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# A Review on Learners' Emotions in Foreign Language Classrooms

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## Abstract

Emotions play a crucial role in the process of learning a foreign language wherein learning is an emotionally charged activity. In the absence of emotional engagement, learners are likely to experience boredom, resulting in minimal retention of knowledge. Moreover, emotions significantly affect learners' motivation to apply what they have acquired. During the journey of learning a foreign language, emotional barriers may emerge, thus impeding the development of the learner. Such barriers can be exacerbated by feelings of anxiety and low self-esteem, which directly impact performance. By recognizing and addressing these emotional factors, educators can foster an environment conducive to improved student performance in various tasks. This paper initially provides a psychological overview of emotions and discusses their significance in the context of foreign language education. Subsequently, it proposes strategies that take emotional considerations into account to enhance classroom organization and activities.

**Keywords:** *Anxiety, emotions, Foreign language (FL), learning process, self-esteem, supportive environment*

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the "pleasure of learning" concept has frequently been highlighted by academicians and researchers in foreign language (FL) classrooms. Following comprehensive investigations into communication, task-based pedagogy, project-based pedagogy, intercultural dynamics, and learner centeredness, scholars such as Arnold (2011) started focusing on learners' emotional factors and their influence on improving the learning process within foreign language (FL) education. As early as the 1980s, Krashen (1982) introduced the idea of an "affective filter," which may emerge when students experience anxiety. With learners positioned at the heart of the educational process as foregrounded by the communicative teaching method, educators are increasingly examining the connections between the emotions students may experience and the teaching and learning processes in FL classes. As such, the emotional and social dimensions appear to be crucial for ensuring that both learners and teachers find their respective places. In fact, a range of concepts, from motivation to the joy of learning, and from anxiety to self-esteem, are being meticulously analyzed by specialists in FL education. Accordingly, paying attention to the effects emotions are likely to have on the FL learning processes among learners becomes a necessity as articulated by MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012). In this very context, the following questions were raised:

- How can a teacher take into account these different emotions and help learners alleviate or try to overcome certain so-called "negative" emotional factors so as they concentrate on and improve their FL learning?
- What can teachers do in the classroom and what tools or activities should they use to help their students override these emotional elements or use them to construct or develop their knowledge, their know-how and their interpersonal skills?

This research will first describe the concept of emotions as defined by various philosophers and psychologists, with a specific focus on anxiety and self-esteem. Then, it will examine the relationship between affective factors and the teaching and learning of foreign languages. In conclusion, recommendations will be suggested for FL educators to consider in their class organization and activities, emphasizing the importance of incorporating emotional factors into their teaching practices.

## 2. The Affective Factors

In the realm of philosophy, Aristotle characterized the experience of an emotion as the presence of pain, pleasure, or a combination of both, with this pain or pleasure being intentional and representational. An emotion manifests as pain or pleasure directed towards the object of the emotion, which is represented in manners that provide justification for the specific emotion felt (Rhetoric II, Chapter 1, 182). Fast forward twenty-four centuries, Cookson (2015) specified that basic emotions correspond to more specific mental states that are notably marked by a swift onset, a brief duration, and an involuntary emergence. He made a distinction between emotions and feelings, such as love or jealousy. He also explained that a feeling can indeed develop gradually, persist longer than an emotion, and is often associated with a conscious awareness, which is not always true for emotions.

In the fields of psychology and neuroscience, it is posited that certain emotions are linked to biological evolution and are universal, including joy, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust (Teimouri, 2018). These emotions are innate and are expressed automatically or unconsciously from the moment of birth. It is

commonly believed that emotions facilitate expressing oneself particularly through non-verbal communication, such as facial expressions (Parameswaran and Beena, 2002). *Pavelescu and Petric (2018)* added that emotions serve as protective mechanisms in emergency situations. For instance, fear enables individuals to escape danger, such as fleeing from a predator. Eickers (2024) also claimed that all emotions can be considered a form of body language but some emotions are more complex, such as shame, pride, shyness, or envy. These "higher cognitive emotions" are significantly more associated with social interactions and require more advanced cognitive skills, such as reflective awareness.

