

**PUTTING THE JOY BACK INTO THE LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS.
STUDENT EMPOWERMENT AND LANGUAGE LEARNING OUTCOMES**

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Abstract

The article focuses on strategies for increasing student engagement and, implicitly, learning outcomes in the Business English classroom. The strategies involve experimenting with key parameters of the learning environment; in this particular case student empowerment was employed as a learning motivation enhancer with undergraduate students. The classroom learning environment, the students' perceptions of it and the overall impact on their learning was monitored through on-going and summative student reflective comments that document the language class as rich in intellectual excitement and stimulation, thus adding a joyful dimension to the learning process.

Keywords: student empowerment, joyful learning, student autonomy, learning enhancement.

1. The Roots

This paper has grown from a life-long interest in student empowerment as an academic enhancer. In addition, my professional practice at the foremost business school in Romania provides ample evidence that the learning that the students find pleasurable is productive and joyful, leading to improved learning outcomes. As a student described her homework experience around a TED talk that she was to watch, summarize and share with the group: "It was so much fun that I watched it three times, laughed a lot, and completely forgot that it was all homework."

I have been carrying this statement with me for the past months and the joy and the bright eyes that accompanied her statement have been pointing me in a new direction that I have been intuitively groping for, unaware that positive education and joyful learning have been around to inject happiness and, for our practical purposes concerning learning outcomes, motivation into the learning process.

But there are more roots to this paper. Empirical evidence shows that when we enjoy the activity at hand, learning included, we are more productive about it and the whole experience is more memorable. This has also played its part in shaping up the paper, and so has the distinctly evolving profile of our undergraduate students. As a generation, they have been developing a unique identity built around the social media and their use of the smart phone around the clock, with the smart phone as an indispensable, all-powerful new organ through which they see, hear, talk, develop emotions, make judgements, and, basically, know the world.

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Since the phone and the social media appear to provide extensive joy, even learning-distracting joy, to the undergraduate student population, teachers could well imagine that by adding a joyful dimension to the learning activity they could make it more palatable to the students, thereby engaging the students' further interest and enhancing their learning. The need to welcome joyful learning to the class and work out a reconceptualised approach to teaching and student learning based on their empowerment is the key tenet that emerges from the literature, my own classroom observations, and the student reflections that the topic has invited. Or, in order to be consistent with the initial metaphor, the many roots described above appear to support the beautiful blossom of student joyful learning through empowerment.

2. The Stem

We will move away from the roots now and proceed towards the stem. Our focus will be dual: we will clarify the meaning of joyful learning and then attempt to examine the conditions, approaches, and practices which facilitate joyful learning, with its corollary, student engagement and effective content retention. In the process, we will also answer the research questions that underlie this paper.

2.1 Research Questions and Methodology

The research questions that guided the present research are available below:

- (1) How can students and teachers work together to provide joyful learning experiences, thereby consolidating learning?
- (2) How could teachers increase student motivation by increasing student empowerment?

They emerged from class observation, class practice and reflection, conversations with fellow teachers, and the many US-based resources on the topic.

The research undertaken in order to find the answers is qualitative in nature and relies on the case-study research methodology to examine the design of joyful learning experiences that enhance language and content learning in the Business English class. By its very nature, the case study methodology explores specific circumstances and phenomena, thereby aiding the future teaching practice and research.

The study aims, among others, to introduce or at least raise awareness of the concept of joyful learning within the Romanian academic community where, traditionally, there has little regard, if at all, for the joyful dimension of education and its psychological impact on student learning.

The methodology relied on collection of data and the study involved three types of data: document analysis, that is students' written assignments in response to the tasks they jointly designed with the teacher, oral presentations inviting peer reaction, and semi-structured interviews. The interview was deliberately loosely structured so as to allow it to flow naturally, like a spontaneous, stress-free, enjoyable conversation. For the sake of validity and consistency throughout the pool of respondents, the topics and the questions in the interview were designed in advance. The interview questions were all open-ended and invited the respondents to focus on their perceptions and reflections concerning three major issues: the learning environment, their experiences with joyful learning in the Business English class, and their sense of personal linguistic progress.

