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CHAPTER 12

Research on Emotions in Second Language Acquisition: Reflections on its Birth and Unexpected Growth¹

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Introduction

Looking back at the history of SLA and the emergence of certain fields within it, it is easy to fall into the trap of predeterministic thinking. In other words, a certainty that events could only unfold in the way they did because they were destined to happen, driven by God, fate or some unknown force (McKewan 2009). In this view Lambert, Gardner and Dörnyei were destined to introduce motivation in SLA research and occupy a central position in the field just like Moses was meant to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. We picture Wally Lambert and Robert Gardner coming down the stairs of the Psychology Department at McGill University in Montreal clutching the fresh off-print of their paper in 1959 like Moses came down from Mount Sinai holding the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments. Little did they know at the time that this paper would be considered the pioneering study of motivation research in SLA. Thinking back of the time, Gardner (2020) writes: “In 1959, no one would have thought that the Gardner and Lambert paper would eventuate in the publication of an anthology referring to it and the research that can be associated with it. I did not” (p. 5).

Similarly, it is easy to imagine Zoltan Dörnyei basking in the sunshine in front of the building of the Psychology department at Eötvös University in Budapest where he obtained his PhD, triumphantly holding an off-print of his 1990 paper in *Language Learning*.

It is equally tempting to see these ground-breaking papers as having descended from heaven through a process of divine inspiration, just like Moses had written down God’s words. Nothing is further from the truth. Zoltan Dörnyei (personal communication 2020)

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pointed out that his highly cited 1994 paper in which he challenged Gardner would have been rejected straight away in today's world as one reviewer recommended a straightforward reject, a second reviewer was lukewarm and only the third reviewer was more positive. The editor, Sally Magnan, decided to ask for revisions and invited the two negative reviewers to write response articles. The resulting debate attracted wide-spread attention. Also, the paper that provided the empirical foundation for the L2 Motivational Self System, Csizér and Dörnyei (2005) was rejected by a major journal on statistical grounds before being resubmitted and published elsewhere. It is crucial for (young) researchers to remember this. The peer review system is fallible (though there is no better alternative) and good papers may get rejected for a wide range of reasons, including those who challenge the orthodoxy and are judged negatively by reviewers who wish to maintain the status quo. As editor myself, I know how difficult it is to weigh conflicting reports of reviewers, and to estimate the citation potential of a paper – because one of the main indicators of an editor's performance is the journal's impact factor.

Beside the fact that nobody has a crystal ball to predict the citations a paper will receive, a regular source of tension between researchers is the ownership of a new concept, and the publication date. One could of course argue that these researchers picked up things “that were in the air” and were somehow lucky to be the first to put it on paper. My argument is that new theories do not appear *ex nihilo*: predecessors and teachers prepare the ground on which young researchers use their free will to produce something original that might end up re-shaping the trajectory of a discipline. Of course, they do not know it at the time and all researchers hope that their work will be noticed and may have some impact. A new idea may at the time of publication feel like nothing more than the flapping of the wings of a butterfly in the sense that it is impossible to predict whether it will cause a turbulence or a storm somewhere in the tortuous future, or sink in a sea of global indifference.

The lift-off of emotion research in SLA

Considering to what extent research into emotion and SLA has taken off in recent years (Dewaele 2019a; Dewaele and Li 2018; Prior 2019; White 2018), it might be equally tempting to believe that this was meant to happen. Psychologists had been studying emotions for decades and several journals are uniquely devoted to emotions. Some language learning researchers referred to emotions as “affect” (Arnold 1999; Schumann 1997). One could thus argue that it was inevitable that at some point SLA researchers would become interested in

affect/emotion. An intriguing question is why this had not happened earlier. The main reason that has been advanced so far is that SLA was long dominated by a cognitive perspective that dismissed emotions as “irrational” (Dewaele 2019a; Prior 2019). These cognitive researchers defended the position that SLA was scientific research in search of the truth because it focused on observable units in learners’ speech: phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, speech acts... It did so in a rigorous manner and subjected them to quantification and statistical analysis. As John Schumann (personal communication 2020) pointed out: “If one used sophisticated statistics in one’s research then one was doing scientific research, one could consider oneself a scientist, and one’s field could legitimately be considered a science”. Because emotions have no observable physical referents in the world, they fell outside the remit of traditional SLA research. John Schumann (personal communication 2020) wondered: “Can we do scientific research on nonmaterial non-observable concepts? Science emerged to explain the physical world. Are we inappropriately overextending it to the nonphysical world? Can we get scientific truths when we work with non-material symbolic entities?”¹ The winds of change in applied linguistics started to blow with the advent of qualitative research that legitimized research on L2 learners’ subjective side that fell outside the scope of sociopsychological research: their emotion, investment, duty, love, desire (Kramsch 2003; Pavlenko, 2007). John Schumann argued that SLA is not a hard science but rather a “Wissenschaft in the sense of inquiry, study, scholarship” that is unlikely to uncover Truth (personal communication 2020).

