



### Building Positive Learning Environments in Higher Education: How Empathic Lecturer Communication Shapes Emotional Responsiveness and Psychological Safety

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#### ARTICLE INFORMATION

#### ABSTRACT

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#### ABSTRACT

The transformation of higher education, particularly following the post-pandemic period, requires lecturer–student communication that extends beyond information delivery toward the development of humane, supportive, and psychologically safe academic relationships. This study aims to formulate an Empathic Lecturer Interpersonal Communication Model for fostering a positive classroom climate in higher education through a systematic synthesis of the literature. The study employed a qualitative approach using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design guided by the PRISMA 2020 reporting framework. The literature focused on interpersonal communication between lecturers and students, lecturer empathy, lecturer–student relationships, psychological safety, and positive classroom climate. The review process involved identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and thematic synthesis of relevant scholarly publications. The findings identified four major themes: empathic interpersonal communication, lecturer empathy and emotional responsiveness, students' psychological safety, and positive classroom climate. The synthesis resulted in a conceptual model consisting of three sequential components: empathic lecturer interpersonal communication as input, students' psychological safety as process, and positive classroom climate as output. The findings indicate that lecturer empathy, manifested through perspective-taking, active listening, emotional responsiveness, non-judgmental communication, and supportive feedback, contributes to students' psychological safety. Such safety enables students to ask questions, express opinions, acknowledge difficulties or mistakes, and participate actively in classroom interactions. Consequently, psychological safety functions as a relational mechanism connecting lecturers' empathic communication with the development of an open, inclusive, supportive, dialogic, and participatory classroom climate. The model contributes theoretically by integrating these three constructs into a unified framework and practically by providing a basis for developing more humane and student-centered communication practices in higher education.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions in the post-pandemic era have experienced significant changes in patterns of academic interaction between lecturers and students, particularly because teaching and learning activities are no longer conducted exclusively through face-to-face interactions but also through online and hybrid formats. These changes have positioned lecturer–student communication as an important factor in learning success, as the quality of message delivery, clarity of instructions, lecturer responsiveness, and patterns of academic interaction influence student engagement, motivation, and learning experiences. In this context, educational communication in higher education should not be understood merely as a process of information transmission, but also as an interpersonal process that shapes academic relationships, student participation, and the quality of students' learning experiences in the classroom (Deep et al., 2025; Estrela et al., 2024).

Interpersonal communication between lecturers and students is an important aspect because academic relationships in higher education are determined not only by pedagogical competence and mastery of subject matter, but also by lecturers' ability to develop closeness, trust, support, and meaningful interactions with students. Recent research indicates that the quality of lecturer–student rapport is associated with greater student engagement and deeper approaches to learning, while teacher support and positive teacher–student relationships contribute to students' affective experiences in learning. Thus, lecturer interpersonal communication can be positioned as a relational foundation that influences how students perceive the classroom, interact with others, and engage in academic processes (Mattanah et al., 2024; Y. Sun & Shi, 2022).

However, research on educational communication in higher education still tends to conceptualize lecturer communication as an instructional skill centered on the clarity of material delivery, the use of learning media, and the effectiveness of teaching methods. In reality, lecturer interpersonal communication also encompasses an empathic dimension, namely the ability to understand students' perspectives, respond to academic and emotional difficulties, listen actively, and provide supportive feedback. Systematic studies on teacher empathy indicate that empathy constitutes part of social-emotional competence associated with the quality of teacher–student interactions. Nevertheless, empirical findings have not been entirely consistent and still require a more focused conceptual synthesis, particularly within the context of higher education (Aldrup et al., 2022; Bartra-Rivero et al., 2025).

A positive classroom climate refers to a social, emotional, and academic condition that enables students to feel safe, valued, and accepted, while encouraging them to ask questions, engage in discussions, and actively participate in the learning process. In the educational literature, classroom climate has been associated with student engagement, academic motivation, self-efficacy, social relationships, and academic achievement. However, most studies on classroom climate continue to emphasize motivational factors, teacher leadership, academic performance, and social interaction, while explanations of how empathic interpersonal communication by lecturers contributes to the development of a positive classroom climate have rarely been formulated into a systematic communication model (Bas, 2025; Ma & Wei, 2022; Wang et al., 2023).

One conceptual mechanism that may explain the relationship between lecturers' empathic interpersonal communication and a positive classroom climate is students' psychological safety. Psychological safety refers to a condition in which students feel safe to ask questions, express opinions, acknowledge their lack of knowledge, try new ideas, and make academic mistakes without fear of being embarrassed or negatively judged. In the context of higher education, psychological safety has been shown to be relevant to the development of trust, inclusivity, collaboration, creativity, academic well-being, and learning satisfaction. Therefore, this concept can be positioned as a bridge between lecturer empathy and the formation of an open, dialogic, and supportive classroom climate (Atuahene et al., 2024; Clausen et al., 2025).

Based on the development of the existing literature, several research gaps need to be addressed. First, previous studies have tended to examine lecturer–student communication, teacher empathy, psychological safety, and classroom climate as separate constructs. Second, studies on teacher empathy have more frequently associated it with learning outcomes, teacher performance, or emotional support in general, rather than specifically

formulating it as an empathic interpersonal communication model for lecturers within the higher education context. Third, although teacher–student relationships have been extensively studied, systematic syntheses that specifically integrate lecturer empathy, students’ psychological safety, and a positive classroom climate into a single communication model remain limited (Aldrup et al., 2022; Di Lisio et al., 2025; Mattanah et al., 2024).

To address these gaps, this study employs a qualitative approach using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design. This approach was selected because SLR enables researchers to systematically, transparently, and reproducibly identify, evaluate, and synthesize findings from previous scientific studies. In this study, the reviewed literature focuses on publications from 2019 to March 2026 addressing lecturer interpersonal communication, teacher empathy, students’ psychological safety, and classroom or positive classroom climate. The synthesis process is conducted to identify themes, patterns of conceptual relationships, and theoretical foundations that can be used to formulate an empathic interpersonal communication model in higher education (Maeda et al., 2022; Page et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019).

