

Emotions experienced by FL learners in a post-COVID classroom

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Abstract

The process of returning to face-to-face education was not easy and more often than not accompanied by mixed feelings, from joy to fear and uncertainty (Witkowski et.al. 2021). The aim of this paper was to examine students' emotions associated with FL learning in a post-COVID classroom. The sample in question constituted 103 secondary school students from the Silesian Voivodship in Poland, who had spent almost three semesters at home on distance learning, and, at the time of completing the questionnaire in September 2022, were entering the first school year of study without any COVID-19 restrictions. The emotions studied were related to the classroom environment, namely, the lesson organization, teaching materials, the person of the teacher and peers, to name a few. The findings show that a large majority are in favour of face-to-face learning and appreciate a direct language contact that is available in a real classroom setting. The data collected allowed for formulating suggestions on how to improve the post-COVID classroom learning to meet students' expectations and deal with habits transferred from remote education.

Keywords

emotions, FL learning, FL learners and teachers, post-COVID classroom

Emocje doświadczane przez osoby uczące się języka obcego w klasie postcovidowej

Abstrakt

Powrót do nauki stacjonarnej był procesem trudnym i nierzadko towarzyszyły mu mieszane uczucia, od radości po strach i niepewność (Witkowski i in., 2021). Celem niniejszego artykułu było zbadanie emocji uczniów w stosunku do nauki języka angielskiego w klasie szkolnej po okresie pandemii. Badania objęły grupę 103 uczniów szkół ponadpodstawowych z województwa śląskiego w Polsce, którzy prawie trzy semestry spędzili w domu uczestnicząc w nauce zdalnej, a w momencie wypełniania ankiety, we wrześniu 2022r., rozpoczęli pierwszy rok szkolny bez jakichkolwiek ograniczeń związanych z COVID-19. Badane emocje dotyczyły środowiska klasy szkolnej, począwszy od sposobu organizacji lekcji i materiałów dydaktycznych po osobę nauczyciela i relacje między rówieśnikami w danym oddziale edukacyjnym. Wyniki pokazują, że zdecydowana większość ankietowanych opowiada się za nauką stacjonarną i ceni sobie bezpośredni kontakt z językiem, który jest możliwy tylko i wyłącznie podczas zajęć kontaktowych. Zgromadzone dane pozwoliły na sformułowanie wskazówek dotyczących poprawy warunków do nauki w klasie postcovidowej, aby sprostać oczekiwaniom uczniów i poradzić sobie z nawykami przeniesionymi do sali lekcyjnej ze środowiska nauki zdalnej.

Słowa kluczowe

emocje, nauka języka obcego, uczniowie i nauczyciele, klasa postcovidowa

1. Introduction to emotions

In trying to find a consensus on the definition of emotion, (Kleinginna and Kleinginna 1981) stated that emotion should say something about the way we feel when we are emotional; mention the physiological, or bodily, basis of emotional feelings; include the effects of emotion on perception, thinking, and

behaviour; point out the driving or motivational properties of certain emotions such as fear and anger; and refer to the ways in which emotions are expressed in language, facial expressions, and gestures. Following Op 't Eynde and Turner (2007), emotions have at least three characteristics:

1. An emotion is an affective reaction which can be determined and described relatively precisely (for example, enjoyment, anger, pride, sadness); and can be attributed to a cause or an incident, (for example a student's enjoyment in learning or a teacher's anger about students' misbehaviour).
2. The experience of an emotion is related to situations which are of importance for an individual. If a situation, an event, or a context is significant for us or if we are touched by something, emotions are likely to be evoked. Learners will experience joy, frustration, anxiety, pride, or satisfaction if the learning topic or the learning process is relevant to them.
3. As soon as an emotion is experienced, it becomes the centre of the awareness of a person, also leading to an increased self-awareness.

2. Emotion characteristics

Emotions can be described by means of eight indicators (Pekrun 1992, Hascher 2007):

- (1) the valence of an emotion,
- (2) the arousal level,
- (3) its intensity,
- (4) duration,
- (5) the frequency of its occurrence,
- (6) the time dimension,
- (7) the point of reference,
- (8) and finally, the context of an emotion.

