Teaching beyond boundaries: Teachers as psychologists in English foreign language classrooms

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Abstract

It is acknowledged that large waves of recent research have necessitated new ways of thinking about learning and teaching. However, most teachers are not adequately prepared for considering the psychological health of their learners. We may assume that there seem to have no adequate resources to help them understand the fundamental issue that underpins psychology in English Foreign Language classrooms. Hence, this paper aims to redirect teachers' attention, inspire their curiosity to move from the traditional ways of teaching to psychology-based education, in the hope to prepare our future generation to successfully engage the world. To collect data for the study, the researcher made use of questionnaires for students and teachers, and semi-structured interviews for teachers. Data were analyzed using SPSS. The results showed that self-confidence plays a role in learning a new language. Other findings are also displayed in the research and recommendations are made at the end of the study.

Keywords: English foreign language; classroom; Anxiety; learners; positive psychology; psychological health; self-confidence.

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1. Introduction

Language teachers sometimes feel that their lessons did not succeed notwithstanding the careful planning, good preparation, and knowledge of the subject. Teachers often ask themselves questions like: "where is the problem?" Is it related to the teaching performance? Or is it because of the learners' interests and motivation? Or because of other influencing factors? Answers to these questions might be crucial for a better teaching experience. Hence, a great number of studies strive to find out the reasons behind a learner's failure since learning a foreign language is believed to be a complex process (Arnold, & Brown, 1999) influenced by cognitive and affective factors which result in individual differences (Tallon, 2009).

Recently, factors involving the individuals' self are in vogue in research on applied linguistics and language pedagogy. Several studies (Gonzalez-Pienda, Nunez, Gonzalez-Pumariega, 2000; Cummins et al., 2015; Najafi et al., 2018; Zheng, Ward & Stanulis, 2020) have shown that a possible correlation may result from connecting learners' self with achievements. To put it differently, affective factors may be considered as one of the vital issues which may determine success in academic performance in general and learning a language in particular.

1.1. Literature review

In the process of language learning and teaching in English Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, there are a lot of paradigms contributing to the variability of contexts such as teaching and learning styles, program characteristics, and learners' needs. The foreign language teacher faces challenging situations where he is supposed to come with wisely. English language experts and language teachers have been facing many challenges over the last years in an attempt to improve the educational practice and design more significant, efficient, and enjoyable courses for learners and teachers alike. The teacher may act as a coach, as noted by Morley (1991, pp 507), who describes the teacher as "coach" in the following terms: '*A coach characteristically supplies information, gives models from time to time, offers cues, suggestions and constructive feedback about performance, sets a high standard, provides a wide variety of practice opportunities, and overall [sic] supports and encourages the learner'.*

Learning to teach necessitates more than providing teachers with a "how-to" bag of tricks to be replicated in the classroom, but rather it requires some basic understanding of some affective variables which may be of great help in either empowering learners' competence to become good language users, or failing in acquiring the necessary knowledge and become ineffective learners.

Accordingly, the teacher is called upon to perform several tasks in the language learning process. Alternatively, the teacher also has a great role to play in creating a relaxed atmosphere to lower the learners' anxiety and feel confident which results in progress in language learning. Teachers may reduce classroom anxiety by making the learning context less stressful (Dörnyei, 2001), encouraging learners, and keeping them wanting to learn more and more. To maintain and increase the learners' self-confidence, Dörnyei (2001, pp 130) believes that teachers should:

> *…foster the belief that competence is a changeable aspect of development and can be promoted by providing regular experiences of success. Everyone is more interested in a task if they feel that they make a contribution. A small personal word of encouragement is sufficient.*

This paper stresses the fact that teachers should find out ways to help their learners become confident and efficient. The way an individual learner learns has much to do with his or her personality and psychological or emotional state at any given time. Acton (1984:75) conceives those teachers should prepare students psychologically first to improve their proficiency levels. For instance, speaking has both *'inside-out'* and *'outside-in'* dimensions which function in a kind of loop: '*speakers can control their nerves or inner states by speaking properly. This is the basic tenet of successful programs in voice training and public speaking'* Acton (1984:75).

1.1.1. *Affective Variables in Language Learning*

Individual learner differences appear to likely affect various aspects of language learning in general and may help determine what practical activities may be optimal for learners' achievements. Individual differences have been researched extensively; making this arena one of the most systematically studied psychological aspects in language research (Dörnyei 2008). The most important result from these investigations was the conclusion that there exist factors that help learners excel within the learning process through the application of individualized learning techniques.

