ISSN 2433-5444

Relay Journal

<https://kuis.kandagaigo.ac.jp/relayjournal>

Affective Factors in Learner Autonomy

Phillip A. Bennett, Kanda University of International Studies, Japan

To cite this article

Bennett, P. A. (2018). Affective factors in learner autonomy. *Relay Journal*, 1(1), 128-132.

To link to this article

<https://kuis.kandagaigo.ac.jp/relayjournal/issues/jan18/bennett/>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Please contact the authors for permission to re-print elsewhere.

Scroll down for article.

Affective Factors in Learner Autonomy

Phillip A. Bennett, Kanda University of International Studies, Japan

“The myth that emotions are only a minor part of learning is one of the most amazing confabulations of all time”

—Rebecca L. Oxford, 2013 p. 67

Learning a second language can invoke feelings of enjoyment, stress, accomplishment, failure, excitement, and discouragement. These affective factors have an interdependent relationship with cognition (Damasio, 2000) which can enhance or impede language learning, however, the affectional aspect of the learning process is a largely neglected dimension of language teaching and learning theories (Damasio, 2000; MacIntyre, 2002; Oxford, 2013). Ryan and Deci (2017, p. 351) state that, “Substantial evidence shows that autonomy-supportive versus controlling teaching strategies foster more autonomous forms of motivation in students and the higher quality engagement, performance, and the positive experience associated with it.” They go on to say that the positive effects of autonomy-supportive strategies permeate through all age groups and cultures. Therefore, if language teachers aim to foster an environment where learners have the capacity and desire to take control of their learning, i.e., promote learner autonomy, (Benson, 2011), teachers must not only be aware of the relationship between affect and language learning but also take action by implementing effective affective strategies in our pedagogical practices. This can be accomplished by assisting learners to be aware of their emotions and the meta-affective and affective strategies they can implement in order to better manage them (Oxford, 2011). Such strategies are paying attention to affect, planning for affect, monitoring affect, etc. (Oxford, 2011). Another facet educators must be aware of in the classroom is how autonomy can be socially mediated (Murray, 2014), e.g., mentoring, cooperation, and peer-assessment. Further, being aware and taking appropriate actions also requires educators to exercise their emotional intelligence, which Salovey and Mayer (1990, p. 189) define as “a type of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one’s thinking and actions.” Thus teachers must play an important role by being partners as well as independent learner-

practitioners when interacting with students (O’Leary, 2014). Lastly, returning to the affective factors in learner autonomy, teachers must guide students to have an awareness about their role as independent learners, for example, instead of using excuses for limited performance they will be able to have “an honest analysis of the circumstances that limited their performance” (Valdivia, S., McLoughlin, D., & Mynard, J., 2011, p. 94) and *feel* accountable for their learning. This fundamental change in their learning, as Yamashita (2015, p. 63) writes, gives students the “capacity to manage their affective states... along with the ability to set goals, find resources, and monitor and evaluate their learning.”

Learner autonomy (LA) has answered many questions about teaching and learning and in turn, gave me an entirely new perspective on how I view myself as a teacher and how I view students as a class and individually. Admittedly, since I find each concept in the field of autonomy intriguing, it’s difficult to just write about one. Also, the way each of the concepts intersect, it’s very easy to start writing about one concept and end with another. That being said, since I’ve always felt that students’ emotions played a role in the classroom, whether it be towards the lesson, each other, or the teacher, a part of the course¹ in LA that I took that made a particular impact on me was how important affect is in creating a learner autonomous environment. Being an ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) for over 10 years I have observed thousands of high school English classes taught by dozens of teachers. One aspect that permeated through each of the lessons was how students felt about learning and how aware and responsive the teacher was to the students. Now after taking this LA course, I am able to reflect back on past lessons and understand much of what I witnessed through the lens of LA. Although I suspected that there was a relationship between learners’ emotions and their language learning experience, I was unaware how “deep the rabbit hole goes”, so to speak. The fact that students’ emotional state can determine how well they retain information at the biological level (in their brains) made a tremendous impact on me. It’s not that I had never thought about it before but it was the fact that despite the evidence I can’t recall it being a factor taken into consideration by my coworkers. The mantra of many educators I have worked with has been “students need to be more motivated”, however, this, in my opinion, implies that the teachers view their students’

