker (Bodie, 2011) during empathic listening. Emotional involvement requires a conscious effort to restrain our own wants or needs and also requires an active response (verbally and nonverbally) to the other person's thoughts, feelings, emotions, and experiences (Nichols, 1995). According to Floyd (2014), this listening should be a resource for interpersonal relationships, for which messages of value and reciprocity between the participants are necessary. Empathic listening not only makes the speaker feel understood and validated but also helps them to value the time and energy that the listener is devoting to them (Floyd, 2014). Moreover, Andolina and Conklin (2021) observed that empathetic listening skills can help bridge political, social, and economic differences, allowing all voices to be heard, not just those of the most

powerful people. Thus, [Howell \(1982\)](#) asserts that quality communication between two people cannot occur without empathic responses from one or both participants.

Empathic listening consists of three phases ([Comer & Drollinger, 1999](#); [Drollinger et al., 2006](#); [Bodie et al., 2013](#); [Sims, 2017](#)): (1) The first phase is the sensing phase, in which the listener pays attention to the implicit and explicit aspects of the speaker's messages, while also taking into account nonverbal cues, such as the intentions, beliefs, and emotions of the interlocutor. (2) Subsequently, the processing phase is characterized by cognitive processes such as organization and memory processes. Information is also synthesized, consolidated, evaluated, and remembered, and the content of the speaker's message is understood to create a coherent narrative. (3) Finally, there is the responding phase, in which the listener offers a verbal or nonverbal response to indicate that they are paying attention. Each phase of listening can occur in two ways: sequential, i.e., first one phase and then the next, or parallel, with all phases occurring simultaneously ([Sims, 2017](#)).

2.1.2. Empathic Listening in the Classroom

Classroom communication, which is a key instrument in the teacher–student relationship, must be underpinned by empathic listening, seeking continuous understanding and comprehension in the relational educational process ([Flores, 2019](#)). Empathy in the classroom manifests itself in the teacher's impulse to recognize and identify the student's mental states (intentions, beliefs, desires, emotions) and to respond with appropriate emotion based on attention ([Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004](#)). In other words, listening to students involves not only attending to what they express verbally but also to the signals they convey through their body language ([Cook-Sather, 2009](#)). This requires the teacher to suspend their own categories, judgments, perspectives, feelings, and identity so that the learner feels heard as a whole human being ([English et al., 2023](#)). However, students sometimes perceive a lack of listening and validation, even though they simply want to be understood and accepted like everyone else ([Cook-Sather, 2009](#)). Despite this, some empathic teachers show a positive approach and a willingness to engage and show interest ([Swan, 2021](#)).

Although empathic listening is complex and requires effort ([Churchill, 2020](#)), time, and dedication, it brings several benefits to the educational process. In a study conducted by ([Weger, 2018](#)), it was found that teachers who listen with interest, understanding, and respect experience a significant reduction in disruptive student behaviors. In addition, empathic listening is a useful tool for recognizing and fostering student diversity in the classroom ([Andolina & Conklin, 2021](#)), as well as for increasing students' sense of competence, autonomy, creativity, and critical and dialogic sense ([Lansdown, 2001](#)). In addition, when students feel listened to and validated, especially by their teachers, they tend to be more proactive in their learning, as they experience a sense of importance and belonging in the educational community ([Cook-Sather, 2009](#)).

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Contextualization and Participants

This study was carried out in January 2024 across five schools in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (ACBC). Two of the participating schools were subsidized schools (CE1 and CE2), and the remainder were public schools (CE3, CE4 and CE5).

The research sample was made up of the primary education teaching staff at each school, tutors, and specialists alike. A tutor, in this case, is the main teacher of the group of pupils and is in charge of teaching most of the core subjects (language, mathematics, science, etc.). Moreover, they are responsible for the overall development of the pupil, both

academically, personally, and socially. The specialist teaches a specific subject, e.g., physical education, and the focus is on developing competences in that particular area.

