

# EMPATHY IN ELT

Stepping into your students shoes

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RESOURCE  
BOOKS FOR  
TEACHERS

*series editor*  
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## MIXTAPE

Posted on May 20, 2013 by kierandonaghy



- 1. What is empathy?**
- 2. Why is empathy important?**
- 3. Is there an empathy deficit?**
- 4. Why is empathy important in ELT?**
- 5. Is there an empathy deficit in ELT?**
- 6. How can we as teachers expand our empathy?**
- 7. How can students expand their empathy?**

**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 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**



**Why is empathy  
important?**

**“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.”**

**Jeremy Rifkin**

**Empathy makes us happier.**

**‘If you care more about people relative to yourself, you are more likely to be happy.’**

**Richard Layard**

# Empathy strengthens relationships

**Empathy has the power to heal broken relationships, deepen our friendships and help create new ones.**

# Empathy improves creativity

**Creative thinking improves with an injection of empathy, since it enables you to see problems and perspectives that would otherwise remain hidden.**

**Is there an  
empathy deficit?**

**“A recent study at the University of Michigan revealed a dramatic decline in empathy levels amongst young Americans between 1980 and today, with the steepest drop being in the last ten years.”**

**Roman Krznaric**

**“New figures reveal that two-thirds of high-income countries have a wider gap between rich and poor than they did in 1980, while a study at the University of California shows that the richer you are, the less empathic you are likely to be – it seems that there is nothing like wealth to make you insensitive to human deprivation and suffering.”**

**Roman Krznaric**



**Why is empathy  
important in language  
education?**

**“Do you know how frustrating it is to have to translate everything in my head before I say it? To have people laugh in my face because I’m struggling to find the words?”**

**Gloria Marie Delgado-Pritchett**

**“You should try talking  
in my shoes for one  
mile. Do you know how  
smart I am in Spanish?  
Of course you don’t!”**

**Gloria Marie Delgado-Pritchett**

**“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.”**

**Earl Stevick**

**“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**

**Students may be in a weak and vulnerable position. The language teacher has to have a high degree of empathy.**

**Is there an empathy deficit in ELT?**

**Teachers?**

**Students?**

**Directors of studies?**

**Trainers?**

**Speakers?**

**Ed tech?**

**Publishers?**

**Social media?**



# 1 A-Z of Hope

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# Nick Bilbrough

## Hands Up Project



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TRAFFICKING**

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**How can we as  
teachers become  
more empathic  
toward our students?**

**Be an 'empathic detective'.**

**Make a mental note every time you notice an instance of empathic thinking or action in yourself or others.**

**Learn the students'  
language to a  
high level.**

**Do the exercises  
you give your  
students in their  
language.**

**Do the  
compositions you  
give your students  
in their language.**



**Activities to help  
students become  
more empathic.**

# 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 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 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?...

**Ask students to empathise with another student, that is, to step into their shoes and see things through their eyes for a while.**

# I AM YOU

**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 perfect 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.**

# Empathic perspective –taking instruction:

**‘Imagine a day in the life of this individual as if you were that person, looking at the world through her eyes and walking through the world in her shoes.’**



