

Emotion and Communicative Competence in English Discussion Class

英語ディスカッションクラスにおける感情とコミュニケーション能力



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Every day we experience a range of emotions in our interactions with different people and from the stories we see in the news. We all implicitly understand to some degree that these emotions can affect our moods, motivation, and actions. When it comes to the language-learning classroom, however, not much attention has been paid to how emotions may affect classroom learning (Benesch, 2012). At *Creating Community: Learning Together 3* (CCLT3), I had an opportunity to reflect on the emotional dimension of classroom learning and its connection to interactive oral communication. While my classroom experiences have informed my belief that an emotional dimension to communication is always present and plays a role in how learners were communicating in my classes, I was unsure of how to frame my own practice-derived ideas of emotion and communication to wider understandings in the English language teaching (ELT) field. In my poster presentation at CCLT3, I talked about my own classroom experiences with learner emotion and the approach I have taken to incorporating my own understanding of it in my teaching practices. I was especially interested to hear what other participants thought about the following puzzling questions: “*How is emotion connected to oral communication in an English language learning context?*” and “*Is being empathetic a good way to frame an emotional communicative competence?*”

In this short paper, I describe my own classroom observations of learner emotion and how it has altered my approach to teaching in my current context. I then present the framework of communicative competence and empathy that I looked at in the poster presentation. I also discuss some of the ideas that other participants put forward at CCLT3.

Observing Emotion in Classroom Learning

My recent interest in the relationship between emotion and communication originated while teaching a university course dedicated to developing English discussion skills for L2 learners in Tokyo, Japan. The curriculum of this English discussion class aims for students to be able to share their beliefs with others in English (Hurling, 2012). Each class lesson is organized around a given discussion topic and communication skill, with the course emphasizing output and interaction to encourage fluency and communication skill development. The course has a unified curriculum, and so each weekly discussion topic is determined by the syllabus described in the in-house textbook. While instructors can modify discussion questions, and learners have some choice as to which questions they want to discuss, each lesson is expected to adhere to the topics established by the course curriculum.

After a year of teaching the course, however, I recognized that in some classes, students were better able to manage certain topics over others, and that discussion topics evoked a range of emotional responses from students. I have observed learners looking happy, interested, and excited to discuss a particular topic, while other times they seemed reticent, unhappy, and sometimes even annoyed, frustrated, or dismissive. In other words, learners sometimes displayed emotions that suggested they were comfortable, and at other times,

they displayed feelings of discomfort. It seemed that less controversial topics such as university life, or university entrance examinations typically evoked the former emotions listed, while more challenging topics, such as those that intersected with identity, social position, and power, would sometimes evoke the latter. For example, several of the more challenging discussion topics focus on marginalized individuals in society, such as *hikikomori* (reclusive individuals who withdraw from social life), or the homeless. In a few sections of the course this year, some learners reacted by being dismissive or annoyed when discussing these topics, while others showed discomfort or frustration with their classmates' dismissive attitudes or ideas. These expressions of emotion were important because however students felt in a given lesson affected class interaction and environment. Learner emotion interacted in the class to create many different kinds of atmosphere and interaction patterns, and would colour ensuing discussions, affecting class dynamics. After observing various kinds of emotion displayed in learner interaction, I wanted to deepen my understanding about how learners can manage these scenarios better, and what I can do to facilitate a more meaningful exchange of ideas between learners.

Incorporating an Emotional Understanding in my own Teaching

Hargreaves (2000) argued that teaching and learning are “always irretrievably emotional in character, in a good way or bad way” (p. 812). Therefore, it seems vital to have a consideration of emotion reflected in our teaching practices. From my perspective, there are several reasons to consider learner emotion in my teaching, the most obvious one being that the classroom should be a comfortable space for learners. Second, by trying to grasp learner emotion, teachers will be better able to perceive learner experiences and develop the background information required to aid them in their learning goals. Piccardo and Aden (2014) suggested that emotion “helps us understand the depth of personal and cultural implication involved in language use and in the process of language learning” (p. 240). By reflecting on learner emotion in my own teaching context, I can learn from my students how to acquire a more robust understanding of language learning in my classroom, which in turn can inform a more nuanced approach to teaching. Third, incorporating an understanding of emotion in the classroom can help to further the stated aims of the course by creating more meaningful, rich discussions, and helping learners develop their communication abilities in English.

