

Re-conceptualizing the knowledge base for non-native language teachers to cope with negative emotions

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Abstract

When non-native speakers become second language teachers, emotions play a significant role in the teacher-learning process and throughout their professional lives. However, few teacher education programs explicitly relate emotions to teachers' knowledge bases to improve their social-emotional skills. Due to the dynamic nature of a knowledge base, teachers can always take an inquiry stance to continuously examine their teaching practices and beliefs. Therefore, this paper takes an inquiry stance to discuss negative emotions in non-native language teachers' narratives and how they can overcome the potentially negative effects of such emotions by reconceptualizing their personal knowledge base to reinforce the effects of positive emotions and minimize the effects of negative emotions in their teaching practice. As a preliminary study, it aims to raise awareness for teachers to develop social-emotional skills through knowledge-base re-conceptualization and to advocate for reform of language teacher education.

Keywords: *emotions, social-emotional skills, language teacher education, knowledge base, non-native teachers*

Introduction

The process of non-native speakers' learning to become second language teachers is emotionally charged (Richards 2020). Teacher learners inevitably experience changing emotions when they learn to become teachers, and managing such emotional levels in their daily teaching is a necessary lesson (Anttila et al. 2016, Teng 2017). Although research has suggested that developing emotional skills is beneficial to teachers at different developmental stages, few teacher education programs explicitly address emotional skills development (Madalinska-Michalak 2015), and emotional competences are not in many teachers' knowledge bases. Thus, some teachers fail to recognize sources of and cope with negative emotions, and have suspicion of their teacher identities (Teng 2017). Therefore, it is important to understand the role of emotions in teachers' teaching practices and to integrate social-emotional skills learning as a new component in teachers' knowledge base so that teachers have ample resources and skills to cope with their emotions when needed.

Due to the dynamic nature of language teaching and learning, the knowledge base of language teachers is not static or neutral (Johnson 2009). According to Tarone and Allwright (2005), teachers in different developmental stages require different proportions of training and education. Even teachers who are at the same career or developmental stage require "an integrated presentation of the knowledge and skills" suitable for teaching (Tarone and Allwright 2005, 14), due to their diverse prior learning experiences and cognitive abilities. Therefore, knowledge base is "a heuristic device" (Reagan and Osborn 2002, 20) through which teachers can take an inquiry stance to regularly (re)examine their classroom practices, identify gaps impeding their teaching effectiveness, learn how to fill those gaps, and continuously reconstitute and reconceptualize their own knowledge base over time (Tarone and Allwright 2005).

Trying to equip a solid knowledge base as passive technicians is not enough for teachers to

implement effective practice in their classrooms (Kumaravadivelu 2006). Therefore, this paper takes an inquiry stance—identifying problems behind emotions and exploring possible solutions from a practitioner’s perspective—to discuss negative emotions in non-native language teachers’ teaching practices. It also elaborates what resources can be used for teachers to identify and manage such emotions to minimize the effect of negative emotions in their teaching practice by re-conceptualizing their personalized knowledge base.

Theoretical background

Various frameworks have been proposed by scholars to understand knowledge base; however, one important aspect has been ignored: teachers’ emotional knowledge base. Faez (2011) summarized and compared several scholars’ knowledge base frameworks in various domains, and those frameworks comprise the types of information and expertise that language teachers require to perform effectively in the classroom, for example, language proficiency, civilization and culture, language analysis, the teacher-learner, the social context, the pedagogical process, etc. Shulman (1987) provided a fundamental framework of the knowledge base by categorizing teachers’ knowledge into the following modules: content knowledge, pedagogical (content) knowledge (including evaluation of students’ learning and appropriate adjustment to teaching practice), curriculum knowledge, and knowledge of students, teaching contexts, and educational ends. Although different categories were used, Lafayette’s (1993), Day’s (1993), and Richards’ (1998) frameworks emphasized the importance of similar domains, such as content, pedagogical, and pedagogical content knowledge, in language teaching practice (as cited in Faez 2011). Thus, compared with cognition, emotions received limited attention in these frameworks (Richards 2020, White 2018).

Emotion plays a significant role in shaping the teaching practice. Teachers’ emotional wellness contributes to student success, teaching effectiveness, job satisfaction and healthy school system (Dreer 2021, Haldimann et al. 2023). According to Richards (2020), emotions are prompted by relations and interactions between teachers and students and by the social contexts in which the process of teaching and learning occurs. This means that emotions positively or negatively shape the way teachers design, implement, and reflect on their teaching practice and how they interact with students, colleagues, and parents.

