

ENGLISH CLASSROOM EMOTIONS ACROSS DIFFERENT CULTURES

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Abstract. *Emotions have been shown to impact the cognitive and motivational aspects of learning significantly. Therefore, choosing appropriate activities to stimulate learners' positive emotions can thus greatly enhance learning. The present study aimed to find out which learning activities induce positive/negative emotions in learners of English at the lower secondary level in three culturally different contexts (Slovakia, Austria, and Japan). The secondary aim was to identify the emotions experienced. A methodological triangulation using mixed research methods (questionnaire, interview, and observation) was conducted with 361 learners and their 6 English teachers. The results showed that joy was the predominant emotion, mainly induced by peer communication and interaction. Negative emotions of anxiety and boredom were associated with testing and frontal teaching. The analysis of learners' emotions in English classes is highly relevant to the area of teaching English for specific purposes. A better understanding of the affective aspect of foreign language learning may help foreign language teachers and methodologists select the tailored instruction and appropriate activities to effectively address learners' actual cognitive and affective needs in different educational contexts.*

Key words: *emotions, English as a foreign language, learning activities, lower secondary learners*

1. INTRODUCTION

The intersection of cognition and emotion in learning has been a focal point in educational research, particularly within foreign language pedagogy. This paradigm shift began with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) and has continued with the Affective Turn (Prior 2019) and the rise of humanistic approaches (Richards 2020). These developments underscore the importance of addressing both cognitive and affective needs in language education. The evolving educational landscape demands that foreign language

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educators adopt learner-centered and reflective teaching practices (Cecilia and Lopez 2018), making it crucial to select activities that effectively engage learners emotionally and cognitively.

Research on emotions in foreign language learning often highlights their dual valence: positive emotions like enjoyment can enhance engagement and motivation, while negative emotions, such as anxiety, can hinder academic achievement (Botes, Dewaele, and Greiff 2022). However, a balanced ratio of positive to negative emotions can be beneficial for learning (Méndez López 2022), suggesting that fostering positive emotional experiences while managing negative ones is key to successful language acquisition.

Emotional experiences in language learning are dynamic and can vary based on learners' goals and the context of learning (Boekaerts 2007). MacIntyre's (2012) *idiodynamic* method reveals how these emotional fluctuations impact performance and language acquisition trajectories. Language classrooms, being inherently communicative, are rich in diverse emotional experiences (Moate and Ruohotie-Lyhty 2020), influenced by context and individual responses (Méndez López 2022).

Early research focused on negative emotions in language learning (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope 1986), but attention has shifted to the role of positive emotions (Pekrun et al. 2002; Pishghadam 2009). Recent studies emphasize the broad emotional spectrum in classrooms, linking positive emotions with preferred learning activities that promote feelings of progress and competence (Bielak and Mystkowska-Wiertelak 2024).

Emotions are intricately linked to learning activities and outcomes (Kralova et al. 2024), varying significantly across educational and cultural contexts (e.g., Shao, Pekrun, and Nicholson 2019; Wang 2011). While individuals possess a universal set of emotions (Kanazawa 2022), their expression and perception are heavily influenced by cultural and societal factors (Matsumoto et al. 2008). Cultural differences can significantly shape emotional experiences and, in turn, learning outcomes (Dewaele, Meftah, and Zhou 2024).

In collectivist cultures, the focus is often on group harmony and fitting in, leading to less willingness among students to express emotions openly, especially in public settings like classrooms (Wen and Clement 2003). Conversely, individualistic cultures encourage personal independence and emotional expression (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Despite these differences, a wide spectrum of emotions is evident in language classrooms across various cultural contexts. For instance, Luo et al. (2019) found that Chinese students were positively engaged in learning, challenging stereotypes of academic success linked with unhappiness.

Studies reveal varied emotional experiences in language learning: Mexican students often felt emotions ranging from fear to excitement during speaking activities (Méndez-López 2022), while Malaysian students associated anxiety with reading and writing (Mokhtar et al. 2021). Iranian learners frequently experienced anger and anxiety related to language skills (Pishghadam et al. 2016). Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) demonstrated the significant impact of cultural backgrounds on learners' enjoyment and anxiety levels, with enjoyment often arising from interactive activities like role-playing.

