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Empathic Responses: A Conceptual Framework for Effective Interpersonal Communication

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Abstract:

The success of every interpersonal communication is usually credited to the speaker. Speaking clearly and eloquently reflects the personality of the speaker in a social or professional setting and creates an impression in the mind of the audiences. But hardly any credit is given to the listener although listening is equally essential for any effective oral communication. Within listening skill, empathic response is an important component which deals with the feedback loop which influences the accuracy with which one is able to perceive the messages in a way that is congruent with the speakers' intended meaning. The ability to develop empathy in listening has not received much attention in the field of applied linguistics, more specifically in oral communication. Thus, the paper is an attempt to examine the effectiveness of emphatic responses in communication theory. It further aims to make the ESL learners aware of the skills of empathic listening which when employed in different communicative contexts such as lectures, seminars, conferences or business meetings or interviews, and other social contexts would assist them in improving their overall communication skills. The paper also describes the significance of empathic responses in both personal and professional settings and aims to recommend some effective classroom activities that can be incorporated by language teachers to enhance the active listening skills of the learners.

Keywords: Listening skill, empathic Responses, interpersonal communication, classroom activities.

Background

The recent trend towards globalization and advances in technology heightened the need to communicate effectively in English. Effective communication consists of both speaking and listening. A lot of attention has already been paid to develop the speaking skills of the ESL

learners. However, listening skill has received only minimal treatment in the field of language teaching. Until the 1970s it was considered a passive skill and there were hardly many textbooks which focused on skills and strategies particularly for teaching listening skill.

With the emergence of CLT and increased demand from the modern workplace to improve the teaching of interpersonal skill, particularly listening skill has been highly valued. Listening occupies a major chunk of our communication. In our daily life, we come across various contexts where we have to listen to others such as our colleagues or boss at workplace, our relatives at social gatherings or our family members at home and for many different purposes such as to obtain information, to understand the speakers' point of view, to evaluate or clarify our doubts. Although we hear them speaking but not necessarily listen to what they are saying with the purpose of understanding their underlying point. How well we listen and respond to others not only builds our mutual relationship but also improves our productivity and our ability to impress and influence others. Even among the listening skill, '*Empathic Response*' also referred to as '*active*' or '*empathic listening*' has been identified as one of the important element of communication. Here, the listener reflects back to the speaker through a variety of verbal and non-verbal strategies such as paraphrasing, questioning, mirroring, clarifying, nodding, or by using fillers or other reflective responses which gives the speaker an impression that they have been understood. Although, the concept of empathy has emerged from the Client-centred therapy (Rogers, 1951) and later has been widely applied in the field of education (Jalongo, 1995), psychotherapeutic training (Lester, 2002), marriage counselling (Cole & Cole, 1999), Sales and management (Comer & Drollinger, 1999), nursing practices and treatments for Alzheimer's patients (Sifton, 2002; Edwards, Peterson, & Davies, 2006) but it has not received much attention in the field of applied linguistics.

Aims and Objectives

- To review the concept of empathic response in interpersonal communication.
- To explore various verbal and non-verbal strategies of empathic listening commonly used in ESL contexts.
- To make the learners aware of some important everyday ESL contexts where empathic responses can be employed.
- To list some effective classroom activities for developing the empathic responses of the learners.



Reviewing the concept of Empathy

Different disciplines have a different perspective with regard to the concept of empathy. Theodor Lipps (1903) and Edward Tichener (1909) described empathy as a psychological phenomenon which reflects the ‘inner imitation an observer experiences when observing another person or object’ (Davis, 1996; Iacoboni, 2008). The concept of empathy in listening is mainly credited to psychologist Carl Rogers (1951) who defined it from a therapeutic point of view in humanistic psychology. According to him, it is a “sensitive ability and willingness to understand the client’s thoughts, feelings, and struggles from the client’s point of view. (p. 85). It means entering the private conceptual world of the other.” (Roger, p.142).

