The Emotionally Intelligent Language Classroom

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Introduction

Motivation is defined by Gardner as "the force that gives behaviour its energy and direction" and it has been clearly demonstrated to be an essential component of successful language learning (MacIntyre & Serroul, 2014). In a meta-analysis of studies investigating the relationship of achievement with attitudes and motivation in a total of 10,489 individuals Masgoret & Gardner (2003) found a strong .37 correlation between motivation and three measures of achievement (grades; self-report; objective measures such as cloze and grammar tests). There can be few teachers who are surprised by this and who don't recognise the absence of motivation when they see it: listless, aimless wandering of mind and body and the feeling that if you, the teacher, don't lift the pen or work the jaws yourself there will be little or no output between now and the tolling of the lunch bell (immediately after which the desire to communicate will magically return and behaviour will suddenly become highly energised and directed). The presence of motivation during class is equally easy to recognise and certainly has to do with positive emotional and intellectual states, but what precisely is this mysterious force that creates so much of the difference between an energising, satisfying class in which learning takes place and a draining, dispiriting one in which it does not? In attempting an answer to this question I will draw on two main sources. Firstly, the excellent work that has been done in a wide range of fields, but in particular psychology and second language acquisition. Secondly, my own experience and that of the countless students and teachers I have observed, listened to and discussed with over two decades working in Japanese universities. The latter, unscientific though it undoubtedly is,

fits well with the purpose(s) of writing this paper. Firstly, to increase awareness of the emotional and other motivational resources available in the classroom. Secondly, to provide some ways to think about classroom emotions and how they can potentially be influenced in ways that increase motivation. Thirdly, to suggest activities that have the best chance of releasing positive emotional energy and thus maximising engagement and, hopefully, progress in learning.

Framing the Question

A useful way to look at motivation is to begin with a simple behaviourist view. In the diagram below (figure1) focusing only on the visible and comparatively quantifiable stimulus and reactive response elements gives the impression that behaviour, for example studying hard before a test, is the result of 'instrumental' stimuli such as the promise of good grades, approval from parents and teachers, or being better than others. I believe it is uncontroversial that these things are powerful motivators, just as money (the instrumental motivator *par excellence*) is almost universally accepted as a necessary, though insufficient condition for effort in work.

Intense research focus on what happens in between the stimulus and the response (labelled 'Freedom to Choose' in the diagram) began with Noam Chomsky's (1959) masterful and devastating review of B.F. Skinner's tome 'Verbal Behavior'. Plenty has been written about this and it is enough to say here that it is now generally accepted that how much time and effort any particular student devotes to studying for a test depends not only on the incentives on offer, but also on harder to quantify and less predictable factors such as how individuals perceive the incentives, how they feel about the teacher and the course, and how closely the totality of the learning environment fits with their current development needs (Reyes, 2012). Put simply, humans are more complex and less predictable than rats and chickens.

It is possible of course that humans in fact are quite like lower mammals, but that they just have a far wider range of reactions based on their highly complex emotional and mental systems. Looked at this way, the behaviourist view is correct and it is simply taking a lot more time than Skinner anticipated to cat-

alogue the full range of our ultimately predictable responses to stimuli. Interesting though it may be to ponder this philosophical question, more useful for anyone who is looking to understand motivation in a way that helps improve classroom success, is to consider what kind of responses to teacher inputs such as instructions, requirements, suggested activities and the overall learning environment are of the greatest benefit and how they can be encouraged by modifying these input variables.

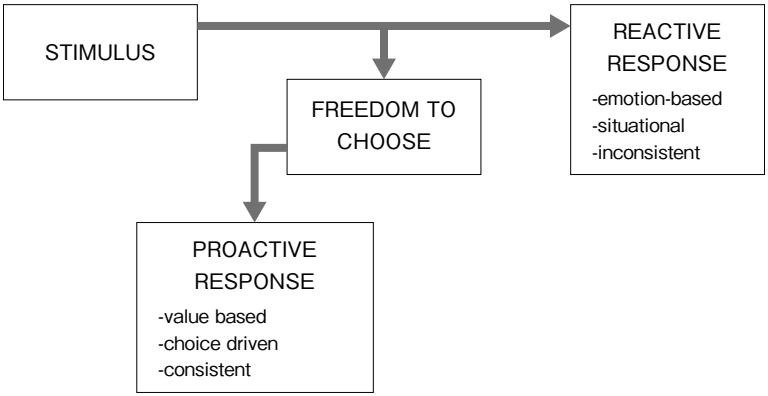

Figure 1: Adapted from Stephen Covey 'The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People'