How emotions go together from a psychological point of view has been interestingly pictured in the circular model of affect by Yik (in Szorc 2012).

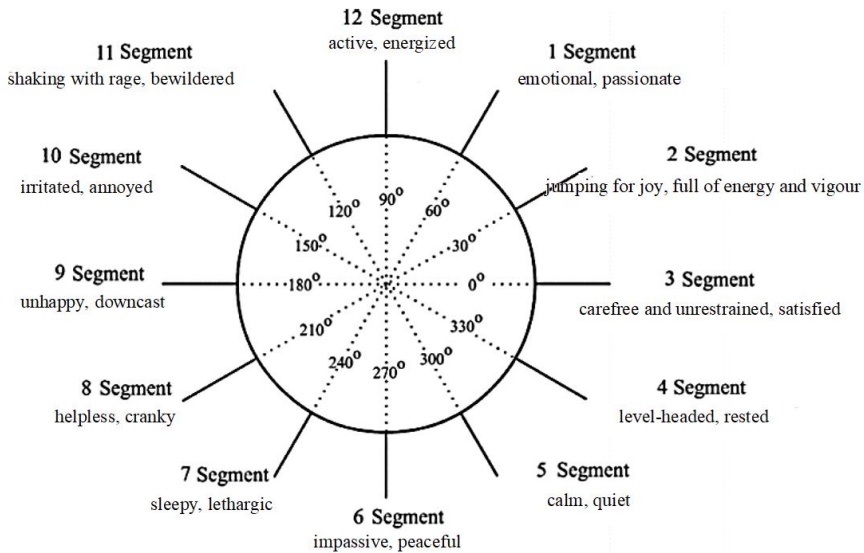


Figure 1

Yik's circular model of affect (adapted from Szorc 2012)

Based on Szorc (2012), the model places emotions in such a way that the closer they are to each other, the stronger the relationship between them. Emotions at opposite ends of the circle are opposite to each other. More specifically, the circle consists of twelve segments, each of them placed on a clock face, with the following parameters: 3 – pleasure, 9 – dissatisfaction, 12 – activation, 6 – deactivation. On the basis of this circular affect, emotional states can be classified according to two basic parameters:

- the extent of emotion, i.e. the level of activation of emotions (deactivation or activation),

- the hedonic tone of the emotions, i.e. the valence of the emotion (positive or negative).

For learners, Arnold's (2009: 146) emotions include feelings about themselves, the classroom environment, about their teachers, about other students, about using English in class, about the teachers' command of English, about the instructional methods, and about the teaching resources the teacher makes use of, such as textbooks or the Internet.

2.1. Emotion types

Positive emotions “serve to enhance the ability to be aware of and notice things in the environment and in the case of language learning, enhancing awareness of language input”. Other researchers (e.g. Dewaele et al. 2017, Fredrickson and Losada 2005) argue that positive emotions encourage curiosity, risk-taking, experimenting, willingness to interact and communicate in the new language, and support autonomous learning. They can motivate learners when they lead to feelings of success and achievement and enhance the learner's sense of self-esteem, encouraging them to invest further in learning and to make use of the range of learning opportunities available through the media or the Internet or through opportunities to use their English out of class. For a language learner, positive emotions serve to enhance the ability to be aware of and notice things in the environment and in the case of language learning, enhancing awareness of language input. Generally speaking, lower dropout rates, higher attendance records, increased engagement, deep rather than surface learning, and improved grades have been reported in education to be the result of positive classroom climate. Negative emotions, on the other hand, can demotivate learners due to a sense of frustration and disappointment when learners fail to achieve their goals, losing confidence in their ability to succeed and discouraging them from investing further time and energy in language learning.

