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Empowering L2 Learners: The Role of Relational Empathy in L2 Learning

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The Challenge

Empathy has emerged as a necessary component for the betterment of social justice in the community, and as such should be viewed as part of the second language (L2) learning process and classroom practices. Concurrently, how does the exercise of empathy in the classroom provide a pedagogical advantage to L2 learners?

Abstract

In this article, we explore the relevance of the concept of relational empathy to L2 learning. To this end, we first provide a short overview of the notion of empathy in second language acquisition (SLA). Then, we present ideas that gave rise to the introduction of relational empathy in the field of intercultural communication, along with potential benefits of taking this perspective in SLA. Next, we describe the post-method framework for L2 teaching as a strategy that is both well-suited for the fostering of relational empathy and is facilitated by the exercise of this approach. Following this lead, we explain in some detail Broome's (2017) guidelines for the development of relational empathy and highlight the congruence of this approach with important principles of L2 teaching and learning. We then offer samples of classroom activities to further demonstrate the value of integrating the exercise of relational empathy in L2 instruction. In conclusion, we observe that these views are consistent with best practices in language instruction, such as the ones given in the *World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015) and the Can-Do statements for

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Intercultural Communication (National Council of State Supervisors, NCSSFL), and submit that they further social justice through the promotion of a respectful and empowering teaching and learning environment.

Empowering L2 Learners: The Role of Relational Empathy

A capacity for empathy is often posited as a condition for the development of moral values. As stated by Hoffman (2000): “Empathy appears to be congruent with all or most [...] justice principles, as well as with caring” (p. 273). What is more, it has been suggested that a disposition for using empathy in communications constitutes a critical element for building better intercultural relationships (Bennett, 1979; DeTurk, 2001). Given that language instruction is at the forefront of promoting intercultural communication, these views are thus in agreement with Mihaly (2021), who, in reaction to the murder of George Floyd and the social unrest that followed, stressed the necessity of making empathy a core component of this field. In addition, there is a sense that the exercise of empathy contributes to making postsecondary students better learners of a second language (L2).

While these considerations seem to support the idea of making empathy a focus of second language learning (L2), the reasons that link empathy to L2 learning call for more scrutiny. It remains difficult to articulate pedagogical recommendations with regards to embedding empathy into the L2 classroom. Thus, the aims of this article are twofold: first to explain how the practice of empathy may also be beneficial to the L2 learner, and second to present examples of classroom activities that may assist teachers in making empathy a central component of the L2 learning experience. To attain these goals, the authors will first review some theoretical concepts.

Conceptual Framework

Even before a name was coined for it, the nature and role of empathy were described and explained from a wide range of perspectives, such as philosophy, poetry, the arts, sociology, psychology, phenomenology, cognitive science, and developmental psychology (Howe, 2013). As generally defined by Demetriou (2018): “Empathy ... is a feeling with the person and has the ability to truly understand what another being is going through but also, to harness a deep-seated emotional appreciation of another’s situation” (p. 29). In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), Brown (1973) laid a foundation by observing that “Language is one of the primary means of empathizing” (p. 235). Since then, a range of angles have been used by SLA researchers to describe the role that empathy plays in their field. Accordingly, it was viewed as an emotional factor that links a teacher to their students (Arnold & Foncubierta, 2022); as a construct consisting of cognitive, affective, and empathetic elements (Mercer, 2016); within the framework of individual difference research (Dörnyei, 2009); within the context of the field of positive psychology (Oxford, 2016); as a category in personality inventories used by SLA researchers (Dewaele, 2022); as a facet of emotional intelligence (Mercer, 2016; Salovey & Mayer, 1990); and as a positive component of group dynamics (Falout, 2014).

While generally accepted, a link between empathy and L2 learning has only been demonstrated in a few studies. Guiora et al. (1972) successfully correlated authenticity of pronunciation with the ability to correctly assign emotions to facial expressions, using the Micro-Momentary Expression (MME) test. In an empirical study conducted with the participation of 169 college students enrolled in Spanish courses at a midsize Midwestern university, significant correlations were revealed between L2 performance and empathy subscales of an emotional intelligence test developed by Caruso and Mayer (1998) including positive sharing, emotional attention, feel for others, and total empathy scale (Olivares-Cuhat, 2012). As another example, a large-scale empirical study involving the participation of 6,434 subjects (Grin & Faniko, 2012) pointed to significant relationships between world language skills and dimensions of a psychological test that evaluates traits related to cultural empathy as defined by Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000).