Thus, enhancing teachers’ ability to develop emotional competences will enable them to enlarge the effect of positive emotions and minimize the effect of negative emotions while meeting their students’ needs and improving learning outcomes (Agudo 2018).

Language teachers’ beliefs about themselves, their students, and their instructional activities can be attributed to their language learning and teaching experiences and can influence classroom practice (Xu 2012). Moreover, the beliefs brought by teachers into their teacher education process have a significant impact on the way they learn, the learning outcomes, and what kinds of teachers they will become (Richardson, 1996). Negative emotional experiences of teaching lead to negative beliefs, which have a negative influence on the formation of teachers’ professional identities (Richards 2020). Although negative emotions are inevitable in non-native language teachers’ practice (Dewey 2015, Song 2018), re-conceptualization of the knowledge base can turn the negative feelings of teaching positive; for example, teachers who have negative beliefs about their students, themselves, and teaching may be encouraged to undertake continual professional growth, which is enhanced by teacher agency and professional confidence to overcome the obstacles encountered (Freeman 2018).

As English language teaching pedagogy and institutional discourse have evolved, the need for including emotions in teachers’ professional development has arisen. Francis et al. (2018) suggested that developing authentic and relevant course content emotionally engages students and connects new knowledge to their prior experience. This indicates that language learning involves more than simply teaching technical and discrete skills; language teachers should also be able to provide students with

access to social practices (Gee 2015). Moreover, in the field of English language teaching, the dominant institutional discourse solidifies native-speaker-based norms (Dewey 2015). Non-native English-speaking teachers need linguistic, cognitive, and emotional resources to challenge the dominant native speaker discourse in English teaching and learning (Rodriguez de France et al. 2018). Previous research on social-emotional learning has focused on how it supports students' academic success and teachers' professional careers; however, little research has been conducted to discuss social-emotional development from teacher educators' perspectives (Soutter 2023).

Freeman (2018) argued that with the changes in the language teaching and learning field, the current knowledge base should expand from the traditional knowledge base, which includes the content, teachers, learners, pedagogy, and issues of teacher education, and urged that the theoretical knowledge base should be integrated with teachers' own classroom practices. In the following section, we examine teachers' practice with negative emotions and discuss how re-conceptualizing a knowledge base can help teachers raise awareness and enhance their knowledge and skills to "develop and maintain an emotionally-managed classroom" (Richards 2020, 227).

Selected quotes from the published articles

This paper employs a textual analysis approach to discuss emotional struggles in teachers' narratives and how they can be overcome if teachers raise awareness and develop social-emotional skills. Narratives in this section were extracted from published papers narrated by non-native language teachers. "Non-native English speaking teachers" and "emotions" were key words for the initial selection, and the number of citations was important for reference. Five quotes were selected. The narrators include a pre-service teacher, who is a non-native English speaker, and non-native English speaking teachers, beginning, and experienced, in the EFL or ESL context. Each quote contains at least two types of negative feelings. Negative emotions analyzed in this section include irritated, humiliated, stressful, challenged, afraid, unsure, uncomfortable, guilty, embarrassed, unconfident, alone, and the feeling of distrust. This is a preliminary study with the hope of subsequent empirically based studies; therefore, the discussions below aim to highlight the importance of social-emotional skills in teacher education and suggest how teachers can develop such skills through knowledge-base re-conceptualization, rather than providing generalizable results.

The following quote (number 1) was narrated by a pre-service teacher studying in an English teacher education program at a university in Mainland China. This quote highlights the teacher's experience of a failure to achieve teaching objectives, leading to feelings of irritation, as well as the experience of diligently preparing a course to avoid feelings of humiliation.

I think my English proficiency is not good enough. I really want to do my best in every lesson. However, I often got irritated because I was not able to achieve my goals or meet the standard that I set before class. I always practiced my English lessons before the commencement of the class because I did not want to lose face before my students. (as cited in Teng 2017, 124)

The following quote (number 2) was narrated by a teacher in a Hong Kong secondary school. This quote highlights the challenges the teacher faces in explaining the use of passive voice to her students, leading to feelings of uncertainty and stress and a search for effective teaching strategies.