This study aims to explore the complex emotional landscape in language learning by utilizing both *etic* and *emic* perspectives (Dewaele 2019). Employing triangulation methods – questionnaires, interviews, and observations – enhances the validity and consistency of findings, allowing participants to freely express their emotions and opinions. As few studies have comprehensively compared English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom emotions in different educational and cultural contexts (Shao, Pekrun, and Nicholson 2019), this research seeks to fill that gap.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Objectives

The primary objective was to identify which learning activities elicit positive or negative emotions among lower secondary EFL learners in Austria, Japan, and Slovakia. A secondary goal was to pinpoint the specific emotions experienced. The study addressed four research questions for each country:

1. What emotions do learners perceive from specific EFL activities?
2. How do teachers perceive learners' emotions during these activities?
3. What emotions are observed in learners during these activities?
4. What are the similarities and differences in emotional responses across the countries?

2.2. Sample

The study was approved by the Ethics Committees of the respective institutions and involved 361 EFL learners aged 10-14 (A1-A2 level, ISCED 2) from Austria (120), Japan (119), and Slovakia (122). Six EFL teachers (two from each country) were interviewed, and six observers (EFL teachers, two from each country) conducted classroom observations. Observers were selected from within the cultural context to ensure valid and reliable insights, given the cultural influences on emotional expression (Matsumoto et al. 2008). Focusing on lower secondary learners was strategic as they are navigating critical transitions in their academic and social lives, and their emotional experiences in the classroom are integral to their language-learning process (Allen and Waterman 2019). They develop their metacognition and reflective thinking, and their ability to recognize and verbalize emotions increases (Manning 2002).

2.3. Instruments

Instruments were administered in participants' native languages, allowing for unstructured responses. Reflexive thematic analysis (Joy, Brau, and Clarke 2023) was used to code and develop themes from the data. Responses were systematized according to standardized criteria for learning activities (Council of Europe 2020) and emotions (Pekrun et al. 2023). The Three-Dimensional Taxonomy of Achievement Emotions (Pekrun et al. 2023) was employed to analyze classroom emotions, considering valence (positive/negative), arousal (activating/deactivating), and object focus (activity, prospective outcome, and retrospective outcome emotions). This framework enabled systematic comparison of emotional responses across different educational settings.

2.3.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire aimed to identify the emotions learners experience during English lessons. It included four open-ended questions:

1. What activities in English classes usually make you feel positive emotions?
2. What are these positive emotions?
3. What activities in English classes usually make you feel negative emotions?
4. What are these negative emotions?

2.3.2. Interview

Interviews were conducted with English teachers to gather their perspectives on students' emotional experiences. Teachers were asked questions similar to those posed to learners. Conducted online by one of the authors, the interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed using Sonix (Sonix, Inc. 2024).

2.3.3. Observation

Experienced EFL teachers observed classroom activities and students' emotional expressions over a month in four English classes. Observations focused on deducing emotions from students' behavior, facial expressions, and body language.

2.4. Data analysis

Data from the three instruments were analyzed using a combined manual coding approach (Saldana 2009). Deductive coding categorized emotions into positive and negative, which were further refined and classified into specific emotions (e.g., enjoyment, anxiety). A psychologist reviewed the classifications to ensure validity. For activities, inductive coding derived codes from participants' responses, which were then organized into themes such as form of work, language skills, language systems, and teaching techniques. Questionnaire data were analyzed using IBM SPSS 29 to identify statistically significant differences in reported emotions and activities across countries.

2.5. Cultural context

By focusing on Slovakia, Austria, and Japan, this investigation allows for a comparative analysis of how different cultural attitudes and educational systems shape the emotional experiences of EFL learners. The study can thus explore how similar age groups in different cultural contexts experience emotions related to language learning, shedding light on universal emotional challenges (such as anxiety or motivation) while also highlighting culturally specific factors. The choice of Slovakia, Austria, and Japan offers a compelling argument for investigating emotions in EFL classrooms due to the distinct educational practices, cultural contexts, and emotional dynamics in these countries.

