

Inteligencia emocional de rasgo en profesores de lengua inglesa: Impacto en las estrategias de enseñanza y las relaciones con estudiantes

Trait emotional intelligence of English language teachers: Impacts on teaching strategies and students' relationships

Mariza G. Méndez López^a, Tania Paola Millán Librado^b

Abstract:

The present mixed methods study expands on the topic of Emotional Intelligence (EI) among English language teachers in Mexico, focusing on their relationship with students and the teaching strategies they use. The EI trait questionnaire was administered in its short form to 201 teachers and then followed up with semi-structured interviews. The quantitative analysis revealed that only small segments belong to the high and low EI trait groups. While qualitative analysis revealed that teachers with low and high scores share some of the intermediate characteristics such as caring for students, the importance of maintaining a good relationship with them, and knowing when to enforce discipline, the approaches demonstrated by these two cohorts differ due to years of experience and academic level.

Keywords:

Emotional intelligence. English teachers. Language teaching

Resumen:

La presente investigación mixta amplía el tema de la Inteligencia Emocional (IE) en profesores de inglés en México, enfocándose en su relación con los estudiantes y las estrategias de enseñanza que utilizan. El cuestionario "breve de IE rasgo" se administró a 201 docentes, para después realizar un seguimiento mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas. El análisis cuantitativo reveló que sólo pequeños segmentos pertenecen a los grupos de IE de alto y bajo rasgo. Mientras que el análisis cualitativo mostró que los docentes en estos grupos comparten algunas de las características intermedias (el cuidado de los estudiantes, la importancia de mantener una buena relación con ellos y saber cuándo imponer la disciplina). Sin embargo, los enfoques evidenciados por estas dos cohortes son diferentes, debido a los años de experiencia y nivel académico.

Palabras Clave:

Inteligencia emocional. Maestros de inglés. Enseñanza de lenguas

Introduction

Emotion and cognition are two dimensions of human life that cannot be separated. In the field of education, the role played by cognition has been widely studied, while emotion is a subject that only began to be incorporated into the fields of foreign language learning and teaching some years ago (Richards, 2020). One of the concepts related to emotion is emotional intelligence (EI).

Research has reported that those with a high EI are better at dealing with stress, facing difficulties, establishing enduring relationships, and receiving social support from people around them (Zeidner et al., 2012). According to Salovey and Mayer (1990: 189), one's EI level indicates one's "ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions".

^a Autor de Correspondencia, Universidad Veracruzana | Centro de Idiomas | Veracruz-Veracruz | México, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5570-0440>, E-mail: marimendez@uv.mx

^b Universidad Veracruzana | Centro de Idiomas | Coatzacoalcos-Minatitlán-Veracruz | México, <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4885-674X>, E-mail: paolamillanlib@gmail.com

Emotional intelligence research is a complex area. Since Salovey and Mayer's foundational work, other scholars have debated whether EI constitutes a set of cognitive abilities, a cluster of personality characteristics, or something in between (Landy, 2005). This diversity made it difficult to study EI consistently, which led to researchers to eventually divide EI models into two broad categories: ability EI and trait EI. Trait EI is rooted in personality self-perceptions and is described by Petrides (2010: 137) as a "constellation of emotional self-perceptions located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies". He identifies four dimensions of trait EI: emotionality, self-control, sociability, and wellbeing. According to Petrides (2009), individuals who obtain high scores in the emotionality dimension tend to enjoy better communication with others because they can recognize their own and others' emotions, resulting in higher quality relationships. Individuals with a high self-control score are better able to manage their impulses and, in general, handle stress more effectively. The sociability dimension refers to the capacity that individuals have to exert a positive influence on groups of people. Finally, the wellbeing dimension characterizes individuals who view their lives in a positive light — people who feel content with their accomplishments and confident about their future.

Trait EI has been studied in different areas, particularly in the social, interpersonal, educational, vocational, business, clinical, health, and organizational research disciplines. In the educational field, most research has been centered on pupils and not on teachers (Petrides et al., 2016). Some studies in the field of organizational research have linked trait EI to job satisfaction and have negatively linked it to stress and burnout (Schutte & Loi, 2014). As a school can be considered an organization, EI scores in other organizational contexts may reflect similar results to those seen in the field of education.

