

# The Language Teacher



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# On Emotions in Foreign Language Learning and Use



Every year, the plenary and featured speakers at our annual international conference write articles for *The Language Teacher* to give attendees some background to their conference presentations. This year, we will be publishing these articles in all of the pre-conference issues of *TLT*. For more information on JALT2015, please see the pullout preview in the centre of this issue of *TLT*, or visit our conference website:

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attention to cognitive and social perspectives, rather than emotional ones. Of course, Robert Gardner, and later Zoltan Dörnyei, could claim that motivation and attitudes have an emotional core in them, but it seemed hidden in complex models. Moreover, attitudes are quite constant, motivation has a long-term, goal-oriented perspective, in contrast to emotions who are experienced in the moment. Also, as MacIntyre (2002) pointed out, attitudes alone are not sufficient to support motivation.

What interested me were the emotions that arise, and fluctuate wildly, the moment a learner or user engages in FL learning or communication (cf. the recent study by Gregersen, MacIntyre & Meza, 2014). The word “emotion” itself was generally absent in the SLA literature up to the start of the current century, although there had been interest in one specific emotion: foreign language anxiety, especially since the study by Elaine Horwitz (1986).

One ground-breaking book, Arnold (1999), brought the concept of “affect” to the fore in FL Teaching. She focused on the importance of establishing a good emotional atmosphere in the classroom, it depending on both learners and teachers. She and others have pursued the study of this crucial topic (Arnold, 2011; Dörnyei & Murphy, 2003; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014).

I also became interested in how, and how much FL learners and users talk about emotional matters when they have the opportunity. This interest was shared by Aneta Pavlenko, whose talk I had missed at the International Symposium on Bilingualism in 1999 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Contacting her after the conference to apologise for having missed her talk, we agreed to collaborate on a study into the variation in the use of emotion vocabulary in our French and English interlanguage corpora, which led to the publication Dewaele and Pavlenko (2002). It was the start of a productive collaboration, with the development of the Bilingualism and Emotion Questionnaire (Dewaele & Pavlenko, 2001-2003), probably the first big online questionnaire in applied linguistics. We collected data from more than 1500 adult multilinguals all over the world on their language preferences to express feelings, love, anger, swearing with various interlocutors, including

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Emotions are at the heart of the foreign language learning process. Without emotion, boredom would reign and very little learning would take place. I report on some recent work that has investigated the role of emotion in the foreign language classroom, both positive (foreign language enjoyment) and negatives ones (foreign language anxiety). It seems that both learners and teachers play a crucial role in managing emotions in the classroom. I also report on the difficulties associated with the communication of emotions in a foreign language and on their relative absence in foreign language course books and during classes. This leaves learners ill-prepared to recognise and express emotions appropriately in a foreign language, which is an essential part of sociopragmatic competence.

外国語学習過程の中心には「感情」がある。感情がなければ飽きるのも早く、学びも限られてしまう。本論では、外国語の授業で感情が果たす肯定的な(例:外国語学習の楽しみ)および否定的な(例:外国語学習不安)役割について報告する。そして最近の研究を基に、いかに学習者と教員双方がクラスでの感情のコントロールに深くかかわっているかを考察する。また、外国語で感情を伝えることの難しさについても触れ、外国語の教科書や授業で感情表現が扱われることの少なさが、社会用語論的能力の主な要素である感情表現の理解不足につながっていることを指摘する。

**M**y learning and teaching foreign languages (FLs) in Belgium and the United Kingdom over many years convinced me that Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is not just a cognitive process, but crucially also an affective one. It is my strong belief that success depends in large part on learners’ affective fuel levels, and that as teachers we have to keep the affective tank full.

I remember how surprised I was when I started exploring the literature for the effect of emotion on SLA. Researchers seemed to pay much more at-

their children, their emotional attitudes towards their different languages and their anxiety in using these languages with different interlocutors. This led to many publications, including chapters in an edited book (Pavlenko, 2006) and two monographs: Pavlenko (2005) and Dewaele (2013). We discovered that multilinguals' dominant language, generally their first language (L1), was often the preferred language to express emotions. However, multilinguals did report switching languages when becoming very emotional, typically for swearing. The type of instruction in the FL also played an important role in language choice for emotion. Participants who had learned a FL through classroom instruction and had simultaneously used that language to communicate outside the classroom, and participants who had started acquiring the FL early in life tended to use that FL more frequently to express emotion than participants who had purely formal instruction and were later starters. FLs that were used frequently were typically also preferred to express emotion. An analysis of individual variation in perceived emotional force of swearwords in the multilinguals' different languages and the perceived emotional weight of the phrase "I love you" revealed similar patterns (Dewaele, 2008, 2013). Balanced bi- or multilinguals – reporting shared dominance in two languages – were found to prefer the L1 to express emotions (Dewaele, 2011b).

