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"An L2 Education without Love is not Education at All": a phenomenographic study of undergraduate EFL students' perceptions of pedagogical love

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Abstract

The role of pedagogical love in second language (L2) education has long remained under-explored due to dogmatic religious and cultural beliefs. There is insufficient scholarship on this construct at undergraduate levels. To bridge this gap, the present study employed a phenomenographic design to uncover Iranian undergraduate students' perceptions of pedagogical love and its features, realizations, and determinant factors. It invited 22 undergraduate L2 learners to attend a semi-structured interview and complete a narrative frame. The results of content and thematic analysis attained through MAXQDA software (v. 20) revealed that the participants had different perceptions of pedagogical love. They considered it as a non-romantic intimacy and respect, deep care for students and their emotions, and pure love based on mutual trust. Furthermore, it was found that pedagogical love is essential for L2 education as characterized by a mutual trust and respect, kindness, care, bonding, intimacy, and forgiveness. Regarding its realizations, the results demonstrated that pedagogical love shows itself through intimacy, classroom engagement/participation, confidence, academic performance, and mutual care, respect, and responsibility. Moreover, it was identified that teachers' emotional literacy, teachers' pedagogical expertise, and positive classroom rapport facilitated the implementation of loving pedagogy at undergraduate level. Finally, the findings indicated that loving pedagogy practice was mostly precluded by strict religious beliefs, stigmatizing socio-cultural norms, emotion expression, fear, and traditional educational systems. Implications for L2 teachers and educators are discussed to augment their understanding of pedagogical love, as an opportunity to grasp the emotional side of language education.

Keywords: EFL student, L2 education, Positive psychology, Pedagogical love, Phenomenographic research, Undergraduate student

Introduction

The centrality of emotions in language learning and teaching has long been recognized by different scholars across the globe (Derakhshan, 2022; Ghiasvand & Banitalebi, 2023; Zhao & Li, 2021). Nevertheless, their studies have largely remained in the dark in the

previous decades of applied linguistic research (Sharwood Smith, 2017). They were overshadowed by cognitive, linguistic, and pedagogical concerns and the misconception about the unscientific nature of studying emotions (Dewaele et al., 2019). This trend has rapidly changed with a burst of interest in the emotional aspects of second/foreign language (L2) education (Prior, 2019). The study of emotions in L2 further flourished in a new branch in psychology known as positive psychology (PP) (Wang et al., 2022). Before the inception of PP in applied linguistics, research was mainly preoccupied with the examination of negative emotions, especially anxiety and burnout (Derakhshan et al., 2022). While confirming the presence and effect of negative emotions, PP mainly underscores positive qualities in academia to breed desirable outcomes (MacIntyre, 2021). Given the rapid momentum of emotionology in L2 education since 2016 (Wang et al., 2021), bulks of studies have attended to various such qualities through the lens of PP (e.g., Huang, 2022; Zare et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022). These studies shed light on the fruitful application of PP in L2 instruction and learning.

Among the numerous instances of PP variables, loving pedagogy has been named as a factor in need of further scholarly attention in L2 education (Zhao & Li, 2021). Regrettably, the literature has dismissed love as a construct in PP owing to cultural/religious sensitivities or general discomfort about discussing love besides pedagogy as it might culminate in transcending professional and ethical boundaries with teachers (Loreman, 2011). As an endeavor to dispel such myths, “loving pedagogy” has recently begun to find its way into the study and practice of L2 education (Wang et al., 2021). Pedagogical love refers to a teacher’s love for her/his students without any expectations (Johnson et al., 2019). Teachers practicing pedagogical love express their affection, empathy, and care toward their students and confidence in their talent (Chen, 2023). It could have positive effects on learning as a component of successful and meaningful education (Grimmer, 2021). Besides focusing on students’ characteristics, pedagogical love influences their learning and development as unique individuals (Wilkinson & Kaukko, 2020). Furthermore, pedagogical love could promote students’ learning, encourage them to seek knowledge, strengthen their bond with their instructor, and inspire them to address their limitations (Cho, 2005; Yin et al., 2019). In formal education, teachers should ideally keep their professional distance from students. However, this distance could leave deleterious effects on both parties as well as the whole society because these relationship patterns are imitated in larger contexts (Loreman, 2011). Hence, impersonal educational systems without instructional immediacy might all be futile (Wang, 2021). There is, thus, a need for warm, caring, and intimate interactions in educational context, or a level of comfort between teacher and students to improve the quality of learning experiences (Zhao & Li, 2021). Accordingly, a shift in perspective toward the consideration of love is required (Loreman, 2011). Loving pedagogy could be a solution to educate people through love (Yin et al., 2019).

Despite potential benefits of infusing love into pedagogy, there is relatively scarce research devoted to loving pedagogy in language education (Wang et al., 2022). This may be due to its novelty in SLA research and practitioners’ skepticism over this issue (Barcelos & Coelho, 2016). Loving pedagogy has been the focus of some recent studies in L2 education with theoretical or conceptual perspectives (e.g., Wang et al., 2022; Zhao & Li, 2021) or quantitative orientation (e.g., Chen, 2023; Derakhshan et al., 2022).

To the authors' best knowledge, no qualitative study has been undertaken with a focus on undergraduate students' experience of loving pedagogy. Moreover, considering that undergraduate students are in the transition stage from school to university, they may undergo emotional, interpersonal, academic, and other challenges (Liu & Liu, 2022), the management of which could bring serious repercussions ranging from academic underperformance and emotional distress to dropout (Mostert & Pienaar, 2020). Additionally, in EFL contexts, the effects of loving pedagogy in enhancing educational experience has been largely neglected (Zhao & Li, 2021). Against these backdrops, this study aimed to investigate undergraduate EFL students' perceptions of pedagogical love by adopting a phenomenographic-narrative approach. The critical rationale for this investigation was that while L2 education is known as a highly emotional job (Derakhshan, 2022), undergraduates' perceptions of love, which is the core of education, has been neglected. Therefore, this study may enlighten the field by unraveling L2 students' appraisal of loving pedagogy and its benefits for humanizing L2 education.

Literature review

Emotions and second/foreign language education

L2 education has long been recognized as one of the most demanding and emotional jobs in the world (Ghiasvand et al., 2023; Mercer, 2023). Success in this field depends on endeavor and practice, besides psycho-affective factors (MacIntyre, 2021). Given the determining role of emotions in language learning and teaching, attention to emotional issues in language education research is booming (Derakhshan et al., 2023; Dewaele et al., 2019). Numerous studies have delineated the role of emotions in language learning (e.g., Dewaele, 2015; Huang, 2022; Shen, 2021). Laconically, research on emotions in SLA could fall within three general periods considering the kinds of emotions studied, shifting from the periphery to a more central position (Dewaele & Li, 2020). During the first emotion avoidance phase, approximately between the early 1960s and the mid 1980s, the study of emotions, though not denied, was regarded irrelevant in language education. Researchers seemed to give weight to scientific cognitive variables (Prior, 2019). In the second Anxiety-Prevailing Phase, between the mid-1980s and the early 2010s, the connection between emotion and cognition and the effect of emotions in language learning was acknowledged. Yet, the studies remained predominantly focused on the negative emotion of anxiety (MacIntyre, 2021). The third Positive and Negative Emotions Phase, starting from the early 2010s, was marked by traces of PP in SLA research (Wang et al., 2021). This marked an explicit positive renaissance in language education, turning to a plethora of positive emotions (Lake, 2013).

