

Walk a Mile: Empathy in the Language Classroom

Susan Laura SULLIVAN¹⁾

ウォーク・ア・マイル: 言語教室で共感を促進する活動

サリバン スーザン ローラ¹⁾

Abstract

This essay explores an adaptation of the Empathy Museum's ongoing interactive installation *A Mile in my Shoes* as an activity using VoiceThread, or alternative software, as a presentation and storytelling tool in one of the author's 2016 advanced level compulsory EFL listening and speaking classes at a Japanese university. The primary objective was to investigate ways in which the adapted activity could enhance students' development of empathy while also incorporating key communicative competence traits. Students created VoiceThread slide presentations, the first slide featuring a pair of shoes. They recorded a story relating to times when they wore those shoes and shared the stories with their classmates. Through storytelling, they were encouraged to "step into the shoes" of others, a process that fosters a deeper understanding of diverse experiences. The essay discusses how personal narratives and storytelling can serve as instruments for building empathy, enabling students to connect with the experiences of others. They also provide students with a practical context in which to develop language proficiency, as the activity integrates key communicative competence traits for language learners, including fluency, the four macro skills and Schmidt's hypothesis that active noticing of language output is helpful for language acquisition (1990; 1995). This essay highlights the potential educational implications of such an adaptation for learners, underscoring its ability to holistically develop students' general wellbeing and aptitude by nurturing empathy and improving language skills within a real-world, cross-cultural context.

Keywords: empathy, interculturalism, communicative competence, student autonomy

Introduction

This paper outlines how an Empathy Museum idea involving physical interaction and focusing on story was adapted for a seat-bound Japanese university class. London's Empathy Museum first hosted Clare Patey's installation, *A Mile in My Shoes* in the U.K. in 2015 (Morris, 2015; Patey, n.d.), and in Western Australia in 2016 (Perth International Arts Festival, 2016). The premise of the installation is that empathy is fostered when people put themselves in "other people's shoes," (Trapè, 2019, author's quotation marks). Attempts to

actualise this idiom are facilitated when participants wear the shoes of another while listening to a podcast recorded by the shoes' previous owner (Morris, 2015). Inspired by this exhibition, the author devised a lesson in which her advanced level EFL listening and speaking (LS) Japanese university students created slide presentations featuring a pair of shoes that they regularly wore and had been wearing at a time that held significance for them. Through the use of presentation and storytelling tools such as VoiceThread (VT), and storytelling techniques, students shared stories of this time with their classmates. It was hoped that this action

1) 東海大学人文学部 Tokai University, Faculty of Humanities, 3-20-1 Orido, Shimizu-Ku, Shizuoka, 424-8610, Japan
(2023年11月14日受付 / 2024年2月5日受理)

would help deepen their understanding of diverse experiences.

The teacher's main goal was to explore ways in which the adapted activity had enhanced or could enhance students' development of empathy while also integrating communicative competency traits such as the four macro skills. Simultaneously, the activity promoted student attention to target language (TL) output (noticing). This specifically refers to Schmidt's claims that noticing is beneficial for language acquisition (1990; 1995). The task also provided students with a practical context in which to develop language proficiency. Classroom observation and analysis of end-of-task student feedback help inform this study. The interest that students displayed in their classmates' stories and in conveying their own underscores the assignment's worth as a way to cultivate empathy and to increase language skills within a real-world, cross-cultural context.

Background

Empathy has many definitions but can be broadly viewed as the inclination to assess experiences, reactions, and situations of others and to then be able to gauge and understand them, or attempt to understand them, even if one does not share the same experiences or outlooks (Trapè, 2019). Bennett (2009) believes that empathy is essential to effective intercultural behaviour (domestically and internationally), stating that "The premier skill of an interculturalist is empathy: that capacity to take the perspective of the other culture, to shift frames of reference, and to act in the context of the other's perspective" (pp. 104-105). For example, attention to the development of empathy is a crucial component of medical training because practitioners need to try and understand what their patients experience, both physically and emotionally (Laughey et al., 2021). Given the desire of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) for students to work towards intercultural and global "citizenship," and its wish to foster collaborative and safe learning environments

domestically (2023, in Japanese), a concentration on activities that encourage connection through what is known and unknown can ideally help foster these outcomes.

According to Bryam, the main point [of intercultural interaction] is to have experience, and to acquire skills and attitudes for exploring the culture of any social group [...students...] meet, whether in the world of work or leisure or of education or of common political action. Furthermore, what they [...learn...] through comparison is as much about their own cultures and identities, and how these can be challenged and questioned, and not only 'strengthened' as [...some national...] curriculum[s have] said. It is not a matter of what culture to learn or to learn about, but which cultures to explore in addition to our own -- and the answer is: any culture of any social group with which learners can be encouraged to interact. (2013, p. 59)

Bryam is reflecting on identity being linked to the fortification of national identity in some national educational curricula (2013; MEXT, 2023), an act which can lead to nationalism and, from there, exclusionary policies and perspectives (2013), all of which contradict notions of interculturalism. He promotes, instead, reflection on all forms of identities and cultures, including our own. Recall that Bennet emphasises the role of empathy in successful intercultural communication.