Interestingly, this work on emotion seems to have inspired other researchers to join in, leading to a substantial increase in publications (for ex. Garrett & Young, 2009; Gregersen, MacIntyre & Meza, 2014; Swain, 2013), as well as many presentations and panels at international conferences. Zoltan Dörnyei acknowledged the importance of emotion in SLA, declaring in 2010:

This is a huge topic, but the current situation is sadly straightforward: Apart from a few exceptions (for example the work of John Schuman, Peter MacIntyre and Jean-Marc Dewaele), emotions have been by and large neglected in the field of SLA. This is all the more surprising given that: (a) classrooms are venues for a great deal of emotional turmoil; (b) emotions are known to be salient sources of action (for example when we act out of fear or anger or happiness); and (c) the process of language learning is often emotionally highly loaded for many people (p. 22).

He confirmed this observation recently, stating that: "Perhaps the greatest omission of the classic Individual Differences paradigm is that it barely acknowledges the central role of emotions in human thought and behaviour" (Dörnyei & Ryan, to appear).

The point I made in a recent blog is that learners' emotions are like wild horses (or at least, ponies). Learners can, with a little dexterity, and with a little

help from teachers, harness the power of their emotions to absorb more of the FL and the culture.

One of the main problems of foreign language (FL) teaching is that the emotional component is too often ignored, resulting in relatively emotion-free (and therefore often boring) classroom sessions (Dewaele, 2005, 2011a). It is undoubtedly easier for curriculum designers and teachers to focus on rigid learning activities that require little emotional investment and therefore little potential for unpredictability, outbursts, surprise, risk-taking, embarrassment, anxiety ... and enjoyment.

In fact, it is my strong belief that by trying to play it safe, curriculum designers and teachers got the wrong end of the stick. Teachers need the liberty to do unexpected, challenging and funny things. Routine is a killer in the classroom.

Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014), inspired by the Positive Psychology movement, explain that negative emotions are not always bad, as they can help learners to eliminate an obstacle but they can be paralysing. Positive emotions on the other hand "can broaden the field of attention and build resources for the future" and help learners "to build relationships, personal strength, and tolerances for the moments when things become difficult" (p. xiv).

The importance of the role of both positive and negative emotions in FL learning surfaced in Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) where we considered the relationship between FL Enjoyment (FLE) and FL Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) among 1746 FL learners from around the world. We found that learners reporting higher levels FLE experienced less FLCA, although some did score high, or low, on both dimensions. To our relief, we discovered that levels of FLE were significantly higher than those of FLCA. The difference between levels of FLE and FLCA was relatively small for beginning learners, but widened for more advanced learners. In other words, as learners progress, their FL anxiety weakens and their enjoyment grows. It is thus crucial not to give up FL classes too early. Interestingly, female participants (who scored significantly higher on self-reported proficiency in the FL) reported both significantly more FLE and more FLCA. It thus seems that emotions (both positive and negative) are the driving force behind FL learning.

This finding nicely illustrates Kramsch's (2009) exhortation that passion and desire are at the heart of the teaching FLs: "Even if we teach a syllabus that is not of our choice and texts we have not selected, we need to find something about them that we either love or hate, but that we are not indifferent to. If we are, our indifference will become our students' boredom" (p. 208).

I will conclude with a personal anecdote on the importance of emotion and emotion words from my days as a teacher of French at the Chamber of Commerce in Brussels in the late 1980s. That Friday evening, I had concluded the class with an unexpectedly outrageous song “Putain putain, c’est vachement bien, nous sommes quand même tous des Européens (Fuck, fuck, it’s really good, aren’t we all Europeans after all?)” by Belgian artist Arno (maewa2, 2008). The (adult) students loved the song, or at least the chorus, and were belting it out, heading towards the door at 9 pm. As their teacher, I was quite amazed by the level of enthusiasm that the song had generated and thought they would never forget the meaning of the highly vulgar and emotional exclamation *putain*, or of the vernacular emotional adverb *vachement*. I will never forget what happened next. As I pulled the door open wide with a theatrical bow, the school director, who must have been leaning against the door listening to the racket inside, fell flat on the floor, got up blushing, and congratulated me meekly for a good classroom atmosphere and mumbled something about whether the song was appropriate. Students burst out laughing, and headed home singing and yelling “Putain putain, c’est vachement bien!” I assumed their affective tank was full.

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