

# From Carl Rogers to our days: An appraisal of L2 teachers' empathy in CLT classes

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Communicative and task-based approaches to foreign language (L2) learning (Council of Europe, 2001; Berard, 1991) have pushed L2 methodologies towards more social teaching-learning processes (Williams & Burden, 1997). Negotiation and collaboration among learners are nowadays praised as means to co-construct new knowledge in the social context of the class (Morris & Tarone, 2003), where conditions of mutual attention and respect must be met in order for learning to occur (Berard, *op. cit.*). The extent to which cognitive and emotional factors determine teaching and learning processes is thus taken into account.

Carl Rogers's concept of empathy, central to his late 1960s client-centred approach, is currently reviewed by researchers in applied linguistics (Narcy-Combes, 2005) as a way to characterise L2 teachers' approach to learners: a communicative style, as far as self-presentation is concerned, is thus recommended (Noëls, 2001) for teachers to foster positive climates within their classes.

We will examine a qualitative corpus–Glasgow (Scotland), 2007–consisting of EFL classroom observations and EFL teachers' interviews. Some suggestions will be made concerning the role of empathy within communicative L2 classes.

## 1. Cognition and foreign language teaching

“When the teacher has the ability to understand the student's reactions from the inside [...] the likelihood of significant learning is increased [...] This attitude of standing in the other's shoes, of viewing the world through the student's eyes, is almost unheard of in the classroom.” (Rogers, 1969: 111-112)

Nowadays, foreign language (L2) learning is widely understood as a social action (Morris & Tarone, 2003) that implies the accomplishment of human actions, identities and social facts while being engaged in a L2 teaching/learning process (Mondada & Pekarek Doehler, 2004: 504). Research in AL shows growing interest in cognitive sciences as a tool enabling the study of internal mental processes underneath observable actions: motivation (Dörnyei 2001), emotions (Bogaards, 1988; Cicurel, 1998; Noëls, 2001) and cognition (Borg, 2003, 2006; Gatbonton, 1998) have thus been integrated into L2 teaching/learning research models as variables capable to account for more thorough observations and results.

In this sense, a study by Breen (2001) shows the correlation between pedagogical principles–considered as general guidelines for conducting L2 lessons–and classroom practices–taken as real actions directly observable. According to Breen, there is an interactive relationship between pedagogical principles and classroom practices: one pedagogical principle entails the existence of specific classroom practices, whereas a given classroom practice may relate to different pedagogical principles (*ibid.*: 495). To our knowledge, Breen's study is the most accomplished attempt to uncover L2 teachers' cognition, as a way to understand the driving forces underneath the observable actions of a L2 teacher in class.

The present study takes a similar cognitive stance while trying to clarify the relevance of L2 teachers' empathetic attitudes in the class.

## 2. Communicative L2 teaching: principles, conditions, and teacher's roles

The main theoretical principle at the base of communicative language teaching (CLT) methodology is Krashen's input theory principle (Krashen, 1985 *in* Gatbonton, 2005): in order for learners to develop their L2 competences, they must be exposed to comprehensible input, that is, to models they can understand and process. These models must also be genuine, that is, learners are to be exposed to discourse instances that are faithful to episodes of communication as found in the target L2 linguistic community.

CLT approaches, thus, involve the selection of contents that, being both comprehensible and genuine, are presented to learners in class in order for them to manipulate. Such manipulation will theoretically trigger episodes of communication among learners which will make learning possible.

However, other than the comprehensible and genuine input, for communication—and hence, learning—to occur in CLT classes, a certain atmosphere must be created: one that encourages communication among participants. According to this tenet, certain conditions must be met within L2 classes: trust, attention to peers, and a climate where participants be at ease must thus be implemented (Berard, 1991; Bogaards, 1988). It is precisely the teacher who must make such conditions possible. In order to achieve the task, L2 teachers display three main roles: input model supplier (L2 expert), decision-maker (L2 interaction facilitator), and individual whose personal experiences are equal to those of learners (L2 communication participant).

