Perspectives

Empathy and Teacher Development

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This article suggests that empathy plays an important role in a cross-cultural setting, particularly when foreign teachers work within the Japanese educational system. Three areas are identified, namely involuntary, emergent, and consciously attempted empathy. These can be thought of as separate categories or ideas which frequently overlap. The use of balanced and informed empathy can often facilitate the resolution of classroom communication breakdowns and can make a significant contribution to ongoing teacher development.

　この記事は、異文化接触場面、特に外国人の教師が日本の教育制度の中で仕事をするときには、共感が重要な役割を果たすことを示す。共感に関して、三つの特徴が挙げられる。それは、主体的であること、進化すること、意識的に試みられることである。これらは、しばしば重なりあう別々のカテゴリーまたは概念とみなされる。バランスのとれた、知識にもとづいた根拠のある共感は、教室内でのコミュニケーションの障害を克服するのに役立ち、教師の成長に多大な貢献をする。

I n his article on "Training Development and Teacher Education" in *The Language Teacher*, Underhill (1990, p. 3) defines teacher development as, "being essentially concerned with the effects that the teacher herself has on the learners and on the learning atmosphere of the class, as distinct from the effect of her techniques and materials." Elsewhere Underhill writes (1992, p. 71) of, "teachers . . . continually in the process of actualizing their own expectations, of becoming the unique and best teacher it is in them to be."

Quoting the work of Carl Rogers, Underhill emphasizes the importance of empathy, acceptance and authenticity, these being, "characteristics of good teachers which could be further developed in any teacher who had the commitment to do so" (Underhill 1990, p. 3).

The following discussion focuses on empathy, the first of these characteristics, as a way of promoting teacher development in the Japanese university or college context.

Three Areas of Empathy

The term empathy is used here to mean identifying oneself with the feelings, perceptions and thoughts of another. Three types are discussed in this report: *involuntary empathy*, *emergent empathy*, and *empathy* resulting from a conscious effort to imaginatively and knowledgeably take the role of the other, hereafter called *consciously attempted empathy*. As constructs suggested by this writer, they are set out to enhance awareness of what many teachers already know: that by "feeling oneself into the situation of the other person," development as both a teacher and a person can be promoted.

Trying to enhance awareness of the familiar by presenting it so that it can be freshly perceived is not readily achieved through a step by step process, as might be the case when learning a concrete skill. Similarly it is not akin to the type of understanding used in mathematics, where, by division and subsequent arrangement of the constituent parts in a particular order, certain propositions can be derived from the preceding ones. Furthermore, the personality of the teacher might make one type of empathy more meaningful than another. Underlying this point is the view that human subjectivity both influences and is influenced by the theoretical and professional concerns of teaching. Thus, either within the empathy types themselves or externally with reference to teacher-student relationships and teacher approaches, there is paradox and often contradiction.

The following sections examine how different types of empathy might function in the language classroom.

Involuntary Empathy

Involuntary empathy is a foundation for all positive human relationships, including those between teachers and students. Where there are acceptable levels of classroom harmony, it is likely that the expectations of both learner and teacher are sufficiently realized for learning to take place. However, there can be communication breakdowns and, in the case of a foreign teacher in Japan, such breakdowns might be due to a clash of expectations derived from quite different cultures. Although it is true that resolution can be facilitated through appropriate use of em-

pathy, it may also occur without any conscious attempt to empathize with the situation of the students. Thus, difficulties such as those set out by Stapleton (1995, pp. 13-16), "Why don't my students have opinions?" "Why are they so unquestioning?" "Why don't they talk and discuss?" and "Why are they so willing to memorize?" can be solved by the teacher through a process of stock taking, self-interrogation and discussion with informed colleagues. Here, involuntary empathy may operate but may not be directly recognized as assisting in the resolution process.

Emergent Empathy

A conscious attempt to empathize with the students' situation provides an additional route to such resolution. However for consciously attempted empathy to be more than of very limited value, the teacher-as-empathist has to make progress in two areas. She must gain knowledge of the students' culture and, equally important, of herself as well. The term *emergent empathy* is used in this discussion to describe the development of such knowledge. The empathy process has no end point, but is rather in a continual state of becoming.

