

*Introducing Pixar Shorts in the Greek EFL Classroom as a Means to Enhancing Empathy  
Among High School Students*

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**Abstract**

For the Greek EFL classroom, film viewing is not a clearly defined objective of the curriculum. Neither is there an approved list of films corresponding to each language level. A careful scan of the registered films on the Digital Film Platform for Schools supported by the Hellenic Film Center, CINEDU, reveals a total absence of Disney animated films as resource material. On the occasion of the author's membership in the action group involved in her school's self-evaluation on the improvement of the students' relationships indicator, she was assigned to find films that nurture empathy. This paper not only proposes a more clear-cut policy framework in the case of film appropriateness but also makes a cross-curricular case for Pixar shorts' storytelling as an educational tool for enhancing empathy. Hence, five Pixar shorts (i.e., *Bao*, *Day & Night*, *Lou*, *Piper*, *Purl*) were used for making an empathy-raising intervention through TEFL. More specifically, the Harvard Project Zero's "perspective-taking" thinking category, with an emphasis on "Stories" thinking routine, served as the basis for the elaboration of a post-viewing writing activity that prompted the elicitation of emotional and cognitive responses. To this end, EFL students stepped in and out of the film characters' "shoes" to reflect upon the conveyed, the untold and the personal story. According to the final valuation report, student response essays gave the first indication in favor of supplementing the range of educationally acceptable films and suggestions were made for improving empathic awareness through TEFL as part of further action research projects.

Keywords: Empathy, Perspective-Taking, Pixar Shorts

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## **Introduction**

In Greek public education, part of the teachers' board responsibilities is to organize workgroups for the school unit's self-evaluation. As a schoolteacher, the author became a member of one of the two formed workgroups. More specifically, she contributed to the development of an action plan aimed at the cultivation of empathy and acceptance of diversity and followed by a prospective improvement of the relationships between students. Because student occasional conflicts were marked by lack of tolerance and empathy, it was deemed necessary to come up with measures to prevent further negative trends in the management of their relationships. Therefore, managing certain aspects of their relationships with the appropriate degree of care and attention became the core goal to achieve throughout the school year. As an EFL teacher, her contribution to the action plan was finding relevant films to raise issues in terms of tracking themes that promote empathy and solidarity.

The first thought was that CINEDU, which is the movie streaming platform for schools in Greece, would provide the appropriate educational resources for responding to the task of raising awareness about the importance of empathy. A documentary, titled *Life, animated* (2016) which is proposed for all educational levels and is about an autistic boy's empathy with Disney secondary characters acted as a springboard for going deeper into what makes children identify with Disney characters in general. The decision to focus on the specific Pixar shorts sprang from the intuition that they would be the opportune choice to make where sampling movie themes and sidekick characters was concerned. The expectation was to give rise to the kind of empathy that stems from the contact with familiar situations and leads to familiar confrontation. Therefore, the engagement with ways of raising empathy in students was further reinforced by the teacher's enrollment on an online seminar about the cultivation of empathy and critical thinking offered by the Scientific Association for the Promotion of Educational Innovation (E.E.P.E.K.) with the prospect of acting as a knowledge multiplier for the other members of her workgroup. At the same time, her initiative as an EFL teacher was to explore Harvard Project Zero's "perspective-taking" thinking category, with an emphasis on "Stories" thinking routine. An interesting graphic organizer derived from Literacy in Focus website tied in well with the storytelling approach to the cultivation of empathy in the EFL classroom.

## **Toward a Definition of Empathy**

The Cambridge dictionary definition that "empathy is the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation" gives the starting signal for emphasizing the distinction of empathy into "emotional or affective empathy" which is about the status of a person's emotional reactions, "cognitive empathy" which is about being aware of what it means to go to the root of a problem and "behavioral empathy" which is about acknowledging the need for changing one's behaviour (Karras, 2020). The prospect of scoring high on either dimension of the abovementioned reveals the significance of not only connecting with the reality of a situation but also of venturing new thoughts and feelings from different perspectives based on personalized assumptions. According to one of Project Zero's Thinking Categories, i.e., "Perspective-taking", which is "the capacity to look beyond one's own perspective and to consider others' experiences, thoughts, and feelings" is a routine that can be practiced in the classroom. On a further note, Puglisi (2018) brings to the picture another important kind of empathy, that of

“character empathy” which entails succeeding to “connect with” and “relate to” a character’s thoughts, emotions, and circumstances.