It's easy if you ask them to rewrite the sentences, because they find it easy to follow. However...they just don't know when we are supposed to use passive voice and when we are supposed to use active voice. And one of the students even asked me, "Miss Wong, who do we have to use passive voice in our daily life?" And I find this question difficult to answer, ha, and I "Oh, I'll tell you next time..." And then I asked my colleagues "Why do we teach and use

passive voice?” And no one can give me the correct answer. And then I go home and think about it. But even now I don’t really know how to handle that student’s questions. I finish the worksheets with them and they know how to rewrite the sentences. But I don’t know how to explain them. It is very stressful. (as cited in Andrews, 2001, p. 76)

The following quotes (number 3) was narrated by a teacher in an Inner-London school. These quotes highlight the teacher’s experience of identity negotiation and development and indicate how she endured to overcome the feelings of under confidence and isolation.

I think I began to feel more comfortable <laughter> with being NNS [non-native speaker], like I understand there_ there are other people like- as me, with the same background (those things) and being, I don’t know, effective teachers. So I think I feel a little bit more confident and comfortable with that, yeah.

I became aware not only of new “content”—what is the whole issue all about, but also found a new perspective [sic] to look at things, in a different way that I’m used to. E.g., caring not for the accuracy and/or idiomaticity of students’ language, but also considering their desire to express their identities in L2, get across their meaning, etc. I also realized that I’m not alone. That there is NNEST [non-native English-speaking teacher] and other teachers going through similar experiences as me. (as cited in Reis, 2015, pp. 38–39)

The following quote (number 4) was narrated by a beginning teacher in Dongguan Middle School, Guang Dong province, China. This quote highlights the teacher’s experience with sharing his teaching methodology with colleagues and reflects the difficulty that novice teachers have in building mutual trust within the professional community.

I didn’t mean to show off. I would like to share, but I am afraid of standing out. Some teachers implemented my method, yet not as successful as in my class. They doubted my way. I know it. I don’t know why it didn’t work in their classes, but I knew why it did in mine. First, I know my students well. It is for them. Second, I am very sure I can succeed. But I can’t explain this to my colleagues. You know, as a new teacher, you’d better listen rather than talking. So I try not to do things differently from others. For example, I don’t have to take a nap at noon. But I dare not to stay in the office to work. I am afraid my colleagues may say that I am working too hard. (as cited in Xu, 2013, p.384)

The following quote (number 5) was narrated by an experienced EFL teacher studying in a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) program at a UK university. This quote highlights the teacher’s experience with inadequate course preparation, resulting in being doubted and corrected by students, leading to feelings of stress, guilt, and embarrassment.

I always feel stressed if the material is not familiar to me such as new texts or when it is difficult to explain and I don’t have enough time to prepare it...or when students’ faces show they are confused about what I’m talking or students correct my mistakes then, I’m stressed. (as cited in Mousavi 2007, 36)

Discussion

Quotes analysis. In quote 1, “not good enough,” “irritated,” “not able to,” and “not want to lose face” showed that the teaching practice created an emotional struggle for the teacher. Her worries about

English proficiency showed that a good command of English involves demonstrating a high level of proficiency in the four language skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking), which is a prerequisite for being a qualified language teacher. Her failure to achieve the learning goals showed that she might possess pedagogical knowledge, but she did not deliberately integrate both content and pedagogical knowledge to optimize students' language learning (Reagan and Osborn 2002).

In quote 2, "difficult," "don't know," and "stressful" imply emotional struggle. This showed that non-native English teachers are familiar with the language structures (grammar) that were explicitly taught when they learned English; however, they may not be familiar with the underlying systems of the language that are not explicitly elaborated upon in English classes (Andrews 2001). The teacher's desire for colleague support did not help resolve the problem she encountered, which implies that sometimes practitioners need support from experts or authorities in one discipline through dialogic mediation (Johnson 2009).

In quote 3, from the teacher's use of the positive words "began to feel more comfortable," "a little bit more confident," "a new perspective," and "realized that I'm not alone," it can be inferred that the teacher overcame the negative feelings of being uncomfortable, unconfident, and alone through identity negotiation. Canagarajah (2005, as cited in Selvi 2014) noted that the majority of English teachers globally are non-native English-speaking teachers. Non-native speakers of English are not inferior to native speakers of English. Teachers and students whose first language is not English have different advantages when it comes to English teaching and learning (Boecher 2005, Liu 2001).

In quote 4, the words/phrase "afraid," "doubted," "don't know why," "can't explain," and "differently" demonstrate this novice teacher's uncertainty about his professional identity and a lack of emotional understandings of his relationships with his colleagues (Xu 2013). He needed emotional skills to identify the source of his uncertainty and then enhance his ability to systematically theorize his teaching experience.