In total, 38 responses were obtained, of which 24 were from women (63.2%) and 14 were from men (36.8%). According to the years of experience as teachers, the mean was $\bar{x} = 17.71 \pm 11.44$ years of experience, with a range between 1 and 40 years. Furthermore, 25 were tutors (65.8%), 11 were specialists (28.9%), and only 2 were tutors and specialists at the same time (5.3%). The specialties included physical education (6 specialists; 15.8%), therapeutic pedagogy (5 specialists; 13.2%), foreign language (3 specialists; 7.9%), arts and crafts (1 specialist; 2.6%), and music (1 specialist; 2.6%).

3.2. Research Tool: Open-Ended Questionnaire

Most recent studies conducted in the field of listening have used quantitative research techniques, such as scales, to measure empathic listening (Bodie, 2011; Drollinger et al., 2006). However, as the aim of this study was to delve into and deeply understand the phenomenon of empathic listening, a questionnaire of open-ended questions was used with which respondents could freely describe and develop their response.

The semi-structured interview question script was based on a review of the concept of empathic listening in primary education. A questionnaire was created consisting of 6 open-ended questions: (1) At what time of the day and environment/place do you think you most listen to your students? (2) What are the main topics that your students usually share with you? (3) What strategies do you use to encourage your students to feel listened to? (4) How do you handle your students' emotions in difficult conversations? (5) What do you think are the benefits of listening to your students? (6) What limitations/barriers have you identified for effective communication with your students?

Information was also collected on independent variables such as gender, function, courses taught, and years of experience. The participants were able to express themselves freely about the way in which they listen to children both ways.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

Regarding the data collection procedure, the five schools were first contacted to request their collaboration by telephone, in person, and/or by e-mail. An affirmative response was obtained from all of them. Once confirmation was obtained from the schools, an informative letter was drafted for the teachers and sent by e-mail.

All the people who participated in the research did so voluntarily and gave their consent before sending their response; they could revoke their consent at any time during the research. Furthermore, they were informed that the data provided would be treated with absolute confidentiality and they would only be used to expand knowledge in this area of study. In addition, they were asked to create a code with the first two letters of their first name (aa), surname (bb), and month and day (mmdd) of their date of birth (e.g., Paula Fernández born on 7 March: PAFE0307).

3.4. Data Analysis

The content analysis of the teachers' responses was conducted using the IRaMuTeQ software, which was selected due to its well established rigor in performing various types of textual analyses, including lexical analysis, correspondence analysis, and similarity analysis (Díaz-Iso et al., 2023; Montero & Ortiz, 2021). These diverse methods allow researchers to explore patterns in qualitative data and identify key themes.

In this study, a descending hierarchical classification (DHC) was generated in order to meet the research objectives. This method enables the grouping of statistically independent similarity classes (Reinert, 1990), which consist of specific words and characteristic text segments. These classes were identified based on high chi-square (χ^2) values, which highlight

the association between words and their semantic context. Through these associations, the DHC helps to reveal the underlying social representations related to the object of study.

Independent variables in this analysis refer to the categorical factors that could influence the text segments, such as teachers' years of experience, gender, function, or education level taught. These variables were predefined based on the research framework.

The software distinguishes between complete words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) and functional words (articles, prepositions, conjunctions, and pronouns), focusing exclusively on complete words for analysis. The initial corpus was then divided into Elementary Contextual Units (ECUs), which typically consist of approximately 30 to 50 words. This division allows for a detailed examination of the vocabulary present in each ECU, creating a contingency table that illustrates the distribution of vocabulary across ECUs.

When a class contains a significant proportion of Elementary Contextual Units (ECUs), in which in which the level of one independent variable exceeds the combined levels of other variables, the class is considered associated with that specific independent variable (Klein & Licata, 2003). Thus, the DHC analysis also calculates the relationship between each thematic or lexical world and the independent variables, allowing for the exploration of how these factors shape the textual data.

4. Results

The DHC divided the entire corpus into 450 ECUs. The results of the analysis showed two main groups of clusters (Figure 1). The first group was focused on the characteristics of teacher listening and the benefits of listening for both students and teachers (Classes 1, 2 and 5). The second group provides information on the time and place of listening, as well as the topics most frequently discussed (Classes 3 and 4). The main results found in each of the classes are presented below. The words that appear in bold below in each of the classes are significant due to their frequency in each of the ECUs, and all of these significant words are compiled in Figure 2. The main results found in each of the classes are presented below.