Yet another view of empathy relevant to SLA is how it relates to communication as a main goal of language learning. An emphasis on the importance of communication in L2 learning is found in the 21st Century Skills map, where it is considered as one of the main elements of the *World Readiness Standards* and the Intercultural communication proficiency benchmarks established by NCSSFL-ACTFL (Partnership 21st Century Skills Map). Consistent with this view, Mercer (2016) stated that:

In the process [of communicating effectively], seeking to understand the mind of the person you are communicating with can greatly assist communication ... Ultimately, communication is about understanding how another person might interpret or misinterpret an act of communication and requires you to put yourself into the mind of the other to some degree. (p.100)

As it happens, researchers in intercultural communication have long been preoccupied with the role played by empathy in promoting better communication. In this respect, a key contribution was made by Bennett (1979), who proposed that the development of empathy must account for essential differences that exist between groups (with different languages and cultures) and between individuals (with different personal circumstances and experiences). It is our understanding that these disparities could be extended to other categories including gender, race and socioeconomic status (Freire, 1970) as defined within the application of critical theory to education. Indeed, as articulated by Kumaravadivelu (2006): “The experiences participants bring to the pedagogical setting are shaped, not just by what they experience in the classroom, but also by a broader social, economic, and political environment in which they grow up” (p.174). Rather than trying to imagine oneself in the position of another person, empathy becomes an attempt to participate with and understand the experience of the other person: “Empathy describes a shift in perspective away from our own to an acknowledgment of the other person’s different experience” (Bennett, 1979, p. 419). In this context, empathy becomes primarily a relational phenomenon. Again, within the framework of intercultural communication, Broome (1991) furthered this view by proposing the concept of relational empathy, whose nature is dynamic, provisional, and

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context-based: “In order for empathy to have intercultural validity, it must be seen as part of the communication process itself, and thus it may be influenced by the variables in that process” (p.240). In the same article, Broome further highlights the contrast between the psychological approach, in which the listener recreates the meaning originally intended by the speaker, and the act of creating a “shared meaning” achieved during interpersonal exchanges. This conceptual distinction becomes clear when contrasting the psychological definition of empathy preferred by Brown (1987): “putting yourself into someone else’s shoes” (p. 165) with Broome’s (1991) relational perspective stating that: “...The dynamic, contextual, and creative characteristics of a relational conceptualization of empathy can instruct our approach to teaching intercultural communication” (p. 245). These ideas were taken even further by DeTurk (2001), according to whom: “Treating empathy simply as a skill or competency is unrealistic. Relational empathy ... can enhance both intercultural understanding and commitment to social justice ...” (p. 383). In sum, relational empathy may be defined as the continuous building of a mutual understanding and shared meaning through dialogic interactions.

The main argument of this article is that the same empathy guided processes that are shown to be effective towards building intercultural communication may also be implemented in the L2 environment, which then becomes a tool to shape a more positive—and effective—learning experience. In other words, an advantage of relying on relational empathy (as defined by intercultural communication scholars) in the process of interacting with language learning peers is that it fosters the creation of a safe and equitable environment, which, in turn, is likely to create conditions more conducive to the L2 acquisition process. This latter implication is supported by several fields of inquiry in SLA. First, it has been recognized that negative emotions may have a significant impact on L2 students’ learning (MacIntyre & Ayers-Glassey, 2022). For example, such links have been demonstrated by empirical studies on foreign language classroom anxiety (Horwitz, 2010), which have led to the recommendation of providing students with a “supportive classroom environment” (Horwitz, 2013). More generally, the foundation of the critical role played by such reciprocal actions may be found in the cognitive-interactionist L2 theories derived from Long’s Interaction Hypothesis (1983) and Swain’s Comprehensible Output Hypothesis (1985), which posit that interactions are central to the process of L2 acquisition. Accordingly, “the input and output that arises in interaction links with internal processes such as noticing to promote interlanguage development” (Ellis & Shintani, 2014, p. 223). Second, following sociocultural theories, the quality of a classroom environment may also be linked to the phenomenon of language socialization, i.e., how the practice of a language is closely associated with its use in society. Therefore, according to Ochs (1996): “An important premise of language socialization research is that language socializes not only through its symbolic content but also through its *use*, i.e., through *speaking* as a socially and culturally situated activity” (p. 408). These ideas are grounded on a body of SLA research that was initiated by Vygotsky (1978) and furthered by Leontiev (1978), Wells (1999), and Lantolf (2000), among others. They are based on the general ideas that higher functions of learning may only take

