

# Empathy

## Is the Gateway

*Drawing on an experience of being in a completely foreign culture helps a high school teacher put himself in English language learners' shoes.*

### David R. M. Saavedra

I am so frustrated! I feel like I'm getting nowhere with the language, and I'm constantly reminded exactly how much I don't know. I turn on the television or radio; I can't understand anything. I try to communicate; nothing happens. I leave class more confused than when I entered.

**A**t 22 years old, I entered the Peace Corps and went to teach in rural Mozambique. Although it was difficult—as this entry in my journal reflects—over time and with intensive language training, I learned to speak Portuguese fluently. I came to love Mozambique, the people, and the culture so much that I extended my service there.

A few years after returning to the United States, I began teaching English as a second language and history to English language learners at Cambridge Rindge and Latin School in Massachusetts, an urban high school with close to 1,900 students. Approximately 6 percent of the student population are English language learners.

I soon realized my experience in Mozambique mirrored my students' experiences here. I had moved to a new country very different from my own, just as they had. Like them, I had adapted to a new culture and learned a new language. Empathizing with the struggles that many of my current students face became the foundation for my approach to teaching English language learners. I often call on my experiences to understand my students and their states of mind, show them I care about them, and move them from frustration to rigorous, meaningful learning.

Empathizing with language learners in terms of their struggles can aid their learning. Krashen (1982) theorizes that anxiety, low self-confidence, and other negative emotions can create an *affective filter* that blocks learning, especially the learning of a new language. When this filter is lower, learning is enhanced (Gass & Selinker, 2001). Showing empathy mitigates students' anxiety and stress, lowering their affective filter and leading to deeper learning.

Here, interspersed with entries from the journal I kept in Mozambique, are areas in which I've found that empathizing with English language learners makes a difference in their ability to achieve.

### Treat Silence Gently

I feel like I'm an observer, watching myself go through everything. . . . If ever I would define my life as surreal, this would be it.

When a person arrives in a country where he or she doesn't speak the language, observation is the first instinct. Silence is a coping mechanism during this adjustment phase as a newcomer focuses simply on taking in information (Igoa, 1995). This is called the silent or nonverbal period. Students at this stage, as its name suggests, are nearly or completely silent. This stage can last anywhere from a few days to a few months, with younger children tending to refrain from speaking longer (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago, 2004).

I remember feeling overwhelmed with new information in Mozambique: unfamiliar sounds, gestures, people,

devices, customs, and routines. I felt like I was on the outside looking in. My brain was processing everything, trying to fit it into a familiar framework. There were times when I swore I heard English words, even though I knew people were speaking Portuguese or Gitonga. I needed to use all my mental energy to piece together cues, simply to follow what was going on around me. Even as an ambitious, college-educated adult, actively participating in conversation was out of the question.

Imagine how overwhelming this must be for a child. The silent period is a necessary developmental stage and must be respected. Teachers must create a nurturing environment that encourages a student to speak and participate when he or she is ready. It's a tricky balance, however. Pushing a newcomer to speak too early will only raise the affective filter and impede learning.

## Be patient and welcoming. Each learner will speak when he or she is ready.

There is much teachers can do to both respect the silent period and encourage a student to move beyond it. When a non-English speaker first arrives, welcome him or her individually, learn to pronounce the student's name, gauge his or her comfort level, and ask if he or she wants to say anything to the class. Introduce the student to the class yourself, inviting the student to speak only if the learner gives a signal that he or she is comfortable speaking.

In class, pair a new ELL with a patient partner who can help show and explain. During group work, create non-verbal forms of participation (such as checking off a list or drawing a picture). Include early English learners in all activities and invite participation from day one, while giving them the option to decline to speak. Offer appropriate books. Most important, remember that silence doesn't mean



**David Saavedra and his students in Cambridge, Massachusetts, pose with flags from their native countries.**

disengagement. The student's brain is processing so much that it's on overdrive. Be patient and welcoming. Each learner will speak when he or she is ready.

### Offer Context

She said the word louder and louder until eventually she was yelling "PESAR!" at me in the middle of the market. Then she grabbed my arm and walked me to the end of the row of stalls where there was a scale. "Oh," I thought, "we have to weigh the cabbage."

This entry, from my early days in Mozambique, illustrates the importance of multimodal experiences in language learning. Academic language is abstract, with little for learners to grab hold of to orient themselves. Teachers need to provide scaffolding to create a context for learning both language and content.

Not having sufficient context to understand what's going on around you is incredibly frustrating. I remember an insurmountable feeling of helplessness. I knew I was missing an important piece of the puzzle; I knew I was getting something wrong. But I was unable to fix it or even set myself on a path to figure it out. I felt stupid and

believed everyone around me was judging me as such.

That day in the market, my affective filter was about as high as it could be. But once the woman showed me the scale, I had the context I needed to both learn a new word (*pesar*, to weigh) and complete the task I'd set out to do.

Put yourself in the student's shoes; imagine the intense frustration caused by insufficient context. Creating a context-rich environment, in which

factories, canals, and steam engines. We discuss these images together as a class. I bring in spools of thread, a replica shuttle from a 19th century loom, and woven cloth for students to touch. Students compare what they see around our school building to images of preindustrial architecture. They replicate water power: Four students put their right hands together and stick their left hands out (the turbine); the rest run to them in a line (the river), causing them to turn. The subject

of family stress—because everyone has made a tough transition.