The original design was to interview 12 students - accounting for 50% of the group - outside class. The interview was also meant, in my intention, to reward engaged participation in class, so I invited the participation of the students who had demonstrated commitment, passion, and excitement throughout our academic interactions. I started with the interviews as planned but soon after I had to alter the methodological design and replace the interviews with a focus group, as all the students wanted to be involved and have the opportunity to share their perceptions.

2.2 Theoretical Background

Of the many definitions and nuances developed by the educators and researchers who promote the joyful learning approach, I will focus on two offered by the U.S. authorities in the field, that is the Joyful Learning Network and Udvari-Solner and Kluth in their 2007 volume on this very topic.

According to the Joyful Learning Network,

joy captures the thrill of true learning – the curiosity, the passion, the collaboration, the connection, the effort, the fun, the pride, the sharing. Joyful learning speaks to both the learning process, where there is considerable evidence that a focus on techniques that we would describe as joyful are [sic] far more effective, and to an outcome that we believe should be valued highly: Joy.

This quote is in my opinion both powerful and comprehensive: powerful because in just a few words it connects true, long-term learning with intellectual excitement and a pleasant emotional experience, implying a causal relationship. Comprehensive in that joy is presented as a multi-tier concept: in this context, joy is viewed primarily as a key pedagogical instrument for facilitating student learning and retention, but also as a major component of the psychological dimension of the learning process since a highly pleasurable experience will motivate learners to further engage in learning so as to experience more joy.

To the educators in the Joyful Learning Network joyful learning is "engaging, empowering, and playful learning of meaningful content in a loving and supportive community", to the effect that "through the joyful learning process a student is always improving knowledge of self and the world."

Passion, play, purpose, meaningful engagement appear thus to be the defining ingredients of joyful learning. Udvari-Solner and Kluth (Udvari-Solner and Kluth, 2007) further refine this approach to education and intertwine the pleasure of learning with the sense of satisfaction the students derive from learning. In their interpretation, joyful learning is a positive experience, both intellectually and emotionally, commonly ensuing from the students approaching learning with curiosity, engagement, and wonder.

According to the literature, the joyful learning approach is currently being targeted mostly at secondary school students in educational institutions promoting inclusive education in the USA. By way of example, Udvari-Solner and Kluth' book focuses on active and collaborative learning for inclusive education in this educational environment. However, my teaching practice suggests that joyful learning is relevant for college education as well, where it could make a significant contribution to the learning process by enhancing the positive affective factors that impact student learning. The following quote supports my perception that joyful learning has a lot to contribute to college education as well.

Beyond the pedagogical benefits, active and collaborative learning make lessons much more enjoyable for both students and teachers. Educators have revealed that when students who are accustomed to active learning begin working in their groups or engaging in a familiar game or structure, the entire mood and feel of the classroom changes. The volume rises, students are talking, interactions that might not happen spontaneously occur, laughter is common, and everyone has an opportunity to contribute and to learn. (Udvari-Solner and Kluth, 2007: xxiii)

With the comment that the active learning mentioned above is the same as engaged learning, the classroom situation described is what every educator wants to see in their class, not less so the language teacher in an undergraduate program: engaged students who cooperate for solving the task in a stress-free environment in which they feel they are competent and their contributions are valuable. Is this type of

educational experience going to be pleasing and satisfactory to college students as well? The practical application in section 3.1 offers the answer that my teaching experience affords.

One may wonder why all this emphasis on making the learning experience exciting and satisfying to the students. This may well be the case especially in more conservative academic environments, like Romania, where the affective factors have been traditionally underplayed, if not altogether underestimated and disregarded by the educational decision-makers. Conservative academic environment or not, research has been able to provide the definitive answer and to connect joy and effective learning through the release of a neurotransmitter, dopamine, responsible both for inducing a sense of excitement and happiness and for enhancing retention of learning content. The following quote is one of the many that shed light on the relevance of happiness to learning.