In quote 5, the words/phrase "stressed," "not familiar," "difficult," "don't have enough time," "confused," and "correct my mistake" demonstrate the teacher's attempt to relate the emotional struggle to inadequate course preparation and less familiarity with new materials. However, no evidence shows that the teacher intentionally explored the source of stress when confused or corrected by the students. The word "stress" is overly broad and general. The teacher needed an emotional tool to identify and specify the origin and source of negative feelings. Worried about being considered incompetent by students leads to feelings of guilt and embarrassment, which originate from inadequate English proficiency.

Integrating social-emotional skills into language teachers' knowledge base. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, (CASEL) (August, 2019) framework for systemic social and emotional learning (SEL), there are five core competences in SEL: 1) self-awareness, to recognize one's emotions and influence; 2) self-management, to regulate one's emotions and behavior; 3) social-awareness, to take perspective of others; 4) relationship skills, to establish and maintain healthy relationships with others; and 5) responsible decision-making, to identify, analyze, and solve problems (pp. 1-2).

It is notable from all the selected quotes that the teachers had already recognized their emotions, although sometimes, they did not express emotions in a straightforward way. They had the ability to control negative emotions, such as irritation, and did not redirect them to students. However, they need skills to manage negative emotions, for example, effective stress management skills, to mitigate stress and maintain overall physical and mental health. In quotes 2 and 5, the narrators both mentioned stress. Emotional knowledge and skills will help them to identify different sources of stress in their teaching practice. For the narrator in quote 2, an expanded knowledge base will support the teacher in engaging in continuing professional development and relieving her stress. For the narrator in quote 5, an expanded knowledge base will support the teacher with course preparation skills and increase efficiency

in becoming familiar with new materials.

According to Wolff and De Costa (2017), the negotiation of emotion-related challenges contributes to teacher identity development. Emotional knowledge and resources allow non-native English speaking teachers to interrogate their professional identities in a positive way, given the linguistic resource tools that are available to them. For the narrator in quote 1, an expanded knowledge base with the inclusion of emotional knowledge will support the pre-service teacher's realization of the ideal professional identity and ease her feelings of irritation and humiliation. For the narrator in quote 3, an expanded knowledge base supports the teacher's professional identity development and overcomes the feeling of isolation. For the narrator in quote 4, an expanded knowledge base will support the teacher in gradually acquiring experience as a teacher, and professional development, including peer coaching and participating in an effective professional community, will equip him with the required skills (Johnson 2009).

The above analysis of the teacher's narratives shows that, with the development of emotional knowledge and social-emotional skills, teachers will be able to identify and manage their emotions, recognize the sources of negative emotions, and utilize available resources to overcome challenges in their teaching practice through knowledge-base re-conceptualization.

Advocacy for reform of language teacher education. Although the sources of negative emotions are included in the language teacher education program, teachers need emotional knowledge and skills to intentionally relate negative emotions to the sources. The sources include, but are not limited to language proficiency, pedagogical content knowledge, professional identity development, peer coaching, and professional community participation. Integrating social emotional skills into teacher education curriculum will guide and promote teacher-learners' emotional learning and help them to re-conceptualize their knowledge base using emotional tools.

Limitations and future research

This study is a preliminary study with a hope for capture related educational stakeholders' attention in terms of insufficient support for teachers' social emotional skills and knowledge. Subsequent interviews will be conducted. Due to limited related literature on this topic, only a small number of quotes is selected. Nevertheless, the selected quotes cover 12 types of negative emotions, and their narrators represent different teaching contexts and professional developmental stages. Future research can be embarked upon to adopt empirically based research methods to provide qualitative and quantitative data on this topic on a larger scale to suggest pedagogical implications for teacher education programs.

Closing reflections

Due to the dynamic nature of language teachers' knowledge base, it is important for them to take an inquiry stance to design effective curricula, pedagogies, and assessments for students and justify what kind of knowledge base makes their language teaching effective. Inquiry-based approaches can prepare teachers to build a personalized knowledge base for their own contexts and classes so that they can be reflective practitioners and transformative intellectuals while meeting their students' needs, improving learning outcomes, and bridging the gap between theory and practice (Kumaravadivelu 2003). While doing so, language teachers can take emotions into account and explicitly relate the lack of knowledge and skills behind emotions to knowledge-based conceptualization in teacher education programs and continuing professional development. Teacher educators can design curricula that include social-emotional knowledge and skills to help teachers and teacher-learners with the conceptualization process.

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