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Designing EFL Lessons to Develop Empathy

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Abstract

One important task as an educator is to contribute to students' growth into morally responsible adults. Part of this is ensuring that the students become more empathetic. The purpose of this study is to investigate how humans learn empathy and, as there is also evidence of empathy leading to better language skills, how that knowledge can be applied in the EFL classroom. The literature provides definitions of empathy and an explanation of why being empathetic is necessary. Language activities and exercises that help students gain empathy are provided and explained.

Keywords— Empathy, EFL, Lesson planning

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2008, US president Barack Obama said, “The biggest deficit that we have in our society and in the world right now is an empathy deficit. We are in great need of people being able to stand in somebody else’s shoes and see the world through their eyes (Conroy, 2017).” Since “[empathy] is not an innate ability present more naturally in some people than others, but rather a skill that can be taught and nurtured through a supportive educational environment (McLennan, 2008),” this places educators in a crucial role to provide the instruction and circumstances for their students to become empathetic human beings. In the following sections definitions of empathy and its importance will be offered. Proven methods of teaching empathy will be shown, and finally, ideas for lesson planning will be suggested.

The term empathy, as it is used in modern English, came from the psychologist E. B. Titchener in 1909. He based it on the German word *Einfühlung*, defined as “the process of humanizing objects, of feeling ourselves or reading ourselves into them (Depew, 2005).” The modern Oxford Dictionary defines it as “the power of mentally identifying oneself with (and so fully comprehending) a person or object of contemplation (Brown, 1993).” Research has been documented showing empathy to be “a sense of understanding between people – an area of common ground, a sharing of feeling and emotion, an ability to feel and see things through the eyes of others – an understanding that, while it is difficult to define and measure, it is too important for human relationships to ignore (Cooper, 2011).” Sympathy is understanding another’s feelings and perhaps feeling concern or pity for them. Whereas empathy is sharing the same emotions and perspective as the other (Burton, 2015). For example, if one has sympathy for an upset friend, they may feel sorry for the friend and wish them well, but they do not actually feel the same emotions. If one empathizes, they feel the same emotions and can see the situation from the same perspective as that friend. There is a distinction between two types of empathy: cognitive and emotional. Cognitive empathy refers to the understanding of another’s perspective. Emotional empathy is one’s response to another’s emotions (Dewaele and Wei, 2012; Olivares-Cuhat, 2012). Other

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terms, such as emotional literacy and emotional intelligence, are sometimes applied to convey similar, or more general meanings. However, for this study, the definition of empathy will be the ability to understand and feel the emotions of another, to see from their perspective, and to respond in an appropriate way.

To build positive relationships between people and societies, empathy is a necessary tool. In his book, *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World*, Jamil Zaki, director of the Social Neuroscience Lab at Stanford University, collected research and cases of people using empathy to improve both personal relationships and the well-being of their communities. In his research he noticed that learning to have empathy for even just one person who is from a different group can result in having empathy for that other person's entire group (Zaki, 2019). In five separate psychological experiments, subjects were asked to imagine the perspective of people from other races in different situations while a control group did not. The results showed the subjects practicing empathy as having less bias and better relations with someone from another race than those in the control group (Todd et al., 2011).

Paul Bloom, a professor of psychology and cognitive science at Yale University, points out the deficiency in empathy. According to him, people tend to have empathy for only those like themselves and over-identifying with someone may get in the way of helping them. He believes empathy is only useful if paired with rational action (Vickers, 2017). However, in spite this plausible shortcoming, empathy is necessary to inspire humans to love and assist others (Decety and Cowell, 2014). Also, as the previous paragraph explained and the following section will show, there are ways to teach people to have empathy for others from groups outside their own.

One compelling reason for educators to include empathy training in their courses is the documented loss of empathy in young people today. A study done on the empathy levels of university students in the United States between 1979 and 2009, found that empathy had declined and that this decline was most distinctive after the year 2000 (Konrad et al., 2011). In October of 2018, as a pre-test for an experiment in teaching empathy, the author of this essay administered a translated version of the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) to 69 first-year university students at Tokyo Woman's Christian University. The students' average score (39.1 points) was 13% lower than the TEQ's suggested average empathy level of 45 points. It was also 15% lower than the mean of Spreng's three studies of Canadian university students (Spreng et al., 2009). Even taking into account the small sample, the cultural differences, and the conceivable translation issues with the questionnaire, this result indicates that Japanese students could be significantly lacking in empathy.

