

Being a Hard-of-Hearing English as a Foreign Language Teacher and How to Foster Inclusion in the Classroom

By *Andrea Lizasoain*
alizaso@uc.cl

I am not an expert on inclusion from an academic perspective but from an experiential one. This reflection aims to share my experience as a hard-of-hearing teacher educator to raise awareness about the need to talk about teachers' needs in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom.

It was difficult for me to acknowledge that I was hard of hearing; it took me about 20 years to assume it. Imagine an EFL teacher educator unable to discriminate English sounds and, therefore, to understand the communication situation fully. I thought that made me a mediocre teacher.

As an undergraduate student, I thought I was simply very bad at listening; I hoped my listening skills would improve with time. But they never did. In fact, at 46 years old, I need a hearing device to perform reasonably well both in and outside the classroom. It takes an enormous amount of cognitive effort to navigate interaction when you experience muffled hearing and you feel you are underwater.

Disabilities are, of course, drawbacks. However, I have been able to turn my disability into something positive. At the beginning of academic semesters, I explain to my students who I am and what I need. I simply need them to raise their hands if they want to say something, look at me while they are saying it, and keep the room quiet when someone is speaking. If they do not raise their hands when they want to talk, I will not know who is speaking since I cannot identify where sounds come from. On the contrary, if people do not look me in the eye when they want to express themselves, I will not be able to understand them fully because I also rely on facial expressions to decode messages, both in English and Spanish, my mother tongue. This arrangement incidentally helps them to develop empathy, more discipline, and better interaction among students since they are consequently learning to listen to themselves effectively as well.

In relation to listening to each other, UNESCO (2022) relates 'inclusion' to social participation; for participation to take place, people need to do their part, which basically means listening and responding accordingly.

In turn, Chilean Law N.º 21.015 of Laboral Inclusion aims at promoting the inclusion of people with disabilities in public and private spaces. Among other things, it appeals to respect and to avoid discrimination. Truth is, no law can guarantee respect in the classroom. But empathy can.

Neuroscience has pointed to empathy as an innate potential ability that human beings can develop given the right input (Auriemma, 2023). Empathy is the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes and experience what they perceive and feel. It is impossible to feel what others feel if you have not experienced it yourself or if they have not been told what it feels like. I think that foreign language classrooms are particularly propitious to foster empathy since the learners are usually in similar circumstances; they know how vulnerability feels like. Vulnerable people need to constantly tell others what they experience in a specific moment or why they react in a particular way: "I am not laughing because I could not hear the joke", "I did not say 'hi' because I did not hear you", "please, touch my shoulder if you want to speak to me and I can turn around to look at you". That's the right input.

References

- Auriemma, V. (2023). *Empathy. The Contribution of Neuroscience to Social Analysis*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Ley N.º 21.015 de 2018. Incentiva la inclusión de personas con discapacidad al mundo laboral. 1 de abril de 2018. <https://bcn.cl/2f9hw>
- UNESCO (2022). Información del vocabulario. En *Tesaurus de la UNESCO*: <https://vocabularies.unesco.org/browser/thesaurus/es/>