

Emotional dimensions in learning: motions in the foreign language class

Des dimensions affectives dans l'apprentissage: Les émotions dans la classe de langue étrangère

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Abstract

Emotions are very important for foreign language acquisition. During the language learning process, the appearance of emotional walls can hinder learner development. These barriers can be reinforced with different emotions, such as anxiety and low self-esteem. These emotions have an influence on the learners' performance. Understanding and considering these emotions can help teachers create favourable conditions in which their students can better perform different tasks. This paper will first give an overview of emotions from a psychological perspective and argue how important they can be in foreign language learning and teaching. Then, some ideas will be proposed about activities such as classroom games that help to take into account emotional factors, based on personal teaching experience.

Résumé

Les émotions nous accompagnent et nous guident dans la vie. Elles nous poussent à faire des choix et à prendre des décisions. Sans la joie, la peur et bien d'autres encore, la vie voir même la survie ne sont pas possibles. D'après certains chercheurs tels que Stephen Krashen et Jane Arnold, les émotions ont une grande importance dans l'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère. Mais quels liens les émotions entretiennent-elles avec l'enseignement/apprentissage des langues étrangères? Apprendre, acquérir des compétences, ou pratiquer une langue devant autrui ne se fait pas sans difficultés. Lors d'un apprentissage, des obstacles ou des murs affectifs peuvent apparaître et gêner les apprenants. Ces barrières peuvent se renforcer avec différentes émotions, dont deux plus particulièrement, qui nous ont semblées intéressantes à étudier: l'anxiété et l'estime de soi. Ces dernières ont une influence sur les apprenants, sur leurs envies, leur motivation ou encore sur leur plaisir d'étudier. Considérer les émotions peut aider les enseignants à placer leurs apprenants dans des conditions favorables pour réaliser différentes tâches. Dans cet article, nous avons tout d'abord défini ce que sont les émotions d'un point de vue philosophique et psychologique, puis nous avons apporté des précisions sur deux émotions en particulier: l'anxiété et l'estime de soi. Nous avons également exposé les liens qu'elles entretiennent avec l'enseignement apprentissage des langues étrangères. Finalement, en tenant compte des facteurs affectifs, des idées ont été proposées afin de réfléchir à l'atmosphère et à l'organisation des classes ainsi qu'à des activités que les enseignants pourraient employer avec leurs apprenants.

Keywords: *affective filter, anxiety, classroom, emotions, learners, self-confidence, teaching and learning*

Mots clés: *anxiété, apprenant, confiance en soi, émotions, enseignement/apprentissage, filtre affectif*

1. Introduction

In philosophy, Aristotle defined emotions as all those feelings that change man in such a way as to affect his judgment and are accompanied by suffering or pleasure (Rhetoric II). Ravat (2007: 83) has explained that “basic” emotions correspond to more specific mental states characterized in particular by a rapid onset, a limited duration, and an involuntary emergence. He distinguishes emotions from feelings such as love or jealousy, and adds that feelings can be established gradually, last longer than emotions, and also refer to a conscious perception. This is not always the case with emotion.

In psychology, certain emotions are related to biological evolution and are primary or universal such as joy, sadness, fear, or anger (Damasio, 1999: 58). They are innate and are expressed automatically or unconsciously from birth. All over the world, emotions allow human beings to express themselves as part of non-verbal language such as facial expressions (Botella, 2015: 9). Furthermore, emotions are used to protect humans against dangers. The physical processes related to fear, for example, allow people to escape danger, such as deciding to run away from a predator (Damasio, 2010: 185). These emotions are all related to body language (Ravat, 2007: 83). Some emotions, such as shame, pride, shyness or envy, are more complex. These “higher cognitive emotions” are much more related to social interactions and require more complex cognitive skills (such as reflective consciousness) (ibid).

Teacher-researchers often refer to the notion of the “pleasure of learning” in foreign language classrooms. After numerous research projects about communication, task pedagogy, project pedagogy, and intercultural and learner empowerment, researchers such as Arnold (2006) are interested in emotional factors and their effects in foreign language classrooms. At the beginning of the 1980s, Krashen (1982: 31) argued that an “affective filter” can appear when students are anxious. It includes three variables: motivation, self-esteem, and anxiety. As learners are at the centre of learning, teachers should examine not only the teaching and the learning in foreign language classes, but also how these are related to the emotions students can experience.