In essence, PP is the empirical study of normal people's lives in order to facilitate their growth (Peterson, 2006). It seeks to foster factors that contribute to individuals flourishing and leading happier lives (Wang et al., 2022). PP has invited researchers and practitioners to look beyond negative emotions for an array of positive emotions like well-being, happiness, creativity, resilience, and love, to name a few (Derakhshan et al., 2022). Considering the semi-controllable nature of emotions, teachers can direct students' emotions (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Teachers need to enhance students' affective experience by promoting positive emotions like hope, satisfaction, joy, interest, pride, and love (Wang et al., 2021). They should provide a safe and supportive

environment to mitigate the effect of negative emotions (Shao et al., 2019). Research suggests that positive emotions boost students' learning by enabling them to better absorb language input (Dewale et al., 2019; Gregersen, 2013). According to Fredrickson's (2001) *Broaden-and-Build Theory*, positive emotions in students can expand other positive emotions and correspondingly reduce negative ones. One such positive construct is loving pedagogy as explicated below.

The concept of loving pedagogy

Given that love has meant multiple things to different people depending on their contexts, the concept resists a definitive or absolute definition (Loreman, 2011). The origin of love in education can be traced back to the sixteenth century, when some eminent philosophers such as Roger Ascham, John Locke, and Martti Haavio acknowledged its role in education (Yin et al., 2019). These scholars considered love as fostering motivation in learning, stimulating good teaching, and encouraging students' personality expression (Cousins, 2016). Freire's (1970) idea of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has fueled further debates of love in pedagogical domains. Noting the oppressive relationship between the teacher and students, Freire (1970) called for the engagement of both parties in a unified quest for meaning with mutual benefits. Each party could take the roles of a student and a teacher simultaneously. This cultivates critical thinking, which directs them to become more human and refuse oppression (Loreman, 2011).

Notwithstanding the acknowledged necessity of love for fruitful teaching and learning, few scholars have contemplated on what the term actually means (Barcelos & Coelho, 2016). Many scholars and practitioners have been cautious to use the term in their research and classes (Wilkinson & Kauko, 2020). This could be explained through a cultural, religious, and ethical lens that views love as merely denoting romance, dismissing it as the essence of humans' life, something that must be satisfied to reach self-actualization (Maslow, 1954). In this simplistic view, love was a deterrent to learning and academic achievement, and a detriment to teachers' professionalism (Barcelos & Coelho, 2016). Consequently, many educators have refrained from using the term love, as a sensitive word. Instead, they referred to it through other soft descriptors like passion, affection, care, and bond to describe classroom relationships, yet they lack the equal meaning and expressive power as love (Wang et al., 2022).

Later on, the multi-dimensional quality of love, with pedagogical love as one of its aspects, became popularized (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2011). Some recent endeavors have culminated in an increasing acceptance of the term in educational settings and language education (e.g., Chen, 2023; Darder, 2017; Grimmer, 2021; Yin et al., 2019). The concept of pedagogy of love or loving pedagogy refers to teachers showing care, support, empathy, and sensitivity toward their students' needs, educational experiences, and development (Zhao & Li, 2021). It aims at humanizing the instruction/learning process and developing desirable outcomes, like well-being, motivation, engagement, social ability, and success (Wang et al., 2021). Overall, love as pedagogy suggests the employment of love in teaching and learning to reap mutual benefits (Loreman, 2011).

Barcelos and Coelho (2016) argued that appraising students' full potential and recognizing language and love as vital components of the human condition facilitates teachers' display of love in their professional practices. Love is reflected in educational

settings through a supportive educational environment, close relationships between the teacher and students, and classroom activities (Loreman, 2011). Through loving pedagogy, teachers can better engage students in the learning process and enhance their academic achievement (Zhao & Li, 2021). A loving pedagogy could provide the ground for efficient practice of teachers and learners in an amicable and more democratic environment (Lanas & Zembylas, 2015). This sets the opportunity for learners to express their emotions and build rapport in the classroom, which sparks academic prosperity (Wang et al., 2022).

Models and dimensions of loving pedagogy

As an attempt to narrow down the meaning of love in education, Loreman (2011) proposed a theoretical framework encompassing nine aspects of a loving pedagogy, namely passion, kindness, empathy, intimacy, bonding, sacrifice, forgiveness, acceptance, and community. The choice of these aspects, while somehow subjective, was informed by a comprehensive study of the literature on love from the psychological, religious, and philosophical fields (Yin et al., 2019). Loreman (2011) considered these three field to be most relevant to discussions of love in pedagogy. Accordingly, loving pedagogy is understood as a combination of something personal, that is created between two individuals (psychology), something shared in different groups, that comes to us externally and affects us spiritually (religion), and the many discussions over the root and notions of love in philosophy, largely regarding living a virtuous life (Loreman, 2011). In sum, these aspects of loving pedagogy develop, with kindness and empathy of teachers towards their students as the most fundamental ingredients. Loving pedagogy, thereafter, evolves into a relationship based on intimacy and bonding, in conjunction with the other above-mentioned components (Yin et al., 2019).

Furthermore, Barcelos and Coelho (2016) extracted six key components for a loving pedagogy in their review study. These components include ethics, growth, care, respect, freedom, and dialogue, which evidently link to PP assumptions. In their review, besides the six mentioned components, love was found to mean believing in the potential of every student, endorsing their emotions, and being willing to express love towards them (Wang et al., 2022). They also argued that teachers should view language and love as two vital aspects of being and basic dimensions of any type of teaching or learning. Therefore, loving pedagogy is a multi-faceted construct including 15 dimensions as depicted in Fig. 1.

Drawing on such dimensionalizations, Wang et al. (2022) articulated a model for implementing professional love in the specific SLA context (Fig. 2). It included various factors behind the effective execution of loving pedagogy, namely teacher-related, learner-related, context-related, and cultural factors. Moreover, this model considers a special place for PP and positive emotions. According to this model, besides pedagogical expertise and knowledge of PP, teachers are required to consider their students' needs, be equipped with emotional sensitivity, interpersonal communication skills, and classroom management skills to create a loving environment. Additionally, learners play a part in the fulfillment of a loving pedagogy. Their proficiency and motivational level, personality, emotions, engagement, and demographic features influence their openness toward a loving pedagogy. The third factor pertains to the educational context. The

