

## The role of emotional intelligence in decreasing the anxiety in language learning

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### Abstract

Many researchers have shown that including emotional intelligence (EI) skills in the process of teaching and learning can increase academic achievement in language learning. At the same time, including the EI in language curricula can increase the quality of teaching and learning, because by helping students to show personal responsibility they will learn effectively and complete their tasks efficiently. It will lead towards the achievement of their personal, academic and career excellence. The study explores the perceptions of the Language Centre (LC) teachers regarding the implications of the EI skills in language teaching during the academic year 2016/2017. It highlights the importance of embedding the EI into language syllabi and demonstrates the recognised need for well-developed EI skills to gain higher academic achievement. The objective of this article is to emphasise some characteristics of EI to today's language teaching and learning trends, used at the LC, South East European University. By examining the relationship between EI and language learning, this study will try to increase teachers' understanding of EI skills in language learning and also provide some insights for sharing experiences regarding the implementation of these skills in the classroom.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, motivation, language teaching.

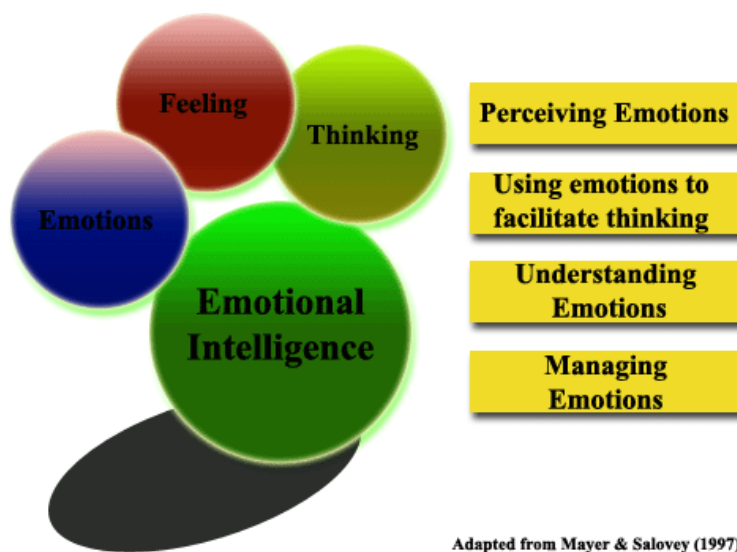
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## 1. Introduction

In education, emotional intelligence (EI) helps students and teachers to promote academic success by reducing anxiety and negative feelings during the learning process (Kamae, Weisani, Researchers, Club & Branch, 2014; Karatas, Alci & Aydin, 2013; Sajadi, Kiakojoury & Hatami, 2012). In order to improve the quality of teaching and learning, teachers need to raise the level of students EI and help them create a sense of identity, safety and value.

Many recent studies indicate that in order to increase academic success negative feelings and anxiety should be eliminated from the teaching and learning process. EI is one of the inner motivators that can increase academic achievement in language learning (Ansari & Derakshan, 2010). Their research results pointed out that language teachers should understand the importance of EI in language learning. By understanding students' EI skills and their relation to language anxiety, many strategies which will improve learners' self-confidence and lower their language anxiety will be provided. Goleman (2004) shows that student's cognition processes and brain activities can be impaired and negatively influenced by the impact of anxiety. Considering that learning is a cognitive activity which is dependent on encoding, storing and retrieval, strong emotions can either facilitate or block cognitive and learning processes. Therefore, as Mayer and Salovey (1993) suggest that teachers need to understand and help students to manage their emotions in order to facilitate thinking (Figure 1).



Adapted from Mayer & Salovey (1997)

Figure 1. Adapted from Mayer & Salovey (1993).

Vanin (2008) emphasises the idea that if teachers manage to decrease anxiety during teaching, motivation and self-esteem of students, which play a crucial role in language acquisition, will increase. By raising the awareness of EI skills, students can apply their judgment and reasoning to deal with anxious situation. Cowden (2010) concluded that students with high anxiety have more EI problems and less developed EI skills, while students with lower anxiety have better EI skills and achieve better academic success. Foreign language anxiety is one of the many factors that interfere with learning a foreign language by hindering learner autonomy. Therefore, teachers should use approaches which can boost students' confidence, they should also create interesting and relaxing classroom atmosphere and engage the students in collaborative work. Most importantly, students should be continuously provided with positive and productive feedback in order to reduce the anxiety levels and promote learner autonomy.

According to Goleman (2001), there are two basic areas of competencies that create the EI. One is personal competence which deals mostly with self-awareness (the ability to read own emotions and recognise their impact) and self-management (controlling own emotions and adapting to changing circumstance). On the other hand, social competence deals mostly with empathy (sense, understand and react to other's emotions).

