

*An ecological perspective on the flow of compassion  
among Iranian learners of English  
as a foreign language*

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Abstract

As a social-interactive positive behavior, the flow of compassion (i.e., self-compassion, compassion for others, and compassion from others), which refers to sensitivity to suffering in self and others with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it, has yet to be investigated in a highly social-interactive context such as foreign language learning classrooms. Thus, the present study adopted an ecological perspective within Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) analytic nested ecosystems model to explore how the flow of compassion is rooted in such a context. Sixteen Iranian English as a foreign language learners took part in the current study, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Employing the framework of the nested ecosystems

model, we identified both influential individual and environmental factors underlying the flow of compassion among the participants. The flow of compassion proved to be influenced differently at different ecosystemic levels by individual and environmental factors. At the individual level, negative and positive emotions, fears, non-judgmental attitudes, intimacy, well-being, improvement, motivation, and action were found as influential factors in emerging the flow of compassion. At the contextual level, the identified influential factors included past experiences outside of the classroom, extracurricular activities, institution policy and criteria, cultural and social values, as well as the use of technology and the internet. Limitations and implications of the present study are also discussed.

*Keywords:* the flow of compassion; self-compassion; compassion for others; compassion from others; English as a foreign language; ecological perspective

## 1. Introduction

Despite being identified as a factor that has an important role in the field of second and foreign language (L2) learning and teaching (Barcelos & Coelho, 2016; Mairitsch et al., 2023; Mercer, 2021), compassion, as a positive behavior (Gilbert, 2015), received little scholarly attention in the field of L2 research. The concept has been described in different ways (Gilbert et al., 2017; Goetz et al., 2010; Strauss et al., 2016). However, there is agreement that compassion can be described as “a sensitivity to suffering in self and others with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it” (Gilbert et al., 2017, p. 1). This definition highlights its two components: *engagement* and *action* (Cunha et al., 2021). The former refers to the attributes that explain the ability and motivation to get involved with suffering, such as, for example, motivation to notice the suffering, sensitivity to become engaged with the suffering, and empathy to become affected by the suffering. The latter refers to the skills and helpful ways of dealing with the suffering to fix it. These include, for instance, paying attention to what is best to help, thinking and reflecting on the helpful solutions, and behaving with the courage to do something helpful concerning the suffering (Gilbert, 2009, 2017).

L2 learning can undoubtedly be defined as a process full of challenges, obstacles, or problems. Compassion, as defined earlier, can act as an effective positive behavior in helping learners focus on their problems (i.e., engagement) and do something to alleviate them (i.e., action). Having said that, compassion is dynamic by nature meaning that it can be either interpersonally (self to self) or intrapersonally (self to/from others) experienced as a flow. In fact, the construct has been considered in the literature as an integrated flow that may include

three directions, that is, self-compassion, compassion for others, and compassion from others (Gilbert, 2014). Since individuals are inclined to be more helpful than harmful, and “the benefits of being a more compassionate person, compassion toward others and/or self, are quite meaningful” (Russell et al., 2020, p. 100684), the flow of compassion should be regarded as an important factor in providing L2 learners with the ability to solve their problems while not giving up on them. Characteristically, the flow of compassion evolves in social-interactional environments (Gilbert, 2014). To the best of our knowledge, in a highly interactive social context, such as the L2 classroom, no studies have focused on the flow of compassion. In fact, there are merely a few empirical investigations that have been limited to the self-compassion element of the flow and mostly focused on language teachers (e.g., Huang, 2022; Rajabi & Ghezelsefloo, 2020; Sheikhan, 2017; Sönmez & Kurtoglu, 2021). The present study aims to fill this gap by exploring the factors impacting how the flow of compassion emerges among English as a foreign language (EFL) learners.

Bearing in mind the social-interactional nature of the flow of compassion, we thus aimed at exploring the construct from an ecological perspective. Since this perspective meets “the dynamic interaction between human beings and the environment” (Peng, 2012, p. 205), it is warranted to illuminate compassion from this standpoint. To cast light on the dynamic nature of the flow of compassion in an EFL classroom, we utilized Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993) nested ecosystems model. This model examines human behavior, compassion in this case, which can be influenced at different ecosystemic levels (Salmon et al., 2020). In other words, it aids the exploration of how possible factors within each level may affect the promotion of the flow of compassion among language learners. According to this model, an educational context includes a set of nested ecosystems at five different levels (Bronfenbrenner 1993, 1994). From the innermost to the outermost setting, these levels encompass the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. To unpack the dynamic nature of the flow of compassion in L2 learning, we utilized the nested ecosystems model to answer the following research question from an emic perspective at each ecosystemic level:

*What are the possible ecosystemic factors underlying the emergence of the EFL learners’ flow of compassion?*

## 2. Literature review

In what follows, we present the concepts that undergird this study, including compassion, the flow of compassion, compassion in L2 research, and the nested ecosystems model.

