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# Exploring emotional dynamics in language learning environment: Teacher perceptions of student emotionality

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#### Abstract

The purpose of this work is to introduce a comprehensive analysis about teachers' awareness according to student emotional states. Relying on current knowledge about the modern second language teaching, the psychological dimensions of students' emotional experiences are pivotal to the learning process. By integrating some information about teachers' awareness of students' well-being, there is a potential to incorporate some techniques oriented on facilitating better understanding between the lecturer and a learner. To investigate this theory, a mixed-method research was conducted by the author, which included: observations, interviews with students, as well as a survey for the teacher. This work connected the idea of a group study, taking into consideration information 102 higher education students, and a case study: focusing on the experience of the author as a teacher, particularly regarding the emotional dynamics observed during language instruction. The study discusses various pedagogical implications derived from the findings, as well as limitations of the study. The interplay between emotional awareness and second language teaching environment is explored, contributing to a deeper understanding of the process of improving educational practices.

*Keywords*: emotionality, second language learning, teacher, emotion awareness, teacher presence

## 1. Introduction

In the modern setting, emotions are playing a bigger role in today's scientific world than ever before. The awareness of mental states and well-being is growing among people all around the globe, and it is especially seen in educational settings. Teachers are facing some more profound challenges within the field of dealing with their students' emotionality, and the expectations of learners towards their educators are getting more exquisite in terms of taking care of their well-being during second language classes. The craving for more authentic, empathetic teachers is reflected in the way that students are drawn to some figures of professors who sympathize with their needs and seem to have some understanding about what they might be feeling. Furthermore, what might be taken into consideration is that a successful bonding between the tutor and the group of students is connected to the ability to draw correct conclusions based on the body language, demeanor, way of speaking that the learners display.

Having asked teachers who are experienced educators within the field of second language acquisition the following questions: "As an English teacher, how important do you think it is to accurately assess and interpret your students' emotions in relation to the second language acquisition? Do you think you are able to accurately predict what the members of the group you are teaching are feeling in L2 educational environment?", the answers were:

From my point of view, the key to conducting a successful foreign language lesson is emotional bonding with the community of pupils. From all the examples that come to my mind, it is especially memorable when a person who came petrified to my classes at the beginning, left satisfied and extremely proud of themselves for having overcome the fear of communicating in a foreign language. But for me, as a teacher, it took some gentleness, patience, and sensitivity to notice these needs and to work through the barriers, so emotional experiences are extremely important. I don't know if I'm capable of accurately interpreting the emotions of my students, but once acknowledged it's easier to cooperate to achieve the linguistic goals.

– English teacher, higher education tutor of vocational courses

Emotions trigger students' reactions and perception of teaching. Without proper approach and attitude, they are unable to acquire the knowledge and may incapacitate other students' abilities. With my experience I am able to assess and predict what the students are feeling by their facial features, what they say, how they approach others, even how they enter the classroom.

- English teacher, higher education tutor of vocational courses, primary school teacher

They (students) are a group and there is something like a group mood. With experience I can assess students' mood emotions. It happens naturally. It seems obvious that with positive emotions learning seems to go smoothly, however happy faces don't mean learning. Sometimes I don't care. There is a job to do and it's not about how they feel.

Lessons are also dynamic; emotions may change all the time. I think I can see the emotions of my students and how they change. Often, I am responsible for emotion changes. It takes experience and empathy.

– English teacher, higher education tutor of specialist philology courses

The conclusions that can be drawn from those answers is that some of the teachers of foreign languages are more focused on emotions and deem the well-being of their students more influential to the process of learning than others. Anyway, emotions are inevitable in the process of learning a second, third, or any other language, and their existence – consciously or subconsciously – is a part of a learner's personality.