place through social interactions and, as a particular case, view the learning of a language as a relational phenomenon mediated by cultural and symbolic artifacts (Thorne & Lantolf, 2007). As a social phenomenon, progress is then facilitated by multiple interactions that may take place within the framework of classroom activities. As summed up by Ellis and Shintani (2014): “Language development is a social process, mediated by both interpersonal and intrapersonal interaction” (p.223).

A question remains as to whether a learning environment may be transformed by its participants. As it happens, it is a central tenet of the social learning theory proposed by Bandura (1976): “Thus, behavior partly determines which of the many potential environmental influences will come into play and what forms they will take; environmental influences, in turn, partly determine which behavioral repertoires are developed and activated” (p. 195). Along these lines, the benefits that group dynamics exerts on L2 learning were demonstrated by Murphey et al. (2021) who examined “... how language learners influence and bond with each other in a group by sharing their past histories, present feelings, and future aspirations” (p. 290). These ideas were further validated within the framework of a large longitudinal study conducted on L2 students enrolled in Japanese universities (Fukada et al., 2017). The positive behaviors that were observed in this research appear to be congruent with the purported role of relational empathy in intercultural communication, thus reinforcing the notion that this type of behavior is a critical component of a rewarding language learning environment.

Bridge to L2 Instructional Practice

How do the concepts presented in the previous section translate to the L2 classroom? To this end, it should first be acknowledged that there is a strong push in the L2 teaching profession to set aside the use of predefined sets of methods to restore a more balanced relationship between theory and classroom practices, a criticism which has led to the inception of a post-method position to L2 instruction (Leaver, 2021). An important premise to this transition, which was articulated by Kumaravadivelu (2006), is that it must revolve around several principles: particularity, which essentially posits that the pedagogical content is specific to the situational circumstances of the classroom; practicality, which implies that teachers “ought to be enabled to theorize from their practice and practice what they theorize” (p. 123); and possibility, which stresses that social context and cultural identity must be integrated into the classroom experience. It can then be derived from these principles that a post-method framework must preserve the autonomy of the students (who control the use of their learning strategies) and teachers (who engage on a career-long path of self-development).

What could be the role of empathy in this frame of reference? As pointed out by Breen et al. (2001), who discuss ways in which teaching and learning principles learned from experience influence decision making in a specific L2 environment, the reflexive process plays a critical role to make it possible for the teacher to continuously adjust to the ongoing classroom conditions. Breen et al. state: “Pedagogic principles are reflexive in both shaping what the teacher does

whilst being responsive to what the teacher observes about the learners' behavior and their achievements in the class" (p. 473). If we generalize this idea to the entire classroom, this description becomes consistent with the very concept of relational empathy, by which positive relationships arise within a group through interpersonal exchanges and mutual feedback. More generally, a case can be made to the effect that the concept of relational empathy is recurrent in the post-method pedagogy—although not referred to by this name. For instance, within his exploratory practice framework, Allwright (2003) proposes seven principles, including "Put quality of life first," "Work primarily to understand language classroom life," "Involve everybody," "Work to bring people together," and "Work also for mutual development," which are congruent with ideas underlying the fostering of relational empathy. As summarized by Kumaravadivelu (2006): "Collegiality becomes crucial to pedagogic enterprise" (p.196). By the same token, a number of macrostrategies proposed by Kumaravadivelu (2006) would seek to reinforce relational empathy through L2 learning, e.g., "Facilitate negotiated interactions," "Ensure social relevance," and "Raise cultural consciousness" (pp. 202-207). In sum, the promotion of relational empathy could be viewed as a facilitation of the L2 post-method paradigm.