I like to refer to dopamine as the “save button” in the brain. When dopamine is present during an event or experience, we remember it; when it is absent, nothing seems to stick. There are actually some regions of the brain that increase our motivation and interest in activities. Often referred to collectively as the reward center, the regions are activated by dopamine. And the more motivated and interested we are in an activity the more dopamine is released and the better we remember it. The reward center helps us to stay focused and repeat activities that were reinforced through positive outcomes – whether it is finding and returning to a location where good things happened in our life or just remembering interesting information. So as a teacher the next question you might ask is, “How do I increase dopamine levels in my students’ brains so that they are motivated to learn and remember what I teach?” And, believe it or not, the answer is pretty straight forward – “make learning NEW, EXCITING, and REWARDING. (Burns, 2012:1)

As to the impact of positive emotions on the cognitive activity, Harvard-trained psychologist Shawn Achor states it clearly:

If you can raise somebody's level of positivity in the present, then their brain experiences what we now call a happiness advantage, which is your brain at positive performs significantly better than at negative, neutral or stressed. Your intelligence rises, your creativity rises, your energy levels rise. Your brain at positive is 31% more productive than your brain at negative, neutral or stressed. (Achor, 10:29)

How can we then transfer all this positive psychology knowledge to the language class, integrate it with our teaching vision, and gear it towards more productive learning?

2.3. Pedagogical Applications

The pedagogical applications tend to amalgamate research findings, instances of good practice, and the teachers’ own intuitions and reflections. As such they aim to highlight the new, the exciting and the rewarding, alongside the strategies and techniques that can generate them in the environment of the Business English class. Due attention is commonly paid to student engagement and empowerment as key ingredient of joyful learning.

Why all this emphasis on student empowerment? According to research, when students feel empowered they become fully committed to the learning process. As a result, they will be

intellectually, socially, physically, and emotionally engaged with the content of the course, with the teacher, and with fellow students... Functionally, empowerment, we suggest, means (a) granting control of course content to the students, (b) permitting students to co-create the subject matter content with each other and with the teacher, (c) enabling the voice of students, (d) enabling choice for students, and (e) enabling creativity with students. (Bryer and Seigler, 2012:430)

In order to achieve this, educators will be wise to focus on the students' capabilities and allow them to build on their own strengths, or as Drucker, quoted by Duhon-Haynes, explains: "Education must focus on the strengths and talents of learners so that they can excel in whatever it is that they do well... one cannot build performance on weakness, even correct ones. One can build performance only on strengths." (Duhon-Haynes, 1996: 4)

Moreover, educators who mean to create joyful learning experiences for their students and facilitate thus superior retention, will necessarily consider student empowerment and will therefore be concerned about the following aspects of the classroom experience which are relevant to empowerment: student perception of their education and how they experience it; the students' role in knowledge creation; the affective baggage they bring to the learning experiences, and more. Basically, "do they [the students] feel they are giving or only getting information? Do they have opportunities to demonstrate what they know and can do? Do they care about what they are learning? Are daily experiences fun or at least satisfying?" (Udvari-Solner and Kluth, 2007: viii)

The above questions resonate with every teacher's observation that some students will struggle and the teacher's expectation is that the students will need to take action and address the issue. The proponents of joyful learning have actually developed a wider repertoire of responses to such classroom realities:

We have consistently observed that students struggle not because they cannot learn the content but because they cannot learn in the way they are being taught. Too often, we expect students to change or to leave our classrooms when they experience failure or are disengaged. More often, we should be examining the classroom itself, questioning our teaching approaches and curriculum, and evaluating all the ways we might support, engage, respond to, and challenge every student. (Udvari-Solner and Kluth, 2007: viii)

With student engagement and empowerment as the foundations of joyful learning, in what follows we will be surveying the key pedagogical decisions that promote and facilitate these two key ingredients of effective and productive learning, as they emerge from the literature, in an attempt to adapt them to our circumstances, so as to have them inform the teaching practice.