Recently, I have been adapting two aspects of my teaching practice based on my observations of emotion in the classroom: discussion topic presentation and materials, and learner skills development. In order to encourage learners to engage in a more critical analysis about a topic, I try to expose them to relevant information that can help learners develop balanced opinions. For instance, if I predict that some learners may not be aware of some knowledge on a given topic, like homelessness in Japan, I provide some background information as scaffolding. As well, I usually brainstorm with my colleagues about how to present topics in ways that encourage learners to have a more holistic understanding of social issues. The classroom materials might include information in the form of evocative images, short fictional narratives, or pertinent facts and statistics. The end goal of this scaffolding is that learners can reach well-informed opinions and achieve a better understanding of a range of positions possible on various issues. Presenting adequate scaffolding can reduce anxiety towards unfamiliar topics, and will give learners the tools to discuss a range of perspectives more effectively. Emotionally, this would likely reduce discomfort and make some learners less dismissive of unfamiliar perspectives.

Learners also need opportunities to improve their ability to manage difficult discussions effectively. I often try to encourage learners to understand opinions that differ from their own. In class, we talk about the importance of clarifying ideas by using follow-up questions

as a means to understand each other's ideas more deeply. We also exchange views on why it is useful in discussions to demonstrate active listening through reactions and body language. Sometimes everyone in the class will share ideas about what makes for a good discussion, and usually they find it easy to distinguish between good and bad discussions. Another useful activity is to have learners consider various points of view on an issue. For example, in a class on crime and punishment, we discuss what is the appropriate punishment for murder. In that case, I will have the students brainstorm different perspectives that would be important to consider in the discussion. Sometimes I will suggest viewpoints that I think are missing, such as the executioner's point of perspective, or the innocent person's point of view. By implementing activities that focus on building communication skills in a discussion context, I can guide learners on how to manage their own feelings towards different ideas or behaviours in class through providing tools to navigate discussion more effectively.

The Emotional Dimension of Communication Skills

Reflecting on the students in my classes, I have often thought that there is an element of emotional awareness inherent in good communication. While it is clear that there are certain learners who are quite skillful at expressing their opinions on challenging topics, there may be other learners who demonstrate a strong interpersonal awareness, exhibiting an ability to communicate well in group communication settings like discussions. For example, some learners exhibit a willingness to try to understand others' ideas, are open to considering different perspectives, or are good at listening to others. Considering those learners who are especially skillful in interactive communication and discussion, it often seemed that their actions reflected an emotional awareness of others. While I have found this challenging to explain theoretically, I am interested in understanding how a learner's emotional awareness may be connected to communicative competence in an ELT context. This is what I was interested in discussing at the CCLT conference, which I outline in the next section.

Theorizing Emotion's Relationship to Communication: Empathy and Communicative Competence

During the poster presentation, I spent a lot of time discussing the idea of communicative competence and how it connected to emotion. I asked other participants, "*In what ways might emotion interface with communicative competence?*" Some participants had interesting comments about alternative ways of framing communicative competence to include an aspect of emotional awareness. A couple of suggestions included strategic competence, or sociolinguistic competence as aspects of learning a second language. Another idea that emerged was that emotional awareness could be better framed as part of a general academic literacy. In other words, the idea that emotion may not only interface with language learning itself, but may be part of a larger cognitive skill that is both included in and transcends the second language learning context. I find this idea particularly compelling because it suggests that such a definition of communicative competence could be developed by drawing on other related fields, such as psychology or education studies, which examine relationships between communication and emotion in the classroom. It may also be useful to isolate differences between second language learning and other academic subjects, where student interaction and communication is emphasized. While I have not arrived at any conclusions about how emotion informs communicative ability in language learning, my poster presentation suggested ways to explore these notions more deeply.

One idea that has intrigued me since I started to think about emotional awareness and communication is the idea of empathy. When I reflected on learners who were adept at handling a range of topics and worked well with others, I often thought that their success could partly be attributed to empathy. They were empathetic listeners and communicators and could tolerate a variety of opinions. Despite this, one puzzle I have faced is how to teach empathy and whether it can necessarily be taught. It is also unclear how it connects to a learner's communicative competence.