## 2. Theoretical foundation

In modern educational contexts, some reflective practices increasingly focus on the phenomenon of self-reflection of L2 educators, specifically around the ideas of emotion awareness as teachers in foreign language classrooms. According to Gabryś-Barker (2012), the notions of educator presence and conscious classroom awareness are vital for comprehending teacher roles. The effectiveness of a teacher does not rely solely on teaching methods and expertise within the field that is being taught, but also on the strong relationships built with learners, perceiving each of them individually. Teacher presence, defined by many scholars (Anderson et al., 2001, Rodgers et al., 2006, as cited in Gabryś-Barker, 2012) as being alert to dynamics in the classroom based on emotionality and physicality, is a foundation of self-awareness and pedagogical skills. Research findings in literature show that teacher presence and being able to accurately assess students' well-being is vital for effective teaching, developing social cognition about learners, which enhances the teaching quality and student motivation (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

This may be possible thanks to developing reflexivity towards one's own practices and beliefs about teaching profession. As mentioned by Derenowski (2011), there is a growing tendency of English teachers to be more reflective and reassess their practices, which leads to improvement of the quality of lessons. As a consequence, it is thought to facilitate second language acquisition. In the research study conducted by the aforementioned author in 2011, the teachers' task was to write a journal focusing on teaching skills, areas for improvement, remarks about the progress that was made within a group of learners. This resulted in strengthening the bond between the tutor and their students, deepening the understanding of the learners' needs, and facilitating autonomy in the educational environment (Derenowski, 2011). This underscores the necessity of recognizing emotions of students in the language classroom and effectively evaluating the emotional health of L2 students.

Regarding the findings of Pawlak & Kruk (2021), the awareness of second language teachers about the facilitating and debilitating emotions of students in a class-room and ways of managing them seems to be vital in a process of learning and teaching a foreign language. It is especially important to thoroughly examine the emotions that accompany L2 learners in various educational incidents. The emotional burdens that are experienced by the individuals who teach the languages are important as well. It is also worth to consider the relationship between emotions, the role that they may play in a language classroom, and the extent to which the feelings may be managed to improve the effectiveness of educational process (Pawlak & Kruk, 2021).

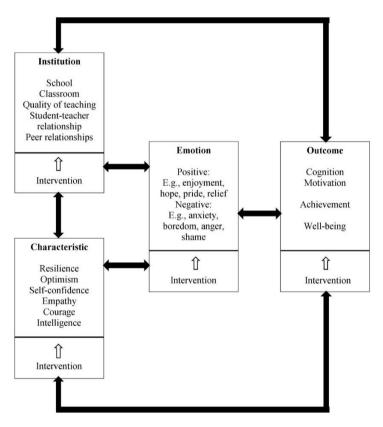


Figure 1 L2EPP (second language emotions and positive psychology) model integrating three pillars of PP (Shao et al., 2020)

Strong relationships between foreign language teachers and students have long been proven to be beneficial for the process of language acquisition. One of the theories that put this phenomenon under scrutiny is second language emotions and positive psychology. As cited in Shao et al. (2020), there is a connection between emotions and success in L2 learning process. As seen in figure 1, the existence and

variety of different positive emotions, like enjoyment, hope, pride, relief, as well as negative sensations (anxiety, boredom, anger, shame) and ways of dealing with them influences acquiring linguistic skills. The presence of different emotions is also a factor contributing to the quality of student-teacher relationships, peer relations, behavior in school and classroom environments. Notably, the way students manage their emotional experiences contributes to the development of important character traits such as resilience, self-confidence, and courage. (Shao et al., 2020: 6). This highlights the importance of being aware of the emotions present in the language classroom and accurately assessing the emotional well-being of learners.

The way that emotions are incorporated in the language learning process is undeniable. There were multiple studies conducted in this area of interest, for instance: Wang et al. (2021) examined over 800 students of English language and measured their mindset, academic emotions, class social climate in relation to the willingness to communicate. WTC being a crucial aspect of second language acquisition was proven to be one of the pillars of success in L2 learning process according to: MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Clément et al., 2003; Yashima et al., 2004, and Kang, 2005. The results of this research work were concluded with a statement that some emotions influence the willingness to communicate differently. That is why it is so important to acknowledge the sensations that occur within the language classroom environment and to accurately assess the emotional well-being of L2 students.

