

# Emotional Intelligence in Foreign Language Acquisition

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**Abstract:** This article aims to touch upon areas of emotional intelligence connected to foreign language acquisition. It is going to frame out the areas that are crucial for everyday human interactions and that can be used fruitfully for foreign language learning. As people need to communicate and their uttermost need is to connect with other people, it becomes necessary to be able to navigate one's own behaviour through the lands of others. Emotional intelligence helps people to be guided through the web of human relations and to understand their own feelings as well as those of others. Undemanding as it might sound, this is in reality very laborious, even in a native language, let alone in a foreign one. However, mastering emotional intelligence in a foreign language can serve as a facilitating element as well as a progress marker, as it represents the threshold dividing a mediocre user from a fluent and natural one. It opens the gate to a much higher level of knowledge; to a much higher level of learning, living and being. After first giving an overview of the topic, this paper therefore discusses the incorporation of certain elements of emotional intelligence into a language classroom to boost learning and results.

**Key words:** emotional intelligence, foreign language acquisition, education, learning

**Abstrakt:** Příspěvek se věnuje oblasti emoční inteligence jako nástroje pro efektivnější osvojení si cizího jazyka. Hovoří o začlenění několika vybraných prvků emoční inteligence do výuky jazyků za účelem podpory procesu učení jako takového a lepšího si osvojení cizího jazyka.

## Introduction

Every single person in the world has done some formal or informal learning. This could lead to the conclusion that there would be many experts devoting their professional zeal to the field of learning and, most importantly, that most people could be instructed on how to make their learning more efficient in institutions set up to serve this purpose. This is hardly the case, as Singapore is most probably the only country so far that requires every pupil and student to go through Social and Emotional Learning Programme<sup>1</sup>. As a result of this, most students are left with the advice of their parents, teachers and peers, who very rarely elaborate on how to approach learning; instead they concentrate on the content of learning. As a consequence, pupils and students may encounter many misconceptions, such as the belief that academic success depends on talent, or that current skills of an individual should be taken at face value (therefore it is often accepted practice in elementary schooling to provide children at a very early age with labels as to their academic competence, following the presumption that this is rather stable and difficult to overturn.) Instead

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<sup>1</sup> see <http://www.moe.gov.sg>



of being shown different, more personalized ways (based for example on Gardner's Multiple Intelligences) to enhance their skills, it is conveyed to them to not expect much in their careers. Children and their parents alike have a tendency to believe these prophecies as they come from professionals, people who are trained to detect the shortcomings in their students. These prophecies frequently become self-fulfilling as research shows that if teacher believes his students will fail, they are more likely to do so and vice versa (Rosenthal, 1992).

However, a growing number of scientists and authors (Gardner, Robinson, Damasio, Goleman and others) start to point at this phenomenon and work towards directing the attention of educators towards emotional intelligence, social intelligence, learning skills, reflective practices and life skills as part of the education process. They argue that looking at students from a traditional IQ-based perspective and assuming that their skills and 'talents' cannot change with time is no longer valid. That by promoting and practising the emotionally intelligent approach among students, parents and educators, the potential to bring a change in this attitude emerges. Students, led by their thus enlightened teachers, can decide to challenge the educational perspective they were given as children, based on the assessment of their verbal, logical and mathematical performance. They are given the power to regard this perspective as a temporary state, depending on their own decisions how to handle it. 'I cannot do it because I am not good at it, my teacher told me' changes into 'I need to find a way that will suit my needs and my inner settings, which will enable me to master this field.' In the classroom, it is very useful to link this emotionally intelligent approach with the 4C's approach (Communication, Cooperation, Critical Thinking and Creativity) as critically reviewing one's own position, discussing it with others and co-operating with others on a creative solution suitable to one's own needs is crucial to a successful change.