Emotional intelligence is paramount in educational contexts, with various studies reporting benefits not only for students but also for teachers and other stakeholders (Mercer & Gkonou, 2017). Among the benefits of EI reported for educational contexts are effective teaching practices, improved student learning levels, higher quality relationships, and higher academic performance (Brackett & Katulak, 2013). Other studies have reported improved classroom management (Valente et al., 2019), higher student enjoyment, increased engagement and stronger motivation (Dewaele et al., 2022). These aspects are of great importance for developing positive classroom environments that are conducive for effective teaching and learning.

Teachers with higher EI scores tend to express more positive than negative emotions related to their profession (Deng et al., 2023). The constant and frequent experiencing of positive emotions promotes wellbeing (Kong et al., 2019), which is paramount for not only

positive teaching practice but also the teacher's integral development (Mercer & Gkonou, 2017). Thus, encouraging EI in teachers is crucial (Sutton & Wheatly, 2003). As reported by a vast number of studies, teachers are under constant pressure, stress, and exhaustion, because of the academic and administrative demands imposed on them (Naderi Anari, 2012; Méndez López, 2017; Valente et al., 2019). The foregoing factors can contribute to dissatisfaction, burnout, and health problems, which sometimes result in a teacher leaving the profession. It seems that emotionally competent teachers are more resilient and able to cope with these negative aspects. It is, therefore, of great importance that teachers are trained to develop their EI, as this can help them effectively manage different aspects of their teaching practice, thus boosting their wellbeing (Valente et al., 2019).

It is important to distinguish EI as a specific construct from the broader notion of teacher wellbeing. While wellbeing refers to a teacher's general sense of satisfaction and positive functioning, EI — and Trait EI in particular — refers to their emotional self-perceptions across distinct dimensions such as emotionality, self-control, sociability, and wellbeing. Trait EI is therefore a component of wellbeing, but it also encompasses social and interpersonal dimensions not captured by wellbeing measures alone (Petrides et al., 2016). This distinction justifies treating research on EI and EFL teachers as a specific and underexplored area, even where broader wellbeing literature exists.

Research specifically focused on the EI of English language teachers, and particularly on the Trait EI model, is scarce. The available studies, however, suggest that the effects of higher EI are mostly positive. Rastegar and Memarpour (2009), in a sample of 72 Iranian EFL teachers, found a positive correlation between EI and self-efficacy, meaning that a higher EI level is conducive to teachers viewing themselves as more capable. As Artino (2012) suggests, self-efficacy is a crucial aspect for developing and maintaining motivation. Ghanizadeh and Moafian (2010) similarly demonstrated that EI appears to play a fundamental role in teachers' happiness and interpersonal relationships, concluding that "EI is critical in the process of teaching" (Ghanizadeh & Moafian 2010: 431). Taken together, these studies suggest that EI not only benefits individual teachers but also shapes the quality of their classroom interactions.

Building on this, a quantitative study by Dewaele (2018) with 513 experienced EFL/ESL teachers found a positive relationship between global trait EI and teacher enjoyment, creative tendencies, tolerance for classroom unpredictability, and love for the teaching environment. Meanwhile, Mercer and Gkonou (2017), in a mixed methods study with 890 EFL teachers from various

geographical areas, found that female and more experienced teachers tend to score higher in Trait EI, and that culture plays a role in how emotional information is processed. Crucially, years of both teaching and life experience appear to contribute to building EI in teachers — a finding particularly relevant to the Mexican context, where novice teachers are often left without adequate emotional preparation (Mugford et al., 2015; Arizmendi Tejada et al., 2016; Méndez-López, 2015).

