Original Research

(Digital) empathising: (De-)constructing (digital) empathy in foreign language teaching

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Whilst representing a core component of any communicative context, empathy may be even more significant in foreign language teaching than other school subjects. Learners need interlocutors to use and learn a language, which makes the language-learning process even more dependent on relationships. How and where learners and users of foreign languages learn, interact and communicate with each other is increasingly shaped by digital technologies, virtual spaces and artificial intelligence-supported communication tools. This change in contexts and ways of communication also entails a change in where and how empathy is expressed. Consequently, our understanding of empathy needs to be broadened to encompass these developments and help our learners to express empathy in different contexts, media and modes. Therefore, this article will begin by delineating the etymological, empirical and theoretical background of empathy. In a second step, the significance of empathy in digital spaces will be explained, followed by a discussion of existing definitions of digital empathy and a necessary (de-) construction of (digital) empathy. Then, a preliminary model of (digital) empathising in foreign language learning will be suggested, comprising three processes: emotional, cognitive and communicative empathising. I define 'communicative empathising' as the process of communicating one's emotional and/or cognitive empathising for the other to the other – in different contexts and using various ways of communication (medium, mode).

KEYWORDS: *empathy, digital empathy, communicative empathising, digital spaces, empathising, foreign language teaching*

1. INTRODUCTION

Empathy represents a core component of any communicative context and is thus essential in all contexts where people interact and learn from one another (Cooper, 2011). Nevertheless, empathy may be even more significant in foreign language teaching than in other school subjects: learners need interlocutors to use and learn a language, which may make the language learning process even more dependent on relationships compared to other subjects (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Mercer (2016, p. 91) stresses this distinctiveness by highlighting *'the centrality of relationships, social interaction, communication and intercultural competence in language learning and use'*. Communicative language teaching, which is still the dominant method in various educational contexts, emphasises interaction and communication as the goal and medium of learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

According to Terry and Cain (2016, p. 3), *'empathy at its core will never change; however, the means by which empathy is expressed is naturally evolving as the world and its forms of communications become increasingly digital'*. This quote about empathy is therefore especially relevant for foreign language learning,

given that where and how foreign language learners interact and communicate – within and beyond the classroom – becomes increasingly shaped by virtual spaces, the ever-growing prevalence of digital technologies and artificial intelligence-supported communication tools. This change in contexts and ways of communication also entails a change in where and how (medium, mode) empathy is expressed. Virtual environments often lack essential non-verbal cues of expressing empathy such as facial expressions, touch or intonation (Bai et al., 2019), which can impact all communication and communication of empathy in particular. Instead, these virtual environments allow learners to resort to alternative (multi-)modal ways of expressing empathy, such as videos, emojis or GIFs. GIFs, defined as 'moving images' (Fan, 2022, p. 46), are multimodal in a double sense: whilst representing 'multimodal entit[ies]' themselves, their use leads to 'multimodal discourses' (Fan, 2022, p. 47). Consequently, language learners need to learn how empathy can (not) be communicated in different contexts.

Following Terry and Cain's (2016) assumption that empathy at its core will never change but yet evolve, any deliberations on digital empathy in language teaching should begin with

the more general term of empathy. Therefore, this article will begin by delineating the etymological, empirical and theoretical background of empathy. This procedure resonates with the following definition of digital empathy, which highlights empathy as its root: *'Digital empathy seeks to expand our thinking about traditional empathy phenomena into the digital arena'* (Friesem, 2016, p. 24). In a second step, the significance of empathy in the digital space will be explained, followed by a discussion of existing definitions of digital empathy. This will lead to the necessary (de-)construction of (digital) empathy in order to develop a preliminary subject-specific (digital) empathy model for contemporary foreign language learning.

2. EMPATHY
2.1. Defining empathy from etymological perspectives

'Disagreement and discrepancy' (Preston & de Waal, 2002, p. 1) are common descriptions for the definitional inconsistency of empathy (Zhou, 2022). Empathy has been examined across diverse disciplines (Duan & Sager, 2018), such as philosophy, psychology, social work, neuroscience and (language) education. Although these sometimes divergent contributions might not have led to conceptual consensus and consistency regarding empathy, they indicate its complexity (Zhou, 2022) and have advanced the knowledge of it. To keep the subsequent deliberations rooted, it is worthwhile to begin with the etymological development of empathy to lay some historical and theoretical foundation for it.

