How do classmates’ emotions affect students’ own emotions when learning a foreign language?

What this research was about and why it is important
Language learning often induces diverse emotions that can have both positive and negative effects on students’ learning and performance. Given that students spend most of their time with their classmates when learning other languages, it is important to understand how the emotions expressed by those classmates influence students’ own emotions during these teaching sessions. The findings of this research may help language teachers to design pedagogical interventions targeting their students’ emotions. The study examined two ways in which classmates’ perceived enjoyment, anxiety and boredom could potentially influence students’ own corresponding emotions towards learning in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms, based on theories of social appraisal (using other people’s emotions as information about the meaning of what is happening) and emotion contagion. The researchers found that classmates’ perceived enjoyment, anxiety and boredom were positively associated with students’ corresponding emotions for language learning at both individual and classroom levels (emotion contagion). They also found that the effects of classmates’ emotions on students’ own emotions depended on students’ control and value appraisals at the individual level and that two of these mediated relations also applied at the classroom level. These findings suggest that social appraisal can explain some but not all of the interpersonal influences found in this study.

What the researchers did
- They recruited 3,643 students with a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds and a vocabulary list of 1,500 to 2,000 in 103 seventh to ninth grade EFL classrooms from six middle schools in China.
- They developed a self-report measure of classmates’ perceived emotion, adapted scales of control-value appraisals and achievement emotions, and pilot-tested all scales on 104 students.
- They asked 3,643 students to complete a questionnaire containing these measures of appraisal and own and classmates’ emotions.

What the researchers found
- Students’ perceptions of classmates’ enjoyment, anxiety and boredom were positively associated with their own corresponding enjoyment, anxiety and boredom at both individual and classroom levels.
- At the individual level, control and value appraisals positively mediated the relationship between perceived classmates’ emotions and students’ corresponding emotions. At the class level, however, control appraisal only negatively mediated effects of perceived classmates’ anxiety on student anxiety while value appraisal only negatively mediated effects of perceived classmates’ boredom on student boredom.

Things to consider
- This study demonstrated that classmates’ positive emotions can potentially improve students’ own appraisals and emotions at both individual and classroom levels. This suggests that interventions might profitably target the emotional climate of the whole class, and thereby improve the learning of individual students within each FL classroom.
- This study showed that appraisals of control and value may have differential impacts on students’ FL emotions at the individual level and the class level. This indicates that while teachers should find ways to boost students’ personal control and intrinsic value for language learning, they may de-emphasize the competitiveness and attainment value of high-stake exams in language classes in order to foster a positive foreign language experience for students.

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