Nurturing Emotional Intelligence through Literature

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Children develop emotional intelligence during the early years of life, and emotional intelligence has been associated with academic achievement. However, today's children seem to be low on emotional well being. This deficiency may harm not only their academic development, but also their personal relationships.

Literature has the potential of fostering emotional intelligence by providing vicarious emotional experiences that shape the brain circuits for empathy and help the child gain insight into human behavior. Literature also promotes language learning by enriching learners' vocabulary and modeling new language structures. Moreover, literature can provide a motivating and low-anxiety context for language learning.

What is emotional intelligence?

Children develop emotional intelligence during the first 15 years of life as they mature. According to Goleman (1995), emotional intelligence is a more reliable predictor of academic achievement than is the IQ. Emotionally intelligent children apparently perform better in academic tasks than other children. One can relate this to the ELT class and argue that emotional intelligence is also a factor in second language learning.

Goleman (1995:9) defines emotional intelligence as "knowing what one's feelings are and using that knowledge to make good decisions." It includes the ability to maintain hope and an optimistic outlook in the face of disappointments and difficulties. He also defines emotional intelligence as empathy, which is awareness of the feelings of others. According to him, empathy develops as a result of experience and interaction with others. Referring to recent brain research, Goleman further suggests that "repeated emotional lessons of a child's life literally shape the brain circuits for that response" (O'Neil 1996). Empathy can thus become a lifelong skill through appropriate learning experiences.

Today's children, however, seem to lack the ability to empathize, negotiate and cooperate, and they often cannot feel optimistic and hopeful about the future. This void has potentially negative consequences, first on their academic achievement and second on their interpersonal relationships. These two factors together will influence children's psychosocial development and can lead to behavior problems, alienation, and perhaps even aggression and violence.

Emotional intelligence and literature

There are a number of good reasons for using literature in a language class, in particular the potential of literature to nurture emotional intelligence and caring communication.

I have argued elsewhere that literature can nurture emotional intelligence by providing vicarious emotional experiences that may help shape the brain circuits for empathy (Ghosn 1998, 1999). A child who lacks personal experiences with empathy may, through repeated vicarious experiences provided by literature, develop some readiness for empathy. Carefully selected literature can also introduce the immigrant child to the language of empathy and caring in the new language and thus facilitate recognition and expression of empathic feelings. Pinsent (1996) has argued that lack of exposure to stories may actually limit the development of empathy in children.

Quality literature can also help the child gain insight into human behavior, and it can demonstrate that there is always hope and that one can overcome even seemingly insurmountable obstacles (Vandergrift 1990; Sutherland and Arbuthnot 1991; Bettelheim 1976). Literature will also promote language learning by enriching a learner's vocabulary and modeling new structures (Crystal 1987; Hill 1986). Most importantly, quality literature provides models for rich, natural language and a variety of different registers. To quote Bassnett and Grundy (1993:7), "Literature is a high point of language usage; arguably it marks the greatest skill a language user can demonstrate. Anyone who wants to acquire a profound knowledge of language that goes beyond the utilitarian will read literary texts in that language."

I don't think anyone in the ELT profession would argue that L2 learners should be left at the utilitarian level of language, especially if the L2 is the community language or the vehicle of academic instruction. (Exceptions to this, of course, might be specialty ESP courses, whose very aim is utility.) Moreover, literature can provide a motivating and low-anxiety context for language learning. Children are naturally drawn to stories and many language learners come from backgrounds rich in storytelling. Although this article focuses on teaching English to children, well-chosen children's literature can be used with adult learners as well.

The following are some suggestions for literature response activities that can both develop language skills and nurture emotional intelligence.

Scripting

This activity is best used with stories in which one of the characters is experiencing setbacks or disappointments without much support from the other characters. Students are invited to add script that shows what the others could have said or done to make the character feel better, and what the character could have said to the others to let them know how he or she was feeling. This activity can also be done with picture storybooks to which children can add speech bubbles to the illustrations.

Making others feel better

Select stories that depict situations in which emotions are clearly evident. For example, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* (Viorst 1972) is an excellent picture storybook. In the story, everything possible goes wrong for a little boy, and no one seems to care very much.

After reading the story, display the illustration from the story. Have pupils identify the characters in the picture. Then ask how they think Alexander (the boy on the ground) is feeling. List the

suggestions on the board. Ask students to justify their suggestions, either based on the illustration or on what they remember from the story. For example, *sad*, *upset*, *hurting* are some possibilities. Ask pupils what aspects of the picture tell something about the boy's feelings. Ask students what the others are doing or saying. In the story, Alexander's brothers (the other two boys in the picture) do not say anything that would comfort him or make him feel better. Students usually can quickly assess the situation, even if they have not read the story or don't remember the exact words.