In a classroom, emotional and social dimensions seem to play an important role for every individual as they find their place, either as learner or teacher. From motivation to pleasure of learning, from anxiety to self-esteem, many notions have been analyzed by specialists in foreign language teaching.

Inspired by the work of psychologists or neuroscientists, many researchers specializing in education consider it important to investigate how emotions could be connected with foreign language learning processes. How can teachers take these different emotions into account and help learners to mitigate or overcome “negative” emotional factors, allowing them to progress and concentrate on learning? What tools or activities could be used in the classroom to enable learners to overcome these emotional elements and help them build or develop their knowledge and skills?

The next section, examines how some psychologists define anxiety and self-esteem and how affective factors interact with teaching and learning foreign languages. The subsequent section proposes ideas that may assist teachers to create a positive

atmosphere in the classroom, organize classes, and conduct activities such as games that support language learning.

2. Affective factors in relation to language learning

Porcher (1977: 74) has argued that foreign language classrooms contain more than linguistics or language. Teaching materials, teachers, and learners are involved in learning for reasons other than linguistics. Students in the classroom are not predictable, programmable machines. As human beings, students have their own perspectives, goals, motivations, or constraints that determine whether their experiences are in common with their classmates or not. Through their experiences, students make discoveries, encounter obstacles, and implement strategies to overcome them. This process is organized differently depending on learners' individuality and on their desires, goals, motivations, and also on their emotions. Affect is a very broad field comprising feelings, emotions, beliefs, and attitudes which significantly condition our behaviour (Arnold, 2006: 407).

2.1 Definitions of emotions: anxiety and self esteem

One emotion that appears to have an impact in foreign language classrooms is anxiety. Arnold and Brown have states that anxiety is quite possibly the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process (2005: 8). The Larousse dictionary (Larousse 2015) defines anxiety as a painful worry, a nervous tension, caused by uncertainty, expectation, or even an emotional disturbance resulting in an indefinable feeling of insecurity. Similarly, the website psychologies.com explains that, like fear, anxiety is an emotional state of nervous tension. People generally experience it when they are waiting for a serious event, such as medical surgery, results of an examination, or a response from an employer, among many others. In foreign language classrooms, anxiety can arise when learners have to speak to others or take an exam.

Delignères (1993: 235) has added that anxiety is the way an organism responds when confronted with environmental demands. This response manifests itself in the development of negative affects, feelings of apprehension and tension, which are associated with a high-level activation of the organism (cold sweats, heart beating faster than usual). It is therefore a complex response, combining the cognitive and somatic dimensions. According to Spielberg (in Delignères, *ibid*), the state of anxiety is linked to the perception of a threat, that is, to the assessment of the present situation as dangerous, either physically or psychologically.

The Cégep de Sainte-Foy mentions that anxiety has effects on several cognitive elements such as the short, medium, and long term memory (ability to memorise, store information and encode); the ability to plan an action, coordinate it, and mobilise ourselves to achieve it; the ability to project the achievement of an objective; communication (expression and understanding); fatigue; discouragement; and shame.

Anxiety is an emotion that can disrupt and hamper learners and hamper their learning. Anxious students will often tend to question and undervalue themselves.

The greater the anxiety, the lower the self-esteem; the first having a strong influence on the second. According to Larivey (2002), self-esteem is the result of self-evaluation. It is, in a sense, a barometer revealing the extent to which we live in harmony with our values. Self-esteem manifests as pride in being ourselves and in the continuous evaluation of our actions. Whether people are aware of it or not, they are always affected by their own self-assessment of their behaviour. At each subjectively important action, individuals issue an evaluation such as, “what I do is valid in my eyes” or, “this is not valid”. For the first example, the result may be that the “action values me”, whereas in the other case it may be “I feel devalued in my eyes” (ibid). In the classroom, learners may lack self-confidence and encounter more difficulties participating in activities or interacting with others if their self-esteem is low or very low. Because of this, students who are learning foreign languages and who have to perform tasks or actions that could have negative consequences for them can be less motivated, because motivation is linked to different emotions, such as anxiety and self-esteem (Arnold and Brown, 2005: 2). To act, it is not enough to mentally develop a project, or to have an idea or representation of our actions. Human beings still have to be motivated to act. Motivation, far from being the only result of rational faculties, proves on the contrary to be intimately connected with emotion (Ravat, 2007: 82).