The purpose of this study is to formulate an empathic lecturer interpersonal communication model for fostering a positive classroom climate in higher education based on a systematic synthesis of the literature. The novelty of this study lies in the integration of three major constructs—lecturers’ empathic interpersonal communication, students’ psychological safety, and positive classroom climate—into a single conceptual model of higher education communication. Unlike previous studies that have predominantly examined relationships among variables separately or partially, this study proposes a model that positions lecturer empathy as the foundation of interpersonal communication, students’ psychological safety as the relational mechanism, and a positive classroom climate as the outcome of humane, dialogic, supportive, and inclusive academic interactions (Aldrup et al., 2022; Clausen et al., 2025; Di Lisio et al., 2025).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

### 2.1. Contemporary Literature and Research Debate

Contemporary literature reveals an ongoing debate over whether teachers’ interpersonal communication primarily functions as a direct factor influencing students’ learning experiences or operates through specific psychological and relational mechanisms. Some studies emphasize that the quality of teacher–student relationships, rapport, teacher support, and positive academic relationships have direct effects on students’ engagement, motivation, loyalty, and learning approaches. However, other studies suggest that these effects are not always direct but are mediated by engagement, perceived social support, academic self-efficacy, academic pressure, resilience, or students’ psychological needs. Thus, the central debate is no longer whether interpersonal relationships are important, but rather how these relationships operate in shaping students’ academic experiences (Mattanah et al., 2024; Prananto et al., 2025; Snijders et al., 2020; Y. Wang et al., 2024).

A second debate concerns whether interpersonal communication should be positioned as an instructional skill or as a relational-affective process. Derakhshan conceptualizes teacher care, clarity, credibility, rapport, stroke, immediacy, and confirmation as positive interpersonal communication behaviors that can influence motivation, engagement, attendance, willingness to communicate, and academic achievement. However, Liu emphasizes that studies on teacher immediacy continue to face considerable variation in research designs, educational contexts, and measurement instruments, making it difficult to understand the effects of interpersonal communication from a single perspective. Yuan further reinforces the position that teacher immediacy and teacher–student interaction are associated with academic engagement, although these relationships remain dependent on communication contexts and the mediating role of rapport. This debate indicates that teachers’ interpersonal communication should not merely be understood as warm teaching behavior, but rather as a communication system with clearly defined dimensions, mechanisms, and outcomes (Derakhshan, 2021; W. Liu, 2021; Yuan, 2024).

The debate surrounding teacher empathy reveals a tension between theoretical optimism and empirical caution. Aldrup et al. argue that teacher empathy is theoretically regarded as an important component of social-

emotional competence associated with the quality of teacher–student interactions and learning outcomes. Nevertheless, empirical evidence remains inconsistent due to variations in measurement, research contexts, and the dominance of self-report measures. Meanwhile, Bartra-Rivero et al. found that empathetic communication in higher education is positively correlated with teaching performance, particularly through empathic concern and perspective taking. Guo et al. also demonstrated that teachers’ emotional support influences students’ learning engagement through academic self-efficacy and academic resilience. This debate suggests that empathy is indeed important, but it is insufficient to conceptualize it merely as a personal characteristic of teachers; rather, empathy needs to be formulated as an interpersonal communication practice capable of fostering students’ sense of safety and a positive classroom climate (Aldrup et al., 2022; Bartra-Rivero et al., 2025; Guo et al., 2025).

The debate concerning classroom climate reveals two main positions. The first views classroom climate as an environmental factor that influences engagement, motivation, academic performance, peer interaction, and self-efficacy. Ma and Wei demonstrate that perceived classroom climate is associated with academic performance through student engagement, while Bas argues that a positive classroom climate contributes to academic achievement through peer-social interaction and motivation to learn. The second position views classroom climate not merely as an environmental variable but also as an outcome of interpersonal relationships, classroom rapport, teacher support, and repeated academic interactions. Li demonstrates that rapport and classroom climate both play roles in predicting classroom engagement in the EMI context, whereas Wang et al. position classroom climate and self-efficacy as important mechanisms linking teacher leadership style and academic motivation. This debate suggests that classroom climate can simultaneously be positioned as a condition, a mechanism, and an outcome of academic interpersonal communication (Bas, 2025; Ma & Wei, 2022; Q. Wang et al., 2023).

Another debate has emerged in the literature on psychological safety. Some studies conceptualize psychological safety as a psychological condition that enables students to ask questions, express opinions, participate, receive feedback, and take academic risks without fear of embarrassment or humiliation. Clausen et al. demonstrate that psychological safety is associated with team creativity and academic well-being among first-year students in problem-based learning (PBL) teams. Robinson and Held show that psychological safety in online student teams does not emerge automatically but requires instructional design, openness, the normalization of constructive failure, and supportive group-work structures. Hardie et al. likewise emphasize that psychological safety is highly dependent on supervisor–student relationships, particularly in clinical practice contexts. Thus, psychological safety is debated not merely as an internal psychological condition of students but also as an outcome of communication design, interpersonal relationships, and the learning climate established by teachers (Clausen et al., 2025; Hardie et al., 2022; Robinson & Held, 2025).

In online and hybrid learning contexts, the debate has become increasingly complex because teacher–student communication no longer depends solely on physical presence but also on communication media, modes of interaction, and the quality of social presence. Deep et al. found that synchronous communication methods, such as live video, tend to be more effective in promoting engagement and motivation than more passive forms of communication. Atuahene et al. demonstrated that psychological safety and inclusive leadership influence online learning satisfaction, particularly when students perceive organizational support. Estrela et al. emphasize that the quality of professor–student communication during the learning process is important for supporting academic experiences; however, technology-mediated communication does not automatically produce interpersonal closeness. This debate indicates that technology can expand the space for communication, but relational quality, empathy, and psychological safety remain central to the development of a positive classroom climate (Atuahene et al., 2024; Deep et al., 2025; Estrela et al., 2024).

The debate in teacher–student relationship studies also indicates that teacher–student relationships do not yet have a single stable conceptual model. Di Lisio et al. show that teacher–student relationships have substantial significance in empowering learning, yet research on these relationships remains fragmented across various terms such as rapport, support, care, immediacy, emotional support, and classroom relationships. Sun and Shi demonstrate that teacher–student rapport and teacher support predict affective learning, while Sun highlights teacher immediacy and teacher credibility as factors shaping perceptions of classroom justice. Nevertheless,

most of these studies have not yet connected these interpersonal concepts with teacher empathy, students' psychological safety, and a positive classroom climate within a single communication model. This debate indicates that the field is rich in empirical findings but has not yet been fully consolidated conceptually (Di Lisio et al., 2025; R. Sun, 2022; Y. Sun & Shi, 2022).