Additionally, in a world where the media is owned by fewer and fewer corporations (Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Molla & Kafka, 2022), the narratives they generate can lack diversity and may help "...weaken any sense of community helpful to civic life" (Herman & Chomsky, xiv, 2002). As such, the importance of hearing and understanding one another's stories becomes more pressing. After all, the survival of the natural world is in its diversity (Pollan, 2008). Further to this, a 2023 report by Reuters on a survey conducted across 45 countries, including Japan, showed that the majority of respondents accessed their news digitally and

that there was an increase in digital use but also a decline in numbers of those who directly connected to online news services. Many people pay “more attention to influencers or celebrities than... journalists, even when it comes to news” (Newman et al., 2023, p. 10).

The university students the author teaches are digital natives and, according to the Reuters’ survey, their online habits reflect the above trend. The Statistics Bureau of Japan reported that almost 85% of the Japanese population had used the Internet by August in 2022 (2023, p. 91) and “the usage rate exceeded 90 percent in each age group between 13 and 59 years old” (p. 91). Smart phones, which might lend themselves to less critically-engaged reading and content-consumption habits (Levratto et al., 2021), were the most widely used way to connect online in this age group, at 80% (Statistics Bureau of Japan, p. 92). Therefore, this shift in content-gathering habits can narrow students’ exposure to the wider world, even domestically, depending upon the views of the people they follow or platforms they access. Subsequently, the need for exposure to wider perspectives becomes even more desirable.

The founder of the Empathy Museum, philosopher Roman Krznaric, feels that empathy is crucial to social change, and that the museum works towards bringing it into the everyday realm through testimonials we might not otherwise encounter (Morris, 2015). Storytellers for *A Mile in my Shoes* range from marginalised to establishment; from refugees and former prisoners of war to neurosurgeons (Australian National Maritime Museum, 2021; Centre for Stories, n.d.; Empathy Museum, n.d.). The Empathy Museum’s “Walk a Mile” installations have so far been set in multi-cultural regions such as Belgium, Siberia, Perth, London, Sao Paolo, and Denver. The Australian National Maritime Museum hosted the installation in Sydney in 2021. The museum “currently [has] more than 350 stories, in 9 languages, collected across 14 countries” (Empathy Museum, n.d.). *A Mile in My Shoes* was held in Brighton, U.K., in early November and then again in late December,

2023. Switzerland has also been hosting an installation since June, 2023, scheduled to finish in mid-February, 2024.

Attendees enter a temporary building (a faux shoe store) resembling a shoebox, containing pairs of shoes in different sizes. Attendees exchange their own footwear for one of these pairs and collect podcasts that were recorded by the original wearers of the shoes from installation employees. Attendees then walk for a “mile” in the shoes, listening to the original owners’ stories (Australian National Maritime Museum, 2021; Centre for Stories, n.d.; Empathy Museum, n.d., Morris, 2015; Pavey, n.d.). The stories include those about “sex work, mining, bereavement, marriage, and parenthood,” among others (Centre for Stories, n.d., paragraph 1). Some installations have specifically been designed to share “...the voices of migrants and refugees...” (Australian Maritime Museum, 2021, paragraph 4). Empathy in our daily lives and perceptions of one another are promoted. A 2016 Perth Festival brochure states that the exhibit provides “a snapshot into the breadth and diversity of who we are ” (p. 37).

The aim of the exhibition is to encourage understanding and connection between people from different backgrounds, and responses from participants seem to show success in this aim (BBC London, 2018; Howard, 2016). Comparably, traditionally established museums have explored the need for their role in the development of empathy, citing its pivotal contribution towards a functioning and equitable civil society (Jennings et al., 2019; Merrit, 2017). *A Mile in My Shoes* has been cited as an example of an installation that promotes empathy by these institutions (Merrit, 2017).

As stated prior, the exhibition has mostly been held in countries and areas considered to be multicultural. Conversely, Japan is widely, although perhaps falsely, perceived as a monoculture. Even so, or perhaps even more so, acceptance and knowledge of “otherness” remains important, particularly in an education system which hopes to foster outward-looking citizens with an ability to connect and collaborate with one another (Bennett,

2009; MEXT, 2023). Bryam says that language learners of many countries “...may not in fact know people beyond their national frontiers and even their local community” (2013, p. 57). Although many related MEXT policies focus on intercultural connections at a global level, it could be argued that the understanding of “otherness” begins at home (Bennett, 2009).

In fact, the need to hear divergent voices within Japan might be seen in the apparent stigma attached by some to people with disabilities. This is reflected in the non-release—at the request of the families—of the victims’ names in the 2016 Sagami-hara tragedy (“Care Home Massacre,” 2016; Kamata, 2016; Peckitt, 2016) in which 19 people were murdered and 26 injured in a care home for people with disabilities (Jiji Press, 2023). The lone perpetrator of the crime was motivated by an intolerance of difference (Kamata, 2016; Peckitt, 2016). Within Japan, bullying in general is also on the rise in schools (Fukuazu & Asahina, 2023; MEXT, 2023). This kind of prejudice is not isolated to any one country (Merrit, 2017), and as stated previously the founder of the Empathy Museum, philosopher Roman Krznaric, feels that empathy is crucial to social change and that the museum works towards bringing it into the everyday realm through establishing an environment in which stories and experiences which may not previously have been encountered can be shared and understood (Morris, 2015).