During the presentation, I provided two ideas about empathy from Piccardo and Aden (2014). These ideas were interesting to me because the authors conceive of empathy as both an attitude and an ability, which could potentially connect empathy with the idea of a communicative competence. They describe empathy as an attitude that can be taken when there is a breakdown in communication. By being empathetic, "one must put oneself in the place of the other, essentially taking control of one's emotions" (Piccardo & Aden, 2014, p. 247). This suggests that empathizing involves a conscious decision to foreground the experience of the other, and so the "empathetic learner" is enacting a kind of self-control. In other words, empathy may help learners to manage their emotional reactions in order to communicate more effectively. Piccardo and Aden (2014) also describe empathy as an "ability to analyze a situation by accepting another's point of view, at the moment when this point of view is experienced or considered, which in turn may change one's reaction to the situation" (p. 247). The ability to accept another's point of view suggests a willingness to be open to changing one's opinion. Both of these ideas suggest that empathy requires learners to make decisions about how they will react to difficult situations and opinions that differ from theirs.

During the poster presentation, other participants agreed that empathy perhaps played a role in good communication in the language-learning classroom. It seemed that everyone could imagine this relationship between being a good communicator and being empathetic. However, there were no strong arguments about whether empathy would be the appropriate way to frame an emotional communicative competence. In discussion with several participants, I expressed my frustration with the difficulties of defining learner emotion and empathy in concise, concrete ways that connect it to other ideas in the field of ELT. One participant commented that he thought this is the nature of emotion in the classroom; it is inherently difficult to pin down. This comment was useful for me in that it reminded me that the difficulties of emotional description, including deciding on appropriate terminology or definitions, reflect the complex nature of emotion itself and its relationship with language and learner experience. While I need to do a more in-depth literature review on emotion, empathy, and communication in the classroom, it seems possible that empathy could be one aspect of a more global communicative competence that attends to emotion and the emotional dimension of learning.

Looking Forward: Future Classroom Research on Emotion

Presenting at CCLT3 provided a valuable opportunity to hear different opinions from other conference participants on how to connect emotion to communication. The experience has encouraged me to think about the relationship between learner emotion and communication more deeply. Next, I intend to explore the ideas of empathy and emotion in the communicative language-learning context through conducting in-class research. To deepen my understanding of this dynamic, it would be fruitful to gain a richer description of learner emotion, which I intend to research by looking at reflective in-class writing. Following an action research model, students will have a chance to write reflections on their feelings and experiences at the beginning and end of every class as a reflection paper. I have called this in-class activity "The Before and After Paper." I will

collect the student papers every class and provide them again at the end of the semester for students to reflect on their progress. By examining student self-reflections on their classroom experiences, I hope to improve my understanding of the complexity of emotional experience in the language-learning classroom. I also hope that the activity provides opportunities for students to become more aware of their emotional states by giving them an opportunity to reflect on their feelings on classroom involvement. I look forward to sharing my classroom research and engaging in an exchange of ideas about emotion and communication with other members of the Learner Development SIG in the future.

References

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Reader Response to “Emotion and Communicative Competence in English Discussion Class”

Lee Arnold, Daito Bunka University

This was interesting to read as you're raising some crucial questions that go beyond language learning and into psychological areas of maturation and the impact such areas have on communication. It chimes in with much of my interest—the subjective side of language learning and acquisition. In my response, I'd like to focus on two points you focus on in your short reflective article—the development of communicative competence, and empathy.

In relation to observing emotion in the classroom, you noticed how topics that center around questions of identity, social position, and power may make some learners uncomfortable. I'm wondering if this is because such topics may be hitting too close to home about their emerging identities and particular social positions. The discomfort may come from a sense of powerlessness given the array of socio-economic forces affecting them and their futures. They are doubtlessly aware of these realities but perhaps are not yet able to articulate or fully grasp them.

These realities impact learners' lives and will have a bearing on how much they are willing to engage in discussion, perhaps in the L1 as much as the L2. But is all this together the only answer? Is it also possible that students might want to avoid dealing with the discomfort of others about these issues? Some learners may be ready to face these “heavy” issues, but are also aware that some of their classmates may not be.

If this is the case, what you are seeing may be the growing pains of communicative competence as a whole in the L2 and possibly the L1 as well. You seem to intuit this where you say “the idea that emotion may not only interface with language learning itself, but may be part of a larger cognitive skill that is both included in and transcends the second language learning context.” So, in broader terms, you may also be seeing how the emergence of these communicative competences is tied into a larger ontological framework, in which learner language development is one part of a scheme of maturation that is transforming them as whole beings with nascent adult selves. Perhaps the resistance to certain topics in discussion is evidence of a conflict within that change, a realization of a departure from adolescence into an “adult” life condition that does not necessarily confer power in dealing with harder social and economic realities.