Twenty years later, Thomas Gordon used the term Active listening in the same tradition and assessed the communication skills used in client-centred therapy in more everyday situations (Gordon, 1970). According to him, empathic listening occurs when the listeners try “to understand what it is the sender is feeling or what his message means. Gordon, then puts his understanding into his own words (code) and feeds it back for the sender's verification” (p.50).

The term ‘Empathy’ has also been defined as “the ability to discern another person’s thoughts and feelings with some degree of accuracy and involves listening on an intuitive as well as a literal level” (Comer and Drollinger, 2013). Carl Roger & Richard Farson points out that “Active listening does not necessarily mean long sessions spent listening to grievances, personal or otherwise. It is simply a way of approaching those problems which arise out of the usual day-to-day events of any job.”

Empathic response, for Richard Salem, is “a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding and trust...The response is an integral part of the listening process and can be critical to the success of a negotiation or mediation....and creates a safe environment that is conducive to collaborative problem solving”. Empathy as a skill has a dual nature. It is passive in the sense that it is reflective of others feelings and it is active in nature as requires some effort on the part of the listener to reflect others feelings through various empathic responses.

Although, the definition of empathy varies from one context to another the communicative context of empathy can be expressed through different types of empathic responses. There are at least three main elements of empathic responses: the first element is the *nonverbal*

involvement; the second element is *paraphrasing* and the third one is *questioning*. (Wood, 1998; Canary, Cody, & Manusov, 2003; Verderber & Verderber, 2004; Trenholm & Jensen, 2004; Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2006; Devito, 2007)

Significance of Empathic Responses across varied disciplines:

There is a list of studies that reflect the importance of empathy in various disciplines. Even the politicians today are laying much emphasis on the importance of empathy. President Obama used “empathy” as one of his criteria for selecting a nominee to the Supreme Court (Hook & Parsons, 2009). Carl Roger’s client centred approach has formed a basis of a variety of discipline ranging from personal to social work, academic to professional including language study, business, medical, communication, and media.

‘Person-centred relationship’ emerged as a framework model to “help people become better at helping themselves in their everyday lives” (Egan, 2007). Michael Argyle’s work on the development of ‘social skill training’ programmes also encouraged the development of these interpersonal skills in the field of counselling and social work in the 1970s.

For social and administration work, good listening is a prerequisite which involves empathy, respect, engaging appropriately with the life experiences of service users, knowing their viewpoints and overcoming personal prejudices to respond appropriately to a range of complex personal as well as interpersonal situations.

Reflective listening in the Educational domain: various studies have confirmed the significance of listening for effective learning (Burkill et al, 2000). Ranging from simple lecture method to the recent student-centred teaching methods, the development of interpersonal skill particularly listening has been given a central position in the university learning experience (Brown and Manogue, 2001). Radloff and Wyber (2000) claim that learning situations in the classroom involve debates, discussions, group work which require students to reflect back their own learning through active listening.

In the field of business and management, effective listening is required for various organizational functioning. A survey carried out by McEwan (1997) indicated that employees spent up to 25% of their total training time on improving their communicative skills including listening and reflecting skills. Even Rautalinko and Lisper (2004) in their study emphasized the significance of reflecting listening in the corporate setting.



Within medical profession, a number of studies have apparently shown how reflective listening skills are used for various reasons such as building relationship with the patients and gathering information from them for the purpose of diagnosis, improving medical management, treatment processes and it also provides increased satisfaction for both patient and physician (Floyd & Beine, 2000; Cocksedge & May, 2005; Aspergen, 1999).

In the modern workplace, interpersonal skills including listening are highly valued (Maes, Weldy & Icenogle, 1997). It not only enhances employability but also extends well beyond the recruitment stage of employment. A study conducted by Zorn and Violanti (1996) showed that employees with better communication skills were at a higher position and it also displayed their upward mobility within the company.