Injecting Relational Empathy into the L2 Classroom

At this point, we should consider the critical question faced by the post-method L2 teacher who would intend to rely on the practice of relational empathy, namely: What strategies are at their disposal? To this end, we propose relying on approaches and solutions that have been informed by researchers in the field of intercultural communication. In doing so, our basic assumption is that the understanding of behaviors observed within the framework of intercultural communication are applicable to the relations that are built within an L2 learning environment. With this in mind, we first recognize a critical contribution made by Deardorff (2006), who identified a set of requisite attitudes for the building of intercultural competence. They consist of three components: "Respect (valuing other cultures, cultural diversity)," "Openness (to intercultural learning and to people from other cultures, withholding judgment)," and "Curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty)." While these principles were proposed with the aim of improving communications with members of other cultures, they may also be of significant benefit within the L2 classroom as "empathy allows us to build trust and respect, reduce tensions, encourage information-sharing, and create a safe environment for interaction" (Broome, 2017, p.1284). Accordingly, these dispositions could sum up the conditions that the teacher should instill among their students as part of an empathy-based learning environment. As a next step, following the notion of relational empathy proposed by Broome (1991), it is crucial for the teacher to cultivate an active engagement of the students with the target culture as well as between themselves. To better understand what this means, one must highlight the imperative to "focus on the creation of shared meaning" and on the idea that "understanding is not viewed as a product, but as an ongoing process occurring between communicators" (p. 1285). Furthermore,

Broome (2017) proposed that the promotion of relational empathy depends on the application of five guiding principles (pp. 1285-87). It should be noted that here as well, these concepts may naturally be expanded to relationships between students within a classroom.

- **View understanding as dynamic and provisional.** This guideline is derived from the recognition that interactions with others are always influenced by preconceived ideas. So, a first step is to accept that a mutual understanding is never reached but must be derived instead from a deliberate process, which therefore is always changing and in progress. This view agrees with the central role that Breen et al. (2001) assigns to reflexivity in L2 learning, as it involves a constant reevaluation of one's opinions about others during interpersonal exchanges. Thus, "intercultural empathy is developed through an ongoing, corrective process that is dynamic and circular" (p. 1285).
- **Focus on the bridging of difference.** This contrasts with the natural tendency to read an action according to our own interpretations, which forgoes the effort of truly attempting to understand another point of view. The same precept is also proposed by Kumaravadivelu (2006) within the context of the post-method L2 classroom in the form of a macrostrategy recommending to "Minimize perceptual mismatches" (p. 204). In his words: "An awareness of these mismatches can help us effectively intervene whenever we notice or whenever learners indicate problems in carrying out a specified classroom activity" (p. 204).
- **Shift our perspective away from our own experiences.** This suggests that one must resist the temptation to assess others through their own system of values and focus instead on the inner thoughts and motivations that are favored by others. This principle may be also summarized by the "Platinum Rule" proposed by Bennett (1979): "Do unto others as they themselves would have done unto them" (p. 422). As it happens, the benefits brought by this change of reference are well known within the field of transformative language learning (TLL), which for instance claims that learners' success in L2 while studying abroad is conditioned by the need to reach an appropriate level of intercultural development "that permits them to shift from the home culture perspective to that of the target culture" (Davidson et al., 2021, p. 111).
- **Base our interpretation on the overall context of the encounter.** This tenet requires one to consider the realities experienced by the others as an essential factor towards reaching a better understanding of their point of view. From the perspective of L2 learning, this view is congruous with Kumaravadivelu (2006) macrostrategy advocating to "Ensure social relevance", which involves developing an awareness for the socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions that underlie the participants' lives.
- **Strive for a synthesis of perspectives.** This idea posits that it is crucial to seek a common understanding between a diversity of views, even when they are too different to lead to a form of compromise, thus leading to a fundamental "goal of intercultural empathy [...] to create a unique understanding" (p. 1287).

