

Emotional Intelligence and Language Learning

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Abstract

My paper briefs on the results of a research that explores possible ways of applying the emotional intelligence theory in the Language and Literature class with students in secondary education. My aims are to improve their language acquisition and to support the development of some components of their emotional intelligence such as to be aware of their own emotions, to express feelings by means of verbal language or other symbolic codes and, last but not least, to display empathy.

Firstly I shall highlight the main issues of the emotional intelligence theory that I selected as a theoretical background for the research. Secondly I shall analyze some of the traditional views that are still at work in the current teaching practice as far as the management of emotions is concerned. For instance, emotions are avoided in the class; students are not invited to express them. Emotions are perceived as a sign of weakness and most teachers would rather choose a canon-based approach to the literary texts instead of a student-centered discussion that start from their emotions in contact with a work of art. Thirdly I shall present some of the activities that I designed and applied and which put the Language and Literature curricular provision in a new empathy-based perspective.

In order to measure the students' progress I use questionnaires and self-assessment sheets. The outcomes testify for the benefits of the approach. In the concluding part of my paper I shall quote some of the students' remarks as recorded in their sheets, show some of their artifacts and interpret their level of text understanding and the depth of their emotional representation. Key words: emotional intelligence theory, language and literature teaching and learning, student-centered approach, empathy.

1. Introduction

In the Romanian education system, the teaching-learning process often ignores the emotional dimension of the students' personality. The present curricular perspective places the student at the center of teaching, by explicit focus on communication competences as well as on values and attitudes; nevertheless, mainly in the current classroom practice there is little concern for what Daniel Goleman calls *emotional intelligence* [2]. In his book, by the same title, he states that emotional literacy is as crucial as the learning of reading, writing and numeracy and he even discusses the possibility of a special school subject that should be included in the curriculum of any country in order to promote the teaching of such an important issue.

Our paper is based on the observation of the actual language and literature teaching. Starting from this grassroots classroom practice experience, we intend to draw a warning about the emotion-deprived pattern of teaching which actually develops a barrier between the student reader and the text. We also list a number of activities that can be conducted in the language and literature classes which allow - and moreover encourage - the children to emotionally relate and react to what they read. We do not consider these activities as recipes of good practice, but mere proof that new theories of learning can be successfully transferred into practice.

There is a bulk of information about emotional intelligence, multiple intelligences, critical thinking, that are circulated via the internet or by the more traditional means of the in-service teacher training. Teachers read, speak and even write reports about these theories. Unfortunately they remain just theory. The actual practice prefers to reproduce the hard-line subject-based way of implementing the curriculum: to cover the subject matter is more important than to build knowledge and promote values. If they do not accept the role of the emotional reality, teachers cannot get to have quality relationships with their students, nor can they teach for *deep understanding*, to use one of Howard Gardner's phrases [3]. If such relationships are fostered, then teachers can facilitate the learning of the most difficult concepts as well as of the desired values and attitudes.

2. Theoretical framework

Our work has been inspired by two theories that produced a revolution in the classic representation of the mind - the multiple intelligences theory and the emotional intelligence. Both theories have a tremendous impact for effective learning if practitioners make the effort to really focus their teaching

on their students instead of their subject matter as it is ordinarily kept in awe between the covers of the academic treaty.

2.1 The emotional intelligence

Daniel Goleman defines emotional intelligence as the ability to be motivated and persevere in front of frustration, to govern one's impulses and to delay personal satisfaction, and to regulate moods and prevent troubles to obscure one's judgment; to be persistent and have hope.

He considers the following primary emotions:

- Anger: resentment, fury, irritability, indignation, exasperation, animosity;
- Sorrow: sadness, being upset, melancholy, loneliness, self-pity, sulk;
- Fear: nervousness, anxiety, being afraid, terror, concern, worry, horror, misunderstanding;
- Joy: relief, happiness, blessing, pride, pleasure, euphoria, satisfaction, amusement, contentment;
- Love: friendship, trust, acceptance, commitment, awe, worship, kindness, affinity;
- Surprise: wonder, shock;
- Disgust: contempt, detestation, revulsion, repugnance;
- Shame: embarrassment, guilt, humiliation, regret, remorse.

Another taxonomy is given by Paul Ekman, University of California who matches emotions with facial expressions. Four are considered universal: fear, anger, sadness, joy. He also claims that some events determine the same emotions in all people, but everyone shows them differently [1].

When working with children, teachers can foster all the dimensions of emotional intelligence from the youngest ages. If the approach of these components is constant, the emotional learning will go deeper. In the following, we will discuss a number of issues that could also sustain deep understanding in the language and literature class and lead to higher levels of reading competence and text interpretation.