When critically mapped, at least 23 articles constitute the debate within this body of literature. The first group emphasizes the importance of teacher–student relationship quality and teacher support for engagement, motivation, loyalty, and learning approaches. The second group highlights that interpersonal communication, including immediacy, rapport, credibility, confirmation, care, and support, influences students' academic experiences, although its effects vary depending on context, measurement instruments, and psychological mechanisms. The third group positions empathy and emotional support as important relational factors while continuing to debate whether empathy operates as a social-emotional competence, a communication behavior, or a mechanism for developing psychological safety. The fourth group positions classroom climate and psychological safety as learning conditions that enable participation, openness, willingness to ask questions, and academic collaboration, but these constructs have not yet been integrated into a model of teachers' empathetic interpersonal communication in higher education (Aldrup et al., 2022; Atuahene et al., 2024; Bartra-Rivero et al., 2025; Bas, 2025; Clausen et al., 2025; Deep et al., 2025; Derakhshan, 2021; Di Lisio et al., 2025; Estrela et al., 2024; Guo et al., 2025; Hardie et al., 2022; Li, 2024; W. Liu, 2021; X. Liu, 2024; Ma & Wei, 2022; Mattanah et al., 2024; Prananto et al., 2025; Robinson & Held, 2025; Snijders et al., 2020; R. Sun, 2022; Y. Sun & Shi, 2022; Q. Wang et al., 2023; Y. Wang et al., 2024; Yuan, 2024).

## **2.2. Research Gaps**

Previous studies have examined teacher support, teacher–student rapport, teacher immediacy, empathetic communication, classroom climate, and psychological safety, but these constructs largely remain separate. Although relationships among these variables have been examined in several mediation models, there has been limited synthesis that specifically integrates teacher empathy as a form of interpersonal communication, students' psychological safety as a relational mechanism, and a positive classroom climate as an outcome of academic communication. This gap is important because without conceptual integration, teachers' interpersonal communication risks being understood as a collection of fragmented behaviors rather than as a systematic communication model for higher education (Aldrup et al., 2022; Derakhshan, 2021; Di Lisio et al., 2025; Prananto et al., 2025).

The second gap is a relational mechanism gap. Many studies have demonstrated that teacher–student relationships, emotional support, and classroom climate are associated with engagement, motivation, academic performance, and well-being. However, the mechanism explaining how teacher empathy is transformed into students' sense of safety and subsequently shapes an open and participatory classroom climate remains insufficiently explained. Several studies have indeed employed mediators such as self-efficacy, resilience, perceived social support, and academic pressure, but psychological safety has rarely been positioned as the primary conceptual bridge within a teacher–student interpersonal communication model (Clausen et al., 2025; Guo et al., 2025; X. Liu, 2024; Y. Wang et al., 2024).

The third gap is a higher education context gap. Much of the existing research on teacher empathy, teacher–student relationships, and classroom climate originates from school settings, EFL contexts, clinical education, or specific project teams. The context of non-clinical higher education, particularly regular classrooms involving lecturers and students in everyday academic interactions, has received comparatively limited attention as the central context for model formulation. Consequently, the concept of teacher empathy in higher education is often borrowed from school or professional-healthcare contexts, even though students' characteristics, learner autonomy, academic culture, and lecturer–student power relations possess distinct characteristics (Bartra-Rivero et al., 2025; Hardie et al., 2022; Mattanah et al., 2024; Snijders et al., 2020).

The fourth gap is a methodological gap in model synthesis. Many recent studies employ quantitative surveys, structural equation modeling (SEM), path analysis, or correlational approaches to examine relationships among variables. However, relatively few studies employ a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to formulate

a conceptual model. When the literature demonstrates fragmented findings, diverse terminology, and inconsistent mechanisms, a qualitative SLR using thematic synthesis becomes particularly relevant for organizing categories, conceptual relationships, and a more comprehensive communication model. This gap highlights the need for research that not only statistically examines relationships but also synthesizes scientific evidence into a formulation of an empathetic interpersonal communication model for higher education (Ma & Wei, 2022; Prananto et al., 2025; Robinson & Held, 2025; Q. Wang et al., 2023).

### **2.3. Scientific Rationale for the Feasibility of the Study**

Based on these debates and research gaps, research on the formulation of an empathetic interpersonal communication model for lecturers is highly relevant because it addresses a theoretical gap at the intersection of educational communication, educational psychology, and classroom climate studies in higher education. Scientifically, this study does not merely replicate findings that teacher–student relationships are important; rather, it seeks to explain how teacher empathy, as an interpersonal communication practice, can foster students’ psychological safety and subsequently generate a positive classroom climate. Thus, the study offers a conceptual contribution by integrating concepts that have previously been dispersed across the literature into a more comprehensive model of higher education communication (Aldrup et al., 2022; Derakhshan, 2021; Di Lisio et al., 2025; Prananto et al., 2025).

The feasibility of this study is also methodologically supported because a qualitative SLR enables the researcher to systematically examine scientific debates rather than merely selecting theories that support predetermined assumptions. By systematically reviewing recent Scopus-indexed articles, identifying themes, comparing consistent and inconsistent findings, and developing a model based on literature synthesis, the study can provide a stronger contribution than a conventional narrative review. The resulting model has the potential to serve as a foundation for subsequent empirical research, the development of an instrument for measuring lecturers’ empathetic interpersonal communication, and the design of lecturer training programs aimed at creating classrooms that are safer, more dialogical, supportive, and inclusive (Clausen et al., 2025; Guo et al., 2025; Robinson & Held, 2025; Yuan, 2024).

Therefore, this study is justified by its theoretical, methodological, and practical significance. Theoretically, it integrates teacher empathy, students’ psychological safety, and a positive classroom climate into an interpersonal communication model. Methodologically, it responds to the dominance of fragmented quantitative studies by offering a systematic qualitative synthesis. Practically, the formulated model can assist higher education institutions in developing teacher–student communication practices that are not only informative but also empathetic, psychologically safe, and supportive of students’ academic participation. Accordingly, this study has a strong scientific foundation for development as an internationally reputable article based on a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) (Atuahene et al., 2024; Bartra-Rivero et al., 2025; Bas, 2025; Estrela et al., 2024).

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative approach using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to formulate an empathetic interpersonal communication model for lecturers in fostering a positive classroom climate in higher education. The SLR design was selected because the study does not aim to statistically examine relationships among variables. Instead, it seeks to systematically identify, evaluate, compare, and synthesize findings from previous studies. The review focuses on scholarly literature addressing lecturers’ interpersonal communication, teacher empathy, lecturer–student relationships, students’ psychological safety, and classroom or positive learning climate. Accordingly, scientific literature serves as the primary source of data for identifying conceptual patterns, theoretical dimensions, and relationships among concepts that can provide the foundation for formulating a higher education communication model. The review process follows the principles of PRISMA 2020, while data are analyzed using thematic synthesis to ensure that the findings go beyond a mere description of the literature and contribute to the development of a conceptual and theoretically grounded model (Page et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019).

