

It Takes Two to Tango: the Dynamic Interaction of Emotional and Psychological Aspects in Foreign Language Learning¹

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The emotional atmosphere of the classroom

Teachers and learners know that boredom and anxiety are the main culprits for the lack of progress in foreign language (FL) learning. It is therefore not surprising that researchers in FLL and in language teaching research have focused on ways to create a positive and stimulating learning environment in order to engage learners and enhance their language learning motivation. Good teachers encourage learners to meet new linguistic challenges that match their increasing and developing communicative skills in the FL. According to Dörnyei & Murphy (2003), Gregersen & MacIntyre (2014) and MacIntyre & Gregersen (2012), this is only possible with the right kind of emotional climate in the FL classroom. We will argue that both teachers and learners need to trust each other as they reach the dance floor, and that once the tango has started, skills can be developed and honed, to the satisfaction of all involved, and that in the heat of the action, nobody will mind the occasional bump.

The learner's role

Initially, learners' emotions are not so much linked with the target language or the teacher, but rather with the other learners. In the words of Dörnyei & Murphy (2003), "it is comparable to walking into a party when you hardly know anyone there" (p. 14). People are careful as they do not yet know what to expect. They observe each other silently, try to avoid embarrassment, and wonder what their place will be in the social pecking order of the new group. They are typically worried about their linguistic abilities fearing that others may be more competent and proficient than themselves. In this stressful first class, learners experience general anxiety, social anxiety and FLA. All this can be coupled to a lack of confidence, a restricted identity, and a certain awkwardness (p. 15).

Garrett and Young (2009) present an interesting longitudinal case study on the development of affect based on Garrett's experience in a Portuguese course for beginners in Brazil. In particular, the study focuses on Garrett's "affective responses to the language learning process, the events from which her affect sprang, and her affective trajectory over the 8 weeks" (2009, p. 209). The authors point out that their study is original in the sense that previous longitudinal research on individual language learners typically focused on the development of linguistic ability or communicative competence in the target language rather than on emotion (2009, p. 220). Garrett's affective responses to events were categorized into four groups: (a) her awareness of her own knowledge of Portuguese, (b) her own professional teacher's voice, (c) her responses to the Brazilian culture to which she was exposed, and (d) social relations with other students and teacher (2009, pp. 212-213). Quantitative analysis revealed that Garrett's remarks centred on social relations, followed by her teacher's voice, linguistic aspects of Portuguese, and cultural information. Only the comments on cultural aspects were overwhelmingly positive; the comments in the other categories were more evenly divided (2009, p. 213).

One striking finding is how dynamic and multi-faceted emotion is. Garrett's interest in linguistic aspects of the Portuguese language declined after the start of the course but her interest in aspects of Brazilian culture increased. It "helped keep her motivated to get through the intensive course" because it allowed her to communicate with more advanced speakers: "She felt she could better cope with her linguistic limitations with the help of culture learning" (2009, p. 222). She also discovered how sociostatic value developed in class. She felt drawn to a group of "cool women" (2009, p. 222) and felt generally better. Not feeling as proficient as the other students made her quite anxious when having to speak Portuguese, and it affected her self-image. She also

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experienced frustration at the Portuguese-only policy in class and at her inability to ask for help using Portuguese. As soon as she had sufficient linguistic resources, her frustration ebbed away but she remained fearful of falling behind towards the end of the course and of being "overstuffed with grammatical information" (p. 216) which, she felt, hindered her ability to communicate. Her comments about her communication anxiety remained constant throughout the course (p. 216). Interestingly, the emotional responses to the course were not the presumed focus of the study before the course. However, after transcription and analysis, Garrett and Young (2009) found that the "emotional responses to the language learning experience (mostly in the classroom but occasionally outside of it) were the most salient features of her learning endeavour" (p. 221). The study shows that emotion should not just be seen as an antecedent of motivated action tendencies or as an outcome but rather as an on-going dynamic interaction between appraisal, emotion, and motivation. Garrett's emotions and motivation were driving her learning but were also influenced by the rate of progress, and by social and cultural factors in the learning environment.