## 2.1. Compassion

Meaning “to suffer from,” the word *compassion* is originally rooted in “*compati*,” which is a Latin word (Gilbert, 2015). In the literature, various ways of describing compassion can be found and it has been regarded as a topic of heated debate (Gilbert et al., 2017; Goetz et al., 2010; Strauss et al., 2016). For instance, some studies consider compassion as an emotion that leads us to compassionate and caring behaviors (Goetz & Simon-Thomas, 2017), while others view the construct as a motive that allows our emotions to arise (Gilbert, 2014). Goetz et al. (2010) see the construct as an affective state and note that “we define compassion as the feeling that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help” (p. 351). However, considering that motives and emotions are not the same and “without a motive, emotions couldn’t be triggered” (Gilbert, 2019, p. 111), Gilbert et al. (2017) view compassion as a motivational system rooted in caring behavior that would lead us to “a sensitivity to suffering in self and others with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it” (p. 1). Other studies have also supported such a view by showing that compassion is associated with emotions in that it can cause experiencing different emotions (Falconer et al., 2019, Gilbert et al., 2019). Strauss et al. (2016) regard compassion as comprising five elements which include “recognizing suffering, understanding the universality of human suffering, feeling for the person suffering, tolerating uncomfortable feelings, and motivation to act/acting to alleviate suffering” (p. 15). Based on the importance of both engagement and action dimensions of compassion which can be found in all these definitions, Cunha et al. (2021) refer to “a sensitivity to suffering in self and others with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it” (Gilbert et al., 2017, p. 1) as the standardized definition of compassion.

## 2.2. The flow of compassion

What is clear about compassion is that it suggests a social mentality and relationship between individuals who engage with suffering and those who are there to help at any time of difficulty (Berlant, 2014). It is thus profoundly important to note that compassion flows in a three-way direction which includes *self-compassion*, *compassion for others*, and *compassion from others* (Gilbert et al., 2011; Neff, 2003). This means compassion has three directions that can be highly interactive (Hermanto et al., 2016) and while they can influence each other, they also are entirely independent (López et al., 2018). It has also been demonstrated that individuals can be highly self-compassionate, and yet, at the same time, may struggle with directing compassion to others (Gilbert, 2019).

Self-compassion refers to appreciating the desire to be kind, non-judgmental, and mindful of oneself when experiencing a difficult time (Neff, 2003). It explains the attention, support, care, and compassion that one gives themselves when facing failure. When it comes to compassion for others, it is the most dominant focus of compassion (Gilbert et al., 2017). It requires the desire and motivation to be considerate, beneficial, and helpful to the suffering of others (Gilbert et al., 2017). Finally, as regards compassion from others, it involves our experiences of the help, care, support, attention, and compassion we receive from others while we are in trying times (Gilbert et al., 2017). Each of these dimensions of compassion (i.e., engagement and action) can be implemented in each of the three directional flows (Cunha et al., 2021). Regarding the flow of compassion, research has demonstrated that “they are profoundly important for our physical, mental, and social well-being” (Gilbert, 2021, p. 3581). However, many studies have mainly focused either on compassion as a unitary construct or merely on one direction, mostly self-compassion (Strauss et al., 2016). Therefore, there is a lack of research on the three directional flows as a whole, both in the field of psychology (Kirby et al., 2019), and more specifically in the realm of L2 learning and teaching.

### 2.3. Compassion in L2 research

There is no doubt that the process of L2 learning can be regarded as a long-term challenging goal to achieve, and thus L2 learners may undergo some pressure and suffer from possible challenges they may face in the process. Consequently, it can be said that providing support for ourselves and getting help from others when facing any language learning issues or challenges, make the process easier to go through. Simply put, acknowledging the flow of compassion in the process of L2 learning may increase the chances that learners will engage with language-related problems they may encounter and try to alleviate them. Being compassionate in each direction may encourage learners to either ask for any assistance they need or do something for their problems on their own, which would consequently help them achieve language improvement. For example, self-compassion has been shown to be beneficial with respect to academic achievement and mastery goals (Neff & Seppala, 2016), and it thus can help L2 learners perform better. However, only a few studies to date have investigated the role of compassion in the field of L2 research.

Compassion as an emotion has been investigated in studies by Meiners (2013) and Sheikhan (2017). In her cross-cultural study, Meiners (2013) examined expressions of compassion in different situations among three groups of

English and Spanish native speakers as well as Spanish as a second language (ESL) learners (each group consisted of 21 participants), concluding that “learning to express emotion such as compassion is an important part of achieving L2 communicative competence” (p. vii). What should be noted here, however, is that she considered compassion as a synonym for sympathy, although they are different constructs (Gilbert et al., 2019). Sheikhan (2017) explored how 32 EFL learners express their compassion emotions in both their first language (Persian) and L2 (English) in four situations. He collected the participants’ expressions of compassion through an open discourse completion task in the form of a questionnaire. Regarding the L2 expressions, the researcher identified five factors such as “expressing sadness, offering assistance, expressing a wish, expressing condolence, and making religious remarks” (p. 145).

In an attempt to explore self-compassion among EFL teachers, Rajabi and Ghezelsefloo (2020) investigated the relationships between teachers’ self-compassion and their job stress as well as their well-being. The researchers collected data from 120 English language teachers working in different private and public sectors. They found that there was a significant negative relationship between job stress and self-compassion as well as a significant positive relationship between teachers’ self-compassion and their job-related well-being. Examining self-compassion as a moderator between teachers’ job-related stress levels and their well-being, they also concluded that self-compassion “can be contributive in moderating the EFL teachers’ stress level and affective well-being among the Iranian EFL teachers” (p. 103). In another more recent attempt to investigate self-compassion among EFL learners, Sönmez and Kurtoglu (2021) examined the extent to which EFL learners’ self-compassion and perfectionism affect their speaking anxiety. In general, their findings demonstrated that learners with high levels of self-compassion are more likely to have low levels of speaking anxiety, which can be the result of being kind, understanding, and non-judgmental toward oneself when facing failures (Neff, 2003).