2.2. Emotions in the lockdown

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the students were caught up in a carousel of emotions, both positive and negative ones. What prevailed among negative emotions was anxiety about the possibility of catching COVID-19 while traveling between home and school or at the school itself, and, more specifically, the feeling of uneasiness thinking that the teacher or fellow students might see their home settings or hear the voices in their homes (Kaisar and Chowdhury, 2020). Also, being anxious was a reaction to the fear of being disconnected during online classes, being recorded during the activity, as well as losing control and concentration. Students' anger and/or frustration were found due to not being able to hear or take the entire class because of the failures of the Internet connection. In some cases, the students responded with annoyance to time-management problems, both the in-class ones like multitasking and fast pace of work caused by the teacher's lack of organization, and through their own thought such as getting a late start. Yet another concern was voiced by students because of not being able to understand teacher's instructions and explanations or express what they wanted to say. Another negative emotion the students experienced was boredom during online classes due to the technical problems related to the lack of a fast Internet connection, as well as repetitiveness, monotony and predictability of what happened throughout a whole lesson or a specific class. Last but not least, students were dissatisfied with loads of time spent at the computer and its consequences, such as mental fatigue or exhaustion (Długosz and Liszka 2021).

2.3. Emotions after the lockdown

From the studies conducted in the second half of May 2021, in line with the school opening, we learn that students return to regular schooling full of fear, stressed and often discouraged. There is no statistical difference between primary and secondary

school students when it comes to assessing direct contact with the teacher and with peers in a real classroom environment (Witkowski et.al. 2021). Most responses included:

- fear of being laughed at by their peers,
- fear of being negatively evaluated by teachers,
- fear of being embarrassed,
- concern that others in the class may be more proficient,
- hesitation to perform in front of peers,
- frustration by lack of vocabulary and grammar.

About 30% of young people have positive feelings about coming back to full-time off-site education. They feel joy, happiness and curiosity. To be more specific, the emotions gathered were connected with the following:

- direct contact with teachers and colleagues,
- learning in classrooms instead of in front of the computer,
- leaving house,
- the possibility of using sports equipment and school fields,
- participating in extra-circular activities, such as interest clubs,
- implementation of school projects,
- reducing the amount of work from home,
- using English in a classroom rather than on-line in a chat room,
- performing activities in front of the class,
- taking part in a group based activity rather than individual ones,
- receiving immediate feedback from the teacher or other learners.

Significant differences appear in the assessment of the importance of learning in classrooms. Such a need is more often indicated by primary school students. What has been evaluated positively by secondary schoolers involved the opportunities to leave the house and spend time with classmates during school breaks and after lessons. Differences in these indications may

partly explain a more positive attitude of younger students towards returning to school (Witkowski et al. 2021).

3. The current study

The aim of the current study was to investigate emotions accompanying learners in the process of getting accustomed to the “new situation” of stationary learning after the COVID-19 lockdown in secondary schools in Poland. The exact time of the study encompassed September 2022, being the beginning of the first school year without any COVID-19 restrictions since March 2020. As compared with lower-level education (pre-schooling and primary schooling) this level of education was marked by a much longer time of distance instruction, divided into four time spans. The very time-length constituted the first period of school closure from March 25, 2020 to June 28, 2020 (announced by the Ordinance of the Ministry of Education of 20 March 2020), the second phase of closing from 26 October 2020 to 30 May 2021, (announced by the Ministry of Education of 16 October 2020), and the third distance education period initiated on 20 December 2021 to 9 January 2022 (implemented by the Ministry of Education of 16 December) and the fourth one from 27 January 2022 to 27 February 2022 (implemented by the Ministry of Education of 26 January 2020).

The research questions referred to the type of (positive/negative) emotions that students associate with the post-pandemic school in general, the factors that generate most positive and most negative emotions, as well as the scope of school or classroom changes the sample would recommend, and, finally, the mode of education (online/offline) they favour after all.

3.1. The participants

The learners who participated in the study represented 103 secondary school attendees (83 females and 17 males) from the Silesian Voivodeship in Poland, including the cities of Będzin,

Bytom, Chorzów, Katowice, Sosnowiec and Tarnowskie Góry. The sample in question constituted third grade students who had spent almost three semesters at home on distance learning. At the time of completing the questionnaires in September 2022, they were entering the first school year of study without any COVID-19 restrictions. The emotions taken into consideration were limited to the context of an English lesson. Each of the research participants declared having 5 hours of English weekly.