What will happen when these American and Japanese students become adults who are unable to empathize with people different from them? Simon Baron-Cohen, professor of developmental psychopathology at the University of Cambridge, says that having low empathy does not necessarily mean they will harm others. However, it does make them less sensitive to others who are in pain (Baron-Cohen, 2011). Cruel chapters of human history such as the Holocaust, slavery, and apartheid were perpetrated because they had support from a sufficient proportion of society. Few people possessed adequate empathy to counter the inhumane trends. This underlines the importance of raising the empathy levels in young people today so that future atrocities will have a greater chance of being resisted.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design of the methodology to be employed was determined by its aim and experimental character. At the preparatory stage we selected empathy-developing topics from a variety of materials to create an ethic focused teaching resource bank to be used in ESP classroom for an empathy development purpose. The method of the study used is a qualitative approach with the "Library Research" design, where researchers as "key instruments" read theories that are directly related to the topic of "Designing EFL Lessons to Develop Empathy" sourced from books, journals and proceedings (Pubmed, Google Scholar, Google with keywords building a culture of tolerance since early childhood) as well as other documents and turn them into research data which were analyzed descriptively.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Empathy in foreign language education is not a new concept. Almost fifty years ago, H. Douglas Brown, currently Director of the American Language Institute, began looking at the effects empathy has on language learning. He recommended group work and role-playing in foreign language classes to strengthen students' empathy (Brown, 1973).

More recent literature also suggests influencing empathy through role-playing, teamwork (Chen, 2008), and authentic instances of communication (Daeweile, 2011). Researchers found that when students role play, they gain greater empathy for the kind of people they act as (Varkey et al., 2006). Lasa-Álvarez (2017) researched

the way reality TV is designed to manipulate the empathy of the audience and recommended this type of program for EFL as it engages students' empathy and also provides authentic language. Empathy can be taught in situations where a character in a story or video is upset and the teacher talks with the students about how they think the character feels (Pizarro and Salovey, 2002). An experiment showed that when students thought about how another person was feeling, they showed more likeliness to help that person (Sierksma et al., 2015). Using any type of narrative, actively discussing the characters' thoughts, beliefs, wants, and feelings, trains students to think about others (Dunn et al., 1991). One experiment discovered that students in a reading program who had discussed the emotions of the characters in the stories showed increased empathy even after six months (Ornaghi et al., 2014). Two psychological experiments proved that reading about people from different backgrounds caused the students to better understand others and helped eliminate stereotyping and prejudice (Johnson et al., 2014). In addition, schools that taught about multiculturalism showed an increase in their students' empathy (Le et al., 2009; Chang and Le, 2010).

Not only can the study of foreign language increase empathetic behavior, empathy in turn helps improve foreign language acquisition and use. Research has shown empathy contributing to accuracy (Dewaele and Wei, 2012), pronunciation (Guiora et al., 1972), and aiding in comprehension and expression of emotions (Dewaele, 2011). Having empathy also has been shown to improve overall academic performance (Le et al., 2009; Chang and Le 2010).

Arrange the class into groups of around four to five students and have them work together on as many activities in class as possible. As research previously mentioned has shown, checking homework together at the beginning of the lesson, going over answers to listening/reading exercises, having discussion, and completing other tasks as a group will increase student empathy. Other research proves this student-centered teaching technique also leads to higher academic achievement, good relationships between students, longer retention of material, and development of critical thinking skills (Bonwell and Eisen, 1991; Smialek and Boburka, 2006; Wichadee, 2005). Group work is also the most readily available way of setting up any course or class for learning empathetic behavior.

Role-playing exercises ask the students to take on another persona which requires them to try to understand someone else's thoughts and feelings. In a writing class, ask the students to compose an essay or dialogue from the point of view of someone from another country, culture, ethnicity, or belief system. For example, in a reading class, have the students write dialogues between different characters in the book. This makes them think about the different perspectives of the characters and imagine how they feel and react in different situations.