Strategies of Empathic Responses and their uses in various ESL Contexts:

Earlier, the non-verbal cues such as eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, postures were considered an effective tool for the speaker. But recent studies have emphasized the use of these non-verbal clues even by the listeners as well. A skilled listener can reflect the speakers' feelings, messages or the content of the conversation through body cues (non-verbal) as well as verbal responses. These responses or strategies can be grouped into three categories:

- I. **REFLECTIVE SKILLS:** Lindh and Lisper (1990) have listed seven categories of reflective listening verbal responses.
 1. **Minimal Encourager:** also called minimal response provided by the listeners in the form of short utterances like “uh-um” or “hmm” “oh”, “I see”, “sure”, “right”, “yeah”, “sounds good” (Davis, 1986; Mansfield, 1991; Ralph & Thorne, 1993)
 2. **Direct Encourager:** it involves the use of words/phrases that explicitly encourages the speakers to continue such as ‘go ahead’, ‘go on’, ‘continue’, ‘tell me more’, ‘then’.
 3. **Reflecting Fact:** this involves perceiving and remembering the speaker’s words and then repeating the message using the exact same words used by the speaker.
 4. **Reflecting Emotion:** paraphrasing the message where the listener makes a major restatement in which the speaker’s message is inferred. For example: **speaker:** I’d love to visit there, but I can’t afford it.

Paraphrasing: if I would find a way to pay for you, you'd be willing to come. Isn't it?

5. **Recapitulation:** it implies summarizing what the speaker says using the listeners' own words like 'you mean to say that...'
6. **Open-Ended Questions:** this type of reflective listening involves questions such as 'what, how, why, which' that encourages the speaker to elaborate his/her feelings (Devito, 2007).
7. **Close-Ended Questions-** it requires the use of short responses from the listeners such as 'really!', 'are you sure?', 'when did it happen?', "didn't you?"

II. ATTENTIVE BODY LANGUAGE: some of the generic non-verbal strategies for reflective listening have been pointed out which are applicable in many ESL situations.

- **Eye contact:** maintaining eye contact with the speaker usually encourages the speaker. However, eye contact can sometimes be intimidating, especially for the shy speaker. Instead of gazing at the speaker it is advisable to combine eye contact with smiles and other non-verbal responses to encourage the speaker.
- **Head Nods:** nodding the head also signals involvement, attentiveness, and awareness in almost all context of communication.
- **Smile:** small smiles when used with nodes can be a powerful reflective response which shows that the messages are being listened to and understood.
- **Posture:** attentive listener tends to lean slightly forward or sideways whilst sitting. Such forward body lean reflect the degree of psychological distance between (or closeness with) others (Andersen & Andersen, 2005).

III. FOLLOWING SKILLS: average listeners tend to interrupt and divert speakers by asking too many questions or bringing up their own topics. However, an attentive listener can show the speaker that you are following the conversation by using the following strategies:

- **Door Openers:** it's a non-coercive invitation to get started as some speakers need encouragement to talk, sometimes in the middle of a conversation. Examples of such door openers may be like:
 - "Would you like to talk about it?"
 - "Can I be of any help with this problem?"
 - "Would it help to talk about it?"



- “Want to talk?”
- **Attentive Silence:** pauses at number of levels play an effective role in communication. It can be used to emphasize a point, or just before or just after saying something important.
- **Tentafiers:** these are statements that are meant to absorb emotions in a conversation. For example:
 - “By that you mean.....”
 - “From your perspective...”
 - “It seems as though....”
 - “You think that...”
 - “Is that what you are saying”
 - “If I understand you right, you mean....”
 - “I get the impression that”

Statements like these, informs the speaker that you understand them and allows the listener to passively challenge statements for clarity. It is important to keep in mind that there is no arbitrary rules as to which set of reflective skills should be used in a particular situation. The use of these responses may vary from one context to the other. For e.g. in a personal setting, one is free to employ both open and close-ended questions to know the feelings of the speaker who can be a family member or any close friend but in other social settings, asking too many close-ended questions may give the feeling of interrogation which will make the rapport building difficult. Therefore, it is advisable to take your clues from the speaker.

Suggestive Classroom Activities for Developing Reflective listening skills:

Developing the ability to listen, reflect and encourage the speaker is a critical skill which requires intentional awareness and practice. Some of the exercises and classroom activities are provided below which can aid the students to strengthen their listening skills. Before practicing such activities it is advisable to debrief the class about the various strategies or skills of reflective listening.