L2 Activities for Promoting Relational Empathy

In this section, the authors propose examples of activities aimed for L2 classrooms at the secondary and post-secondary levels, which are aimed at taking advantage of relational empathy to establish better communications. In doing so, the teacher creates a classroom that minimizes the impact of negative emotions and invites the participants to engage in meaningful interactions. In turn, this should promote the acquisition of the L2 by providing a supportive environment and integrating oral interactions situated within the social and cultural frameworks of the target language. In alignment with Dearsordff's recommendations (2006), the cultivation of a learning environment that combines respect, openness, curiosity and discovery should be viewed as a precondition for this type of exercise to be successful. The following examples stem from Broome's (2017) abovementioned five guiding principles for the promotion of empathy in intercultural communications. Each activity includes suggested grade levels, proficiency targets, and recommended functions and forms in the case of a Spanish language classroom.

Activity 1. View Understanding as Dynamic and Provisional

Grade level: 9-16

Proficiency level: Novice through advanced

Functions: Expressing likes/dislikes, considering other's point of view, stating preferences **Forms:** *Gustar (to like)*, *preferer (to prefer)*, present tense, subjunctive

The purpose of this activity is to steer a group of students towards considering the point of view of another group, and to do so in a dynamic way, i.e., by leading the class to an inclusive outcome, rather than casting views aside. The following example refers to a fondness expressed by students for a specific musical style as a way to initiate a conversation.

- Select two genres reflecting the interest of the students (e.g., either reggae or hip-hop).
- Request students to select one option and form groups.
- Each group is required to write at least five reasons that support their choice.
- The teacher guides a discussion by contrasting aspects of these styles including musical elements and lyrics. In doing so, the teacher may allude to the social justice themes found in reggae versus the more individualistic view of society pervasive in hip-hop.
- Students defend their choice and listen to the arguments of the other side.
- The teacher asks students to vote for a favorite song from the musical style they did not select in the first place.
- Students are asked to write a short reflection on reasons that incited their classmates to support another style of music than they chose.

Activity 2. Focus on the Bridging of Difference

Grade level: 9-16

Proficiency level: Intermediate (includes a complication) through advanced

Functions: Asking for help, resolving conflict

Forms: *Me puede ayudar (can you help me)*, *podría (would you help me)*, present tense, conditional.

In this activity, a role-play scenario is set to enact a situation illustrating a misunderstanding stemming from cultural differences. For instance, a first group of students may impersonate the members of a North American family moving into a South American country, while a second group represent their new neighbors. For instance, a US family from the Midwest moves to a residential neighborhood in Santiago, Chile. While doing so, they expect to experience some friendly interactions with their new neighbors and look forward to doing so while using their hard-won Spanish speaking skills. However, they are disappointed to be apparently ignored (or snubbed?) as nobody seems to even try to approach them. What they do not understand is that Chilean neighbors do not acknowledge newcomers because it is not a cultural norm in this part of the world. At the same time, the Chilean neighbors are put off by the showy attitude of the Midwestern family and dislike their fashion choices. The activity culminates in recreating an encounter taking place as the North American family coincidentally encounters the Chilean family at a grocery store.

- The instructor reviews social customs in Chile and asks the US students to compare them with their own behaviors.
- The students get into groups and select the characters they will represent in the role-play situation (e.g., parents, siblings).
- The teacher informs each group of a need that they encounter, e.g., the US family is out of cash (they miscalculated the exchange rate) and the Chilean family is looking for a ride as their car broke down.
- Both families meet incidentally at the grocery store, but the participants are not aware of the specific need experienced by the other group.
- The students must reach out, identify, and negotiate actions that are in their best mutual interests (while staying in character) by bridging differences.
- Finally, students are asked to write a short reflection on the insight they gained through this exercise.

