Empathy in ELT: Stepping into your students' shoes

What is empathy?

'Empathy is the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions.'

Baron-Cohen 2011

'Empathy is the psychological means by which we become part of other people's lives and share meaningful experiences.'

'Empathy becomes the thread that weaves an increasingly differentiated and individualised society into an integrated social tapestry, allowing the social organism to function as a whole.'

Rifkin 2009

Empathy is intentional kindness towards oneself and/or others by taking into account one's feelings and needs and then intentionally acting to help get those needs met in a way that everyone's needs can also be met.

- We give our full attention - our presence - to have respectful and/or compassionate understanding.

- Empathy does not mean agreement – it means seeing/hearing and understanding

- Empathy means DEMONSTRATING understanding NOT giving advice, fixing, suggesting…

Empathy is…

- Like standing in someone else's shoes.

- Understanding the feelings and values/needs of another person's perspective at a particular moment.

An internal choice to see from a different point of view, to understand another side of a story.

Why is empathy important in language teaching?

'Success in the language classroom depends less on materials, techniques or linguistic analysis, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom…the most important aspect of "what goes on" is the presence or absence of harmony: it is the parts working with, or against, one another.'

Stevick 1980

'Language is one of the primary means of empathising.'

'Communication requires a sophisticated degree of empathy. In order to communicate effectively, a learner needs to be able to understand the other person's affective and cognitive states.'

Brown 2000

'A positive group atmosphere can have a beneficial effect on the morale, motivation, and self-image of its members, and thus significantly affect their learning, by developing in them a positive attitude to the language being learned, to the learning process, and to themselves as learners.'

'Members of a group are more likely to have a sympathetic and harmonious relationship if they make an attempt to understand each others' feelings and points of views.'

Hadfield 1992

Top six questions to develop empathy

When reading literature or discussing a film, we often focus more on what happened than on why it happened, relaying facts rather than exploring the thoughts and feelings that compelled certain individuals or characters to respond the way they did. So whether you're reading a story, watching a film, discussing an article in the newspaper, take time to reflect as a group on what you read, saw and heard, and how those narratives relate back to your students' lives.

Here are a few favourite questions:

• How would you feel if you were [person/character]?

• How do you think [person/character] might be feeling? How do you know?

• Can you think of a time when you felt the same way?

• What led him/her to make that (pick one) choice?

• What would you have done differently in that situation?

• Which character in the story do you relate to most and why?

Roleplay questions

Performing roleplays is an excellent way to develop empathy, but student need a lot of questions to help them empathise with their character.

Tips to help develop the character:

•   What is this person like?

•   What are they like physically?

•   What do they do?

•   What kinds of things do you think they like and dislike?

•   What sort of things do they know about?

•   What and who do they care or worry about?

•   What do they believe in?

Books on empathy

Baron-Cohen, Simon, (2012) Zero Degrees of Empathy, Penguin.

Brown, H. Douglas, (2000) Principles of language learning and teaching, Longman.

Hadfield, Jill, (1992) Classroom Dynamics, Oxford University Press.

Krznaric, Roman, (2014) Empathy, Rider.

Rifkin, Jeremy, (2010) The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis, Polity.

Stevick, Earl, (1980) Teaching Languages: A Way and Ways, Newbury House.

Websites on empathy

Empathy Library - http://empathylibrary.com/

Roots of Empathy - http://www.rootsofempathy.org/

Start Empathy - https://startempathy.org/

ELT websites

ELT Pics - http://www.eltpics.com/

Heart ELT - http://heartelt.org/

The Hands Up Project - https://chuffed.org/project/the-hands-up-project

The No project - http://thenoproject.org/

Empathy lessons on Film English

Moments - http://film-english.com/2013/03/04/moments-2/

My Shoes - http://film-english.com/2013/09/04/my-shoes/

The Other Pair - http://film-english.com/2016/03/30/the-other-pair/

We've All Been There - http://film-english.com/2013/04/23/weve-all-been-there/