

POSITIVE EMOTIONS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract: Emotions are an inherent characteristic of the human psyche. The fact that emotional processes and cognitive processes are interrelated and highly influence one another has been well known and occasionally documented by education psychology researchers during the last few decades. It is safe to affirm that emotions play a very important role in learning in general, and in language acquisition in particular. Our main focus in this article is on the role of positive emotions in teaching and learning foreign languages. We shall quote from several studies in the rather scarce literature dedicated to the role of positive emotions in applied linguistics, and share our personal, teaching practice based views on how joy, happiness, amusement, love, gratitude and other so-called positive emotions may enhance motivation and boost efficiency in both foreign language acquisition and teaching.

Keywords: positive emotions, motivation, efficiency, language learning, teaching

Emotions are an inherent characteristic of the human psyche. The fact that emotional processes and cognitive processes are interrelated and highly influence one another has been well known for a long time. One can say that emotions play a very important role in learning in general, and in language acquisition in particular. To illustrate the idea, let us remember the numerous times when, as a child in school, or even as a parent, we have heard someone claim "I don't think I'll ever be able to understand English grammar because of our teacher. Mrs. X is not grading us fairly, and besides, I hate her vague explanations!", or some other observation like "I never learned French because I didn't like my teacher..." and so on. Few people, actually, really hate a subject like physics, mathematics or German. They rather dislike their own subjective experience that takes place in class and associate this displeasure with the subject to be studied. As likes and dislikes have been noticed to influence knowledge acquisition, so do other positive or negative emotions. Our main focus in this article is on the role of positive emotions in teaching and learning foreign languages. Our observations are based on several publications which have approached the issue, as well as on our own Business English teaching practice, especially at graduate and undergraduate academic level.

Several studies in the literature consulted have discussed the role of affective emotions in applied linguistics (e.g. Aragão, 2007, 2011; Arnold, 1999; Imai, 2010; So, 2005), mostly with an emphasis on motivation and anxiety. In the field of education, certain studies have outlined the ways in which emotions may affect students' motivation and identities, as well as teacher practices.¹ Some positive emotions, such as *enjoyment* and *hope*, have been investigated in relatively recent studies (e.g. Dewaele and MacIntyre, 2014; Ciarrochi et al., 2007; Murphey and Carpenter, 2008). On the other hand, the emotion of *love*, despite being an emotion that all human beings have

¹See Zembylas, 2004

the innate capacity to feel, has not been explored significantly in applied linguistics, apart from some studies on emotions in general and on how love is expressed linguistically in various cultures.² It seems unnatural that, while being part of the essence of human experience, *love* is almost a taboo concept in education research, where it is too rarely spoken of or written about.

Happiness is, just like *love*, a word which has been avoided by many researchers, being considered rather unscientific ('positive emotion' and 'subjective well-being' are terms that have been preferred instead). Nevertheless, the term designates a comprehensive set of subjective experiences (connected or not to educational processes) that learners can easily relate to and which enhance individual and group motivation. Our own teaching experience confirms that the anticipation of positive results in foreign language lessons makes learners willing to try to work on tasks actively, even if sometimes the tasks may be different than what they would expect in a language class, and even though in mixed ability classes of the type we deal with, students whose foreign language level is lower than that of other participants to the class tend to have a slower pace and need more *encouragement* for an active participation. Teaching experience has demonstrated that a good class atmosphere where positive emotions are dominant stimulates the desire to improve one's language skills and one's communication abilities in the foreign language class.

Authors like Oishi et al. wrote about the relation between *happiness* and learning ability, reporting that happy students score higher grades, miss fewer classes and display better levels of conscientiousness both in class and outside the classroom context, in student-teacher and student-student interactions. The same study presented the results of an international survey of over 118.000 people which concluded that higher levels of *satisfaction* enhance the aspiration to continue one's education.³ Seligman et al. affirmed that positive mood stimulates attention and improves creative, analytical and critical thinking, therefore making people better learners⁴, a postulate which has often been confirmed by our own teaching practice.