With the shift towards more education-friendly and classroom-based approaches to language study, research has taken a new orientation since the 1990s and turned its attention towards more cognitive theories of learners' *self.* Therefore, bringing language learner identity and personality research more in the line with the cognitive revolution in the field of psychology has created the philosophy that shapes learners' psychological engagement while learning. These patterns of thinking may encompass, for example, self-perceptions, self-efficacy beliefs, self-esteem, self-worth, and self-confidence (Pintrich, 2002).

1.2. Purpose of study

The dynamic correlation between learners' psychological health achievements should be placed at the heart of teaching. Such a puzzling debate is one motive towards becoming a language teacher. The present research aims at stressing the importance of learners' psychological health in their progress in English Foreign Language classrooms.

2. Method

2.1. Research Model

This research was carried out within the framework of quantitative and qualitative research model.

2.2. Participants

The participants of this research are 92 students studying at secondary school level. These students were taking the "English Language" course as a foreign language education. In addition, seven (7) English teachers were also included in the study.

2.3. Data collection instrument

"General Confidence Test" (GCT)and "Classroom Performance Test" (CPT) data collection tools were applied to 92 students studying in English language course. Validity and reliability studies of these tools were carried out. In addition, opinions were received from field experts. To reach the aim of the study, a questionnaire was administered to learners and teachers to check their opinions regarding one affective variable, namely self-confidence. In addition, Teachers were also taken through a short semi-structured interview. The researcher developed these questions within the framework of expert opinion.

2.4. Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the SPSS software package. The mean and standard deviations were found, and the results were displayed using the mean and standard deviation tables, as well as bar charts and pie charts.

3. Results

3.1. General Confidence Test

The first fifteen items were about general confidence test (GCT)), designed to gather information about learners' general beliefs about themselves in certain unexpected situations within the classroom setting. The following table (1) summarizes the results achieved:

Table 1 *The Mean of Learners' Score in GCT*

Item	Statement	Mean
1	It is difficult for me to do what I want without the help of others.	3.5
2	I avoid the leadership role in my life.	2.46
3	I blame myself a lot when I make a mistake.	2.26
4	When I discuss with others, I cannot insist on my opinion even though I believe it is right.	3.5
5	I hesitate to participate in a discussion, even though I know a lot about the discussed topic.	3.36
6	I often agree with others' opinions **even** though I am not convinced	3.7
7	I believe others' comments on me are criticism.	1.66
8	I avoid any situations where others observe me.	3
9	I speak confidently when I am sure of what I am saying.	1.53
10	I feel unsatisfied with my abilities no matter what efforts I exert.	3.36
11	I feel that people often consider what I say as unimportant.	3.43
12	I don't like to be the first to answer even though I know the right answer.	3.33
13	Others' criticism makes me withdraw from meeting them.	4.5
14	When I compare myself to my peers, I feel they are better than me.	3.5
15	I can help my friends when we are assigned group work.	1.9

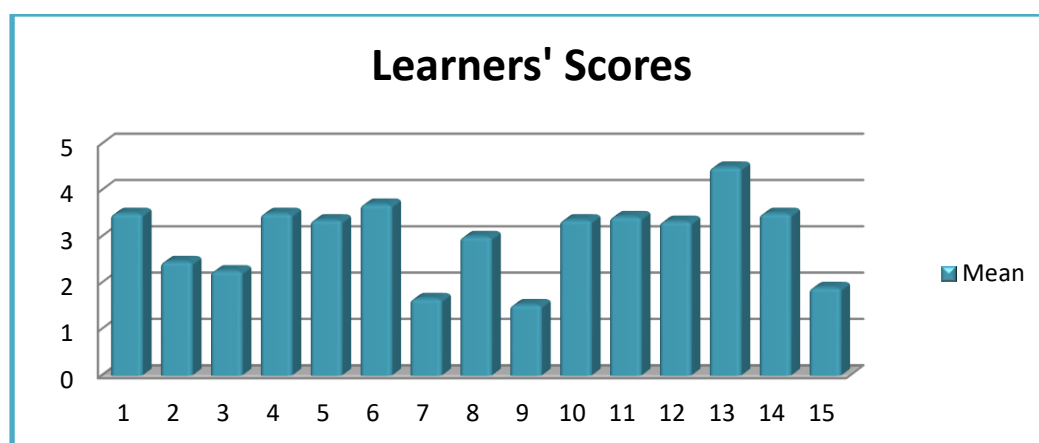In a visual picture, the following bar graph demonstrates this:

Figure 1 *Distributing Learner's scores in GCT*

The mean of the total students' scores is 2.99, and the standard deviation is .84 as shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2, GCT *Mean*

Confidence	Mean	SD
GCT	2.99	.84

This shows that the learners' general self-confidence is below the average.