Student empowerment has long been looked upon as an indispensable component of effective learning in a range of academic environments, primarily in the USA.

As early as 1987, Cummins stated that 'Pedagogical approaches that empower students encourage them to assume greater control over setting their own learning goals and to collaborate actively with each other in achieving these goals' (Cummins, 1986: 28), emphasizing the learning benefits of the 'reciproca', interaction-oriented pedagogy over the traditional 'transmission-oriented' classroom practices. (Arsene, 2016: 214)

Once we accept that engaging and empowering learning experiences underlie joyful, therefore effective student learning, and that "student empowerment - the belief that one has the ability to act effectively and control one's own learning experience - is crucial to the educational, intellectual, and personal development of students (Duhon-Haynes 1966)" (Perrin, 2014:1), then we might benefit from a quick survey of the main pillars of student empowerment which, according to Perrin (Perrin, 2016) are learner autonomy, accountability, and peer support.

Learner autonomy is manifested in various ways, most commonly as students identifying resources and opportunities for their own learning. Student selection or even construction of learning goals, objectives, and outcomes, student selection of activities and projects meant to achieve the intended outcomes, student-developed assessment strategies, are all indicative of learner autonomy.

Since college education has a major social dimension and students build knowledge in interaction with peers and teachers, students are held accountable for the quality of the work they contribute to the class.

Research has been able to document this extensively. A sample is available in what follows. Although the quote refers to student empowerment and the accountability that experiential learning by means of internship programs promotes, its relevance appears to be significantly wider, therefore its inclusion below.

When students see that they are being relied upon to produce professional-level work, the learning reaches a new level. Accountability to others is considered to be a core component of learning (Parsons 2000). Their work is evaluated and critiqued in an applied work environment. Being given responsibility - and accepting it - is associated with empowerment, a sense of personal agency, increased levels of self-confidence and perceptions of capability (Clouder 2009). Students have the opportunity to learn from their successes and failures through discussions with their supervisor and instructor. After the presentations, students and supervisors meet to discuss each student's work. While addressing positives and negatives, supervisors highlight specific areas for professional growth based upon the student's professional presentation. (Perrin, 2016: 7)

Peer support ranks as another key pillar of the learning process. Peer-to-peer discussions, peer-to-peer feedback, the informal questions, comments, and challenges students may raise to their colleagues, all help to hone student assessment skills and ultimately self-assessment, alongside communication skills. Peer support is a valuable empowerment trigger also in light of its potential for developing student management and leadership, particularly the ability to motivate others, which is a major aspect of effective leadership.

The benefits of empowering students go beyond the aspects outlined so far and research continues to provide further evidence of its relevance to producing effective learning, as the quote below indicates.

We believe the use of both active and collaborative approaches achieves positive outcomes by promoting student dignity and empowerment, facilitating self-management, attending to a sense of community, and increasing the energy and awareness of both teachers and students.” (Udvari-Solner and Kluth, 2007: xx)

3. The Blossom

This section focuses on the approach I developed together with first-year college students in order to make their Business English learning experience productive and effective by creating opportunities for student empowerment and also by adding a joyful dimension to the process.

3.1 Joyful Learning for College Freshmen: The Business English Class

Out of the three freshman groups I was teaching last year, for this study I picked the one where attendance and enthusiasm were constantly high, the students were always in a cheerful disposition when we met for our Business English class and they appeared to have an insatiable appetite for fresh perspectives. Their language level ranged from rusty B.1 to flamboyant C.1. They were thrilled to become subjects of this study, the Hawthorne effect set in, and together we were able to explore a number of options intended to enrich the textbook - a Business English textbook recently published in the UK which they found somewhat too dense and remote from their everyday interests - so as to make learning more exciting and, hopefully, more productive. Initially I invited them to come up with business articles of their choice which resonate with the unit covered together in class. The reading-heavy activity soon turned out to be only moderately palatable to the students in the group, so only some learners got engaged and started to search articles that they summarized and then presented briefly in class, inviting their peers' reaction.