The Study

Research Questions

Altan (2018), when speaking about developing intercultural sensitivity in foreign language teacher training mentions that “...teaching programs aiming at raising cultural sensitivity may build on strengthening the students’ own inherent emotional worldview. This could be the most important factor for constructing a broader understanding of the environment each human being is dependent on...” (2018, conclusion, paragraph 1).

The majority of the second-year students who

undertook the task outlined in this paper had shared 56 lessons with their classmates as first-year students, yet some members did not know one another’s names, and groups sat in the same social groups lesson after lesson. Therefore, in some ways, their own “inherent emotional worldview” was lacking knowledge of and interaction with those they often met with. The listening and speaking course was compulsory, and students were from different departments, so academic or social interaction outside of English classes was limited. Nonetheless, trust can be engendered from relating to classmates and acquaintances at a more personal level, and this might lead to increased engagement when discussing wider, more abstract, and possibly controversial, topics that may be removed from the “inherent emotional worldviews” of some. Therefore, activities that are conducive to the promotion of empathy can have reach beyond the task itself.

Additionally, incorporating elements of the philosophy behind *A Mile in my Shoes* into classroom content can also encourage “perspective getting” as opposed to “perspective taking” (Epley, 2014). In the case of this project, the author proposes that the aforementioned notions can be viewed as the differences between students participating in varied but potentially formulaic roleplays and model conversations (which also have their merits in ESOL acquisition), and being engaged in dialogue more likely to encourage “getting” the perspective of their classmates at a more authentic level. This aids the development of intercultural sensitivity, understanding and empathy.

Taking Altan’s and Epley’s words into account, the primary objective of this study was to investigate ways in which an activity informed by the concepts underpinning the installation *A Mile in my Shoes* could enhance the development of empathy among a class of 28 advanced-level, second year EFL LS Japanese university students attending the author’s classes. Key communicative competence traits were also augmented through the task. Moreover, feedback showed that students noticed their TL output and worked to improve it, thereby supporting Schmidt’s notion that language learners noticing their output helps with improving language

proficiency (1990; 1995). The following research questions were identified to achieve this aim:

1. In which ways were elements of empathetic understanding displayed by the students during and at the conclusion of the task?
2. Which communicative competencies were employed by the students when undertaking the task?

Method

Participants of the Study and Setting

The primary participants of this study were 28 second year Japanese university advanced EFL students undertaking a compulsory listening and speaking course. In a unit from a prescribed textbook set by course controllers, the students studied how to tell a story. Storytelling was one of the aims of the unified curriculum that guided all teachers of required English courses at this level at the university. The author felt that, even though students were interested in relaying stories, the specified speaking assignment failed to exploit variables such as anecdotes, tonal and semiotic variety, and ways to inspire listeners' curiosity—all key elements of oral storytelling (Labov & Waletzky, 1997; Labov, 1997; Silviyanti et al., 2022), and elements they had studied in the textbook. Apart from exercises in the class, which tended to “stay on the page,” students did not really have the chance to display skills in more authentic and longitudinal ways. Consequently, the teacher introduced “Take a walk in my shoes,” hoping to make the storytelling activities more dynamic and inclusive. By participating in the VT project, as detailed below, students were more fully involved in the process of both learning how to tell a story, and in improvement and assessment of their communicative ability.

Students attended ninety-minute classes twice a week, and the assignment spanned six to seven classes. After the author explained the proverb “Never judge a [person] until you’ve walked a mile in [their] shoes,” students created slides in-class and as homework to complement any experiences

they wanted to share. Students were asked to feature a pair of shoes related to the story they wanted to tell on the first slide. A model VT was created and provided by the teacher. VT allows one to record messages over visuals and for listeners to respond in the form of oral recorded comments. Other software, such as PowerPoint, can also be used in a similar but slightly more limited way.

For the first two lessons, students learnt how to use the software. When they were ready, they recorded narration using university equipment during class time. They could also complete this as homework. In the fifth and sixth classes, students shared their stories with each other; initially by individually listening to a number of their classmates' recorded VTs in the fifth class, and then in a form of whole-class, round-robin presentations in the sixth. The seventh class was reserved for make-up presentations.

The students were encountering this type of assignment and VT technology in English for the first time. Thus, the topic choices for stories were personal and individual so as not to cognitively overburden them, and to maintain their interest (Hadley, 2001). This also eased them into the second more challenging assignment set for the semester, which explored global issues. Most students chose to discuss travel, friends, hometowns, special events, dangerous situations, and pets, although there were stories related to hobbies and encounters with others that had affected some learners profoundly. Students were asked to contain a smaller, more personalised anecdote within a general theme to maintain listener interest. For example, if students wished to present on their pets, they needed to include a story about the pet that was unique to the student and the pet. VT also has the capability to highlight slides with text and doodles, which students used to draw attention to points of interest.