The data sources consist of scientific journal articles indexed in Scopus and published between 2020 and March 2026. Scopus serves as the primary database, while supplementary searches may be conducted through Web of Science, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, SAGE Journals, Taylor & Francis Online, Emerald Insight, MDPI, Frontiers, and Wiley Online Library, provided that the identified articles meet the criteria for reputable scholarly journal publications. The literature search strategy uses combinations of English-language keywords, including lecturer empathy, teacher empathy, empathetic communication, interpersonal communication, lecturer–student interaction, faculty–student rapport, psychological safety, safe learning environment, classroom climate, learning climate, positive classroom climate, and higher education. Articles are included if they address at least one of the study’s primary constructs, are situated within an educational context—particularly higher education—contain complete bibliographic metadata, are available in full-text form, and have a traceable DOI. Conversely, articles are excluded if they are not indexed in Scopus, were published outside the specified period, are irrelevant to the research focus, or are categorized as editorials, book reviews, conference proceedings, undergraduate theses, master’s theses, doctoral dissertations, popular reports, or publications without a DOI and adequate scholarly metadata.

The article selection process consists of four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. During the identification stage, relevant articles are retrieved from scientific databases using the predetermined keywords. In the screening stage, articles are filtered based on their titles, abstracts, publication years, document types, indexing status, and initial relevance to the research focus. Articles that pass the screening stage are examined more comprehensively during the eligibility stage to determine their substantive relevance to lecturers’ empathetic interpersonal communication, students’ psychological safety, and a positive classroom climate. Articles that satisfy all inclusion criteria are incorporated into the final corpus and analyzed using thematic synthesis through the stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. At the final stage, the identified themes are synthesized into a conceptual model consisting of three principal components: lecturers’ empathetic interpersonal communication as the input component, students’ psychological safety as the process component, and a positive classroom climate as the output component. The rigor and validity of the review are ensured through transparent search procedures, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, DOI verification, maintenance of an audit trail, consistency in thematic coding, and presentation of the article selection process through a PRISMA flow diagram.

## **4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1. Results**

The literature selection process based on the PRISMA 2020 flow resulted in 39 final articles that were analyzed thematically. At the identification stage, an initial search across Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, SAGE Journals, Taylor & Francis Online, Emerald Insight, MDPI, Frontiers, and Wiley Online Library yielded 312 articles. All articles were retrieved using a combination of keywords related to lecturer empathy, teacher empathy, empathetic communication, interpersonal communication, faculty–student rapport, psychological safety, classroom climate, learning climate, and higher education. Following the identification process, 68 duplicate articles were removed, leaving 244 articles for the screening stage. During screening, the articles were assessed based on their titles, abstracts, publication years, document types, journal indexing status, DOI availability, and relevance to the research focus. Of the 244 screened articles, 142 were excluded because they did not align with the focus on lecturers’ empathetic interpersonal communication, students’ psychological safety, or a positive classroom climate. Consequently, 102 articles proceeded to the eligibility stage for full-text assessment. The article selection procedure followed the principles of transparent reporting for systematic reviews as outlined in PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021).

At the eligibility stage, the 102 full-text articles were assessed for substantive alignment with the research focus. The assessment considered the higher education context, relevance of the constructs, document type, DOI availability, and article traceability. Of these, 63 articles were excluded, consisting of 24 articles that were not situated in higher education contexts, 21 articles that did not address the primary constructs of the study, 11 articles that lacked a DOI or traceable full text, and 7 articles that were conference proceedings, editorials,

commentaries, or other non-journal publications. Following the eligibility assessment, 39 articles were included as the final corpus for thematic synthesis. The final articles comprised empirical studies, conceptual papers, systematic reviews, and methodological articles relevant to interpersonal communication, teacher empathy, lecturer–student relationships, students’ psychological safety, and classroom or positive classroom climate within higher education contexts. The use of qualitative synthesis in educational research enables findings from the literature to be systematically organized into themes, categories, and conceptual constructs (Maeda et al., 2022).

Table 1. PRISMA 2020-Based Literature Selection Process

| PRISMA Stage                    | Description of Selection Results                                                                                                                                                    | Number of Articles |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Identification                  | Articles identified through Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, SAGE Journals, Taylor & Francis Online, Emerald Insight, MDPI, Frontiers, and Wiley Online Library | 312                |
| Duplicate Removal               | Duplicate articles retrieved from multiple databases were removed prior to screening                                                                                                | 68                 |
| Records After Duplicate Removal | Articles remaining after duplicate removal                                                                                                                                          | 244                |
| Screening                       | Articles screened based on titles, abstracts, publication year, document type, journal indexing status, DOI availability, and keyword relevance                                     | 244                |
| Records Excluded                | Articles excluded after title and abstract screening                                                                                                                                | 142                |
| Eligibility                     | Full-text articles assessed for substantive relevance to the research focus                                                                                                         | 102                |
| Full-Text Articles Excluded     | Full-text articles excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria                                                                                                        | 63                 |
| Included                        | Final articles included in the thematic synthesis                                                                                                                                   | 39                 |

Table 2. Reasons for Article Exclusion at the Eligibility Stage

| Reason for Exclusion                                                                | Number of Articles |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Not situated within a higher education context                                      | 24                 |
| Did not address the main constructs of the study                                    | 21                 |
| No DOI or traceable full text available                                             | 11                 |
| Conference proceedings, editorials, commentaries, or other non-journal publications | 7                  |
| <b>Total Articles Excluded</b>                                                      | <b>63</b>          |

The final corpus consisted of 39 articles published between 2020 and March 2026. In terms of publication year, the reviewed articles were distributed across 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025, and early 2026. Articles published in 2020 primarily examined the quality of lecturer–student relationships, student engagement, and student loyalty in higher education. In 2021, greater attention was given to positive teacher interpersonal communication, teacher immediacy, and instructional communication behaviors. Publications in 2022 expanded the focus to teacher empathy, teacher support, classroom climate, and qualitative synthesis in education. Articles published in 2023 highlighted classroom climate, academic motivation, and self-efficacy. Meanwhile, studies published in 2024 and 2025 increasingly addressed faculty–student rapport, psychological safety, online learning satisfaction, emotional support, and student engagement in higher education (Aldrup et al., 2022; Derakhshan, 2021; W. Liu, 2021; Ma & Wei, 2022; Mattanah et al., 2024; Snijders et al., 2020; Q. Wang et al., 2023).

In terms of research approach, the reviewed articles comprised quantitative studies, qualitative studies, systematic reviews, scoping reviews, and conceptual papers. Quantitative studies were predominantly used to examine relationships among lecturer support, rapport, lecturer–student relationships, student engagement, academic motivation, self-efficacy, and academic performance. Qualitative studies were primarily employed to explore students’ experiences of psychological safety, academic interactions, and team-based learning.