Empathy is the English translation of the German term 'Einfühlung' and was first used by the psychologist Edward Titchener in 1909 (Howe, 2013). It is rooted in the Greek word 'empatheia', meaning *'to enter feelings from the outside'* (Howe, 2013, p. 9). The prefix 'em' denotes this 'entering into' pathos, meaning experience or emotions. More specifically, empathy means 'into feeling' or 'feeling into'. The idea of getting 'into' a feeling is particularly important, especially when we see and feel the world from the other's point of view, attempt to understand it, and seek to convey that understanding as we relate with those around us. (Howe, 2013, p. 9).

Howe's (2013) rich quote deserves to be analysed more closely to extract some key characteristics of empathy. This 'feeling into' implies a *'process, where observers project themselves into the objects they perceive'* (Preston & de Waal, 2002, p. 2). Although 'object' is inappropriate for language learners, the authors raise our awareness that empathy necessitates agency and action; it is anything but a passive act. Here, it seems helpful to refer to etymology once more to differentiate between empathy and sympathy, another term understood and defined differently by scholars. Whereas sympathy essentially implies having *'feelings (pathos) that are the same as (sym) those of the other'*, empathy is about entering *'into (em) the feelings (pathos) of the other'* (Howe, 2013, p. 12). Hence, empathy can be considered 'you oriented', whilst sympathy is instead 'me oriented' (Howe, 2013, p. 12). Furthermore, Howe's (2013) definition alludes to three steps of empathy: an affective component (feel the world

from the other's point of view), a cognitive process (attempt to understand it) and a third endeavour that aims to convey that understanding as we relate with those around us.

Unpacking Howe's (2013) definition demonstrates its relevance and application in everyday foreign language learning. Learning a foreign language is about feeling into the world of our interlocutors, attempting to understand this other world from their perspective and attempting to relate to the other world through language. These three steps clearly relate to intercultural communicative competence, a key aim of foreign language learning, whose key protagonist, the intercultural speaker, is often paraphrased as a mediator between people of different cultures and languages (Byram & Wagner, 2018).

2.2. Exploring empathy from research perspectives

Historically, two dominant research perspectives have been adopted (Aldrup et al., 2022; Gkonou, 2021) which have debated *'whether empathy is an emotional or cognitive process'* (Preston & de Waal, 2002, p. 2; Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). The affective (Duan & Sager, 2018) or emotional (Howe, 2013) perspective considers empathy as the emotional response to the other person's affective experience (Aldrup et al., 2022; Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; Batson et al., 2009). There is a wide variation within this emotional response, and to be counted as empathy, one's emotions should result from the other person's emotions and be appropriate (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004) – admitting that appropriateness is a debatable term. This notion of appropriateness and having a moral component (Löw-Beer, 2004) resonates with how positive psychologists Batson et al. (2009) define empathy. They define it as *'an other-oriented emotional response elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone else'* (Batson et al., 2009, p. 418). Batson et al. (2009) explain that congruence does not refer to a particular emotion's specific content but rather to the emotion's valence – positive when the other's welfare is considered positive and negative when it is perceived negative. Furthermore, empathy being other-oriented includes *'feeling for the other'* (Batson et al., 2009, p. 419).

From the cognitive perspective, empathy is based on *'seeing, imagining and thinking about the situation from the other person's point of view'* (Howe, 2013, p. 14) to understand the other person. I wish to dwell on this quote for a while, so I have put three words in italics. The notion of seeing is highlighted by the words seeing and point of view. To me, the notion of seeing is reminiscent of Hattie's (2008) seeing through the eyes of students. However, seeing in a literal sense is often impossible – especially in digitally-mediated communication or for visually impaired people – which is where the third word in italics comes into play: imagining. It might be more inclusive to choose the word imagine; we have to use our imagination to envision the situation from the other side. This deliberation resonates with Fuchs (2014), who talks about an 'imaginative operation', which denotes the *'transportation into an 'as if' scenario (i.e., if I were the other)'* (Fuchs, 2014, p. 158). In a similar vein, Maibom (2020)

