Review article

The application of relational theory towards a deeper understanding of emotional variables in language education☆

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ABSTRACT

At the heart of the relational theory, which stems from psychological studies, is the contention that the human mind is formed within interpersonal relationships. In the present paper, the aim is to show that the same goes for emotions. More importantly, in educational settings, the relationships between and among the individuals especially the teacher-student relationships lead to the emergence of different emotions. The present paper shows how the relational theory can be used in the second language acquisition domain to explain the development of different L2 emotions that learners experience while interactively involved in acquiring a second language in class. What is mostly emphasized in this paper is the teacher-student relationships that occur in L2 classes and accommodate the L2 emotions. The related literature on teacher-student relationships and emotional development in L2 classrooms is reviewed, and insightful remarks are provided for L2 teachers, teacher trainers, learners, and researchers.

1. Introduction

The relational theory is rooted in psychoanalysis and is a reaction to the drive theory which views human behavior as resulting from internal drives [1] that in many cases are in contrast with the realities of social life. The relational theory sees the human mind always faced with interactions between primordial and physical drives and the person's own reactions to them, along with the psychological procedures for guiding and managing them [2]. In this view, the human mind is seen to be formed within a relational context, considering both the self and the other. With this respect, Sullivan [3] contended that the only way to understand how people think and feel is to see their relationships with others. Human personality is neither fixed nor predetermined but is highly affected by relationships with others.

Gergen [4] put forth the relational theory in psychotherapy with human relationships at its core instead of individuals in isolation. In the following years, relational thinking gained popularity in psychoanalysis, until finally in 1983, the Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory was published by Greenberg and Mitchell to introduce human relationships as the fundamental content of the mind and as a filter for human performance. In this model, the instincts and internal drives are not replaced by relationships but grow out of the relationships and not by themselves. Later on, Mitchell [5] introduced the combination *relational matrix* to emphasize the interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships to make the human experience up [5]. In this relational matrix, individuals' thoughts and emotions are positioned in a matrix of relationships with other individuals who try both to stay connected to others and to maintain their own distinctive characteristics among the population [5].

The theoretical line of conceptualizing human relations following from Greenberg and Mitchell's [5] earlier works, Sullivan's [3] work, and others continued with Gergen [6] acknowledging that an individual exists always in a fundamental relational network and that the individual and relational cannot be imagined separated from each other. Even the emotions and characteristics that seem to be internal and idiosyncratic are formed through relational procedures [6].

Research has indicated that positive interactions between teachers and students can improve learners' cognitive and motivational behavior [7–10]. However, to what extent this positive interaction can contribute to the emotional bond of both sides still need to be highlighted. Since a tight link between teachers and students can cater to the educational needs of students, the review of relational studies with an emotional lens can provide language teachers with potential affordances to develop their emotional scaffolding in the ecology of their classroom. Given this point, the purpose of the present study is to review the studies which have focused on the emotional aspect of L2 teacher-student interactions. This review can help L2 teachers, in different career phases, actualize their perception regarding the affective aspects of their interactions with their students so that they can utilize the emotional affordances in the environment of their classroom.

2. Relational theory in education

The relational theory is very closely tied to teaching and learning, and academics concur that these activities should place greater emphasis on the relations that students engage in, rather than on the detached self of the student [6,11]. The relational systems underlying literacy were investigated by Street [12]. This research motivated Barton and Hamilton [13] to explore how adult literacy specifically is embedded and contextualized in relational theories. The significance of building positive and constructive teacher-/student relationships was emphasized in higher education [14] and language learning [15–17]. These researchers contended that improving teacher and learner relationships can lead to better academic outcomes. The effects of relational theories on learning and teaching have also been raised by Trigwell et al. [18] in the field of science in higher education.

In education, applying the relational theory requires a comprehensive inquiry of the teacher-student relationships. Among the many sorts of relationships that humans form in their life, teacher-student relationships are distinctive, influential and unforgettable as they take considerable time and energy from both the teacher and students [19]. The relationships students form in class can not only significantly predict the students' academic achievement [20,21] but can as well influence the teacher due to the fact that establishing positive and constructive relationships helps to develop better feelings at work, especially the sense of job satisfaction [22,23].

Most investigations of the teacher and student interpersonal interactions have been in the school context, and though there is no doubt in the effect and value of these relationships, it is contended that they continue to be effective in future years of people's lives [24]. In this paper, attention is drawn to the development of different affective variables or emotions that can emerge out of these classroom-based relationships. We link them directly to L2 classes.

