

Czesław Kiński

# Relationship Matters

Teacher Variables and Learner Emotions  
in the Foreign Language Learning Process



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Sylwia Adamczak-Krysztofowicz, Silvia Bonacchi,  
Przemysław Gębal, Jarosław Krajka, Łukasz Kumięga  
und Hadrian Lankiewicz

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With a foreword by Przemysław E. Gębal

With 32 figures

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*For my Mum, Marianna  
for nurturing the love of books and knowledge*



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## **Foreword: Positive Relationships and Positive Emotions in the Context of Contemporary Concepts of Language Education**

The authors of most modern concepts of language education concentrate their attention on the linguistic and personal development of learners of an increasing number of languages. Focused on the development and support of the potential of all actors of the didactic process, the philosophy of language education expands the previously dominant canons of theoretical considerations and empirical inquiries into new areas. These include, among others, the search for learners' and teachers' personality factors that influence educational success and issues related to the well-being of learners and teachers.

The theoretical background for this type of inquiry is found in the constructivist theories of learning and teaching, dominant in the academic discourse, which perceive language learners as individual units with a specific cognitive potential, the use of which becomes the fundamental goal of most of the adopted curricular and methodological solutions. This linguistic and personal development of individual learners takes place during interactions with other actors in the didactic process, who provide the social communicative and relational context for the language activities undertaken in class (Gębal, 2019).

The constructivist teaching process involves perceiving, experiencing, acting, communicating with others and establishing relationships. Emotions are of particular importance in this process. After all, effective learning and development of language competence is only possible if one is aware of one's emotions (Arnold, 2019).

In the educational construct outlined in this way, specialists in language learning and teaching recognize the multidimensionality and individuality of learners and teachers, that is, a range of cognitive and cultural personality conditions and the resulting expectations, attitudes and feelings. An important element that integrates and conditions the effectiveness of learning and teaching is the psychological well-being expressed in the social and individual context. Its perception is influenced by a person's experience of positive emotions, low levels of harmful moods and high levels of satisfaction with life (Seligman, 2002).

Psychological concepts of well-being distinguish its specific components that provide a person with a eudaimonistic sense of happiness and personal devel-

opment. They include, among others: positive emotions, strong commitment, a sense of deeper meaning, achievements and positive relationships (cf. Seligman, 2011). These components are also spaces constituting research on the well-being of language learners and teachers. This line of inquiry conducted as part of language education, which founds the concept of the so-called positive language education, popularized primarily thanks to the studies by Peter MacIntyre and Sarah Mercer, finds its continuation in the study by Czesław Kiński.

The main goal of his monograph is to examine how the teacher-learner relationship influences the latter's subjective sense of well-being. There are several surprises that await the readers, making the book a novel and important study for the further development of the concept of so-called positive language education. These include a meticulous study of key studies dealing with the issue of teacher-learner relationships in the stream of positive psychology, as well as the presentation of research and concepts on the meaning of emotions in the context of language education. Both spaces of modern, humanistically oriented language learning and teaching also take into account Polish studies that are less known in the consciousness of modern researchers, thus including them in the international scientific circulation.

The empirical part of the work presents a research project whose aim was to examine the well-being of young people learning English in Poland. The author of the study examined the level of satisfaction of people learning this language, comparing it with the anxiety that accompanies the language learning process. This important and innovative research project, from the perspective of developing research on learning and teaching English in this part of Europe, ultimately identifies teaching factors that should be promoted or avoided in the educational process aimed at supporting learner well-being. Thus, it includes specific didactic, pedagogical and psychological arguments in current discussions on the effectiveness of the language education process.