explains that perspective taking/simulation *denotes 'the action of imagining being in another person's situation'* (Maibom, 2020, p. 10). Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright (2004) also mention 'role taking', 'decentering' and 'responding nonegocentrically' within cognitive empathy. Here, it becomes evident that *'empathy explicitly refers to other people rather than to the self'* (Aldrup et al., 2022, p. 1178) and that empathy may effectively catalyse altruistic behaviour (Batson et al., 2009). These deliberations highlight the relevance of empathy for intercultural communicative competence and positive classroom dynamics in foreign language learning.

2.3. Exploring empathy from theoretical perspectives

The majority of empathy theories can be divided into two groups: The first group of theories views empathy as being either cognitive or emotional, whereas the second group views empathy as a concept embracing both components (Duan & Sager, 2018). One prominent view is that cognitive empathy and affective empathy are significantly correlated (Zhan et al., 2022) and complementary (Aldrup et al., 2022). Friesem (2016, p. 27) puts it succinctly: *'as human beings, we feel while we are thinking'*. This idea is echoed by Oxford (2016, p. 13), stating that *'cognition and emotion are inseparable'*. Contemporary conceptualisations describe empathy as a positive, complex, multidimensional construct (Mercer, 2016; Schutte & Stilinović, 2017). Recently, there seems to be concordance among researchers that empathy consists of 'three main components' (Mercer, 2016, p. 94). Whereas the literature is relatively consistent in terming the first two components affective/emotional empathy and cognitive empathy, the third element is characterised by inconsistent terminology: motivational empathy, empathetic concern, compassion or sympathy (Mercer, 2016; Zaki, 2019). Howe (2013, p. 14) mentions *'communicating the recognition and understanding of the other's emotional experience'* as his third process of empathy. It is precisely this notion of communication, which is ubiquitous in the foreign language classroom (Walsh, 2011). Zhou (2022, p. 2) summarises this last process as a *'display of care, concern or compassion … associated with a motivation to enhance the welfare'* of the other. How can we communicate this display in the digital space? The importance of expressing and developing empathy in the digital space will therefore be discussed in the following.

3. EMPATHY IN DIGITAL CONTEXTS

Adolescence is a critical period in the development of empathy, as highlighted by educational and developmental psychologists Phillips and Bowles (2020). It should come as no surprise that social connection is necessary in developing empathy. However, this social connection increasingly occurs in the digital space. For instance, the Jim-Studie (MFS, 2021), which surveyed 1,200 adolescents aged between 12 and 19 in Germany, has revealed that almost one-third of the respondents consider digital and face-to-face communication more or less synonymous. In other words, they do not mind if they communicate face-to-face

or digitally with their friends. This shows that the difference between online and offline performance and participation has become increasingly blurred (Bracci et al., 2022).

Media theorist Rushkoff (2013) paints a more negative picture by coining the word 'digiphrenia', a blend between 'digi' for digital and the affix 'phrenia', used to refer to a mental disorder. It denotes how technology enables us to be in more than one place simultaneously and negotiate between several identities, 'real' and digitally narrated. Digiphrenia might also lead to 'phubbing', a blend at the intersection between technology (phone) and social behaviour (snubbing). Phubbing happens face-to-face when you snub someone by looking at your phone instead of paying attention to them. Thus, phubbing can lead to phone-induced social exclusion and portrays the preference for digitally-mediated participation to face-to-face communication and interaction with those in one's physical presence. A certain irony characterises phubbing: while disrupting their interaction with their face-to-face interlocutors, phubbers often connect with other people over a smartphone. Another irony is that smartphones were originally invented to connect and communicate. Phubbing, however, shows how smartphones can lead to feeling lonely while not literally being alone but surrounded by friends – and their friends' 'friends', namely their phones. Phubbing thus underscores our connectivity conundrum, implying that our increased online interconnectedness can potentially lead to a feeling of disconnectedness in the offline world. Hence, it is crucial to foster awareness of the phenomenon of phubbing among phubbers and those being phubbed so that both groups can understand and feel the causes and effects of phubbing (Zhan et al., 2022). Again, the phenomenon of phubbing underscores the claim that online and offline contexts are increasingly interacting in some situations.