Once 9-12 slides, including narration to accompany them, and any possible digital writing on them, were completed, learners viewed and recorded comments on three of their classmates' VTs. This involved watching, listening to and, in some cases, reading English. Responses involved speaking

(recordings), and sometimes writing (digitally on their classmates' VTs). Asking questions were a required component of their comments. Through these activities, students undertook all stages of Anderson and Krathwohl's modified Bloom's taxonomy: understand, apply, analyse, evaluate, create (2000, in Mehisto et al. p. 155, 2012; Yousofi & Zamani, 2016). It also meant that students could understand their classmates' stories at their own pace, which helped deepen their knowledge of both stories and creators. This, in turn, offered chances for developing empathy (Trivlè, 2019; Tully, 2012).

In response, the creators recorded their answers to their classmates' questions. Comments and responses were digitally, orally, and aurally inserted into the VT. These student efforts meant that interaction with the VTs was not teacher-student centred, but student-student centred. That is, peer-to-peer interaction occurred far more than teacher-student, acts which can help develop learning autonomy.

These stages, as well as the discussion stage outlined below, also encouraged Schmidt's definitions of "noticing" when using a non-native language (Schmidt, 1990; 1995). Noticing enhances linguistic discovery/knowledge and advancement (Schmidt, 1990; 1995; Swain, 1995; 2005), whereby students notice both where they are succeeding and also where they are not reaching personal or target language goals in their output and can try to adjust their behaviour accordingly. This is not to be confused with other ESL uses of the term "noticing" which do not correlate with learner attention to output.

For the final stage of the project, students verbally shared their stories with one another. They used the VT slides with muted sound and, relying on key words, relayed their stories to new partners, changing partners four to five times.

Although the word empathy has not been used in the procedures for students outlined previously—as the purpose of the project was to encourage empathy, not to add to the students' cognitive burden with complex vocabulary—it is a crucial part of the project, and its concept is evident in the

assignment's introduction and name. Likewise, engendering empathy is a known feature of storytelling (Silviyanti et al., Tully, 2012).

The author's advanced level Japanese EFL LS students who undertook this exercise appeared to be mostly composed of majority Japanese culture, but even within majority cultural groups experiences can be diverse.

Data Collection

For the study, a qualitative approach was employed, where classroom observations and isolating common themes in student feedback on the assignment were combined. Although this study concentrates on one class, the assignment was successfully deployed for two years across four semesters. The data discussed in this paper are from the second semester. The reason for choosing these data in particular is that feedback from other classes were lost when the LMS the author stored them in ceased its operation. However, the responses for this particular class had, fortunately, been downloaded separately. At the end of the assignment, students were given a homework task asking for their responses to the activity. As the activity and class were English-language-learning based, the homework was also in English. In conjunction with classroom observation, these data have been used to inform the study.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was employed to find recurring themes or words, particularly focusing on lexis related to empathy. When looking at feedback, one can see how often "friend[s]," "classmate[s]," and "acquaintance[s]" are used. These are counted as having the same basic meaning in terms of students being interested in stories other than their own. About fifty percent of the feedback uses these terms (Appendix A). Much of the feedback clearly states a sense of satisfaction or enjoyment with the task because of both connection with classmates and language-use improvement. Terms such as "difficult," "struggle," and "weird" are also present in the feedback, although the latter two occur less

often than words with a positive meaning when describing the task, such as “interesting,” and “fun.” Students often stated that the task was difficult but fun, and the appearance of one word does not negate the appearance and meaning of the other. Words related to English language use are also apparent, such as “hearing,” “speaking,” “conversation,” and “improved,” suggesting that the task facilitated communication (Appendix A). Holistic analysis of the feedback reveals entire sentences stating the existence and value of student discovery of experiences and feelings of their partners. This analysis also highlights a number of sentences in which students notice their output due to the fact that they recorded their voices, and also due to needing to make themselves understood to others in English (Appendix A). This supports the idea that students noticed their output and used this as an opportunity to try and improve elements of their language use.

Student Feedback, Discussion and Outcomes

The student reaction to the project was mostly positive. A selection of student responses can be seen below and in Appendix A. Eighteen students provided feedback in an end-of-assignment homework task asking them whether they enjoyed the assignment, to explain their answer, and to give any other comments they wished to provide, including about benefits and/or difficulty. All quotes below are taken from Appendix A unless otherwise specified.

About 60% of the respondents stated that the activity was difficult but worthwhile, and the difficulty came with not being 100% satisfied with their English output. At the same time, they noted that it was a good chance to develop fluency and to notice elements of their English use. Furthermore, some mentioned, as Bryam (2013) implied above, that there were not many chances to use English on a daily basis, so the assignment provided opportunities for participants to not only improve and notice their linguistic skills, but to interact with classmates with experiences different from their

own. For the sake of wider comprehension, the entries included below and in the appendix have been adjusted when grammatically needed. Changes are noted by the use of square brackets around the alterations.

Connection with classmates

Students A, B and C speak about the connection they felt with their classmates and their stories while participating in this assignment. The content of their responses infer or state the occurrence of communication and the development of a deeper understanding of one another. For example, **Student A** states, “I could communicate with classmates through this assignment.” **Student B** mentions, “I enjoyed classmate’s VT and talk[ing] with them,” and **Student C** writes, “I can make friends because this practice has many chance to [talk] with class mate.” All three note their pleasure in listening to the stories of others. **Student A**’s full response is below:

I liked [the] VT assignment because I could improve my speaking, listening and writing skill. Especially, I’m not good at speaking, however, compared to different types of speaking assignment, I could try to speak English more actively. In addition, I could communicate with classmates through this assignment. It was [an] enjoyable time for me to [...listen to...] each stories and talk about them.

