Emotionality and Language Learning: Forging Bonds by Sharing Emotions

by Toshinobu Nagamine
Kumamoto University (Kumamoto, Japan)

Introductory remarks

Properly speaking, “language learning” refers not only to the cognitive activity that takes place in the mind of the student but also to a physical activity accompanied by a range of emotions (such as frustration, unease, worry, disappointment, excitement, etc.) (Imai, 2010). Students will experience a range of emotions while engaging in verbal and non-verbal communication with other students, particularly in classes in which cooperative learning activities such as pair work or group work are frequently used. While students’ emotions have not been ignored per se, many researchers in the fields of second-language acquisition and applied linguistics have nevertheless treated the matter as unimportant (cf. Hanauer, 2012). This disregard of students’ emotions suggests that students are perceived by many researchers as impersonal, computer-like cognitive entities.

This situation may emerge in part from two extremely difficult issues of research methodology: How should emotions be conceptualized and defined? And even if we have an appropriate scheme for conceptualizing and defining emotions, what research methods should be employed to study them? However, these are ultimately researchers’ problems; unlike researchers, teaching practitioners are not able to disregard the emotions of their students or treat them as cognitive machines. Instead, they need to be sensitive to students’ emotions and to deal with students’ emotions and their own emotions appropriately (Corcoran & Tormey, 2012).

Students’ emotions represent a critical determining factor for their language learning outcomes. Emotions may sometimes inhibit learning and sometimes facilitate it. It is known that students’ emotions are strongly linked to the formation of motivation as well as to its quality and strength (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). There has recently been an increasing number of academic works calling for a reconsideration of the relationship between emotionality and language learning (e.g., Chamcharatsri, 2013; Imai, 2010), and there has
also been growing interest in teachers’ emotional intelligence (e.g., Yin, Lee, Zhang, & Jin, 2013). In view of this situation, in this paper, I would like to draw upon the practical knowledge formed through my own experience as a teacher in order to introduce sensible examples of the forging of bonds between students and teachers in the classroom by focusing on students’ emotions.

Sociocultural context

Students’ interactions with foreign cultures are complexly intertwined with their cognitive dispositions, styles of language learning, and other behavioral patterns (Valdes, 1986). In this section, I will consider the implications of this point for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in Japan, where I have spent most of my teaching career.

Almost all Japanese students study English for the purpose of advancing to higher-level education (preparation for entrance examination for high school, junior college, or university.) In recent years, there has also been an increasing tendency to study English for the purpose of career advancement—that is, to foster smooth promotion. There are many examples of Japanese companies referring to an employee’s English proficiency, as measured by Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) score, when considering promotion and other personnel matters. Thus, in terms of motivation, the majority of Japanese students study English for the purpose of either career advancement or educational advancement (or both). Particularly at the K–12 level, it is rare for anyone to study English with the aim of using it as a communication tool in everyday life (see Floris, 2013).

Therefore, in some respects, Japanese students are being coerced into learning English by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and leading figures in the business community (when they advance a policy of making English the official language inside a company). Some may consider this an overstatement, but it does describe the reality of at least compulsory levels of education (elementary to junior high level). Against this sociocultural background, it is extremely hard to come up with convincing answers to the fundamental question often posed by students themselves, which is “Why must I learn English in school?”
Nevertheless, the public awareness of the importance of English ability in society has grown, and there has been corresponding growth in the demand for communicative classes, actually taught in English, as opposed to classes that use the grammar-translation method, which are mostly conducted in Japanese (see Floris, 2013; Nagamine, 2013). These trends are putting pressure on students to switch their learning objective from English study as a tool for advancing to higher education or for career advancement to the new objective of gaining a good command of English as an international language and to modify their learning motivation accordingly.