Ultimately, the way that teachers perceive the emotions of their students and if they draw correct conclusions are the factors that learners' success depends on. In Aldrup et al. (2022), the researchers, after having gathered data from the study that measured the link between teachers' ability to perceive emotions and students' outcomes, decided that it is crucial to further investigate this matter. Regarding the findings provided by Aldrup et al. (2022), teachers' empathy and the ability to discern emotional states of the learning group members have been widely recognized as the predominant condition in the academic results. However, in line with the opinions of the aforementioned researchers, there is still a need for data that explores this phenomenon thoroughly.

To sum up, the results of existing studies emphasizes the need to investigate the accuracy of teachers' perceptions of their students' emotional states during English language classes. Comprehending how educators interpret and respond to learners' emotionality may significantly impact students' overall learning experiences. This lays the foundation for the direction of improving the quality of interaction between teachers and students and therefore the learning experience.

# 3. The study

# 3.1. Aims of the study

This work seeks to enhance comprehension of the emotional dynamics at play in language learning environments by concentrating on the role of teachers' perception of students emotionality. This research primarily explores the accuracy of the teacher's perceptions according to her student's emotional states during English language classes. This paper addresses the following research questions:

- How accurately can an educator of a second language perceive students emotions based on the learners' behavior, body language, and way of speaking?
- What is the accuracy of these predictions?
- What variety of emotions are expressed by the students during second language classes?

In this study, the emphasis is put on gaining a detailed insight into the relationship between the teacher and students. Having mentioned the need for indepth inquiry into the matter highlighted by various researchers, the case study conducted in this paperwork prioritizes the significance of self-reporting practices. According to Paulhus & Vazine (2007), self-reports have many advantages of a scientific value, such as: interpretability; the researcher is familiar to the language produced by themselves and thus there is no room for misinterpretation, richness of information; individuals have unlimited access to their own behaviors and emotional states, motivation to report; people are thought to invest more effort and care into self-reports than into assessments of others, causal force: self-perception is a source of interactions with the environment (Paulhus & Vazine, 2007).

This study incorporates a mixed-method approach through observations, interviews, and surveys, considering a group of 102 students, and the measurement of the author's ability to assess her learners' emotional well-being during foreign language classes. In this work, the focus is on the quality of assessment of the feelings that her students might be experiencing during English language classes. The research study answers the questions of how well the educator may assess the scope of emotional experiences based on the impression that the students display through body language, demeanor, way of speaking; what the accuracy of these predictions is; and what the variety of emotions emerging in second language classroom is.

# 3.2. Methodology

The study incorporated mixed-method research, which included:

- observations: distinguishing different body language signs which the students displayed, analyzing the way of speaking (according to the presence of stuttering, loudness of speech, intonation), the overall impression focused on behavior;
- According to Reisezein et al. (2014), objective behavior coding systems, theory-based coding methods, and the intuitive observer judgment method are tools of a diagnostic value when assessing emotional states, therefore it seems an appropriate method for this research study.
- interviews: conversations with participants of the study, about their emotional experiences present during second language classes, taking into consideration specific emotions positive as well as negative ones;
- Regarding Richards' (2009) viewpoints about the role of interviews in investigating the subjective emotional experiences of the participants, this diagnostic tool offers a practical approach to exploring the world from the perspective of a participant who is involved in the discursive exchange.
- questionnaire for the teacher of the group of participants of the study about the perceived feelings that the foreign language users might be experiencing according to the subjective opinion of the tutor based on the set of observed behaviors;
  - As stated by Singleton and Straits (2009), surveys are useful methods to study and interpret human behaviors and therefore they are successfully utilized within the field of social and psychological research.

Some of the questions included in the survey for students are as follows:

- What physical feelings do various emotions bring about in you during foreign language lessons?
- Which factors do you believe most significantly influence the range of feelings you experience in language classes?
- What specific emotion during language instruction aids you the most with your learning journey?
- Which emotion that arises in language lessons is the most challenging for you to manage?
- In what ways could mindfulness techniques support the enhancement of your language acquisition abilities?
- How often do you focus on your emotional condition during language lessons?
- What strategies do you use to alleviate negative feelings in your foreign lanquage classes?
- If you associate a negative emotion with a particular task, what steps could you take to transform it?
- What is the most intense emotion that a particular activity provokes in you?