3.2. Classroom Performance Test

The second nineteen questions were about classroom performance test (CPT), the results are shown in Table 3:

Table 3 *The Mean of Learners' Score in CPT*

Item	Statement	Mean
1	I cannot speak English	4.43
2	I feel my ideas in English are meaningless	4.16
3	I do not dare to say my thoughts in English.	3.5
4	I feel uneasy in the English-speaking lessons.	4.06
5	I do not feel shy of reading aloud during English classes.	2.5
6	I can speak English in front of my classmates.	2.4
7	I dislike competing in English lessons because I fear failure.	3.53
8	I feel embarrassed when I discuss anything in English.	3.2
9	I feel embarrassed when my English teacher asks me to repeat my answer.	3
10	I feel I am ineffective in English tasks.	3.93
11	I like group discussions in English classes.	2
12	I can speak English with my teacher only in private, but not in front of others in the classroom.	3.33
13	I do not work hard on my English tasks because I doubt that I will do them successfully.	4.03
14	I feel unconfident that I did the right thing in English tasks unless others tell me so.	3.56
15	I make mistakes in English without being shy.	2.8
16	I do not feel nervous on oral tests in English.	3.13
17	My participation in the English class adds nothing to the class.	3.73
18	I believe my abilities in speaking English are the worst in the class.	4.13
19	I do not feel confused when it is my turn to answer in English.	2.8

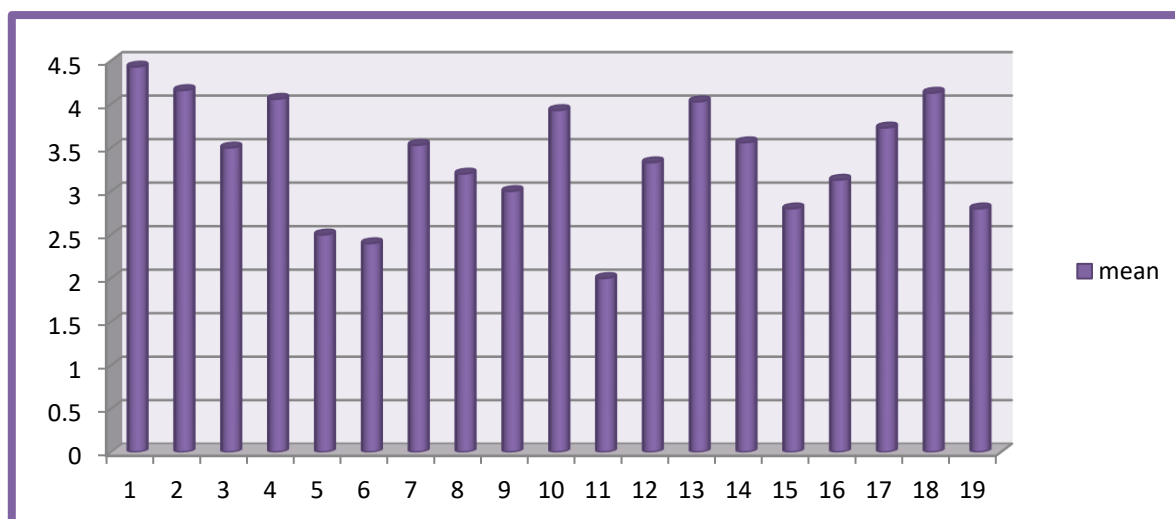These results may also be represented as follows:

Figure 2 *Distributing Learners' Scores in CPT*

Therefore, the mean of the total students' scores is 3.38, and the standard deviation is .67 as displayed in table 4:

Table 4 CPT *Mean*

Confidence	Mean	SD
CPT	3.38	.67

This demonstrates that when it comes to learners' classroom performance, i.e., situational self-confidence, results are below the average.