The act of switching learning objectives and changing the type of motivation will have a substantial impact on learners’ emotions. Regarding students’ sense of purpose—the question “Why must I study English?”—it is crucial to respect the opinions of individual learners. Different students of course have many differing objectives for learning English. However, in practice, far from being respected, students’ opinions are actually stifled, particularly at the compulsory education stage, by a variety of environmental factors, including social climate, public opinion, and sociocultural context as mentioned above (one example might be MEXT’s foreign language education policies) (see Nagamine, 2013). If teachers ignore students’ emotions, unilaterally impose the new learning objective (“gaining a good command of English as an international language”), and attempt to forcibly engender motivation in students based upon this objective, then students’ hearts and minds will drift away from their teachers, weakening classroom bonds and perhaps breaking them entirely. In Japan, where English education policy is undergoing major reform (cf. Floris, 2013), teachers need first to build close relationships with their students and to be sensitive toward their emotions, and then to strive to create a learning environment that takes into account learners’ emotional needs and characteristics.

“Sensei, why do we need to learn English?”
I have more than fifteen years’ experience teaching, in both the United States and Japan; therefore, I am quite familiar with both the differences and the commonalities in the cultural and educational environment between the countries. At present, I am training English teachers at a Japanese university, but at various times I have taught English directly at the junior high, high school, technical college, and university levels.
As a teacher in Japan, every year I am asked by a number of my students, “Sensei (‘teacher’ in Japanese), why do we need to learn English?” Oddly enough, this question is posed most often by junior high school students and least by university students. I cannot prove it is so, but I suspect that as these students advance through the stages of their education, they abandon their attempts to find a convincing answer to this simple question.

So how should teachers working in an EFL environment such as Japan’s respond to a question like this? It may be possible for teachers to withstand this challenge in a unilateral, strong-arm fashion, with such responses as “If you drop out of this class, you won’t be able to graduate,” “It’s in the curriculum, so you have to study it,” “You’ll regret not studying when you find you’re unable to pass the test,” or “Nowadays, anyone who cannot use English will be put to shame, so you better use this time to study it.” However, even if these answers motivate students to start studying seriously, they may not continue to do so in the long run, because such an approach completely neglects students’ emotions. If a student gets the impression that “this teacher doesn’t listen to what I say,” then there will be no hope for a healthy relationship of trust between the student and the teacher. Forging bonds in the classroom will be completely out of the question.

**Emotions do not arise by chance**

A trusting relationship is not something that arises by chance. Instead, it is built up through the mutual efforts of fellow humans. Likewise, emotions can be considered to emerge out of mutual relationships between fellow humans (whether long-term relationships or brief interactions of a moment) irrespective of whether the parties involved are aware of it (Barrett, 2011; Boiger & Mesquita, 2012; Imai, 2010). If one takes the approach described above of responding to students in a unilateral or coercive way that does not take their emotions into account, students will have a negative emotional experience and present a negative emotional response. A negative emotional response may bring about a decline in learning motivation and lead to behavior problems in the classroom. Thus, teachers should strive to provide their classes with as many positive emotional experiences as possible. According to Fredrickson (2001), such experiences help broaden the sphere in which humans are able to exert their attention and awareness and to take actions. In addition, they also help build the physical, mental, and social attributes necessary for resilience, flexible thinking, and problem-solving ability.
One must not forget that students’ decision-making will relate to both their cognition (believing and thinking, and also reasoning) and their emotions (cf. Damasio, 1994). The question of whether, after independently initiating a learning action, a student will maintain it over the long term will depend on the quality of the emotionality accompanying the decision to take the action.

**Activities that strengthen bonds in the classroom**

It is possible to define a situation characterized by “bonds in the classroom” as follows: a situation where the social distance is reduced between fellow students and between teacher and students, and where students gain an increasing sense of belonging, that is, where they feel “I am part of this class.” It can also refer to the situation where the individual consciousness of each student and the group consciousness of the class as a whole are raised so as to create a space in which students can learn in a state of calm (as opposed to an abnormal state such as one of anxiety).