3. L2 emotions and teacher-learner relationships

As described by Van Manen [25], the relationships between the teacher and students are inherently emotional, yet due to the social parameters prescribed, students typically have inadequate personal information about their teachers, and the same holds true for teachers too. Often, teachers show a specific persona in class, and are selective in what to reveal to students about their personal affairs and what not to reveal; thus, they may have different emotions to reveal [26,27] Therefore, teachers typically show emotions more like actors/actresses than teachers [28,29]. In spite of the natural restrictions of the student and teacher relationships, several assumptions are involved. Students begin to develop a conception of their teacher and begin to behave correspondingly. Because emotions are contagious in class, L2 teachers and students are usually emotionally interacting together, especially through positive emotions [30–32].

In an L2 classroom, the relationships involved are naturally two-sided, for instance, there is research evidence that student behavior predicts teacher well-being and happiness [33]. The mutual interaction between student and teacher emotion and behavioral manifestation has been studied by Hagenauer et al. [34], among school teachers. The results showed that student wholehearted engagement was a predictor of both negative and positive teacher emotions, including anxiety and joy. Concerning adult L2 learning, the existing literature on the student-teacher relationships is still limited in size although there is some research on adolescents and children in different areas. What can be concluded from the scarce body of research is the effect of the student-teacher relationships on proficiency and learning outcomes and the interpersonal nature of the interactions is of more importance to learners than how the teacher teaches the content [35,36]. Awareness was raised of the dynamic nature of teacher-student relationships by Hattie [36] contending that teaching is most influential if the teacher imagines him/herself in the learners' shoes by evaluating and noticing his/her own actions and thoughts, and if students imagine themselves in the teacher's shoes as well and use metacognitive strategies and a kind of reciprocal teaching. Hattie's suggestion of the exchangeable roles of learners and teachers highlights the dynamic and reciprocal quality of the student-teacher relationships.

The existing body of research on the student-teacher relationship in L2 learning conducted so far has led to findings with a common pattern related to the teacher. In their work of research, Gkonou and Mercer [37] held class interviews and observations of a number of English language teachers in various multicultural settings that had taken part in a more comprehensive study supported by the British Council [37]. In this study, the instructors all realized the significance of positive relations established with language learners and realized the significance of instructor empathy. These researchers found that besides teacher's emotional intelligence, the social intelligence as well, which is related to the constructive development of interpersonal affairs, significantly influenced student-teacher relationships.

4. Relational theory and L2 emotions

Social context has been perceived as effective in L2 learners' emotions [35,38,39], emphasizing the significant role that both the instructor [24,40] and the students' social milieu play in general, which includes the influential others [41]. The relevance of relational psychology is that it contends human beings are inevitably influencing and influenced by the relationships; in other words, the psyche is formed by these relationships as the major drive for emotions [42].

As relational theory reckons, identity, attitude, emotions, and behaviors can necessarily be interpreted in the relatedness milieu [42]. In educational context, Gill and Gergen [43] reckon that relational procedures are essential. Gill and Gergen [43] suggested that the classroom should be seen as a context of making relations and not just as a place for learning the subject matter. In the class, the students learn to take part in the relational experiences of the world and at the same time valuing the experience of relating on its own [44].

When we consider L2 acquisition as an experience embedded inside a relational matrix [5], we can also think of the student-teacher relationship at its core. The present paper recommends the need for moving toward a relationally-based interpretation of L2 learning emotions, where learning is seen to happen in a relational matrix marked by the student-teacher relationships at the center. Though Gergen [6] viewed education as the main constituent element of the relationships, the present paper, influenced by the relational theory, views student-teacher relationships as the constituent elements of L2 learning emotions. For instance, Lamb [29] maintained that L2 teachers are capable of eliciting different positive emotions from students including motivation through effective classroom-based interactions.

In spite of the two-sided quality of the teacher and student relationships, teachers are typically the side in more managing of the emotional climate of the class. There is research evidence that, for example, teachers can affect foreign language enjoyment directly [45] by promoting learning, conveying a sense of relaxation to language learners and increasing their receptiveness to the learning of new subjects [46], or improving their attention [47]. If the instructor and learner relationships are positive and constructive, the instructor's role can be conceived of as a partner or facilitator, since once the instructor is not the expert anymore, and is perceived as a learning partner, constructive relationships and feelings emerge [44].