In Mexico, research on EFL teachers' emotions converges on a concerning scenario: novice and student teachers struggle with emotional regulation and lack the training to address it. Mugford et al. (2015) found that undergraduate EFL programs typically focus on pedagogical knowledge while neglecting the emotional dimension. Student teachers in their study struggled with negative emotions partly because they believed such feelings were abnormal. Arizmendi Tejada et al. (2016) observed that student teachers employed preventative or responsive emotional regulation strategies — such as choosing comfortable proficiency levels or using self-talk — to manage first teaching experiences. Méndez-López (2015) reported that students' negative emotions stemmed significantly from their teachers' lack of interpersonal skills and non-verbal communication, while Méndez-López (2017) documented that experienced university teachers in PRODEP programs described their classrooms as an "oasis" (Méndez-López, 2017: 38) from external pressures, yet also experienced frustration from insufficient time for lesson planning. Taken as a whole, this body of literature points to a systemic need for emotional competency training across all career stages in Mexican EFL teaching.

White (2018) emphasizes that a good language teacher should be equipped to develop quality relationships with students, facilitate group cohesion, and take more risks in the classroom. As the literature shows, these characteristics are typically exhibited by emotionally intelligent teachers. Focusing on EI therefore has the potential to "provide us with a more holistic understanding of the emotional aspect of language learning and teaching" (White, 2018: 30).

This study aims to contribute to knowledge on the influence of EI on the teaching practice of Mexican EFL teachers working in public and private schools across different states. To this end, the following research question was formulated: What are the differences between English teachers with high Trait EI and low Trait EI in terms of their relationships with students and their teaching strategies?

As studies focusing on both of these concepts within a single study are absent from the Mexican EFL literature, the current study is among the first to address the role played by Trait EI in the classroom practice of language

teachers in this context. Understanding these differences is of practical importance: teachers with low Trait EI may benefit from targeted support and training to help them develop the emotional tools that, as this and previous research suggests, are associated with more effective and fulfilling teaching practice.

Methodology

EFL teachers in Mexico were contacted through a private Facebook group, eliciting 201 responses to the two questionnaires, namely a sociodemographic questionnaire and the TEIQue-SF. Of the 201 participants, 159 identified as women and 42 as men, while their ages ranged from 19 to 67 years. In terms of their English proficiency level according to the European Framework, 90 participants had a C1 level, 61 a B2 level, 41 a C2 level, and three an A1 level, while five did not know their level and one failed to answer the question. Most of the participants had an undergraduate degree (132), 47 a master's degree, 16 had a post-graduate specialization, and only four had a doctorate, while two failed to answer the question. The participants gave their consent to use their data solely for this research.

Instrument

For the quantitative phase, the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire – Short Form (TEIQue-SF), developed by Petrides (2009), was used. The TEIQue-SF contains 30 items spanning two elements from each of the 15 facets in the full version, rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Completely Disagree; 7 = Completely Agree). It calculates both a global Trait EI score and scores on four dimensions: well-being, self-control, emotionality, and sociability. The TEIQue-SF has been validated in prior research as providing a high degree of precision for global Trait EI scores (Cooper and Petrides, 2010), which is the primary measure used in this study.

The questionnaire was administered via Google Forms. Before the form was distributed, it was piloted with a small group to identify any errors. Participants first completed a short biodata section capturing sociodemographic variables (age, gender, teaching experience, proficiency level, state, and academic level), followed by the TEIQue-SF. The questionnaire was posted in the Facebook group and remained open for responses over a period of several weeks; the researcher also sent the link directly to the five additional participants. Most participants who completed the questionnaire did so within the first few weeks of the call being posted.

For the qualitative phase, a semi-structured interview guide was used (see Appendix A). The interview questions were designed to explore teachers' teaching style and approach, their relationship with students, their workplace

environment, and their emotional coping strategies in the classroom. Although the guide provided a framework, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the researcher and participants to pursue relevant ideas in greater depth. Follow-up questions were used throughout the interviews to probe responses further — for instance, asking participants to elaborate on specific classroom situations or to explain how they handle boundary-setting with students. These extended probes generated much of the rich data presented in the findings.