In light of this definition of “bonds in the classroom,” I will introduce some related activities that I have actually practiced in the past, in lessons that had as learning objectives, the development of English speechmaking, presentation, discussion, and debate skills. I have carried these activities out in research and writing classes, speech classes, and academic presentation classes. When students are required to speak in class in order to present an argument or explain something in English, the teacher tends to guide speakers closely from beginning to end, as it is of course important to instruct the speaker on what to say, how to say it, and why. However, the teacher must also provide instruction to students acting as listeners: not just what to listen to, how to listen, and why listen (cognitive aspects of listening), but also in how to consider the feelings and emotions of the speaker, imagine the emotions they themselves would be experiencing in the speaker’s position, consider the question “What should I do to achieve a listening style that is supportive of the speaker?” and implement their answer. In the next section, I will give a detailed explanation of a lesson using some of these activities.

**Description of activities**

Let us suppose that we are observing the very first lesson of a new school term. The title of this lesson is “Speech and Presentation.” Its purpose is to help the students master English
speechmaking/presentation skills. In each lesson, one of the students will be required to deliver a speech in English. The first activity proceeds as follows.

1. Students break off into small groups.
2. Group members share their experiences of giving speeches and presentations in the past.
3. Each group member (on their own) reflects on what emotions they felt before, during, and after their speech or presentation.
4. Group members share the results of step 3.
5. Group members discuss what emotional response they expected of their audience while giving their speech or presentation, and whether they got the reaction they hoped for.
6. Groups share the new perspectives they gained, or things they learned for the first time as a result of the group discussion, with the rest of the class.

Once the above procedure has been completed, I ask the students to write a short essay detailing the kind of reaction they wish to receive from their audience when giving a presentation. In the following lesson, the students share their essays in groups and discuss how the reaction they wish to receive would be best achieved, focusing on emotional as well as cognitive aspects. Then, they carry out the following activity:

1. On their own, students consider speeches or presentations they have listened to in the past, and list those that left an impression on them emotionally.
2. In small groups, students discuss the reasons why these speeches/presentations left such an emotional impression.
3. Each student considers a topic and approach for a speech or presentation they would like to make before the end of term and what reaction they wish to receive from their audience.
4. Students share the results of step 3 with the rest of the class.

When one compares classes that carry out these activities at the beginning of term with classes that do not, one finds a difference not only in class solidarity at the end of the term but also in listening students’ attitudes or behaviors during speeches and presentations. This is likely because class members that carry out these activities become more mindful of cooperative ways of paying attention to the speaker and submitting useful feedback or
comments that reflect not only the form, content, and delivery of the speech or presentation but also the speaker’s emotional needs.

If any students provide sensitive feedback of this sort without prompting from me—for instance, comments that express an “empathetic listening attitude” or an “empathetic response”—I share them with the class, keeping the name of the student giving feedback anonymous but mentioning the name of the presenter. For example, a student with an empathetic listening attitude might write “You were really nervous, weren’t you? You had a really anxious expression, which is a pity, because the content of your speech was excellent. You should speak more confidently without worrying so much.” Or: “You said that your pronunciation is bad and so we should try not to be prejudiced by your pronunciation while listening, and that if we agree with what you say we should nod our heads. Well, I listened to your speech bearing in mind what you said. When I agreed with something you said, I nodded my head. Did you notice?” An example of an empathetic response might be as follows: “After the part when you tripped over your words, you started speaking very quickly. I have also fallen into the same trap. After making a slip-up, you get flustered. That feeling then makes you start speaking quicker and quicker. I got a sense of your panic and it gave me a bad feeling inside.”