In his book called *Flourish*, Seligman proposed and presented a new model for positive psychology that can also be applied to education; it was called PERMA, since the acronym stands for the five elements of positive psychology: *Positive* emotion, *Engagement*, positive *Relationships*, *Meaning* and *Accomplishment*. As the author rightfully suggests, these elements can be combined with clear language teaching/learning goals not only to attain success in foreign language acquisition and use, but also to make language classes more enjoyable for both students and teachers. We have applied the elements of PERMA quite extensively in teaching English for Specific Purposes to Master program students in Management, Human Resources and other areas of specialization.

Our teaching practice has singled out one of the activities which has proved itself among the most successful in enhancing upper intermediate and advanced students' motivation and efficiency in developing various language skills; it is called role play, which may take the form of "business simulations" or "case studies" in English for Business. Besides helping build students' confidence and creativity in communication in the foreign language, such a complex role-play group activity has been noticed to contribute to the development of participants' problem-solving skills, meeting skills, presentation skills, to boost critical and analytic thinking and to stimulate

²See Dewaele, 2008

³See Oishi et al., 2007

⁴See Seligman et al., 2009

the acquisition and accurate use of specific vocabulary for debating: asking and answering questions, agreeing and disagreeing politely, expressing opinions, interrupting, coordinating a discussion, interpreting data, negotiating solutions, drawing conclusions, etc.

Through the careful choice of suitable topic and roles, through good planning and organization of the activity, through collaborative coordination and positive assessment of students' performance in the simulation, the trainer or teacher can largely contribute to generating positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment in the language class (PERMA). Our practice has pointed out that the assignation of management positions in a discussion which simulates a true-to-life problem-solving meeting in a company may trigger positive feelings of *responsibility*, *motivation*, *ambition*, *enthusiasm* in the ESP class. It also became obvious through practice that finding suitable solutions to a problem/situation in their area of interest stimulates students' *joy*, *satisfaction* and feelings of *accomplishment* in many cases. On various occasions we noticed that the debate as such often became a source of good mood, even *amusement*, and animated the participants in such a way that the whole atmosphere of the class transformed into a *livelier* and *happier* one, during the simulation and afterwards.

Pair work and group work enhance student-student and student-teacher communication and significantly contribute to the improvement of active participation, while stimulating collaboration and competitiveness at the same time. Our students have been noticed to display better communication skills in English during and after using these interactive activities in class, and communication among them in the native language has seen rapid improvement as well, which has generated feelings of *joy* and *accomplishment* to both students and teacher. In time, through such methods, progress may become more visible in the case of students whose self confidence in using English was initially low; we have witnessed significant improvement in certain cases. Overall, one may claim that such classes are definitely more enjoyable for students and teacher alike, and a lot more profitable from the point of view of motivation and efficiency in language acquisition and use, as compared to classes which do not make use of pair and group work in a positive way.

According to Achor, there are scientific explanations which account for how positive emotions influence the learning process; he stated that "positive emotions flood our brains with dopamine and serotonin, chemicals that not only make us feel good, but dial up the learning centers of our brains to higher levels. They help us organize new information, keep that information in the brain longer, and retrieve it faster later on."⁵ Dopamine and serotonin are known to increase concentration, memory and motivation, which are key elements in learning, elements that every teacher wishes to see developed in students to the highest possible degree.

Therefore, a positive atmosphere in a language class is (scientifically!) meant to stimulate language acquisition and improve language skills, while a dull or stressful atmosphere would, most likely, have the opposite effects. Joy, happiness, amusement, love, enthusiasm, gratitude, empathy, encouragement, hope and other such affective emotions can function as important catalysts of the educational process, and it is highly recommended that language teachers, in particular, should make better use of them to stimulate their students' learning and practicing abilities. Consciously appealing to positive emotions in class contributes to a sense of well-being in both teachers and learners and makes the whole process of teaching and learning more efficient.

⁵ Achor, 2010:44

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