Systematic reviews and scoping reviews were used to synthesize developments in research on teacher empathy, teacher–student relationships, and teacher support for student engagement. Conceptual papers were used to explain positive teacher interpersonal communication behaviors within instructional contexts (Aldrup et al., 2022; Clausen et al., 2025; Derakhshan, 2021; Di Lisio et al., 2025; Prananto et al., 2025; Robinson & Held, 2025).

Based on their research focus, the final articles were categorized into five main groups. The first group addressed teachers’ interpersonal communication, including teacher immediacy, teacher credibility, teacher confirmation, teacher care, teacher support, and faculty–student rapport. The second group focused on teacher empathy and empathetic communication in higher education. The third group examined students’ psychological safety in learning environments, academic teams, and online settings. The fourth group investigated classroom or classroom climate as a social, emotional, and academic condition associated with student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement. The fifth group focused on lecturer–student relationships, student engagement, and learning experiences within higher education contexts (Atuahene et al., 2024; Bartra-Rivero et al., 2025; Bas, 2025; Deep et al., 2025; Estrela et al., 2024; Guo et al., 2025; Li, 2024; Y. Sun & Shi, 2022; Yuan, 2024).

Table 3. Characteristics of the Articles Included in the Systematic Literature Review

| Characteristics  | Category                                      | Number of Articles | Sample References                                                                             |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Publication Year | 2020–2021                                     | 7                  | Snijders et al. (2020); Derakhshan (2021); Liu (2021)                                         |
| Publication Year | 2022–2023                                     | 11                 | Aldrup et al. (2022); Ma & Wei (2022); Wang et al. (2023)                                     |
| Publication Year | 2024–March 2026                               | 21                 | Mattanah et al. (2024); Atuahene et al. (2024); Clausen et al. (2025); Di Lisio et al. (2025) |
| Research Method  | Quantitative                                  | 22                 | Ma & Wei (2022); Mattanah et al. (2024); Wang et al. (2023); Yuan (2024)                      |
| Research Method  | Qualitative                                   | 5                  | Clausen et al. (2025); Robinson & Held (2025)                                                 |
| Research Method  | Systematic/Scoping Review                     | 7                  | Aldrup et al. (2022); Di Lisio et al. (2025); Prananto et al. (2025)                          |
| Research Method  | Conceptual/Methodological                     | 5                  | Derakhshan (2021); Maeda et al. (2022)                                                        |
| Research Focus   | Teachers’ Interpersonal Communication         | 10                 | Derakhshan (2021); Liu (2021); Sun (2022); Yuan (2024)                                        |
| Research Focus   | Empathy and Empathetic Communication          | 6                  | Aldrup et al. (2022); Bartra-Rivero et al. (2025); Guo et al. (2025)                          |
| Research Focus   | Students’ Psychological Safety                | 6                  | Atuahene et al. (2024); Clausen et al. (2025); Robinson & Held (2025)                         |
| Research Focus   | Classroom/Classroom Climate                   | 8                  | Bas (2025); Li (2024); Ma & Wei (2022); Wang et al. (2023)                                    |
| Research Focus   | Lecturer–Student Relationships and Engagement | 9                  | Mattanah et al. (2024); Prananto et al. (2025); Snijders et al. (2020); Wang et al. (2024)    |

The thematic synthesis of the 39 articles resulted in four main themes. The first theme is lecturers’ empathetic interpersonal communication. This theme encompasses studies examining teacher communication as a relational process involving empathy, care, communication clarity, support, interpersonal closeness, supportive feedback, and the ability to establish academic rapport. The literature within this theme positions teachers’

interpersonal communication behaviors as an integral part of the learning process associated with students' motivation, engagement, affective experiences, and academic relationships. Articles within this theme frequently employ terms such as teacher immediacy, teacher support, teacher care, teacher–student rapport, faculty–student rapport, and positive teacher interpersonal communication (Derakhshan, 2021; W. Liu, 2021; Mattanah et al., 2024; Y. Sun & Shi, 2022; Yuan, 2024).

The second theme is teacher empathy and emotional responsiveness in learning. This theme comprises studies examining empathy as the teacher's ability to understand students' perspectives, attend to their academic needs, respond to learning difficulties, and provide emotional support. Articles within this theme use terms such as teacher empathy, empathic concern, perspective taking, empathetic communication, and teacher emotional support. The literature positions empathy as a social-emotional component associated with the quality of teacher–student interactions, teaching performance, learning engagement, academic self-efficacy, and academic resilience (Aldrup et al., 2022; Bartra-Rivero et al., 2025; Guo et al., 2025).

The third theme is students' psychological safety. This theme encompasses studies addressing students' sense of safety when asking questions, expressing opinions, acknowledging mistakes, sharing ideas, and participating in learning activities without fear of embarrassment or negative judgment. The literature within this theme employs terms such as psychological safety, safe learning environment, inclusive learning, online learning satisfaction, and student team climate. The articles included in this theme predominantly originate from higher education, online learning, team-based learning, and problem-based learning contexts. Key findings within this theme concern trust, inclusivity, organizational support, collaboration, team creativity, and students' academic well-being (Atuahene et al., 2024; Clausen et al., 2025; Robinson & Held, 2025).

The fourth theme is a positive classroom climate. This theme comprises studies examining classroom or learning climate as a social, emotional, and academic condition associated with engagement, motivation, social interaction, learning comfort, and academic achievement. The literature employs terms such as classroom climate, positive classroom climate, learning climate, classroom environment, peer-social interaction, and classroom engagement. Studies within this theme conceptualize classroom climate as an interactional space involving teacher support, social relationships, student participation, and learning motivation. Research on classroom climate in higher education has also linked it to rapport, engagement, academic performance, self-efficacy, and academic motivation (Bas, 2025; Li, 2024; Ma & Wei, 2022; Q. Wang et al., 2023).

## **4.2. Discussions**

### **Empathetic Interpersonal Communication as the Foundation of Academic Relationships**

Lecturers' empathetic interpersonal communication can be understood as the foundation of academic relationships because the lecture process involves not only knowledge transfer but also communicative relationships that enable students to feel understood, valued, and accepted as active subjects in the learning process. In higher education, lecturer empathy should not be understood merely as a personal or emotional attitude but as a communication competence reflected in the ability to understand students' perspectives, identify their academic needs, respond to learning difficulties, and convey messages in a supportive manner. Empathy in lecturer communication is important because students need not only explanations of course content but also academic relationships that provide space for questions, uncertainty, mistakes, and the expression of ideas. The literature on teacher empathy indicates that empathy is associated with the quality of teacher–student interactions, while positive interpersonal communication in instructional contexts is associated with support, clarity, interpersonal closeness, care, and the strengthening of learning relationships (Aldrup et al., 2022; Derakhshan, 2021).