Activity 3. Shift our Perspective Away From our Own Experiences

Grade level: 9-16

Proficiency level: Intermediate through advanced

Functions: Analyzing literary pieces, expressing an argument, shifting perspectives, integrating others' point of view, writing an argumentative essay

Forms: *Opinar* (to give an opinion), *parecer* (to appear), present tense

Students are faced with the ambiguous actions of a famous historical figure and put in a situation where they must decenter themselves from an initial opinion they formed about them. In an essay they must then explain how they process the dichotomy between myth and reality and how they may still see the value of a legacy despite the personal failings of its author.

- Students read poems from Pablo Neruda, for instance from *Los veinte poemas de amor*, and then reflect on them.
- In the next session, the instructor presents biographical information on Pablo Neruda that reveals objectionable aspects of his life, which has led to a rejection of his work by some intellectual circles.

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- Students are asked to take a position in this debate and submit anonymously a few reasons behind their choice (as perhaps motivated by their own personal circumstances).
- The teachers select, read and discuss some of the feedback with a view to emphasizing the critical dynamics that arise within the classroom.
- Subsequently, students are asked to write an essay in two parts: first defending the work of Pablo Neruda to one of his accusers, and second to argue against the work of Pablo Neruda with a professor of Spanish literature.

Activity 4. Base Our Interpretation on the Overall Context of the Encounter

Grade level: 16 Advanced Placement

Proficiency level: Advanced

Functions: Interpreting oral and written text, expressing understanding, synthesizing different type of information

Forms: Major time frames, tenses

The teacher writes a famous quote on the board, first without offering any further background. After the students react, the teacher provides more details about the text, the life, and the historical circumstances of the author. The students are then given an opportunity to review their previous positions and consider this new information.

- For example, the following quote by Federico García Lorca could be used in an L2 Spanish class “*En España, los muertos están más vivos que en cualquier otro país del mundo.*” (In Spain, the dead are more alive than anywhere else in the world.)
- The teacher requests the students to react to this statement and write down their impressions.
- The teacher reads reactions expressed by the students (while preserving their anonymity).
- The teacher then reads the text “*Juego y teoría del duende*” (1933) from which this quote originates.
- The students are then requested to describe the new understanding they have gained from classmates’ feedback and their own interpretation of the original text.
- Finally, the students are asked to reflect on how they were better able to interpret the thoughts of García Lorca after reading—and possibly getting inspired by—the passionate talk that the author gave to his original audience.

Activity 5. Strive for a Synthesis of Perspectives

Grade level: 9-16

Proficiency level: Novice through advanced

Functions: Preparing a travel itinerary, finding common ground, negotiating, stating preferences

Forms: Present and future tenses, locations

For this role-play activity, the classroom must plan a study abroad trip that combines L2 learning with other interests. It is up to them to identify a venue that may best satisfy all the participants. For instance:

- The participants are divided into two groups, representing students who are members of the ski club and students who are members of the literature club.
- To secure affordable housing, the two groups must pool their resources and agree on lodging accommodations that will neither be in the mountains nor within an urban cultural center.
- Each group will propose a travel itinerary that, in their minds, strike the best compromise.
- Both groups get together and compare their proposals.
- After negotiating a final decision, the students will generate an itinerary and plan for the study abroad trip.

Activity 6. Cumulative Assignment

Grade level: College

Proficiency level: intermediate to advanced

Functions: Researching information, skimming, scanning, expressing feelings and emotion, finding common ground, negotiating, shifting of perspective

Forms: Major time frames, indirect speech.

This activity immerses the student into the 2019 Chilean protests, also known as *estadillo social* (social uprising). It consisted of a series of demonstrations that started in the capital, Santiago, and expanded to the entire country. The four-day civil unrest was a result of the marked inequalities in the society, the high cost of living, university graduate unemployment, neo-liberal policies, and corruption scandals. As a result, the country suffered the destruction of major means of transportation, businesses, and infrastructure. The president called for a state of emergency and the armed forces took action to prevent more destruction. The army was blamed for the use of excessive force leading to the deaths of 29 protesters and injuring of 2,500 others. After the protests, President Piñera announced a series of measures to improve living conditions, namely, better pensions and healthcare benefits, raising the minimum wage, price controls on energy costs, a new tax for higher-income earners, and a reduction in the salary of elected officials (Wikipedia). The movement also led to a process for the writing of a new Chilean constitution, which is still ongoing.