In terms of specific qualities needed to support an encouraging climate, Bogaards details some which are proper to L2 teachers: warmth, sensitiveness, tolerance, patience, and suppleness (*ibid.*: 124). Likewise, Noëls puts forward the idea that L2 teachers must be viewed as “active participant[s] in the learning process, [who] provide feedback in a manner that is positive and uncritical [...]” (Noëls, *op.cit.*: 135-136).

Such characterisations of L2 teachers may remind of Carl Roger’s idea of empathy (Rogers, 1961): an individual’s capacity to accept and consider uncritically someone else’s emotions, to the point of being able to feel them as his own. According to Rogers, empathy allows a genuine understanding of another individual’s emotions; this may, in turn, facilitate a counselling work aiming to accompany the other in his self-construction process.

Within the field of social psychology (Mills, 1984) and that of clinical psychology (Gladstein, 1983), Rogers’ construct of empathy has been broken-down into two specialised types: a) a cognitive type of empathy, decoding skills would be its distinctive feature, the capacity to understand a person’s condition or state; b) affective type of empathy, an empathetic expression would be its distinctive feature, the capacity to show the other person that we understand his condition or state. Our claim, thus, is that empathetic behaviours exist among L2 teachers, in L2 CLT classes, in ways and with functions that resemble the ones considered by psychology scientific literature.

In counselling psychology, specific cues are given concerning which type of self-presentation may suit best specific cases (Gladstein, *op. cit.*); the objective of such recommendations is for the counsellor to be able to adapt to the client’s needs while retaining his competences to assist and accompany. As the ones responsible for implementing a positive atmosphere within CLT classes, L2 teachers also accompany learners, when performing actions such as

- giving learners time to complete their productions in the L2
- taking time to listen to learners’ productions and have learners listen to one another
- giving (uncritical) feedback to learners
- making decisions about when and how to correct learners
- praise and encourage learners
- acknowledge learners’ attempts in the L2

our assumption, thus, is that a detailed analysis of interactions (Cicurel, 1998: 4) in L2 CLT classes may show the occurrence of L2 teachers’ empathetic behaviour. If we get to locate and isolate such discourse instances may consequently lead to a more comprehensive characterisation of L2 teachers’ practice—one which would take into account teacher’s empathetic dimension in L2 classes and that would be able to characterise it in terms of both cognitive and affective empathy.

### 3. Method

The excerpts here presented are taken from a corpus of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers working at the University of Glasgow Language Centre. From the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> of April 2007, three different groups were observed and tape-recorded: two pre-entry English for academic purposes (EAP) classes—teachers *C* and *R*—and one EFL leisure class—teacher *J*. The overall time of recorded class interactions amounts to nine hours.

All three teachers were interviewed individually; the overall time of teachers’ interviews amounts to two hours fifteen minutes (an average of forty-five minutes per interview). Learners were also interviewed during a one-hour focus group where six volunteering learners participated: three from the pre-entry EAP group and three from the EFL leisure one.

At the present stage of the research, only teachers *C* and *R* have been analysed; consequently, only excerpts taken from their classes will be presented here. Since the present article presents empathy as a hypothetical pedagogical principle for L2 teachers, opinions expressed by learners during the focus group will not be discussed.

#### 4. Data

Recordings were transcribed following an amalgamation of DILTEC and ICAR transcription conventions that applies to all three transcriptions here presented. Each excerpt will be followed by a short discussion that will precede a final general discussion.