Adjusting skills to aid comprehensibility

Many students, such as student **D, E,** and **F** speak of how they adjusted both their VT and their presentation skills, in addition to honing their speaking and listening skills, in order to make themselves understood. **Student D** states,

In my VT, I tried to choose easier words and pictures I took, but my final submission has some problems. One is that [...it...] was not clear to listen because of my voice. It was the first time to record my voice in English, so it was [a] really hard time [for me]. That point made me so nervous. If I have another

chance, I'll try to be relax. [On the] other hand, I should [have] put some questions for [the] listener.

Here **Student D** can be seen trying to utilise methods for easier comprehension ("choose easier words and pictures"), but is also aware of needing to adjust their speaking volume so that the VT recording was understood ("but my final submission has some problems. One is that [...it...] was not clear to listen because of my voice").

Student E wrote:

At first, I felt Voice Thread assignment is so difficult because I don't use English on a daily basis. After that, I adjust to this assignment and I became to speak English fluently. Moreover, I get talking skills by listening other member's Voice Thread assignment. For example, I knew using gesture, eye contact, questioning and so on.

Student E's feedback indicates that they felt their English fluency was enhanced by participating in the assignment, compared to how they had viewed their level before the assignment ("At first, I felt Voice Thread assignment is so difficult because I don't use English on a daily basis. After that, I adjust to this assignment and I became to speak English fluently"). **Student E** then goes on to outline how they learnt other communicative skills such as body language and conducting a conversation by interacting with the VT presentations of other class members ("I get talking skills by listening other member's Voice Thread assignment. For example, I knew using gesture, eye contact, questioning and so on").

Student F mentions:

[T]o listen other members VT taught me many things. They used some talking skills, for example, to shift a tone, to use a writing or gestures and so on. I think, I could not have command of those techniques and I could not choose a correct words, so their VT was useful for me.

This comment shows that **Student F** also felt that they learnt new techniques to aid in communication (utilising tone, body language and digital writing on

the slides), and adjusted their own assignment and presentation delivery in accordance with what they had observed in those of their classmates.

Noticing output

All three examples also show how noticing output led to efforts to improve English use. **Student D** mentions how they would relax more if they attempted the assignment again. They felt that the fact that they were nervous contributed to a sense of difficulty in undertaking the project successfully in English:

but my final submission has some problems. One is that [...it...] was not clear to listen because of my voice. It was the first time to record my voice in English, so it was [a] really hard time [for me]. That point made me so nervous. If I have another chance, I'll try to be relax.

Student E clearly writes, "I get talking skills by listening other member's Voice Thread assignment." This indicates that they not only noticed their own output (their communication skills were not similar to that of their classmates in stated aspects such as gestures and eye contact), but that by observing the output of others they were able to adopt successful methods and improve their own skills. In a similar vein, **Student F** observes that they learnt methods from other students to help facilitate successful presentations, which they felt they would not have been able to do without this exposure ("[T]o listen other members VT taught me many things... [but] I think, I could not have command of those techniques and I could not choose a correct words [without seeing them demonstrated], so their VT was useful for me").

In all three cases, students were guided by their awareness of their own levels of English and by an ideal level of English use informed by external and internal factors. For example, **Student D** chose easier words and images in a hope that they would help with clear expression. This displays an existing awareness of their own perceived levels of English, and of factors that could aid communication. However, they noted that, despite their efforts, their

VT "...was not clear to listen because of [...their...] voice," which portrays a new awareness of a lack of proficiency in this area. **Student D** then addresses this situation by imagining a future self who would try to relax in order to counter nervousness, an act which they feel would contribute to a more audible recording if they attempted the assignment again. This supports Schmidt's theory that improvement in other language use can come from first noticing weaknesses and strengths in output. **E** and **F** both benefitted from observing the successful techniques of their classmates and from trying to integrate them into their own presentations (see above).

Intercultural possibilities

Student H: I enjoyed [the] VT assignment, because I feel like this assignment developed my English ability. I think that we don't have [much] English [exposure] in Japan, so I felt [it was] very difficult to speak English. However, I thought speaking English is very fun through this assignment. That is why I want to speak English by [...travelling...] to the world.

Student H's feedback (directly above) ends with a desire to travel around the world, at which time they hope to use English. Depending upon interpretation of the response, they might use English as a way to facilitate travel around the world, which could open themselves to new stories and chances of intercultural experiences ("I thought speaking English is very fun through this assignment. That is why I want to speak English by [...travelling...] to the world"). That is, the sentence could suggest that from learning more English **Student H** would be more likely to travel, or, alternatively, that they might travel around the world to learn more English (the use of 'by' rather than 'when,' 'from,' or 'for' leaves the intended meaning ambiguous). In either case, speaking English in communicative situations is not often done alone, so meeting new people and speaking with them in English seems to be a likely aim. Student H's response also highlights the fact that it is difficult for students to find opportunities to use English within Japan, but also illustrates that

by learning about their classmates' stories, students might be inspired to learn the stories of many other people. This showcases the intercultural potential of the assignment beyond the classroom, and also demonstrates students imagining themselves in different situations, which is a key component of empathy.