Digital communication is confronted with the so-called 'online disinhibition effect', which describes *'several subtle, but powerful underlying factors that contribute to the nature of communication via digital devices'* (Terry & Cain, 2016, p. 2). Terry and Cain (2016) list dissociative anonymity, asynchronous communication and physical invisibility as their three factors that might explain unempathetic behaviour online.

Dissociative anonymity. People adopt a nonidentifying identity such as a pseudonym or avatar, which can lead to two types of dissociation: separating oneself from in-person identity and moral agency or dissociating the interlocutor and subconsciously regarding them as non-person avatars. This loss of perceived moral agency and responsibility might increase unsocial, hostile communication.

Asynchronous communication. Due to the asynchronous nature of some online communication, users might avoid taking responsibility for their offensive remarks and do not have to regulate their immediate responses to online debates.

Physical invisibility. Interlocutors' communication online is often characterised by not seeing the other and their reactions, which makes it hard to spot the nuances of communication that are often conveyed via non-verbal cues.

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Even though Terry and Cain (2016) do not negotiate the immediacy of synchronous digital communication within the context of the online disinhibition effect, it needs to be stressed that instant messaging (in the literal sense) often lacks the empathetic social filter. As Terry and Cain (2016) point out, *'the ability to instantly share thoughts, feelings, and behaviours with the rest of society via digital channels can occur in mere seconds, often without the empathetic social filter that accompanies traditional communications'* (Terry & Cain, 2016, p. 1).

Therefore, adolescents need to develop alternatives to exhibit empathy in digital environments, such as using emojis (Bai et al., 2019; Yang, 2020), so that these psychological factors underlying the online disinhibition effect do not decrease the expression of empathy in digital communication. The rapid adoption of social technologies and the dependency on digital devices as tools and channels for communication are often considered potential contributors to the growing empathy deficit (Friesem, 2016). This dependency on digital devices was drastically reinforced during the Covid-19 pandemic when social distancing took over. Face-to-face teaching was replaced by virtual, distance teaching. Instead of being in the same physical sphere, pupils and teachers were in front of their digital devices and had to find new ways to interact and relate to break down the imposed distance. A study by Baiano et al. (2022) explored the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on different dimensions of empathy (cognitive empathy, affective empathy and empathic social skills such as active listening or collaboration) within a sample of healthy students enrolled at an Italian university. They compared data from before the pandemic outbreak and about one year after the implementing Covid policies to limit the spread of the disease. They concluded that one year after the outbreak of the pandemic, their participants showed 'lower empathic social skills', which they attribute to *'social distancing, isolation, the use of face masks, and possibly extensive use of home-based communication technologies'* (Baiano et al., 2022, p. 5). On a more positive note, the *'tendency to identify with fictional characters'* (Baiano et al., 2022, p. 5) increased. This last aspect resonates with Fuchs (2014), who posits that *'empathy not only connects quite easily with virtual or fictitious persons and situations – it is even stimulated by imagination and fictionality'* (Fuchs, 2014, p. 156). Fuchs' (2014) idea needs to be explored empirically and is especially relevant for the surge in artificial intelligence-mediated communication.

Therefore, teachers need to help their students become digital citizens. According to the Council of Europe (2022, p. 11), a 'digital citizen' is *'someone who, through the development of a broad range of competences, is able to actively, positively and responsibly engage in both on- and offline communities. As digital technologies are disruptive in nature and constantly evolving, competence building is a lifelong process'*.