##### Transcription convention

<b>R, C:</b> teacher	<b>*fragment*</b> , use of language other than English
<b>AF:</b> female learner	↑, rising intonation
<b>AM:</b> male learner	<b>XXX</b> , unclear fragment
<b>AS:</b> several learners	<b>{fragment}</b> , observer uncertain of fragment
<b>(0.4)</b> , pause	<b>/fragment/</b> , phonetic transcription
<b>:, ::, :::</b> , lengthened syllable	<b>(fragment)</b> , observer's commentary
<b>[fragment]</b>	<b>FRAGMENT</b> , fragment spoken loud
<b>[fragment] overlap</b>	<b>frag-ment</b> , clear division of syllables
<b>.....]</b> continuing overlap	

##### Excerpt 1: "Stress" (teacher C)

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1 C: so TODAY {carrying on with the theme} XXX with something that's a little bit
2 less: a little bit less CHEER:FUL (1.1) we're talking about when STRESS affects our
3 life and our WORK
4 (0.5) XXX
5 AF: {yes} (3.0) it's cause [many disease] (/di'zaiz/)
6 C: [YEAH] (0.9) WHAT
7 (0.2)
8 AF: it's cause many diseases (/di'zaiiz/) (0.5) like hypertension
9 (0.2)
10 C: hmm [.....]
11 AF: [and headache]
12 (0.2)
13 C: YES (2.7) and: how do you know THIS
14 (1.4)
15 AF: eh: I: know
16 (0.1)
17 C: a-ha [.....]
18 AF: [I read] (/ri:d/)
19 (0.8)
21 C: a-ha (0.1) have you have you have you yourself {some of these things:}
22 you've mentioned
23 (0.1)
24 AF: when I {go enter in a kind of exam} my {rate's fast}
25 (2.9) it's cause XXX (laughs)
26 C: a-ha (0.1) ok:
27 (0.4) do you do you do you do the same thing you you still you always have
28 stress before the exam
29 (0.8)
30 AF: YES and then XXX (noise)
31 (0.2)
32 C: a-ha
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Teacher (C) introduces a new lesson theme—*stress* (lines 1-4). Learner (AF) spontaneously gives information about the theme newly introduced that has not been solicited by C (line 5). Once AF has justified her intervention (lines 15-18), at C's request (line 13), learner is questioned by C about her personal experience with stress (lines 21-26); AF is then asked by C to give further details about her personal experience with stress (lines 27-32).

Excerpt 2, teacher C: "Promotion and stress"

1	C:	{what about the word HIGH RESPONSIBILITY}	32	C:	[what happens] when you get a
2		(0.7)	33		promotion
3	C:	could you {match} that in-a-PHRASE	34		(2.3)
4		(1.0) remember we're talking about	35	AF2:	your status [change]
5		PROMOTION then: XXX PROMOTION	36	AM:	{[self promotion]}
6	{AM}:	{promotion}	37		(0.6)
7		(0.7)	38	AM:	hmm:
8	C:	XXX expect XXX to be in a phrase	39		(0.7)
10		(4.6) the PROMOTION: {brings ABOUT:}	40	AM:	XXX the people (0.5) get higher (0.2)
11		(1.4)	41		status
12	AM:	pressure	42		(0.2)
13		(0.6)	43	C:	a-ha hm-mm XXX of status F (S's first
14	C:	WELL FIRST we need XXX someone who	44		name)
15		XXX (3.3) the PROMOTION: (0.1)	45		(1.4)
16		BRINGS: YOU: (1.5) {a new:}	46	AF2:	changes: his: status (0.1) I think
17		(0.2)	47		(0.5)
18	AF1:	XXX	48	C:	YES a-ha hm-mm (0.1) XXX CHANGE of
19		(0.3)	49		status (0.5) what about the word
20	C:	A-HA (0.1) probably (0.1) GREATER	50		(1.0) EXPECTATIONS (1.8) could you put
21		(0.7) greater responsibility (0.5) or	51		(1.0) that in a sentence
22		perhaps DIFFERENT responsibility	52		(1.3)
23		(0.1)	53	AM:	is is YOUR expectation of from the
24	AM:	MORE responsibility	54		other {people}
25		(0.2)	55		(0.6)
26	C:	YES more responsibility and then you	56	C:	{breathes, 0.5} maybe maybe from your
27		you use XXX the word status (0.2)	57		BOSS: if {it's your boss who has
29		could you put THAT in a sentence	58		promoted you}
30		(1.0)	59		(4.8)
31	AM:	eh: [.....]	60	AF3:	promotion bring higher expectATIOn
			61		{from} the boss
			62		(0.2)
			63	C:	YES a-ha (0.1) yes and maybe even
			64		(1.0) from: from YOURSELF you you:
			65		(0.1) you expect YOURSELF to do: to do:
			66		to do better
			67		(0.1)
			68		hmm ok:

During the analysis of a transcription corresponding to an audio extract that has just been played, teacher (C) suggests learners the idea of *high responsibility*; she then gives indications about the type of intervention she expects from learners ("could you match that in a phrase") before relating the newly introduced concept—*high responsibility*—with the main theme of the audio extract—*promotion* (lines 1-5). Several attempts are made by learners (lines 6, 12, 18, 24), which are systematically followed by C's reactions (lines 8-11, 14-16, 20-22, 26-29). Each of C's reactions either gives indications about either the type of participation she expects from learners ("to be in a phrase", "could you put that in a sentence"), or nuances learners' suggested ideas ("well first we need", "probably [...] or perhaps", "yes [...] and then"). C addresses a direct open question to the class (line 33), which elicits a number of reactions from learners (lines 34-41); these are followed by a new series of binary exchanges consisting of C's reactions to learners' attempts either focusing either on content or on the type of production she expects (lines 43-51). A learner (AM) asks C for clarification (lines 53-54); after C has answered to AM's question (lines 56-58), learner (AF3) gives an answer (lines 60-61) that, even though seeming positively accepted by C (line 63), is nuanced (lines 63-66).

### Excerpt 3, teacher R: “Sleepwalking”

1	AF2:	I think they they can speak	30		{deep psychological}
2	R:	I (S's first name)	31	AF2:	and [XXX.....]
3	AF2:	sleep when they walk	32	R:	[XXX]
4	R:	REALLY	33	AS:	[.....(laughs)] (0.3)
5	AF2:	yeah I know {someone} (0.3)	34	AF2:	and I think other people scared (0.2)
6	R:	that you [know in your home country]	35	R:	yeah OF COURSE
7	AS:	[(laughs)]	36	AS:	[(laughs).....]
8	R:	in S (S's country) (0.1)	37	AF2:	[.....for me I'm scared] I just take her
9	R:	yeah (0.1) what do (0.2) what do they [DO]	38		and (0.2)
10	AF2:	[she's] MY cousin	39	AS:	[(laughs).....]
11	R:	your [cousin what does she do what does she do]	40	R:	XXX
12	AS:	[(laughs)]	41	AF2:	(laughing) yeah
13	AF2:	[she] she walk and I have to look for	42	R:	{I know} (0.4) XXX
14		her	43	AM1:	it's a dangerous situation becau[se:]
15	R:	(laughs, 1.2)	44	R:	[yeah:]
16	AF2:	XXX {and I have to look for her} XXX	45	AM1:	they:'ll eh: go out and eh for maybe for
17	R:	SHE WALKS OUT (0.5)	46		CARS [or streets or]
18		and where does she where does she GO (0.2)	47	R:	[yeah of course] (0.8)
19	AF2:	I don't know (1.2)	48		WHEN I was younger I used to SPEAK in my
20	R:	probably [go [straight] XXX.....]	49		SLEEP (0.4)
21	AF2:	[and she speak]	50		I used to TALK (0.1) in my sleep (0.5)
22	R:	[.....XXX]	51		it was QUITE eh: (1.6)
23	AF2:	and she [says things (laughs)]	52		maybe quite dangerous too (0.5)
24	AF3:	[(laughs)]	53		[(burst of laughter) XXX {it always is}]
25	R:	what	54	AS:	[(burst of laughter)]
26	AF2:	while she walk	55	R:	people would ask me questions and I would
27	R:	what type of things does she say (0.7)	56		answer
28	AF2:	XXX anyone and start talking like that XXX	57		(soft laughter, 1.4)
29	R:	(low-pitched hollow voice) ohhhh: (0.4)	58	TM:	(burst of laughter, 2.1)
			59	R:	ok

