



## The Effect of Empathy on College English Speaking

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### Abstract

With various learner factors identified, empathy have been assumed to affect foreign learning to the extent to which it may result in certain differences in learner's learning styles and strategies as well as the ultimate achievements. This paper reviews the research on the correlation between empathy and language learning .A small-scale survey about empathic state of non-English majors was carried out to indicate the effect of empathy on language learners' speaking proficiency. It aims to implicate that college language researchers could attempt empathy-related teaching techniques to create completely "native" classroom environment to help language learners improve their speaking performance in a most favorable affective state.

**Keywords:** Foreign language Teaching, Personality traits, Empathy

### Introduction

The latter half of the twentieth century has witnessed a shift in interest in foreign language teaching research from teacher's teaching to learner's learning. Thus a considerable number of empirical researches have been directed at the study of learner factors in foreign language learning. Compared with attitude and motivation, personality research has a long tradition in psychology. There were discussions in Aristotle. With the affective domain, such personality traits as extroversion/introversion, anxiety, risk-taking, self-esteem, inhibition and empathy, etc, have been proposed that are likely to affect second language learning.

Brown (1994) describes empathy as "the projection of one's own personality into the personality of another in order to understand him or her better." Brown holds that there are two necessary aspects to the development and exercising of empathy: first, awareness and knowledge to one's own feeling, and second, identification with another person. According to him, empathy is probably the major factor in the harmonious coexistence of individuals in society, and it facilitates communication, since social communication requires people to "permeate" their ego boundaries so that they can send and receive messages clearly.

Guiora (1972: 142) defines empathy as "a process of comprehending in which a temporary fusion of self-object boundaries, as in the earliest pattern of object relation, permits an immediate emotional apprehension of the affective experience of another, this sensing being used by the cognitive functions to gain understanding of the other."

Guiora and associates at the university of Michigan have been attempting to study the relationship between empathy and the ability to pronounce a second language; an instrument called the Micro-Momentary-Expression Device (MME) was developed. It was felt that empathic observers would be able to accurately detect such changes. In another study (Guiora et al, 1972) with 411 students at the Defense language institute learning Japanese, Chinese-mandarin, Thai, Russian or Spanish, subjects were given MME as well as other empathy measures. The MME scores correlated with pronunciation scores for the several languages, but the correlation was positive for Spanish, Russian, and Japanese and negative for Thai and Chinese Mandarin. Despite the inconsistent results, Guiora apparently maintained his belief that empathic capacity is related to pronounce a second language. He and his associates then decided to attack the problem of the proposed link between empathy and pronunciation through experimental manipulation. In one study (Guiora et al 1972), the effect of small amounts of alcohol on the ability of college students to pronounce words and phrases in a language totally unknown to them (Thai) was investigated. It was hypothesized that alcohol would temporarily lower inhibitions and heighten empathic capacity and thus have a beneficial effect on pronunciation.

Hogan (1969:309), one of the leading researchers on empathy, refers to empathy as "a relatively discrete social phenomenon recognizable in the experience of laymen and psychologists alike."

As applied to second language learning, it is believed that individuals who are sensitive to the feelings of other would be expected to recognize unique characteristics in the other language, and thus acquire it more readily than those who are less sensitive. It is also believed that highly empathic L2 (Second Language) learners are more likely to identify with the communicative behavior of users of the target language.

However, in the process of language learning, when he fully or mostly understands what another person is feeling, the

learner may not see himself as a layman in language activity. Thus adequate interest can be aroused to foster his language capacity. The learners may not be active-minded and even suffer from serious psychological barriers, if they are lacking in the necessary enthusiasm for language learning. So it is agreed that empathy can encourage learners to learn language successfully and that if a learner shows no interest, he will not have a thirst for knowledge. On the contrary, the appropriate empathic state one holds helps him to be energetic and quick-minded in learning process, consequently make the most of his language potentials.

Since many experts believe high empathy positively affects language learning while low empathy does the opposite side, it is urgent to come up with a practice to enhance it in our daily class. We expect the help from the subjects and methods to convey the significant correlations between empathy and compatible knowledge areas. Meanwhile the paper presents the new teaching methods and the results of the experiment aiming at increasing students' empathy in oral class.

## **1. Methodology**

### *1.1 Objectives*

This study intends to track the reasons that cause students' low empathy on speaking ability so as to provide some practical implications for college English speaking instruction.