From the authors' analysis, lecturer empathy needs to be positioned as a communication practice, rather than merely as a moral characteristic or individual personality trait. In other words, empathy acquires academic significance when it is manifested through communicative actions that can be perceived by students, such as active listening, providing non-judgmental responses, understanding students' learning barriers, and providing constructive feedback. The dimension of perspective-taking enables lecturers to understand learning difficulties

from students' points of view, while empathic concern reflects lecturers' concern for students' academic and emotional conditions. Active listening strengthens the quality of dialogue because students feel that their voices are genuinely heard, while emotional responsiveness demonstrates lecturers' ability to respond appropriately to students' psychological conditions. In addition, non-judgmental communication and supportive feedback are important elements because they prevent academic communication from developing into a relationship that is oppressive, humiliating, or discourages student participation (Bartra-Rivero et al., 2025; Guo et al., 2025).

Empathetic interpersonal communication also functions to reduce the psychological distance between lecturers and students. In classroom relationships, psychological distance may emerge from the lecturer's position as an academic authority, differences in experience, disparities in knowledge, and classroom cultures that position students as passive recipients. When lecturers communicate empathetically, relationships that are initially hierarchical can become more dialogical, open, and supportive. Lecturers who demonstrate care, warmth, openness, and a willingness to listen can develop academic rapport that makes students more comfortable asking questions, expressing opinions, and engaging in discussions. Thus, empathy functions as a relational bridge connecting lecturers' academic authority with students' need for recognition, support, and safety during the learning process (Mattanah et al., 2024; Snijders et al., 2020; Y. Sun & Shi, 2022).

The authors' analysis indicates that the primary strength of empathetic interpersonal communication lies in its capacity to establish academic trust. Academic trust develops when students perceive lecturers as competent, fair, caring, and unlikely to use their authority to demean students. Under such conditions, students are more likely to develop the confidence to participate because they believe that their questions, mistakes, and opinions will be responded to appropriately. This trust does not develop instantaneously but through consistent patterns of communication, including message clarity, willingness to provide assistance, respect for students' opinions, and feedback that does not undermine their confidence. Therefore, lecturer empathy can be understood as a relational prerequisite for creating academic interactions that are more open, communicatively equitable, and conducive to the development of a positive classroom climate (W. Liu, 2021; Y. Sun & Shi, 2022; Yuan, 2024).

Based on this synthesis, empathetic interpersonal communication can be formulated as the core of humanistic academic relationships in higher education. Lecturer empathy not only improves how lecturers convey messages but also shapes the quality of relationships that enable students to feel safe, valued, and motivated to participate in the learning process. Within the framework of this research model, empathetic interpersonal communication is positioned as the initial component that activates the subsequent relational process, namely the development of students' psychological safety. Thus, empathy is not merely an additional attribute of lecturer communication but a fundamental foundation determining whether classroom interactions develop into a dialogical, supportive, participatory, and positive academic environment (Aldrup et al., 2022; Derakhshan, 2021; Mattanah et al., 2024).

### **Psychological Safety as a Relational Mechanism**

Psychological safety represents a relational mechanism that explains how lecturers' empathetic interpersonal communication can be transformed into a safe learning experience for students. In higher education, students encounter not only academic content but also power relations, assessment systems, performance expectations, and classroom dynamics that may influence their willingness to ask questions, engage in discussions, express opinions, or acknowledge a lack of understanding. Therefore, psychological safety should not be understood merely as an internal psychological condition but as an outcome of the quality of academic interactions continuously established through empathetic, supportive, and non-judgmental lecturer communication. When lecturers demonstrate a willingness to listen, provide proportionate responses, and refrain from humiliating students for academic mistakes, students are more likely to perceive the classroom as a psychologically safe environment (Clausen et al., 2025; Robinson & Held, 2025).

According to the authors' analysis, psychological safety occupies a critical position because it serves as a bridge between lecturer empathy and a positive classroom climate. Lecturer empathy does not automatically create a positive classroom climate if it is not translated into a sense of safety experienced by students. In other words, empathetic communication produces relational effects when students perceive the message that they are allowed not to immediately understand the material, ask questions, disagree with others, and make mistakes as

part of the learning process. At this point, psychological safety functions as a transformative mechanism that converts lecturers' communication from a mere expression of care into a classroom condition that enables academic participation. This is consistent with findings indicating that a sense of safety in learning environments is associated with trust, collaboration, openness, and students' willingness to participate in the learning process (Atuahene et al., 2024; Hardie et al., 2022).

Psychological safety is also closely related to how lecturers exercise their academic authority in the classroom. Lecturers occupy formal positions as evaluators, graders, discussion facilitators, and managers of classroom dynamics. Consequently, how lecturers respond to students' questions, mistakes, or opinions influences students' perceptions of safety in academic interactions. When lecturers respond in a demeaning, sarcastic, judgmental, or humiliating manner, students tend to restrict their participation and remain silent in order to avoid social risks. Conversely, when lecturers create space for dialogue, value even basic questions, treat mistakes as learning opportunities, and provide constructive feedback, students are more likely to develop the confidence to participate actively. In this context, psychological safety serves as an indicator that the lecturer–student relationship has shifted from a hierarchical instructional relationship toward a more dialogical and supportive academic relationship (Robinson & Held, 2025; R. Sun, 2022).

The authors' analysis indicates that psychological safety has a dual function within the lecturers' empathetic interpersonal communication model. First, psychological safety functions as a psychological condition that enables students to participate without fear of negative evaluation. Second, it functions as a social condition that strengthens the classroom climate because students' sense of safety is not experienced individually alone but is also constructed collectively through classroom interaction patterns. When many students feel safe to speak, ask questions, and express ideas, the classroom develops into a more open academic communication space. Conversely, when psychological safety is absent, the classroom may become passive, formalistic, and lacking in dialogue, even when the lecturer delivers the course material effectively. Thus, psychological safety constitutes the process element that determines whether empathetic lecturer communication can generate an active, inclusive, and participatory classroom climate (Clausen et al., 2025; Li, 2024).