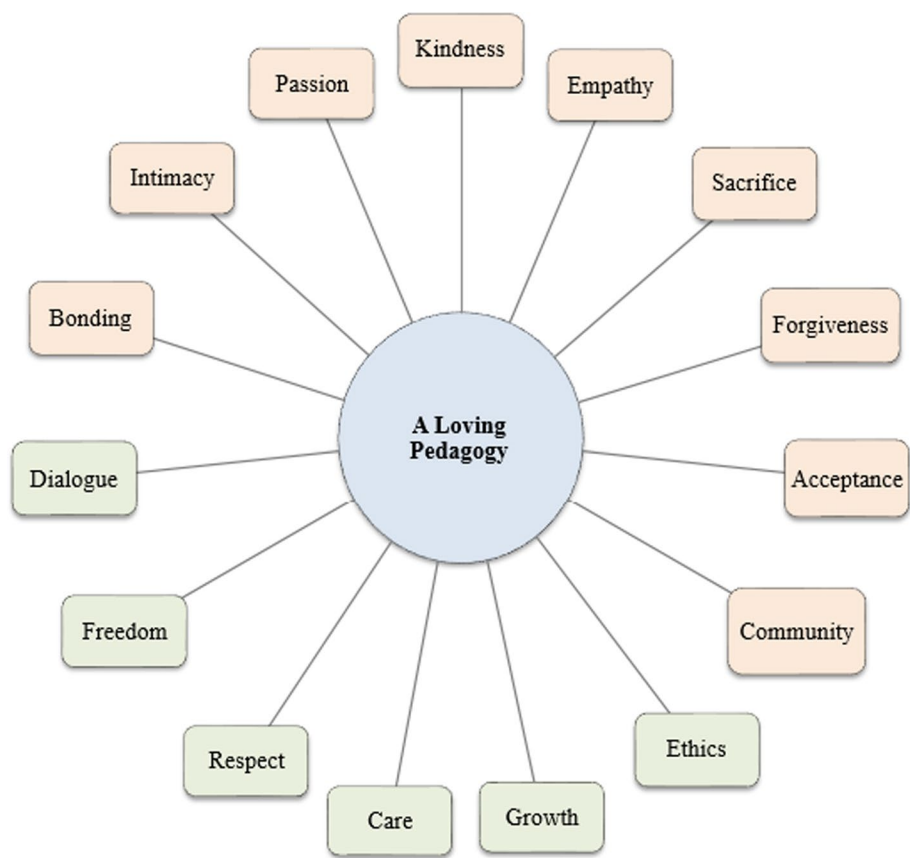


Fig. 1 Elements of a loving pedagogy

Pedagogical Love in SLA			
Teacher-related Factors	Learner-related factors	Context-related factors	Cultural factors
<div>- Pedagogical expertise</div> <div>- PP knowledge</div> <div>- Emotional sensitivity</div> <div>- Interpersonal communication skills</div> <div>- Awareness of self and others</div> <div>- Classroom management skills</div>	<div>- Personality traits</div> <div>- Motivational intensity</div> <div>- Demographic features</div> <div>- Language proficiency</div> <div>- Learning strategies/styles</div> <div>- Psycho-emotional states</div>	<div>- Classroom atmosphere</div> <div>- Classroom climate/culture</div> <div>- Mixed/single gender class</div> <div>- School organizational stucture</div>	<div>- Religion</div> <div>- Cultural interpretations</div> <div>- Cultural variation acceptance</div> <div>- Individualism vs. collectivism</div>

Fig. 2 A model of pedagogical love in SLA

atmosphere, climate, culture, and gender-segregated or integrated nature of classrooms besides the organizational structure of language centers could affect the application of a loving pedagogy. Lastly, cultural issues like students' cultural and religious background, intercultural awareness, and the collectivist/individualistic nature of societies would be influential successfully implementing a pedagogy based on love. Individualistic countries do not seem to care much about others' emotions, whereas collectivist countries look at things from a group perspective (Boroş et al., 2019). Hence, the latter countries seem to provide a more fertile soil for cultivating a loving pedagogy. The justification for using these two models of loving pedagogy was that they comprehensively mapped out the ecology of a pedagogy of love in SLA. They were applied to the study by asking the participants about the influential factors and realizations of loving pedagogy in their L2 learning. Additionally, the current models of loving pedagogy mostly focus on its dimensions, but Wang et al.'s (2022) model is the only model that casts light on the practice of loving pedagogy in SLA.

Previous studies

Driven by the emerging PP in applied linguistics research, a wide range of emotions and affective factors have received more and more scholarly attention in the past two decades (Dewaele et al., 2019). Emotions have been frequently reported as intricately woven with different aspect of learning and teaching quality (Richards, 2022).

Many studies have demonstrated the significance of positive emotions in providing a pleasant atmosphere to enhance learners' L2 motivation, interest, creativity, performance, and proficiency (e.g., Dewaele et al., 2018; Shao et al., 2019; Zhi & Wang, 2023). They have noted that these emotions could not only broaden attention and cognitive resources in language learning, but also mitigate the negative emotions in the challenging process of learning (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Additionally, research has shown that positive emotions affect teachers' professional practices and turnover rate (e.g., Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2021; Richards, 2022; Roffey, 2012; Zhang et al., 2023). A multiplex of PP variables concerning L2 teachers, like motivation, happiness, enjoyment, grit, engagement, resilience, care, among others, have been the focus of previous research (e.g., Fathi et al., 2023; Kubanyiova, 2019; Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2021; Zhang, 2021). More importantly, teacher-student rapport has been named as a remarkable stimulator of positive emotions to the benefit of both parties (Zhou, 2021). Despite important research developments on emotions in SLA, they still remain inadequately studied compared with dominating cognitive research in L2 learning (Dewaele et al., 2019).

Among PP factors, love is a cardinal positive emotion that has not attracted the attention it deserves in educational contexts, especially L2 education (Zhao & Li, 2021). However, the significant contribution of love in education is increasingly recognized by different scholars (e.g., Cho, 2005; Grimmer, 2021; Patience, 2008). Loreman (2011) dedicated a book to the discussion of love and suggested a framework of loving pedagogy in general education. Based on this framework, Yin et al. (2019) developed the first scale, called the Dispositions towards Loving Pedagogy (DTLP) scale, to measure different conceptual and practical facets of loving pedagogy. In addition, Wang et al. (2022) provided a review of loving pedagogy conceptualization and research background, and formulated the first model or agenda for loving pedagogy application in SLA domain.

Furthermore, Zhao and Li (2021) conducted a review article to explicate the definitions, aspects, theoretical underpinnings, and benefits of love in language learning. Similarly, Ye et al. (2022) revealed the efficacious role of teachers' organizational commitment and loving pedagogy on EFL students' achievement by reviewing the theoretical and empirical evidence.

Furthermore, few studies used Structural equation modeling (SEM) to test hypothesized relations among some constructs, including loving pedagogy. For example, Zhi and Wang (2023) explored the relationship among creativity, loving pedagogy, and professional success in the EFL context of China. The results delineated the predictability of teacher professional success by loving pedagogy. In a similar vein, Chen (2023) examined the effect of loving pedagogy dispositions and self-efficacy on Chinese EFL teacher burnout. She found that loving pedagogy could heighten teacher self-efficacy, and consequently, lower teacher burnout levels.

As observed, the handful of studies on loving pedagogy in L2 education have mainly remained at the conceptual or theoretical level. The literature is barren in terms of studies with a qualitative orientation to explore the practice and experience of a loving pedagogy in L2 context. Furthermore, the current literature lacks research on undergraduate students' perceptions and experiences of loving pedagogy despite the fact that their emotional sensitivity is very high at the outset of their academic journey. While pedagogical love is a penetrating variable, whose presence can safeguard L2 learning success, limited empirical research has been done on it. Previous theoretical and correlational studies are insightful enough, but it is empirically unclear what influences a pedagogy of love exerts on undergraduate EFL students, to date. Moreover, there is few (if any) research on the features, realizations, and determining factors of loving pedagogy at undergraduate levels. Also, the experience of loving pedagogy may vary among undergraduates; hence, qualitative studies via phenomenographic design are momentous given the potential of this design to unmask individuals' varied experience of a phenomenon. Nevertheless, such a deep scrutiny of loving pedagogy is rare in the literature. To fill these lacunas, this study inspected Iranian EFL students' perceptions of loving pedagogy at the undergraduate level using a narrative phenomenographic design to obtain their real experiences. Particularly, the study sought out the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of undergraduate EFL students' about pedagogical love?
2. What are the features and realizations of pedagogical love in L2 education?
3. What factors facilitate or hinder the implementation of pedagogical love in L2 education?

