
CHAPTER 8

DEVELOPING EMPATHY

This chapter of the Peace Education volume is on Developing Empathy. Empathic communication is described as extending oneself into another person's space in order to see things from the point of view of that person. In cross-cultural situations, empathy includes adjusting to the cultural as well as the individual identities of others. The [activities](#) in this chapter give students opportunities to develop an awareness of empathy and to use language skills to send appropriate messages that communicate shared understanding of others through role-taking tasks. Language development includes working with concepts and vocabulary associated with emotions, attitudes, and feelings, which are the basic elements of empathic communication. Teachers can use this unit by itself or expand it by adding additional content and activities in related lessons. The [Internet resources](#) and [bibliography](#) at the end of this journal give ideas for extending the lesson.



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Tolerance of the cultural differences is based on shared understanding, good will, and a common positive goal for the people or groups involved. This understanding is called **empathy** and means putting aside one's personal and cultural perspective of a situation and assuming an alternative perspective. Unlike **sympathy**, which carries the connotation of pity and sufferer-supporter social roles, empathy assumes an equality between two people or groups from different cultural backgrounds. While sympathy functions as a communicative strategy for those that share common values, empathy provides the best interface for cross-cultural communication.

In order to develop empathy, one must realize how difficult it is to practice this interpersonal skill. Empathy requires that we extend ourselves beyond the level of cultural and sociological understanding and try to make connections on the level of individual personality. Our own moods, feelings, emotions, and attitudes change constantly, and it is even more challenging to predict the emotional state, needs, and reactions of others from a different culture. Practicing empathy is a psychologically and emotionally demanding interpersonal skill, but one that is necessary for effective cross-cultural communication.

Samovar and Porter (1997, p.258-261) suggest a number of important behaviors that can be developed to improve **empathic communication skills**:

- Be sensitive to the values and customs of the culture with which you are interacting. Learning about these values and customs is a good foundation for becoming more sensitive and will help you to avoid being unintentionally insulting or **insensitive**.
- Pay attention to the spontaneous emotional expressions of others and stay focused on the other person and the situation. This requires concentration, practice, and **objectivity**.
- Be reciprocal in expressive behaviors. You need to inspire confidence and trust in your communication partner in order to learn about their inner feelings and thoughts. For this to happen you need to be aware of their cultural expectations for interpersonal responsiveness. Know which cultures value physical gestures of friendliness, such as touches and hugs, and which cultures value interpersonal restraint, then act accordingly.
- Interpret another person's verbal and non-verbal actions from his or her cultural orientation, not from your own.

According to Samovar and Porter (1997), behaviors that interfere with empathy are as follows:

- Constant self-focus makes it impossible to gather and reflect on information about the other person. Empathy requires that our attention be on our communication partner, and not on our own thoughts and feelings.

- The tendency to note only some features in an intercultural interaction to the exclusion of others often causes us to misuse information. The physical characteristics and the person's name are only a part of the information we need if we are to do a good job of empathizing.
- **Stereotyped notions** concerning gender, race, and culture often cause us to make assumptions and judgments about other people that are untrue and are obstacles to empathy.
- If we show defensive behavior toward another person, it is difficult to imagine that person disclosing personal information to us. For example, imagine how you would feel if you confided in someone and they immediately gave you a lecture on your action.
- Attitudes of superiority often result in remarks that are perceived as criticism or ridicule.
- **Dogmatism**, or believing that you have all the answers and must put those views forward, is also a negative attitude in intercultural communication.
- We are most personally involved with members of our families, our friends and neighbors, and our community acquaintances. Thus, it is hard to show the same attention to and enthusiasm for the problems or issues of people who live thousands of miles away. While this is a normal reaction, empathy requires that we work to understand and respond to experiences of people who are not part of our daily lives.

Empathy, then, is a very complex and demanding communicative interaction. It is, however, a necessary response for successful interpersonal and intercultural communication. Empathic communication combines socio-cultural, psychological, and linguistic skills to send meaningful and appropriate messages to others. It uses the language responses of labeling, verifying, accepting, validating, extending, and at times **prescribing** to communicate shared understanding with others of different cultural groups. The following activities focus on developing empathy according to these guidelines.



CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

This 50-minute lesson has activities for developing an understanding of empathy and for practicing empathic communication skills. The activities are designed to develop understanding of concepts related to empathy (i.e. identifying and responding to the emotions, attitudes, and feelings of others) and to develop the vocabulary that expresses these concepts. Students are encouraged to continue to add to the Lexical Notebook that they have used throughout the Peace Education volume. Teachers are encouraged to expand on the lesson and to adapt the language and content to the learning needs of their students. Ideas for further lesson expansion are found in the Internet Resources section of Chapter 8¹.



PRELIMINARY LESSON PLANNING

Materials:

- For all of these activities, you will need a picture file of international students in a variety of communicative interaction situations in which emotional responses are shown. Popular magazines, posters, and brochures are good sources for these types of pictures.
- A collection of dictionaries, lexicons, or thesauruses will be useful for the vocabulary work related to emotions, feelings, and attitudes that takes place in the activities of Chapter 8.
- Lexical Notebooks for all students.
- If you are teaching a mono-cultural class, arrange for speakers from other cultures to share cultural information with the class. If this is not possible, collect information on situations that elicit feelings and emotional responses from a variety of cultures, and report the information to the class.
- For Activity # 2, make enough copies of [Appendix A](#) for all students in the class.
- For Activity #3, make enough copies of [Appendices B](#) and [C](#) for all students in the class.
- Students will continue to use their Journals for written responses to the lesson.

¹ Thank you to Barbara Birch (1995 TESOL Institute on Peace Education), who suggested many of the techniques to develop the strategy of empathy for ESL learners that were presented in this section of this chapter.

WARM UP ACTIVITY

(approximately 5 minutes)

Purpose:

- To sensitize students to the diversity of cultural situations, with similar emotional responses

Materials:

- chalkboard

Procedure:

1. Explain to the class that similar emotional responses are common in all cultures; for example, people in all cultures feel embarrassed at times. However, what causes the emotional response of embarrassment may be different from culture to culture. In order to develop an understanding of the feelings, attitudes, and emotions of people from different cultures, it is important to learn about their responses in different situations.
2. Put a word denoting an emotional response (for example, *embarrassed*) on the board or on a transparency for the class to read as you discuss the meaning of the word with them. Give examples and illustrative situations to establish the meaning and exemplify the situations in their culture that would cause embarrassment.

Note: Depending on your class, you might choose another word to illustrate a feeling or an emotion. The important thing is that the word be clearly understood and easily illustrated for the students. If possible, bring in pictures that depict the emotion or feeling.

3. Ask students to think of the contexts in their culture which would elicit the emotion of embarrassment. Write the responses on the chalkboard or poster board. Ask about common situations such as the classroom, a family gathering, an office situation, etc. Note: If you teach a mono-cultural/lingual class, arrange for people from other cultures to attend this session of your class and to act as informants for the students or you may collect this information and report it to the class.
4. Conclude with a review of the situations that elicit the same emotion in different cultures. Point out to the class that what may be a neutral situation in one culture may be an embarrassing situation in another culture. Ask students to think about how this might cause an intercultural misunderstanding between people and to give examples of such a misunderstanding.



Transition to Activity 1

Explain to the students that two of the skills that are needed for developing empathy are (1) the ability to objectively observe and record the behaviors, attitudes, and physical characteristics of the participants, and the details of an interaction situation, and (2) the ability to imagine that you are the person in the situation and to describe your feelings, attitudes, and emotions. It is important to understand the difference between objective observation and **subjective** interpretation and to view situations from both perspectives.



ACTIVITY #1

(Approximately 10 minutes)

Purpose:

- To practice the skills of observation/description and imagination/interpretation

Materials:

- A large poster picture of an international student in a communication situation.

Procedures:

1. Place the picture in the front of the room and ask students to observe the actions and interactions in the picture. Then ask them to write down several sentences in which they objectively describe what they see in the picture, e.g., the facial expressions, the physical characteristics of the people, their demeanors, and the setting. Ask students to share their descriptive sentences about the picture. Write several of the sentences on the chalkboard and discuss any new vocabulary.
2. Ask the students to look at the picture again and to imagine that they are one of the students in the picture. How do they feel? What are their thoughts, anxieties, intentions, etc.? Ask the students to write several sentences that describe these feelings and emotions. Ask students to share their imaginative responses. Put several of the sentences on the chalkboard and discuss any new vocabulary.
3. Review the differences between the descriptive and the imaginative responses to the situation. Ask students if they used different senses or mental abilities for observing in contrast to imagining.
4. Ask students to put any new words in their Lexical Notebooks with meanings, examples, and illustrative situations.