This cumulative activity intertwines all strategies as part of a roleplay simulation activity, creating situations that will induce the exercise of relational empathy, thus leading to better communication. This activity can be shortened and used during a class period or expanded and used during the semester over the course of a few weeks. In addition, these examples are aligned with Broome's (2017) five guiding principles for the promotion of relational empathy.

Each student impersonates a character involved in this protest with the goal of decentering their cultural beliefs and recognizing the socio-cultural background of their character. To help students learn about the characters' stories and what led them to hold certain ideas (without judging them based on their own feelings and experiences), we decided to flip the usual flow of an activity and introduce the characters' stories without alluding to the social uprising. A few notes before diving into the activity: While many of the characters are real, this type of activity leads to a certain degree of fictionality and dramatization of the event. This activity

can serve as a model that can be adapted to other social justice topics relevant to the L2 classroom.

Step 1. Dynamic Worlds

This activity serves to familiarize students with the topic of the Chilean social uprising. To this end, each student is assigned a character they will impersonate. Some sample characters are given in Table 1. The last column of the table is included to show the involvement of the characters.

- Students conduct an online search about the character they represent.
- They draw a timeline of the life of their character, highlighting the most impactful events in their life.
- They write a list of their characters' personalities, cultural beliefs, and social views.

These steps enable the students to better impersonate the characters in their complexity and thus shape their understanding as dynamic and provisional (guideline 1).

Table 1

Sample Characters of the Activity

	Name	Profession	Involvement
Group 1 (Protesters)	PareMan	Student	Protester who became famous worldwide thanks to a picture of him holding a stop sign going viral.
	Tía Pikachu	Kindergarten teacher	Protester who became famous for dancing and singing dressed up as Pikachu.
	Gustavo Gatica	Student	Protester who was hit by a rubber bullet and blinded during the protests.
Group 2 (Government)	Sebastián Piñera	President of Chile	In charge of the government that raised the subway fare for the Chilean capital that sparked the protest, he announced a state of emergency to authorize the deployment of the Chilean Army in the street.
	Mario Rozas	<i>Carabinero</i> (Chilean police) general director	He was in charge of the police force that repressed the protests and was accused of human rights violations by various ONGs.

Group 3 (Not involved in the Uprising)	Julieta Rojas	<i>Peluquera</i> (Hairdresser)	The mother of a student attending the protests
	Gaspar Soto	University professor in Chile	A college professor with family members in favor and against the protest

Step 2. Big Worlds

The purpose of this activity is to guide students to consider the perspectives of different social actors in the Chilean uprising and their actions. Students are divided into groups based on their role in the uprising (e.g., protesters, members of the government, and Chileans not directly involved in the protest). Members of two groups interact and share their cultural/personal beliefs and views of the current situation in the country.

- Group 1 (protesters) and Group 2 (government) discuss with each other their motivations for their participation and reaction in the uprising, as well as their views that they think legitimize their position.
- Group 3 (not directly involved in the uprising) works with groups 1 and 2 to present and discuss their own views (concern for their relatives, their own safety, and the long-term prospects of the movement).
- Students write a reflection on the personal reality of the main actors, their social context, and their involvement. Each group (1-3) must indicate at least one point of view that they did not consider before from a different group.

These steps will enable the students to focus on the bridging of differences (guideline 2).

Step 3. Shifting Worlds

In this activity, students must re-enact a situation in which the characters must decenter themselves and bridge differences. A sample scenario for roleplay is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Scenario

The *estallido* (social uprising) has escalated and the city infrastructure is being burned and vandalized.

Participants	Prompt
Julieta Rojas, mother	Julieta is worried that her son participating in the protest would be hurt and that her downtown hair salon could be damaged.
PareMan, protester	The protester has lost hope for durable change and has begun throwing Molotov bombs on the main square.

- Julieta goes to *La Plaza de Armas* to find her son, who is involved in the protests. She approaches PareMan to find information about her son while criticizing what he is doing.
- Students role-play the interaction.