The teacher's task was reflection on the emotional experiences of her students by answering some questions designed for the learners in advance, thinking how they might have answered. Due to the fact that emotional connection between the teacher and the students is facilitated during the foreign language classes conducted by the author, the answers could have been reflected upon in a detailed manner.

## 3.3. Participants of the study

102 higher education students participated in this research study. In terms of gender, 83.3% of the participants, which is 85 students, were female, while 16.7% or 17 students were male.

Regarding age, 69 students (67.5% of the total) were under 20 or exactly 20 years old. There were 29 students (28.4%) aged 21 to 32, 3 students (2.9%) who were between 33 and 43 years old, and 1 student (1%) was over 60. The participants came from a variety of fields of study, including criminalistics and criminology (27 students, 26.5%), cosmetology (23 students, 22.5%), paramedics (19 students, 18.6%), nursing (12 students, 11.8%), pedagogy (20 students, 19.6%), and philology (1 student, 1%).

When measuring language learning experience measured in years, the results were: 12 participants (11.8%) had more than 15 years of experience, 67 participants (65.7%) had between 8 to 15 years, 16 students (15.7%) had 4 to 7 years, 6 students (5.9%) had 1 to 3 years, and 1 student (1%) had less than one year of experience. In terms of the number of hours spent per week in foreign language classes, 100 participants (98%) attended between 1 to 9 hours of lessons, while 2 participants (2%) attended more than 18 hours per week.

# 3.4. Results of the study

Teacher reflection logs, including documentation by teachers about their observations and interpretations of student emotions during classes, were used to draw conclusions about emotional states of students. The methods used in a log to establish determinants for the learners' emotional well-being were: objective behavior coding systems, theory-based coding methods, and the intuitive observer judgment method (Reisezein et al., 2014). To compare and contrast these findings, answers from students were used based on the interviews about their emotional states during lessons. Each student's task was to choose one negative emotion that is the worst according to their emotion experiences when in L2 environment, and to pick one that is the most facilitating for the process of language acquisition in

their opinion. The same supposition was for the tutor to make when thinking of a particular learner and the scope of emotions that the students experienced in the educator's view. Then, the results were compared and for every emotion that was presumed correctly, one point was given. If there was no feeling experienced or assumed by the teacher, it was also marked correctly/incorrectly, and a point was given accordingly. For the answers of the teacher, the prediction score for the total of positive and negative emotions experienced by the students was 33,5% correctly assumed sensations during foreign language classes.

When it comes to the distinction between the positive and negative emotions, a different prediction score was marked out. For the total of negative sensations occurring in a foreign language classroom, 41% prediction score of correct assumptions was concluded. Emotions that were displayed and named by the learners were: fear, anticipation, surprise, anger, boredom, disgust. The tutor could discern the emotions in her students' behavior in less than half of the cases. Among all the feelings that were taken into consideration in this research study, fear being the most frequently selected emotion, was also the one that was the most correctly interpreted by the teacher.

For the total of positive emotions that were present during English classes, a prediction rate of 26% was achieved. Among all the feelings that were taken into consideration in this research study, acceptance and joy being the most frequently selected emotions, were also the ones that were the most correctly interpreted by the teacher. The summary of results of this research study is as follows:

Correctly Predicted Negative Emotions: 41 out of 100
 Correctly Predicted Positive Emotions: 26 out of 100

Total Correct Predictions: 67 out of 200

Total Emotions: 200

Overall Prediction Score: 33.5%Ratio of Correct Predictions: 1.58

The answers to the interview conducted with students on the topic of emotional experiences allowed for several themes to emerge and classify those responses into categories regarding the awareness of student emotion by the teachers. Semi-structured interviews allowed the author to ask open-ended questions while providing flexibility for students to elaborate on their thoughts. This method was useful for gaining in-depth insights into students' emotional experiences. Then, a thematic analysis was employed to categorize and interpret the students' responses. This method involved systematically coding the data to identify recurring patterns:

Recognition of student stress and anxiety

This theme highlights the significance of teachers acknowledging student stress and anxiety, specifically when giving a speech in a foreign language in front of the whole class. Recognizing these emotions may contribute to creating an environment where learners are supported and their feelings validated. By acknowledging their sensations, educators may be a part of reducing the intimidation connected to learning a language.