2.5.1. Austria

English has been taught in Austrian schools since the end of World War II. English is very widely taught and spoken in Austria, with approximately 73% of the population being able to communicate in English at some level. This makes it one of the most proficient countries in spoken English (How Widely Spoken n.d.). Education in Austria is compulsory for 9 years from primary school (ages 6-9). Learners between the ages of 10 and 13 attend lower secondary school. The ninth school year (ages 14-15) can be completed in other types of schools. Children start learning English in primary school, usually at the age of six, with one 50-minute lesson per week in the 3rd grade and 3 or 4 lessons per week in lower secondary school. Teaching English is based on a communicative approach focusing on the development of communication skills and strategies (Migration.gv.at. n.d.).

2.5.2. Japan

The prevalence of English speakers in Japan is very low, with less than 30% acknowledging themselves equipped with basic communication skills in English, and less than 10% acknowledging themselves as fluent users (Terasawa 2015). This is despite the fact that English has been widely taught in schools for many years. Compulsory education lasts for 9 years, beginning with 6-year elementary schools (ages 6-12), 3-year junior high schools, and 3-year high schools (ages 13-15). About 98.8% of junior high school graduates go on to senior high schools (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Japan 2021), and about 57.7% go on to four-year colleges (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Japan 2023).

Most pupils start learning English in the 3rd grade of elementary school, with an emphasis on listening and speaking. Currently, the total number of English lessons in the elementary school curriculum is 210 hours (a 45-minute lesson once a week for the 3rd and 4th graders and twice a week for the 5th and 6th graders). Junior high school students study English four times a week (50 minutes each), and the total number of English lessons in junior high school is now 420 hours. The approach to teaching English in Japanese junior high schools is now rapidly changing from grammar-translation to communicative teaching, with more English being used in the classroom by both students and teachers (Ikeda, Imai, and Takeuchi 2019; Ikeda, Takeuchi, and Imai 2020).

2.5.3. Slovakia

Overall, it is estimated that around 27% of Slovaks can speak English at some level, mainly the younger population under the age of 30. This figure is likely to have risen further in recent years, perhaps to around one-third, as more young people have learned English at school (ETS TOEIC 2022). Compulsory schooling lasts ten years (between the ages of 6 and 16) and is completed with the first year of upper secondary education. Primary and lower secondary education is a 9-year long single structure system (primary education lasts 4 years – ages 6 to 10, lower secondary education lasts 5 years – ages 10 to 15). English is taught from the 3rd year of primary school – three 45-minute lessons per week applying both communicative and grammar-translation approaches.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Questionnaire

One-way ANOVA and the Kruskal-Wallis H-test were used for each type of activity, calculating the F-statistic, p-value, and variance. The higher the variance, the more spread out the numbers are from their mean, indicating greater differences between the countries. The activity “useful topics” showed the most dramatic difference (variance 450.0, SD = 21.2) with two zeros and one value of 45 (Austria), making it the most statistically significant difference between the countries. The high variance was also detected in the activities: game (variance 284.67, SD = 16.9) and discussion (variance 116.67, SD = 10.8) with the lowest number of responses from Japan, and homework (variance 238.89, SD = 15.5) with zero responses from Japan (Table 1).

Table 1 Activities inducing positive and negative emotions

Activity			Questionnaire			Interview			Observation		
			AT	JP	SK	AT	JP	SK	AT	JP	SK
POSITIVE	Form	whole class									
		group	48	52	40	+	+	+	+	+	+
		pair	20	15	25				+	+	+
		individual									
	Skill	reading									
		listening	4	3							
		writing									
		speaking	23		19			+			
	System	pronunciation									
		vocabulary		3	5		+				
		grammar									
	Technique	game	50	21	61	+	+	+	+	+	+
		learning apps	9	3	17	+	+	+		+	+
		useful topics	45			+			+		
		foreign teachers		14			+			+	
		discussion	60	35	55						+
		project				+		+			
		quiz	10	5	8						
		video watching	26	13	24						
		chants/repetition		13							
		song	15	5	20						
		assignment	7						+		
		testing		4							
NEGATIVE	Form	whole class									
		group									
		pair									
		individual			5						
	Skill	reading	10	2	15	+	+	+	+		
		listening						+	+		
		writing			5						+
		speaking	5		4	+				+	
	System	pronunciation									
		vocabulary									
		grammar	25	3	6	+	+		+	+	+
	Technique	testing	35	20	40	+		+			
		exercise					+	+	+	+	+
		lecture	24	5	18		+			+	
		homework	30		35						

+ activities identified by interview/observation

The Kruskal-Wallis results showed H-statistics of 2.0 and p-values of approximately 0.368 for all emotions, which is well above the 0.05 threshold typically used for statistical significance. None of the emotions showed statistically significant differences between the countries at the conventional significance level ($p < 0.05$) (Table 2).