- Awareness of own feelings. Emotions, as response to a change, are more difficult to realize by children because there is a tendency to relate more to external events (behaviors) than to inner motives that involve reflection and self-analysis. For example, a student who does not participate in group interaction or refuses to do her homework can be helped by the teacher during classes. The latter should support the child to understand her feelings, irrespective of what those mean – if they are pleasant or unpleasant. Consequently, students learn that **all** emotions are normal. It is perhaps better to classify emotions under the headings pleasant / unpleasant than positive / negative.

- Expressing emotions. Quite often, when students are asked questions like: "How are you feeling? How did you feel when ...? How did character X feel when...? What was in his soul?", students tend to answer with a simple "I don't know" or by formulating clichés. It is hard for them to express their emotions by means of words or other symbolic codes. They actually find it difficult to understand the nuances of their own feelings.

- Self-control and emotional regulation. Children can be helped to learn self-control (anger, sadness, fear) by using strategies that allow emotion-based solutions to their problems. If a student exhibits inexplicable fear towards written tests it is not enough to lecture him/her. Instead it is important to put him/her in actual and imagined situations, by which they learn to educate both their emotional and rational self.

- Empathy. There are basically two components of empathy: *emotional reaction to others*, which is developed during the first six years of life, and the *cognitive response* that determines the extent to which older children are able to understand the feelings of others and show their compassion.

2.2. Multiple intelligences

Howard Gardner [4] defines intelligence as the ability to solve a problem or fashion products that are valued in a given culture in a certain epoch. Both problems and products are quite varied in scope and structure – from musical masterpieces to successful political campaigns or from awesome sports performance to breakthrough scientific discoveries! Therefore Gardner pluralizes the classical concept of "general intelligence" and claims that individuals rather possess a set of abilities that could each be described by a core operation, embedded in a symbolic system, that benefits from a notational system. Moreover each such ability that Gardner calls "intelligence" has a neural representation and is subject to developmental changes.

In school education, we normally connect talent to the core operation of the subject we teach. As a teacher of language for instance we value children who are linguistic, or, in Gardner's terms possess a strength in *linguistic intelligence*. It is them who naturally enjoy reading, write easily, do not have problems to explain what they have learned by telling a story or by giving a beautiful description.

Words come easy to them. But how to teach a linguistic topic to students whose cognitive profile have a weakness in this area? Moreover, how can they speak or write about a character if "words don't come easy"? At this point, as teachers, we completely ignore if bad performance is due to a lack of understanding or to the low verbal ability to express something. In a previous research [5], we showed that all students, irrespective of their intelligence profile, can get to deeper levels of text understanding if they are involved in transdisciplinary projects that put their various intelligences at work to fashion meaningful artifacts.

In the present research, the emotional intelligence theory works as the prime source of inspiration while the multiple intelligences are used as a secondary source. The following examples suggest activities that value various dimensions of the emotional intelligence while students work with the text. Their response to the given instructions can be encoded in a variety of "languages" so they can more easily express their understanding by benefiting from the strengths of their intelligence profile.

3. Examples of emotional intelligence at work in the mother tongue class

A careful observation of children's emotions when they work during the class activities can help teachers design approaches, strategies that target the curricular vision and provision and at the same time be an authentic support for the students' emotional learning.

3.1 Emotional awareness and expression

- Listening to poems: Students are asked to individually listen to classical poetic texts with music as a background (the texts can be famous recordings by actors who recite the poem) and note at least three emotions they experience throughout the listening. Then 3-4 students can come together to identify similar or same emotions and analyze the different ones. Also, they can be asked to associate an emotion they experienced to certain words in the poem or to certain colors.

- Musical diary. Students listen to various musical excerpts, preferably collages of sounds from nature - water, wind, dolphins, whales - and describe by means of words or colors how they feel during the listening. The excerpt can be replayed 2-3 times.

3.2 Self-control and emotional regulation

In our literature, a novella ("nuvela" in Romanian) is, par excellence, a narrative that centers a character who goes through a tumultuous emotional crisis. For teachers it is a good opportunity to design activities that lead students towards reflecting on the importance of self-control and emotional regulation. For example, in "Two Lottery Tickets" by the canonic writer I.L.Caragiale, the character Lefter Popescu is unsatisfied with his job, quite unhappy about his life. At one point, he thinks he won the lottery, but cannot find the tickets, which triggers bouts of anger or genuine sadness that are inexplicable. His lack of self-control leads to violence and human rights violations. When he finally finds the tickets in a desk drawer, he goes to collect the money that would have changed his life, but he learns then he does not have the winning tickets as wrong numbers were published in the newspaper. In the example below, students are invited to identify and analyse emotions starting from a picture (See Fig.1) and the text "Two Lottery Tickets" .