Transition to Activity 2

Explain to the students that one component of empathy development is identifying and reducing "**empathy inhibitors**" such as perceptual biases and personal inferences. Explain that this can be accomplished by emphasizing non-evaluative **perception** of another person and by being able to differentiate between non-evaluative and evaluative statements. While Activity #1 practiced the skills of observation and recording of behaviors, attitudes, and details of settings and the use of imagination to interpret another person's attitudes and feelings, Activity # 2 will focus on the language that carries both non-evaluative and evaluative perceptions.



ACTIVITY #2

(approximately 15 minutes)

Purpose:

- To differentiate non-evaluative perceptions from personal inferences by comparing non-evaluative and evaluative statements
- To practice making non-evaluative statements

Materials:

Copies of [Appendix A](#) for each student.

Procedures:

1. Place Statement A on the chalkboard or use a transparency. Discuss with the students the words that indicate that this statement is an evaluative perception.

Statement A: *"He's an overbearing, opinionated person who is very obnoxious and irritating."*

2. Ask the students to suggest behaviors that might contribute to this statement. Put the behaviors that students suggest on the chalkboard and discuss how they differ from the evaluative statement. For example, *"He speaks in a loud voice and talks to people in a very self-assertive way. Sometimes this makes people feel uncomfortable."* is one way to rephrase Statement A as an impartial (descriptive) observation of behaviors. Point out that the words *overbearing*, *opinionated*, *obnoxious* and *irritating* carry connotations of personal judgment that are contrary to a statement that shows empathy.
3. Give students the six statements in Appendix B and ask them to work in pairs. Ask each pair to choose one of the six statements for analysis. The pairs should
 - a. decide whether the statement is an impartial observation or an evaluative perception.
 - b. discuss the reasons for their decision (e.g., by pointing out the vocabulary that was used in each type of statement).
 - c. give the counterpart of the statement. If it is an impartial observation, what would a possible evaluative statement be? If it is an evaluative statement, what would an impartial observation statement be?
4. With the class, go over the six statements and discuss the students' analyses. When reviewing the impartial observation statements (numbers 2, 4, and 6) with the class, discuss any reasons why the person may have exhibited the described behavior.
5. Ask students to put any new vocabulary items in their Lexical Notebooks with meanings, examples, and illustrative situations.



Transition to Activity 3

Explain to the class that in order to demonstrate empathy with others from different cultural backgrounds they need to be able to appropriately respond to the perceived feelings, attitudes, and emotions of others. In order to demonstrate the language necessary to communicate empathy, use the information about empathetic responses from [Appendix C](#).



ACTIVITY #3

(approximately 20 minutes)

Purpose:

- To formulate questions that ask for verification of perceived understanding of another person's feelings, attitudes, or emotions

- To practice the language of labeling, responding, verifying, accepting, validating, and extending

Materials:

- Pictures which depict certain emotions: e.g., frustration, humiliation, anger, grief, etc.
- Copies of Appendix C for all students.

Procedures:

1. Show pictures that represent a feeling, attitude, or emotion in a clear setting. For example, show a picture of an office worker at his desk looking frustrated about a document in front of him. Ask students to suggest a label for the worker's feelings at the moment. Then ask for a question that would confirm their perception.
 - a. The worker feels frustration.
 - b. "You look frustrated. Can I help you with that account?"
2. Show several other pictures that clearly illustrate a feeling, attitude, or emotion, and ask students to identify and label the feeling and to ask a question that will verify their perception of the situation, as illustrated in Step 2. Write several of the suggested labels and questions on the chalkboard.
3. Give the students a copy of Appendix C and review the possible responses to the perceived feelings, attitudes, or emotions of another person: responding, accepting, validating, extending, and prescribing.
4. Give students Appendix D. Ask students in groups of three to choose one of the four scenarios. After reading the scenario, the group should offer a statement of response for each of the five categories of response that were listed in Appendix C.
5. Ask volunteers give responses for each of the four scenarios in Appendix D. Discuss other possible responses with the class.