Selection of Qualitative Participants

At the close of the TEIQue-SF questionnaire, all 201 participants were asked whether they would be willing to

take part in a follow-up interview; 57.1% (n = 115) indicated interest. Once the quantitative analysis was complete and the three Trait EI groups had been established, the researcher contacted volunteers from the high and low groups only, as the study's focus was on differences at either end of the spectrum. Despite the large pool of volunteers, most stopped responding to follow-up messages. Ultimately, six teachers agreed and remained in communication: three from the high Trait EI group (T1, T2, T3) and three from the low Trait EI group (T4, T5, T6). No further selection criteria were applied beyond group membership and willingness to participate. Pseudonyms were assigned to all interviewees to ensure anonymity. Table 1 summarizes their sociodemographic profiles.

Table 1. Qualitative phase participants' sociodemographic attributes

	Group	Age	Experience	Proficiency	Academic level	Teaching level	Sector
<i>T1</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>9 yrs</i>	<i>C1</i>	<i>Master's</i>	<i>University</i>	<i>Public</i>
<i>T2</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>25 yrs</i>	<i>C2</i>	<i>Master's</i>	<i>University</i>	<i>Public</i>
<i>T3</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>2.5 yrs</i>	<i>B2</i>	<i>Bachelor's</i>	<i>Multiple</i>	<i>Private</i>
<i>T4</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>10 yrs</i>	<i>C1</i>	<i>Master's</i>	<i>High school</i>	<i>Public</i>
<i>T5</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>6 yrs</i>	<i>C1</i>	<i>Specialization</i>	<i>Multiple</i>	<i>Private</i>
<i>T6</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>4 yrs</i>	<i>B2</i>	<i>Bachelor's</i>	<i>Multiple</i>	<i>Private</i>

Source: own elaboration.

Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods were applied in the respective phases of the study. For the quantitative phase, participants' TEIQue-SF responses were first automatically compiled by Google Forms. The researchers then transferred these responses manually to an Excel sheet provided by K. V. Petrides on his academic webpage (www.psychometriclab.com). This tool is designed specifically for scoring the TEIQue-SF: it calculates global Trait EI scores and scores on the four dimensions, as well as the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient. Crucially, the tool also allows researchers to identify participants as high, middle, or low Trait EI, following descriptive statistics.

To identify the three Trait EI groups, the procedure established by Dewaele et al. (2018) was replicated. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were first obtained for the full sample's global Trait EI scores. Participants whose scores were more than one standard deviation (SD) above the mean were classified as the high Trait EI group; those more than one SD below the mean formed the low Trait EI group; and those within one SD around the mean constituted the middle group. This categorization was the basis for selecting potential interviewees for the qualitative phase. Additional statistical analyses — including Mann-Whitney U tests (for gender and sector variables) and one-way ANOVA (for variables with three or more groups) — were conducted to examine statistically significant differences in global Trait EI scores across sociodemographic variables.

For the qualitative phase, thematic analysis was conducted following Clarke and Braun (2017). The process began with the researchers familiarizing themselves with the data by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. In the second step, information in the transcripts was coded. The codes were then grouped into broader themes, which were organized to enable comparison between the high and low Trait EI groups. The themes that emerged were: relationship with students (encompassing empathy, boundaries and discipline, and vulnerability), teaching approach (encompassing adaptability and methodology), and workplace environment. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data was carried out in the discussion phase, allowing the researchers to examine how the sociodemographic patterns identified quantitatively — particularly the role of age and experience — were reflected in the qualitative themes.

Results

Quantitative Findings

The TEIQue-SF was administered to 201 EFL teachers, yielding a global Trait EI mean score of 5.2 (SD = 0.80). The highest score obtained in the sample was 6.7 and the lowest was 3.1. To understand the distribution of Trait EI across dimensions, Table 2 summarizes the descriptive statistics.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for global Trait EI and dimensions

Dimension	Mean	SD	Cronbach
Well-being	5.81	0.88	0.68
Self-control	4.88	1.05	0.66
Emotionality	5.35	0.94	0.65
Sociability	4.95	1.05	0.67
Global Trait E	5.29	0.80	0.89

Source: own elaboration

The Cronbach's alpha for the global Trait EI score was 0.89, which is considered good (George and Mallery, 2003). The reliability coefficients for the four dimensions were lower (0.65–0.68), which is expected for a short-form instrument and consistent with prior research (Siegling et al., 2014). Participants scored highest in the well-being dimension and lowest in self-control, suggesting that, as a group, the 201 EFL Mexican teachers tend to feel positive about their lives but face challenges regulating stress and impulses.