After a number of moderately successful attempts to engage the whole group in what we called a “treasure hunt” for informative and fun articles with a strong business flavour from the international business press, we agreed that articles were somehow too static and definitely not exciting enough for dynamic them. At

that point we decided to shift to YouTube videos. And then we had our Eureka moment: TED talks that speak to their interests.

As a rule, I would select three TED talks and invite each student to choose 2. We agreed together that they would then watch their preferred two talks at home, write a summary, pick 5 language items of their choice from the talk that they would research and then teach their colleagues in class, and they would also react to the talk and share their personal reaction with the group. In class they would work in groups with their peers who had picked the same two videos. We would also analyse the ingredients of the presentation, what exactly made it so persuasive, effective, powerful, as the case may be, and also looked into the presentation style. The students then decided what they would like to pick from each presenter in order to improve their own presentation skills. And more.

At this stage they were thrilled and engaged, and the quality of the talks together with the comprehensive assignment that looked at topic, quality of presentation, presenter's charisma, humour, pace of presentation, etc. contributed a lot to their enthusiastic response. They loved the degree of choice the tasks gave them. As the classroom practice consistently demonstrates, "giving students the power to choose creates a sense of ownership over the learning. (Svitak, 2012: 1)" (Arsene, 2016: 216)

In addition, I invited one student per session to make recommendations of talks that he or she had found to be adequate, preferably perfect, for our teaching purposes. They loved the opportunity and once we decided collectively on the topics that we considered relevant, they clearly took advantage of the many excellent talks and picked the best. By way of example, in one session the 3 talks focusing the students' attention were Shawn Achor, The Happiness Advantage, Tim Urban, Inside the Mind of a Master Procrastinator, and Dan Pink, The Puzzle of Motivation.

The classes were full of excitement, the eyes were bright, and the learning was truly joyful. I still remember Adela who captured the general mood when she concluded her presentation of Tim Urban's talk with the most rewarding comment: "I watched it 3 times, it was so funny and smart, I couldn't stop laughing. I completely forgot I was watching it for school, to do my homework." And then we carried on in this joyful, engaged and productive fashion until the end of the semester when they were to write the term-paper. As we revisited the topics they were expected to prepare for the term-paper, we were debating if to include the TED talks or not. We finally did, after a struggle. They insisted so much and they provided solid arguments and even evidence that they had learned a lot from them.

Joyful learning and empowerment have been actually able to change the paradigm: students pleaded with the teacher to have extra content included in the learning content they had to prepare for the test. As they explained afterwards, they wanted to show evidence of linguistic progress, so as to make sure we would continue in the same fashion, that is with joyful engagement of the students in the selection of the learning content and their contribution to designing the tasks around it.

Once the semester was over and I was able to collect all the data, I started to dissect it in order to identify common experiences, trends, and evidence of productive learning. The students' ad hoc as well as summative reflective comments document the language class as rich in intellectual excitement and stimulation, thus adding a joyful dimension to the learning process. Moreover, the written and oral assignments gave ample evidence of effective learning and enhanced learning outcomes. With gusto, too.

4. Conclusions

Now that our research questions have been addressed, we have specific answers, relevant to the subject group. However, the topic will benefit from further research as the findings of this small-scale study are clearly not applicable to all learning environments and subjects. The findings cannot be generalized since there is no random sampling procedure and the research builds on a selected case. This appears to be in

line with the very essence of qualitative research, according to Perrin who states that “the goal of qualitative research is to focus on the ‘process or the meanings individuals attribute to their given social situation, not necessarily to make generalizations’ (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006, p. 70).” (Perrin, p. 2)

The research has confirmed that joyful learning is highly relevant to young college students as well, and that when coupled with student engagement and empowerment it will lead to thrilling learning experiences with productive learning outcomes.

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