¹ The course on learner autonomy is part of the MA TESOL program offered at the Graduate School of Kanda University of International Studies in Tokyo

natural state as demotivated. Given, this might very well be the case, yet, I believe this prejudice can set a negative pace for a lesson or worse an entire semester. This then puts all the onus on the teacher to “do all the heavy lifting” even if there is nothing heavy to lift. This takes away any sense of agency and control from the students, thus holding opportunities for their learner autonomy hostage. I realized this can be remedied just by the teacher simply asking questions and listening to the students so they (the students) can have the opportunity to shape their learning environment.

Another factor which made an impact on me was the meta-affective and affective strategies which can be implemented in a lesson or throughout a course. For example, having students create collages from various English magazines based on their future language-learning goals as a language learner and putting it on display. This activity not only acts as a reminder for themselves but has a social dimension to it as well by being extrinsically motivating. Another example which I learned and have already used in class was having students think of positive solutions to negative situations by responding in English. I find this activity particularly effective because students must not only produce a meaning-focused output but also practice an affective strategy of thinking positively in negative situations. This, in turn, can be used as a strategy students implement to manage their learning motivation intrinsically.

As an ALT, I have no direct influence at the curricular level, just on one-on-one interactions and in stand-alone lessons. In my current situation, while I do have the opportunity to conduct lessons which are influenced by students’ interests as well as introduce activities that raise their affective awareness, I do not have the authority to assign homework or plan activities that require a semester-long process. Given the circumstances, recently while helping a student prepare for university entrance exams and interviews, I was able to use much of what I learned in the LA course. The student expressed enjoyment during and looked forward to our study sessions after school. I am happy to say that they were accepted into the university of their choice—which was a pretty big deal at my school—and the student said the study sessions were helpful and motivating. It is without a doubt that what I was able to implement in the study sessions, i.e., advising and affective strategies, is in direct relation to the student's positive feelings about our meetings. Be that as it may, the more I learn about LA the more I notice that teachers generally lack the time to fully explore LA—notably in regard to its affective factors. Due to administrative restrictions, robust curriculums, and being inundated with an array of other

responsibilities, teachers can only do so much concerning learner autonomy in today's teaching environment. Therefore, I have become increasingly interested in the learning advising position and research in the field of learner autonomy.

Going forward I will continue to learn more about learner autonomy and build a tool belt of activities which encourage students to think about their learning and be aware of the impact emotions have on learning. Further, I must strengthen my emotional intelligence, so, when observing and interacting with students I can also be cognizant of their affective states. By doing so I will be able to improve my autonomy-supportive teaching practices—where the learners can take control of their learning and also be aware of the learning of their peers. Lastly, I will talk with fellow teachers about the relationship between affect and learning as well as the benefits of LA.

Notes on the Contributor

Phillip A. Bennett is currently a graduate student of the MA TESOL Program at Kanda University of International Studies. He has over 10 years of experience teaching in private Japanese high schools as well as teaching adult learners of all levels and walks of life.

References

- Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching autonomy* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge
- Damasio, A. (2001). Emotion and the human brain. In *Unity of Knowledge: The Convergence of Natural and Human Science. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 935(1) pp. 101-106.
- MacIntyre, P. D. (2002). Motivation, anxiety, and emotion in second language acquisition. In P. Robinson (Ed.), *Individual differences in second language acquisition* (pp. 45–68). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.
- Murray, G. (2014). *Social dimensions of autonomy in language learning*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan
- O'Leary C. (2014). Developing autonomous language learners in HE: A social constructivist perspective. In G. Murray G. (Ed.), *Social dimensions of autonomy in language learning*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan

- Oxford, R. L. (2013). *Teaching and researching language learning strategies*. New York, NY: Routledge
- Ryan, R., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press
- Salvoes, P., & Mayer J. D., (1990). Emotional intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality*, 9(3) pp. 185-211.
- Valdivia, S., McLoughlin, D., & Mynard, J. (2011). The importance of affective factors in self-access language learning courses. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 2(2), 91-96.
- Yamashita, H. (2015). Affect and the development of learner autonomy through advising. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 6(1), 62–85.