Psychological safety in higher education is also important because students are at a stage of academic development that requires independent thinking, confidence in argumentation, and the ability to take intellectual risks. A healthy classroom should not merely produce students who understand course content but also students who are willing to challenge ideas, ask critical questions, and acknowledge limitations in their understanding. All of these processes require a sense of safety that cannot be established solely through classroom rules but must be developed through consistent interpersonal communication. Empathetic lecturers can help students reduce academic anxiety because students perceive mistakes not as signs of personal failure but as part of the learning process. From this perspective, psychological safety becomes a prerequisite for reflective, dialogical, and meaningful learning (Guo et al., 2025; Y. Wang et al., 2024).

Based on the above discussion, psychological safety can be positioned as the primary relational mechanism within the lecturers' empathetic interpersonal communication model. Lecturer empathy provides the initial foundation of care, understanding, and support, while psychological safety constitutes the process through which students translate the experience of being understood into academic confidence. This academic confidence subsequently creates the conditions for a positive classroom climate characterized by open dialogue, active participation, respect for opinions, and inclusive learning relationships. Accordingly, this study positions psychological safety not as an additional variable but as the core relational process explaining how lecturers' empathetic interpersonal communication operates in shaping the quality of the classroom climate in higher education (Atuahene et al., 2024; Clausen et al., 2025; Robinson & Held, 2025).

### **Positive Classroom Climate as an Outcome of Academic Communication**

A positive classroom climate can be understood as the outcome of repeated academic communication between lecturers and students rather than merely as a consequence of classroom management, instructional rules, or formal learning design. In higher education, classroom climate develops through the ways lecturers create opportunities for dialogue, respond to questions, provide feedback, respect opinions, manage differences in

perspectives, and establish a classroom atmosphere in which students are accepted as active participants in the academic process. Therefore, a positive classroom climate is not only associated with classroom order but also with the quality of social relationships, psychological comfort, student participation, and learning experiences during the instructional process. Recent literature indicates that classroom climate is associated with engagement, motivation, academic performance, self-efficacy, and students' social interactions in learning (Bas, 2025; Ma & Wei, 2022; Q. Wang et al., 2023).

According to the authors' analysis, a positive classroom climate needs to be positioned as a social-communicative construct because the classroom atmosphere does not emerge automatically from the presence of lecturers, curriculum, or learning technologies. Rather, classroom climate is formed through communication patterns continuously produced in academic interactions, including verbal and nonverbal communication as well as lecturers' emotional responses to students. When lecturer communication is open, supportive, non-judgmental, and conducive to participation, the classroom is more likely to develop into a dialogical and inclusive learning environment. Conversely, when lecturer communication is rigid, one-directional, demeaning, or dismissive of questions, the classroom may develop into a passive environment characterized by psychological distance and low participation. Thus, a positive classroom climate reflects the quality of academic communication consistently established within lecturer–student relationships (Derakhshan, 2021; Li, 2024; Y. Sun & Shi, 2022).

A positive classroom climate as an outcome of empathetic interpersonal communication is characterized by several key indicators, namely academic openness, active student participation, learning comfort, supportive relationships, inclusiveness, respect for opinions, and academic dialogue. Academic openness emerges when students have opportunities to ask questions and express ideas without fear of humiliation. Active participation develops when students feel that their contributions are valued in the learning process. Learning comfort develops when the classroom is not merely a space for evaluation but also a space for intellectual exploration. Inclusiveness emerges when differences in students' abilities, experiences, and perspectives are accepted as part of academic dynamics. In this context, lecturers' empathetic communication strengthens the classroom climate by creating interactional conditions that are safer, more humane, and more supportive (Aldrup et al., 2022; Bartra-Rivero et al., 2025; Guo et al., 2025).

The authors' analysis indicates that a positive classroom climate represents a subsequent outcome of students' psychological safety. Students who feel psychologically safe are more likely to ask questions, participate in discussions, acknowledge learning difficulties, and take academic risks by expressing ideas or arguments. When these behaviors occur collectively, the classroom is no longer dominated by one-way communication but develops into a dialogical space that facilitates the exchange of ideas between lecturers and students. At this stage, psychological safety functions not only as an individual student experience but also as the foundation of a more open classroom culture. Therefore, a positive classroom climate can be understood as a social-academic condition that emerges when lecturers' empathetic communication successfully establishes a sense of safety and encourages students to participate actively in the learning process (Atuahene et al., 2024; Clausen et al., 2025; Robinson & Held, 2025).

A positive classroom climate also has strategic significance in higher education because students are expected to think critically, formulate arguments, collaborate, and develop academic independence. These capacities are difficult to cultivate in classrooms that emphasize only compliance, silence, and passive acceptance of course material. A positive classroom instead provides opportunities for students to test their understanding, ask questions, receive corrections, and construct knowledge through open academic interaction. Within this framework, lecturers' empathetic interpersonal communication helps shift the classroom from a space for knowledge transmission into a space for developing participatory academic experiences. Thus, a positive classroom climate not only supports learning comfort but also strengthens the quality of students' engagement in the academic process (Deep et al., 2025; Mattanah et al., 2024; Yuan, 2024).

Based on the above discussion, a positive classroom climate is positioned in this research model as the output of academic communication developed through lecturer empathy and students' psychological safety. Empathetic interpersonal communication constitutes the initial foundation that provides care, openness, and

support; psychological safety represents the process that enables students to feel safe to participate; while a positive classroom climate represents the outcome in the form of a dialogical, inclusive, supportive, and participatory classroom atmosphere. Thus, this model emphasizes that a positive classroom climate is not merely a learning-environment condition but a relational product of academic communication consistently enacted between lecturers and students. This position strengthens the argument that the quality of the classroom climate in higher education cannot be separated from the quality of lecturers' interpersonal communication as key actors in shaping the social, emotional, and academic atmosphere of the classroom (Bas, 2025; Li, 2024; Ma & Wei, 2022; Q. Wang et al., 2023).

### **Formulation of the Empathetic Lecturer Interpersonal Communication Model**

The Empathetic Lecturer Interpersonal Communication Model formulated in this study is based on three main components: input, process, and output. The input component is lecturers' empathetic interpersonal communication, the process component is students' psychological safety, and the output component is a positive classroom climate. This model positions lecturer–student communication as a relational process that functions not only to convey course content but also to develop safety, trust, participation, and the quality of the academic atmosphere in the classroom. Within this framework, lecturer empathy serves as the starting point because empathy enables lecturers to understand students' perspectives, respond to academic needs, listen to learning difficulties, and provide supportive feedback throughout the instructional process. The literature on teacher empathy and positive interpersonal communication indicates that teacher empathy, support, interpersonal closeness, clarity, and care are associated with the quality of academic interactions and students' learning experiences (Aldrup et al., 2022; Bartra-Rivero et al., 2025; Derakhshan, 2021).

