



Scaling emotions and identification: Insights from a scholarship student



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 4 October 2015

Keywords:

Emotion
Identity
Timescale
Voice
Silence

ABSTRACT

In alignment with more recent work that has conceived of emotion as action instead of a static entity, I argue that an understanding of emotion as embodied action can be enriched through the use of *timescales*. By applying the construct of timescales to examine the language learning experience of a scholarship student, I illustrate how her desire and anxiety not only evolved over time but were also influenced by intersecting timescales that ultimately influenced her learning outcomes. Additionally, I maintain that issues concerning student voice and silence need to be addressed to fully understand the impact of emotions on language learning. The paper closes with suggestions on how to improve pedagogy in ways that would also harness the emotional work that goes on in classrooms.

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The teachers tend to think that scholars are very smart and industrious and able to conduct excellent work . . . I feel the *pressure* of being a scholar. When I first received the scholarship, I felt proud since I did better than my friends to be recruited the scholarship. After all the time, which sounds a bit wrong and tedious. For me, it's impossible for I'm *ashamed* being a scholar when I don't do well for schoolwork.
(Daniella, 11/18/2008)

Daniella's experience is not uncommon in Singapore, or in other parts of the world where international scholarship students move to English-speaking countries in order to enhance their educational opportunities. Moving to a new country is not an easy task, especially when a student is as young as Daniella, who was 15 when she arrived in Singapore from Vietnam. As McNamara (1997) reminds us, the immigrant student's experience constitutes "a complex renegotiation of their social identity in the new society, a process that has profound implications for their attitudes to their own language and the learning of the majority group's language" (p. 561). Closely related to identity (re)negotiation is the emotional transformation that immigrant learners undergo which in turn ultimately impacts their overall learning experience. This article focuses on the emotional challenges encountered by Daniella and how she was identified as a scholarship student, that is, a student who was awarded a scholarship by Singapore's Ministry of Education to pursue her secondary education in Singapore. As I will demonstrate, a reconceptualization of emotions as action and along scalar lines in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) (1) provides useful insights into understanding how teachers can rethink pedagogy to meet the needs of transnational immigrant learners (Duff, 2015; Lam & Warriner, 2012), and (2) attempts to respond to Schutz and Pekrun's (2007) lament that, "in spite of the emotional nature of classrooms, inquiry on emotions in educational contexts, outside of a few notable exceptions . . . has been slow to emerge" (p. 3).

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Theorizing anxiety and emotions in socioculturally-oriented second language acquisition (SLA)

To date, much of the SLA emotions-related research has focused on *foreign language anxiety* and is situated more broadly within the ‘affective factors’ paradigm (for a critique, see De Costa, 2015; see also De Costa, 2014). Further, much of the earlier emotion SLA research (1) extended the work of earlier cognitive emotion theorists (Arnold, 1960; Lazarus, 1991; Weiner, 1986) who framed their research in terms of approach and avoidance tendencies, and (2) conceived of anxiety as an individual difference. Overall, such earlier research has prompted Pavlenko (2013) to assert that the ‘affective factors’ paradigm “has exhausted its limited explanatory potential” due to “the lack of a theoretical foundation, a reductionist view of affect, and the desire to pin it down as a ‘factor’ that somehow influences L2 [second language] learning” (p. 8). A similar and equally critical perspective is echoed by Swain (2013) who bluntly pointed out that, “emotions are the elephants in the room – poorly studied, poorly understood, seen as inferior to rational thought” (p. 205)¹. In this paper, I join other applied linguists by theorizing emotions as embodied action while proposing that the SLA emotion research agenda be advanced through scalar approaches to language learning and teaching.

Emotions as embodied action

Critical applied linguist Sarah Benesch (2012) has noted that emotions “are not private, individual, psychological states, but social and embodied” (p. 133). That emotions are interpersonal and not private events is underscored by Swain (2013) who notes, “Emotions are socially and culturally derived and, along with cognition, they mediate learning” (p. 196). Hence, in contrast to mainstream SLA research, which has conceived of emotions as static, monolithic, and unidirectional (i.e., emotions influence language learning but not conversely), Benesch sees emotions as overlapping, moving, and shifting.² Similarly, Lewis and Tierney (2013) have called for an interpretation of *emotion as action*. To them, emotion is not a static trait; rather, it is constantly changing in relation to changes in the person and external actions (social, verbal, visual, etc.) in his or her immediate environment. Additionally, this conceptualization of emotion emphasizes what emotion *does* as opposed to viewing emotion as an individual trait.

In their examination of how language was used to mobilize emotion in a racially and ethnically diverse high school, Lewis and Tierney (2013) asserted that an emotion-as-action perspective “requires a reading of classroom dynamics that honors its complexity and understands emotion to be linked to other actions historically and spatially within and beyond the classroom” (p. 290). Simply put, such a perspective addresses how larger structural forces and power relations shape emotions along temporal and spatial lines. This perspective is consistent with the scalar approach proposed in this article. As they also rightly observe, “mediated actions such as emotions are linked to chains of actions over time, resulting in a thickening of identities sedimented through histories of participation that link mediated actions and practices over time” (p. 297). In this paper, I adopt Lewis and Tierney’s conceptualization of emotion as embodied action, which is a crucial reminder that emotions are intimately connected to identities, to guide my investigation of the identification of a student and her emotional responses to learning English.

Scaling emotions

According to Lemke (2000; see also, Lemke, 2013), meaningful action is always a site of *heterochrony*, that is, the inter-section of processes and practices that have different inherent timescales (see Clonan-Roy et al., this issue, for an analysis of overlapping timescales). Such timescales can vary from over fractions of a second to days, months, years, decades, and centuries, thereby forming “a continuum from the very short/small to the very long/large” (Mortimer & Wortham, 2015, p. 163). Hence, as a result of *heterochrony*, a particular event on some local timescale may simultaneously also be part of many other processes on longer timescales. In his study of shifting identities in the classroom, Wortham (2010) explained the importance of looking more closely at other timescales that can be relevant to social identification, which takes place in and through classroom practice. This need to explore cross-timescale relations is elaborated in Wortham and Rhodes (2012), where they illustrated how speech events in a town added up to the discursive identity construction of Mexican immigrants in the town. The significance of looking beyond the speech event and studying the cross-event chains or trajectories to explain social identification is reinforced in Wortham and Rhodes (2013; see Wortham & Reyes, 2015 for an in-depth discussion of this discourse analytic methodology). In sum, while the notion of timescales has been particularly useful in helping trace social identification, I would add that timescales can also be used to examine learner emotions in order to better understand how these emotions influence learning.

¹ To their credit, Gregersen et al. (2014) have more recently adopted an experimental idiodynamic method which measures the dynamic and rapid (per-second) changes in the emotions of language learners. However, such an approach, which focuses on the here-and-now dynamics of the interaction, fails to take into account the histories of these learners.

² One notable mainstream SLA researcher is Peter MacIntyre who in recent years has adopted a dynamic systems approach to examine language anxiety (see Gregersen, MacIntyre, & Meza, 2014). Significantly, a dynamic system approach (Larsen-Freeman, 2007) also acknowledges the value of using timescales to studying language learning.

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