After these two activities have been carried out, I usually ask the students to explore the cognitive–emotional connection that takes place in learners when they speak in English. As mentioned above, English teaching in Japanese schools mainly uses the grammar-translation method. This method has been something of a boon for native-Japanese-speaking English teachers, who may not have a particularly great command of English but can lead the class in Japanese, focusing on explaining difficult grammatical terms and the grammatical appropriateness or inappropriateness of various phrases. In other words, in classes that use the grammar-translation method, the “provider of teaching”/“receiver of teaching” schema is explicitly expressed. This is where the flaw of this method lies: students who are taught using it become oversensitive toward grammatical errors and mistakes. This may be helpful when preparing for a test or exam, but it will cause one to hesitate to actually communicate in English due to lack of confidence in the “correctness” of one’s English.
This applies to pronunciation as well as to grammar; however, the matter of pronunciation involves a further troublesome sociocultural factor as well, namely, the “culture of shame” particular to Japan (see Benedict, 2006). This shame culture engenders an extremely troublesome tendency for students to believe that their spoken English has to be “completely correct,” particularly in classes that require them to speak extensively in English such as speech- and presentation-making classes. Such psychology or attitude becomes a stumbling block to active participation in class (for example, to the willingness to make autonomous utterances). Alongside the shame culture that inhibits students with less confidence in their ability exists the mentality that “the nail that sticks up gets hammered down,” by which even students who are confident in both their grammar and their pronunciation may be misled. These students may think, “No, I should probably hold back from saying anything. It’s best not to make myself too conspicuous,” or “If I speak in a realistic English accent, my friends will probably make snide remarks,” or “I don’t want to be made fun of just for saying something in English.” I have encountered a number of returnees from English-speaking countries who, for a long period, deliberately spoke a broken “Japanese English” in class and recited English from textbooks in the same way. They claimed they did this for fear of standing out in class and being made fun of by their friends; however, they now lament the fact that they have lost the proper English pronunciation they once had as a result. It will be important for measures to be taken to address this complicating psychological factor, in which students’ cognition and emotion are intertwined; and it will be easier to overcome these barriers and engender solidarity in a class by implementing activities that encourage students to put themselves in each other’s position and understand each other’s emotions as speakers and listeners. Teachers who do this will be forging “bonds” for the long term.

Concluding remarks
In this paper, I discussed the importance of students’ emotionality, in other words, of their emotional state in class. I then introduced and described certain bond-forging activities. Learning is always accompanied by feelings or emotions, and in cooperative learning in the classroom, this is all the more so. The activities I introduced in this paper are designed specifically for speechmaking and presentation classes, and the positive outcomes I experienced may also have been related to the special environment of English teaching in Japan. As mentioned earlier, in Japan, students tend, on the whole, not to be emotionally invested in their English learning, but there are now calls for changes to foster more
personally significant learning objectives and motivations. If it is acceptable for schools to teach English merely from the perspective of students’ university entrance exam preparation or career advancement, then only the cognitive side of learning will be relevant. However, in today’s Japan, where schools are shifting toward a teaching model that sets the goal of enabling all students to “gain a good command of English as an international language,” teachers have the unique responsibility and opportunity to draw closer to students and provide them with emotional support.

While I am sure that nobody would deny outright the importance of “sharing emotions” in this way, there will probably be differences of opinion regarding the question of what emotions should actually be shared and to what degree. Various countries or cultures may have sociocultural environments that are negative toward the idea of sharing emotions under some or all circumstances, or conversely, there are sociocultural environments in which sharing of emotions is largely taken for granted and where it is commonly understood that trusting relationships cannot be built without emotional honesty. In light of this reality, individual teachers in their respective contexts should explore and discuss these issues together with their students and find ways to reach a common understanding. I believe that this process has great intrinsic value in addition to its instrumental value for language learning. The problem currently is that many teachers only provide instruction with regard to the cognitive aspects of learning. By placing a new focus on students’ emotions, teachers will shine a spotlight on their students’ tastes, goals, and needs, and this in turn will form the foundation upon which strong classroom bonds may be forged.

References


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**About the author**

Toshinobu Nagamine is Associate Professor of English teacher education at Kumamoto University, Japan, where he teaches English phonetics, research methodologies, and EFL teacher education courses. His research interests include foreign language education policy, language teacher cognition, and EFL teacher education and development.