The present paper contends that the relationships between the teacher and students can be a major drive for the emotions involved in L2 learning. Viewed this way, the main unit of investigation should not be the individual as an isolated unit the desires of whom might contrast with the reality out there. Rather, the individual should be seen as struggling within a network of interactions to communicate with others and express themselves [5].

5. Relational theory and L2 learning

Any kind of learning occurs where learners are engaged in relationships, which justifies the reliance on the relational theory [19]. Therefore, learner interest, enthusiasm and curiosity for learning emerge out of these relationships [10,43]. In the second language acquisition (SLA) domain, there is a rapidly growing and established body of research about the significance of teacher and student relationships in L2 learners' affects [10,48]. For instance, concerning L2 learner anxiety in class, language learners' relative position among peers can strongly predict better learning outcomes, and concerning foreign language enjoyment, teacher behavior and characteristics have a strong predictive power of academic achievement [45], which points to the significance of the relations in L2 classes in language learners' emotions as well as the relational network in L2 acquisition.

A study of 40 L2 learners was conducted by Dewaele and Dewaele [49]. These students had two different teachers, showing that differences in foreign language enjoyment are significantly related to the teacher of class. Dewaele and MacIntyre [50] conducted a mixed-methods investigation of enjoyment and anxiety, and examined the data from 750 L2 learners from different countries, and found that the teacher-student relationship is more effective in L2 enjoyment, but the effect of student-student relations is effective in anxiety, too. Same reports of instructor's effect on L2 enjoyment have supported from other different cultural settings too, for example, in Kazakh Turkish language learners [51] as well as Chinese English language students [52–54].

Due to the domineering authority of the instructor to affect language learners' emotions, logically it can be expected that the teacher and student relationships influence language learners' emotions, motivation and language learning [55]. Overall, teachers and students have indicated to be emotionally connected with each other [56]. Moreover, positive affects showed to be conveyed from the teacher to L2 learners. Moskowitz and Dewaele [2] observed that L2 learners who feel their instructors are more joyful also reported a better attitude towards L2 learning as well as a higher motivation level. Dewaele and MacIntyre [50] observed that more joyful instructors made the class climate more enjoyable and, consequently, more motivating to L2 learners. Happier and more easy-going L2 educators showed to give their language learners a welcoming endorsement for risk-taking by eliciting students' positive feelings and playfulness in classroom [57]. Whereas positive emotions including enjoyment can be motivating to language learners, Resnik and Dewaele [58] maintained that medium strengths of anxiety are not always an inevitable barrier to learning. It can increase the heart beats, can also sharpen students' senses, and allow for a better focus on a given task, which may not be as sharp otherwise (i.e., when being too cautious).

Resnik and Dewaele [58] also found that anxiety in language learning can be attributed to different variables including the psychological and classroom-specific factors. These researchers found that language learners' attitude to their teacher was a significant predictor of L2 enjoyment, and L2 anxiety was most significantly predicted by emotional stability as a personality trait. This can be strongly linked to relational factors, including the fear of being negatively judged by other learners and instructors and the fear of losing face amongst peers [59] which shows that even the positive impacts of low levels of anxiety as suggested by Resnik and Dewaele [58] can be viewed from a relational theoretical lens. As seen in relational psychology, human affairs are key to making sense of the

reason why we behave like this and what forms our emotions and motivation for learning. It is noteworthy that relational theory perceives the significance of relations both in reality and in imagination within individuals' minds [6]. We should admit that the relationships between the teacher and students in L2 learning are positioned in a broader setting, and might not often be experienced or realized mutually. Even adult students might negotiate themselves in their teacher's mind, and students can search for positive feedback or appreciation from their teachers in an attempt to attain self-acceptance. Nevertheless, in the L2 learning context, the relationships between the teacher and students is key to the formation of learner motivation, and learners pay attention to their teacher and value his/her emotions as it forms the basis of that relationship [19].