Andic, quoting the last journal entry of Simone Weil, the French social philosopher, pacifist and mystic who died in England in 1943, writes,

> The most important part of teaching is to *teach* what it is to *know* . . . Nurses who really know read the pain of their patients as human suffering, feel it as their own, and therefore act, to relieve it, according to their suffering. (Andic's italics) (1993, p. 145)

In this passage, the nurse "reads" the pain of her patient through the operation of emergent empathy. It should be noted that "read" has special connotations in Weil's writing, in part because of her view that self-centredness causes us to interpret people, events and nature incorrectly. Here, the nurse must not only empathize with the patient but also must know how to alleviate the pain. Similarly, during conscious attempts to empathize with the students' situation, the foreign language teacher must be aware that self-centeredness distorts a correct understanding of others and that, however imperfectly, this understanding must be informed by knowledge of the students' world view, beliefs and values.

Knowledge about Japanese customs, civilization and achievements can be assimilated without direct involvement with Japanese people, for example through reading and study. Thus, knowing about the role of Confucianism in Japanese education will give insight into the questions Stapleton (1995) has raised. However being knowledgeable is not

the same as being what Bennett (1996, p. 6) calls *interculturally compe-*
tent. This comes through not only knowing about the historical and
developmental background of a country, but also through communica-
tion with its people. This communication must be informed in two ways.
The foreign teacher has to be aware that some of the norms of her own
culture might well be ethnocentric or objectionable to people of an-
other culture. One way of determining which aspects of the teacher's
culture might present problems to EFL learners is to recognize those
cultural patterns which have been viewed negatively by informed out-
siders. For example, Barnlund (1989, pp. 186-187) refers to some prob-
lematic aspects of American culture and quotes a Japanese person as
saying, "the American love of freedom has exceeded all reasonable
bounds and threatens to degenerate into self-centeredness." Jones (1984,
p. 74) identifies negative stereotypes of "typical" American and British
people: "arrogant," "uncultured," "reserved" and "hypocritical." Teach-
ers should be on their guard against classroom displays of qualities
which are problematic for people of other cultures.

Secondly, there has to be some understanding of what beliefs and
values are assigned importance by the local culture. In the case of Ja-
pan, Hioki (cited in Loveday, 1986, p. 100) suggests the following: se-
niority, politeness, communal responsibility and sensitivity to face, inner
versus outer worlds, modesty and the abandonment of individual self
for a more collective identification.

From a Kantian perspective, new concepts and new ideas only have
meaning when they are related to pre-existing experience and knowl-
edge. Thus the extent to which the new is accepted and adopted when
a foreign teacher deals with Japanese students and the educational set-
ting in general is related to her pre-existing knowledge, values and
beliefs. Suggesting which concepts and ideas are appropriate for a for-
eign language teacher in Japan is outside the limits of this article. How-
ever the relationship between personal values and teaching must be
recognized. In the words of Edge (1996, p. 10), "Because we are people-
who-teach (indivisible the person from the teacher), our actions in teach-
ing arise from the same sources as our other actions and express deeply
held values" (Edge's parentheses).

Consciously Attempted Empathy

Samovar, Porter, and Jain (1981, pp. 203-210) outline a six-step pro-
cedure to develop empathy. They first stress the importance of self-
knowledge on the part of the empathist both at the level of personal

ethnocentrism and at the cultural level of being aware of the image portrayed to the rest of the world by the empathist's country of origin. They also emphasize the need to be sensitive to feedback and to defer conclusions, especially when dealing with unfamiliar world views, values, languages, and nonverbal codes.

Their six-step procedure is as follows: 1) differences should be assumed among individuals and cultures, as not all people see the world in the same way. 2) We should know ourselves. 3) We should then temporarily set aside our self-identity and then 4) imaginatively put ourselves in the other person's situation. This leads to 5) the empathetic experience. Thus, having made a conscious effort to divest ourselves of our customary outlook, persona and ethnocentricities, we make a serious attempt to "walk a mile in the other person's shoes" in order to see and experience the world from their point of view. This is followed by 6) the re-establishing of our former self. We become once again the people we were before the careful reflection involved in the empathetic experience. However if the experience has resulted in insight into the other person's situation, the "pre-empathetic self" will not be exactly the same as the "new self."

