THE ROLE OF EMPATHY IN (LANGUAGE) TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract: In today's society, increased interconnectivity has transformed the notion of success in communication and has brought intercultural competence to a level unseen before. One of the core ingredients of successful collaborative communication in teaching, learning and other forms of interaction is empathy. This article attempts a review of theoretical research about the connection between empathy and education. It proposes a reflection on the role of empathy in communication in general, and in language teaching and learning in particular, drawing on the views of notable researchers in the fields of second language acquisition, educational psychology, and sociology. The contribution of empathy to enhanced networking abilities, to positive classroom atmosphere, to increased intercultural awareness, and to higher efficiency of the educational process are some of the ideas exposed in our study.

Keywords: communication, intercultural competence, empathy, teachers, learners

Introduction

In today's society communication is quintessential. Employers value interpersonal skills among the most important assets of job candidates, since communicating across borders and cultures has become the norm in most businesses and areas of human activity. More than ever before, today we are linked to others around the world professionally and personally. People with strong networking abilities and highly developed emotional intelligence seem to hold the key to success in all walks of life, their success often being more far-reaching than that of their peers from school with outstanding academic achievements, but lesser interpersonal abilities.

For language instructors and learners, this interconnection has increasingly and beneficially transformed the opportunity to communicate with others and learn with and from others, changing the way we understand communication in a second/foreign language, language acquisition and language skills practical development. Such enriched exchange has also led to the improvement of cultural and intercultural awareness, of people's access to global knowledge, and to labour force mobility. And yet, making the most of opportunities and possibilities depends, among other factors, on one's ability to establish and develop effective relationships in the real world, as well as in the virtual world - where a large portion of the communication takes place nowadays, especially in business.

Humans as social beings and empathy

Nowadays, success depends not only on personal effort and level of achievement, but also on collaborative communication. Collaborative communication, as well as the abilities to teach others and to learn from others are based on empathy, to a significant extent. Therefore, it would be important to understand what empathy is and how it is related to language teaching and learning.

In English dictionaries, empathy is variously defined, from a one sentence simple explanation to complex, savvy - addressed formulas. In two dictionaries consulted lately, empathy appears as "The ability to understand how someone feels because you can imagine what it is like to be them" (Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners; International Student Edition, 2002: 453), or as "The imaginative projection of a subjective

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state into an object so that the object appears to be infused with it" and "The action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner; *also*: the capacity for this." (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1986: 407)

Essentially, empathy seems to be connected to the way we relate to others, a function of the mind and psyche which helps us to understand the mental and emotional, and even physical states of other people. According to Howe, empathy is a core skill that we, humans, need "to make sense of behaviour and relate to others effectively" (Howe, 2013: 9).

Relating to others seems to be more and more involved in language learning today, this idea being in harmony with the latest trends in second language acquisition research, according to which humans are viewed as situated social beings. In second language acquisition especially, there has been a "social turn" (Block, 2003), which has pointed out that learning and teaching are inherently socially situated processes, because learners relate to the contexts in which they learn a language, as well as to the people with whom they learn and use the language.

Lieberman, a social neuroscientist, states that we are neurally "wired to be social" (Lieberman, 2013: ix) and it is part of our human nature to seek connections and interactions with others. According to him, "we are naturally curious about what is going on in the minds of other people" (Lieberman, 2013: ix). In his book, Lieberman further explores the concept of humans as inherently social beings, suggesting that there is what he calls a "mentalizing system" in our brain, which is pre-programmed to see the world in terms of others and their mental states. We are reported to "mentalize" and make educated guesses about what others think and how they feel hundreds of times daily, as a regular part of our social interactional behaviour (Lieberman, 2013: 120). This mentalizing ability not only allows us to imagine what people are thinking and feeling at the moment we engage in interaction with them, but it also enables us to reflect on how they might react to an event in the future, and even to imagine how they might react in case certain circumstances might change (Lieberman, 2013: 130). This "mindreading" capacity of humans is so impressive, that it led Lieberman to conclude that "empathy is arguably the pinnacle of our social cognitive achievements – the peak of the social brain" (Lieberman, 2013:160).

The researchers consulted tend to agree on the existence of three main components or aspects of empathy, namely affective empathy, cognitive empathy and empathetic concern (also conceptualised as sympathy or compassion). The first two aspects refer to the ability to feel and understand other people's emotions and thoughts. The third aspect, empathetic concern, as explained by Howe, involves communication; he claims that we are empathic when we communicate with compassion the fact that we have recognised and understood the other person's emotional experience. Therefore, Howe defines empathy "as an affective reaction to the emotions of another; the cognitive act of adopting another's perspective; a cognitively based understanding of other people; and the communication of such an understanding" (Howe, 2013: 14).

Empathy in teaching and learning

For teachers, the connection between empathy and education is highly relevant, and methods for developing empathy in students and in the teacher-student relationship can make a significant contribution to the success of the educational process. In order to be able to teach a person anything, one needs to first establish a good connection with that person. Connection is an important part of the context in which we learn, and empathy is a core competence that needs to be developed in order to create a positive and collaborative atmosphere in a classroom. The contextual approach to empathy explains how a person needs

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to have had experienced and received empathy before they themselves can empathise with another. Translated in an educational setting, this means that those who often require the most empathy are those who have perhaps experienced it the least in their own lives (see Howe, 2013).