Method

Research design

In tune with research goals, this study employed a phenomenographic research design that fits well with studies that intend to unmask the perceptions of a group of people about a specific phenomenon (Richardson, 1999). This design indicates various ways by which individuals conceptualize and perceive an incident. It naturalistically explores real-life phenomena in situ (Sin, 2010). Phenomenography takes a second-order standpoint to describe one's perceptions of a phenomenon, while phenomenology takes a first-order outlook to do so (Stolz, 2020). As EFL students at BA level may have diverse

perceptions and appreciations of pedagogical love in L2 education, this qualitative design was employed in the present research.

Participants and context

Using the convenience sampling technique, in this study, the researchers recruited 22 Iranian undergraduate students of English Language and Literature at Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran. They belonged to both genders with females accounting for 68% of the sample ($n=15$), while males accounted for 32% ($n=7$). The age of the participants ranged from 21 to 30 years old. They were freshmen and going through their Bachelor's degree. The goal of the study and the data collection phases were fully explained to the students and they willingly attended the research by signing a consent form.

Instruments

Semi-structured interview

To tap into the participants' perceptions and experiences of pedagogical love in SLA, the researchers utilized a semi-structured interview, which was held in English and audio-recorded via a smartphone. The interview comprised three sections. The first one dealt with demographics, the second part that included 5 open-ended items measured the students' perceptions of loving pedagogy in detail, and the third part encompassed interview prompts (Appendix A). Particularly, the items asked the respondents to define pedagogical love, its realizations, features, and influencing factors in SLA. The prompts were used to maintain consistency across the interviewee pool and the same questions were requested from all respondents to ensure a fair evaluation. The interview questions were checked by a panel of experts in qualitative SLA research to safeguard their content validity. After obtaining their feedback, the researchers revised the items and proceeded the data gathering. The interviews were face-to-face, each lasting about 25 min.

Narrative frame

To assess undergraduate students' lived experiences and perceptions of pedagogical love, the researchers developed and used a narrative frame (Appendix B). This qualitative tool perfectly aligns with phenomenography as it allows researchers to obtain a 'second-order perspective' or how the respondents' characterize their experiences and conceptions of a phenomenon (Stolz, 2020). It is a helpful instrument to capture learners' thoughts, perceptions, emotions, and actions (Barkhuizen, 2016). Inspired by these potentials, the researchers developed a narrative frame echoing the research objectives to ask undergraduate EFL students to narrate their experiences of loving pedagogy. The frame was completed in English and the respondents described the features, practices, emotions, and effects of pedagogical love in SLA. Since the participants were freshmen and their research knowledge was low, the researchers taught them how to fill the frame and share their real experiences and perceptions of pedagogical love. The comprising blanks and the structure of the frame was examined by two experienced researchers in applied linguistics, who approved the relevance and validity of the tool after one revision round.

Data collection procedure

The data were collected through two qualitative instruments, namely semi-structured interviews and a narrative frame. They were developed by the researchers in compliance with pre-specified research goals. Before administration, the researchers ensured the content validity of the items in both tools. Concerning interviews, Creswell's (2013) guidelines for conducting interviews were followed in this study. There was an interview guide throughout the data collection, which specified the number of interview questions, warm-ups, probing questions, and interviewer behaviors. The interviews were audiotaped and held with 22 BA students during non-instructional time at Allameh Tabataba'i University. During interviews, the researchers talked less and listened more to the participants. However, in case required, further clarification requests or probing questions were posed. The researchers were reflective throughout the interview process. Five questions about the definitions, characteristics, realizations, influences, and importance of pedagogical love were asked from each participant in the interviews. The researchers, then, transcribed all the interviews word by word.

As an effort to capture the participants' real-life experiences and perceptions of pedagogical love, a written narrative frame was distributed among the same 22 BA students. All the recruited participants were required to complete the frame in one week after being taught on how to do so. The frame was developed in accordance to previous studies (e.g., Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008; Kayi-Aydar, 2021) that highlighted guidance to gain a rich picture of students' experiences and conceptions of a given phenomenon. When the data of both interviews and the frame were gathered, the researchers double-checked them for missing parts and typos before the data analysis embarked on. Finally, content and thematic analysis were conducted to analyze the participants' responses to both instruments.

Data analysis

As corroborated in the literature, phenomenographic studies can be analyzed by different methods. In the present study, we took advantage of both content and thematic analysis in analyzing interviews and the frame. As narratives are all concerned with content (i.e., spoken, written, or pictorial), we first ran a basic content analysis of the narrative frames submitted by BA students (Riessman, 2008). This method underscores "content features that could be categorized with little or no interpretation by the coder" (Baxter, 1991, p. 239). It quantitatively analyzes the data and uses descriptive statistics to report code frequencies. Additionally, to theorize and interpret the narratives, the researchers used thematic analysis as a common approach to analyze data in phenomenographic research. Regarding the interviews, we specifically used phenomenographic qualitative analysis (PQA). In doing that, we drew on Stenfors-Hayes et al. (2013) model, which comprised seven stages including data familiarization, condensation, comparing, contrasting, grouping, articulating, and final labeling. First, all the interviews were transcribed carefully by both researchers. Then initial codes were created in an iterative process that culminated in a codebook. Memo writing was used in this phase and the extracted codes were complemented by sample transcriptions, quotes, and interpretations. Afterwards, the initial codes went through constant-comparison to produce larger

codes/themes. Similar codes/themes were merged to condense the data. The analysis of both instruments continued until data saturation and data rigor were ensured. Although two separate codebooks were developed for each data source (i.e., interviews, the narrative frame), the researchers made their final interpretations based on the results of both.

To add rigor and credibility to the findings, we also guaranteed maxims of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nassaji, 2020). Firstly, we did member-checking by inviting the students to scrutinize their responses and our interpretations. Secondly, an expert researcher in L2 education was asked to examine half of the data in order to ensure inter-coder reliability and cross-checking. The results of Cohen's Kappa coefficient in this phase showed an agreement of 0.97. Thirdly, the maxim of confirmability was observed by audit trialing the whole data analysis by another researcher. Fourthly, the credibility of the findings was safeguarded by using cooperative interviews, peer debriefing, and bracketing of personal experiences/perceptions. Fifthly, the dependability was established by conducting thematic analysis, iterative data analysis, and comprehensive phase description of the study. Finally, a thick description was provided to ensure the transferability of the findings to other settings. As to researcher positionality, we strived to stay as neutral as possible and bracket our own experiences and views as university professors of the same context. We just collected and analyzed the data as reported by the participants. However, like other qualitative studies, it was impossible to be absolutely objective in this phenomenographic research and our values and experiences might have trivially affected the final interpretations.