### *1.2 Subjects and instruments*

About forty four-year non-English majors of grade 2002, drawn from Chinese department of Yantai Teachers' University, complete the study, among whom twenty-five are girls and fifteen are boys. The participants come from different parts of Shandong province, varying from eighteen to twenty-one in age. As college age students, they have been learning English for eight or nine years on the average from junior middle school to the present day. The experiment began in October 2002, when they just started their college life and lasted for seven months till July 2003, excluding a month's winter vacation.

### *1.3 Observation*

This period lasted for about a month and a half, from October to the late November. The purpose of observation was to find out the physical response from students on oral class as well as the possible relationship between teacher and students. The whole procedure was conducted in a natural setting in order to observe the subjects' natural reaction to keep the validity of the whole experiment.

### *1.4 Questionnaire*

The questionnaire is made to assess the level/intensity of the subjects' empathy on oral class (see Appendix 1). It has been used twice before and after the application of new teaching techniques. The items in the questionnaire were designed in the form of statements, and the subjects' responses were rated on a five-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The results were collected for later statistical analysis to test the students' level of empathy in language learning.

### *1.5 Some new teaching techniques*

Based on years of teaching experience, the writer tried out several practical teaching techniques in the light of the results of the previous stages to enhance the empathy of students. The class activities that prove to be effective are employing NVC into classroom, exchanging the roles between the teacher and the students, teamwork, role-play, humorous time and special day, etc.

### *1.6 Data collection and analysis procedures*

The results of the observation were to make a verbal comparison on students' empathic state before and after the employment of these new teaching techniques. The questionnaires were distributed to students on November, 24, 2002 and on July 6, 2003 respectively. They were immediately collected back after their accomplishment. The results of questionnaire were input into computer, and Microsoft Excel was used to transform them into charts so as to analyze them conveniently.

## **2. Results and analysis**

The first figure shows the empathic state before teacher employs new teaching techniques; the second one is the students' empathic state after the application of new teaching techniques.

The comparison between the two periods of observation shows that after the employment of new teaching techniques students have achieved relatively high empathy in language learning in terms of both the students' responses and the classroom atmosphere. Both the teacher and the students respond that English learning and teaching becomes easier to go than it did before except that only few students still feel still nervous, indifferent and worried about speaking English on class. Most of them expressed their willingness to have English class since they have regarded it as ways both of acquiring knowledge and of communicating with or about people.

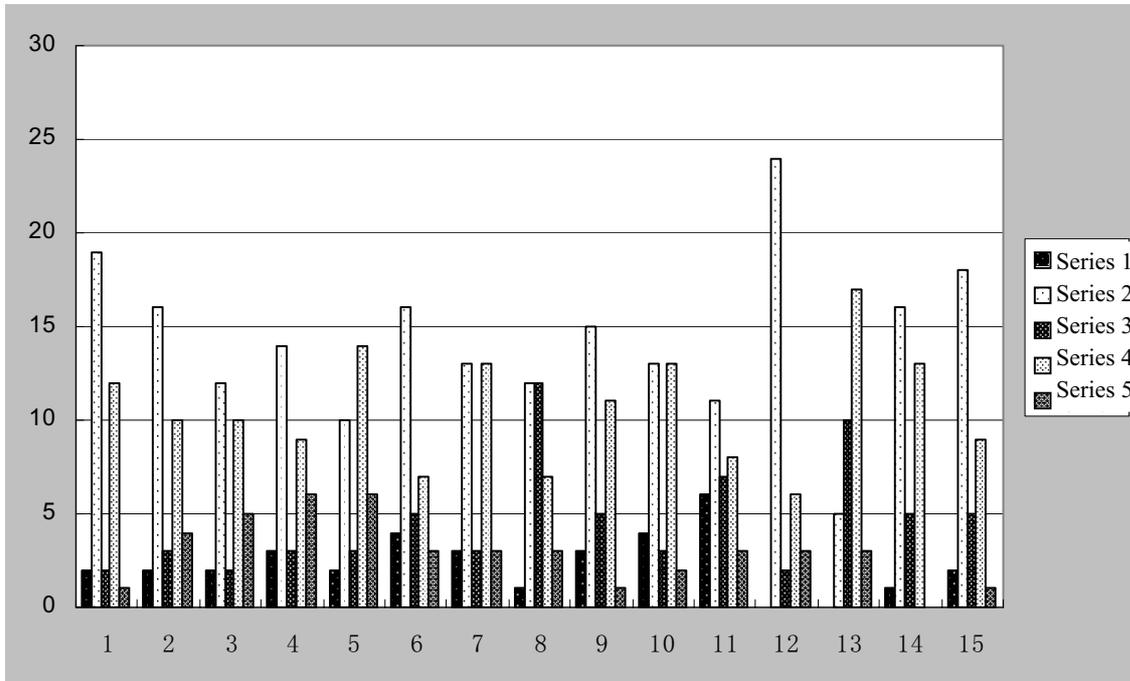


Figure 1.