One could of course wonder why SLA researchers seemed unaware of long-standing solid research carried out by psychologists on emotion. One possible explanation is that most SLA researchers had graduated from modern language departments, where they typically had been immersed in the literature of the target language. Emotions are at the heart of novels, poems, plays and I personally remember how the woolly, emotional and hermetic language of literary criticism put me off as a MA student and drove me to the unemotional philological and linguistic courses that looked at facts that professors did not try to embellish. It is possible that (applied) linguists associate/d emotion with the literature courses that they left behind and resolutely opted for the study of the cold observable facts.

Luck played a part in what would become my life-long interest in emotion. I met Aneta Pavlenko in the early 2000s and she went on to become a figure-head for emotion research in applied linguistics. She studied emotion concepts in Russian-English bilinguals and tracked their conceptual restructuring as a consequence of socialisation in the L2. My own interest in emotion was triggered indirectly by two separate events in 2001. The first

was a purely personal event: a beloved aunt of mine who worked in palliative care and whose belief in social justice and charity is unsurpassed asked me what my job at Birkbeck consisted of. I answered happily that I taught university students about SLA and multilingualism and did research on these topics. ‘Could you give an example?’, she asked. Proud of my recent study on gender agreement in French interlanguage (Dewaele and Véronique 2001), I explained to her that we had uncovered a mysterious pattern of correct gender agreement and a startling lack of agreement in the same sentence by my Flemish learners and that we tried to pinpoint the psycholinguistic causes. She looked at me quizzically, and asked gently “isn’t that splitting hair?” I was taken aback by the brutal honesty of that comment. Of course, solving a little psycholinguistic riddle was a perfectly legitimate enterprise for an academic but it was not going to have any social impact. So I told her that I felt it was amazingly fun to do and, moreover, that I got paid to do it. A distinct feeling of unease swept over me as I uttered these words. Did it matter, really? The second event was 9/11 and its wide-ranging socio-political consequences. I realised that there was an urgent need to promote peace, tolerance and positive thinking. I felt that as applied linguists we have a moral duty to do some good for society beyond our ivory tower and our classrooms (Dewaele 2004). I was in this frame of mind when I met Aneta Pavlenko whose own multilingualism, persecution, immigration and research had made her aware of the central role of emotion in language and life (Pavlenko, 1997).

Communicating emotions in a foreign language

Aneta Pavlenko and myself were surprised to discover that very little research in SLA had ever focused on emotion in a foreign language (LX), so we decided to collaborate on a joint paper in which she would look at variation in the use of emotion words in her corpus of advanced English interlanguage by Russian L1 users and I would do the same in my corpus of advanced French interlanguage by Dutch L1 users. We managed to produce and finish the paper over email before having ever met and we presented it at the Third International Symposium on Bilingualism in Bristol in 2001 (Dewaele and Pavlenko 2002). She continued her work on emotion concepts in her Russian bilinguals and how L2 socialisation could cause conceptual restructuring of emotion categories (Pavlenko 2005). We soon realised the limitations of our early joint work and decided that to capture the complexities of emotions in multilingualism, triangulation and a broader interdisciplinary perspective was needed. Organising panels on emotion at international conferences allowed us to bring together colleagues from various disciplines with different ontological and methodological

backgrounds who shared our interest in how multilinguals communicated their emotions in different languages, how their preferences evolved, and how it affected their identity. This group of cognitive psychologists, specialists in autobiographies of bilingual authors, psycholinguists, educational psychologists, psychotherapists and applied linguists contributed to our special issues (Dewaele and Pavlenko 2004; Pavlenko and Dewaele 2004) and to an edited book (Pavlenko 2006). All contributors agreed that a better understanding of multilingualism and emotions might lead to better practices in environments where monolingualism was the norm and where it never occurred to people that using a LX to talk about profound feelings and private, complex emotions was not a fact that could be swept under the carpet. Wierzbicka (2004) and Pavlenko (2007) also made a powerful point that autobiographical data from multilinguals is a rich and legitimate source of data for researchers. Aneta and I agreed that future research needed a combination of etic and emic perspectives, of quantitative and qualitative data to understand both general trends and unique experiences of multilinguals (see also Dewaele 2019b). It led to the development of what was the first online questionnaire in applied linguistics, the Bilingualism and Emotions Questionnaire (BEQ) (Dewaele and Pavlenko 2001-2003). It was put on a dedicated webserver at Birkbeck, with the technical help of an expert in informatics, and it allowed us to collect data from 1579 multilinguals with more than 71 different L1s from all over the world. The dataset was used for multiple articles and chapters, and two monographs (Dewaele 2010; Pavlenko 2005). The BEQ has since been adapted and re-used by multiple scholars.