Findings

Perceptions of pedagogical love

To unveil the undergraduates' perceptions of pedagogical love, the first interview question and the second blank in the narrative frame were examined. The results demonstrate that most of the participants (18) regarded "pedagogical love" essential for L2 education (Fig. 3). The most frequent themes included "pedagogical love is a non-romantic intimacy and respect", "pedagogical love is a deep care for students and their emotions", "pedagogical love creates classroom intimacy", and "pedagogical love is a pure

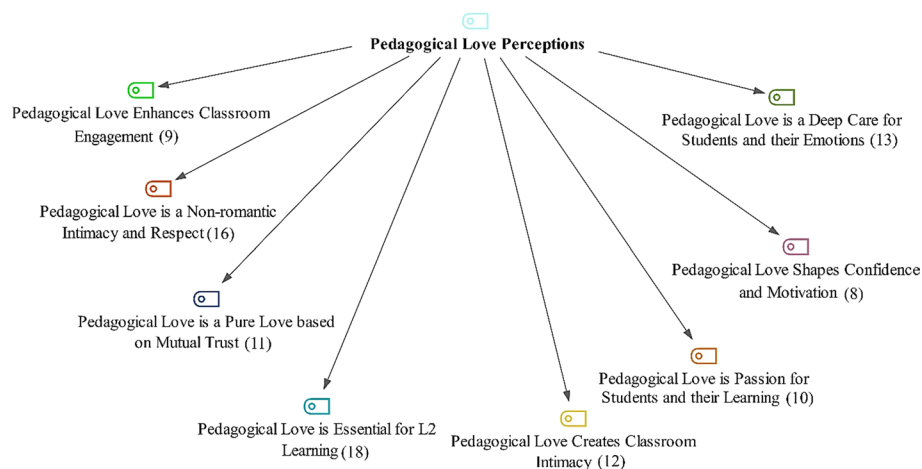


Fig. 3 Undergraduate EFL students' perceptions of pedagogical love

love based on mutual trust”, which were respectively repeated 16, 13, 12, and 11 times across the interview dataset. In this regard, student #8 argued that *“pedagogical love is sense of mutual non-romantic intimacy and respect between a teacher and his/her students. It makes both sides care about each other and do sacrifice for their growth”* (Interview). Additionally, one of the participants (Student # 17) connected pedagogical love with the presence of a range of features by stating that *“pedagogical love is a composite of mutual respect, pure love, care, emotional literacy, and intimacy in the classroom”* (Interview).

The interview analysis also pointed to other common perceptions of pedagogical love among undergraduates. Particularly, 10 participants maintained that “pedagogical love is a passion for students and their learning”, while its influence on “classroom engagement” and “confidence and motivation” was posed by 9 and 8 respondents, respectively. To support these themes, student #8 declared that *“pedagogical love is the passion for the job of teaching and a desire to help learners learning the L2 language”* (Interview). Furthermore, another participant (Student #21) made a more radical comment by arguing that *“an L2 education without love is not education at all since loving pedagogy makes students more active, engaged, motivated, and confident to take academic risks”* (Interview). These positive views of pedagogical love and its presence in L2 education were also reiterated in the participants’ narrative frames. More specifically, they argued that pedagogical love is essential for their L2 success. The most frequent themes in the narratives considering this research question were that pedagogical love “enhances classroom engagement/participation”, “makes students feel comfortable”, and “boosts positive feelings in learners”, which were repeated 14, 11, and 10 times across the narrative data (Fig. 4).

In this regard, one of the participants narrated *“pedagogical love is significant for L2 learning success because it makes the students feel comfortable and highly engaged in the classroom activities”* (Student #6, Narrative Frame). Moreover, some participants pointed to the stimulating role of loving pedagogy on producing other positive emotions by stating that *“loving pedagogy boosts many other positive emotions among students including motivation, confidence, passion, and interest”* (Student #20, Narrative Frame). Others took a reverse approach and maintained that *“pedagogical love decreases*

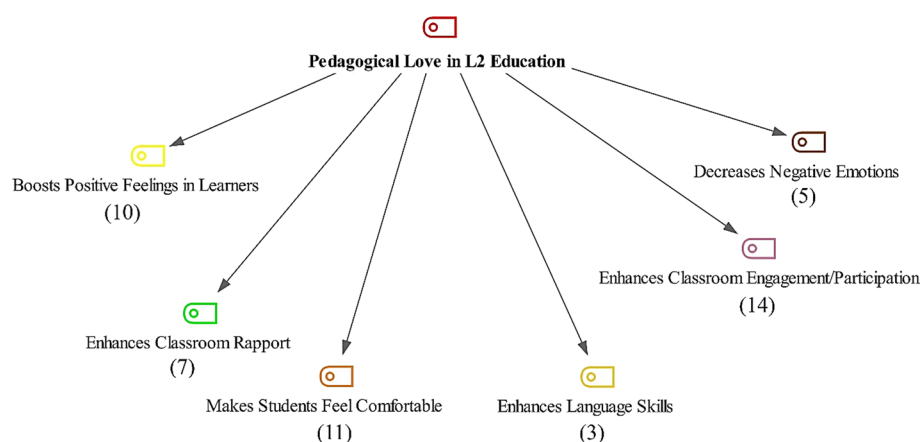


Fig. 4 The contributions of pedagogical love

negative emotions like stress, boredom, anxiety, and demotivation" (Student #16, Narrative Frame). The role of pedagogical love in establishing a positive teacher-student relationship was also capitalized in the narratives. As Student # 18 declared *"an education based on love enhances the degree and quality of classroom rapport between the teacher and students, which ultimately promotes language skills"* (Narrative Frame).

To conclude, the findings showed that Iranian undergraduate EFL students, in this study, commonly perceived pedagogical love in a positive way. They described it as a "non-romantic intimacy and respect", "deep care for students and their emotions", and "pure love based on mutual trust", which is essential for L2 education. It was also declared that pedagogical love contributes to L2 education by enhancing positive constructs (rapport, intimacy, comfort, classroom engagement/participation, motivation, and confidence) and decreasing negative emotions among learners.

Features and realizations of pedagogical love

The researchers examined the second and the third interview questions along with the first part of the narrative frame to answer this research question. The results pertaining to the common features of loving pedagogy or pedagogical love culminated in 11 features from the undergraduates' vantage point (Fig. 5). The participants frequently proposed "mutual trust and respect", "kindness", "care", "bonding", "intimacy", and "forgiveness" as the common features of a love-based L2 education. To verify these themes, a student enlisted the features of loving pedagogy in the interview by claiming that *"in my opinion the main features of love based L2 education includes trust, kindness, compassion, empathy, forgiveness, acceptance, intimacy, affection, and sacrifice"* (Student #14, Interview). Moreover, student #13 stated that *"teacher-student bonding, care, affection, and intimacy evince loving pedagogy in L2 classes"* (Narrative Frame).

Concerning the realizations of loving pedagogy, different emotional and instructional realizations were mentioned by the participants. They reported 10 realizations or manifestations of pedagogical love in L2 classes among which high "intimacy",