### **Developing the Research Question**

As stated in the introduction, a careful scan of the CINEDU platform for a Disney movie produced a Disney-related documentary about an autistic boy who empathized with Disney characters to such an extent that he learned to communicate emotionally and cognitively through responding to their words and actions, hence the change in behavior. This is how the research question began to take shape: How can Disney characters become a means to enhancing empathy in the Greek EFL classroom among High School students? Three possible answers reveal the way:

- Through “character empathy” which is about identifying with a specific character whose display of specific traits strikes a familiar chord.
- Through “cognitive empathy” which is “about awareness, imagining and understanding another person’s perspective and realities” (Karras, 2020, p. 127).
- Through “imaginative empathy” which is facilitated “under the influence of moving audiovisual stimuli” (Greiner, 2021, p. 125).

In the framework of a more context-specific discussion about the use and meaning of empathy, what follows is a reference to the issue of film education opportunities in Greek school through the presentation of CINEDU which is the Digital Film Platform for Schools supported by the Hellenic Film Center and under consideration for approval by the Greek Institute of Educational Policy (IEP). More specifically, the Hellenic Film Center, which is the provider of approximately 92 films and educational resources free of charge for use in the context of all the available school subjects in Greek school, has been established under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture to be the main body for the implementation of film policy. The resulting Digital Film Platform for Schools project is co-funded by Greece and the European Union through the Operational Program "Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning".

Although animated films abound on this digital platform, Disney animated films appear to have been left out almost by oversight. Hofmann (2018) has also observed a similar negligence in German secondary school, especially in the context of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) which, as she claims, can benefit from Pixar animated films because the addressed topics are closely linked to the daily lives of students. In Greek secondary school, the aim behind including *Life, animated* (2016) is to provide initiatives that indirectly have an impact on fostering alternative pathways to growth through film education. By observing how Disney characters have the power to affect the daily life of an autistic child who regains his voice through watching repeatedly the classic Disney films, students have the opportunity to respond to the agenda that an inclusive world full of empathy is a shareable vision inside the classroom. Just like Owen infers that feeling empathy towards the sidekick characters renders him capable of not only receiving support by but also of giving help to the main hero, an eager student draws a moral from stories that are about empathizing with empowered characters as an empowering option to confront an otherwise disempowering condition.

At this point, it has become obvious that Disney characters have the potential of becoming a means to enhancing empathy. Therefore, the question that takes form is the following: Can Pixar shorts become a means to enhancing empathy in the Greek EFL classroom among High

School students? Answering in the affirmative entails recognizing not only the guided identification with the characters' mindset but also the potential activation of emulating their way of acting through the storytelling power over the spectators' imagination. Therefore, yes, Disney shorts have the potential to become a means to enhancing empathy in the Greek EFL classroom because, through story(re)telling activities in the post-viewing stage, EFL learners are practically expected to:

- prolong their engagement with the movie themes (i.e., empty-nest syndrome, dealing with difference, bullying, perseverance, gender representation).
- make up for the lack of dialogue in most of the animated shorts by thinking out the story behind the moving images.
- imagine what it must feel like stepping into the characters' shoes considering the main conflict of the story from different perspectives.
- bring movie themes home to them how each situation can be resolved on a positive note.

### **The Pixar Shorts**

The proposed choice of the specific Pixar shorts as a film education opportunity to integrate in the school curriculum has everything to do with bringing movie themes home to students. What follows is a short overview of the movie themes and characters.

To begin with, *Bao* (2018) is about a mother's fulfilled wish to bring to life a substitute for her son who left home to embark on his adult life. A piece of dough taking life form and becoming the new focus of a mother suffering from the empty-nest syndrome is a relatable theme in a relatable storyline that really connects with the student audience.

*Day & Night* (2010) is about two opposite characters who resolve their differences after going through a number of stages reminiscent of Bennett's (1986) six stages of Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), namely Denial, Defense, Minimization, Acceptance, Adaptation, Integration.

*Lou* (2017) is about a "Lost and Found" objects box acting as a sidekick character who helps schoolyard bully J.J. fulfil his destiny, i.e., that of reaching the self-realization that giving to others can be more self-fulfilling than stealing from others.

*Piper* (2016) is about perseverance through thick and thin and going into full-on survival mode in adverse conditions, in which fending for oneself seems to be the only solution.

Finally, *Purl* (2018) is about gender equality in the workplace which could be extended to any case of a shared public space where a balanced gender representation should be accounted for.