This will also be an opportunity to invite students to go back to the story and reread relevant parts. "Come on, don't be a crybaby" was what one of the brothers actually said. Ask if that makes Alexander feel better. Now ask students to think about themselves in the position of the two boys. What could they possibly say to Alexander that might make him feel better? Have students work in pairs to write a script for the picture. Older students can add longer dialogue parts to the story, such as:

1. "Are you OK, Alex?"
2. "Does it hurt very much?"
3. "Would you like me to go get Mom?"
4. "It's OK, Alexander. Here, let me help you get up. Don't worry about your pants."
5. "I will explain to Mom what happened."

When reading longer stories, select an excerpt that presents an appropriate situation for examination. Discuss the emotions involved and the different characters' potential roles in making a positive change. Proceed as described above.

This activity gets students to think about how others feel and what appropriate responses might be. Thus, we can teach pro-social communication. In terms of language skills, this will be a good opportunity to practice conditionals with *could*, *should*, *would*; for example, "What do you think they could say? What would you say to Alexander?" Reported speech can also be used during the discussion, for example, "Zeinab says that they could ask him if he needs help."

Sharing one's own feelings

It is also important for us to learn to identify our own feelings and let others know how we feel. Again, looking at Alexander, the question that needs to be asked is: What could Alexander tell his brothers so that they would know how he feels? Invite pupils to work in pairs to write speech bubbles for Alexander. Have pupils share their suggestions with the class and discuss what reactions each suggestion might evoke. Have pupils write possible responses. Discuss which responses would generate the most positive feelings.

In terms of language, we have again a meaningful context to practice modals and reported speech, two fairly difficult concepts for primary school pupils. The same procedure can be followed with older students with longer texts.

Feeling detective

Reading body language

It is difficult to know what to do or say to people if we don't know how they feel. We can use literature and illustrations to help pupils "read" feelings. Sometimes we can tell how a person feels just by looking at them. To teach pupils how to read body language, select an illustration from a story such as the one about Alexander's miserable day.

Invite pupils to think about the story and then examine the body language of the characters in the illustration. How does each character's body language show his feelings? For example, Alexander is disappointed, and it shows in his slumped posture and facial expression. Ask pupils how they show their disappointment. Then ask about the other characters, whose feelings are not explicitly mentioned in the story but are shown in the illustration. For example, how does the boy on the left feel and how can we tell? He is smiling and showing the toy he got in his cereal box. He is clearly pleased.

Detecting feelings in text

This is a good activity that requires students to return to the text to find evidence for their interpretations while they try to figure out how the author reveals the characters' emotions. Students know that in stories, authors use specific words to show directly how the characters feel, but sometimes the reader needs to read texts closely to identify the characters' feelings and how they are expressed in words, behaviors, or silence. This is not always easy, but with practice pupils will gain insight that will be helpful in real life. Select excerpts from stories that describe feelings explicitly and indirectly (see Appendix 1). Invite pupils to read the excerpts and to determine how the characters are feeling. They should support their responses with evidence from the text. If pupils have differing opinions, ask the class to find the excerpt in the text and reread it to determine which suggestion is most accurate. Encourage students also to think about other ways people may show the emotions being discussed. This activity reinforces critical reading for details and making inferences.

Feeling hunt

The following activity will reinforce vocabulary that pupils need in order to express their feelings in real situations. Identify as many feelings as possible and make a list of appropriate words from the stories that pupils have read. Ask them to match the words in the list with the feelings of the characters in the stories. You can make the activity easier by also providing a list of characters. This will be useful if students do not have access to the stories while working on this task. Remind pupils that one character may experience many different emotions during one story. Encourage pupils to tell how they determined the match.

Here is what one class said about *The Ugly Duckling*: The ugly duckling was sad at the beginning. We know that from the way he was sitting, with his head bent. He also had tears in his eyes. But at the end of the story he was very happy: "I never dreamed of so much happiness…." Invite students to fill in a feeling hunt chart for some of the characters (see Figure 3. The chart can be used as a guide for writing about the character's feelings.

Positive language

Dictionary

Have pupils find in the stories examples of positive expressions that demonstrate caring, empathy, tolerance, and cooperation. Have them record these expressions in a Positive Language Dictionary. They can then use these dictionaries in the other activities.

Transforming communication

Pupils will benefit from practicing expressions that reflect caring, empathy, willingness to share, and cooperation. Select excerpts in which characters experience conflict, disagreement, or sadness. Invite pupils to change the dialogue so that it reflects more positive, pro-social communication. Students can use their Positive Language Dictionary in this activity. Encourage sharing of dictionary entries.

What if I...?