3.2. The tool

The tool consisted of a questionnaire which, apart from the background information section, included the main part devoted to an attempt to name students' emotions corresponding to the situation of a stationary re-learning. The measurement consisted of the questionnaire in the shape of a table with six sections to go through. In each, the learners were requested to identify emotions they had towards the classroom environment, the lesson itself, lesson materials, and participants (the person of the teacher, the peers and the learners themselves), in line with Yik's circular model of affect. In addition to that, the informants were asked to indicate one most negative and most positive emotional reaction from those provided, and briefly justify their choice. Below the close-ended questions there was a list of more open questions concerned with learners' suggestions for the present-time (post-pandemic) schooling related to learning English, and their attitude towards online learning in general.

Table 1

The main part of the questionnaire used in the study

CATEGORY	COMPO- NENT	NEGATIVE EMOTIONS						POSITIVE EMOTIONS						
		U ¹	H	L	F	A	I	S	FE	P	C	LH	AT	
Classroom environment	Seating arrange- ment													
	Equip- ment													
	Code of conduct													
	Climate													
The lesson	Topics													
	Evalua- tion													
	Home- work													
Materials	Textbook													
	Teacher- made													
	Listening													
	Reading													
	Speaking													
	Writing													
	Vocabu- lary													
	Grammar													
Phonology														
The teacher	Use of English													
	Time manage- ment													

¹ U = Unhappy, H = Helpless, L = Lethargic, F = Furious, A = Annoyed, I = Impassive, S=Satisfied, FE = Full of Energy, P = Passionate, C = Calm, LH = Level-Headed, AT = Active.

3.3. Data presentation and discussion

3.3.1. Classroom environment

As shown in Table 2, the classroom environment evoked more positive than negative feelings among the sample.

Table 2
Classroom environment

COMPONENT	U	H	L	F	A	I	S	FE	P	C	LH	AT
Seating arrangement	47						50			10		
Equipment		41		2			50			10		
Code of conduct	52						51					
Climate	47						50			10		

The seating arrangement, to start with, appears to be a fairly satisfying class component, referred to as such by almost half of the learners. Nearly one tenth of the examined reacted to the current classroom seating with a feeling of calmness. A little less than half of the learners admitted being unhappy about the status quo. When it comes to the class equipment, the situation was very similar because as many as 50 participants felt satisfied with its quality, and 10 learners did not worry about it. Negative feelings expressed by the sample involved helplessness and fury voiced by 41 and 3 learners respectively. As far as the thought of the code of conduct is concerned, students expressed half positive and negative thoughts (being satisfied vs being unhappy about it). Finally, the classroom climate matched the results of the above-mentioned seating arrangement. When asked about the most unfavourable component of the classroom interior, the respondents mentioned the code of conduct most of all. They expect a lot of changes to be done here, starting from using language applications on a daily basis.

3.3.2. The lesson

The lesson itself gave rise to the superiority of negative emotions over positive ones.

Table 3
The lesson

COMPONENT	U	H	L	F	A	I	S	FE	P	C	LH	AT
Topics	40	40					21			2		
Evaluation	61	2					40					
Homework					70		21			12		

This was most noticeable with lesson topics about which 80 respondents were negative (40 voices of unhappiness and 40 of the feeling of helplessness in the teacher's choice of issues to be covered). Positive voices being in the minority corresponded to the feeling of being satisfied with a list of topics (21 learners) and the peace of mind that choosing certain issues brought for 3 respondents. Feelings of unhappiness and helplessness in the number of 61 and 2 successively occurred among the sample regarding evaluation. Those satisfied with the grading system constituted slightly less than half of the questioned learners. The homework assignment made 70 people feel annoyed while 21 and 12 showed contentment and calmness respectively. The biggest loads of bad emotions occurred at the thought of homework. The learners argued their annoyance with cheating and downloading everything from the Internet, the imitative nature of the tasks and discouraging deadlines.