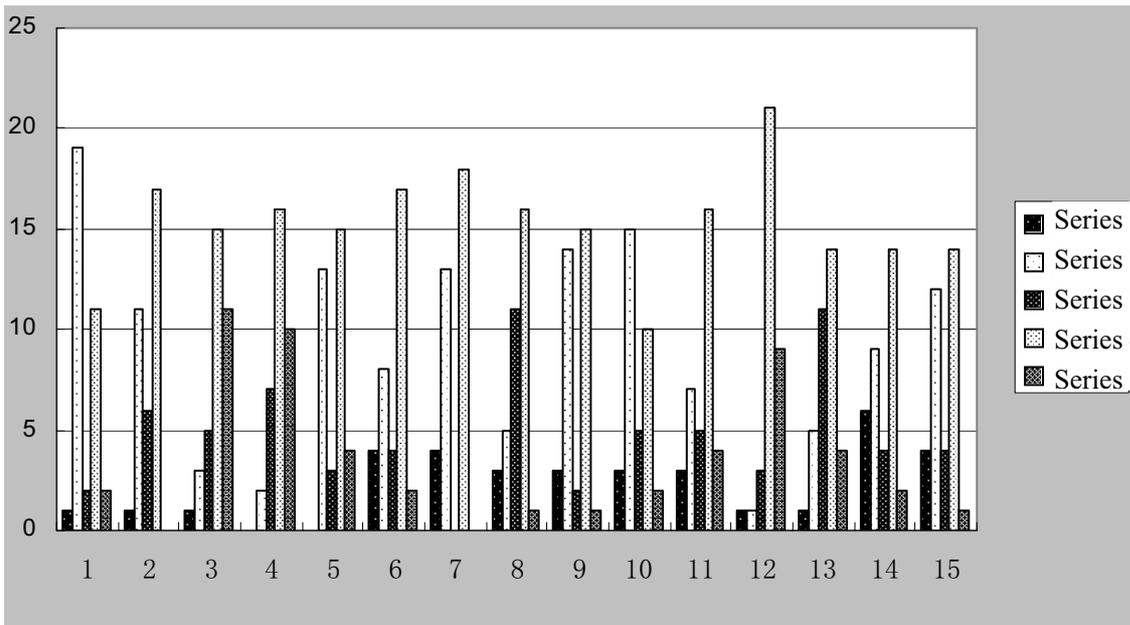


Figure 2.

1 = I strongly agree 2 = I agree 3 = I 'm undecided 4 = I disagree 5 = I strongly disagree

(1) The comparison between the first and second questionnaires indicates that empathy has little correlation with motivation. Respondents did not discard their former English learning purpose of passing CET 4 because the test-oriented education has much influence on Chinese students. The four-year college students have to pass CET 4 and CET 6 in case they are not qualified to get the Bachelor's Degree.

(2) Students are no longer vulnerable to engage in speaking and listening interaction on oral class though a few low empathy students produce shorter academic solicits than high empathy group because of the long established power relationship between teacher and the students in China.

(3) Students can feel less competition among classmates for teacher succeeded in applying teamwork techniques into class activities in order to promote mutual encouragement and understanding as a great help especially in the earlier phase.

(4) However, students' anxieties about the unbalance between "give" and "take" in language learning contribute to their poor learning styles and strategies.

(5) Highly empathic students pick up more cultural knowledge because they believe it helps their understanding of the content. Vocabulary and grammar are not their focus of attention any more because they gradually realize the value of communicative use of language and have a desire for knowing both the English-speaking countries and peoples.

### 3. Pedagogical implications

(1) As early as they were admitted to college, most of the students aimed language learning little at communication, because they mistakenly but firmly conceive that language learning can be achieved by means of a good command of vocabulary, grammar and some test-oriented techniques. What should be clarified is that the present CET 4 and those term achievement tests in college are only ways to judge how well the syllabus has been executed and how effective the teaching process is. But the ultimate purpose of language learning is to train students to communicate. Therefore, a proper attitude towards test should be developed. Meanwhile, it is strongly suggested that the content of CET 4 should be further improved to induce student's perfect management of the relationship between language learning and examination. Accordingly, the current college English Test patterns could be readjusted to closely relate to the cultivation of student's communicative skills.