Language use, and difficulty and enjoyment of the task

Student I's feedback emphasises that the task was difficult for them. Most students mentioned this:

I enjoyed VT assignment. First time, I felt uneasy about this assignment because I am inexperienced in having conversations in English. This assignment made me have a little bit of confidence. When I got asked by my partner, I wanted to have an answer to tell them. However, I can't think an correct English word, so I think conversations in English is difficult for me. I had never used VT, so I had a good experience.

However, similar to **Student I's** response, most students also mention that they enjoyed the task, and most feel that there was some form of improvement, even if it was in confidence rather than in skill. **Student I** felt that "this assignment made me have a little bit of confidence." At the same time, they also wanted to communicate with their partner to the best of their ability ("When I got asked [questions] by my partner, I wanted to have an answer to tell them"). There were limitations, though, between what Student I and other students wanted to say and whether they had the ability to say it or not ("I can't [always] think [...of...] correct English words, so I think conversations in English is difficult for me"). This shows the challenges of the task while also accentuating the gains that students made, even if those gains were in terms of levels of awareness rather than in levels of output.

Student G: This assignment was interesting for me. Using Voice Thread is new speaking practice. I like this method because I can use pictures so many people can understand

easily and have a great time hearing. In addition, I could know a lot of things about my classmate so I think that become better acquainted with them compared to before. I think that my speaking skill improved because I spoke many things and time. I do not have so many words to express myself so speaking with only looking pictures without practice was difficult point for me. But I felt English was fun and think that want to become able to speak English better

As seen from the feedback of **Student G** in the preceding quotation, a number of students indicated a wish to continue to use English to communicate, whether overseas, with foreign students, or just in general, consequently displaying a positive attitude towards English use (especially students **G, H, L & Q**). **Student G** states, "...I felt English was fun and think that want to become able to speak English better." **Student H**'s desire to travel to either improve English or because of learning English (or both) were examined earlier, and **Student L** wrote that they were looking forward to the next topic ("I enjoyed talk with classmates. It was great experience. I'm looking forward to next topic"). All assignments were conducted in English, so Student L's feedback does not indicate any reluctance towards this medium.

Potential for the development of empathy

Student Q especially points out a wish to make non-Japanese friends:

I knew [the] pleasure [to] talk with someone in English and I wanted to speak English more fluently. I will study English more and want to make foreign friends. That is why I will [take] part in the next assignment aggressively.

This response and others underscore the potential of the assignment to seed empathy. **Student E** previously stated that they developed a better sense of their classmates due to the interactive assignment tasks, and **Student J** said, "Sharing VT was interesting as well. I was so surprised to hear about [my] partners' journeys with their favorite shoes on." **Student O** writes

I enjoyed this assignment. First time I felt it was very hard to talk about other people's story just in time. However, I was excited to talk and ask about their story at last. There are many story and each story has personalities. I will try harder at next time if there is chance to do like this assignment again

Student J's statement about the different stories and shoes encountered, and **Student O**'s comment that they were "excited to talk and ask about [... my classmates...] story at last," in addition to their observation that "there are many story and each story has personalities," align with comments left by participants in the original *A Mile in my Shoes* in terms of participants' interest in stories outside of their own.

Peer interaction and the use of visual components

In the way writing peer-assessment helps students realise their work and experience has validity beyond the "expert" instructor's eye (Zamel, 1982), and in the ways detailed previously, students enjoyed learning about their classmates and sharing their stories. Arguably, this was successful due to personal investment. Students had spent time making the VTs, were aware of the arc of their stories, and their memory retention and recall was not overly taxed due to the familiarity of the content. Slides also supplemented the stories as a visual aid/reminder. This also contributed towards the development of fluency, communicative competence and noticing. Some students specifically commented on this and/or enjoyed the visual component. **Student G** notes, "I like this method because I can use pictures[,] so many people can understand easily and have a great time hearing." **Student K** writes "Especially, some friends' dogs picture [...made...] me happy, relax. In addition, I could know friends' hobby."

Each stage of the project required at least one lesson, with the discussion stage taking two. Returning to peer-assessment, students peer-evaluated in the final stages on linguistic points—

particularly relating to telling stories—as well as on effort and provided any other comments they wished to. Peer-evaluation was one element which contributed to the final assessment.

A further observation on noticing

Further to the assignment feedback, noticing was also observed by the teacher in students learning not to be too meticulous about recordings, but also in them ensuring their recordings were understandable. These elements aided confidence, fluency and speaking and listening skills, among others.

Study Limitations

The teaching of this particular activity garnered a fairly large amount of feedback data from participating students. From 2019, however, teachers were required to use a campus-wide task replacing the story-telling speaking assignment. This also included student discussion and participation, but not the use of pre-recorded elements or Voice Thread due to all teachers needing to use institutionally prepared materials. Therefore, more recent and regular use of VT for the task described in this paper was halted and more data could not be gathered. Nonetheless, during online classes in 2020, one class used VT to complete adjacent activities, whereby students recorded content and listened to and responded to this content via recordings. However, VT is not an easy site to navigate, and with changes in technology its software was not compatible with some provider platforms. This is unfortunate, because it includes many useful and creative features which can help reinforce learner growth. As such, taking the aforementioned into account, the procedure outlined in this paper might be difficult to replicate. It should be noted that the author has also executed this assignment using the more widely available and navigable PowerPoint to some success, so the assignment and the ideas behind it can be used with other applications.