Following the procedure established by Dewaele et al. (2018), three Trait EI groups were generated based on the mean and standard deviation of global scores.

Participants scoring more than 1 SD above the mean formed the high group, those more than 1 SD below formed the low group, and those within 1 SD of the mean formed the middle group. The distribution is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of participants across Trait EI groups

Trait EI Group	Number of Participants	Percentage
High	26	12.93%
Middle	145	72.15%
Low	30	14.92%

Source: own elaboration

These results are consistent with those reported by Dewaele et al. (2018), where the majority of EFL teachers also fell into the middle Trait EI group. The present study focused on the high and low groups for the qualitative phase, as the research question centered on identifying differences in teachers' classroom practices at either end of the Trait EI spectrum.

In terms of sociodemographic variables, Mann-Whitney U tests and one-way ANOVA analyses were conducted to examine whether statistically significant differences existed in global Trait EI scores. Statistically significant differences were found for teaching sector ($U = 2798.000$, $p = 0.005$), with private sector teachers scoring higher than public sector teachers. Significant differences were also found for age ($F = 5.245$, $p < .001$), years of experience ($F = 3.728$, $p = .001$), proficiency level ($F = 3.843$, $p = .005$), and academic level ($F = 3.397$, $p = .019$). No statistically significant differences were found for gender ($U = 2890.000$, $p = 0.588$) or teaching level ($F = 1.051$, $p = .394$).

A notable pattern emerging from the sociodemographic profiles of the high and low Trait EI groups was the role of age and experience. In the high Trait EI group, the majority of teachers were aged 40 or over and had more than 15 years of teaching experience. By contrast, in the low Trait EI group, most participants were in their twenties and thirties, with fewer than ten years of experience. This pattern suggests that Trait EI may develop progressively through years of professional and life experience, a finding consistent with Mercer and Gkonou (2017).

Qualitative Findings

This section presents the themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the six semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded with

participant consent, and lasted between 20 and 50 minutes. Teachers from the high Trait EI group (T1, T2, T3) spoke an average of 38 minutes, while teachers from the low Trait EI group (T4, T5, T6) spoke an average of 19 minutes. Participants' fillers were removed from transcripts for clarity. Three overarching themes emerged: (1) relationship with students, (2) teaching approach, and (3) workplace environment. Within these themes, the groups showed both differences and common ground.

Theme 1: Relationship with Students

Boundaries and discipline.

A key difference between the two groups concerned their approach to boundaries — that is, the professional limits that teachers maintain in their interactions with students, including how they manage discipline, deliver honest feedback, and navigate personal versus professional roles. Teachers in the high Trait EI group demonstrated a clear and consistent ability to establish and maintain these boundaries. When asked about their approach to student relationships (Q10: "Would you say you have a good relationship with your students?").

T1 described her approach to honest assessment:

I consider myself objective. If I see that you're not ready for the next level, I tell them: you're going to fail.

For T3, setting boundaries extended to structuring lessons while preserving student autonomy:

When it comes to the exercises, I give them a lot of freedom in the sense that they can talk about anything they want as long as they respect the structure or the vocabulary.

T2 illustrated a boundary-setting situation involving sexual harassment in his classroom, emphasizing the teacher's responsibility to guide students through consequences without abandoning them:

The person who acted wrongly... maybe he didn't mean it, but you must tell them that they made a mistake, but you have to be there throughout all the process — you tell them I'm here, I'm not going to let you off the hook, but I will walk you through the process.

These three examples illustrate different facets of boundary-setting: academic honesty, classroom structure, and interpersonal accountability. What unites them is the teachers' confidence and clarity in their professional role.

Teachers in the low Trait EI group, by contrast, described struggles in finding an appropriate middle ground between authority and closeness.

T4, for instance, expressed a dual aspiration:

I try to have a cordial relationship. I mean, I do want them to see I'm the authority but at the same time, as a person they can trust, one who you can sit and talk to and one who will help you and guide you if you have a problem.