When inspecting SLA research on compassion, it can be seen that the construct has been examined either by focusing mainly on compassion as a unitary factor (e.g., Meiners, 2013; Sheikhan, 2017) or merely on its self-compassion element (e.g., Rajabi & Ghezelsefloo, 2020; Sönmez & Kurtoglu, 2021). No research on the flow of compassion has been conducted thus far, which is the gap that the present study attempted to address. Therefore, we utilized the nested ecosystems model to investigate this issue from an ecological perspective. The reason for adopting this model is that compassion can be experienced and influenced differently in different contexts. In other words, it is “intrinsically situated within particular social settings, and shaped by them” (Roze des Ordons et al., 2020, p. 198). Using the nested ecosystems model provided us with an opportunity to identify any factors that may contribute to the emergence of the flow of compassion at different ecosystemic levels.

## 2.4. The nested ecosystems model

In the field of L2 research, the context in which learning takes place has been featured as a key concept since it can be influenced by the surrounding environments (Chong et al., 2022). We employed Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) nested ecosystems model for the reason that it "offers a unique perspective regarding 'contexts' because it adopts a more granular and systematic approach to conceptualizing contexts than the other theories" (Chong et al., 2022, p. 1). This approach was likely to help us deepen our understanding of individual and contextual factors underpinning the emergence of the flow of compassion as a context-dependent behavior that can be impacted by the environments and particular contexts where individuals are situated. It posits the existence of a set of ecosystems within which the constituents of an educational context such as an EFL classroom can be explored. This model is a hierarchy of five subsystems nested inside one another. The first and innermost sub-system is the *microsystem*, which deals with "a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 15). The second component, the *mesosystem*, which is regarded as a system of two or more microsystems, addresses the links between those settings embracing the developing person. The third subsystem, the *exosystem*, pertains to the relationships between two or more contexts in one of which at least the developing person is not included but he or she is still affected by it in his/her immediate environment. The fourth element, the *macrosystem*, is considered the outermost level in the developing person's environment. This sub-system refers to the "characteristic of a given culture, subculture, or other extended social structure, with particular reference to the developmental instigative belief systems, resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options, and patterns of the social interchange that is embedded in such overarching systems" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 25). Lastly, the *chronosystem* involves possible changes in the developing person's environment in terms of the time dimension.

Several studies in the field of applied linguistics have used this model to explore the ecosystemic factors contributing to the emergence of different psychological constructs such as language mindsets, anxiety, and boredom (e.g., Elahi Shirvan et al., 2021; Kruk et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022). Considering the importance of context, it should be noted that this model focuses on context in general terms. However, Chong et al. (2022) attempted to specify the blurry boundaries of the five ecosystems in the case of L2 learning and the environment in which it takes place, unpacking the meaning of these levels and exemplifying them. In this study, we operationalized each of these ecosystemic levels based on their work.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants and setting

This study was conducted at a private language institute in an eastern province (i.e., Golestan) of Iran. Focusing on the deviant case sampling strategy (Dörnyei, 2007), sixteen participants, studying English at this language institute (all men, aged 17 to 24), were purposefully selected (Glaser & Strauss, 1968). Their demographic information is shown in Table 1. Based on their English proficiency, determined with the help of the Oxford Placement Test (OPT), we equally selected participants representing two different levels. This was done with the aim of gaining in-depth understanding of the flow of compassion as a function of proficiency. The participants were informed about the aim of the study and agreed to take part in the investigation. Their identity was ensured with the use of pseudonyms.

Table 1 Demographic information of the participants

Participants	Pseudonym	Age	Proficiency	Duration of interviews
1	Mostafa	18	Pre-intermediate	35:40
2	Mohammad	19	Pre-intermediate	39:50
3	Mehdi	21	Pre-intermediate	29:17
4	Matin	18	Pre-intermediate	42:17
5	Ali	21	Pre-intermediate	36:50
6	Amin	18	Pre-intermediate	28:00
7	Parham	19	Pre-intermediate	37:21
8	Javad	20	Pre-intermediate	29:49
9	Samiar	24	Pre-intermediate	34:30
10	Ali Asghar	24	High-intermediate	40:11
11	Mojtaba	17	High-intermediate	31:39
12	Amir Hossein	22	High-intermediate	34:50
13	Hessam	24	High-intermediate	31:10
14	Majid	20	High-intermediate	39:13
15	Kiarash	22	High-intermediate	29:50
16	Ilia	20	High-intermediate	30:25

#### 3.2. Data collection

We first met the administrator of the language institute to get his consent and to explain the aims and the voluntary basis of participation in this study. The administrator was asked to let the students know that the interviews would be based on anonymity. Oral consent was also obtained before starting the interviews. The participants were informed that they could finish the interview or not respond to any question at any time. Based on Fylan's (2005) suggestions



for conducting semi-structured interviews, we collected the data through sixteen face-to-face sessions, with the participants being interviewed individually. The interviews were conducted at different times over the period of five months. In terms of limiting and avoiding social desirability bias, we used strategies such as establishing rapport with participants in private rooms (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). Based on each of the five ecosystems, operationalized in L2 research (Chong et al., 2022), the interview protocol was established (see Appendix). Considering the fact that the flow of compassion can be aroused when individuals notice a problem and “any act which has the intention of preventing suffering could be an example of a compassionate act” (Gilbert et al., 2019, p. 2260), we started the interviews by asking the participants to mention the most frequent language problems they encounter in the classroom. We then went through the main questions focusing on the flow of compassion as a response to problems mentioned by the students at the five systemic levels. All the participants were interviewed in their first language (Persian). The sixteen interviews, each of which lasted from 29 to 42 minutes, were digitally (i.e., using a cellphone) recorded, transcribed, and then translated.