Emotional Intelligence

Daniel Goleman (1995) defines Emotional Intelligence (EI) as: "...a range of emotional responses controlled by us and appropriate in any given context." This definition covers two of the three elements of 'Reactive Responses' listed in figure one. The 'control' part of Goleman's definition, which refers to a rational and cognitive rather than emotional process, is what makes the response 'consistent' and takes us into the territory of proactivity. Note therefore that both *reactivity* and *proactivity* are essential to emotionally intelligent behaviour, a reactive emotional state being one triggered automatically without thought or intention while a proactive response is the result of exercising your freedom to choose. Emotion in essence is a rich source of energy which has potential regardless of how it arises and its presence in any classroom is not only desir-

able, but essential for motivation which, as we have seen, is a cornerstone of progress.

According to Goleman, EI is a potential with which evolution has equipped humans. Thus its purpose is to enable adaptive behaviour - to give us tools which will help us survive and thrive. However, due to the rapid rate of social and technological change in industrial societies which has outpaced the maturation of human endowments such as our emotional systems and moral sense: "We too often confront postmodern dilemmas with an emotional repertoire tailored to the urgencies of the Pleistocene." (Goleman, 1995) This means that there is huge potential for all of us to be better educated in the ways of EI - to be more aware of the powerful and extensive emotions that flow through all of us and to apply our cognitive powers to make the best use of these rich resources which provide us with not only energy but also information that can help us to make better decisions about how to act "in any given context."

Modelling Emotions

How should we think about emotions? Clearly not all emotions are helpful in the classroom, so there is a need to distinguish between those we would like to see more of and those we would like to discourage. It can be argued that the categorisation of emotions or thoughts as either positive or negative is overly simplistic. However, the brain is a dynamic system (McKenna, McMullen, & Shlesinger 1994) which, much like the wiring in your house, works on a principle of positive and negative charges and on-off switches. And anyone who has ever tried to do anything more difficult than change a fuse and ended up turning to an expert electrician for help will know that this magical system is very far from simple and, when it is functioning as it should, produces results that are simultaneously remarkable and endlessly useful. Thus I offer the following scheme as a way to think about emotional states (figure 2).

Emotions are the province of the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) which is a blanket term referring to two subsystems: the Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) and the Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS). Emotions in the negative column in figure 2 are experienced subjectively when the SNS is

	Negative	**Positive**
High Energy	*C. No Grow Zone* Fear Anger Revulsion Disgust Anxiety? Contempt	*A. Game Zone* Play Exploration Pleasure Interest Creativity Excitement Inspiration Confidence Courage
Low Energy	*D. No Grow Zone* Boredom Inadequacy Disappointment Sadness Helplessness Shame Anxiety?	*B. Comfort Zone* Relaxation Safety Contentment Positive expectation

Figure 2: Adapted from 'Ninja Selling by Larry Kendall, 2017'

engaged and those in the positive column are associated with PNS states. Labelling emotions negative does not mean they are wrong or unnatural or even that they are not adaptive. They are after all found in all human cultures (Eckman, 1972) and have presumably evolved for a reason and, as Daniel Kahneman has said, "In a functional sense all emotions are adaptive." (quoted in McIntyre & Mercer, 2014) Rather 'negative' emotions are those that are associated with the fight-flight-freeze survival instinct and thus help us to *not* die. Fear, for example alerts us to danger and readies us to escape it; anger focusses our resources on winning a fight against a mortal threat; and sadness directs us to drop out of the action and fly beneath the radar while we consider the best course of future action.