Finally, Ravat (2007) has explained that emotions are not solely related to the individual action. They also contribute to the collective action, making possible different phenomena of affective synchronisation. Thanks to more specifically social emotions, common parameters of action can emerge and organise. Collective action, therefore, is not solely the result of the cognitive activity of rational and calculating agents, it also emanates from a coordination of emotions. The link between emotions and actions is thus not only dependent on innate programs derived from biological evolution, but also on socio-cultural interactions (ibid: 88). The socio-cultural interactions that take place in classrooms can also reveal various emotions depending on the content of the exchanges or on the activities carried out.

2.2 Emotions and learning

2.2.1 Emotions of individual learners

Emotional factors play an important role in the success of classroom learners. In the 1980s, Stephen Krashen (2009: 31) had already cited anxiety and low self-esteem as negative factors in learning a second language and also as components of the level of motivation among learners. He identified an emotional filter composed of three elements: motivation-attitude, self-confidence, and lack of anxiety. If a student’s anxiety is low, and if he or she has good self-confidence, they will have more motivation and more success in learning. The weaker the emotional filter, the stronger the acquisition, and vice versa (Germain, 1993: 249). It is important to consider this filter to help language learners. If anxiety is too strong, the filter works as a

psychological wall that can appear when students are afraid of making mistakes, or appearing ridiculous in front of others when they try to communicate. Anxiety is therefore an obstacle in learning, especially when fear comes to consolidate it. It is a mechanism of psychological defense (Kertesz-Vial, 2009).

Learning another language is an arduous task that requires much effort from those who undertake it (Bogaads, 1991). This includes efforts to spend time on the process, but also social efforts for learning, cooperation, or collaboration with the various actors of the course. In the classroom, a learner is not alone and must work, share, and cooperate with others. It is somewhat akin to a real society whose learners are the social actors. In the classroom, the importance of individual efforts is the same as in our societies (e.g., politeness formulas, sociolinguistic correction), as well as the rules that are linked to the language they study. In the classroom, the interactions can reflect (i.e. are similar to) those which happen in the broader society in everyday life. Relationships with others are necessary as students must communicate with each other and with their teacher, and take into account others' emotions in order to move forward in their learning.

By making efforts to do this, learners manage different emotions such as self-esteem, anxiety, beliefs, and many more. They are confronted with different experiences. An individual can live situations he or she does not know and become familiar with previously unknown attitudes (Bogaards, 1991). This experience can lead to changes in behaviour and attitudes. A challenge that is judged to be too difficult can cause anxiety and demotivation in learners, or give them the feeling that they are not good at learning a particular language, finally leading to a decrease in self-esteem. They will not feel able to do what a teacher requires and will not be involved in the classroom tasks. Foreign language learners, especially those at the beginning of their learning, may find themselves in a similar emotional situation. Therefore, it is up to the teachers to play a friendly role, providing support and encouragement to their students. This will enable learners to feel safe in an environment where they can achieve their potential with less fear.

2.2.2 Impact of the teachers on students' emotions

Teachers' own lives also play a positive or negative role on students' emotions. As Gagnon, Gravel and Tremblay (2013) have argued, another difficulty for teachers is their own history and their own emotional life that consciously or unconsciously interferes with and influences the pedagogical relationship and the learners' feelings. These difficulties are compounded by the fact that language teachers are often taken by surprise and must act on the spot, which creates uncertainty (ibid). Therefore, intervening appropriately requires an effective mobilisation of the teacher's cognitive and emotional resources, which means that the teacher must know how to distinguish and identify the emotions involved in order to better understand and manage them. Moreover, it is known that the emotional charge present in certain situations can block rational thinking (ibid). For example, students may ask a teacher about a grammar

structure they do not understand. The teacher may be surprised by the question, but the answer may sometimes be crucial to the pupils. If the teacher explains and the students understand, these students can be reassured and continue to advance in their learning. However, if the teacher's response does not match the expected one, it may cause the learners to feel confused or to become lost, potentially leading to anxiety or stress. It is the responsibility of teachers to take these emotional factors into account and to try to ensure that their students can understand themselves. They have a role as a mediator and facilitator in class, following the path of student emotions. In general, many adults who talk about their school experiences exaggerate memories with affective coloration, in particular a teacher perceived as a more or less benevolent mediator (Chevalier-Gaté, 2014).