The sudden interest in our early research on multilingualism and emotions led to some unexpected pressure from established colleagues about our positioning in the field and our theoretical and methodological (not to say tribal) allegiances. We decided not to join any particular camp to avoid power plays and to maintain an open and welcoming attitude towards anyone with an interest in emotions.

Classroom emotions

My interest in the communication of emotions in individuals' multiple languages had always been complemented by an interest in the personality and the emotions of LX language learners and users (both aspects were combined in Dewaele 2010). This interest arose from my experiences as an instructor of French at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. I had been struck by the differences in oral performance of my students during informal conversation classes and during the formal oral exam. It became the topic of my PhD dissertation (Dewaele,

1993). The smell of students' sweat during the exam could become overpowering on a hot summer day. I opened the windows, added an extra table between the student and myself, made sure to break the ice and put the students at ease, to no avail for some students. I became interested in the sources of anxiety (Dewaele 2002). Around the same time, I attended my first conference of the American Association of Applied Linguistics and ended up meeting Zoltan Dörnyei, Peter MacIntyre, Elaine Horwitz, John Schumann at the receptions and conference dinner. The impact of these face-to-face meetings were profound and sometimes unexpected. Discussions ranged from the theoretical, ontological, methodological, even theological, to the esthetical and purely personal. I discovered that these researchers had a wicked sense of humour, an amazing sense of purpose, a willingness to listen and to give constructive criticism. Moreover, they had outstanding work ethic and could be relied upon to act as reviewers or contributors. The prevailing view at the time was that emotions were peripheral in SLA. We later demonstrated the strong link between motivation and emotions (MacIntyre, Dewaele, Macmillan and Li 2020). This was reflected in Dörnyei's (2005) book where there are a mere 13 occurrences of the word "emotion", mostly linked to personality traits and emotional control. The author's increased interest in emotions in SLA was reflected in Dörnyei and Ryan's (2015) revised version where a whole section in the introduction is entitled "Emotions" and start as follows:

Perhaps the greatest omission of the classic ID paradigm is that it barely acknowledges the central role of emotions in human thought and behavior, even though affect is an unavoidable component of any attempt to understand the nature of learner characteristics. Feelings and emotions play a huge part in all our lives, yet they have been shunned to a large extent by both the psychology and the SLA literature. 'Shunned' does not mean fully 'ignored,' though, because there is a significant body of research looking at emotions in both fields; but affect has been considered at best a poor relation to rational thinking, a disposition that originates from the deeply rooted tradition in Western thought that has separated reason from emotion (p. 9).

The authors acknowledge the existence of previous work on anxiety (cf. Horwitz 1986) and add that "there are also other, more positive emotions, such as excitement or hope, that are integral to learning a language, and we need to consider these aspects too" (p. 10). The section concludes with an admission that the previous edition of the book had omitted emotion:

Thus, it is fair to conclude that past research on learner characteristics has suffered from a general ‘emotional deficit’ and the 2005 version of our book reflected this trend fully: Affective issues were only discussed under the rubric of ‘emotion control strategies’ within the chapters on motivation and learning strategies (p. 10).

Unsurprisingly, the word “emotion” appears seventy-three times in Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) and I am confident that it will be even more frequent in the next edition of the book.

The arrival of Positive Psychology in SLA led to a boom of interest in learner emotions. MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) introduced Fredrickson’s (2001) broadening-and-building theory that highlights the distinctive functions of positive and negative emotions. Adapting the theory to the FL classroom, MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) argue that learners’ positive emotions can counter and overcome anxiety and shame, enhancing acclimatization in the classroom and boosting the ability to catch more language input. MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) linked Fredrickson’s approach with Dörnyei’s L2 Self System (Dörnyei 2005), arguing that it is possible to use L2 learners’ imagination to provoke a positive reaction. Teachers could thus focus on introducing activities that are emotionally arousing and have an inherent positive-broadening direction (p. 202).