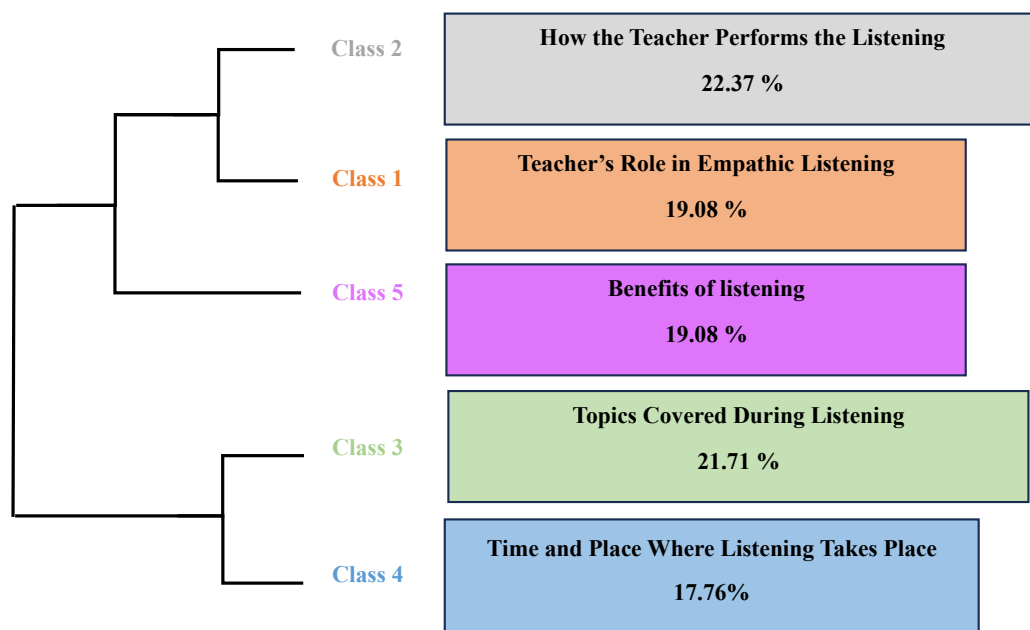


Figure 1. Dendrogram of the classes resulting from the descending hierarchical classification.

4.1. Class 1—Teacher's Role in Empathic Listening

The first class corresponds significantly to the category of the teacher's role in empathic listening.

In this class, the teacher talks about the role they have to play when listening to their students. The students emphasize how important it is to **make them feel** ($x^2 = 16.7, p \leq 0.0001$) understood. Thus, a teacher emphasizes that listening "makes the students feel understood, listened to, more secure and calmer" (Participant 16; female; therapeutic pedagogy; third third and fourth fourth grades; 33 years of experience).

In this same class, they emphasize that it is important to be close and to let them **know** ($x^2 = 17.42, p \leq 0.0001$) that they can trust the teacher: "Make them feel confident, let them know that what they talk to me is a conversation between us and that it will not go beyond that" (Participant 23; male; tutor; third, fourth, fifth and sixth grades; 8 years of experience).

In the same way, it is important to make them **see** ($x^2 = 22.11, p \leq 0.0001$) the problems and situations from another point of view, as highlighted by a teacher: "Feeling listened to, I think it relaxes them, it makes them see the problems from another point of view. . ." (Participant 24; male; tutor and physical education; first, second, third, fifth, sixth grades; 20 years of experience). The teacher highlights that it is also relevant how the students see you. Thus, some students may see the teacher as a person they can turn to and who can help them face different problems, "Making them see that they can trust me" (Participant 21; female; therapeutic pedagogy; fourth, fifth, sixth grades; 15 years of experience), or on the contrary, "I don't know if it is a barrier as such, there are simply students who do not see you as someone to talk to about something other than the subject. In those cases, there is little you can do" (Participant 33; male; tutor; grades 3, 4, 5, 6; 9 years of experience).

4.2. Class 2—How the Teacher Performs the Listening

The second class corresponds significantly to the category of teachers' management of students' emotions.

The teachers indicate that when managing students' emotions, it is important to **give** ($x^2 = 39.62, p \leq 0.0001$) space and time to listen, as well as to understand how to validate and give importance to what they express. In this vein, a teacher expresses, "I give them time to feel comfortable, I put words to their emotions, I do not judge what they are telling me. . ." (Participant 15; female; tutor; first and second grades; 7 years of experience).