Contrary to the above-discussed phenomena of digiphrenia and phubbing, this definition of a digital citizen casts a more positive light on the interrelation between technology and interaction. It does not consider on- and offline interaction as rivals. To highlight this positive, complementary approach, I have emphasised that digital citizens can interact positively and communicate both on-and offline. They 'inhabit both virtual and real spaces' (Council of Europe, 2022, p. 13). Nonetheless, the Council of Europe (2022) has warned of educators' lack of awareness of the value of developing pupils' digital citizenship competence for their well-being in today's highly digitised society. Well-being constitutes one of the three areas into which ten digital domains underpinning digital citizenship are grouped. The three areas are being-online, rights online and well-being online. For the purpose of this paper, it seems worthwhile to dwell on the last category for a while. Well-being online consists of the following three domains: ethics and empathy, health and well-being and e-presence and communication. The domain of ethics and empathy is defined as concerning *'online ethical behaviour and interaction with others based on skills such as the ability to recognise and understand the feelings and perspectives of others. Empathy constitutes an essential requirement for positive online interaction and for realising the possibilities that the digital world affords'* (Council of Europe, 2022, p. 13).

Here, the Council of Europe's (2022) report emphasises cognitive ('understanding', 'perspectives') and emotional empathy ('feelings'). At second or third sight, one could argue that they have included a communicative aspect of empathising, too, when they consider cognitive and emotional empathy as a *'requirement for positive online interaction'* (Council of Europe, 2022, p. 13). It is to be noted, however, that they do not consider interaction/communication a component belonging to empathy; instead, they see empathy as a precursor leading to positive interaction.

Let us consider this quote from a different perspective. Empathy is considered a 'requirement for positive online interaction', so a lack of empathy is more likely to lead to negative, harmful online interaction such as cyber-violence (Jiang & Gao, 2020), which can be explained by the online disinhibition effect, for instance. Furthermore, Davis (2004) explains that the cognitive process of perspective-taking serves a de-escalatory function during provocations. It delays the immediacy of the first reaction, which often runs the risk of being destructive, hurtful and accelerating the escalatory cycle. Therefore, Davis (2004) concludes that empathy not only offers a maintenance function in social life, but also a reparative function during more complicated interactions. Foreign language education scholars (Byram,

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2021; Golubeva & Guntersdorfer, 2020; Mercer, 2016) have stressed empathy as an integral part of intercultural communicative competence, which is still a primary goal of many foreign language curricula.

Thus, we have demonstrated that the contexts for social interaction and communication become increasingly digital and blurred, implying that online and offline contexts often interact. Consequently, current understandings of empathy also need to embrace digital and blurred spaces. Therefore, having argued for developing and communicating empathy in digital contexts, this section explores existing definitions of digital empathy and thereby seeks to explain why previous (digital) empathy concepts need to be de-constructed and then re-constructed. This will lead to a subject-specific conceptualisation of (digital) empathy in the context of and with the specific focus on language learning in the twenty-first century.

4. (DE-)CONSTRUCTING (DIGITAL) EMPATHY FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

4.1. Digital empathy and its necessary de-construction

From a healthcare perspective, Terry and Cain (2016) define digital empathy as the *'traditional empathic characteristics expressed through computer-mediated communications'* (Terry and Cain, 2016, p. 1). Given that social connection increasingly occurs in digital spaces, Terry and Cain's expansion of empathy has been necessary. Furthermore, the digital environment is not only a context to learn the foreign language but also a context where learners use the language beyond their studies. Its relevance can also be seen in Fuchs' (2014) claim that *'our affective relationships to others are increasingly based on mediation and virtuality'* (Fuchs, 2014, p. 155).

However, Terry and Cain's (2016) 'computer-mediated communications' do not necessarily include hybrid forms of communication, which – as phenomena like 'phubbing' and 'digiphrenia' have shown – characterise lots of communication and interaction nowadays. Therefore, we must not only seek to expand our understanding of traditional characteristics of empathy to include digital, virtual and artificial-intelligence-mediated forms of communication but also embrace those situations where online and offline interactions intersect. Therefore, does it

even make sense to differentiate between digital and non-digital empathy? On the one hand, I would argue yes, especially when endeavouring to raise awareness of the challenges and chances of communicating empathy in the digital environment. It would also contribute to exploring differences and similarities in how empathy is communicated in these contexts. This relates to Jakobson's (1960) model of communication, which emphasises the importance of context, channel and code. On the other hand, it could be argued that online and offline participation and performance should rather be seen on a continuum (Bracci et al., 2022). So maybe the right approach to this question would be a combination of both approaches?