2.2.3 Requirements of the teacher

As emotional factors play an important role in foreign language classrooms, teachers must take them into account to help their learners to progress and build their knowledge. Arnold has argued that the affective dimension reaches all aspects of our existence and in a very direct way what happens in the classroom (2006: 408). Citing Stevick (1980), she explains that, in the classroom, success [in learning foreign languages] depends less on linguistic materials, techniques and analyses than on what happens in and between people in the classroom. Giving adequate attention to the subjective processes means focusing on individual factors such as anxiety, inhibition, self-esteem, ability to take risks, self-efficacy, learning styles and motivation. Inter-subjective processes may relate either to intercultural processes, such as cultural shock in second-language learning situations, or to interactions in the classroom where it is necessary to take into account the attitudes of the teacher, and the establishment of an appropriate classroom atmosphere.

Taking into account emotional factors essentially reduces the effect of negative factors and stimulates positive factors (Arnold, 2006). It is the task of every teacher to consider factors such as joy, humour and motivation. They must create an environment that promotes learning and places learners in favourable situations to carry out activities. Teachers should therefore examine various elements related to affectivity, such as anxiety, self-esteem, and learners' attitudes and beliefs. Doing so will place learners in good emotional conditions, which could enhance their motivation and thus enrich their learning. In order to achieve this, the teacher has to structure the class to bring support to students and to prepare various pedagogical provisions, among other things.

3. In class: practical experiences and suggestions

In this section, some elements that are important for managing emotions in the classroom will be introduced and some explanations will be offered for how teachers could implement them. For example, creating a positive environment, supporting the

learners, and using games can bring about less daunting learning experiences in the classroom.

3.1 Atmosphere

First, teachers can consider the emotional state of their students only if they are aware of the atmosphere in the classroom. Canfield and Wells (1994: 5) have suggested the importance of creating an environment of mutual support and care in order to help students emotionally and intellectually. To create an atmosphere where learners feel comfortable, the teacher must be warm, sensitive, tolerant, patient, and flexible (Robinett, in Bogaards, 1991). Further, the teacher must inspire confidence, respect for his- or herself and others, and a sense of acceptance. Finally, they must have a strong personality and be a source of stability (see Stevick 1976, in Bogaards, *ibid*: 124). During the first foreign language lesson, the fears that learners and teachers feel are sometimes very intense. Students may worry about whether the teacher will be competent, understanding, sympathetic, strict, stern, calm, or relaxed. Similarly, teachers may wonder whether the students will work, participate actively, be motivated, and be friendly. Teachers must consider that all these concerns asked can generate curiosity as well as anxiety for both parties. Bogaards supplements that it is only in a warm and confident atmosphere that learners can flourish and optimally exploit their learning abilities (*ibid*).

It is for this reason that teachers should try to create an environment in which learners can feel safe physically, psychologically and emotionally, where it will benefit both learning and teaching. In order to develop a comfortable atmosphere for the students, a teacher can arrange the tables in the shape of a “U” in the classroom. Through this arrangement, students are facing each other and are more aware of their classmates, therefore looking at and listening to them more than in a traditional class and asking more questions. The teacher should then try to stay, as often as possible, on the sides of the “U”, avoiding the centre of the class and making the students more relaxed. With this arrangement, the teachers can look at all the members of the classroom, walk around the classroom to help students to check their progress, and be attentive to their emotions. Moreover, the “U” shape creates an open space in which the students can move freely and without pressure.