This procedure is valid across academic disciplines; however, this paper concentrates on foreign language acquisition, in particular within groups of students who do not study English (or other languages) as their main subject. In particular, students of ESP and EAP classes as well as participants in different support groups of English Autonomously at Masaryk University. These students are very likely to either have difficulties with the language (it is precisely why they have selected a different field) or with motivation (they might not consider it a priority). It is the task of the teacher then, to propose strategies that will enhance their learning, analyse and redirect their motivation and assist them at mastering the foreign language. In this case, the techniques of emotional intelligence allow for potential exponential growth. Because when students are learning a new language, they can learn it from scratch, put new corner stones, learn vocabulary connected to emotions, and as a bonus become more aware of them. By trying various sorts of self-reflection exercises in the target language, students get a boost in both emotional intelligence and language acquisition. It becomes a self-feeding circle.



## Background of Learners

Followed by discussions with students as well as teachers, it appeared that students at Masaryk University might benefit from the introduction of emotional intelligence into their foreign language classes. A trial run was carried out during one semester.

For the purpose of this practice, certain elements of emotional intelligence were selected and applied throughout both the regular and modular lessons, and also in language counselling, with the aim of raising the awareness of emotional intelligence among the students and practically trying out activities to make foreign language acquisition more effective. At the same time, the expectations was that the students would become more emotionally intelligent as a bonus.

The activities used in the classroom strove to constantly challenge students' learning and their assumptions in terms of emotional and social intelligence. Sometimes, it required the teacher to assist them and teach them what skills in particular might help each of them individually to become a better learner in the careers they wanted to pursue in their lives. This is in line with the approach of showing the students how to be transformed from the person studying for the exams to a lifelong learner (Hazzlewood in Honoré, 2008).

The students needed to be explained the existence of the comfort zone and how no learning happens within that zone. Frequently, the teacher was facing the challenge that the activities and exercises the students would benefit most from were those that they were least willing to try. There, their understanding of the situation as such (not necessarily the aim of the activity at this point) was crucial, including its benefits and pitfalls. By bringing their awareness to their feelings and by placing themselves in the comfort/learning/panic zone circles (below), they were provided with a tool to work with in their (future) learning.

Their feelings towards the matter in hand helped them distinguish between what was feasible and what was not. That is why feelings are important, why 'taking the emotional temperature' (Goleman, 2000) can be crucial.

It follows from my own personal experience that, paradoxically, in order to accept what they are being taught, the students already require a certain level of emotional intelligence, to be able to admit that this could be beneficial to them.

To deal with the issues described above, it was discovered that when the teacher asked the students various controversial or seemingly unrelated questions in a rhetorical way, or included self-reflection exercises as warm-up activities for lessons hoping for the seed-plant analogy and cumulative effects of such practice, it was the right direction to follow.



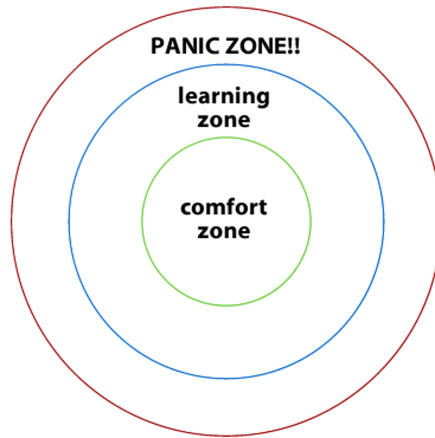


Chart 1: (<http://blog.pickcrew.com/getting-out-of-your-comfort-zone-why-its-hard-and-why-you-should/>)

## Emotional Intelligence As a Changing Quality

It is of the utmost importance for the students to realize and integrate the fact that even though they cannot alter their IQ or their personality, they can still influence their emotional intelligence and the way they approach their studies.

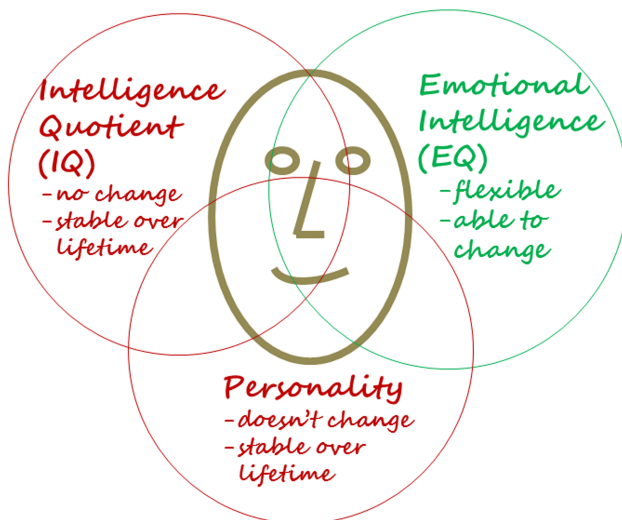


Chart 2: ([plumproductions.inc](http://plumproductions.inc))