Marinetti et al. (2011) also explained that emotions are not solely associated with personal actions. They also support group activity by enabling various affective synchronization phenomena. In the unremitting complexity of social life, emotions play a key role in defining and regulating our relationships with others and, more generally, with the environment surrounding us. Our emotional reactions to other people influence how those others react to us and, to a certain extent, how future encounters will develop. At the same time, our own emotional behavior is shaped by others' thoughts and deeds. Although emotions undeniably have personal and subjective aspects, they are usually experienced in a social context and acquire their significance in relation to this context. This holds true in educational settings. For example, the socio-cultural interactions that take place in classrooms can also cause a range of emotions to appear depending on the topics of the conversations or the activities conducted.

## 3. FL Learners' Emotions: Anxiety and Self-Esteem

According to Eickers (2024), anxiety is one of the emotions that significantly affect language learners. With reference to Oxford language dictionary, anxiety is defined as "a feeling of worry or unease about something with an uncertain outcome," it is also "a painful concern, a nervous tension caused by uncertainty or anticipation." MacIntyre, (1999) maintained that when learners feel anxious about using a foreign language, their "worry and negative emotional reaction aroused" (p.27). He further explained that anxiety is an emotional state of nervous tension, which people experience when anticipating an event, such as a medical procedure or the results of an examination. The same can also be applied to certain experiences in language learning classes, where learners face situations that provoke anxiety, such as speaking in front of others or taking an exam. Similarly, Scovel, (1991) stated that anxiety is a physiological response to environmental demands, which manifests through the emergence of negative emotions, feelings of apprehension, and tension, all associated with a heightened level of physiological activation. This response has thus complex intertwining cognitive and somatic dimensions. Recent research approached anxiety from a cognitive perspective, suggesting that it is influenced by intermediary variables that are represented. Ellis (1994), for example, claimed that the state of anxiety is connected to the perception of a threat, meaning that it arises from the assessment of the current situation as dangerous, either physically or psychologically.

When it comes to anxiety in foreign language classrooms, Psychologists such as Horwitz, 2001, found that learners intuitively perceive anxiety as the most important variable that negatively affect the language leaning. In fact, foreign language anxiety (FLA) collocation appeared to be described as a significant emotional factor influencing students' language acquisition and learning (Fallah, 2017; Abdurahman and Rizqi, 2020). College students are still in the process of developing their foreign or second language competencies. When faced with the need to engage in communication using this language, they often experience feelings of anxiety. Despite their limited proficiency, their attempts at communication are subjected to evaluation based on uncertain or even unfamiliar linguistic and socio-cultural criteria, making second language communication inherently risky and challenging (Horwitz et al., 1986). Anxiety can also disrupt learners and hinder their educational progress. The greater the intensity of anxiety, the lower the self-esteem tends to be. The former significantly impacts the latter.

Nawaz et al. (2021), on the other hand, conducted a research to study the impact of anxiety on self-esteem, self-concept and academic achievement among adolescents and found a strong correlation between these variables. These authors stated that high self-esteem had many positive effects and benefits, especially among college students. Students who felt positive about themselves had fewer sleepless nights, succumbed less easily to pressures of conformity by peers, were more persistent at difficult tasks, were happier and more sociable and tended to perform better, academically. Cvencek et al. (2018) also added that self-esteem is shaped by a multitude of factors, including the roles of parents, educators, colleagues, friends, classmates, and the surrounding environment, all of which continuously impact an individual's self-worth. It is interconnected with nearly every psychological concept or area, encompassing aspects such as personality, task performance, and related behaviors, as well as cognitive elements like attribution bias and clinical issues such as anxiety and depression.

Similarly, researchers argued that an anxious individual frequently tends to question their own abilities and may undervalue themselves. They may lack self-confidence and face greater challenges to engage in activities or establish connections with others, as their self-esteem is often low, or even very low. The perception of others can significantly impact them, leading to withdrawal, reluctance to communicate, or a complete cessation of interaction with others. This sometimes holds true for learners in language education classes. The more anxious a person is, the lower their self-esteem is, and the less inclined they are to take acts or complete tasks that could harm them. The various emotions that people experience, including anxiety and self-esteem, are related to motivation. The same authors added that numerous psychological factors are thought to affect motivation and performance; three key elements that are essential for determining success while interacting successfully are anxiety, self-confidence, and self-esteem.