“Sleepwalking”—as a sleep-related phenomenon—having been introduced by a learner (not reproduced in current sequence transcription), learner (AF2) gives information about her cousin, a sleepwalker herself (lines 1-33), before guessing about other people’s reactions to her cousin’s sleepwalking episodes, and before explaining her own impression about her cousin (lines 34-41). The idea of sleepwalking as a dangerous phenomenon is introduced by a learner (AM1, lines 43-46), followed by teacher’s (R) own personal account of sleepwalking (lines 48-56).

## 5. Discussion

In terms of the six specific actions presented in part two—give learners time, take time to listen and have learners listen to one another, give feedback, make decisions about correcting, praise, and acknowledge—which hypothetically relate to L2 teachers’ empathetic behaviour, we find that C and R’s discourse, as displayed in the three excerpts above, account for all six actions.

Both teachers C and R show an empathetic behaviour towards learners, in the sense that learners’ attempts are systematically accepted as appropriate for each sequence and often praised, however they may at times be nuanced by teachers in order to accommodate them in the structure of teachers’ lesson plans—whose existence we can neither prove nor produce, but only strongly presume.

As for the two types of empathy that have been considered—cognitive and affective—, we find that, depending on the sequence considered, both teachers’ (C and R) discourse may fit into the two. When teachers accompany learners’ L2 attempts towards the resolution of a language-related problem (as is the case of teacher C’s sequence 2), we find that praising and acknowledging are particularly present. This may indicate that, while accompanying learners, and having understood the difficulty of the task the latter face, L2 teachers appeal to a cognitive kind of empathy in order to build up learners’ confidence and encourage them to pursue the task. Cognitive empathy, more focused on class dynamics and hence associated with accompanying learners, would particularly activate L2 teachers’ role of interaction facilitator and L2 expert, more than it does that of interaction participant.

Likewise, whenever teacher and learners—individually or as a group—become engaged in an exchange that is illustrated by means of participants’ own personal experiences (as is the case of teacher C’s sequence 1 and teacher R’s sequence 3), we find that teachers may actively encourage attention and a listening atmosphere by taking on a listening position. Such a position implies teachers driving learners to develop and elaborate their L2 productions by asking them questions, but also their taking a personal interest in learners. Affective empathy, more focused on contact among and with participants, would thus activate L2 teachers’ role of interaction participant, more than it does those of expert and facilitator.

## 6. Future directions

The present article has suggested that detailed analysis of L2 teachers’ classroom discourse may reveal traces of empathetic behaviour. According to the two types of empathy considered by counselling and

personality psychology, the empathetic behaviour observed in L2 teachers has been characterised as cognitive–i.e., using decoding skills to recognize the difficulty of particular tasks learners are confronted with–or affective–i.e., taking a personal interest as participants in the interaction, often reacting to learners' contributions.

Analysis has suggested that both types of empathy would not be exclusive, but rather extremes making part of a continuum. Further analysis may reveal the extent to which these two types of empathy relate to specific pedagogical principles, as tools that can be actively displayed by L2 teachers. Pedagogical principles, having been considered as guidelines closely related to individual particularities of specific L2 teachers, the preference for one type of empathy over the other could be linked to personal choices made by L2 teachers in relation with their own teaching styles.

Finally, further research should concentrate in the impact that suggested empathetic behaviour may have upon learners–i.e., how learners react to teachers' behaviour that has been described as empathetic–and also upon learning–in the sense, does empathetic behaviour increase learning opportunities?

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