EMPATHY IN LANGUAGE TEACHING:
Stepping into your students’ shoes
IATEFL Conference
Glasgow, 6th April 2017
Overview of the session

1. What is empathy?
2. Why is empathy important in language education?
3. How can we as teacher be more empathetic?
4. How can we help our students be more empathetic?
What is empathy?
“It goes beyond sympathy. Sympathy is to understand what someone feels. Empathy is to project your imagination so that you actually feel what the other person is feeling. You put yourself in the other person’s place.”
Empathy inspires with a unique combination of teaching, storytelling and a serious call to action.

Brené Brown, author of Daring Greatly

EMPATHY

WHY IT MATTERS, AND HOW TO GET IT

ROMAN KRZNARIC

"One of Britain's leading lifestyle philosophers" Observer
‘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.’

Roman Krznaric 2015
Why is empathy important in language education?
Christina Gkonou and Sarah Mercer
Understanding emotional and social intelligence among English language teachers
Christina Gkonou and Sarah Mercer
“On the whole, the teachers pointed to four main characteristics of quality relationships with their pupils: empathy, respect, trust and responsiveness.”
“The most notable characteristic mentioned directly or indirectly by all the teachers was the importance of being empathetic and trying to put themselves in the shoes and minds of their learners.”
H. Douglas Brown
“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”

H. Douglas Brown
How can we as teachers become more empathic toward our students?
Have a growth mindset.
Be an ‘empathic detective’.

Make a mental note every time you notice an instance of empathic thinking or action in yourself or others.
Be bilingual, trilingual or a polyglot.
Gain as much experience as a teacher as possible.
Find out and remember as much as possible about your students and their lives.
At the start of a course ask students to write an autobiography describing their past, present and future dreams and ambitions.
Reveal things about yourself and your life to students.
Try to use self-deprecating humour with your students.
Smile and make eye contact.
Allow judicious use of L1 when students want to communicate something which is important to them.
Focus on commonalities

Rather than finding differences, focus on commonalities. Give students opportunities to find common ground (things they have in common).
Activities to help students become more empathetic.
Make your students learn and use the names of all the students in the class.
Ask empathic questions

- How does that make you feel?...
- Do you know at times I’ve also felt scared?...
- How would that make your [brother/sister/friend] feel?...
- What do you think [a particular character] felt?...
- Why do you think he/she made those choices?...
- What emotion is that?...
- If you had superpowers, how would you use them to help...
- What were you like when you were nine years old?...
Empathy roleplays

Give students a lot of questions to help them empathise with their character.

- What is this person like?
- What age are they?
- What are they like physically?
- What would their house be like?
- What do they do?
- 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?
Ask students to empathise with another student, that is, to step into their shoes and see things through their eyes for a while.
Imagine you are your partner and complete the sentences.

I like the colour _______ because ____________________________.

My favourite time of day is ________________________________.

When I was at school I used to ____________________________.

I enjoy ________________________________.

I particularly dislike ________________________________.

The kind of music I like best is ________________________________.

I sometimes worry about ________________________________.

My ambition is to ________________________________.

I like people who ________________________________.

People like me because ________________________________.
IF I WERE YOU

Complete the sentences as if you were your partner.

If I found some money in the street I would ____________________.

If I found a rat in the bedroom, I would ____________________.

If I could travel anywhere in the world, I would ____________________.

My idea of a good night out would be to ____________________.

If I won a lot of money I would ____________________.

A prefect day for me would be where ____________________.

If someone offered me the chance to work abroad for a year I would ________
______________________________.
Ask students to write autobiographies not from their own point of view, but as if they were someone else.
Help students to really listen and to show that they’re listening.
Empathic listening

Your partner will tell you a short anecdote. Listen carefully. Show you are interested and encourage your partner to continue by using phrases like:

- Go on!
- What happened next?
- What did you do then?
- So what did you do?
- Really?
- How did you feel then?
Empathic listening

Your partner will tell you something about his/her feelings. To your surprise he/she is describing exactly how you feel about the subject too! Join in and agree with her. You can use phrases like:

- Oh yes!
- Me too!
- I feel just the same!
- I know just how you feel.
- I know what you mean.
- That’s how I feel too.
Listening circles

Put students into a circle. Give them prompts such as:

What is something you’re passionate about?
What is your favourite place to relax?
Who has had the most influence on your life?
What has been a pivotal event in your life?

One student talks for one minute. The other students just listen.
Encourage students to read literary fiction about people different from them.

Literary fiction focuses on the psychology of characters and their relationships, and helps to extend empathy.
Picture books expand empathy
Read about marginalised people
Empathic reading 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?
Use film to expand empathy
“The movies are like a machine that generates empathy. It lets you understand a little bit more about different hopes, aspirations, dreams and fears. It helps us to identify with the people who are sharing this journey with us.”

Roger Ebert
Watch films about people who are very different from us and about marginalised people.
Watch stories about people who see the world differently than us.
from

STORYCORPS & UPWORTHY
I wanna see you live with your hands unfolded.
“We might have the most brilliant materials and resources but without the right kind of interpersonal dynamics, these affordances will never achieve their potential.”

Christina Gkonou and Sarah Mercer
Take home messages

• Empathy is good for society and individuals.
• Empathy is not fixed and can be expanded.
• Empathy is particularly important in language education.
• Literature, films and art can expand empathy.
• Empathy can bring harmony to the classroom.
• There is a need for specific empathy training on pre-service and in-service courses.
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