3.2 Relaxation

For teachers, it is essential to work with and for their learners, to give them freedom, to help them to be in good conditions to learn, and to leave room for them to use their inventive and creative forces. One perspective is to consider that to learn a language is to mobilise a body through the attention sought, among other things, by listening and seeing the other, and to temporarily become another individual, with cognitive, semantic, emotional, relational, and cultural implications (Louÿs and Leeman, 2013). Bottineau (2013) has added that, despite the current valuation of communicative skills

and the notion of task in a task-based approach, learners are kept apart from two essential dimensions: speaking, which is physically engaging in a relationship; and semantic, emotional and interactional cognitive effects, which are co-produced bilaterally and irreducible to a task. This discrepancy between the displayed objectives and the nature of the experience leads to frustrations and blockages, which sometimes lead to trauma and are based on a cascade of misunderstandings (ibid). It is the responsibility of the teacher to ensure that communication is possible among all class participants, thereby mitigating the impact of emotional factors that may affect the learning process. Teachers must therefore pay attention to the different emotions that learners can feel.

In his autobiographical novel, Pennac (2007) explains that some students even fell asleep from time to time in his classes. This would happen when he tried to restore his students' taste for French literature by reading them texts as people would read stories to children. However, the micro-siesta of Pennac's students did not bother him because they seemed to be more creative and better motivated after their nap. They remobilised themselves to be actors of their learning. To rest in the classroom can sometimes be beneficial. Teachers can occasionally (depending on the state of fatigue or nervousness of their learners) invite their students to place their heads on the desk and ask them to close their eyes for five minutes. This can help learners remove tensions and refocus. Of course, these are not pedagogical moments, but they allow students a short break. Such a tactic can only be applied if the teacher considers the emotional state of the class. Like Pennac, teachers should not hesitate to allow certain freedoms to the learners in their classes in order to help them. Allowing them to yawn or walk in the classroom can help evacuate the stress that has accumulated. Fife (2016) has explained that, to promote relaxation, the teacher can propose exercises in the form of exhalation with sound emission, releasing the tensions of the face and the body, as after an exercise of muscular tension in gymnastics. This relaxation can be obtained through laughter and other activities that concern breathing. Humour can also be an important tool. Indeed, the pedagogue must take into account the "socio-emotional factors" that encourage the appropriation of the target language, because stress and negative stimuli reduce or even remove the willingness to offer answers in the language classroom. One of the most convenient ways to defeat anxiety is using humour (Kertesz-Vial, 2000). It is not just about humour itself, but also about using it to help learners to unwind and relax, allowing them to focus on classroom activities.

3.3 Valuation

If learners feel valued, they can invest more in classroom activities. According to the Rodriguez, Plax and Kearney model (quoted by Arnold), if the teacher creates an affective relationship that supports learners through proximity and friendship, this predisposes students to devote more time to learning tasks and thus leads to better cognitive outcomes (Arnold, 2006: 416). A teacher can facilitate positive relationships between students (ibid), and also between the students and the teacher. A way the

teacher can build confidence is to act more as an advisor or even a friend and less like an authority making the students perform (Young, 1991: 432). Students are aware when their teacher is trying to get to know them, and this creates a relationship between student and teacher. By doing this and by giving the learners confidence in their skills, the teacher makes them feel comfortable and creates group cohesion, or even a true micro-society. Murphey (1998: 15-16) has noted that when students are allowed and encouraged to make friends quickly and effectively with their classmates, socialization is facilitated, self-esteem is higher, and the conditions for learning are better. As the students feel encouraged and listened to by the others, they talk more in the foreign language, without anxiety or stress.

Both inside and outside classes, teachers must try to encourage learners to speak the foreign language with them but also between themselves. At the beginning of the learning period, a teacher should explain to students that they are willing to help them express themselves in a foreign language with their classmates. By taking this habit, students seem to take more pleasure in practicing a foreign language and they become more and more confident in their abilities. For example, the University of Tokyo (College of Arts and Sciences at Komaba) has recently implemented a program where teachers organize a weekly meeting where students can come freely to talk in French. Two Japanese assistants (with a high level of proficiency in French) help to make the students more comfortable to have discussions in the foreign language. Each week, the room is full (approximately 25 people). It is not easy when students come for the first time. However, after a few weeks, they open up to others, become friends, and improve their self-esteem and social skills.