Exemplary students answers: "It would definitely be useful for people who are stressed about speaking out loud, even though we are never assessed during classes." "I think it's good to chill out during stressful situations."

2. Importance of creating a supportive environment

This realm is said to be vital for efficient education. Students suggest that when positive feelings are fostered in a classroom, they are more willing to take part in all the activities with engagement and learn new information. Educators play an important role in fostering a space where learners may feel secure to express their emotions without a fear of judgement. This in turn may contribute to a productive learning conditions.

Exemplary students answers: "Knowledge is absorbed better when we have positive emotions." "Managing emotions is very important in learning a language, positive emotions affect better learning and the ability to manage bad emotions well can have positive effects because we will not be discouraged from learning the language."

3. Facilitation of emotional management:

Teachers are encouraged to help students explore the ways how they can manage their emotions, including facilitating and debilitating sensations. This theme emphasises the notion that by equipping learners with strategies to manage their feelings, educators can support them in overcoming barriers preventing them from communication and learning. Taking risks in language use is an important step to develop fluency.

Exemplary students answers: "You can learn to control your fears, which can be helpful, for example, in breaking the language barrier." "Managing emotions would help us open up and speak the language more without barriers."

4. Encouragement of resilience and persistence:

This notion underscores the importance of supporting resilience in students. Educators can help learners perceive challenges and failures – rather than obstacles – as integral components of the learning process. By fostering a mindset that acknowledges setbacks, teachers may maintain longitudinal cooperation of the students in the teaching process and achieve improvement in language acquisition.

Exemplary students answers: "Thanks to the training of emotions, I can explain to myself that difficulties are important in learning because they contribute to better memory of the problem." "When we can manage our emotions, we can focus on learning the language and not introduce negative emotions when we fail at something, just keep trying and practicing."

5. Promotion of positive outcomes through emotional understanding: This idea highlights the part of comprehension and emotion management in developing better educational outcomes. When educators support students in their process of learning to navigate their feelings efficiently, it may improve their overall skills to learn a foreign language. This awareness of basic emotions may lead to gaining more confidence as an L2 user and motivation to engaging in linguistic activities.

Exemplary student answers: "If we can manage our emotions, then it will be easier for us to improve our language skills."

These are some answers that tended to repeat throughout the total of the interviews, so conclusions that may be drawn from these responses are that students acknowledge the importance of emotion management during foreign language classes.

## 3.5. Discussion and pedagogical implications

Some of the results obtained in the course of analyzing the data gathered in this research study shed light on the nature of the relationship between the teacher and their students in educational context. What is also worth mentioning is the fact that according to the research conducted in 2018 by Frenzel et al., not only is students' emotional well-being linked to the satisfaction of teachers in a classroom environment, but it also works the other way round. In this research study that the scientists conducted, the findings showed that taking care of the emotional experiences of one side (which in this context is the community of learners of English language) results in increased motivation, resilience, will to achieve better results, well-being of the other side (which is the teacher) (Frenzel et al., 2018). It is therefore important to be able to discern, name, and correctly interpret the emotions occurring in the L2 educational environment, in order not to overlook if someone's comfort is being neglected.

Moreover, findings of different researchers from 2016 by Arguedas et al. on the topic of students' awareness of their own emotional experiences as well as teachers' awareness of their learners' feelings in a foreign language classroom show the following: when students are aware of their emotions and receive tailored instructional strategies, their academic performance improves in aspects such as motivation, engagement, and self-regulation. Similarly, when teachers are aware of students' emotional states, their reactions become more effective (Arguedas et al., 2016).