Table 2 Emotions induced by learning activities

Emotion			Questionnaire			Interview			Observation		
			AT	JP	SK	AT	JP	SK	AT	JP	SK
POSITIVE	Activating	enjoyment	96	114	116	+	+	+	+	+	+
		excitement	4	6							
		hope									
		anticipatory joy	6		8						
		pride									
		retrospective joy	15	2	12						
		gratitude									
	Deactivating	relaxation		4							
		assurance									
		relief			37						
NEGATIVE	Activating	contentment	12	3	8	+	+	+	+	+	+
		anger									
		frustration		19							
		anxiety	20	17	21	+	+	+	+		+
	Deactivating	shame/guilt									
		boredom	20	12	19	+	+	+	+	+	+
		hopelessness		3							
		disappointment	5	5	7	+		+			
		sadness	3	9	2		+				

+ emotions identified by interview/observation

While the statistical analysis showed significant differences between the countries in the positively or negatively perceived classroom activities, no significant differences were found for experienced emotions. In general, the learners reported more positive than negative feelings in their English classes within the activating emotion of “enjoyment” and the most frequently identified negative emotions were “anxiety” and “boredom”.

Most of the learners perceive communication (dialogue, discussion, conversation) and cooperation (pair work and group work) as the most positive activities that arouse their joy and interest, and test situations as the most negative and stressful ones. Most of them like spoken interaction and information exchange (Council of Europe 2020) with their peers. On the contrary, individual oral presentations in front of the class make them feel rather nervous. They like to be active and experience boredom during frontal teaching.

Austrian learners (AT) highly appreciate topics “*we will need for life*” such as healthy eating or bullying, and autonomous learning through the “*COOL plans*” (COoperative-Open-Learning assignments), where they are free to decide about the pace and management of the work – “*I can work in my way*”. They are satisfied when they have orientation in the lesson structure and can monitor their performance in the assignments.

Japanese learners (JP) prefer receptive activities (repeating the chants) when they feel relaxed and satisfied, rather than creative mediation of grammar and vocabulary (Council of Europe 2020), which sometimes makes them feel confused and demotivated, especially when they compare themselves with their peers (“*I can’t understand, I can’t do it*”). They are keen to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds and are fond of having foreign teachers.

Slovak learners (SK) like to have fun in English classes and they enjoy cooperative and creative games and IT learning applications (*“There’s so much fun in English classes. Much more than in any other.”*). They generally prefer skill- and content-oriented activities to system- and form-oriented activities (Council of Europe 2020). They are afraid of unexpected tests and feel great relief when they are not tested.

3.2. Interview

Teachers’ views are more or less in line with the learners’ opinions. They perceive mostly positive emotions in their English classes. They state that their learners enjoy peer interaction when they *“feel practical meaning in learning English”*. They often include games and IT in the classroom because they stimulate students’ interest and zest. Overall, they find that a variety of activities during a lesson works best in their opinion.

Austrian teachers understand that many students are very nervous about speaking and presenting in front of the class. Their students are required to read and work on English literature at the appropriate levels as a part of the curriculum but many *“do not feel comfortable with this and often do not meet deadlines”*. Positive emotions can be seen in current topics when learners often *“get into a workflow that often even results in them forgetting to take a break”*.

Japanese teachers agree that their students are excited to have English native teachers and to learn about other cultures. They feel that students enjoy learning vocabulary through activities and games but sometimes feel confused and hesitant when they have to use and arrange it (*“not good at creating something”*). They sense that learners do not like to take lecture notes which are then checked by the teacher. They think that their students are often tired and demotivated.

Slovak teachers assume that their learners like cooperative and opinion-based activities (spoken production and interaction), which stimulate their enthusiasm, while some of them are rather anxious about testing and assessment. They state that their learners are *“happy to know what the lesson plan is”* and are more focused when there are no tests. They are aware that the teacher is the key factor in the emotional experience of the learners.