### 3.3. Data analysis

We used a deductive qualitative content analysis approach. The three authors read the transcriptions repeatedly, as was the first phase of analyzing the data. To facilitate the process of data analysis, we utilized MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software, 2021) software. We deductively developed the categories and coded identified themes based on the two compassion dimensions at each ecosystemic level, that is, top-down categories and themes based on Bronfenbrenner’s (1993) nested ecosystems model and our research focus. Considering the operationalized examples of L2 learning context (Chong et al., 2022) at each of the ecosystemic levels, we primarily focused on the innermost setting (i.e., microsystem) and then moved upwards towards the outermost one by one (i.e., macrosystem) to explore each of the flow directions at each ecosystemic level. We used specific techniques to measure the trustworthiness of the study, and to establish the credibility of our data and the obtained results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, we went through member-checking to validate the results and to check our interpretations and conclusions. Then, the data transcriptions and summarized themes extracted from the data were returned to the participants. Next, to detect any bias, we opted for peer debriefing by discussing the transcriptions and emergent factors with a competent colleague who had no personal interest in this study.

## 4. Findings

Based on Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993) model, we found several individual and environmental factors (see Table 2) to be influential in inducing the participants’ flow of compassion which are elaborated on in the following subsections. Notably, our findings suggested that the participants’ flow of compassion was synergistically influenced by both individual and environmental factors at each of the five ecosystemic levels. This indicates that not only individual characteristics but also contextual and societal structures may determine how people experience the world in a bidirectional way (Mercer, 2021).

Table 2 Factors influencing the participants’ flow of compassion

	Microsystem	Mesosystem	Exosystem	Macrosystem	Chronosystem
Identified factors	Negative emotions				
	Positive emotions				
	Fears				
	Non-judgmental attitude	Past experiences	Institute criteria (i.e., dominant teaching methodology)	Sociocultural values in Iran	Social media the Internet Technology
	Empathy	Extra-curricular activities			
	Intimacy				
	Well-being				
	Improvement				
	Shame				
	Motivation				
	Action				

### 4.1. Microsystem level

It should be noted that the identified factors at the microsystemic level, which contributed to the emergence of the flow of compassion, seemed to be reflective of individual characteristics. As illustrated in Table 2, belonging to all three elements of the flow of compassion, most of the identified influential factors emerged at the microsystem level. Following the interview protocol, we first asked the participants to mention the most frequent problems they face while learning English in the classroom. The participants (both pre-intermediate and high-intermediate groups) mostly referred to learning difficult and challenging new lessons, failing exams, missing classes, and taking (oral and written) exams. The identified factors influencing the emergence of the flow of compassion in each direction are reported below.

#### 4.1.1. Self-compassion

The following influential factors in the emerging of their self-compassion were reported by all participants when confronting the problems mentioned above: a variety of negative and positive emotions, improvement, motivation, and action. All participants reported negative emotions including anxiety, anger, shame, sadness, and disappointment when encountering their language problems in the classroom. However, they all seemed to stay motivated to take actions to overcome the challenges they face, simply trying harder when encountering them. In particular, motivation and action were the two most recurrent factors repeated by the participants regarding their self-compassion at this level. Furthermore, they also shared their positive emotions such as enjoyment, happiness, and pride, when they were successful and witnessed their efforts pay off. Amin, for instance, offered the following comment:

*When I find learning a new lesson hard, although it makes me disappointed at first, I would then do everything I can to learn the lesson, and then when the learning happens, I enjoy it since I see the effort, I put into practice has worked.*

When queried about how he feels when he cannot correctly answer his teacher's questions in the classroom, Mehdi stated: "I might first get anxious and ashamed of myself, but I surely will try my best to work on it. For example, I will study more to get quite ready for the next session." When asked how he feels when his efforts work, he added: "Well, when I try harder to learn more about any lesson and it works, it makes me prouder of myself as I see the positive consequences of my efforts." With respect to failing an exam, Hessam commented:

*Well, it makes me angry when I do badly in my exam, but I don't blame myself. Instead, I would put more time and effort into practice to survive next time. Because this would make me so happy when I find my language skills improved.*

Mohammad offered the following comment in this respect: "I may get angry with myself first because I didn't study and couldn't get ready for the questions. But I will try to compensate for the next session." With regard to missing classes, Navid reported:

*Anxiety is the first feeling that I feel when I miss my English classes. Because I know that I would have lost the opportunity to learn many things in the new lesson if I missed the class. To make this up, I need to study the lesson on my own, though this might be hard, I would practice more to improve my skills.*

Overall, although all participants addressed a variety of negative emotions when facing different possible language learning challenges, no matter what English levels they were at, they seemed to have both motivation and the ability to persist in their efforts to learn, which, in turn, led to language improvement and emergence of positive emotions.