A Personal Note

In my early days of teaching Japanese university students, I probably over-empathized with the students' situation. I had little or no grasp of the checks and balances outlined in the preceding two sections.

This is the land, according to Lebra (1976), where individuality, "rests not on the imposition of one's will on the social environment but on the refusal to impose oneself on it." Thus, after years of, from a westerner's point of view, self-development taking second place to the clearing of examination hurdles, I got the impression that, in the freer atmosphere of the university, the students would prefer a "social relations" approach to English. Informal chats with colleagues seemed to confirm this; although looking back, I realize that I was probably seeking confirmation of what I had already half decided rather than being open to alternative opinions. Pairwork, information-gap exercises, the sharing of personal information, games, mingling activities, and occasionally reading a short article from an English language newspaper became the order of the day with large freshman classes.

In addition, it did not take long to realize that basic humor which the students could easily understand really seemed to lift the classes. I could readily identify with Shimizu's (1995, p. 5) comment that, after nine

years of teaching in Japan, she still feels that students view her as "more of an entertainer than a teacher." However, in my case, I overdid the entertainment side of things. "Playing to the gallery" seemed to be an essential part of the lesson. To my way of thinking, I was putting into practice Holliday's (1994, p. 113) maxim: "Learning about the real world of a new culture is a two-way reflexive process. One learns about others through monitoring how they respond to one's own actions."

Jokes and "social relations" English animated students, whereas listening and grammar exercises, together with "serious" topics, such as discussions about environmental issues, did not. Looking at the teacher and the lesson through the eyes of the students, and as a result giving them what they seemed to want, also found echoes in an existential phase I had passed through in my own student days.

It is hard to pinpoint when I changed the apparently successful formula of social English with an entertainment ingredient, but many teachers pass through a similar evolution. Richards (1994, p. 403) quotes Floden and Huberman on the three seasons of a teacher's professional life: stabilization, stock taking or self-interrogation, and disengagement. Pennington (1995, p. 705) quotes Freeman's observation that the key ingredient to teacher change and long-term development is awareness, a point emphasized by Kemp (1995) when discussing ways of recognizing cultural schisms.

A more informed understanding of the students' outlook and expectations showed clear differences between what I had thought about their expectations of university life and what they actually desired. Certainly there were those who wanted a social relations focus both inside and outside the classroom. But there were also those who wanted to continue to study. With such students as a catalyst, it was possible to interest the rest of the class in a wider range of activities and subject areas.

Classes are quieter now. The entertainment side of things is still important, even if much more occasional. A lesson might well be spent at the interface of what the students know and do not know about the use of "will" and "be going to." If they seem sufficiently receptive, the next week might be spent on "green" issues while the third week might center round a pop music and fashion video clip, with an accompanying likes and dislikes work sheet.

Concluding Remarks

This article has pointed to empathetic awareness in the context of broader personal growth as a way of promoting teacher development. The areas of involuntary, emergent and consciously attempted empathy

can be thought of both as vertically separated categories and as horizontally linked ideas which frequently overlap. Which particular aspect is of relevance to the teacher will depend on her outlook, values and beliefs, together with her strength of commitment to awareness and action.

Consciously attempting an orderly six-step empathy training exercise might be more appropriate for someone who tends towards "convergent thinking," in contrast to a less methodical, more intuitive endeavor to assimilate knowledge of the second culture and of the self, as set out under emergent empathy. Peer help as a practical way of expanding and reinforcing the strength of commitment to awareness and action can be gained by what Edge (1992) calls "cooperative development." He sets out a framework of structured activities, which could well include a focus on enhanced awareness of empathy, designed to show how colleagues, working together, can promote self-development.

Kramsch (1993, p. 3) suggests that teaching is a juggling act which needs an intuitive grasp of the situation together with, "personal judgment based on as broad and differentiated an understanding as possible about what is going on at that particular moment in the classroom." It is suggested that balanced empathy informing day to day teaching decisions can make a significant contribution to the breadth and depth of such personal judgment.

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