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## Shifting Emotions in Speaking English as an Additional Language

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### Abstract

The present research explores the trajectory of changing emotions throughout the lifelong experience of English language learning and language use among English-as-an-Additional-Language (EAL) students at a Vietnamese university. It employs a qualitatively-driven mixed methods research design with two phases of data collection using initial and exploratory self-designed questionnaires, followed by semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. The quantitative data, collected from English majored students aimed to capture the range of emotions the participants experienced in speaking English. The qualitative data, collected from the students recruited from the questionnaire phase, revealed the complexity and dynamism of their emotions in the process of language learning and use. The findings show that the participants experienced shifting emotions across the different contexts of language learning, including school, out-of-school, and tertiary contexts. The emotions were seen to be dynamic, socially and contextually constructed, emerging from their social circumstances and interaction with others. They were interwoven with self-concept, language learning success, perceived standing in different communities, and relationships with others. The results also provide theoretical and practical implications for emotion research and pedagogies of EAL teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** emotions, language use, EAL, trajectory, social interactions

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## **1. Introduction**

As a step to further enhance language teachers' and learners' foreign language proficiency, the Vietnamese government issued a decree approving a national foreign languages project for the period of 2008-2020 (now extended to 2025) (The Prime Minister, 2008). The ultimate aim of this project is to reform the teaching and learning of foreign languages nationwide to improve language teachers' knowledge and capacity to use a foreign language. It also aims to train Vietnamese graduates to use a foreign language independently and confidently to communicate, study, and work (The Prime Minister, 2008).

Although a great deal of effort has been invested in language education, most secondary school graduates cannot use the English language they have studied for seven years or more for basic communication (T. H. Le, 2011). Several researchers (e.g., V. C. Le & Barnard, 2009; Tomlinson & Dat, 2004) have recognised that traditional pedagogies emphasizing the mastery of grammar and vocabulary rather than communicative competence have failed to satisfy various communicative needs in an era of globalization.

One of the reasons for the inability to speak English effectively could relate to the students' personal characteristics, such as being "quiet and attentive, good at memorizing and following directions, reluctant to participate, and shy away from oral skills and from group interaction" (H. T. Nguyen, 2002, p.4). Such personal characteristics around learning English together with culturally respectful attitudes toward teachers and older people might prevent the students from improving their speaking skills and hence cause them to avoid communicating with other people.

Unlike at secondary schools, more investment to strengthen the quality of teaching, and English speaking has received more attention at tertiary level. At university, classes are arranged around the four language modes. Thus, each practical skill receives an equal focus. Despite the development in language teaching techniques, university students' ability to communicate in English remains a concern for language teachers and educators (T. G. L. Nguyen et al., 2010; Thanh Ha, 2008).

The review of the literature (see Ewald, 2007; Kim, 2009; Kitano, 2001; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Lucas et al., 2011; Subaşı, 2010; Williams & Andrade, 2008) has indicated that the focus on the individualistic cognitive dimensions of emotion in a linear cause and effect paradigm has sidelined the social dimensions of emotion. As

previous research (e.g., Bown & White, 2010; Imai, 2010) has predominantly paid attention to emotion in language classroom contexts (Al-Obaydi et al, 2023; Derakhshan, 2022a, 2022b; Fan & Wang, 2022; Han & Wang, 2021; Shakki, 2022) at a specific time, re-focusing emotion research on shifting emotions throughout the lifelong experience of English language learning and use may provide valuable insights into understanding the complexity and dynamics of emotions. The present research exploring the trajectory of changing emotions of Vietnamese EAL learners will contribute to adding to the literature of the field a fuller picture of emotions that are socially constructed, shifted, and accumulated over time in a wide range of contexts in their long-lasting process of learning and using the English language.

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What emotions do Vietnamese EAL university students report experiencing when speaking English?
2. How have emotions affected their English speaking over time since they began learning English?