Communicative skills mean more than reading and writing. It is a comprehensive process, including speaking and listening. However, nowadays, most of language learners in China acquire knowledge for coping with CET 4 and CET 6 and have long overlooked the ability of speaking because it is not listed as a part in this kind of test. In order to help students eliminate this misconception, an oral test is strongly suggestive in CET 4. Correspondingly, an oral class can be added to college English teaching though starting an oral class is not yet a mature consideration for reasons of all kinds. It is advisable that the present listening class teaching be adjusted into a real speaking and listening class teaching. It would be better if the class size can shrink into thirty students or less. In so doing, the possible results may be:

- 1) The form of old listening class in which students utterly input the language information can be avoided.
- 2) A good access to opening speaking class for non-English majors has been provided at first attempt.
- 3) The combination of speaking and listening enhances student's communicative skills.

Thus in college English instruction, teachers should get rid of the test-oriented pattern to cultivate students' communicative ability by providing them adequate speaking tasks and materials and to derive pleasure and enjoyment from authentic human interaction. In short, the teacher should optimize their learning motivations and attitudes.

(2) Communicative competence involves knowing not only the language code, but also what to say to whom, and how to say it appropriately in a given situation (Saville-Troike, 1996). Moreover, this ability to use and interpret linguistic forms appropriately calls for social and cultural knowledge and experience beyond the grammar of the language (Bialystock and Hakuta, 1994). To help students understand appropriateness in English interactions and intercultural communication, teachers need to affirm individual differences and diversity, and differences must have positive value for students.

It is time for us to stop deprecating differences and instead, to encourage students to understand them empathically, to generate a new harmony that will create a school environment where differences can be viewed more constructively. An empathic viewpoint can sensitize one to the full range and depth of someone else's affective stage or situation (Goldstein and Michaels 1985) and create new insights into classmates' personal differences. By fostering empathy in an EFL context, a Chinese teacher with only limited knowledge of English appropriateness can still help students develop competence in intercultural communication.

Gudykunst and Kim (1995) explain that we cannot understand the communication of people from other cultures if we are highly ethnocentric.

*Ethnocentrism leads us to see our own culture's way of doing things as "right" and all others "wrong." While the tendency to make judgments according to our own cultural standards is natural, it hinders our understanding of other cultures and the patterns of communication of their people. Becoming more culturally relativistic, on the other hand, can be conducive to understanding.*

According to Porter and Samouvar (1991), inter cultural understanding goes through several stage from ethnocentrism to ethno relativism. Ignorance or feelings of denial and rejection are natural at the first stage. To help students shift their viewpoint, the teacher needs to make them encounter value conflicts. The stronger the impact on the students' belief systems and their value judgment, the more they will question the stability of their values. Then, by reflecting on their belief systems and value judgments in comparison to the norm of the new culture, students will become aware of, admit, and then accept the differences. When students can tolerate differences and believe that no cultural group should be judged as being inherently superior or inferior to another, the teacher has successfully created a classroom culture where students have acquired empathy through intercultural understanding via the learning of English.

(3) As far as foreign language learning is concerned, it is indispensable to understand the culture and customs of native countries. Just as Xia guo-you has notes, "Nobody can separate language from its culture. Knowing the cultural background of English-speaking country can greatly promote and facilitate language learning." Apparently English teachers can intentionally encourage and instruct students to gain more about cultural information in which reading original novels, magazines and newspapers or communicating frequently with native speakers are some workable ways. Owing to such a practice, students can put what they have learned into use.

(4) The quality of English teachers can be improved. As is suggested by the present study, empathy can be heightened to a certain extent with the help of certain teaching techniques executed by the teacher. So language class requires a lot out of the teacher. A good language teacher should not only possess language knowledge which is to be transferred to the students, but also have corresponding techniques and good professional ethics which can make use of the quality of the transference.

To be a good teacher, rich academic knowledge and experience are necessary but not all. What he or she needs more is academic theories which can dominant and guide his or her teaching practice. For instance, without the guidance of the Affective Filter Hypothesis, a teacher may not notice the existence and increase of empathy and of course will not take any measures against it. And without knowing such helpful methods as Community Language learning, a teacher may not know how to manage empathy. With certain knowledge about successful theories, a teacher can better pass on his or her rich knowledge in his teaching practice.

### Conclusion

Learners are the most important part in English leaning, so is the speaking. Every teacher is responsible for creating a highly empathizing atmosphere in classroom to spur their high motivations for speaking and to develop students' capacity of language use in the most favorable state. In addition, it is high time that the traditional test-oriented and teacher-centered teaching methods were transformed into those emphasizing the students' overall competence.

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