According to the authors' analysis, the model demonstrates that a positive classroom climate does not automatically emerge from the presence of lecturers, curriculum, instructional methods, or classroom rules. Rather, it develops through repeated communication processes, particularly when lecturers are able to establish empathetic and non-judgmental academic relationships. Lecturers' empathetic interpersonal communication encompasses perspective-taking, empathic concern, active listening, emotional responsiveness, non-judgmental communication, and supportive feedback. These six dimensions constitute the foundational input of the model because each represents a concrete manifestation of lecturer empathy in academic interactions. Perspective-taking enables lecturers to understand students' perspectives; empathic concern demonstrates concern for students' difficulties; active listening provides space for students' voices; emotional responsiveness enables lecturers to respond appropriately to students' emotional conditions; non-judgmental communication prevents students from feeling humiliated; and supportive feedback helps students improve their understanding without undermining their self-confidence (Guo et al., 2025; Mattanah et al., 2024; Y. Sun & Shi, 2022).

The process component of this model is students' psychological safety. Psychological safety is positioned as a relational mechanism because it explains how lecturer empathy is transformed into students' willingness and confidence to engage in the academic process. Students who experience lecturer communication as empathetic, supportive, and non-judgmental are more likely to feel safe asking questions, expressing opinions, acknowledging gaps in their knowledge, and communicating learning difficulties. From this perspective, psychological safety is not merely an individual psychological condition but also a social process shaped by the quality of lecturers' responses to students. When lecturers exercise their academic authority in a dialogical and supportive manner, students receive a signal that the classroom is a safe space in which they can think, experiment, make mistakes, and learn. Literature on psychological safety in higher education indicates that students' sense of safety is associated with trust, inclusiveness, collaboration, creativity, academic well-being, and learning quality (Atuahene et al., 2024; Clausen et al., 2025; Robinson & Held, 2025).

The output component of the model is a positive classroom climate. A positive classroom climate is conceptualized as a social, emotional, and academic atmosphere characterized by open interaction, dialogical learning, active participation, supportive relationships, inclusiveness, learning comfort, and respect for students' opinions. According to the authors' analysis, a positive classroom climate is the outcome of an academic communication process that occurs consistently. When lecturers' empathetic interpersonal communication creates students' psychological safety, the classroom is more likely to develop into a more dynamic, open, and

participatory academic environment. Students are no longer merely recipients of course content but become academic participants who are willing to ask questions, engage in discussions, challenge ideas, and receive feedback. Thus, a positive classroom climate represents the relational output of lecturer–student interactions grounded in empathy and psychological safety (Bas, 2025; X. Liu, 2024; Ma & Wei, 2022; Q. Wang et al., 2023).

This model may be referred to as the Empathetic Lecturer Interpersonal Communication Model. Its structure demonstrates a sequential relationship between lecturers' empathetic interpersonal communication as the input, students' psychological safety as the process, and a positive classroom climate as the output. According to the authors' analysis, the strength of this model lies in its ability to integrate concepts that have often been examined separately, namely lecturer empathy, students' psychological safety, and classroom climate. The model also emphasizes that the quality of the classroom climate cannot be developed solely through instructional strategies but must be supported by interpersonal communication that is humanistic, dialogical, supportive, and oriented toward students' sense of safety. Therefore, the model can serve as a conceptual framework for understanding, evaluating, and developing lecturer–student communication practices in higher education (Aldrup et al., 2022; Di Lisio et al., 2025; Prananto et al., 2025).

Conceptually, the formulation of this model generates the proposition that a positive classroom climate is formed when lecturers' empathetic interpersonal communication generates students' psychological safety as the primary relational mechanism. This proposition positions empathy not as an additional attribute of lecturers' teaching styles but as the core of academic communication that determines the quality of students' learning experiences. Within this framework, an empathetic lecturer does not merely communicate course content clearly but also creates a communication environment in which students feel safe, valued, and encouraged to participate. Accordingly, this model contributes theoretically to the field of higher education communication by expanding the understanding of lecturer communication from a primarily instructional process into a relational process that shapes the academic climate of the classroom (Derakhshan, 2021; Mattanah et al., 2024; Yuan, 2024).

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that lecturers' empathetic interpersonal communication constitutes a fundamental foundation for building a positive classroom climate in higher education. Based on the literature synthesis, lecturer empathy should not be understood merely as a personal characteristic or moral attitude, but as an academic communication practice manifested through the ability to understand students' perspectives, engage in active listening, respond to learning difficulties, provide supportive feedback, and establish non-judgmental interactions. These findings address the research objective by demonstrating that empathetic interpersonal communication functions as an initial component in developing humanistic, dialogic, and participatory academic relationships.

The main finding of this study indicates that students' psychological safety serves as a relational mechanism linking lecturers' empathetic interpersonal communication to a positive classroom climate. Lecturer empathy does not automatically produce a positive classroom climate unless it is translated into a sense of safety experienced by students. When students feel safe to ask questions, express opinions, acknowledge their lack of knowledge, and make academic mistakes without fear of being humiliated, the classroom develops into a more open, reflective, and inclusive learning environment. Thus, psychological safety represents a key element explaining how lecturers' empathic communication shapes the quality of students' learning experiences.

This study also confirms that a positive classroom climate is not merely the outcome of classroom management, instructional design, or academic regulations, but rather a relational product of academic communication that takes place consistently between lecturers and students. A positive classroom climate develops through open interaction, respect for students' opinions, active participation, learning comfort, supportive relationships, and dialogic spaces that enable students to participate as academic subjects. These findings demonstrate that the quality of the classroom climate in higher education depends substantially on lecturers' ability to establish interpersonal communication that is both empathic and psychologically safe.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in the formulation of the Empathic Lecturer Interpersonal Communication Model, which consists of three main components: lecturers' empathic interpersonal communication as the input, students' psychological safety as the process, and a positive classroom climate as the output. This model enriches the literature on higher education communication by integrating three concepts that have largely been examined separately: lecturer empathy, student psychological safety, and classroom climate. As a contribution based on literature synthesis, the model provides a conceptual foundation for future research to empirically test these relationships in specific higher education contexts.

Therefore, this study provides new insight that developing a positive classroom climate cannot be achieved solely through improvements in teaching methods or the use of educational technology; it also requires strengthening the quality of lecturers' interpersonal communication. The findings reinforce the view that higher education institutions should regard lecturer empathy as a strategic academic communication competency for creating classrooms that are safe, inclusive, dialogic, and conducive to student participation. The resulting model can serve as a conceptual framework for lecturer development and training, evaluation of academic interaction quality, and further research on communication in higher education.

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