4.2. Constructing (digital) empathy for foreign language teaching

This need for re-conceptualising digital empathy is also evident in foreign language teaching. Foreign language education scholars Jiang and Gao (2020), inspired by Friesem (2016), define digital empathy as the *'cognitive and emotional ability to be reflective and socially responsible while strategically using digital media'* (Friesem, 2016, p. 72). This definition shows that their view of digital empathy only embraces cognitive and emotional components. In contrast, a third aspect, which Howe (2013, p. 14) described as *'communicating ... the recognition and understanding of the other's emotional experience'*, is missing. It is, however, precisely this communicative aspect which I consider particularly crucial for the foreign language classroom. The goal of foreign language learning is to become able to communicate and interact in a foreign language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) – in different contexts and by using different media and modes.

Furthermore, language learning is an ongoing process, not a product. The same applies to empathy: even though empathy is often misconstrued as a *'have-or-have-not personality trait'* (Everhart et al., 2016, p. 3), it is a process (Friesem, 2016), a learnable skill (Everhart et al., 2016, p. 3) that can be learnt and taught. However, this process perspective is rarely mirrored in the terminology of models: scholars talk about components (Aldrup et al., 2022, p. 1179), phenomena (Friesem, 2016, p. 33) or dimensions (Terry & Cain, 2016) of empathy. A (digital) empathy model for language learning needs to reflect this process perspective. Therefore, I decidedly opt for process, which resonates with the active notion of agency instead of empathy being a passive response, denoting a rather behaviourist conditioning perspective. This notion of process needs to be reflected in the terminology, too. Instead of using nouns ('empathy'), I opt for the gerund form ('empathising') as a noun to underline the active process. This echoes the etymological root of empathy, whereby it means 'feeling into', which implies a *'process, where observers project themselves into the objects they perceive'* (Preston & de Waal, 2002, p. 2). Resonating with contemporary conceptualisations of empathy, the following preliminary multi-dimensional model embraces cognitive, emotional and communicative processes. The notion of 'preliminary' emphasises that this model is still in its infancy and likely to be reconceptualised (Figure 1).
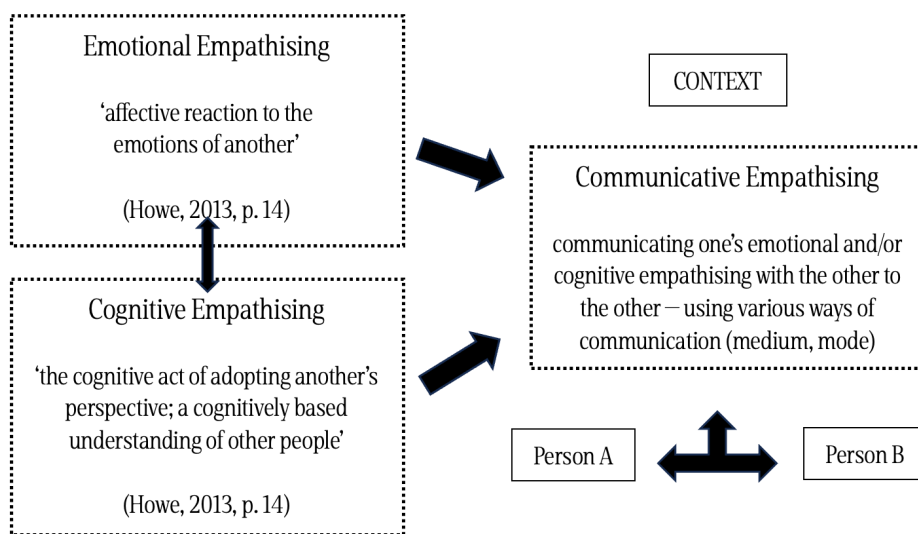
Figure 1. (Digital) empathising in foreign language learning (a preliminary model)

I have used Howe's (2013) emotional and cognitive empathy denotations but replaced 'empathy' with 'empathising'. Whereas emotional and cognitive empathy/empathising have already been explained and echo previous lines of investigation, the third interrelated process – which I call 'communicative empathising' – warrants further explanation. I define 'communicative empathising' as the process of communicating one's emotional and/or cognitive empathising with the other to the other – in different contexts and using various ways of communication (mode, medium). Communicative empathising is the process whereby person A connects and interacts with Person B.