At the same time, teachers emphasize that it is important to be consciously, actively and emotionally involved with students. Thus, when teachers listen to students, they **try** ($x^2 = 20.63, p \leq 0.0001$) to put themselves in their **situation** ($x^2 = 28.2, p \leq 0.0001$) and empathize with them. Along this line, a teacher commented, "I try to put myself in their situation, talk to them in terms according to their age but always taking for granted all the emotions they feel. I give them importance and thank them for sharing with me what worries them, always from the point of view of affection" (Participant 6; female; tutor and foreign language; first, second, third, and fourth grades; 5 years of experience).

Teachers identify that it is important to listen to students when they **need** it ($x^2 = 20.63, p = 0.0001$): "I try to listen to them whenever they need it. There are usually more listening situations after playgrounds, but they also occur in the classroom when common issues arise" (Participant 10; female; tutor; fifth and sixth grades; 14 years of experience). Likewise, depending on the situations or emotions being dealt with, listening has to be performed individually or in **groups** ($x^2 = 17.94; p \leq 0.0001$). In this way, one teacher states, "Depending on the seriousness of the emotions, in private or in a group if the situation requires it. I try to deal with their reactions or emotions calmly in order to generate a good acceptance of their emotions" (Participant 8; female; tutor; grades 3 and 4; 14 years of experience).

4.3. Class 3—Topics Covered During Listening

The third class corresponds significantly to the topics covered during empathic listening.

Regarding the topics that the participants highlight the most, on the one hand, are aspects related to **weekend** experiences ($x^2 = 34.5$; $p \leq 0.0001$), **activities** ($x^2 = 30.45$; $p \leq 0.0001$), and **interests** ($x^2 = 17.69$; $p \leq 0.0001$): “The activities they do at the weekend or in the evenings, their tastes, funny anecdotes, their worries” (Participant 7; female; tutor; first and second grades; 4 years of experience). On the other hand, more academic and school-related topics are mentioned, such as **doubts** ($x^2 = 18.64$; $p \leq 0.0001$) or difficulties with the subjects and **problems** ($x^2 = 16.73$; $p \leq 0.0001$) of coexistence with their peers: “Activities carried out in leisure time, disputes or problems arising in daily relationships, doubts or solving homework problems” (Participant 28; male; tutor; sixth grade; 35 years of experience).

4.4. Class 4—Time and Place Where Listening Takes Place

The fourth class corresponds significantly to the moment when empathic listening occurs.

On most occasions this listening occurs in the same **class** ($x^2 = 18.65$, $p \leq 0.0001$): “In class sessions” (Participant 16; female; therapeutic pedagogy; third and fourth grades; 33 years of experience). Teachers also mention that it can occur during **recess** ($x^2 = 19.02$, $p \leq 0.0001$): “During leisure time. Outside school hours: breaks, after class, outings, extracurricular activities. . .” (Participant 35; male; tutor; fifth and sixth grades; 25 years of experience).

As for the moment of listening, it usually occurs in the **morning** ($x^2 = 49.56$, $p \leq 0.0001$), in the **first** ($x^2 = 18.13$, $p \leq 0.0001$) **hours** ($x^2 = 34.06$, $p \leq 0.0001$) of class. This is indicated by the following quote: “Welcome to the morning, during their preparation for work, moments of running, transfers, playgrounds” (Participant 17; male; physical education; grades 1, 2, 3, 4, 4, 5, 6; 13 years of experience).

4.5. Class 5—Benefits of Listening

The fifth class corresponds significantly to the benefits of empathic listening.

Regarding the benefits generated by empathic listening, the teachers mention that it helps them **to know** ($x^2 = 31.12$, $p \leq 0.0001$) their students better, thus being able to adapt to their needs. They also mention the bond between **students** ($x^2 = 23.16$, $p \leq 0.0001$) and **teachers** ($x^2 = 21.1$, $p \leq 0.0001$), indicating that another benefit is the **trust** ($x^2 = 17.98$, $p \leq 0.0001$) achieved with the teacher and in themselves.