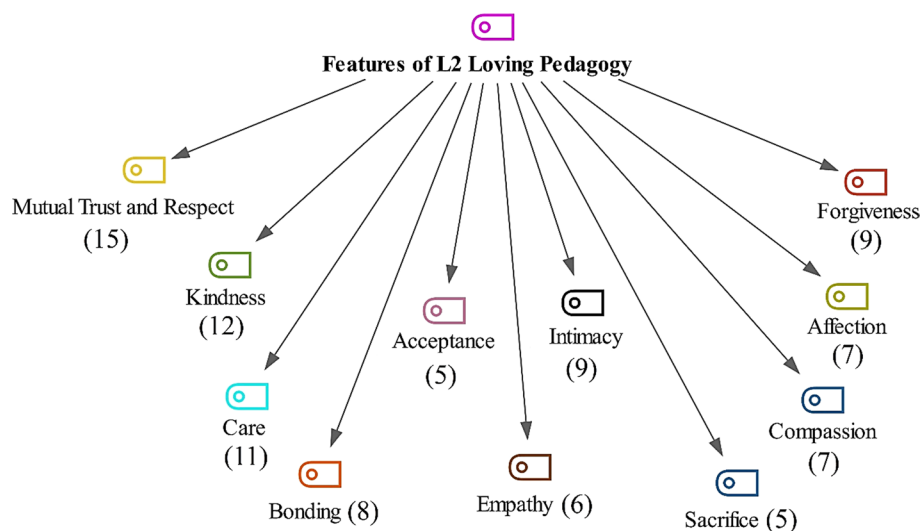


Fig. 5 Undergraduates' perceptions of loving pedagogy features

“classroom engagement/participation”, and “confidence in classroom practices” were the most repeated ones (Fig. 6). As pinpointed by a participant, “*pedagogical love shows itself in the close bond and intimacy that it creates in the class that inspires learners to get actively involved in activities*” (Student #22, Interview). Moreover, the academic influence of pedagogical love on students was underscored by the respondents. As an example, one of them declared that “*pedagogical love is materialized in students’ high academic performance, motivation, and self-esteem that produce a sense of willingness to be productive in education*” (Student #4, Interview). The emotional consequences of loving pedagogy in “*lowering negative emotions such as stress and anxiety*” (Student #11, Interview) and “*increasing positive feelings of mutual care, respect, responsibility, and classroom enjoyment*” (Student #17, Interview) were also underscored in this study. Additionally, some students suggested that “*the presence of pedagogical love in the classroom denotes the fact that we are important to the teacher and this makes us feel safe to take academic initiatives and risks*” (Student #13, Interview).

In sum, the analysis of interviews and narratives in this research questions revealed that loving pedagogy had different features and realizations in L2 education, from the view of the participants. The most common features of loving pedagogy practice in L2 classrooms were “mutual trust and respect”, “kindness”, “care”, “bonding”, “intimacy”, and “forgiveness”. Additionally, it was illustrated that loving pedagogy possessed 10 realizations in L2 classes. It manifested itself through high levels of “intimacy”, “classroom engagement/participation”, “confidence in classroom practices”, “academic performance”, and “mutual care, respect, and responsibility”. The stimulating role of pedagogical love in increasing positive emotions (e.g., motivation, self-esteem, enjoyment) and decreasing negative emotions (e.g., stress, anxiety) was also highlighted by the participants.

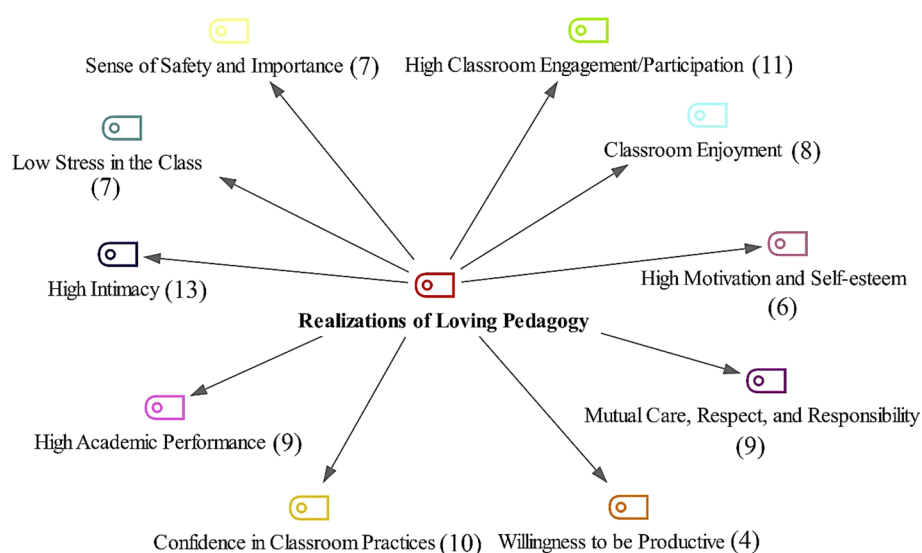


Fig. 6 Undergraduates’ perceptions of loving pedagogy realizations

Facilitative and preventive factors of loving pedagogy practice

The fourth and the fifth interview questions alongside the third blank of the narrative frame were analyzed to respond to this research question. Regarding the facilitative factors, the results indicated that the implementation of loving pedagogy at undergraduate level could be facilitated by 5 factors (Fig. 7). As shown in Fig. 7, the most frequently raised factors perceived facilitating for loving pedagogy include “teachers’ emotional literacy”, “teachers’ pedagogical expertise”, and “positive classroom rapport”. In support of these themes, a participant maintained that *“the practice of loving pedagogy at undergraduate levels for L2 learners is definitely fostered if the teacher has a high level of emotional literacy to establish a positive climate for learning plus pedagogical expertise to strike a balance in his/her emotions and profession”* (Student #11, Interview). Likewise, another student argued that *“loving pedagogy practice is largely facilitated with the presence of a positive classroom rapport between the instructor and pupils”* (Student #21, Interview). Two other proposed factors that might foster loving pedagogy practice were “patience” and “students’ acceptance and awareness” of a love-based education. As put by a respondent, *“practicing loving pedagogy in EFL contexts takes time and this requires patience on the part of teachers, students, and institutions. Unless students are ready and aware of loving pedagogy, the implementation of this method is not possible”* (Student #8, Interview).

Regarding the preventive factors, the results demonstrated that loving pedagogy practice might be precluded by 9 factors (Fig. 8). The most frequent factors include “strict religious beliefs”, “stigmatizing socio-cultural norms”, “emotion expression fear”, and “educational system”, which were repeated 16, 13, 12, and 11 times across interviews and narrative frames.

Moreover, it was shown that loving pedagogy practice could be prevented by “students’ negative emotions”, “teachers’ outdated methodologies”, “low spirits”, “lack of facilities”, and “lack of trust and respect”. As for the role of region, a student declared *“strict and radical religious beliefs can make teachers think second before applying loving pedagogy and/or forming intimacy and bond with students at a professional and*