Positive emotions on the other hand arise when 'mere' survival is assumed. Take creativity for example. If your life is threatened, it is intelligent to be creative in locating possible escape routes, but far less so to get out your sketch

pad and knock off a quick portrait of your attacker. And it is the latter that you would want to perfect in an art class. Education can thus be characterised as the domain of positive emotions because it is only when the PNS is engaged the majority of the time that real learning and growth can take place. However, it is certainly possible to have too much of a good thing and spending large amounts of time in a highly energised state (the 'Game Zone' in figure 2) will become stressful and is likely to tip an individual into negativity. Too much excitement for example can result in anxiety or exhaustion and "High levels of motivation, plus high anxiety, plus intense effort, plus frustration is not a sustainable state in the long run" (McIntyre & Serroul, 2014). Thus the default state should be a relatively low energy positive one (the 'Comfort Zone in figure 2). Imagine for example an athlete who hangs out at training in a focused, but relaxed state - at times s/he does repetitive practice, sometimes full on sprints, sometimes s/he sits and listens to a trainer or chats to friends - all with the purpose of becoming fit for a full energy effort in an upcoming competition. I believe this is how optimum language learning should also operate.

Negative Narrowing Emotions & Positive Broadening Emotions

High energy negative emotion encourages a narrow focus of attention and "predisposes specific action tendencies" (Seligman, quoted in McIntyre & Mercer, 2014). At first glance there appear to be obvious uses for this state such as passing tests and producing essays to a deadline. Fear of failure is certainly a strong motivator, but useful fear is hard to sustain over the timescales needed to learn test material or make a good job of a complex assignment and it tends to bleed into anxiety, a state which reduces focus and often leads to avoidance behaviours (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). As Xiaoyan Du puts it: "The pressure to perform well on exams is a great motivator unless it is so extreme that it becomes irrational." Further, perfectionism and/or feelings of unworthiness can lead to the setting of unreasonable goals which, especially if they become too tied up with self-esteem, can have devastating consequences (Du, 2009). There are at least two broad ways to resolve this paradox. One is to start with fear and quickly transform it into something more appropriate and durable such as cour-

age or determination. The other is to greatly reduce the part played by fear by acting directly from wants, values or principles by means of the imagination. Although, as with so many supposedly either-or phenomena, these two methods are not mutually exclusive, it is the latter path I will follow here saving a detailed investigation of the mechanisms by which fear and other negative emotions might be transformed for another time.

Barbara Fredrickson's broaden and build theory states that:

> ...certain discrete positive emotions – including joy, interest, contentment, pride, and love – although phenomenologically distinct, all share the ability to broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological resources. (Barbara Fredrickson p.219, quoted in MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012)

In other words, positive emotions are more than the flip side of the emotional coin, they actively and independently produce health and well-being. This is the very definition of proactivity: it does not require a predetermined stimulus-response association to get into energised action. What this means in practice is that the brief jolt of energy that the words "remember this as it could be on the test" creates in a classroom may be less desirable than the potentially sustainable flow of positive emotional energy released by a question such as: How do you see your future? followed by something like: How does becoming a better English speaker serve that goal? Such questions, which are an appeal to the imagination of the learner and an invitation to express their unique individuality also imply a *feeling* which, although it cannot be predicted in advance, is in my experience almost invariably positive.

A useful distinction offered by Baumgartner, Pieters and Bagozzi (2008) is that between *anticipatory* emotion and *anticipated* emotion. The former is a current emotion based on a hoped-for future event. For example feeling excited at the prospect of a study abroad trip. The latter is an imagined emotion that will be the likely result of something that is hoped will happen in the future

such as feeling happy in response to the approval of your parents after passing an entrance exam. To state the obvious, what both kinds of emotion have in common is that they are elicited by imagining a state of being that is wanted but is not yet reality.