COOL DOWN ACTIVITY

Ask students to find an opportunity to practice empathetic communication with someone during the next few days. Ask them to write about the experience in a journal entry that they will share with you.



EXTENSIONS

1. *Exploring feelings and emotions in diverse cultural contexts: An expansion of the [Warm-up Activity](#)*
2. Put the list of words from Set A on the board and distribute handouts of Lexical Sets A - E to students.
 - I. embarrassed, ashamed, humiliated, self-conscious
 - II. trusting, cooperative, confident, supportive
 - III. contented, happy, delighted, appreciative
 - IV. threatened, frightened, angry, hostile
 - V. aggressive, assertive, belligerent, quarrelsome
3. Discuss the meanings of each of the words in Group A, giving examples and illustrative sentences to establish the nuances between the words. If possible, find pictures that depict the meanings of the words and situations that elicit these responses.

- I. Ask students to think of the contexts in their culture that would elicit each emotion. For example, what is embarrassing in your culture? or What makes people feel humiliated? What causes people to feel ashamed? Write the responses for each emotion on the chalkboard or poster board.
 - II. Repeat Steps 1 and 2 for Lexical Sets B, C, and D, and E. If time is limited, ask the students to choose the words that they would like to discuss. This activity works best if spread across a number of lessons in order not to overload the vocabulary learning burden.
4. *Observation and Imagination: Expansion of [Activity # 1](#)*
Select a picture of people interacting; select a picture to show the class. Ask half of the class to write descriptive statements about the actions and interactions in the picture and the other half to write imaginative responses. (See Activity # 1 for model sentences.) Review the sentences and the differences between descriptive and imaginative responses. Ask the students to agree on a "label" for the emotions that they identified from the pictures. The goal of this activity is for students to develop flexibility in using observation and imagination skills and to identify and label the responses of the characters in the pictures. If possible, extend this activity across a number of lessons, and choose pictures that depict different types of emotional responses.
 5. *Labeling and Verifying Responses: Expansion of [Activity # 3](#)*
Use the pictures that you collected for Observation and Imagination activities. After completing the Observation and Imagination activity of labeling the perceived emotional responses of the characters in the pictures, ask students to make up short comments that they could ask the picture characters to verify their labels. After completing one or two comments as a class, ask students to form pairs and choose a picture to develop a role-play that includes verification of a perceived emotional response and several other types of empathetic responses introduced in [Appendix C](#).
 6. *Using literature and films for empathy training*
Collect poems, short stories, and excerpts from novels and films of people in interactive situations. After reading or viewing the text, ask students to comment on what they perceive that the characters are feeling. Ask for the students' responses to that feeling Practice the responses of accepting, validating, extending, and prescribing as you discuss emotional responses of the characters in the texts.
 7. *Learning about cultural customs:*
One of the most useful resources for developing shared understanding of the emotional responses, attitudes, and feelings of people from other cultures is to have knowledge of their customs, traditions, attitudes, and values. An on-going task for students could be to develop a list of common social interactions that they are interested in and to find out how these interactions are carried out in a different culture. Ask students to chose a culture that they would like to become more familiar with and to work with other class members as a team to get information about common social interactions, attitudes, and situations that evoke common emotional responses. Students can present their information throughout the course.

¹Thank you to Barbara Birch (1995 TESOL Institute on Peace Education), who suggested many of the techniques to develop the strategy of empathy for ESL learners that were presented in this section of this chapter.



APPENDIX A

Statements for Activity 2

1. M is very talkative on the phone, and she's really rather nosy, too. It takes her forever to get to the point, even when she calls me at the office.
2. M always begins phone conversations by inquiring about the person's health, job, family, immediate plans, etc., and gives her personal information in return. After these introductory remarks, B gives the reason for her call.
3. E is snooty and stuck-up and thinks he's better than anyone else. He's just not very friendly with us.
4. E is quiet and reserved in conversations with the people in his class. He doesn't talk about other people and he doesn't confide the details of his life with friends, which are the usual topic of conversation.
5. Y is a real freeloader and a cheapskate. He expects people to pay his way and takes advantage of them.
6. When a group of friends decide to go to the movies or to get pizza afterward, Y never has any money and always expects someone else to pay for him. On occasions when he invites people out, he treats by paying the bill.