### **Method**

For the purposes of this study, the starting point was a film project aimed at cultivating empathy in students that matured into the implementation of pertinent post-viewing activities to assess the student's quality of responsiveness to relatable movie themes and characters. The participants were the EFL teacher as member of the action group involved in the school unit's self-evaluation and the EFL learners of the second grade of a Senior High School who became the target group. Greiner (2021, pp. 130-131) points out that "on the basis of

immersion, affect and empathy [...] we often enter into an intimate imaginary relationship with the film character, especially if that character's perception coincides with the film's subjective experience of the world". For the purposes of this study, the teacher and the students transformed into a film community that brought in its shared subjective experience to the data processing through storytelling.

The data came from:

- the EFL learners' written responses for the purposes of the post-viewing activities.
- the EFL teacher's oral feedback during classroom discussion on empathy.
- the EFL teacher's report at the teachers' meeting on the impact of Disney short films on enhancing empathy by expanding self-awareness.
- the action group's final valuation report on the improvement of the students' relationships.

The intervention activities:

- created the circumstances for a storytelling analysis of the movie themes and the issues of conflict among the students.

### Perspective-Taking

To begin with, a warm-up activity on exploring the meaningfulness and purposefulness of perspective-taking was implemented with the aid of the graphic organizer on "differing perspectives" provided by Literacy in Focus. Figure 1 is an example of a student's completed worksheet where she has chosen to take, first, the perspective of Bao's mother and then, Bao's perspective. By internalizing their "thoughts", "feelings" and "actions", the student has taken a glimpse into their mindset and, even if only for a short moment, she has completely immersed into the story and its implications. By exploring different, almost contradictory, perspectives, she has also found out by herself that perspective-taking is thankfully different from taking sides as it involves analyzing one's behavior into different processes before passing judgment.

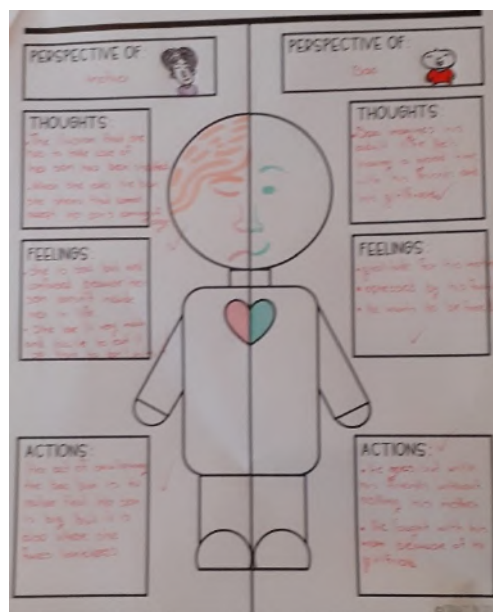


Figure 1: "Differing Perspectives" from Literacy in Focus

## “Stories”

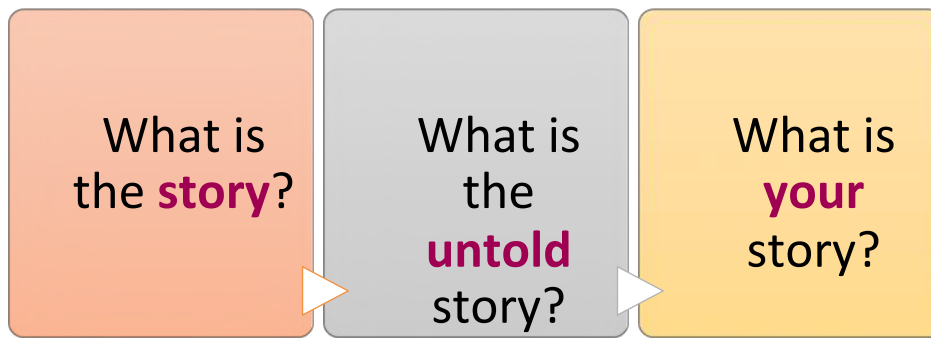


Figure 2: “Stories” thinking routine

Having warmed up to the concept of trying out different perspectives, students went on to develop this new thinking routine in accordance with the guidelines of Project Zero’s Thinking Routines. More specifically, according to Project Zero’s Thinking Routines toolbox, “perspective-taking” is about developing “the capacity to look beyond one’s own perspective and to consider others’ experiences, thoughts, and feelings”. More specifically, “Stories” is regarded as “a routine for uncovering complex issues”.