Preparing such a comprehensive dissertation requires extensive experience from its Author – not only of a theoretical nature, but also related to the practice of teaching and teacher education and training, which cannot be denied to the Author, whose professional activity began with teaching English and conducting seminars and workshops for teachers. In recent years, Czesław Kiński has had the opportunity to implement his concept of positive language education into the everyday practice of academic education of future English teachers in Poland. The publication of his monograph as part of the InterVAL series is an important addition to the series with a transdisciplinary perspective, bringing applied linguistics into a dialogue with pedagogy and psychology (mainly in its positive stream).

Przemysław E. Gębal

Warsaw, January 2024

## Introduction

The book is organized as follows. Chapter 1 begins with a short section in which I explain my motivation for writing this book and introduce the main concepts used herein, such as teacher-student relationship, well-being, foreign language classroom anxiety, and foreign language classroom enjoyment. Next, I provide an explanation why I believe that the last two notions might be replaced by the respective terms of Foreign Language Ill-Being (FLIB) and Foreign Language Well-Being (FLWB) in order to capture the wide range of negative and positive emotions experienced by foreign language learners. At the end of the chapter, I also present an overview of language levels, introduce the notion of subjective versus objective language level, and explain the choice of English as the foreign language studied by the research participants.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the teacher-student relationship as perceived by the major theories in psychology, psychology of education and foreign language teaching. In this chapter, I present the changing historical perspective on the roles of the teacher and the student in the educational process. It has to be noted, however, that this presentation should on no account be treated as chronological per se, as certain trends in psychology, e.g., cognitivism and humanism, developed simultaneously, while others, such as social interactionism, received renewed interest in the world of science many years after they were originally introduced. While discussing the roles of the teacher and student and the relationship between them, I have decided to use the behaviourist and neo-behaviourist theories by Pavlov, Skinner, and Bloom as the starting point. My intention is to present a relatively large number of applications of these theories in the educational process, concurrently pointing to their deficits and limitations.

In the next part of this chapter, I discuss the cognitivist and constructionist theories, commenting not only on the changing attitude to the roles of the teacher and the student, but also on the revised perception of the environment in which the educational process occurs, and the significance of personal meaning as a necessary element of all learning. Furthermore, I examine the notion of educa-



tion as a dialogic process with its social dimension, with particular reference to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development and Feuerstein's concept of education as a mediated experience. The penultimate part of chapter 2 provides an overview of the humanist theories by Maslow, Rogers and Erikson, and their influence on the perception of the teacher-student relationship. The chapter closes with a summary of the various models of the relationship proposed by Polish scholars, such as Grucza, Woźniewicz, Pfeiffer and Gębal.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the role of emotion in the educational process, a subject that was initially perceived in cognitive terms. The theoretical framework for understanding the key role of affect and emotion is outlined by three positive psychology theories: Fredrickson's broaden-and-build, Csíkszentmihályi's flow and Seligman's PERMA. In this chapter, I also discuss the specific applications of the abovementioned theories in general education as well as foreign language education. A particular reference is made to Oxford's EMPATHICS model, stemming from Seligman's PERMA, but specifically intended for FLE purposes. In addition, the chapter presents the main criticisms of positive psychology and an attempt to find a balanced approach to the role of affect and emotion in learning, which, on the one hand, would take into consideration both the contributions and limitations of positive psychology, and on the other – would take advantage of the possibilities provided by the rigorous research methods that have successfully been employed in second language acquisition studies for many years. Finally, the chapter examines the present state of studies into well-being, teacher-student relationship in the learning process, as well as student FLE and FLCA, which may serve as the starting point for my own research. In a selected number of cases, these studies aid the formation of relevant research hypotheses for the present study.

The fourth chapter outlines the methodological aspects of FLT research, such as levels of FLT considerations, typology of T-S contexts, levels of FLT research, and the ethical aspects connected with conducting FLT studies. Furthermore, I present my research methodology, the tools employed in the present study, and formulate the research questions and hypotheses.