Bown (2009) published a study in the same vein, using a qualitative approach (semi-structured interviews and narrative journals) to investigate the regulation of emotion by 22 beginning learners of Russian. The study draws on social cognitive theory, research on the intelligent processing of emotions, and affective control in distance FLL. Bown argues for the importance of understanding the individual and social antecedents of emotions and the relationship between emotion and cognition in FLL. From the material gathered, it became clear that beliefs and emotions played a crucial role in students' social relationships, thoughts, actions, and decision-making. Learners' beliefs about their responsibilities in their own language learning process had a strong effect on learning outcomes. Emotions also affected their cognitive appraisals of tasks, teachers, the learning environment, and themselves. Students' relationships with teachers and the power relations that emerged were particularly salient features of the learning environment and acted as significant emotional antecedents in the individualised instruction setting. Bown (2009) found that students' cognitive appraisals of situations mediated their experiences of emotions and that they applied their cognitive abilities to self-regulate emotions during the language learning. She concludes that intelligent processing of emotions can have a positive impact on the experience of language learning.

Another study of the emotional experience of learners in the FL classroom was carried out by Mercer (2006) on advanced tertiary level learners over the course of one semester. The learners kept a journal focusing on their emotional FL experience. Mercer then constructed a questionnaire on the basis of an initial analysis of the journals. It provided meta-feedback on the use of journals from the learners' perspective and allowed a detailed study of learner beliefs and emotions. Some students appreciated the fact of having to write down their emotions in the FL. In more recent work Mercer (2009) has looked at the development of tertiary learners' FL self-concepts and self-beliefs, i.e. beliefs learners have about themselves which are thought to affect their behaviour and attitudes.

One negative emotion mentioned earlier is foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA). It has been defined as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, p. 128). FLCA is linked to any activity in the foreign language class, but is typically highest for speaking. It affects learners at all levels, including even non-native foreign language teachers. Gregersen (2007) stress that FL teachers need to be able to recognize explicit anxiety-indicating cues so as to identify learners who struggle with high levels of FLCA. This is not an easy task as some learners are silent because they are frozen with FLCA, while others might be shy, introvert, tired, sad, sulking, or simply bored with the topic (Horwitz et al., 1986). Tackling FLCA is very important because it can interfere with learning and performance.

In a 2009 study, Dewaele and investigated the link between FLCA and the decision to pursue FL learning in a group of 79 London teenagers. Three sub-groups were distinguished: those wishing to pursue FL classes, those having decided to abandon FL classes, and those still undecided about further FL study at the moment of filling out the questionnaire. A comparison of the three sub-groups on a range of learner-internal variables revealed that those who had decided to abandon further FL instruction suffered from significantly higher levels of FLCA. The design did not allow the authors to establish a causal link between FLCA and the abandoning of FL learning, but it did show that FLCA can become a real obstacle. As mentioned earlier, Garrett, an adult and a teacher

herself, could not get rid of her anxiety about expressing herself in Portuguese (Garrett & Young, 2009). Dewaele and Thirtle (2009) speculate that young teenagers are probably more afraid than younger children or adults to appear ridiculous or to stumble in the FL. It is therefore absolutely crucial to give these adolescent learners not just linguistic but also pedagogical support to help them cope with their FLCA.

Other studies have revealed that FLCA and Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) among FL learners and users are linked, to varying degrees, to a variety of higher- and lower-order personality traits, affective factors (attitudes toward the target language, attitudes towards the language teacher), as well as a range of sociobiographical factors (the knowledge of multiple languages, gender, and age) (Dewaele, 2010, 2013). Dewaele & MacIntyre (2014) considered the relationship between Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) and FLCA among 1746 FL learners from around the world. Although a significant negative relationship was found between both variables, the amount of shared variance was relatively small, which allowed us to conclude that FLE and FLCA are independent dimensions. Levels of FLE were significantly higher than those of FLCA, a pattern that was more striking among more advanced learners and those who felt their proficiency was above average in their FL group. In other words, our participants had more fun than anxiety in the FL. Female participants reported both significantly more FLE and more FLCA and older participants reporting more FLE and less FLCA. Narrative material on episodes of enjoyment in the FL class showed a diversity of elements that contributed to participants' FLE, ranging from teachers' professional and emotional skills to a kind and supportive peer group. Many episodes recounted a successful action in the FL class, which filled learners with pride, a sense of achievement and boosted their FLE.