The teachers also emphasize that listening to students in an empathetic way helps them learn **to manage** ($x^2 = 17.42$, $p \leq 0.0001$) different aspects of life, for example, “They learn to manage emotions, they learn to express emotions, they feel important, they feel good in class and therefore they attend better, both personally and academically. They learn to solve conflicts” (Participant 15; female; tutor; first and second grades; 7 years of experience). The teachers also add that the students can feel in a **safe** environment ($x^2 = 16.7$, $p \leq 0.0001$) thanks to empathic listening. This is what one of the teachers indicates: “It has many benefits on a personal and academic level, since everything goes together. It is essential that students feel listened to and that they are in a safe environment where they can speak and express themselves freely” (Participant 6; female; tutor and foreign language; first, second, third, and fourth grades; 5 years of experience).

Class	Category	Word	Freq	χ^2	P
Class 2 (22.37%)	How the Teacher Performs the Listening	To give	13	39.62	P=<0.0001
		Situation	9	28.20	P=<0.0001
		Try	7	20.63	P=<0.0001
		Need	7	20.63	P=<0.0001
		Group	5	17.94	P=<0.0001
Class 1 (19.08%)	Teacher's Role in Empathic Listening	Make them	16	47.95	P=<0.0001
		See	8	22.11	P=<0.0001
		Know	4	17.42	P=<0.0001
		Feel	5	16.7	P=<0.0001
Class 5 (19.08%)	Benefits of listening	To know	7	31.12	P=<0.0001
		Students	9	23.16	P=<0.0001
		Teachers	6	21.1	P=<0.0001
		Trust	7	17.98	P=<0.0001
		To manage	4	17.42	P=<0.0001
Class 3 (21.71%)	Topics Covered During Listening	Weekend	9	34.5	P=<0.0001
		Activities	8	30.45	P=<0.0001
		Doubts	5	18.64	P=<0.0001
		Interests	6	17.69	P=<0.0001
		Problems	11	16.73	P=<0.0001
Class 4 (17.76%)	Time and Place Where Listening Takes Place	Morning	10	49.56	P=<0.0001
		Hours	10	34.06	P=<0.0001
		Recess	4	19.02	P=<0.0001
		Class	8	18.65	P=<0.0001
		First	9	18.13	P=<0.0001

Figure 2. Distribution of classes and their respective units of meaning based on the class scheme shown in Figure 1.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to analyze how teachers listen to their students, as well as their perception of the benefits of empathic listening in the classroom. In this way, we explored the perceptions and realities that teachers experience in the application of listening to their students.

Regarding the first objective—the way in which teachers listen to their students—the findings reveal that teachers often practice empathic listening, which is vital for cultivating meaningful relationships with their students (Flores, 2019; Howell, 1982).

In relation to the characteristics of empathic listening and taking into account the definition of empathic listening of Strom (2020), teachers emphasize the importance of putting themselves in the student’s situation, which denotes the presence of an empathic component in the teacher’s listening. It should be noted that this essential element distinguishes empathic listening from other types of listening (Drollinger et al., 2006; Manusov et al., 2020). Furthermore, as Floyd (2014) points out, teachers show active interest and involvement in understanding students’ realities, demonstrating attentiveness and communicative emotional engagement (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; Walker, 1997), which generates a feeling of validation and understanding in students.

In line with this approach, teachers emphasize the importance of conveying confidence and fostering a safe environment in which students can feel and express themselves freely. In this way, they address their needs and concerns or help them to reconsider problems from different perspectives, issues that often arise, their interests, and everyday experiences. This nuanced approach aligns with the qualitative insights gathered, where participants voiced the necessity of making students feel understood and secure. For example, one

teacher stated, “Listening makes the students feel understood, listened to, more secure, and calmer” (Participant 16; female; therapeutic pedagogy; third and fourth grades; 33 years of experience). This comment encapsulates how empathic listening is perceived not just as a passive act but as a vital component in establishing a supportive classroom atmosphere.