From the teachers' perspective, another questionnaire was administered to 7 teachers to further investigate the issue raised. It focused mainly on unveiling the respondents' assumptions and beliefs about their efforts as far as our EFL learners' psychological health. Results show that teachers believe that the majority of learners feel anxious, de-motivated, and afraid, only very few learners have a high level of confidence when performing a speaking task. The next pie-chart (Figure 3) illustrates this:
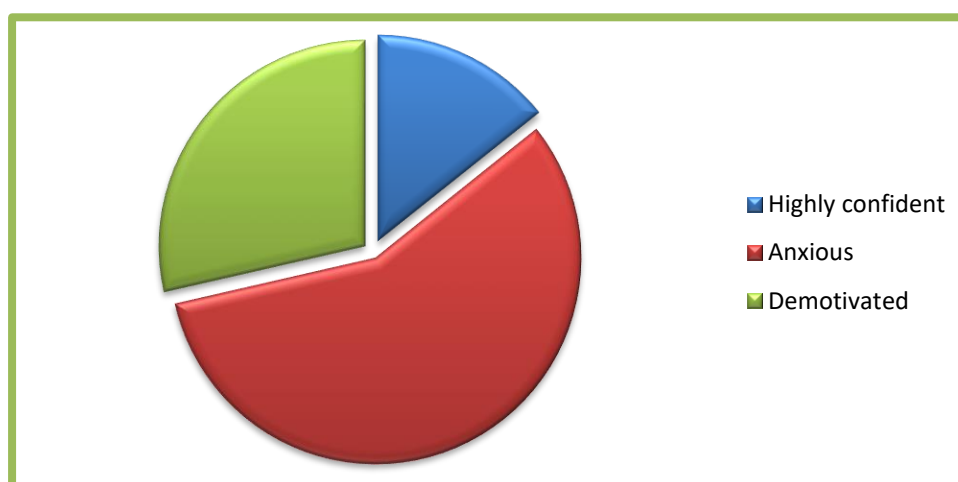

Figure 3, *Learners' Psychological Status*

Moving to possible relationships between the two variables, it was found that all teachers assume that learners with high self-confidence achieve good speaking results, they made this point clear by stating that since learners' confidence level is high, they take the risk of talking and they make mistakes without being afraid or reluctant, it is a *cause-and-effect* relationship. Moreover, teachers link a low level of self-confidence to the reluctance of participation in the classroom, lack of interest and motivation, neglecting the classroom tasks and activities. Other agreed reasons among teachers are listed below:

- Breaks and pauses when speaking,
- Misconstruction and lack of understanding,
- Little or no enthusiasm in the classroom,
- Lack of the necessary linguistic and general knowledge,
- Afraid of making mistakes and being corrected,
- Losing their image and importance in the classroom,
- Prior learning experience.

On the other hand, according to teachers, high self-confidence leads learners to participate, take the risk of talking and making mistakes without being shy or afraid, and also, are more or less fluent when speaking. Teachers also assume that learners reflect their self-confidence when always ready to answer questions and add and comment after the teacher's explanation.

4. Discussion

To put it in a nutshell, one may conclude that learners' self-confidence be it overall, situational, or task is crucial. The statistics above demonstrate that learners' general beliefs about themselves are below the average, the majority of the learners avoid leadership because they are not sure of their capacities, they quickly agree with others even if they are not convinced. They avoid all situations where they felt they are being noticed and they have a constant belief that they are incompetent learners no matter what they do. The present findings seem to be consistent with other research carried out by (Jabor et al., 2017; Hanifa, 2018; Saleh, 2019) about readiness for classroom communication activities, where it was demonstrated that lack of self-confidence is thought to be the most dangerous barrier for effective communication and success in language learning. Conversely, high self-confidence may develop the learners' desire to engage and communicate and help improve their language proficiency in general and generate their communication readiness in particular (Martin-Rubió & Cots, 2018).

As for their classroom performance, a low mean was scored. Learners' English abilities seem to be low. The second-lowest level of self-confidence among first-year LMD students was in task self-confidence (speaking). The mean of students' scores was 2.84 which indicates below-average task self-confidence. A possible explanation for this might be due to their low level of speaking achievement or the other way round, i.e., their low level of speaking achievement could be an interpretation of their low task self-confidence. Similarly, it was also found that the correlation between specific performance and self-esteem is interchangeable (Bandura, 1982; Martin-Rubió & Cots, 2018; Moneva & Tribunalo, 2020).

5. Conclusion

This paper depicts the scenery of theoretical and practical frameworks to hopefully understand the importance of considering learners' psychological state in language learning. A great number of researchers believe that many teachers intuitively understand the importance of maintaining their students' psychological health. However, without offering specific guidance, teachers may be at a loss as to how to provide this support while at the same time accomplishing more conventional language teaching goals.