Although empathy is an innate ability which transcends culture, nationality, gender, age, or social category, it is not an understatement that it will be displayed in the teaching-learning process a-priori. Using empathy in their teaching techniques and in all forms of communication with students is the responsibility of instructors in any study area, including languages. Teachers may encourage the development of empathy in their students by serving as role models in behaviour, by being empathic in their whole interaction with students, in class and outside class. Learners who thus feel the positive effects of empathy, including the apparently less empathic ones, will feel more enabled to empathise with others and develop better study relationships in time.

Empathic teachers are likely not only to be more popular among students, but also more successful in their educational approach and more able to guide students towards success, providing encouragement, help, motivation, impulse, positive feedback, etc. On the other hand, empathic students are able to contribute to a positive and creative atmosphere in class, to avoid or solve conflict, and to maintain an environment which is emotionally comfortable and therefore nurtures the process of learning.

Empathy in language teaching and learning

In the domain of language studies, empathy has a specific relevance in connection with the notions of cultural identity and intercultural competence. Several decades ago, Guinora *et al.* (1975:48) affirmed that "to speak a second language authentically is to take on a new identity. As with empathy, it is to step into a new and perhaps unfamiliar pair of shoes". Since language and culture are inseparable, learners of a foreign language tend to assimilate numerous elements belonging to the culture associated with the language they learn, as part of the natural process of learning. The research conducted by Guinora and his team was very useful for understanding language acquisition, as it focused mainly on the relationship between empathy and pronunciation. They discovered that higher degrees of empathy indicate a better ability to imitate a native speaker's pronunciation (Guinora *et al.*, 1972). From this, the idea that empathy actually fosters all second or foreign language acquisition processes can be easily inferred.

While books may help learners with the independent acquisition of vocabulary and grammatical theory, or even knowledge about culture, successful foreign language use requires the sufficient development of all four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – and probably their use in the foreign cultural context, which is best and in the easiest way achieved through interaction and communication with other, preferably native, speakers. That is why achieving or improving communicative competence is a core aim of most language courses at present. Effective communication supposes seeking to understand the mind of one's interlocutor and responding adequately to their thoughts, feelings and words; it is about understanding how a person might interpret or misinterpret an act of communication and putting oneself into the mind of the other to some degree, through empathy (Lieberman, 2013: 287).

Teachers can see the positive potential of empathy at work in intercultural communication, to a significant degree, especially teachers who are currently dealing with multicultural groups of learners. Multicultural or multi-ethnic classrooms require both teachers and students to empathise and interact appropriately, having a respectful attitude towards diversity. Research has shown that in a culturally diverse language class, empathy may play an important role in raising intercultural awareness and promoting intercultural

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competence. According to Rasoal *et al*. (2011:2), "empathy can reduce intolerance, conflicts and discrimination, and increase understanding, respect and tolerance between people with similar as well as different ethnic and cultural backgrounds". Also referring to interculturality, Goleman claims that empathy "leads to caring, altruism, and compassion. Seeing things from another's perspective breaks down biased stereotypes, and so breeds tolerance and an acceptance of differences. These capacities are ever more called on in our increasingly pluralistic society, allowing people to live together in mutual respect and creating the possibility of productive discourse." (Goleman, 1996: 285)

Among the efficient methods for developing empathy in the case of both teachers and students, we may mention: cultural training; learning to read subtle social signals – such as facial expressions and body language; using positive response and empathic listening in communication (empathic listening supposes listening with full attention, without interruptions or judgement); reflecting on other people's behaviour to discover the reasons behind unexpected reactions; taking part in role-play and other group activities, as well as simulated real-life-like scenarios, and afterwards talking about the (emotional) outcome of the experience with the group; experiencing literature, film and other forms of artistic expression as a way to understand others and their culture in order to become better empathisers.

Our own teaching practice has shown that, for business students, cultural training, group debates and simulated work scenarios with discussions in the target language (English, in our case) have proven to be the most efficient methods for stimulating and enhancing empathic communication while developing intercultural competence and business skills, especially in the case of more experienced, graduate learners involved in master study programmes. Such in-class methods have been noticed to promote active and empathic participation, encourage relationship building within the group, contribute to the creation and maintenance of a positive sharing and learning atmosphere, and raise diversity awareness and integration.

Instead of a conclusion

Although the topic of empathy in education and in language teaching and learning is an inviting one, few researchers have chosen to dedicate extensive studies on these issues, in English, in the past few decades. The connection between positive emotions and success in teaching and learning awaits further attention and a more dedicated interest. Although, in this short study, we have touched upon some interesting aspects of this connection focusing on empathy, the prominent role of empathy in the teacher-learner relation, as well as in multicultural and multi-ethnic contexts deserves a much more detailed and deepened exploration.

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