For me, this mental exhaustion came and went for months. I didn't experience it every day, but it appears in my earliest journal entries and is still there 10 months into my Mozambique experience. At times, I felt an unusual need for sleep, probably because my brain just needed a break. In large groups, I sometimes stopped paying attention because the conversation moved too quickly, straining my mental capacity. Often, I needed to pause a few minutes before plunging back into the murky world of functioning in a second language.

Keep in mind how much each ELL you teach is dealing with every day. If a student is disengaged or has her head down on the desk, check in privately. Allow a break, if necessary, and invite that student back into the activity later. Pare down learning activities to their most necessary components—and lighten the load for a particular student if necessary. Even telling a student you understand and asking him to just do his best can be comforting and helpful.



David Saavedra's students in Mozambique.

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English language learners can participate and learn effectively, means differentiating curriculum and activities in response to students' readiness to learn and their learning profiles. With enhanced context, students are less likely to get stuck.

Think multimodality: Add visual, tactile, and kinesthetic supports to learning activities. Bring in objects related to the lesson or unit that students can tinker with. Use pictures where possible to teach key words and build background knowledge. Display exemplary work samples and model tasks step by step so students hear and see what they need to do. Accompany all oral instructions with a written version that students can refer back to.

When teaching about the Industrial Revolution, I show images of

comes alive for students, helping them better understand academic text and create academic writing.

### Give Them Breaks

It's an incredible effort just to understand what's going on around me. . . . I haven't been able to get myself to do much of anything.

Functioning in a second language is incredibly mentally taxing. Mental exhaustion is unavoidable for those transitioning between cultures. Add in constant unfamiliarity with one's surroundings, and the mental effort required just to get through the day is huge. English language learners often experience mental tiredness (Igoa, 1995). The tiredness may be only compounded at home by a high level

### Understand Being "In Between"

I'm being pulled in two different directions by two different cultures. The difficulty is that the two are mutually exclusive.

People who move from one culture to another eventually begin to adapt to life in their new home. Invariably, the adjustment leads to a sense of being "in between." They no longer fully fit into their old culture, yet they don't fit into the new. This state can last for years. Ideally, with guidance, students will integrate the parts of themselves represented by each culture, embracing both the old and the new as part of who they are (Igoa, 1995).

My in-between stage began with much frustration and even anger. Between 7 and 10 months in the country, various aspects of the new

culture began to set me off. Cultural expectations no longer seemed novel, interesting, or exciting. They just seemed wrong, and it made me angry. I was clinging to my known, comfortable way of being while it was actually becoming more distant. Yet I didn't feel a part of the new culture either. I was in the midst of the struggle to form a new identity.

When students reach this stage, I often see a change in attitude. They might become more defiant and act out. Their effort and focus in class often diminish.

As my journal entry suggests, I didn't make it to true integration. At the end of my three years in Mozambique, despite making friends and becoming a member of the community, I still felt like an outsider. But it's important that we help immigrant children who find themselves in this in-between space integrate both parts of themselves into their identities. Igoa (1995) refers to the failure to integrate as a "cultural split" and likens it to a psychological wound. This split can negatively affect students later in life, as they are, in essence, rejecting a part of themselves.

The crucial point to recognize is how long the cultural integration process can take. It would be rare, if not impossible, for a student to complete her journey to cultural integration in the course of a school year. Even students who've been in the country for many years may still be struggling internally. We need to remember that although teachers can offer support, ultimately, each individual must make this journey in her own time.

One small but powerful way to help students through this transition is to simply acknowledge the student's reality—even if you haven't experienced it and don't fully understand it. If a student's behavior and attitude begin to change noticeably—more acting out, for instance—talk with

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that student about the difficulty he's having. Suggest constructive ways to deal with emotions, such as talking to someone trusted or drawing pictures to express his state of mind.

You might integrate journaling into your classroom requirements, so students have a space to process the transition. If you respond to a student's journal entries about fitting into a new culture, remember the purpose is to focus on the message and the feelings. Don't worry about grammar, spelling, or syntax.

As the opening routine in my advanced English as a second language classes, students look at a quote of the day. They spend a few minutes answering guiding questions related to the quote in their journals before a brief discussion. The quotes allow students to ponder themes like identity, resilience, purpose, kindness, and human nature in relation to their own experience.

A former student recently told me that her journey of cultural adjustment started as a conflict inside herself and eventually turned into conflict with others. She now sees how her teachers helped her cope and grow; she said she regularly looks at those quotes in her journal because, "they remind me who I am."


### Build Trust

I've had a few moments where I notice a kind of cultural assimilation. If I step back and look at my actions, I think "that's something a Mozambican would do."

Adjusting to a new culture is a trying and confusing process. This is all the more true for children and ado-

lescents. Empathizing with students in this position—trying to see things from their perspective and taking time to talk with them about their situation—helps build meaningful relationships with them. It lowers each student's guard and creates the conditions for rigorous learning.

Yet even as I draw on my personal experiences living in and adjusting to another culture to connect with students who have immigrated to the United States, I'm always conscious of one enormous difference: choice. I chose to move to Mozambique at an age when I was intellectually and emotionally mature. But, with rare exceptions, my students haven't had a choice in this matter: The decision to move was made for them. At times, they weren't even aware of the plan to move until a day or two before it happened. Immigrant children may be ripped from all they know without the chance to say goodbye.

The trauma associated with this lack of agency demands empathy. And effective teaching for language learners demands empathy, the fuel for relationships, too. At its core, good teaching is about relationships—because students allow themselves to learn from people they trust. 

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