I am well aware that coining new terminology might easily attract criticism, especially when – as in this case – it could be seen as merely replacing an old term, such as 'motivational empathy' or 'empathetic concern' (Zaki, 2019), with a new one ('communicative empathising'). Nevertheless, I consciously take this risk to show that linking empathy to foreign language learning and teaching is crucial, where communication 'underpins everything' (Walsh, 2011, p. 3). This ties in with the socio-cultural approach to language learning, according to which we learn a language by using the language with others. What distinguishes foreign languages from other subjects is that the language is both the medium and the message of learning (Walsh, 2011). Let us focus on the teacher's perspective: teachers convey the content via their teacherese, coined analogously to motherese. Modern, multimodal motherese, also involving non-verbal characteristics such as facial expressions, gestures or touch, not only contributes to babies' language development but also functions as *'emotional regulation of infants'* (Botha, 2016, p. 126). I would claim that motherese – sometimes termed caretaker speech – also conveys empathy: through their motherese, parents communicate to their babies that they see, hear, feel, understand and care for their babies. In analogy, I posit that teachers communicate empathy to their pupils through the medium of multimodal

teacherese. Usually, teachers have a tremendously higher talking time than their students; therefore Hattie (2008, p. 72) posits that *'the proportion of talk to listening needs to change to far less talk and much more listening'*.

Consequently, I believe that teachers should also embrace 'empathetic listening' (Oxford, 2016, p. 207). In sum, teacherese should be considered a multimodal form of empathy.

In addition to avoiding definitional narrowness, this approach seeks to make (digital) empathising subject-specific, i.e., adapt it to the subject of teaching foreign languages. To achieve this, I have complemented previous research by focusing on the communicative process since communication characterises foreign language teaching. Inspired by Jakobson (1960), the influence of context on communicating empathy has been highlighted extensively throughout the study. 'Communicative empathising', occurring in different contexts and drawing on different ways of communication (medium, mode), has been introduced and coined with this particular aim in mind. Besides, by opting for the gerund 'empathising' instead of 'empathy', I have highlighted the process perspective, which characterises both language learning and empathy. Lastly, the approach suggested in this study differs from the previous approach to digital empathy by Terry and Cain (2016), who express a rather negative and one-sided attitude toward technological advances, which is why they extensively focus on the threats of digital communication in expressing empathy. Whereas their approach to digital empathy was sparked by a desire to confront the plethora of challenges pupils encounter in the digital age (Chen, 2018), my approach aims to be more balanced by addressing both chances and challenges. This model has been informed by Howe's (2013) understanding of empathy, Terry and Cain's (2016) definition of digital empathy and Jakobson's (1960) communication model, acknowledging the significance of the 'standing on the shoulders of giants' metaphor.

5. CONCLUSION

Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright (2004, p. 163) put it vividly by stating that empathy is *the 'glue' of the social world, drawing us to help others and stopping us from hurting others'.* This social glue called (digital) empathising is invaluable for the vitality of foreign language teaching. Both empathising and foreign language teaching are relational endeavours. Empathy might be seen as *'the most 'social' of phenomena because it can only arise within some kind of interpersonal context'* (Davis, 2004, p. 20). The foreign language classroom is an interpersonal context abundant with and intrinsically dependent on interaction and communication.

Empathising should be considered the backbone of online, offline and hybrid participation and performance in the foreign language classroom. Misleadingly and erroneously, however, empathy is often viewed as a personality trait (Batson et al., 2009), which 'misconstrues and undervalues' (Everhart et al.,

2016, p. 3) this complex concept. Consequently, it is of paramount importance to reconceive (digital) empathising as a learnable skill, a *'set of abilities that can be developed, taught'* (Everhart et al., 2016, p. 3). As the study has argued, such a change of conceptual perception is crucial if teachers want to explain to peers, pupils or parents why they incorporate (digital) empathising in their foreign language curricula.

Acknowledgements

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