Furthermore, from 2016-2020, the author used the Edmodo LMS for storing information for classes and for posting assignments, among other functionalities. The majority of the feedback from

the VT classes was kept on Edmodo. Edmodo ceased to function as an LMS in 2021, and although the author thought that a number of feedback responses had been backed up in alternative repositories, it appeared that they had not. However, the responses from the second semester of 2016 were preserved, and can be seen in the paper and in the Appendix, but the data are not as extensive as they could have been. Therefore, due to the small number of participants, any conclusions drawn cannot be viewed as widely applicable.

Moreover, feedback questions and responses were in English which would likely have presented a language barrier to the students, considering the first language of most was Japanese. The reason for doing so was that the feedback was homework for an advanced English language class about an English language activity. Regardless, generally speaking, students would have a wider range of expression in their native tongue. That almost a third of the class did not complete the feedback assignment could be attributed to a reluctance or an inability to respond to the questions due to the language they were written in and asked to use. This is an inherent weakness of the study which would need to be addressed if it were to be replicated.

Conclusion

Similarities and diversities learnt through exercises and discussion, such as through the VT project, could have strengthened a sense of community “helpful to civic life” (Harman & Chomsky, 2002; MEXT, 2023) among students. If compassion begins at a personal level, then it can expand to empathising with those whose experiences differ from our own. That is, if we can learn to care for others in the way that many of us care for those within our immediate circles, wider understanding of others might be the result. When diversity is recognised as part of a whole human experience, rather than differences being a cause for discrimination, then hopefully less fragmentation and more cohesive approaches toward universal needs can be attempted. Ideally, these approaches accommodate and evaluate differences and

similarities in a balanced manner. In this way, intercultural sensitivity and “citizenship” can begin to develop both on home soil in a location as simple as a classroom, and in ways that open up a wider world to all participants, including those our students might ultimately interact with.

The idea of developing and personalising storytelling tasks to include students’ real-life experiences so that they can relate to the content while using a non-native language and relate to one another while doing the same falls within the realm of narrative inquiry research. Students could use this method in the future to further understand both themselves, their areas of interest, and others. For ESOL researchers of story, empathy, interculturalism, intercultural sensitivity and many other areas, these stories too can be built upon and expanded to widen the world for all participants.

The activity fosters a situation where students can understand aspects of themselves of which they may have previously been unaware, thereby encouraging a wider awareness of the different outlooks evident in the world, while also providing opportunities for similarities to be noted. Individuality is highlighted while the fact that we all have a story to tell and share if we want is stressed. In addition, there are good chances that others can understand and relate to our stories, even if they are outside others’ own experience. This is a possible foundation for introducing stories on a wider scale which might tackle sociopolitical and global issues such as discrimination, poverty, class differences and racism, among others. Students, in fact, did go on to complete a more global assignment after this one. Expansion of the lesson could encourage students and the instructor to possibly face their own biases, while providing the opportunities to understand the harm that certain outlooks can cause, even if individual students have not suffered from the same experiences.

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和文要旨

本論文は、VoiceThreadまたはそれに代わるソフトウェアをプレゼンテーションやストーリーテリングのツールとして使用しながら、エンパシー・ミュージアムの展覧会「A Mile in my Shoes」を教室での活動に適応させることを検討する。この研究の主な目的は、重要なコミュニケーション能力の特徴を取り入れながら、適応された活動が、生徒の共感能力の発達をどのように高めるかを調査することにある。学生はVoiceThreadスライドプレゼンテーションを作成し、最初のスライドは靴を表すことになる。その靴を履いた際関連した話を記録し、その話を他の学生と共有する。ストーリーテリングを通して、学生たちは他者の「靴に足を踏み入れる」ことを促され、多様な経験に対するより深い理解が育まれる。この論文では、個人的ナラティブやストーリーテリングが、他者の体験とつながることを可能にし、共感を築くため

の道具としていかに役立つかについて論じている。さらに、このアクティビティは、「気づき」、「流暢さ」、「4つのマクロスキル」といった言語学習者にとって重要なコミュニケーション能力の特徴も統合する。このアクティビティは、他者の人生に対する理解を深めながら、言語能力を伸ばすための実践的文脈を学生に提供する。この論文では、こうした適応活動の教育的意味の可能性を強調すると共に、現実の世界と異文化状況の中で学生の共感を育み、また言語能力を向上させることによって、彼・彼女らの全般的な幸福と適性を総合的に伸ばす能力も強調する