There is power in this discrepancy between the positive imagined future self and the current reality since it creates a desire to close the gap - or to put it more technically to reduce 'cognitive dissonance'. This desire is, however, only elicited if it is both noticed and arouses an emotional reaction of some kind (Cooper & Fazio, 1984). This reaction doesn't have to be a positive one since the feared future self (McIntyre & Gregerson, 2012) also has a role to play in motivation. I have seen this truth in action, on a small scale, on many occasions when I have required students to prepare for and give a presentation in class. If I have designed the assignment effectively and presented it to students in a way that engages their interest, they will in most cases want to make a good job of it and will probably have some idea of what success looks like (them speaking fluently, listeners attentive, etc.). If I then arrange a practice run a few weeks before presentation day it will, again in most cases, serve as a stark revelation of how much they still have to do. In other words they are staring their feared future self in the face and the shock gets them focused on putting in the work necessary to become their better self on the big day.

It occurs to me that it might be helpful to spend some time at the beginning of this process not only eliciting from students what factors they believe constitute a good presentation (speaking clearly and logically etc.) but also to invite them to imagine who they are when they are giving the best performance they are capable of. There is evidence (e.g. Jack et al., 2023) that tapping into the ideal self in this way creates the kind of positive emotion that broadens thought and action possibilities and builds resources in the way Fredrickson has described, whereas focusing too early or too much on what Dornyei and Chan (2013) call the 'ought to self' has a narrowing effect - focusing minds on 'not getting it wrong' which puts them in an SNS, fight-flight state and reduces the opportunities for learning. Referring back to the anticipatory/anticipated distinction we can now see how it would also be helpful to invite students to note

how they feel when they imagine their future self and to imagine the emotions they may experience when it becomes reality.

Creating Emotional Balance

If it is indeed in the teacher's power to wield an emotional slider switch, what would be the best balance between positive emotional broadening and negative narrowing? McIntyre and Gregerson (2012) write that: "in general, well functioning persons have a ratio of between 3 and 11 positive emotions to each negative one." In my experience of Japanese learners the optimum would usually be closer to the high end of this scale - given their natural tendency towards anxiety and risk-aversion, although individuals will undoubtedly differ and there is never a good substitute for really knowing your students, something which is in itself potentially highly motivating. I believe many teachers will relate if I say that over the years I have developed a default attitude of being encouraging and that as a rule it is not possible to do too much of this. This makes sense given the Oxford dictionary definition of the word encourage: 'give support, confidence or hope (to someone)'

Another thing that is very much within the teacher's power to control is the materials that are used in class. A good textbook is an asset, but even the best of them can have the effect of narrowing focus and deadening what Reyes et al. (2012) refer to as the 'classroom emotional climate'. This presumably means there is some kind of negative emotion involved. It is easy to speculate on this topic: it is due to boredom triggered by an association of textbooks with long and painful grammar-based and test-focused lessons in high school and *juku*; it is due to fear engendered by the Confucian reverence for texts and intolerance of the slightest deviation from the authoritative version etc. However, Jack et al., (2023), in the different but related field of coaching research, put forward a possible explanation which is better supported by neuroscientific research. In a study looking at a similar conflict to that mentioned above (between the positive-broadening effect of imagining an ideal self and attending to the deficits in the current real self in order to set self- improvement goals) Jack et al hypothesised that there would be a parallel in the conflict between

local and global visual processing systems. Their study made use of 'Navon Figures' which are made up of a large figure such as a capital E composed of smaller versions of a different figure such as a capital B (figure 3). Using neuroimaging technology, they found a significant overlap in brain activity between tasks involving the Navon figures (which are known to cause visual processing conflict) and those involving thinking about future desired and current versions of the self. Their conclusion was that this conflict is unhelpful for coaching outcomes and thus it is better to spend plenty of time focusing on the positive global vision of the ideal self to build resilience before addressing the specific work that needs to be done on aspects of the flawed current self.

In the absence of access to more research focused on a teaching context I will have to return to the realm of speculation to make my point here. However, I believe it is not a great stretch to conclude that textbooks, with their numbers, letters, gap-fills and grammar boxes have a tendency to trigger associations of boredom, difficulty and fear of making mistakes or failing and that this has something to do with past experience and, perhaps, the way they engage the local visual processing system or related brain systems. I think most teachers have learned through experience to wield the emotional-attentional slider that is a textbook (or *purinto*) with care, but perhaps we could cultivate greater awareness of the emotional permutations that are involved in the use of this powerful

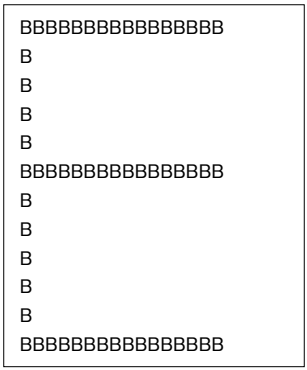

Figure 3: An example of a 'Navon Figure' - the letter 'E' composed of many smaller letter 'B's

tool.