This reaches to the point of empathy. Is it possible that what you're observing in your learners is an empathetic emergence out of concern towards their more sensitive classmates? They perceive that some are not ready to grapple with these issues, and where you discuss emotional understanding in your own teaching, you seem to touch on the possibility of an empathetic pedagogy. This term might be a useful way to characterize an approach to mature classroom learner engagement that reviews content that some learners may be uncomfortable with. It could also include broaching difficult issues and engaging with learners who may not seem to be ready for engagement, but who also may break through to such topics within an empathetic peer-and-teacher environment.

I would be very interested in what you explore further and what approaches you decide on, which, as you show, will require nuance and a gentle persistence.

Reader Response to “Emotion and Communicative Competence in English Discussion Class”

Blair Barr, Tamagawa University

Having had a chance to talk with Nicole during her poster presentation, I really felt that I could empathize with her motivation as a teacher trying to facilitate discussions on complex topics that trigger emotional restrictions to speaking. Several years ago, in an adult discussion course based on events in the news and media, I had issues engaging learners with topics such as *hikikomori*, the homeless, and other political and social topics. However, I felt that I was successfully able to change the teaching approach to help learners discuss these complicated issues of identity, society, and power with greater engagement by giving them more time to prepare with guided tasks. In this reader response, I will attempt to summarize the changes that I made while also considering Nicole's use of empathy as a part of communicative competence.

Regarding the students' feelings of annoyance and frustration when approaching complex topical discussions in real time, there are at least three reasons why university-aged English language learners might experience these emotions. For one, they must deal with a cognitive load that is difficult to discuss for any speaker, regardless of their first language. In fact, learners may have never even considered some of these topics in the past, so their lack of knowledge prevents them from carrying on a discussion with a peer even in their first language. Second, as language learners, they may also lack the lexical knowledge to express their thoughts on the topic. Thus, they would need to be primed with some of the language required to carry out the task. Finally, there may also be social or empathetic barriers to discussing complex topics about society and power with peers. Outside of class, these learners may typically discuss softer topics such as holidays and popular culture. Expressing strong views on society and politics could potentially affect relationships outside of the class as well, so learners may ultimately choose to remain neutral or disinterested. Although this last issue may be more complicated to resolve, I have found that we can successfully help learners with the cognitive and linguistic restrictions.

For myself, my own motivation to change the approach to complex discussion topics came from Willis and Willis's (2007) approach to what they classified as *problem-solving tasks* (pp. 93-99). For them, they suggested that there is a need for an extended priming stage to manage complex discussions. Nicole certainly makes a great effort to prime learners with images, narratives, and facts; however, learners also need the benefit of time, and some directed priming work to help them deeply engage with the topics independently before they can confidently carry on discussions. Much in the same way a teacher will often research their topics more deeply before presenting

materials in the class. My own approach involves research tasks assigned for homework that are often based on targeted yes-no questions that force learners to consider supported reasoning for opposing viewpoints. Once learners complete the homework, they generally return to class with a great deal of content to discuss, and they have primed not only their language, but also their opinions regarding the topics. In the end, the learners have improved their competence to deal with the subject matter and language. However, Nicole's concern still stands as not all learners come to empathize entirely with their peers or participate in discussions.

The approach is not a magic solution for all learners, as the social barriers to discussing certain issues may remain for some people. Despite the increased engagement and interest from many learners after an extended priming stage, I still find that some learners are reluctant to participate or do research. This may relate to Nicole's concern about an inability for some learners to empathize as a part of communicative competence. For these learners, perhaps the experience is crucial for true empathy. Lacking the personal experience to empathize, they would rather express disinterest in complex topics, and generally prefer to stay silent. This disinterest and silence may result from a cognitive and linguistic barrier, but it could also be a defence mechanism to avoid social and political conflict in their own real worlds. However, from my own experience teaching adults, a few people even blamed their inability to engage with topics on a lack of time, thereby reinforcing my belief that time is a crucial factor needed for learners to reflect on and engage with complex discussion questions. In the end, I have found that the majority of learners can alleviate their cognitive and linguistic frustrations with these topics when they have been given the time to investigate the topics independently, but certainly more work needs to be done to understand the emotions of those who continue to resist.

Reference

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