To be able to do so, students analyse this fact in their own context and are then given an exercise to determine which intelligence (based on checklists provided by Armstrong, 2012, and inspired by multiple intelligences theory), is their strongest and how they could use this particular intelligence to improve their learning reality, in this particular case, their English. This activity was for most students very powerful as it manifested the connections between the different intelligences, and gave practical interlinked suggestions for minor changes resulting in a substantial impact on learning.

## Key Elements of Emotional Intelligence Used in Lessons

After the students have acquired the necessary knowledge of what emotional intelligence was and what tools it provided, they were ready to start implementing some of the elements. Due to space constraints, this paper does not aim at explaining the basics of emotional intelligence<sup>2</sup>, for the purpose of this article it is enough to define it as a set of skills using the information system of emotions. These skills were thoroughly examined and those that were likely to assist the students in the implementation process were chosen.

The key skills, or elements, of emotional intelligence that were selected for their potential to make a difference in foreign language acquisition fell into the three following categories as follows (though they often intertwine):

1. **emotional awareness:** acknowledgment of the aforesaid system is a fundamental precondition;
2. **access** to this system: the ability to identify emotions in oneself and other people, (verbal or nonverbal cues), distinguishing individual emotions – how they blend together and change, acquiring the relevant vocabulary;
3. **managing and regulating emotions:** learning techniques for calming down before an exam or presentation that makes students nervous, awareness of the fight-or-flight reaction, motivating oneself during strenuous, repetitive, demanding or seemingly irrelevant tasks, engaging other people in a discussion, problem-solving sessions or study support groups; in short using the emotions and the information provided by them for production of something creative.

Equally important, the students also needed to bear in mind that emotions are contagious; the most emotionally expressive person transmits their mood in a group within minutes, while positive feelings spread more powerfully than negative ones, the smile being the most contagious emotional signal of all. This fact on its own might persuade students when presenting, or even teachers perhaps, to strive to be the most positively emotionally expressive person in the classroom.

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<sup>2</sup> For fuller understanding of the topic see e.g. Mayer and Salovey, Goleman or Brackett



The three aforementioned categories can be further subdivided into individual skills that lessons were aimed at. The final part of this paper provides a list of these individual skills with comments relevant to foreign language acquisition and descriptions of tendencies that experience in the classroom has shown:

- **The ability to take direction and feedback** from tutors and peers while not getting offended and as a result self-directing oneself; this includes self-reflection, self-assessment, self-confidence and perseverance (to practice this particular one, students were asked to do things they are not good at) or self-control.
- ‘Being able to name your feelings and put that together with your memories and associations turns out to be crucial for self-control.’ (Goleman, 2013) Activities aimed at this skill have shown that the ability to take direction and feedback is sometimes diminished in students who are individualist and who tend to fight for their creations only because they are their own. Perfectionist students on the other hand had a tendency to fear failures. They needed to be repeatedly reminded that ‘When failure is not an option, we can forget about learning, creativity, and innovation’ (Brown, 2012). And that each step in their learning processes has an element of success as well as an element of error, and every other step is an effort to get the balance back, just like when walking (Brooks, 2012). However, the students involved in this trial classes were not asked to go as far as the students of Boston Philharmonic’s conductor and teacher, Benjamin Zander, who instructs his students to lift their hands in the air, smile and say ‘How fascinating’, after they make a mistake (Zander and Zander, 2002).
- **Self-reflection** was found out to be by far the most problematic aspect of the emotional intelligence toolkit, as is regularly visible not only in lessons but also in logs of autonomous students who are purposefully instructed on self-reflection and asked to integrate regular self-reflections in their journals and recordings of their studies. Yet, from the few successful ones, it was clearly visible that regular and determined efforts of reflective practice with plentiful examples of their own learning do inevitably lead students to notice the emerging patterns, providing them with valuable and much sought-after data about themselves and their studying habits.
- **Self-assessment** had a tendency to oscillate between two extremes, harsh self-criticism and blind praise, the first of which was more frequent. Another typical characteristic of students’ self-assessment was its shallowness. Together with giving peer feedback, this is a skill that needs serious consideration and practice in any language classroom. Being given specific guidelines, examples and tools, as well as enough practice, facilitates the process considerably and brings it closer to the students.
- **Self-confidence** is an element that is assumed to prevail in contemporary students. However, as students sometimes admitted themselves, it is often artificial, serving as self-esteem protection measure and when challenged, it might evapo-