In 2019, the American College Health Association conducted the National College Health Assessment survey that included responses from over 88,000 college students across the United States. This survey revealed that a significant majority of the participants (63.40%) experienced severe anxiety at some point during the previous year. In the subsequent Spring of 2022, the National College Health Assessment (American College Health Association, 2022) reported that more than one-third of students (34.60%) had received a diagnosis of an anxiety disorder, such as generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, or specific phobia. Additionally, 35.10% of students indicated that anxiety negatively affected their academic performance.

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## 4. The Relationship Between Emotions and Teaching/Learning

Dewaele (2015) explained that the emotional aspect is a very vast field, in which one can find the feelings, the emotions, the beliefs, the attitudes that significantly condition someone's behavior. He argued that in foreign language classrooms there is more than just linguistics or language. Students are human beings above all and are not machines. As such, each student has their own perspective, goals, motivations, or constraints that lead them to have experiences that are either common or different from those of their peers. It is through such experiences that students make discoveries, encounter obstacles, implement strategies to overcome them, etc. All of this is organized differently depending on the learners and various factors such as their desires, their goals, or even their motivation. But it also depends on the emotions they may feel. The same author also claimed that the affective dimension plays an important role in our lives, outside of the classroom, but also within it. To put it in his words, "emotions are at the heart of the foreign language learning process. Without emotion, boredom would reign and very little learning would take place." (p.13). Karthikeyan (2015) also confirmed that the emotional factors hold an important place in language classes and asserted that the affective dimension reaches all aspects of our existence and very directly what happens in the classroom. She came to the conclusion that in the classroom, success in learning a foreign language depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analyses than on what happens in and between the people in the classroom. He stressed that success depends less on 'things' than on 'people'. "what happens within individuals" refers to individual factors such as anxiety, inhibition, self-esteem, the ability to take risks, self-efficacy, learning styles, and motivation while the expression "what happens between the people" involves aspects of the relationship, which can relate either to intercultural processes, such as culture shock in second language learning situations, or to interactions in the classroom where it is important to consider the teacher's attitudes and the establishment of an appropriate classroom climate.

According to Krashen (1982), the emotional factors play a role in language learner success. He explained that when emotions such as anxiety, fear, or embarrassment are heightened, the process of language acquisition is significantly hindered. The affective filter is often likened to a metaphorical barrier that emerges in the mind, obstructing the intake of information and impeding cognitive function. Conversely, when the affective filter is diminished, a heightened sense of safety prevails, facilitating the process of language acquisition and learning. In more practical terms, Fallah (2017) maintained that anxiety has "major impacts" on language learning, particularly on attention, concentration, different types of memory, organization, planning, communication, self-esteem, self-confidence, fatigue, as well as discouragement and shame.

Malureanu and Enachi-Vasluianu (2021), on the other hand, studied the factors that can influence the emotions of learners and mentioned the teachers' own lives as another variable that plays a positive or negative role in the language learning process. They argued that another difficulty for educators and teachers concerns their own history, their own emotional life which, consciously or unconsciously, interferes with and influences the pedagogical relationships. These difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that the "intervener" is often caught off guard and must act on the spot, which creates uncertainty. Intervening appropriately therefore requires a good mobilization of cognitive and emotional resources from the person, as it demands the ability to distinguish and identify the emotions at play in order to better welcome and manage them.

Moreover, it is known that the emotional burden present in certain situations can "block rational thinking" (Graefe, A., & Ritchotte, J. (2019)). A student can, for example, ask a teacher a question about a grammar point they do not understand. He may be surprised by the question, but his answer can sometimes be of crucial importance in the eyes of his student. If he explains and the student understands, the latter will be reassured and able to progress in their learning. However, if the teacher's response is complicated, incomplete, or does not match the expected one, it may lead the learner to feel confused or lost. From this, anxiety or stress could arise in the latter. It is up to the teachers to take these emotional factors into account and to try to ensure that their students can understand them. They have a role as mediators and facilitators in the classroom, following the path of emotions.

Learning another language is a daunting task that requires a lot of effort from the one who undertakes it (Hall, 2002). These efforts do not only include the time spent learning the language but also the social efforts invested in cooperating or collaborating with the different actors of the course. In the classroom, a learner is not alone and must work, share, and live with others namely teachers and peers. The classroom is a miniature of a real society where the learners are the social actors who are assumed to acquire polite expressions, sociolinguistic correctness, etc. as well as the rules related to the language they study and its culture. The relationship with others is necessary. By making these efforts, learners may experience different emotions such as self-esteem, anxiety, beliefs, and many others. They are confronted with different experiences.