6. Conclusion

From the perspective of the relational theory, the student-teacher interaction in the classroom environment of can have the potential of contributing to the emotional bond of the teachers and their students. The application of the relational theory in the SLA domain has been justified in this paper because it contends that L2 learners' emotions are formed within the interpersonal relations that occur in the classroom. Some of these emotions have been already studied, especially aiming to prove emotion contagion in L2 classes. Yet, many are left under-researched, such as L2 boredom, compassion, grit and so on. In the present paper, a body of research was reviewed on the significance of teacher student relationships in education in general and in the language learning domain in particular. How these classroom-based relationships can lead to the L2 emotions was elaborated on in the light of the existing literature. The relational theory can, thus, be quite relevant in the SLA domain, especially in recent years when SLA research has shown a growing interest in positive psychology [60] as well as the dynamic systems theory. These two influential domains together with the relational theory can hold promises for more productive further investigations of the potential effects of teacher student relationships in L2 classes.

As already stated, an L2 class should be viewed as more than a context just for language learning. Rather, it needs to be seen as a context hosting a complex network of relationships out of which L2 emotions emerge. Teachers have been recommended to create a climate ripe for developing positive emotions (e.g. more enjoyment, more willingness to communicate, higher motivation) and lowering negative emotions (e.g., boredom, anxiety, stress). These effects can be developed through effective and constructive teacher-student relationships in class in different interactive tasks and activities. As already reviewed, there has been research evidence for the fact that enriching positive emotions in language learning is followed by better language learning outcomes. Thus, it is expected that L2 teachers and teacher educators be mindful of the growable nature of emotions in the class-based language learning process and the active role that the teacher can play in this process. Belief in the relational theory and how it can relate to L2 emotions broaden teachers' horizons to the capability of L2 class relationships forming students' mind, emotions and behavior. Probably better language learning outcomes can follow as well.

7. Pedagogical implications

The L2 teacher training courses need to be enriched with the content and relevance of the relational theory in SLA practice. Pre-service teachers need to be made aware of the active role they can play beyond the mere enhancement of L2 learners' language proficiency level. They should be made aware that they can establish constructive relationships in class with students to increase their engagement and to form positive emotions in students, motivating them, increasing their willingness to communicate, increasing their playfulness, grit and other positive emotions. Effective interpersonal relationships in class can help to reduce initial states of negative emotions, such as boredom, anxiety and stress. In-service teachers can also learn about the relational theory in their professional development courses, and better know the value of the relationships they form in class out of which learner emotions emerge.

In the light of the relational theory, L2 teachers, teacher educators and students come to believe that individuals cannot be imagined outside interpersonal relationships. Thus, in an L2 class, no learning, no personality development, no identity formation and no emotions can be formed in isolation. If language teachers are willing to help students learn the second/foreign language, they can make the best use of interactive tasks and activities in class to create a state of emotional readiness in students to acquire the language. The relational theory is also compatible with the complexity and dynamic systems theory which has gained popularity in recent years in SLA research. The latter views language learning a complex phenomenon marked by the dynamic and emergent nature of many different emotions. Thus, it can be concluded that a combination of the relational theory, dynamic system theory and positive psychology, all influencing the SLA research in recent years can significantly contribute to the quality of emotion development and language learning in the L2 learning contexts.

8. Suggestions for further research

Though inspired by the relational theory, a number of L2 emotions have been investigated in L2 classroom learning, many others are still under-researched. They might have been investigated more in other domains than SLA research (e.g., grit), or might be brand new to the SLA domain and, thus, require a domain-specific definition before further research (e.g., compassion). Moreover, it is noteworthy that most of the reviewed works of research have addressed L2 *learner* emotions, and significantly fewer studies have investigated L2 *teacher* emotions formed in the interpersonal relationships in classroom learning. Thus, the latter requires significantly more research.

Another relevant topic worth further investigation is the student-student relationships in L2 classes and how they can lead to the emergence of certain emotions in language learners. The existing literature has dealt more with teacher-student relationships.

Exploring classroom-based relationships with peers can be interesting and fruitful too. Still another issue to raise is that we need more longitudinal research to investigate the dynamic nature of L2 emotion progress and their parallel processes in an entire term in interpersonal relationships emerged in the language class. Fluctuations are not considered to happen out of the blue and in a short time. The specifics of the interactions between the instructor and the students, particularly during communicative tasks, must be carefully observed to understand how they may influence the development of certain emotions, personality characteristics, attitudes, and so forth. Certain creative research methods that are consistent with the dynamic paradigm in SLA are required for such longitudinal investigations, which may be qualitative, quantitative, or both. It is advised that researchers interested in these novel methods read Hiver and Al-Hoorie [61].

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All authors listed have significantly contributed to the development and the writing of this article.

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No data was used for the research described in the article.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper

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