rate. In this case, it proved useful to build the students' confidence around their solid self-assessment and profound feedback (tutor- and peer-based).

- **Perseverance and self-control** (which are invariably connected to the preceding skill) are qualities that have the reputation for not being recognized in the 21st century. However, they still matter substantially; therefore I felt a pressing need to incorporate them into the lessons. Teachers might find it difficult to promote these qualities in their classroom for the fear of being viewed as old-fashioned and conservative. However, this was challenged by furtively but deliberately incorporating listening and reading practices based on interesting narratives of successful people who were willing to try harder. Old-fashioned or not, it is still more than likely that: 'In scientific work, excellence is not about technical competence, but character' (Ernest O. Lawrence in Goleman, 2000). On the other hand, some authors point to research showing that self-control is an exhaustible resource (Hood, 2014), and therefore striking a balance once again needs to be considered.
- **The ability to concentrate**, which, according to some authors (Goleman, Brooks...), is the key element of emotional intelligence – 'Attention is our most precious resource.' (Goleman, 2013). The capacity of the working memory is limited and the less people focus consciously on a task, the more space is occupied by emotionally-driven thoughts of diverse character. It needed to be stressed to students that thoughts of the kind 'I should be studying...' do not fall into category of conscious focus. Thoughts of this kind imply that studying is not happening and in that case numerous questions should be pondered. What is distracting me from the given task? Is it external or internal? What can I do about it? The answers may range from very practical and straightforward (open a window, get some nutritious food, drink plenty of water, go for a short walk, clear the clutter from your working table, get a more comfortable chair or try to change the spot of work altogether) to the more fluid (dealing with the preeminent emotionally-laden issue that is occupying most of the attention capacity, e.g. writing an email or making a phone call to resolve such an issue, using a timer to reduce the hesitation time before any task gets done, or if there is no time, i.e. during an exam, doing a series of breathing exercises.) Obvious as it might sound, it did not always come naturally to the students and bringing this kind of awareness into learning enabled them to deal more efficiently with the task at hand, to experience positive feelings of fulfilment and to motivate themselves more smoothly next time.
- **The ability to survive change**; as change is ever-present in human lives and careers, it should be one of the aims of education institutions to prepare students not only to survive it but also to use it for their own benefit. With change inevitably come fear, anxiety and discomfort. Fear in particular is a very powerful emotion influencing learning heavily.

During stress or fear, the RAS (reticular activating system) filter gives intake preference to input considered relevant to the perceived threat, at the expense of



the sensory input regarding the lesson (Shim in *Mind, brain and education*). Unless the perception of the threat is reduced, the brain persists in doing its primary job – protecting the individual from harm. During fear, sadness, or anger, neural activity is evident in the lower brain, and the reflective, cognitive brain (prefrontal cortex) does not receive the sensory input of important items, such as the content of the day's lesson' (Willis in *Mind, brain and education*).