3.3.3. Materials

In the case of class materials it was the textbook that left much to be desired.

Table 4
The materials

COMPONENT	U	H	L	F	A	I	S	FE	P	C	LH	AT
Textbook	14	30		5	14		40					
Teacher-made	1						30		72			
Listening	50						50					3
Reading	50						50					3
Speaking	50						50					3
Writing	50						50					3
Vocabulary	50						50					3
Grammar	50						50					3
Phonology	50						50					3

Grading their negative emotions, the learners most often felt helpless (30 of them), 14 people showed a lack of satisfaction and annoyance whereas 5 participants were furious about the coursebook contents. A completely different picture of the situation emerged with teacher self-made materials. Here, almost three quarters of the sample were passionate about their teachers' extra materials while another 30 learners were happy whenever they were supposed to work on them. Only one person expressed a negative opinion that translated into being unhappy. The situation of half-satisfaction and half-dissatisfaction was observed as regards language skills practised during English classes. Apart from listening, tasks related to reading, speaking and writing were approached by learners with energy. The same full of energy reaction was expressed by the sample responding to the language subsystems. Extreme emotions, as mentioned above, appeared in relation to supplementary materials. The respondents would like to change the frequency of using the textbook in favour of other more interesting files, as well as updating more old-fashioned materials.

3.3.4. The teacher

The person of the teacher evoked positive emotions in the majority of the examined learners.

Table 5
The teacher

COMPONENT	U	H	L	F	A	I	S	FE	P	C	LH	AT
Use of English	3						50			50		
Time management		19		19			50			50		
Conduct management	3						50			50		
Problem solving	60						35			8		
Interaction with students							75	25				3
Feedback							81					22

As far as the teacher's command of English is concerned, almost all learners responded positively (50 of them expressed satisfaction and another 50 voiced calmness), having an advantage over 3 people who claimed being unhappy about it. Time management, maybe not to such an extent, but still generated positive feelings among the sample. 19 learners felt helpless about it and the same number of subjects reacted with fury. Conduct management, on the other hand, was appreciated by most of the respondents except for 3 people who were unhappy about it. Unfortunately, the issue of problem solving seemed to be responsible for an increase in bad emotions. Most learners felt unhappy and a handful were helpless in this matter. Only one third of the participants evaluated the teacher's ways of solving in-class problems in a positive way. What gained best results, though, was the teacher's interaction with students, where all learners declared having good emotions being divided into three

quarters of those who were satisfied, almost one quarter of students who come with energy to school because of that, and finally 3 people who are motivated to take part in each English class actively. Almost the same was true of the feedback given to the students. Two thirds of the sample were satisfied with the teacher's guidance and the remaining number of people were more active during English lessons. All in all, most negative feelings appeared with classroom problems and the teacher's ineptitude while dealing with behaviour issues.

3.3.5. Peer students

When asked about their attitudes towards classmates, none of the students responded. Positive reactions were noticed next to the interpersonal communication. Almost half of the respondents expressed satisfaction and the other half emphasized the increased on-task activity. Both admitted spending their breaks actively playing chess, table tennis or mini table football. 3 persons said that they cannot wait for the lesson breaks.

Table 6
Peer students

COMPONENT	U	H	L	F	A	I	S	FE	P	C	LH	AT
Attitude												
Communication							50	3				50
Cooperation							50	3				50
Support							50	3				50
Proficiency in English												

The cooperation and support they receive from their classmates caused the same exact positive reactions. The last category, that is English proficiency, was in fact left unanswered. Instead of the emotion chosen, the learners left a note that it was difficult for them to judge.

3.3.6. Students themselves

The students in their self-assessment were more decisive and performed slightly better as compared to previous classmate evaluation.