No (Dark) Sarcasm in the Classroom

I referred briefly above to the 'classroom emotional climate' (CEC) and I believe it is worth saying a little more about this important concept which has a parallel in what Daniel Goleman refers to as the 'emotional economy'. Goleman describes it thus:

> "...like the market economy, (it) concerns both individuals and groups. It is, in essence, the net inner gains and losses we experience as a result of the emotional transactions (and emotionally-charged interactions) we conduct with the people we come into contact with." (Goleman, 1995)

Reyes et al. (2012) describe CEC in this way:

> The quality of social and emotional interactions in the classroom - between and among students and teachers (e.g., teacher and peer support, student autonomy) - creates the classroom emotional climate.

In a study of 5th and 6th grade American students, Reyes takes as her starting point the proven connection between student engagement and academic success. She goes on to look at the connection between teachers' ability to create an emotionally supportive classroom environment and students' academic success, concluding that CEC has a strong positive relationship with achievement via its influence on student engagement. According to Reyes, there are four essential elements of an optimal CEC: the teacher is sensitive to student needs; there is a warm relationship between teacher and students; the teacher takes the perspective of students into account; the teacher refrains from sarcasm and harsh discipline.

To me this is a useful and refreshingly simple way of thinking about how what I do in the classroom might impact the students emotionally. Each reader will have to refer to their own experience, but I will offer a few of my own thoughts here. I believe I am reasonably sensitive to what students need and

quite good at adopting their perspective (what EI calls 'cognitive empathy'), but I could usefully make an effort to be a bit warmer and more emotionally empathic. I certainly don't use methods which are harsh or harshly sarcastic, but I might want to curb my fondness for using sarcasm to amuse myself ("I *know*, Japanese public transport is famous all over the world for its unreliability, how could you possibly be expected to make it to class on time?").

Conclusion: Translating Adaptive Emotional States into Intellectual Progress

McIntyre and Mercer (2014) write that: "...one of the goals is to foster the positivity of our learner's educational experiences and support them as individuals in reaching their personal highest levels of achievement and success." This nicely expresses how I also feel about what constitutes a good course in a university and perhaps any institution of learning. Looking back on my own early schooling, I can clearly see that this philosophy was very far from being consistently applied by my teachers and the institutions they were a part of. My university education was very different in all the good ways mentioned above and I believe it is partly this gap, having first hand experience of the impact that education done well and done badly has on the development of an intellectually curious mind that wants very badly to grow, that has motivated my own teaching career and struggle to understand what exactly it is that makes the difference. After more than 20 years of teaching, reading and thinking about it I am very sure now that motivation is one of a small number of fundamental keys to this difference and that emotion is the largest part of the force that energises student behaviour both adaptively directed and less so. If we recognise our students as individuals we will realise that what represents success for them will be at least a little different in each case. For some students just getting through this two to four year experience they never asked for is all they want, especially the English language part which they asked for even less. Others are motivated to achieve high grades and to excel in extrinsically measurable ways and will hope to go on to further academic, business or other successes. And some, I do believe, genuinely just love learning and are motivated by intrinsic factors that

they and we would struggle to find a rational explanation for. Our role is not to judge, but it is to educate which, in a university, means encouraging intellectual progress, albeit necessarily broadly defined. I believe that greater awareness of the classroom emotional climate can reveal the sometimes subtle ways in which students show their willingness to grow their minds and that adding some emotional tools to their repertoire can help teachers with the delicate process of harnessing this embryonic willingness in the service of the enrichment of all concerned. I hope this paper has helped at least a little with this noble endeavor.

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