The last chapter of this book is concerned with the presentation of research results. After the presentation of the demographic profile of study participants, I provide an overview of general life well-being levels among the population studied, as well as their foreign language enjoyment and foreign language anxiety levels. The final part of this chapter is devoted to how specific teacher variables influence the student's subjective classroom well-being and ill-being. The aim is to familiarize the reader with the variables which should be promoted as well as the ones that should be avoided or dismissed. The chapter ends with a conclusion, in which I summarize the research results, as well as outline possible future research areas.

It is my observation that a large number of teacher training workshops and conferences focus on the strategies and materials which a modern language educator could employ in their working practice in order to make their teaching more appealing to the learner. Simultaneously, the academic world offers a rather limited amount of research regarding which teacher variables may effectively influence student language enjoyment or anxiety. As a result, teachers may find themselves in situations where they utilize certain strategies and make use of specific strategies or materials hoping that their students will find their efforts sufficiently engaging. The intention underlying this book is that the conclusions of my study might lead to specific, in-context applications which might be of use not only to fellow academics, but also to practising foreign language teachers.

It has to be noted here that selected fragments of the study were published previously in Polish and in German (Kiński, 2020, 2021). However, this book presents the full results in their unabridged form, together with the extensive theoretical background, extended discussion of results as well as a number of pedagogical implications.



## Chapter 1 – Rationale for the book and outline of crucial concepts

The purpose of this book is to investigate how the teacher-student relationship, or, to phrase it more specifically, the various behaviours, strategies and materials employed by the teacher in their dealings with the student, influence the subjective foreign language classroom well-being and ill-being. The motivation underlying this particular choice of subject stems from three different foundations: my own memories of being a secondary school foreign language student, over twenty-five years of experience as a practising English teacher, and the present pedagogical context of modern foreign language didactics supported by the latest research into human emotions so conveniently provided by the framework of positive psychology.

Considering my own high school education in retrospect, I cannot resist the impression that more often than not, it was perceived in terms of an unnecessary “us-versus-them” dichotomy. Save for a few notable exceptions, a vast majority of educators appeared to be more concerned with their students’ academic achievement rather than their classroom well-being. With the prevalence of such a mindset, the most successful learners were those who obtained the highest grades, and the most effective teachers were those who managed to produce, to borrow a rather uncomplimentary industrial term, the largest number of such students. The often-quoted educational maxim of the day was “you do not have to like me in order to learn my subject,” and as long as the school requirements were met and no substantial misdemeanours on the part of the teacher were observed, the system functioned perfectly and no major objections were voiced.

As I began my teaching practice during my college education, and subsequently wrote my BA thesis on the subject of maintaining discipline in the foreign language classroom, I was still convinced that strictness and rigidity were the key to effective education. With such an attitude, I entered the profession at an age barely higher than that of my most senior students. Wholeheartedly believing that discipline was fundamental in order to achieve the desired results, I did not even attempt other strategies for ensuring my students’ linguistic success, not to mention their psychological and emotional well-being.

Nevertheless, throughout the years of my experience as a teacher and teacher trainer, I have had the opportunity to observe fellow educators who represented a whole diversity of teaching styles. It seemed that strictness was not an indispensable prerequisite for the students' high academic achievement or a desirable level of job satisfaction on the part of the teacher. Paradoxically, teachers who employed fewer conventional discipline strategies seemed to have better rapport with their students, and consequently enjoyed their job to a larger degree. Simultaneously, I observed a gradual shift in my own attitude to teaching, which could be roughly described as "relationship-based" rather than "rule-based." Entering discussions with fellow teachers and academics as well as reading literature on the subject of the teacher-student relationship, I started considering which aspects or elements of this relationship exert the most significant influence on the learner.