Practicing empathic listening:

To provide students some practice in empathic listening, the teacher can divide the class into groups of three students-X, Y, & Z where X can be the speaker, Y would be the Listener and Z would be the observer. ‘X’ can be made to speak and share his/her views on any topic.

when 'X' shares his views, 'Y' is supposed to listen and when 'X' pauses, 'Y' has to paraphrase what 'X' has said and then again pauses to listen. If 'X' doesn't respond, 'Y' can ask an open-ended question and in this way, the conversation would continue for few minutes. Meanwhile, the observer 'Z' would be keeping a record of the frequency and duration of pauses.

Students can exchange roles so that each person would get an opportunity to practice pausing and to record the waiting time. The activity can be practiced with other groups also to make them aware of the non-verbal cues of listening.

Practicing Paraphrasing Content

The teacher can divide the class into pairs and ask each student to speak on any topic of their choice for about 2 to 3 minutes. When one of them would speak, his or her partner would listen and when the speaker finishes, their partners are required to paraphrase the content they heard. Then they can be made to reverse their roles for practicing the second round. Debrief the class about the activity with the following questions:

- What strategies did you use to help paraphrase the content?
- What do you think what made your partner show interest and attention while you were speaking?
- What opportunities can be anticipated for practicing paraphrasing both inside and outside the classroom situation?

Practicing Reflecting Feelings: the teacher can organize students in triads say, X, Y, Z for three rounds of practice. Then provide students with three different situations based on real-life contexts and ask them to read their scenes and determine what feelings the speaker might be experiencing. When it is their turn to be the speaker, they will share the content of the situation in the 1st person, conveying the feelings nonverbally so that the paraphraser can practice 'listening between the lines.'

The paraphraser would try to label the emotion(s) and to reflect non-verbally how the speaker is feeling. The observer would record examples of feeling language and non-verbal "matches" between the speaker and paraphraser. Allocate 3 to 4 minutes for each round of role-playing and after each round, invite the observer to share his or her notes with the paraphraser. Ask the class to share their feedback about what it felt like in each of the three



roles they played. Invite descriptions of how paraphraser demonstrated non-verbal paraphrasing.

ROUND	A	B	C
Scenario 1	Speaker	Paraphraser	Observer
Scenario2	Observer	Speaker	Paraphraser
Scenario 3	Paraphraser	Observer	Speaker

Listen for lies: the teacher can divide the class into two teams. Ask any student to come up and speak on any topic of his choice or to narrate an incident or a short story. Then ask him to speak the same thing but to make some changes. Each time a lie (or change) is made by the speaker the students from any team must stand up and identify the lie. The first team to stand up and identify the change would be getting a point. The team that scores the maximum points would be the winning team. This kind of activity would encourage the students to practice how to reflect back to the speaker or to clarify their doubts.

Movie Clip Quiz: the teacher can incorporate movie clips in the class to provide students with a more authentic speech used in our day to day life. Divide the class into teams and give students a question to answer. Then play the clip, students are required to pay attention and stand up as soon as they hear the answer to the question in the movie. Pause the clip and check if they have answered correctly. Then they can be asked another question and the process can be repeated. Alternatively, they can be provided with a list of questions to answer and allowed to watch the entire clip. Then we can see which team has got most of the answers correct.

Order the song lyrics: songs are a great way to engage reluctant listeners, as they can be tailored perfectly to fit the preferences of the students. Here, each pair of students can be given a set of the song with lyrics cut up into lines. As they listen to the song, they have to put the lyrics in the correct sequence on the table. Songs can be repeated if necessary.

Conclusion: In order to be a good listener, it requires practice and most importantly it requires a change in our basic attitudes. These changes come slowly and especially when we have the desire to change the way we view ourselves. Individuals can explore it themselves and see what it is or what it is not, decide for themselves about “how realistic it is. And he is then in a position to change’ (Roger & Farson)

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