The premise here is that many learners experience several psychological problems such as anxiety, lack of self-confidence, fear of losing their face, these feelings drive learners not to *"be themselves"* when speaking a new language. In a long-term vision, lack of self-confidence in learners can, in short order; make them become hesitant language teachers.

6. Recommendation

These strategies are recommended to EFL teachers to maintain their learners' psychological status in the classroom:

- **Encourage Moderate Risk Taking:** it is often noticed that many students fear failure and therefore, are afraid to take risks. Good teachers encourage such students to be reasonable risk-takers. Such risk-taking, however, often produces increased achievement. For instance, students seem to have no chance to improve their pronunciation skills if they refuse to try to speak, fearing that their efforts will be unsuccessful; improvement can occur only after students try to express themselves.

- **Highlighting Enhancement over Doing Better Than others:** a strategic teacher needs to emphasize his learners' performance in accomplishing their goals. Such an approach calls for a fascinating challenge of the motivation of all students to keep them interested.

- **Supporting Cooperative Learning:** this is a far more challenging task to establish in the classroom. Beyond competition, students may be encouraged to cooperate, with emphasizing constantly positive effects on achievement. It is generally acknowledged that students often learn more when they work together with their peers. The most motivating situation is one in which students receive rewards based on how well their fellow group members perform, creating a great incentive for students to work together to make certain that everyone in the cooperative group is making.

- **Making Tasks Interesting:** educational researchers have identified many specific approaches to motivate academic effort and achievement. Learners pay considerable attention to the degree of interest in the content of a task; sometimes adequate material grabs students' attention and helps them be active. For instance, listening to a song in an oral expression session is create more fun by having the students learn interestingly. This later produces a suitable atmosphere of learning in which students find the experience intriguing rather than boring, and this results from their progress.

- **Increasing Students' Self-Efficacy:** Self-efficacy has gained increasing prominence as a key mediator of regulatory and motivational processes; it positively affects self-regulation and cognitive engagement while performing a task and has been linked to improvement and success. Learners with positive self-efficacy believe they can accomplish tasks. High self-efficacy motivates future effort; hence, students must believe in their capacities and develop a sense of challenging themselves.

- **Adopting A Motivating Classroom Atmosphere:** Effective teachers strive to create a motivating classroom environment. There are two types of environments; the physical and the psychological one; teachers need to consider both to promote engagement and learning. *The physical Environment;* involves building a comfortable and inviting place for learning, with many educational materials readily accessible for students. For example, in dealing with pronunciation, charts and diagrams, videos, tape recorders and the use of laboratories can support the teaching/ learning process. Additionally, variation in choosing the activities may

in all probabilities enhance learners' improvement. For instance, introducing new topics in classroom discussion, changing the shape of the classroom (U-shape), and encouraging students to be creative. As far as the *Psychological Environment* is concerned, it assumes that teachers need to promote *community* in their classroom, i.e., the teacher establishes frequent connections to students, motivating, supporting, and encouraging them.

- **Classroom management:** The classroom management of the efficient teaching/learning process is said to be one of the most important components of successful teaching. Classroom instruction is complex and coherent aiming at meeting the needs of the whole class while matching the abilities and interests of individual students with different learning styles and personalities. Teachers need to be aware of classroom management strategies, instructional strategies, motivational techniques, and a variety of theories of learning which results at its core the development of self-regulated students.

- **Teaching Cultural Aspects of Communication:** When being aware of the target culture, learners' self-confidence will raise because effective communication requires not just the mastery of individual sounds and the accompanying aspects of pronunciation such as stress, rhythm, and intonation. It also depends on the speaking habits of the target culture such as gestures, posture, and eye contact. EFL learners need to be aware of such cultural aspects of speech. Here, the teacher must familiarize his learners with the following questions: - What do facial expressions convey? Are they the same in all cultures? Do they matter? - What gestures are used (e.g., to greet, wave goodbye, indicate agreement, non-comprehension, etc.)? How do gestures vary from our culture to the target culture? Should we use gestures to communicate? How often should one gesture in conversation? What happens if we do not use gestures? Do men and women gesture in the same way? Such questions and others make learners develop a certain degree of self-confidence when speaking.

Therefore, being aware of how teaching may be successful based on psychological knowledge is crucial for teachers since teachers do much to motivate their students through supporting words, classroom organization and management, and cooperative learning, i.e., teachers are engaged in a complex orchestration of psychological variables to make the learning process as successful as possible. Bearing the above principles in mind, teachers may in all probabilities attain effective teaching.

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