To take things one step further, the “Stories” routine encourages the kind of thinking that invites learners to “explore how accounts of issues, events, people, society are presented; tease apart and rethink the various angles, dimensions and scope of accounts; consider what has been left out in the account and take a stand on the kind of account that they would like to hear”. To achieve this, students were expected to tell the story following the storyline, retell the story filling in the gaps through empathy with the characters and trace back the story and reconstruct it through a different filter, personalized through their individual experience.

For the students to be able to develop connection to the story, finding and filling in the gaps in the story has been instrumental in their understanding of how empathy develops and brings about a massive change in mindset. What follows is two students’ retelling of the story of *Bao* and *Lou* from their own perspective, with the key gaps filled.

“Bao’s story is about the emotional turmoil that every mother goes through when her child leaves home. The habit that mothers ~~have to~~ be overprotective with their children and deprive them of their independence causes a lot of problems in their adult lives. Because of her emotional void, she created an imaginary son who represents the way a mother sees her son, that is fragile, in need of protection and special care. When he becomes a teenager, he asserts his independence and pushes his mother emotionally away, causing her to feel crushed. Swallowing him on an impulse reveals that she cannot bear to lose him. As soon as she does that, she realizes that her real son is still there for her and that he has not stopped loving her. Many young adults distance themselves from their parents causing them distress. This is normal as we ~~have to~~ realize that children have to reach maturation before they can accept mother’s unconditional love”.

Figure 3: Bao’s story

“Lou’s story is about bullying other kids to attract attention because that is the only way of getting others’ attention even if it is in a negative way. J.J. keeps on bullying other kids to give him their toys because he can’t handle seeing them having fun without remembering how he felt when someone else did the same to him. As a victim of bullying J.J. would rather replicate the bully’s behaviour instead of condemning it and avoiding to do the same. Obviously, wounds are not always visible which means that one has to look for them in order to find them and heal them. The boy has a chance to heal his own wounds when he recovers his own lost toy. Only then does he realize that he can show kindness to others and be rewarded for it. As soon as he gives everything back to their owners, kids who are good at forgiving and forgetting give him a second chance by inviting him to play with them. So, this story is not only about bullying and invisible wounds, but it is also about second chances and tolerance.

Figure 4: Lou’s story

For the students to be able to proceed with “relatability”, developing their personal view of how the story should be told so that messages are better conveyed and implications are better facilitated is a step that cannot be skipped in the developmental sequence proposed by the perspective-taking thinking routine “stories”. What follows is two students’ recontextualization of the story of *Day & Night* and *Piper* with a view to expressing what they would like to hear in order to reach a consensus on how empathy is about finding a happy medium between addressing ethical values and accommodating conflict concerns.

“Day was an accomplished businesswoman who always had a plan and knew what she wanted. Night was a carefree artist who lived the moment and followed his instincts. One day, they met at a New Year’s Eve party. There, they had the chance to meet and get to know each other. Day thought Night was irresponsible and without any goals in life, while Night thought Day was uptight and too focused on work. However, as they got to know each other better, they appreciated each other’s approach to life. Day learned to let go and enjoy the present, while Night learned to prioritize and make plans for the future. They became friends and learned to appreciate each other’s perspective”.

Figure 5: Day & Night’s story



Figure 6: Piper

“It was not long before Piper realized that if it was money that she needed to fulfil her extra wishes then she would have to rely entirely upon herself to earn it as her family could hardly get by. Getting a job at her age was not exactly easy as there were not that many employers who were in the habit of hiring minors to work for them. But she did persist and finally she managed to get a decent job for some extra pocket money. In fact, she was so content with her achievement that she felt she had to share her success story with her friends. When they asked her how she could possibly manage with both homework and a job, she explained that it was all about perseverance. If you really want something, then you will definitely find the way to achieve it sooner or later”.

Figure 7: Piper’s story

When students were first informed about the exclusion of Disney films, in general, and Pixar shorts, in particular, from the platform, one of them retorted that a primary school teacher had nevertheless shown them some of the same Pixar shorts implying that generalizing about assumed non-familiarity is like giving one’s backing to misjudgment. The same student who professed a certain familiarity with the story of *Purl* took the initiative to tell her “own untold story” about how she would have liked to reconstruct the story, i.e., intervene in the plot of the story, to make it more impactful for the viewer. To prove her point, she backed up her intervention with a drawing.