Appendix A

Students Responses to the question of if they enjoyed the assignment, what was difficult, what did they fell they learnt and any other comments: 2016 second semester	
Students	Responses
A	I liked [the] VT assignment because I could improve my speaking, listening and writing skill. Especially, I'm not good at speaking, however, compared to different types of speaking assignment, I could try to speak English more actively. In addition, I could communicate with classmates through this assignment. It was [an] enjoyable time for me to [...listen to...] each stories and talk about them.
B	This activity is interesting for me. I like this assignment because I often feel a tense when talk English in front of people. Therefore VT is good way for me. Moreover I enjoyed classmate's VT and talk with them. I could feel my English skill improve.
C	I enjoyed Voice Thread very much. Through this speaking assignment, our English skill is more refined. Moreover, I can make friends because this practice has many chance to [talk] with class mate. I am looking forward to study next topic.
D	In my VT, I tried to choose easier words and pictures I took, but my final submission has some problems. One is that they was not clear to listen because of my voice. It was the first time to record my voice in English, so it was really hard time. That point made me so nervous. If I have another chance, I'll try to be relax. Other hand, I should put some questions for listener. However, I really enjoyed thinking my VT and listening my friend's one. Thanks to this learning I gained skills to listen details or speak more clearly.
E	I like Voice Thread assignment. I had a better sense of [my] classmates by this assignment. In addition, I enhanced talking and listening skills by this assignment. At first, I felt Voice Thread assignment is so difficult because I don't use English on a daily basis. After that, I adjust to this assignment and I became to speak English fluently. Moreover, I get talking skills by listening other member's Voice Thread assignment. For example, I knew using gesture, eye contact, questioning and so on. I will benefit from my Voice Thread assignment.
F	I enjoyed and struggled in this assignment. To think how to tell my story was so difficult, but it was interesting for me, because it was first time for me to try such a challenge. In addition, to listen other members VT taught me many things. They used some talking skills, for example, to shift a tone, to use a writing or gestures and so on. I think, I could not have command of those techniques and I could not choose a correct words, so their VT was useful for me. Through this assignment, I could see to tell a story in English includes a lot of elements. I improved my talking skills to use English in terms of speaking and in terms of listening. In conclusion, I like this work and I could find parts to be improved in my English.
G	This assignment was interesting for me. Using Voice Thread is new speaking practice. I like this method because I can use pictures so many people can understand easily and have a great time hearing. In addition, I could know a lot of things about my classmate so I think that become better acquainted with them compared to before. I think that my speaking skill improved because I spoke many things and time. I do not have so many words to express myself so speaking with only looking pictures without practice was difficult point for me. But I felt English was fun and think that want to become able to speak English better.
H	I enjoyed VT assignment, because I feel like this assignment developed my English ability. I think that we don't have English in Japan, so I felt very difficult to speak English. However, I thought Speaking English is very fun through this assignment. That is why I want to speak English by [travelling] to the world. Thank you.

Students Responses to the question of if they enjoyed the assignment, what was difficult, what did they fell they learnt and any other comments: 2016 second semester

Students	Responses
I	I enjoyed VT assignment. First time, I felt uneasy about this assignment because I am inexperienced in having conversations in English. This assignment made me have a little bit of confidence. When I got asked by my partner, I wanted to have an answer to tell them. However, I can't think an correct English word, so I think conversations in English is difficult for me. I had never used VT, so I had a good experience.
J	I would rather this assignment than usual speaking tests that the other classes has. This is really good activity for us, I think. It is weird that hearing my voice and I feel embarrassed actually. But it let me know how my english sounds and I can see good/bad point of my pronunciation. Sharing VT was interesting as well. I was so surprised to hear about partners journey with their favorite shoes on.
K	I enjoyed VT assignment, but I don't like English. Because I can't speak English. VT was very hard work. For example, I needed take picture, and think about the shoes. Through this work, I can speak English little, and I can talk with many friends. Especially, some friends' dogs picture make me happy, relax. In addition, I could know friends' hobby.
L	I enjoyed Voice Thread assignment. I could learn how to tell the story for other people and clearly sentence. Moreover, I could show other person's Voice Thread. It was impressive. I enjoyed talk with classmates. It was great experience. I'm looking forward to next topic.
M	I enjoyed Voice Thread assignment. Because, I could speak many classmates and I could hear various stories. As a result, I could learn speaking, listening English and so on. In addition, I knew classmates. First time, I am poor at English, I had difficulty speaking English But, Voice Thread assignment made my English skills improved. I think that I could gain precious experience.
N* Thai	I enjoyed ... this assignment. I had obstacles about topic at first. I needed to find a thing that is not boring and I also can explain about it very well. But after found my topic, process wasn't have any problem. I found that my voice when I am speaking English is very high tone and hard to listening. So, I have to improve this. Maybe it need to long time to fix.
O	I enjoyed this assignment. First time I felt it was very hard to talk about other people's story just in time. However, I was excited to talk and ask about their story at last. There are many story and each story has personalities. I will try harder at next time if there is chance to do like this assignment again.
P	I enjoyed Voice Thread Assignment. It is because Voice Thread Assignment make me happy. I can talk with classmate in English. I can study English speaking and listening. I like dog, a few people made Voice Thread Assignment about their dogs. I enjoyed it.
Q	I enjoyed this assignment. However I was not good at speaking English, classmate heard my story and ask for me. I knew [the] pleasure [to] talk with someone in English and I wanted to speak English more fluently. I will study English more and want to make foreign friends. That is why I will part in the next assignment aggressively. I will try my best.
R	I enjoyed VT assignment because I could speak many classmates and listen about them. I want to know more about them. I think telling a story was difficult but I like speaking English with my classmates. That a nice experience for me. I want to speak more stories!!