Mayer (2007) states that EI is about activating the intelligent use of emotions and utilising the power or information included in emotion with the purpose to make effective decisions. Language anxiety is associated with a fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety and communication apprehension. Many researchers (Cheng et al., 1999; MacIntyre et al., 1997) emphasised that there is a close relationship between language anxiety and students achievement. According to Krashen and Terrell (1983), the language input is limited when the level of motivation is low and when the learners have low self-confidence and high anxiety. In one research study where Ganschow and Sparks (1996) used a Foreign language classroom anxiety scale, it was concluded that there are some typical behaviours among high anxiety foreign language learners.

## 2. Methods

This study uses the phenomenological approach using interviews as data collection with seven Language Centre (LC) high lecturers in order to gather specific and detailed information regarding the use of EI in language teaching. The essence of phenomenology focuses on the meaning of individual experiences, at this point the experience of using EI in teaching language skills. We based the results of the study on a paradigm of teachers' personal knowledge and subjectivity, and emphasised the importance of personal perspective and interpretation, used with advanced levels of English proficiency, mainly Academic English and English for specific purposes.

The study by examining the relationship between EI and anxiety will help to increase teachers' understanding of language learning from the learner's perspective and also provide some insights to understand the difficulties which students face during the EFL learning.

The following are the aims of the study.

- Sharing teachers' understanding on how students' emotions affect learning;
- Making teachers aware of EI skills;
- Giving ideas how to create emotionally safe learning environments.

This micro research answers the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between EI and language learning anxiety?
2. Which language tasks increase the language anxiety?
3. Which are the teaching techniques that increase EI skills in the classroom?

## 3. Results and Discussion

The results of the research show that foreign language anxiety is one of the most important predictors of language performance. Foreign language anxiety is recognised as an affective filter that prevents students from accepting language input (Krashen, 1983). The research questions of the study are briefly described in the following.

### 3.1. *What is the relationship between EI and language learning anxiety?*

There is a close relationship between EI and learning anxiety. According to the majority of the interviewed teachers, many students are anxious about the learning often when they do not feel competent academically. At this point, they do not trust themselves and often withdraw from

classroom activities. As a result, 80% of teachers agree that teachers should help students to handle anxiety.

### *3.2. Which language tasks increase the language anxiety?*

The majority of teachers (five) think that anxiety is increased when students need to speak in front of the class or when the teacher is correcting errors. Two from the interviewed teachers think that the anxiety is raised when students make presentations, role playing and defining a word in foreign language. On the other hand, all teachers agree that low self-esteem and fear that they can be criticised by their peers increase the level of anxiety in all activities.

### *3.3. Which are the teaching techniques that increase EI skills in the classroom?*

All teachers support the idea that students learn and perform more successfully when they feel secure and excited about the subject matter. Journal writing is emphasised as a productive way to lower anxiety and also organising debates to raise their awareness for managing emotions. By role play activities, teachers can help students to develop empathy and understand different perspectives. An emotionally safe classroom environment is necessary for students' cognitive learning, growth and creative expression. Teachers can create emotionally safe classroom and lower the anxiety by affirming students' accomplishments in non-competitive ways, encouraging self-confidence, providing opportunities to take risks without penalty and giving thoughtful feedback. Teachers need to create opportunities and activities by which students can appropriately use EI skills, where students can apply their judgment and reasoning to deal with anxious situations. If teachers are concerned and want to address or improve students' EI skills, they can help them to use their reasoning and judgement to deal with anxious situations.

## **4. Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between language anxiety and EI skills for students in the LC. The research results may serve as a guide for EFL teachers and may help them increase the understanding of learners' perspective regarding language learning. It also suggests how to decrease language anxiety using strategies to improve learners' self-confidence and by lowering the level of language anxiety. For example, when a teacher asks a student to answer a question in front of the class he/she may shuffle his/her feet, nervously touch objects, sway back and forth, toy his/her pen, put and take out his/her hands from the pocket or play with his/her hair. For this reason, his/her utterances might be fragmental and incomprehensible. To help academic anxious students perform better, teachers should be familiar with how to use controlling techniques like helpful reinforcement or providing detailed guidelines which will raise learning efficiency. They should be able to recognise conditions which may provoke student's anxiety and try to turn their anxiety into a constructive and positive outcome such as motivation. Since students learn more effectively if they enjoy learning, teachers can utilise many techniques which can assist the students to improve their EI in the language classroom while they are learning a foreign language. Some of the suggested learning techniques are role plays, simulations and other enjoyable activities.

EI, unlike general intelligence, can be fostered, learned and developed. EI can be improved like any skills in life. As it has been proven by many modern theorists, language policy makers, and curricula, developers should provide opportunities for students to learn and improve it. In conclusion, it is the teachers' responsibility to guide the students' use of strategies adjusted to their learning styles and individual differences, and encourage them to feel comfortable using their preferred learning styles in order to learn the foreign language actively and effectively.

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