For a speaking class, create role-playing cards with characters who have varied opinions about a topic. Give time for the students to read, think about their character, and get into their character's mind. In one example lesson, the students read an online magazine article about the situation of young people in Italy. The teacher created many different character cards based on real comments readers had made on the magazine website. After reading the article and answering comprehension questions, students briefly write their opinions about the issue. Then they are given one of the role-playing cards (see example in Appendix A) and are asked to read it and imagine they are that person. They think about not only their character's opinions and feelings, but why those characters might think the way they do. The students are then assigned teams that include different characters, given discussion questions, and asked to have a conversation acting as their designated character. As a wrap-up exercise, they are asked to write about their opinion and if/how acting out and hearing about several different perspectives changed their own thoughts about the issue and how it relates to their personal lives.

Exercises putting students in a position where they imagine others' emotions and perspectives are effective with listening and reading exercises that have a narrative and characters. As a warm-up, give the students an introduction to the story and have them think, write, and/or talk about the main characters' feelings, hopes, and beliefs then share their ideas with the class. After the listening/reading, do not limit the comprehension check to fact-based questions. Include questions that ask them again about the characters' emotions and perhaps ask them to predict the characters' future actions or what the students themselves would do in the same situation. Follow-up activities could include writing a short essay from a character's point of view or a dialogue between several characters where feelings are shared.

As mentioned in the previous section, including material where the characters have significantly different backgrounds from the students is important for learning how to empathize, especially when the students are encouraged to find commonalities as opposed to differences. In the example in Appendix B, Japanese students are first prepared to listen to an American radio show by reading the background to the story and thinking about and predicting the speakers' feelings. During the listening, they discover the speakers' emotions and

compare them to what they first thought. They are also asked to find similarities between themselves and the characters. Finally, they discuss with their classmates how they might feel in a similar situation.

Instead of focusing on differences between cultures, challenge the students to find what their culture has in common with others. In Appendix C is an excerpt from a reading exercise used in a Japanese university's English-conversation class about cities. The students are divided into pairs, read their assigned text, answer a few comprehension questions, and finally discuss with their partner about what they think is similar between the two cities. Notice that the texts are purposely written to emphasize the commonalities between the cities and stay away from focusing on differences or stereotypical clichés, such as Mexico City being "dangerous". The aim of the exercise was to make the students realize that they have many similarities with people and places that at first seem foreign to them.

The Greater Good Science Center (GGSC) at the University of California, Berkeley, is a research institute that "studies the psychology, sociology, and neuroscience of well-being and teaches skills that foster a thriving, resilient, and compassionate society" (Greater Good Science Center, 2019). The GGSC website currently offers many ideas for fostering empathy and finding commonalities between others. These activities are readily adaptable for almost any kind of classroom situation. One example, called "Shared Identity," is a writing exercise where the student chooses someone with a very different background from themselves. They then make a list of things they have in common. Finally, they think about how their view of this person has changed after finding common points. Another idea is a list of thirty-six questions designed to create conversation that initiates a closer bond with their speaking partner (Greater Good in Action, 2019).

The Southern Poverty Law Center's website, Teaching Tolerance, provides free lesson plans that help teachers improve the empathy of their students. For example, one lesson teaches the meaning of empathy, another teaches how to listen empathetically, and another practices how to recognize others' emotions (Teaching Tolerance [1], 2019). Although designed for American students from kindergarten to high school, the lesson plans can easily be applied in an EFL classroom. There are also teaching strategies to aid the instructors in making lessons that construct students' emotional and social skills. Included on the site are tips for helping English-language learners (Teaching Tolerance [2], 2019).

IV. CONCLUSION

This essay shows the importance of empathy and several ways language teachers may assist their students in becoming more empathetic individuals. Educators are encouraged to include empathy-building exercises in their curriculum. The consequences of a world society that lacks the will or ability to try to understand the "other" are disastrous. Opportunities for further research include experimenting with different methods of empathy training that include not only students, but also teachers, scholars, and administrators.

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