## 1.1. Teacher-student relationship

Human relationships may be understood and described by determining the main dimensions that underlie people's perceptions of them (Sprecher & Reis, 2009, p. 1354). The first of these is usually identified as solidarity or affiliation, and relationships that are high on this dimension are characterized by warmth and friendliness, while those that are low on it are typically associated with a sense of competitiveness and hostility. The second dimension is labelled as power or control, and relationships high on this dimension are typically recognized by dominance and asymmetrical resource control, while those low on it are egalitarian and autonomous. An occasionally emerging third dimension juxtaposes formal, task-based relationships with those that are informal and emotional. Based on such a taxonomy, interpersonal behaviours appear to vary between the dimensions of warm versus cold and dominant versus submissive, with various combinations of these dimensions being possible, as outlined by Leary's interpersonal circle (1957). In principle, these behavioural patterns can be symbolized as falling in a continuous ring around the dimensions.

An alternative approach to relationship taxonomy was developed by Clark and Mills, who propose that there are two specific relationship types, namely communal and exchange, the former of which are those in which participants experience a sense of selflessness and mutual responsibility towards each other (1993). The latter type, on the other hand, happens when individuals engage in a relationship in order to derive specific benefits from it, thus interacting in a transactional mode. Contributions to the relationship are therefore to be appropriately reciprocated, unlike those in communal relationships. To provide examples, mutual relationships are those that occur between friends, family or

partners, whereas exchange relationships happen between employees or clients and service providers.

A final way to consider relationship taxonomy involves a search for universal components on the basis of which relationships are constructed. One of the theories of this type is Foa and Foa's Resource-Exchange Theory, which proposes that all relationships are based on an exchange pattern, and they differ in the resources which the participants exchange (1974). According to this theory, there exist six discrete resources underlying human interactions: Love, Status, Information, Money, Goods, and Services. While making sense of personal relationships, individuals employ one or more of these categories in order to exchange resources. In an educational context, the exchange or the transfer of knowledge may be connected with Status, Information, Money, and Services, as it involves at least two participants who are conventionally perceived as superior and inferior, at least with regard to their knowledge. The process is an exchange or transfer of information, which is also a service provided for money, even though this last resource is not delivered directly in most educational settings.

It is a challenging endeavour to establish whether the teacher-student (T-S) relationship should be viewed in terms of dimensions or categories, and one feasible solution might be to treat these taxonomies as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. With all their advantages and disadvantages, they provide a solid basis for the empirical study of the T-S relationship.

As effective educators are typically labelled as those that create relationships based on emotional safety as well as high expectations of academic performance, it appears justifiable to search for which elements of the relationship are crucial, not so much in terms of objective criteria, but rather in the students' subjective perception. It seems to be universally agreed that apart from providing the necessary knowledge, the teacher should attempt to support the student's emotional well-being and their positive sense of self, thus tending not only to the achievement of academic goals, but also to the student's development of social skills.

With regard to education understood in general terms, it is believed that the student's sense of relatedness depends on the teacher's provision of various contextual supports, such as interpersonal involvement, a sense of structure, and autonomy. These supports tend to facilitate the student's reception of goals and values exhibited by the teacher, which in turn contributes to the overall performance of the class as a social group, including their academic motivation and engagement.

For the purpose of this book, the teacher-student relationship will be defined as the set of various behaviours and attitudes displayed by the teacher towards the student within the T-S communication channel, which is the basis of Grucza's foreign language system (1978), further developed and modified by Woźniewicz

(1987), Pfeiffer (2001), and Gębal (2013), all of whose contributions are discussed in Chapter 2. While the developed models add to understanding the complexity of the foreign language process, with all its surrounding reality, it has to be admitted that it is the T-S communication channel, which lies at the heart of all these models, that is of paramount importance to the present writer. It is understood that the T-S relationship is shaped by the teacher's behaviours and attitudes, as well as the student's reactions to these. In addition, it has to be specified for the purpose of this book that the T-S relationship, or human relationship in general, is perceived in the European/North American context and it is assumed that this perception may vary in different cultural contexts.