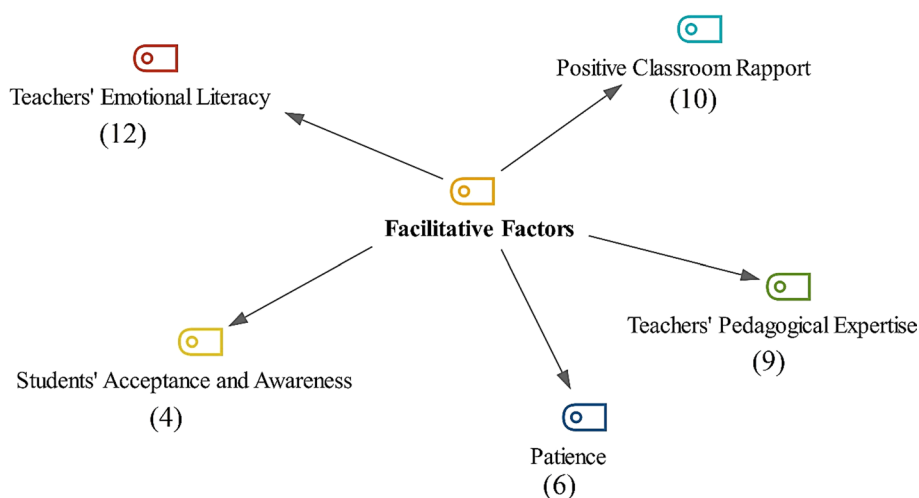


Fig. 7 Facilitative factors of loving pedagogy practice

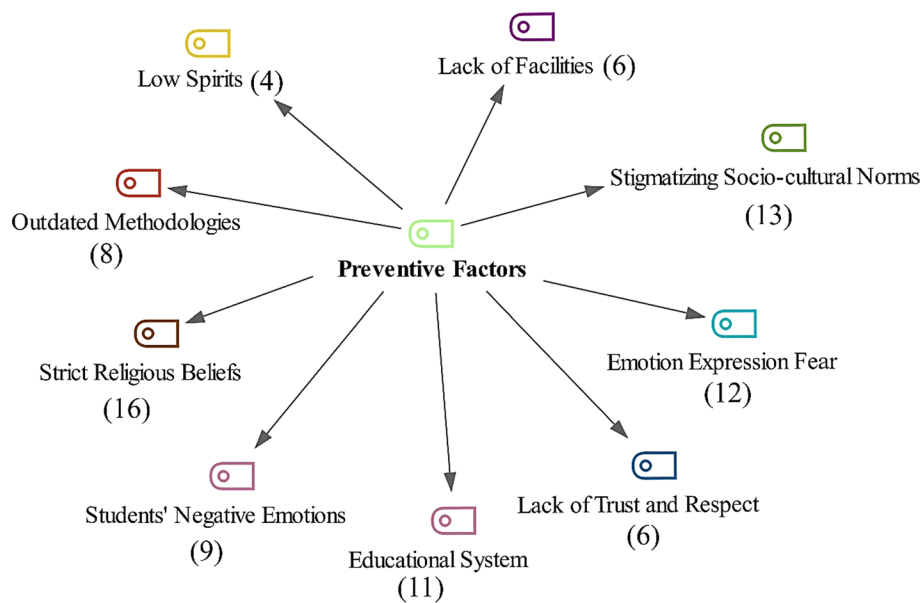


Fig. 8 Preventive factors of loving pedagogy practice

ethical level" (Student #19, Interview). Moreover, in one of the narrative frames, a participant mentioned *"cultural or social norms that discourage or stigmatize pedagogical love prevent the practice of this methodology in L2 classes"* (Student #3, Narrative Frame). Going further, some students attributed this uncertainty to *"bigoted educational systems, old methodologies, and a common fear of emotion expression in academia"* (Student #5, Interview; Student #12, Interview). Additionally, lack of enough facilities and distrust/disrespect were claimed preventive factors of loving pedagogy as stated by some respondents. For example, Student #22 maintained that *"sometimes the absence of trust and respect in the classroom and limited facilities for practicing loving pedagogy become hurdles in L2 contexts"* (Interview).

In brief, the results of interview and narrative frame analyses evinced that different factors are at play to implement loving pedagogy practice. As for facilitative factors, the results showed that *"teachers' emotional literacy"*, *"teachers' pedagogical expertise"*, and *"positive classroom rapport"* were the most frequently suggested factors by undergraduates. On the other hand, *"strict religious beliefs"*, *"stigmatizing socio-cultural norms"*, *"emotion expression fear"*, and *"traditional educational system"* were posed as the preventive factors of loving pedagogy practice in L2 education.

Discussion

This study aimed to disclose the perceptions of Iranian undergraduate EFL students' perceptions of pedagogical love and its features, realizations, and determining factors. The findings indicated that the participants commonly perceived pedagogical love in a positive way considering it as a non-romantic intimacy and respect, deep care for students and their emotions, and pure love based on mutual trust. The findings theoretically

resonate with PP and Wang et al. (2022) agenda for loving pedagogy practice. They concur with PP, especially positive interpersonal communication skills, which highlight the importance of positive emotions and relations between the teacher and students to flourish academically. Likewise, the findings echo Wang et al. (2022) model in that the participants' perceptions of pedagogical love were representative of the learner-related factors and teacher-related factors of the model. It seems that, for them, pedagogical love had been mostly a function of teacher-and-learner-related factors more than anything else had. Furthermore, the participants' description of pedagogical love reflects its joint and interactive essence in that care, respect, intimacy, and trust are all constructed and reconstructed in two-way interactions. This may signify the participants' knowledge of the social and interactive basis of loving pedagogy practice. The undergraduates also found pedagogical love essential for L2 education in that it could both enhance positive emotions and decrease negative emotions among learners. This reverberates the contagious nature of positive emotions (e.g., love) in generating other positive emotions and curbing negative ones. Such an interpretation could be theoretically supported by the Broaden and Build theory, which argues that positive emotions can produce other positive emotions and expand our capacity to deal with negative one (Fredrickson, 2001). In light of this theory, it can be argued that the emotional contagion of loving pedagogy can build different thought-action repertoires in undergraduate EFL learners. A probable reason behind these findings could be the emotional literacy and sensitivity of undergraduate EFL students in Iran. Since BA students are in a sensitive and emotional age, they are likely to depend on positive emotions and their corresponding impacts on other areas. The findings could also be attributed to the highly emotional nature of L2 education (Derakhshan, 2022), which might have directed the participants to claim for such a chain of emotions.

This study also showed that loving pedagogy was mostly characterized by the existence of a mutual trust and respect, kindness, care, bonding, intimacy, and forgiveness in L2 classrooms. Such features are partly in line with Loreman's (2011) and Barcelos and Coelho's (2016) frameworks of loving pedagogy. Concerning the former framework, the findings endorse the kindness, intimacy, bonding, and forgiveness components of loving pedagogy. As for the latter framework, two of the proposed features of loving pedagogy, namely care and respect, are consistent with the obtained findings of this study. Furthermore, the suggested features agree with the teacher-related and learner-related factors of Wang et al. (2022) model that enumerated four categories of factors affecting the implementation of loving pedagogy in L2 contexts. It is likely that the participants highlighted these features of loving pedagogy because of their affective needs as the basic human needs for development. Most of the features concern students' need for affective support and sense of belongingness to a community, which cares and respects their feelings. Therefore, this finding could be explained by the participants' natural tendency for a reciprocal affective relationship with community members, who show kindness, care, respect, and intimacy to others. Another justification might be the EFL context of Iran at BA level that evinces affective support and tie between the teacher and students. Such

an emotional climate might have made the undergraduates to suggest the mentioned features for loving pedagogy.

This study also demonstrated that, in L2 education, pedagogical love manifests itself via intimacy, classroom engagement/participation, confidence, academic performance, and mutual care, respect, and responsibility. These realizations could possibly signpost the positive influence of loving pedagogy on other positive constructs in L2 education as evidenced by prior studies (e.g., Chen, 2023; Ye et al., 2022; Zhao & Li, 2021; Zhi & Wang, 2023). Moreover, as argued by Yin et al. (2019), pedagogical love triggers a positive interpersonal treatment of learners through care, respect, understanding, and sensitivity. The penetrating role of pedagogical love in other academic domains could be ascribed to the teachers' shared goals and relations with students that stimulates their supportive and positive interactions in the classroom. In such caring and just environments, students are more likely to experience positive emotions (e.g., love). The participants' belief in the chain of positive emotions in L2 education may also be the root of the findings. They believed in the power of love in engendering other desirable outcomes in students' language learning. This might be due to their emotional literacy skills and knowledge of PP.