Table 7
Students themselves

COMPONENT	U	H	L	F	A	I	S	F E	P	C	L H	A T
Perceived English proficiency	6 5	1 5					2 0					
Relative standing among peers	6 5	1 5					2 0					
Preparation for classes	3 0						6 5	8				
Attitude towards the teacher					1 3			15				75
Attitude towards peers					1 0	1 0		3	8 0			

The majority of the examined seemed dissatisfied with their command of English (65 people altogether). 15 learners even showed helplessness about it and just as many as 20 students seemed happy about their English. The same was true with learners' position among peers. What they perceived more positively was the person of the teacher. 75 of the subjects were active during English classes, 15 learners admitted that they were bursting with energy in the classroom being motivated by the teacher, and just 13 students felt furious about the teacher. This emotion of fury was recognized among one tenth of the respondents, equaling the number of people being indifferent

(impassive). Most of the respondents (80) reacted with great energy to meeting their peers at school. Another 3 people felt satisfaction at the thought of meeting their peers. Negative emotions were divided between those angry about it (10 people) and indifferent towards their classmates (another 10 people). All things considered, most positive feelings were brought by peer presence and direct contact.

3.3.7. Online vs offline mode of learning

As regards modes of learning, the majority (nearly 90) of the learners in question would like to remain permanently in the off-site form of education, though under multiple conditions. First, they would introduce some of their “online habits” into the teacher’s classroom practicum. These include:

1. Speaking exercises should be performed in front of the screen within chatrooms to lower language barriers and inhibitions.
2. Homework assignments should be sent to teacher’s via e-mails, as it was previously the case during the COVID-19 lockdown, to save time for discussions and feedback during lessons.

Secondly, the teacher should implement a greater selectivity of materials to reduce the number of boring exercises, such as reading and listening textbook activities, worked on during a single lesson.

Those students against a traditional English lesson, on the other hand, complained about the predictability of lessons that often translated into discouragement and boredom among them.

4. Conclusions

As seen from the results of the study, the learners under investigation are very much into offline studying. Their emotions differ as to the classroom environment component and participant, and can be named in line with the Yik's circular model of affect. The classroom-related surroundings have been assessed in a two-fold way, reflecting students' satisfaction and dissatisfaction. What learners criticize largely includes the code of conduct rules, voice their objections, probably due to the homeschooling habits, such as laziness and poorer engagement into the lesson. When it comes to the lesson organization, it gave rise to feelings of satisfaction and unhappiness, the latter being mostly related to homework assignment. Also, the issue of home study was a cause of annoyance among the sample. The immediate reason for the very situation might be little homework assigned or having more time for completing it. In the materials section, students were notorious for criticizing coursebook and expressing unhappiness. Their expectations concerned teacher's greater care while choosing task types. The teacher as such evoked a multitude of emotions, most visible being feelings of unhappiness as far as dealing with classroom problems was concerned, and satisfaction with receiving teacher's feedback. The former situation could be accounted for a completely different (easier?) classroom management at the time of the pandemic, the latter being the reason why learners were so willing to participate in English classes. Peer students gathered only positive emotions divided between the feeling of being satisfied with communication, collaboration and support, as well as being active in school life, concerning both lessons and break time. The students themselves were very negative in their self-evaluation of English proficiency and position among peers presumably because of their low self-esteem and the like. They reacted with energy and passion at the thought of teamwork and peer integration at school. All the emotions displayed hereby correspond with learners' reactions to traditional learning. Their optimism about

future offline studying has taken over minor unfavourable opinions on real classrooms. The activities that do not match their English proficiency level, their repetitive character, as well as teacher routines and predictability of proposed forms of work have their justification in the literature (cf. Kruk and Zawodniak 2017). It is very often the case that students face boredom related to the lesson monotony, however, this tedious repetition is also or above all the characteristic of online learning (Kruk 2020).

5. Further studies

One of the directions of the future research might be around students' emotions relative to time. It would be of interest to check the attractiveness of traditional learning among the youth in the future. Another option is to compare the outcomes of this study based on secondary schoolers with different groups of students, such as young learners and adult language users. Last but not least, an interesting line of inquiry would concern teachers, particularly, teacher emotions and teacher awareness of students' feelings expressed as a result of the post-Covid classroom learning.

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