

Exploring Psychology in Language Learning and Teaching – a book review

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Gregor Vnučko

Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia; gvnucko@ukf.sk

The book *Exploring Psychology in Language Learning and Teaching* (Mercer, Williams and Ryan, 2015) is authored by Marion Williams, Sarah Mercer, and Stephen Ryan. Marion Williams is an established educator and former senior lecturer at the University of Exeter, later founding the teacher training institute ITEFL. Sarah Mercer is Professor of Foreign Language Teaching at the University of Graz, Austria, and is widely recognized for her research on language teacher psychology, learner autonomy, and positive psychology in language education. Stephen Ryan is a professor in the School of Culture, Media, and Society at Waseda University in Tokyo, with research covering various aspects of psychology in language learning. Their combined expertise ensures a comprehensive treatment of the subject, drawing from applied linguistics, psychology, and classroom practice.

The book explores psychology in language learning and teaching across eight chapters, each addressing a specific aspect relevant to EFL teachers. It aims to support both current and future English teachers in understanding human psychology, offering practical principles and a hands-on perspective for classroom application. Each chapter concludes with suggestions for further study. The text connects to the Educational Role of Language framework, particularly Language as a determinant of educational success (Scope Major A) and Language as a reflection of human mental life (Scope Major B), as well as Language as a tool for identity-building (Scope Minor D), emphasizing the personal, cultural, and social dimensions of language learning. In this context, L2 anxiety is highlighted as particularly significant, as it relates directly to self-image and learners' ability to express themselves.

The first chapter introduces fundamental theoretical principles underpinning language teaching, covering four major perspectives: the positivist approach, cognitive approaches, humanism, and sociocultural and ecological perspectives. Readers gain insight into teaching foundations, such as the behaviourist view that rewards reinforce desired behaviour. Practical exercises help students understand methods arising from each theory, while the authors emphasize that no single universal method works in every context. Teachers are encouraged to experiment and adapt methods to best fit their groups and circumstances—a theme repeated throughout the book.

Chapter 2 focuses on groups, exploring common phenomena teachers encounter, including group formation, developmental stages, group dynamics, competition, leadership, and the importance of avoiding isolation of individuals from the group context. The authors caution against presenting role models as unattainable for students and note that while a cooperative environment is beneficial, group coherence can sometimes stifle creativity if the desire to conform becomes too strong. They also advise careful selection of EFL games, as competitive games may create “winners” and “losers,” leading to frustration or disengagement. Instead, collaborative tasks where all students can succeed are recommended.

Chapter 3, *The Self*, examines individual identity, built on the premise that teachers must first understand themselves to better understand their students. It addresses the self as shaped by internal experiences (emotions, thoughts) and external influences (feedback, peers, culture). Learners' self-image develops through interpretation of successes, failures, and social feedback. Teachers can strengthen positive self-image by giving meaningful feedback, encouraging reflection, fostering respect, and recognizing each learner's potential. The chapter also discusses social comparison, including the “big-fish-

little-pond” effect, in which students of equal ability may experience different motivation and outcomes depending on their learning environment.

Chapter 4 examines beliefs, which may be facilitative—helping learners progress—or debilitating—hindering them. Teachers are encouraged to respect diverse belief systems, as imposing one’s own may cause resistance, especially at a cultural level. The authors stress attention to cultural perspectives embedded in teaching materials, which may challenge students’ usual interaction patterns. A particularly useful analogy compares learning a language communicatively to learning to drive: practical skills (know-how) matter more than theoretical knowledge (know-about), aligning with the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020). The chapter also advocates fostering a growth mindset, viewing intelligence as expandable through effort, which can enhance motivation and achievement.

Chapter 5, Affect, distinguishes between emotions and feelings, noting that feelings are often more personal and harder to label. Emotions and cognition are inseparable, directly affecting cognitive processes. The authors draw on Schumann’s (1999) concept of appraisal, which explains why students may respond differently to the same activity depending on factors like novelty, pleasantness, or goal relevance. The chapter also links to Krashen’s (1985) affective filter hypothesis, which posits that negative emotions can block input and hinder learning.

Chapter 6 addresses motivation, highlighting the ambiguity surrounding the term and its implications for teaching strategies. Motivation is not solely about academic achievement but also about engagement with the learning process. Setting clear, achievable goals, providing consistent feedback, and fostering positive emotions enhance motivation. The chapter discusses motivational theories chronologically, culminating in self-determination theory, and offers practical suggestions for fostering learner-centred strategies.

Chapter 7 examines agency, defined as learners’ capacity to make intentional choices and take purposeful action in their learning. Agency is closely connected to self-confidence, motivation, and access to resources. Learners may apply strategies in different ways: some facilitate long-term development, while others address immediate goals. Teachers are encouraged to support learners in selecting and refining strategies, fostering metacognitive awareness through planning, monitoring, and reflection. To further promote agency, teachers should help learners set goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART; Doran, 1981).

The final chapter integrates the book’s themes through Willingness to Communicate (WTC), illustrating how motivation, confidence, affect, and group dynamics converge in practice. WTC is dynamic: a student may speak confidently in one context but hesitate in another. Teachers are encouraged to remain sensitive to individual differences and to implement practical awareness-raising activities while maintaining holistic principles. This recognition of the “messiness” of teaching, balanced with clear principles, is one of the book’s greatest strengths.

Reading the book, I felt a strong connection between my experiences and the phenomena described. For example, I have experienced the “big-fish-little-pond” effect, which shows how equally capable students may feel confident or inadequate depending on their group context. In secondary school, being among peers less focused on English allowed me to build confidence that later motivated me to pursue a PhD in English studies. In my teaching practice, I often observe students using grammar correctly without being able to explain rules, fulfilling communicative purposes and supporting the book’s emphasis on know-how over know-about. I also relate strongly to Schumann’s (1999) concept of appraisal, which explains why students react differently to the same activity based on novelty, pleasantness, or goal relevance. Many activities succeed in one class but fail in another—not due to motivation, but because tasks do not align with immediate goals. The chapters remind me of the importance of acknowledging these dynamics, sharing metacognitive strategies with students, and guiding them toward SMART goals that support long-term aspirations.

The authors occasionally revisit examples to clarify key points. While repetition can support learning—as we say in Slovakia, “repetition is the mother of knowledge”—it sometimes reduces conciseness. Nonetheless, the book offers numerous practical insights thoughtfully connected to each chapter. It will resonate with language teachers, teacher educators, applied linguists, and researchers alike. Teacher trainers may find it invaluable for course design, teachers will gain actionable classroom strategies, and researchers will appreciate the integration of classic and contemporary perspectives. Overall, I wholeheartedly recommend this book to teachers and teacher trainers. It provides a rich, nuanced overview of how psychology shapes language learning and teaching, enabling readers to better understand—and articulate—the behaviours and phenomena they encounter in classrooms.

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