Fig. 1. *Two lottery tickets* by Sabina Popescu, art student

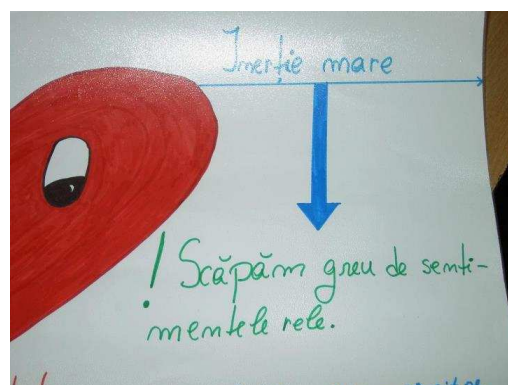


Fig. 2. One of the students' artifacts

The entry point in the discussion is a short drama activity. The students are asked to carefully examine the drawing, then to mime the situation, then to explain why it was difficult to express anger. They are also asked to list some solutions for the character to calm down. The entry point is followed by the following sequence of activities:

- Students are informed about the assignment for the portfolio - *Human rights and their violation*
- Students discuss, read again and illustrate in a drawing / collage how the law of inertia (which they studied in physics) might work in the case of "human emotions" (see Fig. 2 for a sample of their response)
- Similarly, in a multiple representation they illustrate the topic: *Addictions. Habits. Temptations - In fiction and reality* – an assignment for the portfolio
- Students discuss conflicts in text. We try to find out what action and reaction can mean at the level of the text
- Students make a drawing or a collage or a scheme or a role-play that illustrates the types of action and reaction in the fictional world. And, finally, students develop a written portrait of the character.

Following the implementation work, we reached some important conclusions. Everything went much better than expected. Children welcomed the proposal and were really excited about the work. The various very active and creative portfolio assignments supported them for a deeper understanding of the character. Thus, by the end of the I learning unit, the students were able to write a type of text that is stipulated in the exam syllabus. When we tried to "make" together a plan to describe Leter, the students' answers came very quickly and showed a good reception of the text. The children explained in a metacognitive feedback sheet that what helped them most were the activities connected to "inertia", "relationships" and "types of interaction".

3.3 Empathy

The following example which is excerpted from a material published by UNICEF – Romania [6] was designed for the discussion on *Hatchet* a novel by Mihai Sadoveanu, a canonic writer. The students are asked to examine the drawing in Fig. 3 and to answer the following questions:

1. What can be the feelings of the character in the picture?
2. How old is the character? How do you know?
3. What is the meaning of the yellowish spot?
4. Why is one of the characters drawn backwards?
5. Do the two characters communicate with one another? How do you know?
6. What does the tree in the background mean?
7. Where does the male character go?
8. What do the dark colors suggest to you?
9. Write down some thoughts that are read in the woman's eyes .
10. Does the drawing speak of a happy or sad story? Why?

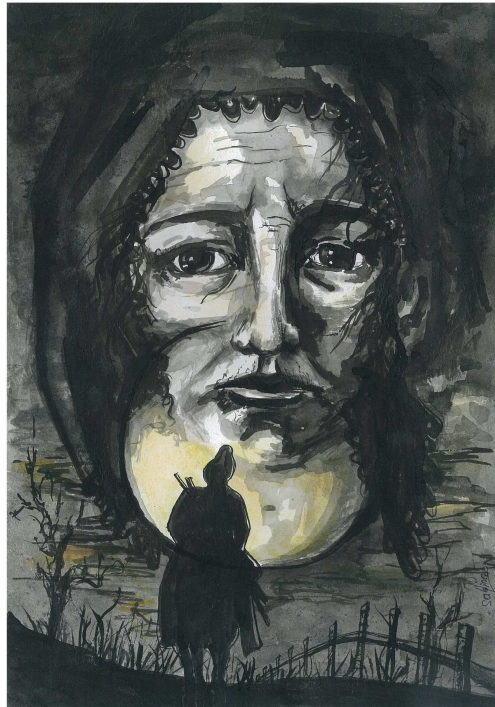


Fig. 3. *Hatchet* by Sabina Popescu, art student

4. Conclusions

We have worked with this type of activities for three years. Our conclusion is that a thorough transfer of the emotional theory in the language class has at least three important results: a. The students' understanding and reading competence developed; b. the students emotional intelligence developed as proved by their behavior in school; c. their motivation for learning is higher. In this respect, their statements from their feedback sheets are relevant:

- I'm happy I found out some ways to calm down.* (Matei)
- I liked that I thought more about others.* (Dragos)
- Sometimes I'm very jealous, but I know now that's not necessarily a negative quality.* (Ioana)
- I understand that there are cures for sadness and anger.* (Iulian)
- Others have feelings similar to mine.* (Andreea)
- I'm thinking about talking about my feelings with my parents.* (Dan)

References

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