Affirming that "desire" is at the heart of language learning, Kramsch (2009) defines desire as "the perceptual disturbance and realignment experienced by the language user whose identity is constitutive of and constituted by the symbolic system itself" (p. 16). Kramsch sees desire as being close to affect, "but in a more concrete sense than just emotional reactions or metaphysical illuminations of the soul" (2009, p. 16). For some learners the desire to learn a new language reflects an urge, "the urge to escape from a state of tedious conformity with one's present environment to a state of plenitude and enhanced power" (p. 14). Others, however, have "a deep desire not to challenge the language of their environment but to find in the foreign words a confirmation of the meaning they express in their mother tongue" (p. 15).

The teacher's role

The establishment of a good emotional atmosphere in the classroom does not just depend on the learners. Teachers play a central role in establishing a positive learning environment. They need to be aware of the need to structure their discourse so that it is comprehensible and have to create – through verbal and non-verbal means – an environment where students believe in the value of learning a FL (Arnold, 1999)

The progress of an L2 learner can be linked to the chemistry that develops between the learner, the group of learners, and their teacher. Pedagogical practices and classroom environment have also been linked to students' motivation levels. Pertinent and appealing subject matters combined with non-threatening techniques create a positive language learning experience, support and promote group solidarity, and lower levels of FL anxiety in the classroom (Arnold, 1999; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Ewald, 2007; Williams, Burden, Poulet, & Maun, 2004).

The teacher's verbal and non-verbal behaviour affects learners' perception of them from the first few minutes of class. Ambady and Rosenthal (1993) found that students' first impressions of teachers' nonverbal behaviour (10 seconds from the first 10 minutes of class, 10 seconds from the middle of class, and 10 seconds from the last 10 minutes of class) correlated significantly with their end-of-year evaluations of the teacher. Teachers who were fidgeting with their hands or with an object and teachers who were frowning typically obtained lower ratings during the first meeting. Teachers who scored higher "were judged to be significantly more optimistic, confident, dominant, active, enthusiastic, likable, warm, competent, and supportive on the basis of nonverbal behavior" (p. 434).

Borg (2006) found that one crucial trait of effective language teachers was “an ability to communicate freely and to radiate positive feeling” (p. 23) and to develop close relationships with the students. This finding reflects the conclusion of an earlier study on effective teachers of all subjects, namely their ability to create a supportive and caring emotional environment and express empathy with the learners (Walls, Nardi, von Minden, & Hoffman, 2002).

Gregersen & MacIntyre (2014) argue that teachers need to capitalize on their learners’ individual differences and view their language classrooms as a kaleidoscope (p. xxi). They point out that language learners are different one from another, but also that they change –sometimes because of teachers’ interventions. The classroom is thus a dynamic system where teacher and learner’s behavior, thoughts, and emotions are interwoven (p. xiii). The authors explain that some of these emotions can be negative, others positive. Negative emotions are not always bad, as they can help learners to eliminate an obstacle but they can have additional effects that can be less facilitating (p. xiii). Positive emotions on the other hand “can broaden the field of attention and build resources for the future” (p. xiv). Happy learners are more likely to notice pleasant things. Positive emotions can help them “to build relationships, personal strength, and tolerances for the moments when things become difficult” (p. xiv). One crucial aspect is that positive emotion tends to broaden a learner’s perspective, opening the person to absorb the language (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Indeed, “emotion may be the key to the motivational quality of the imagined future self” (p. 193).

Arnold (2011) has proposed the metaphor of fuel for positive affect in the learning process, while negative affect is like cold water dousing the emerging flames.

Teachers can also help combat students' FLCA. Arnold (2000) showed that visualization-relaxation training exercises can lower FLCA and improve listening performance of advanced FL learners.

Kramersch (2009) argues that FL teachers should abandon the traditional monolingual perspective and embrace a multilingual perspective (p. 188). The traditional emphasis on the instrumental or referential uses of language as determined by monolingual speakers needs to shift towards the expansion of learners' symbolic selves (p. 189). According to Kramersch (2009), teachers should help their learners “express and interpret subject positions that are sometimes non-negotiable. For what gets expressed, interpreted and negotiated, especially in multilingual encounters, is not so much information as emotions and memories, values and subject positions – the realm of the symbolic” (p. 190).

To conclude, the popular saying that “it takes two to tango” is certainly applicable to the FL classroom. Apprehension between all participants needs to be overcome, trust needs to be established, fun and hard work will then lead to performances that no member of the group could have anticipated on entering the FL classroom (or ballroom?).

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