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- In a reflexive assignment, students are asked to provide reasons that explain the positions and actions taken by their counterpart.

In this step, students impersonate a shift of perspective from their own experiences (guideline 3).

Step 4. Real Worlds

The teacher talks about the uprising, how it escalated, the subsequent deployment of the armed forces and the declaration of state of emergency, and the excesses that took place during the repression of the movement.

- Students watch a YouTube video depicting the events (Guardian News, 2019). This original footage shows the violence and distress of the protests in a way that stirs the emotions of the viewers.
- Based on this new perspective, students are asked to reflect on the meaning and impact of the uprising on the lives of the groups they represent.

In this step, the students gain an interpretation of the events in relation to its context (guideline 4).

Step 5. A Better World?

The uprising has eventually led to a series of actions for the writing of a new Chilean constitution, a process that is still ongoing today. The teacher brings this information to the classroom and asks the groups to move forward in time and become the participants of a consultative initiative aimed at defining the process for the writing of a new constitution.

- Participants are asked to research larger aspects of Chilean society whose legitimate claims were not featured prominently in the protests, such as the rights of indigenous people.
- In view of the new perspective gained from the activities, which segment of society should be asked to join a constitutional assembly?
- The three original groups provide recommendations for priorities to be considered by the constitutional assembly.

In this last step, the students strive for a synthesis of perspectives (guideline 5).

Throughout these exercises, it is noteworthy that the activities include elements that can make the classroom environment more favorable to L2 learning. Indeed, the very nature of activities requiring students to shift their perspective, rethink their understanding, find agreements, and synthesize point of views, all within the framework of dynamic interactions and with the aim of improving relationships, is bound to be quite engaging and take the students away from negative emotions that may otherwise be detrimental to the learning of an L2. In other words, the outcome is to induce flow, a concept stemming from the field of positive psychology (MacIntyre & Ayers-Glassey, 2022), which is considered an enabler of an especially deep-seated form of motivation. What is more, these examples provide students with opportunities to practice the L2 in a context that recreates authentic social and cultural conditions with respect to the target language. This is consistent

with Handford's view (2016): "Learning takes place in particular contexts of use, which in turn influence the language used and its appropriateness; learning the socially informed constraints and opportunities of particular situations is seen as fundamental to successful acquisition" (p.152).

Conclusions

This article explored the notion of relational empathy, as proposed by researchers in the field of intercultural communication and promoted the idea of transposing this concept to an L2 learning environment consistent with the views of a post-method condition in language teaching. These considerations reinforce the premise that, in addition to playing a crucial role in promoting social justice, the exercise of empathy makes positive contributions to the learning of an L2. The key element to this insight is to consider empathy as a factor which facilitates improved communications through better interactions, thus resulting in a more rewarding learning experience. Accordingly, examples of activities were provided to implement these ideas: 1) by seeking to explore different social and cultural realities relevant to the target language, whose themes are selected based on the teacher's own experiences while capitalizing on the students' unique cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and 2) by focusing on developing empathic interactions between students in accordance with Broome's five guiding principles, whose aims are not to merely transpose oneself into somebody else's thoughts and feelings, but rather to seek a shared understanding of experiences and values. While this approach was presented within the framework of a post-method condition in L2 instruction, it should be stressed that the use of relational empathy in the classroom could also be used alongside other teaching methods that put an emphasis on the fostering of social justice, such as Critical Content-Based Instruction (Sato et al., 2017) and social justice informed teaching (Wassell et al., 2019). In conclusion, teachers may find in relational empathy a pathway towards developing better interpersonal communication skills in accordance with the guidelines of the *World Readiness Standards* (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015) and the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do statements for Intercultural Communication (NCSSFL; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2011). Furthermore, in pursuing this goal, teachers may also value the idea that these empathetic practices serve their students throughout their lives in the service of building a more just society.

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Appendix

Resources for *Estallido Social en Chile*

A tres años del estallido social, Gabriel Boric pide unión a los chilenos. <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-10-18/chile-en-un-mar-de-incertidumbre-a-dos-anos-del-estallido-social.html>

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