T4 also described his students as his "second family," a framing that, while warm, risks blurring the professional-personal boundary. T6, a teacher with only four years of experience, articulated this struggle explicitly:

Sometimes they think I'm their friend...and they think that I'm going to do them favors and when they see that it's not the case, it's like I betray them. So, I haven't reached that middle ground, but I do like them to feel like they can trust me.

Empathy

All three teachers in the high Trait EI group frequently and explicitly referenced empathy as a core part of their teaching — a theme that did not emerge with the same consistency in the low Trait EI group. T1 described approaching disengaged students with curiosity rather than frustration:

If I see a student that does not show any interest, instead of focusing on the fact he is not participating or whether he might hate me, I approach him and try to show my human side [...] it is not that I see myself as a psychologist, but I let them know that they can count on me.

T3 added that he never invalidates students' emotions, and narrated an incident where a student became visibly distressed during an online class: he gently acknowledged her feelings and gave her space rather than proceeding with the lesson. For T2, the absence of empathy is what he considers the defining flaw in poor teachers, drawing on 25 years of experience to make the point.

Vulnerability

Teachers in the high Trait EI group implicitly — and at times explicitly — demonstrated comfort with showing vulnerability to their students. T3 shared that he tells his students when he is going through difficult times; T1 recalled arriving to class in distress and choosing to share that with her students, believing it helps them connect with their teacher's humanity; and T2 disclosed his clinical diagnosis of depression openly, describing it simply as part of who he is. These behaviors reflect a capacity to model emotional authenticity — a quality that Bullough (2019) argues, when managed appropriately, can be highly valuable for human development. This pattern was absent in the low Trait EI group.

Theme 2: Teaching Approach

When discussing their teaching approach (Q6: "How would you describe your teaching style?"), both groups expressed awareness of student diversity and the importance of adapting. However, the depth and confidence with which they described this adaptability differed markedly.

Teachers in the high Trait EI group described adaptability as a core and natural feature of their practice. T2 rejected any fixed methodology, emphasizing instead the need to learn each group anew:

I can have a certain level with a group and that group will have a unique identity. They'll interact with me in a certain way and next semester, I'll have the same subject, the same level but now I have 30, 40, 50 different people so I have to get to know them and adapt myself to their learning style.

T3 echoed this, framing versatility as a professional obligation:

There are times when teachers marry a certain way to explain a topic and then you think that is the perfect way. But sometimes there will be students who will not understand so you must change your perspective; you have to be versatile.

Teachers in the low Trait EI group showed awareness of the same principle but described implementation as more difficult. T4 described switching between behaviorism and constructivism depending on student behavior, though also expressed frustration with curricula that he felt neglected essential skills. T5's primary concern was maintaining full control of her classroom, planning meticulously to eliminate downtime:

I try to plan my lessons very well so there's no dead time, so the kids are always working and won't have to get bored and say I'm done. I carry extra sets for the kids who finish before others.

T6 acknowledged being constrained by the textbook and routine, identifying this as a source of professional dissatisfaction:

Sometimes I see that my lessons are very boring, and this is because I'm just following the book. So, I try to involve other ideas [...] but even so, I still fall inside this imposed structure that they want us to follow. We remain the same for comfort reasons.

A notable commonality across both groups was the use of humor: all three teachers in the high Trait EI group mentioned humor as a regular strategy, while only T5 in the low Trait EI group mentioned it. According to Stroud (2013), humor in the classroom has documented benefits for retention, participation, enjoyment, and anxiety reduction.

Theme 3: Workplace Environment

Both groups described mixed workplace environments, acknowledging positive and negative aspects of their institutional contexts. However, this theme did not emerge as a defining differentiator between groups. The main contrast was that one teacher in the low Trait EI group (T6) described a workplace she found genuinely distressing —characterized by unpaid labor expectations and a lack of peer support— which may have contributed to her overall scores. Teachers in the high Trait EI group, even when acknowledging difficulties, described strategies for maintaining equilibrium, such as T2's practice of treating all colleagues with equal respect or T3's habit of meeting institutional expectations proactively to preserve his relationships with authorities.