Speaking of individuals among the participants of this study, some of the students are naturally more expressive and extroverted than others. It is necessary to always have in mind that different learners react differently to various circumstances, but also the phenomenon of group emotions is present when conducting lessons for many people, as opposed to classes 1:1. According to MacIntyre and Gregsen (2012), teachers are responsible for building closeness with their learners, and also fostering positive group emotions (MacIntyre, Gregersen, 2012). In order for this to happen, it is vital to be able to know when the feelings of students shift, and be mindful of the presence of various sensations, both facilitating and debilitating, however intense they are or easy to overlook. Developing sensitivity and the quality of being observant are traits that are especially helpful in the profession of a foreign language teacher, no matter how focused the teachers are on building rapport in terms of emotional connection with a group of students.

# 3.6. Limitations of the study

Limitations of the study include the fact that this case study is based on the experience as an English teacher in higher educational setting of the author, therefore the extent of the data includes only the assessment of the author's relationship with the group of her students in the number of 102 learners. This may not be representative in terms of other educational environments. Also the fact that the study explores only the interaction between the author and her students, broader social factors are not considered. Exploration of the learners' community outside the classroom environment might provide a broader context that shapes their emotional responses. The research is focused on Polish foreign language learners, therefore it may not be relevant to students from different language backgrounds and the linguistic challenges that they face.

All in all, this paper consists of data gathered first-handedly and its contextual relevance offers insights into the relationship of a certain group of Polish L2 learners within the environment of a university of applied sciences in a practical content. This specific example of a certain phenomenon that may not apply to broader trends is being studied from an individual point of view and is therefore a basis for further research study. The tendency that is concluded from the analysis of this study may be a foundation for conducting more extensive exploration in the future. The topic of the influence of the teacher's perception of students' emotions is not often taken up by researchers and it is certainly worth investigating this area. However, in the study of the analysis of the accuracy of

predictions of students' feelings, it would be necessary to go further and show whether/how it affects language learning.

Overall, some of the students may be unaware of the emotions they experience, or they are having some difficulties naming them, therefore the perception of their own emotions might have been inaccurate. Anyway, this research study is a source of information about the self-image of learners of foreign languages, creating a possibility for educators to foster a reflective approach towards their practice. Thus, this paperwork serves as a tool for educators to emphasize human experience and individual stories and to remember to always be cautious when it comes to expectations according to the well-being of the students.

#### 4. Conclusions and future directions

When it comes to the overall correct prediction of emotions, it stands at 33.5%, which is a showcase of a moderate level of insight from the teacher into their students' emotional states. The inability to properly assess the factual student emotional states might be caused by the lack of accurate teacher training on emotional intelligence and emotion management. A more extensive psychology courses during pre-service teacher educational pathways might be beneficial to the overall ability of an educator to accurately examine the nature of learners' emotional states.

A significant gap can be observed between the teacher's ability to predict negative emotions (41%) versus positive emotions (26%). Analyzing this difference, this might imply that the learning environment induces more pronounced negative emotions which are harder to miss, while positive emotions may be subtler and thus harder to interpret. For instance, when it comes to fear, as cited in Kristanti and Hidayat (2023), there are many physical symptoms that accompany this emotion and therefore they are easy to spot. The outer signs of experiencing this type of a difficult feeling might be: trembling, pitched voice, sweaty hands, shortness of breath, forgetting something that was meant to be said, spasmodic dysphonia, and even dizziness (Kristanti & Hidayat, 2023, p. 186). Other, more positive emotions are not displayed through that many external indicators, and that is why they may be overlooked or interpreted differently.

The potential areas to investigate in the future course of study include calculating the total responses for each category (positive and negative) to better understand sample sizes, as well as considering the implications of these findings, such as methods for increasing the teacher's ability to interpret positive emotions more effectively. Moreover, investigating student feedback regarding emotional experiences to corroborate the teacher's perspectives would be beneficial to deepen the understanding of the topic on second language teachers' awareness

of student emotions and its impact on language acquisition. Exploring whether addressing negative emotions can lead to improved language acquisition outcomes is another factor that may be put under scrutiny to widen the perspective on the issue.

The data obtained in this research study suggests teachers can predict negative and positive emotional states to some extent. However, there is a clear distinction in accuracy, which reveals potential areas for professional development. Focusing on emotional awareness and facilitating positive emotional experiences in L2 contexts is a direction in which current knowledge on linguistic education is developing.

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