This is an activity that requires students to speculate what their own emotions would be if they were in situations experienced by story characters. This works best in small groups that allow students an opportunity to exchange ideas about their reactions. Students are asked: What if I were in the situation of the character? What if this happened to me? How would I feel? Why would I feel that way? This activity fosters self-awareness by inviting students to provide reasons for their emotions. The groups can report to the whole class and a class discussion will help develop awareness of different ways of reacting. A guide sheet with questions and response stems will be helpful (see Figure 4). This activity is very useful when introducing or reinforcing conditionals with *if* because it requires students to put themselves in hypothetical situations for which the context has already been established.

Revisiting some old favorites

Diary entries

Diary entries are a familiar and popular activity with many students and teachers. They are especially useful in introducing a discussion about feelings. Before asking pupils to write a diary entry from a character's point of view, discuss the story and the feelings involved. The discussion will allow for review of past tense verbs in a meaningful context and enable the teacher to introduce any vocabulary that pupils may need. When assigning diary entries, it is important to include more than the main character. Examining the feelings of other characters might shed some light on their behavior. For example, when writing diary entries on the classic *The Ugly Duckling*, it will be interesting to consider not only the duckling but also the feelings of the mother duck on finding an odd addition to her family (See Appendix 2). The writing activity can be followed by a debriefing during which students share their entries and discuss their reasoning.

This activity, a change in point of view, requires sophisticated inferential skills (Johnson and Louis 1987), and the teacher can quickly assess each student's grasp of the main ideas. When the writing activity is accompanied by a prewriting discussion and a follow-up debriefing, this activity can help develop insight into feelings of self and others. In a language class, the

discussions and debriefings provide opportunities to present vocabulary related to emotions and a meaningful reason to return to the text for careful rereading.

Letters to characters

Writing letters to characters is a familiar activity in literature-based reading classes and is perfect for getting pupils to practice positive, caring expressions. It requires the writer to infer the character's feelings, empathize, and then think about what might make the character feel better. After reading about a character who faces obstacles, students discuss the feelings involved. After the class discussion, students write letters to the character, saying something that indicates they understand how the character is feeling and why, and something that might be encouraging or supportive. Pupils can share their letters and evaluate them. Building language skills, letter writing can reinforce not only use of vocabulary about feelings, but also the conventions of a friendly letter.

Conclusion

Successful literature-based strategies help foster personal and emotional intelligence while developing students' language skills. All the activities in this article can be adapted to different grade and proficiency levels depending upon the type of literature chosen. I have successfully used them in teacher training sessions and university language classes.

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Figure 3. Feeling Hunt

Story	Character	Feeling	Showing it	When?
Ugly Duckling	Duckling	Sad Rejected		At the beginning
		Lonely		
				When finding mother
	Mother			

Figure 4

What if I...? Questions and response stems

If you were in Alexander's position, how would you feel?
If I were in Alexander's position, I would _____.
I would _____ because _____.

If this happened to you, how would you feel?
If this happened to me, I would _____ because _____.

If your best friend lied to you, how would you feel?
If my best friend lied to me, I would _____.

Appendix 1. Detecting Feelings

How do you know what people that you read about are feeling? Read the following excerpts from stories you have read in class. Describe how the people in the excerpt are feeling and find the part of the text that makes you think that. (All of the excerpts are from stories in Ghosn 1999.)

Dragonfly Surprise

Miss Randa stood alone with her face ashen. (p. 20)
Miss Randa feels _____. I think so because _____.
Mallika's face broke into a big smile while tears were running down her cheeks. (p. 23)
Mallika feels _____. I think so because _____.

The Old Key

Walid's world began to spin as his eyes were fixed on the big old key on the wall. Through the hot tears that suddenly welled in his eyes, he could see the old house…. (p. 14)
Walid feels _____. I think so because _____.

Mystery of the Missing Mosaics

Roya pretended to read the message while her eyes wondered around the old mosaic. How she loved the colors and designs of this floor. She could see the people carefully putting it together, piece by piece. She could see the noble ladies stroll across it. (p. 7)
Roya feels _____. I think so because _____.

Appendix 2. Journal entries with a shift in point of view

This morning I had a frightful experience. All my ducklings were happily learning to cluck and peck for corn. But there was one egg that had not yet hatched. I was a bit worried, but finally it was ready to crack. I waited for my last duckling to emerge, but little did I know what to expect! This was no ordinary duckling. It was big and ugly and gray. I was shocked and embarrassed. What would all my neighbors say? How could I explain this ugly duckling to them? I had no choice but to chase it away. I felt a bit sorry for the miserable thing, but I could not keep it. I could not let the other ducks know that this ugly thing was my duckling. By the time my neighbors came to congratulate me, there was no sign of the ugly duckling anymore. What a relief!