[\(back to Preliminary Lesson Planning\)](#)

[\(back to Activity #2\)](#)



APPENDIX B

Responses for Empathic Communication

Responses to others from different cultural backgrounds that demonstrate a shared understanding of the perceived feeling, attitude, or emotion can be categorized as:

1. *Responding*: Describing how you respond to another person's feeling, attitude, or emotion by labeling your own feeling, attitude, or emotion: "When you are yelling and arguing, I feel intimidated."
2. *Verification*: It is important to be sure that you have identified and labeled the other person's feeling, attitude, or emotion correctly. You can verify the accuracy of your perception and label by asking a question: "You look upset. Did the discussion in class bother you?"
3. *Accepting*: Telling the other person that you understand their behavior: "It's normal to feel angry and disappointed when you were not picked for the team. You worked really hard."
4. *Validating*: Confirming that the behavior is an appropriate one: "I would feel really proud too if I had received a perfect score on an essay. Great job!"
5. *Extending*: Using another context to elaborate on the behavior: "I know you are pleased with your work in this course. Do you plan to enter the degree program next semester?"
6. *Prescribing*: Suggesting another course of action related to a behavior: "Maybe you could ask your advisor to change you to another section. Another teacher might give you the motivation you need right now."

[\(back to Preliminary Lesson Planning\)](#)

[\(back to Transitions to Activity 3\)](#)

[\(back to Extensions\)](#)



Scenarios for Activity 3: Empathetic responses

Scenario A:

Z looked very sad and depressed. S asked him what had happened. Z explained that he had not been selected for the tennis team for the school. Z felt terrible because he had spent many hours practicing for the team and had even hired a coach to help him perfect his game. His parents were waiting at home for news of the tryouts, and Z dreaded having to tell them that he had not been selected. Z felt that his parents would be very disappointed as well.

Task: Refer to the information about empathic responses in Appendix C. Make as many types of responses as possible to Z to show your understanding of his feelings about the rejection from the tennis team. (Omit #1 *Responding* and consider #s 2 - 6 of [Appendix C](#)).

Scenario B:

D was smiling and looking very satisfied with herself. M asked her what she was so pleased about. D explained that she had just received a letter from the scholarship board telling her that she had been awarded a grant for summer work at a well-known chemical research laboratory. Since D's family had little money for college, this would be an opportunity for her to qualify for a college grant in her field of chemistry.

Task: Refer to the information about empathic responses in Appendix C. Make as many types of responses as possible to D to show your understanding of her feelings about the award. (Omit #1 *Responding* and consider #s 2 - 6 of [Appendix C](#)).

Scenario C:

M noticed that W was avoiding the office crowd in the cafeteria and kept to himself during lunch. He seemed worried and preoccupied, and didn't joke around as much as he had in the past. M asked W about this. W explained that he had some unexpected bills because his wife was ill, and so he couldn't afford to eat in the cafeteria anymore. He felt awkward about taking his bag lunch to the cafeteria, so he just ate at his desk. He was considering taking another part time job to help with the expenses of his wife's illness, but then he couldn't take care of his small son in the evenings. He had a lot of things on his mind.

Task: Refer to the information about empathic responses in Appendix C. Make as many types of responses as possible to Walt to show your understanding of his feelings about his financial responsibilities. (Consider #s 1 - 6 of [Appendix C](#)).

Scenario D:

T has been getting in trouble in school lately. She doesn't do her homework and comes to class unprepared, so the teacher often remarks on her laziness in front of the class. T also talks to her classmates during the lesson and passes notes or drops books or does other annoying things. The teacher is extremely impatient with T, so there is a lot of tension in the classroom. D is a friend of T's and finally asked why she acts the way she does in class. T told him that she had worked very hard on a science report (T is a very intelligent student), and that the teacher had accused her of copying another person's work and had given her a failing score on the report. T tried to explain that the work was hers and that maybe the other person copied, but the teacher ignored her explanations. T became very angry and discouraged and decided that if the teacher didn't believe her, she would not do anything in this class?

Task: Refer to the information about empathic responses in Appendix C. Make as many types of responses as possible to T to show your understanding of her feelings about her schoolwork. (Consider #s 1 - 6 of [Appendix C](#)).

[\(back to Preliminary Lesson Planning\)](#)