- Therefore, it was considered significant to highlight that teachers and students alike need to be aware of what they fear in the learning/ teaching process and what they could do about it (make the fear conscious, accept it and then do the thing they fear over and over and over again, until the fear disappears, at the same time making sure not to interchange perceived and real danger). It goes without saying, that the impact of such a practice is manifold. At workplaces, for example, innovators with the courage to go against the established order and against fear are highly prized, and to meet this need, it was felt, one of the aims of educators should be widening students' horizons and encouraging creative and innovative solutions with an array of strategies (e.g. angel's advocates – always giving positive feedback first) at the same time keeping at bay the four creativity killers: surveillance, evaluation, overcontrol (micromanaging) and relentless deadlines (Teresa Amabile, in Goleman, 2000).
- **Finding a mentor**, or perhaps someone to practice with is more valuable for students who score high in interpersonal intelligence. However, as languages are meant to be spoken, finding anyone willing to speak the target language counts. Thus, students were often reminded of the fact and encouraged to undertake the necessary (often not too comfortable) steps.
- **Grounded intuitions**; though intermittently underestimated and overvalued in the past, they have now reached equilibrium and have been acknowledged by scientists (Damasio, 2005) and are sought after by companies (Goleman, 2000); they require immense knowledge-gathering phase (and therefore persistence) but have the potential of yielding effective results. Whether in management or in deciding the correct tenses, grounded intuitions are the secret weapon, which is a concept many of the students needed to be introduced to.
- **Positive attitude** might be considered the obvious element of emotional intelligence, and practically taken for granted, but it is still not regularly made effective use of. Students learn more effectively if they are positive about what they are studying. The students themselves can influence, alter and produce such a learning enhancing attitude despite not being aware of it. The task of the teacher remained to bring this reality into their awareness.
- **Inner rudder**: Emotions represent our deepest values; the values are the scale to compare individual feelings to. Subsequently, when people go against those values, they experience negative emotions (i.e. in learning when students are forced to learn in a way they consider ineffective). It is worth noting here that whenever teachers make their students contradict their own values, these students may



experience negative emotions which they are likely to link with the respective teachers.

As mentioned above, all these elements are competencies that can be learnt. The first step is the also aforementioned awareness of how mental processes and behavioural patterns determine learning, the subsequent step then focusing and refocusing. The effectiveness in performing any task, any learning is determined by to what extent we can focus (Goleman, 2013). Your focus determines your reality (Master Yoda in Star Wars). This needs to be practiced to perfection, as attention, as has been proven by research, works like a muscle (Blackwell in Bronson and Merryman, 2009). And also, the latest neuroscience findings point to the fact that, when people are learning something new, the learning takes place in the frontal cortex with numerous neurons assisting the task. When the task is repeated often enough, it becomes automatic, the neural pathways for this skill are delegated farther down the cortex, and the neurons in the frontal cortex are available for further learning (Greene, 2012). These data can serve as an argument for implementing emotional intelligence competencies into a foreign language classroom as the vast majority of students were not familiar with these facts and found them immensely useful.

Being aware of the research on attention, students might consider the option to deliberately switch off all their devices or communication applications during learning, in order to avoid being in a state of continuous partial attention. As was so very exactly put as early as 1977 by Herbert Simon, a Nobel-winning economist: what information consumes is 'the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention...' (<http://www.economist.com/node/13350892>).

## Conclusion

Whenever learning is undertaken, there is an undercurrent of emotions going on with crucial information. Whether it is taken into consideration or not, it is still there. By acknowledging it, by labelling the emotions related to different aspects of learning, and by working with them, the individual process of learning is mastered. The tendency to be disappointed by 'failures' is likely to diminish as failures are taken as parts of the learning process, as learning experiences. For this realization, emotional intelligence is the corner stone, the most fundamental element, the very basics of any learning. This article has looked at emotional intelligence skills from the perspective of foreign language learning/ teaching and has shown what particular elements of emotional intelligence can the foreign language classroom benefit from and how. It did so based on the experience with students in standard classes as well as modular lessons and individual language counselling. Putting theory into practice, interesting patterns emerged; these are discussed in the second part of the paper. The patterns shed light on elements of learning that might otherwise elude the students (and teachers). Learning a language is not easy, some might call it hard work. However, it is



not restricted to the talented few, and I argue that when using emotionally intelligent strategies, every student can succeed.

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## Bionote

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