## 5. Teachers' Role in FL Classrooms in Managing Learners' Emotions

According to Richards (2020), "teaching and learning a second language are both emotionally-charged activities. Emotions can shape the way teachers teach and can influence learners' willingness to make use of what they have learned" (p.1). This sensitizes educators to hold a crucial position in influencing the development of their students. In addition to delivering academic instruction, they act as mentors, exemplars, and sources of motivation and inspiration.

Certainly, a teacher's primary task is to teach, but they must also learn to get to know the members of their class. This primarily involves knowing their name or first name. Students can thus get the impression that their teacher is trying to get to know them, and this can create a bond between student and teacher. Feeling valued, learners can invest more in class activities. Dornyei (2005) stipulated that if teachers create an emotional relationship that supports learners through proximity and friendship, students will devote more time to learning tasks and thus achieve better cognitive outcomes. What a teacher can do is ensure that the classroom atmosphere facilitates positive relationships among students and between the students and the teacher. By instilling confidence in learners regarding their skills, teachers will be able to put them at ease and create group cohesion, even a true micro-society. It is from this perspective that some scholars accentuated the role of the teacher. Curci (2014), for example, insisted that teachers should take their students' emotions into account to help them build knowledge and achieve the expected language proficiency goals.

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Michalak (2015) required language teachers to master "emotional competence" which describes their ability to command "an emotionally-managed classroom" where neither too little nor too much emotions are felt.

Effective educators undoubtedly employ various methods to foster an emotionally supportive classroom environment, characterized by collaboration and sharing, where students perceive themselves as part of a learning community. Mendez (2011) stated that learners provided multiple examples of strategies that teachers implemented to regulate the emotional atmosphere of the classroom. In this study the author demonstrated some of the learners' views on how their teachers control their own feelings and emotions:

> *"In this class, we all participated. You cannot feel tension in the environment and everything just flows. This teacher made everyone participate without showing you up when you make a mistake."*
>
> *"When teachers tell me something good about my performance, I feel really happy and I was like that all day in my classes. You feel good and motivated. I feel like participating more because I know I am doing things right."*
>
> *"Well…this teacher gives you security, confidence and this has helped me a lot because I participate all the time in class…the teacher always asks everyone in the group without making any exceptions. Whereas other teachers…er…this teacher gives you the confidence to participate without feeling you are being judged."*

As it is demonstrated from the learners' feedback, an essential aspect of a teacher's role involves fostering an environment where students can experience positive emotions, feel at ease, and be open to taking risks. In the words of Borg (2006), this encompasses "an ability to communicate freely and to radiate positive feelings" (p.23). The emotional atmosphere within the classroom is influenced by the teacher's perception of their role, the nature of their interactions with students, the rapport and trust established, the responsibilities assigned to students during lessons, the materials and resources utilized, and the grouping of students.

An illustration of fostering an emotionally supportive classroom environment is the teacher's incorporation of humor. Senior (2011), for instance, investigated the significance of humor in promoting and sustaining class cohesion. Educators reported various advantages stemming from the judicious application of humor during instruction. This approach facilitated a more relaxed atmosphere for students, encouraging their participation in lessons, enhancing their confidence, and boosting their motivation. The same author also explored how effective language classes operate as cohesive groups and the factors that contribute to or hinder the development of this cohesion. He found that teachers whose classes exhibit enthusiastic and collective responses to their personalities and teaching methods noted an improvement in their students' performance, allowing them to learn in a more dynamic, creative, and engaging way.

To help them have a better self-esteem regarding the learning object that is the FL, the activities proposed and carried out in class must make sense to the learners. Next, the teacher must try to discover their learning styles. Indeed, some learners will be more auditory (learning by listening), others visual (finding it easier to memorize things they read on the board), kinesthetic (perception through gestures), etc. For a teacher, meeting the expectations of all their learners represents a difficult task in a foreign language class. The teacher will not be able to meet the needs of every student, but they should have a very wide range, a varied toolbox, which will allow them to address the different expectations of the class members. Creative activities, tasks to be carried out in groups (through cooperation or collaboration) with the support of the teacher could be useful to address in class. Encouraging verbal and non-verbal exchanges, performing theatrical games, theatrical phonetic exercises, or playful activities could lighten the classroom atmosphere. The fact of varying the activities and the way the class is organized could help the learners get to know each other, build trust, exchange ideas, and thus strengthen their bonds (Murphy and Dörnyei, 2010).