I realised that I had always behaved as a positive psychologist in my interactions with students without having ever heard of positive psychology. Judicious praise and honest feedback about areas for improvement had been my motto from my language teaching days to my current PhD supervision. Having met Peter MacIntyre at a number of AAAL conferences, I was impressed by his combination of professionalism, knowledge, and a great sense of humour. Being an expert curler and a proud New Brunswicker added to this uniqueness. As psychologist teaching courses on human sexuality at Cape Breton University, he could regale us, applied linguists, at conference dinners with the type of assignments he would set for his BA students (description of a form of deviant sexuality with the exception of paedophilia). Around 2010 we discussed the need for a widening of the range of classroom emotions in FL classes using a mixed-methods approach. We devised a new 21-item Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) scale. Using an online questionnaire, we collected data from close to two thousand FL learners world-wide. In two contributions that triggered interest in this approach, we juxtaposed FL Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) (Horwitz 1986) and our own measure of FLE (Dewaele and MacIntyre 2014, 2016). The main finding was that despite a moderate negative correlation, these two dimensions were independent of each

other. In other words, they do not fluctuate in a seesaw manner. This was supported by qualitative data in which participants reported experiencing high levels of anxiety and enjoyment simultaneously in public speaking tasks. Further research showed that FLE is much more linked to teacher characteristics (Dewaele and MacIntyre 2019; Dewaele, Witney, Saito and Dewaele 2018) while FLCA is more dependent on learner-internal variables such as Neuroticism (Dewaele and MacIntyre 2019). Research on FLE and FLCA blossoms, especially in Asia (for general overviews, see Dewaele, Chen, Padilla and Lake 2019; Dewaele and Li 2020).

How emotion research fed into a social justice agenda

The lack of interest in emotion in SLA was reflected in the absence of emotion in textbooks. As a consequence, FL learners were left woefully unprepared to use their newly acquired language skills in emotionally loaded situations (Dewaele 2005, 2011). I have thus argued consistently for textbook writers and teachers to pay more attention to emotional language in the target language, preferably using authentic audio-visual material to show students how the presence of a hedge preceding an emotion word, how the inflection of word of the volume and pitch at which it is uttered, how the dramatic pausing, the facial expression and body posture all contribute to the correct interpretation of the illocutionary force. A swearword can thus become more or less offensive depending on these multiple verbal, vocal and visual factors. It is crucial to prepare FL learners for real-world interactions where emotion wielded wrongly can have painful social consequences.

One of the interesting aspects of publishing research is that it causes a spark in readers, who might get in touch to pursue one specific aspect of the research. This was the case for Beverley Costa who was then chief executive and clinical director of the charity *Mothertongue*, a multi-ethnic counselling service that provided therapeutic support that was culturally and linguistically sensitive to Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities. Beverley realised that too little was known about multilingualism in therapy and that trainers of psychotherapists in the UK seemed to assume that language was no more than a technical issue. Together we used online questionnaires to gather data from psychotherapists and clients (using snowball sampling) on their awareness of the language status of patients and on their eventual use of code-switching (Costa and Dewaele 2012; Dewaele and Costa 2013). This research received the Equality and Diversity Research Award from the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy in 2013. We have since continued to raise

awareness among therapists about the issues that clients face in having to discuss their emotions in a LX and how code-switching is highly relevant in understanding how the client feels, as it typically occurs in moments of heightened emotional arousal (Costa and Dewaele 2019). This work on multilingualism in psychotherapy inspired young researchers to dig deeper and in different directions. Rolland, Dewaele and Costa (2017) reported that a large majority of her multilingual participants who were in psychotherapy had not had the opportunity to discuss their multilingualism and multiculturalism despite the fact that it was a central element of their identity. They also avoided any code-switching. Cook and Dewaele (to appear) used an interpretive phenomenological approach to investigate the lived language experiences of refugees in the UK who had endured sexuality persecution and who were part of a therapeutic community. They found that the use of English (an LX for all participants) facilitated disclosure of trauma in the individual therapy sessions. It also acted as a tool to reinvent themselves, freeing them from the shackles of shame deeply embodied in their L1, and it enhanced their self-awareness, self-esteem and confidence.

Some concluding remarks

Doing research is a lonely exercise, as you sit for hours in front of a computer imagining and polishing new research questions, designing new research instruments, harvesting and cleaning data before moving to the analysis, calculating, sorting, double-checking, looking for trends, for unique life experiences told by participants, for an original storyline, turning fledgling incomplete provisional pieces of research into tentative conference presentations, or a first draft of a chapter or paper. It takes courage, optimism and a fair amount of self-belief. The first exposure to critical feedback from supervisors, reviewers, editors, audiences is like launching a newly built boat from the dry-dock into the water: Will it float? Can it be improved? Will people want to read it? This experience is shared by all researchers. Sometimes fresh ideas have more chances of getting published in journals that are not the flagships journals of the discipline and that are less conservative in their preferences. Those of us who presented our research on emotions at mainstream applied linguistic and SLA conferences will remember the early indifference more than the hostility. I imagine that we could have shifted to different, safer topics that might have speeded up our career progression. However, we cherished our academic freedom and we shared our passion with a growing group of friends and colleagues. We could not have foreseen that twenty years later, most major SLA and applied linguistic conferences have panels on emotions.

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ⁱ For further discussion on the epistemological status of concepts such as emotion, see <https://johnschumann.com>.