In my study, I decided to concentrate on the teacher-student relationship within the context of Polish secondary schools, my main motivation being the fact that students at this age possess sufficient learning autonomy and self-awareness regarding their well-being and language enjoyment or anxiety. Furthermore, learners in this particular age group can be researched with regard to all levels of linguistic competence, which might be an impossible endeavour with younger students. Finally, were a full cross-age study a feasible option, it might prove to be overly extensive in scope for the purpose of this book.

## 1.2. General life well-being

The concept of well-being is rooted within the framework of positive psychology and was developed by Seligman (2011) on the basis of his earlier work on the Authentic Happiness theory (2002). His PERMA theory of well-being is understood to be a construct of five components, namely Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment, hence the acronym. Each of the elements may be pursued for its own sake, may be defined and measured independently of the others, and is considered necessary for the human being to experience the state of flourishing (see section 3.5).

Seligman's PERMA model was adapted to the developmental profile of adolescents by Kern et al., who developed the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-being, testing teenagers' Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness to others and Happiness (2014). An explanation of the EPOCH model, including the modifications of Seligman's model, may be found in section 4.2.

Another development of PERMA was introduced by Oxford who recognises the original model as helpful in understanding learner well-being, yet proposes that a more elaborate construct was needed in order to capture the full intricacy of the phenomenon, thus introducing the EMPATHICS model (2016). It encompasses the dimensions which are required for human well-being as well as learner achievement and proficiency, namely emotion and empathy, meaning

and motivation, perseverance, agency and autonomy, time, hardiness and habits of mind, intelligences, character strengths and self factors. A detailed description of Oxford's model may be found in section 3.5.4.; however, it needs to be stated here that while the model offers a significant extension of Seligman's PERMA with specific relevance to FLE education or SLA studies, it also appears to be unfeasible for practical application due to its multifaceted and convoluted nature.

Within the book, general life well-being will be understood in accordance with Seligman's PERMA model, and while researching the levels of general teenage life well-being, Kern et al.'s model and questionnaire will be employed.

### 1.3. From Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety to Foreign Language Ill-Being

As indicated by Dewaele and MacIntyre, the topic of Foreign Language Anxiety tended to be initially misunderstood. On the one hand, teachers and learners hinted at the potentially significant role of anxiety in the learning process (2016, p. 216). However, at the same time it was found that research results were rather vague and confusing (Scovel, 1978). Providing less ambiguous observations concerning the link between anxiety and second language acquisition was possible due to the conceptualization and measurement of FLA, first proposed by Horwitz et al., who define it as "a distinct complex construct of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of language learning process" (1986, p. 128). Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) observe that anxiety has been the most studied topic within the negative face of emotion in SLA studies (Dewaele, 2007; Horwitz, 2001; Lu & Liu, 2011; MacIntyre, 1999; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Saito et al., 1999). Another definition of FLA is proposed by MacIntyre, who defines it as "the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language" (1999, p. 27).

FLA has been linked to a significant number of learner variables, such as age, authentic use of FL in the learning phase, frequency of FL use, the degree of FL socialization, gender, general education level of the number of languages previously learned (Dewaele, 2013). It is a complex phenomenon with a vast number of destructive consequences for the learning process, as heightened levels of FLA can weaken the learner's potential, impair the best teaching techniques or reduce the effectiveness of the most attractive teaching materials (Arnold & Douglas Brown, 1999, p. 2). Furthermore, FLA has been described as part of a vicious circle due to the fact that FL-related anxiety episodes become established in the



learner's mind to such an extent that they lead to the expectation of episodes of similar nature in the future (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989).