Conclusions

This study examined Trait EI through both a quantitative and qualitative lens in a sample of 201 Mexican EFL teachers, with particular focus on the differences between teachers with the highest and lowest Trait EI scores in their relationships with students and their teaching strategies. The quantitative results revealed that 12.93% ($n = 26$) of the sample obtained the highest Trait EI scores and 14.92% ($n = 30$) the lowest, with the majority (72.15%, $n = 145$) falling in the middle group — a distribution consistent with Dewaele et al. (2018).

The quantitative analysis revealed that the sociodemographic variables most associated with higher Trait EI scores were teaching sector, age, years of experience, proficiency level, and academic level. The finding that private sector teachers scored higher may relate to the comparatively better material conditions and smaller group sizes in private schools, as noted in the Mexican context (Méndez-Carmona 2019; Millán and Basurto, 2019). The absence of gender differences contrasts with Mercer and Gkonou's (2017) finding that gender was among the strongest predictors of Trait EI globally. The strong association between age and experience and higher Trait EI scores suggests that emotional intelligence, in this model, develops progressively over the course of a teaching career — a finding with direct practical implications.

The qualitative findings extend and illuminate these patterns. High Trait EI teachers described their student relationships with notable confidence, emotional clarity, and professional maturity. They set clear, consistent boundaries — maintaining authority while demonstrating care — and were comfortable showing vulnerability. These behaviors align with Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam's (2013) argument that appropriate teacher boundaries serve as a model for students, helping them

"learn how to function with other adults outside the home" (p. 72), and with Bullough's (2019) assertion that well-managed vulnerability supports human development. Low Trait EI teachers, by contrast, were often still navigating the authority-approachability balance, with some describing an inability to find the "middle ground" they recognized as desirable. Empathy—identified repeatedly by the high Trait EI group and supported in the literature (Kliueva and Tsagari, 2018)—was largely absent as an explicit theme in the low Trait EI group's responses.

Regarding teaching strategies, both groups expressed student-centeredness as a value. However, high Trait EI teachers described adaptability as an internalized and flexible practice, while low Trait EI teachers more often described rigidity, a desire for control, or frustration with curricular constraints. These differences align with Kliueva and Tsagari's (2018) finding that teachers with higher Trait EI are more likely to employ emotionally engaging strategies, including humor—a pattern reflected in the present data.

Taken together, these quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that low Trait EI is closely associated with early career stage, and that the emotional challenges described by novice teachers may be partly a function of limited experience rather than fixed personality deficits. This has important implications for teacher training. As Ghanizadeh and Moafian (2010) and Richards (2020) argue, novice EFL teachers need structured support not only in cognitive and pedagogical dimensions but also in the emotional aspects of teaching. The present study provides evidence that well-designed workshops, mentoring programs pairing novice teachers with experienced colleagues, and EI-focused components in undergraduate and postgraduate curricula could meaningfully strengthen the professional development of EFL teachers in Mexico.

Future research in this area would benefit from deeper exploration of the life and career trajectories of high Trait EI teachers to understand what experiences have contributed to their development. Moreover, additional data collection instruments—such as reflective journals and classroom observations—would strengthen the comparison between groups and provide a richer picture of how Trait EI manifests in real-time teaching practice.

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Appendix A.

Interview guide

- 1.- Are you familiar with the concept of emotional intelligence?
- 2.- Have you taken any workshops, courses or seminars about emotional intelligence?
- 3.- If yes, was this provided by your workplace?
- 4.- How would you describe your workplace environment?
- 5.- Would you say you have a good relationship with your colleagues?
- 6.- In general, do you feel supported by your institution?
- 7.- How would you describe your teaching style?
- 8.- What do you think are the best qualities to have as a teacher?
- 9.- How many students do you teach?
- 10.- Would you say you have a good relationship with your students?
- 11.- When a stressful situation arises in your classroom, how do you deal with it? What are your coping mechanisms?
- 12.- Did the shift to online classes affect your mental health during this pandemic?
- 13.- When you feel stressed out, what do you do to unwind?