#### 4.1.2. Compassion for others

As described above, all participants seemed to be self-compassionate; they all reported their ability to connect to their suffering and language problems and to take care of them. However, regarding their compassion for others, the responses were far from unanimous. On the one hand, most of the participants (e.g., Mostafa, Mehdi, Mojtaba, Iliia, Samiar, Amir Hossein, Javad, Majid, and Parham) reported being compassionate toward others. Apart from positive emotions (enjoyment and happiness), the identified factors impacting the emergence of their compassion for others included empathy, non-judgmental attitudes, well-being, motivation, and action. For instance, when asked about any classmates who struggle to learn a difficult and challenging new lesson, Iliia commented: "I try not to judge them, and I would rather give any help I can. Because for me it is so enjoyable when I help my classmates with their English." When asked about what he would think about a classmate having language learning problems, Mehdi stated: "I'm not sure, maybe s/he hasn't tried enough that s/he ends up learning the lesson late than their classmates. By the way, I would voluntarily suggest to them that if there is any help I can do, I am ready for it." On the whole, not only did the participants report being empathetic and non-judgmental to their friends but they also appeared to be motivated to help them to solve their language problems. Regardless of being asked or not, they showed their willingness to help other classmates under any circumstances.

On the other hand, however, some of the participants manifested their compassion for others only when some conditions were met (e.g., Hessam, Amin, Mohammad, Matin, Ali, Ali Asghar, and Kiarash). Although they shared their empathy and non-judgmental attitudes toward their classmates experiencing learning difficulties, they refused to take any action unless they were explicitly asked for help. For example, Ali Asghar stated the following: "I feel sad when I see my classmates suffering from their language struggles, but I don't think that I can help them unless they want me to. I mean if they really need it, they would definitely want it." A similar sentiment was expressed by Matin who offered the following comment:

*To be honest, I don't like to offer any help to others because I feel abused if they keep relying on me and don't try themselves, and I am fearful of this. But I would do whatever I can for those who ask me to support them.*

Kiarash and Ali, however, explained that the decision whether or not to help classmates depends on the level of intimacy and closeness. Ali remarked: "Well, it depends. I would try to help only my close friends. I mean, the more they are close to me, the more I would help them solve their language problems."

#### 4.1.3. Compassion from others

As was the case with compassion for others, our data also suggested that the participants varied in terms of compassion from others. Most of them (i.e., Hessem, Mojtaba, Amir Hossein, Ilia, Kiarash, Mohammad, Mehdi, Ali, Majid, and Parham), on the one hand, presumed that if they face any language-learning challenges, they are willing to get help from others, either their teachers or classmates. They believed that getting help from others would help them improve their language skills in the case of problems. For instance, when asked if he sought assistance when facing difficulties, Ilia commented: "Yes, many times. Because it would help you to learn better, if you don't ask for any help, you may not receive any and thus cannot achieve your language goals and improve." Parham, in turn, remarked: "I would definitely ask for others' help and support if I face a language challenge or problem. Why not? This makes my language skills improved."

However, other participants (i.e., Ali Asghar, Amin, Samiar, Javad, Matin, and Mostafa) reported refusing to get help from others and preferred to rely on themselves or the Internet when facing problems. The most often repeated reasons they mentioned included fear of rejection, excessive dependence upon others as well as shame. Javad, for example, commented:

*I cannot always have the opportunity to ask others. Moreover, if I always go for asking others to help me learn the language, this may result in becoming too dependent on others which itself is a barrier to learning.*

Mostafa who shared the fear of rejection also stated: "Actually, I'd prefer not to ask others since I am fearful of being rejected which in turn makes me ashamed of myself. Apart from this, they might not always be available to get help from." Also referring to shame, Ali Asghar explained: "I would like to ask my classmates to help me to get rid of my language problems, but I mostly feel shame and prefer not to say anything."

## 4.2. Mesosystem level

At the mesosystem level, the data generally demonstrated that participants' past experiences and extracurricular activities could correspond to the emergence of the flow of compassion. In particular, the students' extracurricular activities were found to be influential in providing optimal opportunities to foster self-compassion, which resulted in confronting language-related challenges and trying to alleviate them. When asked whether they had experiences outside the classroom that either positively or negatively aided them in successfully facing such challenges, the participants reported a variety of extracurricular activities that they took advantage of. These activities included online groups, free discussion meetings, YouTube educational videos, surfing the Internet, and watching TV series and movies. For instance, Matin remarked: "Language learning process, in my opinion, would be easy if we use the Internet. I myself usually surf the net first, when I get a problem." Ali, in turn, offered the following comment:

*With the help of online groups on Telegram or WhatsApp and free discussion meetings, I have dramatically improved my skills, asking my friends whenever I got a problem. I believe that a one and half-hour English class cannot fulfill our needs, and keeping in touch with friends outside of the class is necessary too.*

The data also provided evidence for the link between participants' past experiences and their compassion for and from others. They were asked to report if they had any pleasant or unpleasant experiences helping their classmates or getting help from them at school. Regarding compassion for others, most of them appeared to be satisfied with what they experienced in terms of giving help to their peers. When queried whether those experiences led them to decide to help their classmates in the future, they all agreed. Ilia, for example, pointed out:

*I always enjoyed helping my classmates to learn. Once when I was in the eighth grade, there were three of my classmates who couldn't improve their language proficiency and seemed to need some help. I decided to help them and I did. I still can vividly remember how they could make it improve their English and got so happy. This experience was so enjoyable and satisfying for me and it truly made me happy.*

However, some of the participants reported their unpleasant memories of helping others. Ali Asghar, for instance, stated:

*I used to help my classmates a lot. But now I prefer to be asked for help. There was a close friend at school who was truly bad at English. I tried to help him a lot and I did several times. But I ended up feeling abused since he asked me to do his homework many times. I felt like I am forced and under pressure.*

Regarding compassion from others, although most of the participants shared their positive experiences of receiving help from peers, some of them also had negative experiences. Since they had experienced a hard time leaning on someone else, they refused to get help from others, which resulted in becoming independent. Mostafa, for instance, reflected: "Most of the time, back to those days at school, I was denied and rejected when I asked my classmates for help. Not directly, but I felt like I am being blown off."

### 4.3. Exosystem level

At the exosystem level, a link between participants' flow of compassion and the teaching method implemented in the institute where they studied English emerged from the data. This interaction-based teaching method was found to be an influential environmental factor contributing to the increasing levels of participants' flow of compassion. Regarding self-compassion, most of the students pointed to the emphasis on creating a learning atmosphere which promoted willingness to communicate and encouraged interactions in English. Matin, for instance, stated:

*For example, I could greatly boost my speaking skill when I had problems. In this institute, since they care a lot about English communication, I have had so many chances to talk which made me improve my skill.*

The students also reported that this dominant interaction-based teaching methodology offered them the opportunity to solve their language problems together as well, thus fostering their sense of compassion for and from others. As they were required to interact and communicate with each other while learning in the classroom, they often collaborated to overcome the challenges they encountered. Kiarash offered the following comment in this respect:

*This interaction-based method dominant in the classroom could help me communicate more with my classmates consequently led us to be closer to each other. I now have many intimate friends in the classroom that can easily get help from.*

Hessam, in turn, provided the following comment in this regard:

*Fortunately, in the institute where I chose to study English, the students themselves must have an active role in the classroom and the teachers mostly try just to pave the way. I think this would help the student, by having a lot of interactions, help one another more in terms of any language-related issues they may have.*

He also added: "This could be a great opportunity for us to help others and at the same time ask for help and support."

#### 4.4. Macrosystem level

At the macrosystem level, sociocultural values in Iran were found to constitute influential environmental factors that may have indirectly impacted the participants' compassion for and from others. Specifically, the participants reported such values as believing in empathy, caring about other people when they are in trouble, and supporting and helping them while struggling with problems. Most of the students agreed that such values may have tacitly affected their behaviors to a large extent. For instance, Ilia reported:

*To me, being sensitive to others who are in trouble somehow lies within our social values. I mean, no matter what age we are, Iranian people more often would like to help the people around them. Growing up in such a society, when I see one of my English classmates seems to have language learning problems, I can't wait to help her/him.*

Nevertheless, all the participants believed that neither cultural nor social values were related to being self-compassionate. Mehdi, for instance, stated: "I think it depends on me whether I can help myself out or not. I'm not sure if I can say that our culture or society plays any role in this regard." Overall, the findings at this level indicated that although being self-compassionate may mainly depend on one's personality, in terms of compassion for and from others, cultural and social values seemed to play a key role.

#### 4.5. Chronosystem level

At the chronosystem level, the data revealed that the participants' flow of compassion underwent changes over time. With increased use of social media, the Internet, and technology in their language learning endeavors, while self-compassion appeared to increase over time, participants' levels of compassion from others decreased. Most of the students believed that with the passage of time they gradually became more independent thanks to new technologies, which allowed them to solve problems on their own rather than relying on assistance from others. Hessem, for example, commented: "I used to ask my classmates or teacher to help me a lot. But now I rarely do. I'd rather use the internet and learn everything on my own. But if I couldn't, I would then ask others."



## 5. Discussion

The current study was conducted to determine how the flow of compassion is embedded among L2 learners. To provide a holistic understanding of how the flow of compassion is contextualized in an Iranian EFL context, we utilized the nested ecosystems model proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993). From an ecological perspective, the flow of compassion appeared to be influenced differently at different ecosystemic levels by individual (e.g., empathy, motivation, emotions) and environmental (e.g., social media and the use of technology) factors. Such results can be accounted for by the nature of the flow of compassion which can be experienced and influenced differently in different contexts (Roze des Ordons et al., 2020). More specifically, although at the microsystem level primarily individual factors, such as positive and negative emotions, seemed to be influential in impacting the participants' flow of compassion, at the meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystem levels the contextual and environmental factors, such as extracurricular activities, impacted its emergence. Supporting a view of the flow of compassion as a complex motivational system that leads individuals to experience different emotions towards themselves and others (Gilbert, 2019; Khoury, 2019), our findings yielded a variety of emotions manifested as a consequence of both noticing and alleviating language problems.