In relation to the times and places in which teachers say that they listen to their students, this activity mainly occurs during the first hours of the day, in the classroom, and during breaks. However, teachers should adjust to the needs and circumstances of the moment in order to ensure that the listening process is effective and truly meaningful. This aligns with the three phases of empathic listening as described in the literature (Bodie et al., 2013; Comer & Drollinger, 1999; Drollinger et al., 2006; Sims, 2017). The perception phase involves showing genuine interest, the processing phase requires understanding verbal and nonverbal cues, and the response phase culminates in providing an appropriate and empathetic reply. These phases underscore the dynamic nature of listening, requiring teachers to be attuned to the complexities of their students’ emotional expressions.

Regarding the second objective, in line with Codina (2004), teachers perceive that the practice of empathic listening brings significant benefits for both students and teachers. Moreover, this skill is essential for improving pedagogical intervention (Motta-Ávila, 2017). On the one hand, as Floyd (2014) highlights, empathic listening is of great help to build and strengthen interpersonal relationships. Similarly, teachers emphasize that this type of listening helps them to get to know their group of students, thus fostering a bond of trust that is crucial for the students’ personal and academic development.

This idea is in line with the reflections of authors such as Codina (2004), Cook-Sather (2009), and Lansdown (2001), who highlight benefits such as the promotion of autonomy, creativity, critical thinking, proactivity, and self-esteem. On the other hand, feeling listened to creates a sense of belonging in students (Cook-Sather, 2009), thus contributing to creating a more democratic, ethical and hospitable society (Castro et al., 2016; Koskinen & Lindström, 2013; Lipari, 2010).

This notion is consistent with the findings of (Weger, 2018), who states that empathic listening can positively influence student behavior, which is essential to create a more just and equitable society (Motzkau & Lee, 2022). Moreover, this positive influence in students’ behavior can help to promote a positive classroom climate, reducing disruptive situations in the classroom (Andolina & Conklin, 2021) and empowering diversity (Tamayo et al., 2023).

Teachers also mention the security provided by empathic listening in addition to helping the student to relativize different situations they experience in their daily lives. As one participant noted, “It is essential that students feel listened to and that they are in a safe environment” (Participant 6; female; tutor and foreign language; first, second, third, and fourth grades; 5 years of experience).

In addition to the benefits of empathic listening, it is essential to acknowledge the obstacles and challenges that teachers may encounter in their interactions with students. These challenges can hinder the effectiveness of empathic listening and create barriers to establishing meaningful connections. Addressing these potential issues in future research is crucial for developing strategies that can enhance the listening process and improve the overall teacher–student relationship.

6. Conclusions

The research carried out highlights the importance of practicing empathic listening due to the two-way benefits it offers to those involved in the teaching–learning process. It is also important to note that teachers are aware of the importance of empathic listening, which is the first step in responding to students’ needs, although it is often underestimated (Friedman, 1978; Manusov et al., 2020).

It is important to note that this research on empathic listening includes innovative elements in the educational setting as it has not been much approached in that field (Andolina & Conklin, 2021; Tamayo et al., 2023; Weger, 2018). However, it also presents certain limitations. On the one hand, adopting a mixed approach with quantitative techniques could have provided a more complete picture of participants' perceptions. On the other hand, the limited approach of the study of empathic listening in teachers has made it difficult to compare and create inferences with previously conducted studies.

As an area of future research, it would be interesting to carry out an in-depth study on the way teachers listen in order to understand this phenomenon even more. Therefore, it would be interesting to identify the existing limitations when carrying out this listening in the educational environment. Furthermore, as mentioned above, empathic listening is one of the most difficult skills to develop (Codina, 2004); therefore, it could be extremely enriching to offer, in the future, training or interventions for teacher training in this skill. Moreover, it would be interesting to explore whether there are differences in teachers' perceptions of empathic listening depending on the geographical context to which they belong.

In this context, it is important to note that the initial training for primary education teachers currently places limited emphasis on developing listening skills, including empathic listening. We believe that this is an important area that deserves greater attention and exploration, and incorporating specific training in listening skills in teacher education programs could greatly benefit future educators.

Focusing on students, it would also be interesting to analyze their perception of how teachers listen to them. Finally, it should be noted that this work is based on the conviction that it is possible to move toward a responsible and high-quality education system that educates people in a comprehensive manner. This study highlights the importance of teachers implementing empathetic listening with their students, since this not only fosters understanding and empathy toward the students' individual needs and experiences but also strengthens the relationship between teacher and student, creating a more inclusive and collaborative educational environment.

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