The findings also evinced teachers' emotional literacy and pedagogical expertise along with the existence of a positive classroom rapport facilitated the implementation of loving pedagogy at undergraduate level. The findings are consistent with Wang et al. (2022), who developed a model for practicing loving pedagogy in EFL contexts including four factors related to teachers, learners, context, and culture. The obtained finding complies with its teacher-related factors and context-related factors. Particularly, teachers' emotional literacy and pedagogical expertise echo teacher-related factors and positive classroom rapport echo context-related factors in their agenda. They considered loving pedagogy practice applicable via teachers' abilities and contextual qualities rather than their own capacities and requirements. This could represent their affective dependence on teachers at undergraduate level, which is customary. Another reason could be the idea that teachers are the main players of education as they are more experienced and familiar with L2 learning process. Hence, the participants placed most of the burden upon teachers' shoulders to implement loving pedagogy. The last finding was that the practice of loving pedagogy was mostly precluded by the presence of strict religious beliefs, stigmatizing socio-cultural norms, emotion expression fear, and a traditional educational system. This finding corroborates previous studies (e.g., Loreman, 2011; Wang et al., 2022), which regarded macro-level factors such as religious beliefs and cultural norms as determinant factors of accepting or rejecting pedagogical love. These factors prevented the practice of loving pedagogy in Iran probably because the country is highly governed by religious and cultural beliefs and values that consider 'love' as a familial, household notion. Such value systems have covered almost all aspect of Iranians including L2 students. The educational context of Iran might have not welcomed 'love' because it still has a romantic connotation to many educators. The stereotypes and stigmas attached to the use of pedagogical love in academia have made many Iranian teachers reluctant and conservative concerning this term. These interpretations are well-supported by previous

studies that endorsed the role of cultural and religious beliefs in the practice of loving pedagogy (Barcelos & Coelho, 2016; Derakhshan, 2022; Loreman, 2011; Wang et al., 2022).

Additionally, this study revealed two more preventing factors (i.e., emotion expression fear, educational system). The former reflects the second dimension of Wang et al.'s (2022) model, namely learner-related factors, while the latter expands its context-related factors category. The participants' broad understanding of pedagogical love could explain this finding. Their consideration of macro-level factors as preventing loving pedagogy could be an exhibition of their belief in a top-down approach to practice this methodology. Another justification might be the participants' self-experienced contacts and clashes between their religious and socio-cultural beliefs and the phenomenon of pedagogical love. Given these mismatches, students might have been afraid of expressing their non-romantic emotions in the classroom. The governing cultural and religious system might be the reason behind the fear of expression 'non-romantic love' in educational settings. Many educators prefer to conceal or prevent their emotions in such context because they worry about their reputation. Despite these fruitful findings, there are yet some uncertainties and limitations regarding the replication of this study. Moreover, the potential bias in the findings owing to self-reported data in narrative frames and interviews cannot be ruled out. It is also unclear whether language proficiency level, gender, and discipline play a role in loving pedagogy practice, which are left to future scholars.

Conclusion and implications

As it has been observed, the momentous significance of love resonates down the educational system, though not often mentioned as a vital building block for rigorous academic settings (Wilkinson & Kauko, 2020). To add to the current body of knowledge on the far-reaching contributions of loving pedagogy, this study focused, especially, on its practice as experienced by a group of Iranian EFL undergraduate students. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that, first, loving pedagogy is a multidimensional construct, shaped via myriad of micro (e.g., personal and contextual issues) and macro (e.g., cultural and sociopolitical issues) factors. Moreover, the findings encourage loving pedagogy for fostering other positive emotions in L2 learning like motivation, enjoyment, and intimacy, which seem to be contagious, and lead to better students' performance through enhanced engagement and participation. Pedagogical love, also, enfeebles negative emotions like anxiety, stress, boredom, and demotivation by blurring their presence. This may find special importance for undergraduate students, who have just entered the university life and, thus, seem more vulnerable to the side effects of negative emotions (Mostert & Pienaar, 2020). Furthermore, it could be asserted that perceptions of pedagogical love varies across individuals depending on their experiences and perceived connotations of love. It could also be contended that pedagogical love is not a stand-alone phenomenon, but one with different features and realizations in L2 education. Finally, it could also be extrapolated that loving pedagogy practice might not appear in vacuum, but as a

result of interplay of several factors that perhaps facilitate or hinder its implementation. To inject it into L2 education, teachers should gain necessary emotional literacies and competencies in a socio-cultural context, where speaking of love is no longer taboo.

In light of its findings, this study may have valuable implications for language policy-makers, teacher educators, EFL teachers, L2 learners, and researchers. More specifically, language policy-makers may take benefit of this study to add tints of the extracted features of loving pedagogy into their policies and decisions. Moreover, teacher educators can incorporate the tenets of PP and loving pedagogy in their educational programs for both novice and experienced teachers to raise their awareness of these issues and help them in the implementation of pedagogical love. They can take measures to reinforce the facilitative factors and mitigate the debilitating factors behind the implementation of loving pedagogy. Additionally, having gained a better recognition of pedagogical love, EFL teachers could put more effort into breaking the taboo of speaking about and practicing pedagogical love in L2 education. They could take active steps toward practicing loving pedagogy to improve their instruction and interactions with students. Furthermore, L2 learners can become aware of the components and effects of loving pedagogy, which ultimately prepares them to play their part in the interaction with their teacher in the formation of this pedagogy. Finally, L2 researchers may extend this line of inquiry by a deeper exploration of the multi-dimensional construct of loving pedagogy. They can pay further attention to influential factors behind loving pedagogy applications, its correlation with other positive and negative emotions and effects on teaching and learning in other contexts.

Despite the abovementioned insights provided into the practice of loving pedagogy, we acknowledge the limitations and uncertainties in this study. For example, it gleaned the data from a single research site (i.e., Iran), which may constraint the extrapolations. Moreover, the participating students were all at the undergraduate level coming from different backgrounds, which were not controlled by the researchers. Besides, this study adopted a pure qualitative approach and gathered self-reported data via two instruments. It is also worth mentioning that the researchers had no access to the participants' emotional intelligence and emotional literacy level, which may influence the results. Noting these limitations, further studies could take a larger sample size for the purpose of generalization. Moreover, cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary studies could be conducted to see whether the same findings would be obtained. Future studies could also make use of other qualitative instruments to achieve a deeper outlook of pedagogical love and its practice. In addition, researchers are encouraged to focus on other educational levels, like graduate or high school levels to find potential discrepancies or similarities. Finally, a shift of perspective from the students to other stakeholders (e.g., teachers, school managers) could be examined in future studies.

Appendix A

Demographics

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Major:
4. Language Proficiency Level:

Interview Questions	Interview Prompts
1. As an EFL student, how do you define pedagogical love? Does love play a role in L2 education?	▪ What roles does love play in L2 in your perspective? Why do you think so?
2. What are the main features of a love-based L2 education from your perspective?	▪ Which of those features have you experienced? Are there other features?
3. What are the impacts and realizations of pedagogical love in your L2 learning?	▪ How does love show itself in your language learning process? What influences have you experienced?
4. What factors facilitate the implementation of loving pedagogy in L2 education at undergraduate level?	▪ Are there other factors that should be considered to foster a love-based L2 education?
5. What are some preventive factors of admitting and applying loving pedagogy in L2 education contexts?	▪ What are the sources of such factors?

Appendix B

Narrative Frame

Personally, I believe that loving pedagogy or pedagogical love includes features such as It is significant for L2 learning success because it Despite challenges like..... loving pedagogy can be practiced by L2 teachers and educators through.....in the class. When I see my teacher is injecting love to his/her instruction I feel and this emotion is crucial in L2 education.

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Author contributions

All authors have materially participated in the research and article preparation. Additionally, all authors have approved the final article.

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Availability of data and materials

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and informed consent

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

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Consent for Publication Statement

The authors, hereby, give their consent for the publication of this article in Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education. We also affirm that the content of the manuscript is original and has not been published elsewhere. Moreover, the journal has a non-exclusive right to reproduce and distribute the article in print and electronic formats. We understand that our names and affiliations will be published along with the article, and we agree to be held responsible for any ethical or legal issues arising from the publication of the manuscript.

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