Figure 8: Purl

Watching Purl has made me think about a lot of things and most of all what it must feel like being the only woman in a workplace dominated by men. I have even tried to put myself in Purl’s shoes and try to think what I would have done and whether I could have reacted differently. I am still not quite sure how I would have dealt with the men’s attitude towards me, but recalling the image of Purl being squeezed between two men and not being allowed to the right of her opinion infuriates me. The idea of not being able to give voice to my ideas would probably generate feelings of retaliation. And then I realized that I would have liked the opposite happening. What I mean to say is what if a man was squeezed between two women, deprived of his turn to talk, feeling helpless and unappreciated? But then I also realized that this is not a matter of reversing roles so that either gender gets to experience how things are from a different perspective but mostly a matter of finding a way to co-exist in a harmonious way.

Figure 9: Purl’s story



## **Results, Discussion and Implications**

At school level, the valuation report acknowledged the role of Pixar short films in the cultivation of empathy for providing student-related themes. It also underscored the importance of exploiting the resources for the purposes of in-school training on the issue of conflict management through fostering self-awareness and empathy. The proposal of a follow-up on the role of film education projects in the restoration of student relationships emerged naturally, along with the conclusions reached.

At classroom level, the intervention in the form of post viewing activities helped students adopt new thinking routines when it comes to analyzing the motives behind an individual's behaviour. At the same time, it invited students to experiment with new approaches to storytelling, i.e., through empathizing with movie characters. Their experimentation proved satisfactory and their experimental project worthy of being extended in time and to other school subjects.

At research level, the EFL teacher prepared a PowerPoint presentation for her fellow colleagues on the role of film-generated empathy in conflict management to formally propose the endorsement of new sets of criteria and to ensure their effective implementation in the school environment. These sets of criteria included investigating in practice why Disney popular culture should be embedded in the school curriculum as indispensable for charting and ensuring the emotional development of students.

On a practical level, the EFL learners saw the need to reflect the priority for the improvement of their relationships in the creation of a storyboard to illustrate how a growing empathic regard for others can lead to conflict resolution. For her part, the EFL teacher encouraged students to take the initiative for making a short film to take part in CINEmathia, the annual festival of student films from the North and South Aegean. The main idea behind this collaborative venture is that all voices should be heard and taken into account when defining the parameters of action through empathy. As for the board of teachers, the proposal of a follow-up on conflict management in the school environment through in-school training (e.g., corresponding E.E.P.E.K. seminars) verified the successful implementation of the initial action plan.

## **Directions for Further Research**

At storytelling level, a further suggestion for cultivating empathy would be to explore Deardorff's (2019) Story Circles method for the development of intercultural competencies in the EFL classroom context. Encouraging students to "gain increased cultural self-awareness" through "developing relationships with culturally different others" would mean taking the idea of empathizing to another level, i.e., that of reconstructing the cultural self through restorying processes (Deardorff, 2019, p. 20). Thus, motivating students to reenact a film-viewing experience from the standpoint of the narrator who "practiced listening for understanding" (Deardorff, 2019, p. 20) before taking up the role of contact point between the fictional character and the real self entails reaching the pinnacle of their mission, i.e., that of going beyond everyday interpersonal and/or intercultural conflicts.

At film project level, incorporating Greiner's (2021) concept of "imaginative empathy" in relation to post-viewing activities in the EFL classroom is another suggestion for further research because it ties in with the core goal of aligning the school's agenda with the

students' potential for personal development and progress. The idea of offering the students an immersive experience, i.e., that of assuming the perspective of a character in order to look for familiarity in thought, feeling and behavioral patterns, is an appeal not only to the viewer's imaginative faculties but also to the viewer's capacity for empathy through "imagining" whilst "understanding another person's perspective and realities" (Karras, 2020, p. 127).

## **Conclusion**

It is quite striking to realize that the issue of raising awareness through film-viewing is often entangled in discussions about "the rock the boat" argument when it comes to prompting students to step out of their comfort zone in order to get a glimpse of the different and parallel realities. Hence, the lingering question: why can we not help them expand their thinking beyond the obvious without finding recourse to stories and images that leave students with the blunt reality that everything is flawed and unlikely liable to change? And what is more to the point: Why can the use of film-generated stimuli not be merely evocative instead of point-blank? It ought to be noted that TEFL has a lot to offer on the subject of bringing home to students how popular culture can lead to thinking differently or imagining how things could be different instead of being just a source of temporary entertainment.

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