3.3. Observation

The observers reported a positive classroom atmosphere, especially when the activities were varied and playful and required peer interaction. During these activities, most of the students seemed to experience interest, amusement, confidence, satisfaction, pleasure, acceptance, and contentment which can be attributed to the emotion of “enjoyment”. On the other hand, teachers’ monologues, tests, or grammar exercises were accompanied by looking down when a question was asked, evasive glances, lack of eye contact, trembling voice, delayed responses, negative body language, frowning, and staring, which can be interpreted as the symptoms of insecurity and worry contributing to the emotions of “anxiety” and “boredom”. Activities supported by audio-visual materials (working with an interactive board, watching videos, listening to and singing songs) were associated with apparently positive student reactions.

Austrian students were enthusiastic and cooperative during teamwork and information gap activities. They looked tense during listening activities as they struggled to comprehend the information and bored during the reading of a text from the book. Japanese learners were enthusiastic and spoke aloud during pair practice, but were hesitant when they did not have

designed communication partners and had to mix. They were tense and quiet when writing notes as they knew they would be checked by the teacher. Slovak learners seemed very enthusiastic during whole class brainstorming or discussion maintaining eye contact with the teacher, smiling, and outpacing each other in their responses. During individual writing tasks, many were sighing and looking around.

4. DISCUSSION

The present study sought to explore the emotional experiences of lower secondary learners in EFL classes across three distinct cultural contexts. The findings substantiate the growing body of research emphasizing the pivotal role emotions play in the language learning process. Consistent with prior studies (e.g., Dewaele and MacIntyre 2014; Botes, Dewaele, and Greiff 2022), the current findings affirm that positive emotions, particularly enjoyment, are predominant in EFL settings and are largely associated with peer interaction and engaging activities such as games. Enjoyment, as an activating emotion, can enhance motivation and participation, fostering a conducive learning environment.

The study highlights significant cultural variations in emotional responses to EFL activities. Austrian learners' preference for autonomous and practical learning activities suggests a cultural inclination towards self-directed learning. This is indicative of a student-centered learning environment supporting individual autonomy (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Japanese learners' preference for structured and receptive activities, such as chanting and interactions with foreign teachers, reflects the cultural emphasis on harmonization and structured learning approaches (Wen and Clement 2003). The hesitance and anxiety observed in creative tasks could be attributed to high academic pressure and the competitive nature of the educational system (Terasawa 2015). Slovak learners' enthusiasm for interactive and technology-supported activities underscores the importance of integrating modern pedagogical tools in language instruction. Their aversion to unexpected testing further emphasizes the need for assessment methods that reduce anxiety and foster a supportive learning environment (Kralova et al. 2024).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The study provides some revelations into the emotional dynamics of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms across three distinct cultural contexts: Austria, Japan, and Slovakia. The research demonstrates that while the emotions experienced by learners in EFL settings are largely universal, with enjoyment being the predominant positive emotion and anxiety and boredom as common negative emotions, the activities that elicit these emotions may vary across cultural settings.

To the best of our knowledge, there have been few studies that have included learners from both community-focused and individual-focused cultures in the context of TEFL. Several cultural differences were observed in language skills, systems, and techniques used in EFL classrooms. However, in order to facilitate the intellectual development of young adolescents, direct interactions with their world should be included in language teaching, for example, in group work and practical experiences that simulate real life. A better understanding of the affective aspect of language learning may help foreign language teachers and methodologists select the appropriate activities to effectively address the real cognitive and affective needs of learners in diverse cultural and educational contexts.

LIMITATIONS

While the study offers insights into EFL learners' emotional experiences across cultures, several limitations exist. The sample is limited to three countries, potentially not capturing the full range of cultural influences on language learning emotions. Self-reported data from questionnaires and interviews may introduce biases, as participants might not accurately recall or express emotions. Observations are also subject to the observers' interpretations, which could be culturally influenced. The focus on lower secondary learners may limit the applicability of findings to other age groups or educational levels. Future research should consider a larger, more diverse sample and include objective measures like physiological or behavioral data to complement self-reports.

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