Some scholars such as Jones (2004) suggested certain tools which they argued are captivating to use with learners if one wishes to take affective factors into consideration. This is the case with board games. When they play, learners often forget that they are studying, their anxiety is reduced, and their motivation is strengthened both unconsciously and consciously. Little by little, they hesitate less to speak. They often maintain more friendly relationships with their classmates, and positive emotions such as joy are manifested. These playful supports can help to de-dramatize the educational scene, making the learning of a language, which can seem extremely complex to those who are learning it and can lead to frustration, annoyance, or blockages, less stressful and less oppressive. Studying, reviewing, or reusing different linguistic points in a de-dramatized context can help students.

Similarly, Light (2002) claimed that learning while playing provides the opportunity to try combinations of behaviors that, under functional pressures, would not be attempted. With play, learners have the right to make mistakes. They are also encouraged to think and find solutions to solve the puzzles presented to them, for example. This makes them more responsible and leads them towards greater autonomy. They have problems to solve (to win the game) in order to achieve objectives (defined by the game rules or its variants), paying attention to what their peers say, cooperating, and making deductions. Thus, the students have the opportunity to accomplish the tasks assigned to them with more freedom than in a traditional setting and have more choices in their conversation topics, without being aware that they are studying or learning. During the sessions where board games are used, it is surprising and pleasant to see learners who are usually very reserved or anxious, open up and speak much more. As for the teachers, they position themselves behind or among the students to ensure the smooth running of activities, to answer questions, to provide clarifications, and to ensure the emotional and affective safety of the learners.

An individual can experience situations they are not familiar with and become acquainted with attitudes that are foreign to them (Hall, 2002). This can lead to changes in behavior and attitudes. An excessive difficulty may cause anxiety and thus demotivates learners or gives them the impression that they are not capable of learning a particular language, leading to a decrease in self-esteem. FL learners, especially at the beginning of their learning journey, can find themselves in a similar emotional situation. It will therefore be the teachers' job to play the role of that welcoming person, who will provide support and encouragement to their students. Thanks to this, the learners will be able to feel safe and in an environment where they can thrive with less fear. Richards

(2020) came to the conclusion that teachers are assumed to create an environment that will promote learning and place students in favorable situations to carry out activities. He must therefore examine different elements related to affectivity such as anxiety, self-esteem, attitudes, and beliefs of the learners, etc. By doing this, he will place the learners in good emotional conditions, which could enhance their motivation and thus promote their learning. For this, it is up to him to structure his class, provide various educational materials, prepare them, etc.

## 6. Conclusion

Studying a foreign language is not an easy task, not everything is always logical. Certain tensions may thus arise. It would therefore be necessary to give learners more freedom, in order to encourage them to be creative, to play with their knowledge with the aim of de-dramatizing learning and mitigating the influences of negative emotions such as anxiety.

Teachers should develop activities that will help them be less anxious, improve their self-esteem, reduce their fear of expressing themselves, and overcome their "affective filter." This could help strengthen positive affective factors, allowing learners to invest more in learning tasks, take responsibility, and become more autonomous. It would be interesting to create environments in the classrooms that promote the emergence of positive emotions among the learners. Accordingly, taking into account the learning styles of the students, varying the types of activities, and taking the time to discuss with the learners are important steps for teachers to constitute a supportive learning approach. Students who notice that their teacher takes their interests or personalities into account will feel reassured, which will alleviate anxiety in the classroom and boost their self-esteem. It goes without saying that it's not just about the type of activity but rather about how we could introduce, guide, and carry out the activities with our learners. Taking into consideration all the negative or positive emotions they might feel represents a daunting task for teachers. It's not about wanting to take everything into account or control everything, but above all, being attentive and doing your best.

Finally, it would be interesting for teachers especially foreign language ones to consider and reconsider the emotional variable in their teaching if better outcomes from their learners are expected to be achieved. One way to do this is through self reflection. In fact, self-reflection is a good source for teachers to learn about their experience and think critically about what they have taught. It is also a valuable way to see whether their teaching was successful or not and on the basis of students' emotions and thus reconsider their teaching methods, strategies or activities. One last important point has to with the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) tools into language classrooms and how both teachers and learners feel towards them. This paves the way for future researches to be conducted on such up-to-date topic.

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