Given that compassion is composed of two dimensions (i.e., engagement and action), the participants who reported both of them in each direction of the flow had more opportunities to solve their problems (Cunha et al., 2021). According to the findings, however, some of the participants struggled with compassion for and from others; they appeared to be experiencing compassionate engagement while lacking compassionate action. That is, although being self-compassionate, they had difficulty directing compassion to others. This finding lends support to previous studies that have shown that the three directions of the flow of compassion not only influence each other but can also be entirely independent (Gilbert, 2019; López et al., 2018). Furthermore, as shown in the findings, the fear of compassion for and/or from others can also be closely related to individuals' shame (Matos et al., 2017a, b). The factors affecting the flow of compassion inside and outside the classroom are discussed below.

### 5.1. Self-compassion

Considering the two dimensions of compassion (i.e., engagement and action), all participants were found to be self-compassionate at all ecosystemic levels as they would not disconnect or run away from the pain that emerged from their

suffering and instead strove to alleviate it (Neff, 2003). While the participants reported negative emotions when noticing language problems, they all expressed their motivation to alleviate them and to take specific actions to this effect (Gilbert, 2009). It was revealed that the factors identified at each ecosystemic level provided participants with care and support when they noticed language problems or challenges, and even failures. At the individual level, influential factors at the microsystemic level included negative and positive emotions (e.g., fear), intimacy, well-being, improvement, motivation, and action. Accordingly, what is important to emphasize is that the participants' sense of self-compassion helped them deal with their negative feelings and try harder to confront their problems. Not only did they ignore or avoid their negative emotions when facing difficulties, but they also reported the desire and motivation to deal with such challenges. At the contextual level, the role of environmental factors including extracurricular activities and the use of new technologies was also found instrumental in that it helped the students in both actively approaching and solving language problems. Our findings showed that self-compassion can be deemed as a psychological strength that can be associated with well-being (Neff & Knox, 2016). It is also worth mentioning that the participants' being self-compassionate resulted not only in helping them overcome their language-learning problems but also in leading them to experience positive achievement emotions pertaining to achievement outcomes (Pekrun, 2006). Therefore, self-compassion might positively influence the attainment of participants' language learning mastery goals and enhance achievement by providing individuals with the ability to solve their problems (Neff & Seppala, 2016).

## 5.2. Compassion for others

Taking into account the two dimensions of compassion, that is, engagement and action, the findings revealed that most of the participants appeared to be compassionate for others, in both engaging with and alleviating others' suffering. However, some participants, although they seemed to be emotionally and empathetically engaged with their classmates' suffering, refrained from taking any action to help them deal with their problems. At the individual level, the students who were found compassionate for others manifested the ability to be empathetic, non-judgmental, motivated to act, helpful and supportive, and, finally, ready to engage in behaviors preventing problems on the part of their peers (Gilbert et al., 2017). They also reported voluntarily suggesting solutions and providing assistance to their classmates, which resulted in positive emotions. This suggests that their perceived value of helping others might instigate positive affect

(Shao et al., 2020). At the contextual level, past experiences of helping others, the dominant interaction-based teaching method, sociocultural values embraced in Iran, and the use of social media as well as new technologies including Internet-based resources were identified to be influential in developing compassion for others. The findings also offer insights into individual and contextual factors that influenced the participants that preferred not to take any supportive actions. Individual factors such as intimacy levels along with contextual factors such as unpleasant past experiences of helping others tended to decrease the levels of compassion for others and at the same time increase the levels of self-compassion.

### 5.3. Compassion from others

When it comes to compassion from others, similar to compassion for others, the participants could be divided into two groups. Those in the first group were characterized by exhibiting both engagement and action dimensions of compassion. They appeared to be motivated to engage with their language problems and also ask for help and support from others while dealing with such challenges. Furthermore, not only did they find receiving help from others beneficial in facing these challenges, but they also considered such assistance a significant factor that would positively influence their language improvement. At the individual level, they mentioned their language improvement when referring to their positive attitude toward compassion from others. Their pleasant past experiences, the interaction-based teaching methodology, the sociocultural values of Iran, and the use of social media were identified as contextual factors that led them to increase their levels of compassion from others. When it comes to the second group, that is, the participants who preferred not to ask for any help from others, the findings also suggested the role of both individual and contextual factors. The former included fear of rejection, overdependence on others and shame, whereas the latter encompassed unpleasant past experiences of getting help from others. Together they contributed to decreased compassion from others and increased self-compassion.

### 5.4. Ecological understanding of the flow of compassion

By looking at the flow of compassion through an ecological lens in a highly social-interactive EFL context, we aimed to recognize the influential factors underpinning its emergence. According to our findings concerning each ecosystemic level, both individual and contextual factors were identified depending on

the way in which the participants' flow of compassion fluctuated. That is to say, both individual characteristics (e.g., negative and positive emotions) and contextual conditions (e.g., institutional criteria) in which L2 learning took place could potentially affect the levels of the flow of compassion. In line with the ecological perspective, our findings thus revealed that there is a bidirectional interaction between participants' flow of compassion and their environment. For instance, as demonstrated at the exosystem level, the teaching method implemented in the institute contributed to the emergence of the participants' flow of compassion in that the more opportunities to interact in English they were provided with, the more likely they were to focus on their problems and try to solve them collaboratively. We believe that since compassion can be taught and trained (Kirby & Gilbert, 2019), L2 practitioners should take responsibility in this respect and take specific actions to enhance it (Mercer, 2021).