3.4 Games

For a teacher, helping learners to have better self-esteem while meeting the expectations of all learners is a difficult task in any foreign language classroom. Teachers will not be able to always answer each learner individually, but they will have a very wide range, a varied toolbox, that enables them to meet the different expectations of the members of the class (Agaësse, 2009: 89). Creative activities and tasks to be carried out in groups with the support of the teacher (i.e., cooperating or collaborating) could be useful in class. Variation in activities and class organization could help learners get to know each other, trust each other, make exchanges and thus to strengthen their ties (see tenseignes-tu.com).

Tools such as board and card games can be captivating to use with learners if emotional factors are to be considered. When they play, learners often forget that they are studying, their anxiety is reduced, and their motivation is reinforced both consciously and unconsciously. Little by little, they become less reluctant to speak (Agaësse, 2009). They often maintain more friendly relationships with their peers (*ibid*: 54) and positive emotions such as joy manifest themselves. These tools can be helpful to calm the pedagogical scene and to make the learning of a language less stressful.

The rules of grammar that are very different from those of their mother tongue can

be a barrier to learning another language and can also create frustration, nervousness, or blockages. Studying, revising or re-using different linguistic points in a relaxed context can help students. Brougère explains that game, “as a game”, produces devices to get away from everyday life and consequences (Brougère, 2005: 57). He quotes Bruner who argues that the game provides the opportunity to try combinations of behaviours that, under functional pressure, would not be attempted (ibid: 56). With the game, learners have the right to make some mistakes. They are also led to think and find a solution to solve riddles, leading them to greater empowerment, and help them to develop their autonomy. They have problems to solve (defined by the rules of the game or its variants) in order to achieve goals (to win the game). Students must pay attention to what is said by their comrades, cooperating and making deductions. Thus, students have the opportunity to perform tasks with more freedom than in a traditional setting and have more choices in their topics of conversation without being aware that they are studying or learning. During sequences where card games are used, it is surprising and enjoyable to see learners who are usually very reserved or anxious become more talkative and willing to interact. As for teachers, they position themselves behind or alongside the students to ensure the smooth running of the activities, answer questions, clarify meanings or rules, and ensure learners’ psychological and emotional security. Pennac (2007: 164) left his students to play freely with the language in his French classes. According to him, we must know how to play with knowledge because it can help learners to better learn, memorize, and master it.

Games can be used to help learners to review vocabulary, reuse grammar, or think about strategies to improve their learning process. In a game like *Who Would Win?* (see boardgamegeek.com) students can practice arguing, work on the construction of their argument, and reuse what they learned without much stress. When teachers use this type of game, students try to speak more and they use strategies such as cooperation and collaboration in order to win. The atmosphere is more relaxed, and students who are usually timid speak and participate much more, laughing and they having fun together. By using games, the teacher is no longer in front of the learners, but behind or among them to answer their questions, to take care of their emotional state, and to watch the progress of the game. As the students are in smaller groups, the teacher can bring them more individualized support. However, games should not be used exclusively in lessons. Teachers have to use various types of activities to help their learners improve their skills in foreign languages. Games are one such useful activity, and should not only be used for break times.

4. Conclusion

Studying a foreign language is not easy, and it is not always logical; some tensions may appear. It is therefore necessary to give learners more freedom to be creative and play with their knowledge in a relaxed environment in order to mitigate the influences of negative emotions such as anxiety. Activities that will lead them to be less anxious should be developed to improve their self-esteem, reduce their fear of expressing

themselves and lower their “affective filter”. This approach could enable learners to become more involved in the tasks of learning and more autonomous.

It would be beneficial to create environments in classrooms that encourage positive emotions in learners. Students who notice that their teacher or their classmates are considering their interests or personalities may feel reassured, which will alleviate anxiety in the classroom and increase their self-esteem. To achieve this, teachers must first take into account who the students are, taking the time to talk with them and varying the types of activities in their lessons. The emphasis of this paper is that good pedagogy is not just about the type of activity, but about how teachers can introduce, manage and complete the activities with their learners. Taking into consideration any negative or positive emotions they may feel is an arduous task for teachers. While it is impossible to control everything, it is important to be attentive and to do one’s best.

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