However, one cannot neglect the fact that the notion of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety might occasionally be confusing while trying to capture the broader range of negative emotions experienced while learning a foreign language. Anxiety is defined as a subjective feeling of tension, nervousness or panic, accompanied by the arousal of the individual's nervous system (Spielberger, 1983; Abu-Rabia, 2004). It is also understood as a state of tension, facilitated by upsetting thoughts and connected with a range of physical symptoms, such as increased blood pressure, sweating or quickened heartbeat (Kazdin, 2000). As indicated above, foreign language anxiety is a complex construct of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours (Horwitz et al., 1986); subsequent studies indicated that foreign language anxiety encompasses "a suite of anxieties" (Horwitz, 2016, p.72) related to language learning. Nevertheless, some studies, including the one described in this book, focus on other states, such as boredom, apathy or loss of motivation, all of which are the common experience of the language learner. To avoid this confusion, I am going to propose the notion of foreign language ill-being (FLIB) whenever discussing the whole spectrum of negative emotions felt by learners, thus attempting to fully incorporate the complexity of emotions and attitudes contained in the language learning process. With various scales being available to measure FLA, the one employed in this work will be the FLCA scale developed by Dewaele and MacIntyre, obtained from the authors with their permission (2018).

#### 1.4. From Foreign Language Enjoyment to Foreign Language Well-Being

The emergence of positive psychology as a separate scientific specialization has provided a framework for the study of positive emotion in foreign language learning (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016). Drawing on three positive psychology theories, namely Fredrickson's broaden-and-build, Csikszentmihályi's flow and Seligman's PERMA model, Foreign Language Enjoyment researchers have argued for a more holistic view of the learning process, which may be perceived as a move away from the deficit pedagogy towards understanding the role of positive emotions in second language acquisition. It has to be clarified that such a change does not imply the abandonment of research into language anxiety, but rather advocates research into the full nature of emotions that learners experience in the language classroom (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

An attempt at differentiating between pleasure and enjoyment was proposed by Csíkszentmihályi who considers the former to be an agreeable feeling, while the latter could be defined as a complex emotion, encompassing various dimensions of challenge and ability as well as reflecting the human drive for success (2004). Thus, enjoyment may occur when one does not only meet one's needs, but attempts to exceed them in order to accomplish new, unexpected goals. To illustrate, it may be enjoyable to engage oneself in an activity that is challenging, demanding or strenuous albeit not necessarily pleasurable, as long as the goals and the outcomes are relevant to the one engaged. Moreover, if the goals are high-stake, they may be accompanied by an element of risk or anxiety in addition to the opportunity which they provide. In effect, enjoyment and anxiety may appear as two coexisting states rather than discrete emotions.

Positive psychology concepts were introduced into the field of FLE by MacIntyre and Gregersen, who observe that positive emotions should not be understood as synonymous with pleasant feelings, as their function reaches beyond the temporary nature of the latter (2012). For instance, they enable the learner to become aware of language input and help them to deal with the negative emotions that tend to result in the narrowing of attention. Furthermore, positive emotions can allow the learner to take calculated risks while studying or using the foreign language, or make them more resilient during challenging moments. While specific studies recognising the key role of positive emotion in learner's SLA have appeared relatively recently, it has been admitted that teachers have recognized it for a long time:

Many language educators are aware of the importance of improving individual learners' experiences of language learning by helping them to develop and maintain their motivation, perseverance, and resiliency, as well as positive emotions necessary for the long-term undertaking of learning a foreign language. In addition, teachers also widely recognise the vital role played by positive classroom dynamics amongst learners and teachers, especially in settings in which communication and personally meaningful interactions are foregrounded (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014, p. 156).

Dewaele and MacIntyre developed a foreign language enjoyment scale, consisting of 21 items on a Likert scale relating to various positive emotions connected with the learning process, the teacher and the classroom peers (2014). The FLE scale was combined with an 8-item FLCA scale, extracted from the established FLCA scale, reflecting physical symptoms of anxiety, nervousness and lack of confidence (Horwitz et al., 1986). Their findings indicate that even though FLE and FLCA are empirically related, they are not opposite ends of the same experience, but two distinct emotions, which is in keeping with Csíkszentmihályi's conclusions mentioned above. The original FLE questionnaire was subsequently modified by Dewaele and MacIntyre, and the most recent version includes 10