## 6. Implications and limitations

The results of the study can be used to offer some pedagogical recommendations. For example, in line with the findings, it can be recommended that promoting the flow of compassion among EFL learners is likely to make the process of L2 learning easier to go through. Some studies have shown various ways of practicing and promoting compassion, such as training programs and workshops. However, we admit that such programs in educational contexts have to be "thoroughly secular, developmentally and culturally appropriate, and predicated on evidence-based practices" (Davidson et al., 2012, p. 150). Therefore, we offer some general guidelines that can be addressed to all classroom teachers. Students should first get acquainted with the concept of compassion and its three directions (to self, to others, from others). To do so, teachers, as powerful role models in the classroom, can share experiences of both giving and receiving help to make students realize the benefits of such actions in the context of L2 learning. Teachers can also create teams and groups to promote these prosocial behaviors by offering volunteer positions for helping other people in the groups. Drawing on these opportunities when challenges arise can help L2 learners successfully confront their problems rather than simply giving up.

Compassion may have a positive influence on the process of L2 learning because it can positively and indirectly impact engagement and consequently enhance academic performance (Estrada et al., 2021). Therefore, an ecological understanding of this construct may also make teachers aware of the need to consider all possible factors that can contribute to the emergence of the compassion flow among learners. Perceiving such individual and contextual factors

as affordances may help teachers support learners in improving their flow of compassion, which can lead to greater progress in mastering English. For example, by creating a friendly cooperative environment where everyone can help others and also get help from them, teachers can enable learners to increase levels of intimacy and overcome fear of rejection. Furthermore, as the results of this study indicated, appreciating communication-based teaching methods can be one of the ways to improve EFL learners' flow of compassion, especially their compassion for and from others. Teachers should thus consider the facilitative role of an interaction-based instruction in enhancing students' flow of compassion. In particular, creating cooperative groups where individuals can experience both engagement and action (i.e., two dimensions of compassion) in solving their or others' language problems plays a key role in cultivating compassionate mindsets.

Some limitations of the present study should also be taken into account. It should first be stressed that the findings of this empirical investigation cannot be generalized in view of the small sample size. For this reason, it is necessary to conduct quantitative studies with large samples. In addition, mixed-methods studies should be undertaken to provide more multifaceted insights into the role of compassion. Another problem is that while some research has indicated that men and women may differ in terms of the levels of self-compassion and compassion for others (Gilbert, 2017), we only had access to men. Therefore, future studies may set out to investigate the flow of compassion among women as well. It might also be beneficial to examine how various individual difference factors mediate the way in which learners engage in the flow of compassion.

## 7. Conclusion

In this study, we aimed at providing a preliminary holistic understanding of the flow of compassion in an L2 context. Employing the analytic nested ecosystems model proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993), we attempted to discover how the dynamic interactive nature of the flow of compassion is embedded in an EFL classroom. The findings revealed some individual and environmental factors influencing the emergence of the flow of compassion rooted at different levels of the nested ecosystems model. Furthermore, the results demonstrated that a high level of compassion flow among the learners corresponds to detecting, approaching, and alleviating the possible challenges and problems they may encounter in the language learning process. Specifically, the more learners appreciate the flow of compassion, the more likely they might be to successfully manage, alleviate or even prevent such difficulties.

We are confident that the findings of the present study may encourage L2 teachers to acknowledge and appreciate various factors that can potentially

contribute to the emergence of the flow of compassion among learners, which may facilitate instructional practices and learning processes. Since this investigation is the first attempt to investigate the flow of compassion in an L2 context, several recommendations that could improve our understanding of the construct are worth mentioning. First, we encourage future studies to focus on individual factors that have either a positive or negative effect on the emergence of compassion in its three directions. Second, further consideration should be given to exploring the nomological network of compassion by examining its association with other variables related to the process of L2 learning. Finally, future studies could also explore changes in compassion over time and the factors influencing the dynamics of this construct.

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APPENDIX

Interview protocol

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ English Level: \_\_\_\_\_  
Start Time: \_\_\_\_\_ End Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Questions:

- Please name some of the most frequent language learning challenges/problems you face in your classroom.

1. Microsystem

- Imagine yourself, sitting in your classroom and facing the challenge mentioned by the participant in the interview. How do you feel about it? What do you think about it? Is there anything you would want to do about it? What? Would you also ask for help if you could not manage to solve it? Whom would you ask?
- Imagine one of your classmates had the same problem in the classroom. How do you feel about her/him? What do you think about her/him? Is there anything you would like to add?

2. Mesosystem

- If any: tell us about any experiences in your past courses or group activities outside the classroom that have either positively or negatively affected the way you deal with your language problems. What is that? How? Why? Did it make you needless of getting help from others? How? Would you voluntarily share that experience with your classmates that seem to struggle with the same problems? How and why would you do that?

3. Exosystem

- If any: tell us about any language learning challenges that you think are either caused or solved by the implemented curriculum design, teaching methodology, and course evaluative criteria in this language institute. How would you solve them? Do you think that others can help you with those problems? How? Why? Is there anything you would do for your classrooms that seem to struggle with the same problems? What? Why?

4. Macrosystem

- If any: tell us about any language learning challenges or problems that you think are either caused or solved by the dominant sociocultural and political factors in Iran. How would you overcome those challenges? Would you get any help from others (e.g., classmates or family and friends) who you think can support you with those problems? How? Why? Is there anything you would do for your classrooms that seem to struggle with the same problems? What? Why?

5. Chronosystem

- How do you think that social media and technology helped you in solving your language problems?