

Teaching Empathic Listening in the Language Classroom

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The purpose of this article is to explore the value of teaching empathic listening in the language classroom, and also offer some insights on how to go about it. It has been the experience of this author that teachers can expect a noticeable increase in the meaningfulness of classroom interaction if they chose to put this type of listening on their list of learning objectives.

Defining empathic listening

The two basic elements to empathic listening are grasping the speaker's message and then expressing that the message has been understood on both an informational and emotional level. For example, let's say that recently one of your students seems preoccupied during class, and therefore seems unable to engage in learning tasks. If you were to approach him after class with a desire to listen to him in an empathic manner, the dialogue might sound like this:

<p><i>You:</i> Hey, Juan, I notice that you aren't participating in class like you were at the beginning of the semester.</p> <p><i>Juan:</i> (<i>Looking down and shrugging his shoulders</i>) I guess I have some other things on my mind. You know, some personal problems.</p> <p><i>You:</i> (<i>You see that Juan's body language confirms he is worried about something. This is comprehension.</i>) I can see that your worries are making life hard-for you now. (<i>This response conveys acceptance.</i>)</p>
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In this dialogue, the teacher reflects both the content and emotional context of the student's words and behavior.

Too often teachers with the best of intentions attempt to cheer up such a student, saying, "Things will get better". Or they come out of our own autobiographies saying, "I know how you feel. Why, I remember one time..."

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Some teachers may attempt to force the student into focusing, answering, "Remember, these things that we are studying in class will be on the exam." A few might even admonish the student by responding, "You really should try leaving your problems outside class and take advantage of what we're studying." And finally, all too common is no response at all, "I just don't have time to speak with him." With each of these responses (or lack thereof), the teacher diverts the focus away from the student's need to be understood and accepted, or in the last case ignores it.

Empathic listening and TESOL

The explicit teaching of empathy has been quite limited in the field of TESOL. During a breakfast seminar at the 1995 TESOL Convention in Long Beach, California, a panel of four leading authorities on listening comprehension was asked if, to their knowledge, any researcher had examined the value of teaching this skill in the language classroom. Panelist David Mendelson from York University recalled one article written in the 1970's about the teaching of attending skills.

By examining any of the texts recently written for new, as well as experienced teachers, on how listening can be taught, it is clear that the idea of teaching empathy is mostly absent. At best, comments are limited, such as in Brown's (1994: 246) text. He writes:

As you "teach learners how to learn" by helping them to develop their overall strategic competence, strategies for effective listening (e.g., looking for nonverbal cues to meaning) can become a highly significant part of their chances for successful learning.

TESOL teachers are encouraged to show empathy in at least one well-known method: Community Language Learning (CLL). At the end of class, CLL facilitators ask students how they felt during the class, what activities they liked or did not like. Students are encouraged to identify and express their ideas, opinions, and feelings; and teachers need to reflect back what students share (Richards & Rodgers 1986: 120-122).

Over the last several years, Edge (1992) has promoted the education of teachers in empathic listening to create a staff environment that is more conducive to effective collaborative teaching. He has explored the value of respecting and empathizing with others, and brought ideas from the field of psychotherapy for our consultation in the field of English language teaching.

For example, he has defined respect, an essential element of empathy, in terms of eye contact, posture, and tone of voice. One of Edge's colleagues, Richards (1995) recently extended this work to the language classroom in a talk at the MEXTESOL National Convention. He carried out an experiment in which participants were asked to work in pairs and one person was to tell a story. The other participant was to act as distracted and uninterested as possible. Then the participants switched roles, and the listeners were to pay as careful attention as they could. An informal survey was taken afterward, and the consensus was that the speaker had much more to say in the "good listener" situation.

Justifying the teaching of empathic listening

In a chapter about the importance of empathic listening, Covey (1989: 238) writes:

Communication is the most important skill in life. We spend most of our waking hours communicating. But consider this: You've spent years learning how to write, years learning how to speak. But what about listening? What training or education have you had that enables you to listen so that you really, deeply understand another human being from that individual's frame of reference?

Covey's point is rooted in his belief that the single greatest need of the human soul is to be understood; thus, the need to develop well-trained empathic listeners. This signifies a complete shift in paradigm because, typically, we want to be understood first, and then, perhaps are able to give full attention to another person. Covey adds that so often we fail to truly listen because we are in the process of preparing our response to what we are hearing.

Covey has a different slant about listening than most teachers in the field of TESOL. He examines listening from the stand point of helping to make life more meaningful. By delaying gratification of our need to be understood in lieu of taking a genuine interest in the life experience of another person we encourage others to feel understood. For many teachers, however, this level of listening is not a priority. Well-thought out communicative tasks could be enhanced if they included this additional dimension.

How to teach ESL/EFL students empathy

There is no activity or technique for teaching empathy that can take the place of a teacher who is an effective, empathic listener. In other words, our first step toward teaching this skill is nurturing this talent within ourselves. Repeating the cycle of reading-practicing-discussing has helped the author. Reading Rogers' (1983) and Covey's (1989) texts are good starting places. Egan (1985: 89-90) describes how attitudes such as respect can be behaviorally defined. Educational settings are ripe with chances to practice. Finally, if you take the challenge of becoming a more empathic listener, inviting a trusted colleague to join you should prove to be an invaluable asset.

Once you have gained some insights into the how and why of empathic listening, you might try the following activity. At the end of the next class you teach ask students to discuss in pairs what they liked and what they did not like about the learning tasks practiced that day. Tell them that you would like them to practice comprehending and accepting the comments expressed by their peer. You can model this first. After four or five minutes, allow them to make comments to the entire class on both levels--comments about the learning tasks in the class and their experiences with practicing empathy. Something like the following exchange might occur:

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| <p><i>You:</i> Who would like to report on how their conversation went? (<i>Juan raises his hand.</i>) OK, Juan, how about you.</p> <p><i>Juan:</i> Well, first, about the class, Susana and I think the same. We think the activities in the book are difficult. There are a lot of new words in the dialogs. And about the listening, I recognize that it is not normal for me to keep my own thoughts down while Susana is speaking. I am usually getting ready to say what I want to say.</p> <p><i>You:</i> What I hear you saying is that the dialogs are hard because of the new vocabulary and the listening is something new for you, not what you do normally. (<i>This response conveys acceptance of how Juan experienced the classwork and the listening activity.</i>)</p> |
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This activity entails students practicing as well as your modeling empathy following their comments. There are many other related activities that, for example, highlight the role of eye contact, tone of voice, and gestures in listening empathically. If these sound interesting to you, consult the books cited in this paper.

It will be more motivating if students see that this type of listening is not only a language skill, but is life-enhancing as well. Help students to see how common "roadblocks" to communication, like judging, sarcasm and probing (Gordon 1974: 19) can plague conversations. Encourage them to set a learning goal of becoming a better listener by "first seeking to understand, and then being understood," to use Covey's words. Only by setting an explicit goal regarding empathic listening and then offering students practice, will they develop this skill.

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