**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

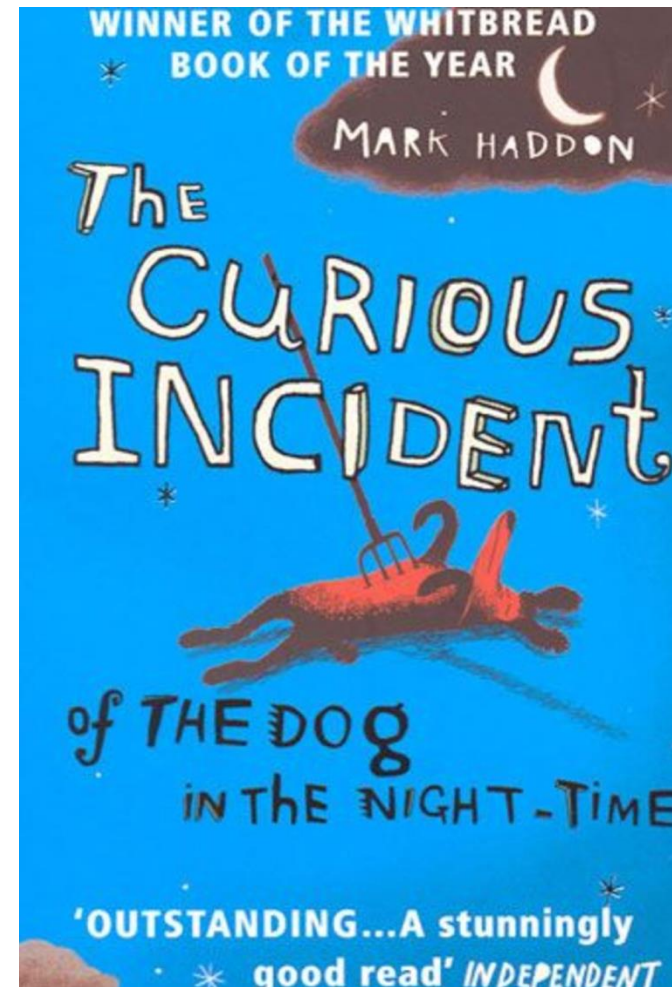
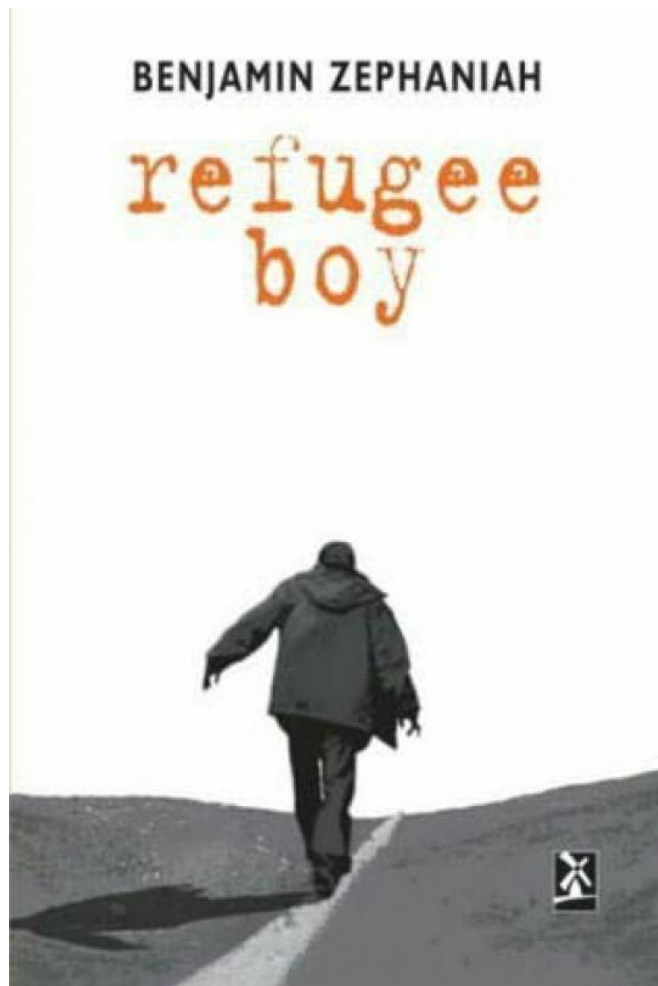
**Your partner will tell you something about his/her feelings. To your surprise he/she is describing exactly how you feel about the subject too! Join in and agree with her. You can use phrases like:**

- 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.

**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.**

# Read about marginalised people



## Students discuss empathic questions

**When reading literature 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.**

# 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

**"We all are born with a certain package. We are who we are: where we were born, who we were born as, how we were raised. We're kind of stuck inside that person, and the purpose of civilization and growth is to be able to reach out and empathize a little bit with other people. And for me, 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.**

PROJECT  
LITERACY

# Take home messages

- Empathy is good for us.
- Our personal empathy quota is not fixed: we can develop our empathic potential throughout our lives.
- We can develop an awareness of what kinds of contexts bring out empathy in ourselves and others.
- Students are more likely to have a sympathetic and harmonious relationship if they make an attempt to understand each others' feelings and points of views.
- Empathy is particularly important in language education.

**‘Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melt away.’**

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