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. On the Concept of Emotion***

The definitions of emotion vary across disciplines. From a psychological perspective, emotion is commonly viewed as a physiological, cognitive and psychological state which is brief, rapid, intense, and short-lived, and usually stems from a definite cause (Colman, 2009; Keltner & Ekman, 2000). In this sense, emotion is primarily cognitive and internal to the individual.

Wetherell (2012, p.3) criticizes the conventional psychological paradigm as too narrow and restrictive and proposes that emotions need to describe a “range and variety of affective performances, affective scenes and affective events”. She employs affective practice as a key concept which “focuses on the emotional as it appears in social life and tries to follow what participants do” (Wetherell, 2012, p.4). This suggests that emotion is complex and dynamic and needs to be interpreted with consideration for all the relationships with which it is experienced. More recently, there has been a call for a more holistic view of emotions, including emotions in

foreign language classrooms (e.g., Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; MacIntyre, 2017; Saito et al., 2018) and across different learning contexts (Zhang et al., 2021).

## ***2.2. The Development of Emotion Research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)***

The long interest in emotions in the SLA literature has focused predominantly on language anxiety. The social turn in SLA has also driven researchers to include social dimensions of emotion in addition to its cognitive ones.

### ***2.2.1. Individualistic Cognitive Dimensions of Emotion***

Research has adopted a linear cause-effect relationship of emotion and language learning; i.e., a dichotomy of negative and positive emotions and their detrimental or beneficial effects on language learning. This approach has focused on identifying direct causes and effects of anxiety on language learning. As such, this view has diminished the complexity of emotions and learning, and sidelined contextual differences and changing emotions.

A number of researchers (e.g., Ewald, 2007; Kitano, 2001; Subaşı, 2010) have agreed that language anxiety mainly arises from the learners themselves, and involves their personalities and beliefs about language learning. Learners' fear of negative evaluation was identified as one of the main sources (Horwitz et al., 1986). This source was also confirmed in a great deal of later research (e.g., Ayuningtyas et al., 2022; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Kim, 2009; Kitano, 2001; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Lucas et al., 2011; Rantala & Greenier, 2020; Subaşı, 2010; Williams & Andrade, 2008).

Researchers have further attributed learners' anxiety to others, such as friends, and particularly their teachers. Half of the students in Subaşı's (2010) study thought that teachers were responsible for their anxiety. Students' fear of appearing foolish when speaking the target language in front of peers is also associated with language anxiety (Frantzen & Sieloff Madnan, 2005; Kim, 2009; Liu & Jackson, 2008; MacIntyre, 1999; Young, 1991). Teachers' harsh manners in correcting students' errors are also seen as an anxiety provoking factor (Horwitz, 1988; Koch & Terrell, 1991; Lucas et al., 2011; Subaşı, 2010). In addition, a few researchers (e.g., Huang, 2014; Ohata, 2005) consider cultural factors to be sources of language learners' anxiety. In Ohata's

(2005) study of Japanese ESL learners' perspectives of the influence of Japanese cultural norms on the nature of language anxiety, for example, one of the participants reported that his culturally fixed beliefs about learning prevented him from asking the teacher or his peers to explain the topic again when everyone in the class seemed to understand it. Apart from the general tendency to view anxiety as a hindrance to language learning, some second language researchers assert the existence of positive effects of anxiety (Argaman & Abu-Rabia, 2002; Humphries et al., 2015; Oxford, 1998). One of the participants in Humphries et al.'s (2015, p.169) study indicated that anxiety could facilitate capacity to speak: "when doing a presentation [I could speak well] because it made me nervous".

### *2.2.2. Expanding the Scope of Emotion Research: Other Emotions*

With the work of Imai (2010) and others (e.g., Bown & White, 2010; Piasecka, 2013), the scope of emotion research has expanded beyond anxiety. A number of researchers have found a wide range of emotions in the process of language learning and language participation (Aragão, 2011; Bown & White, 2010; Derakhshan, 2022b; Garrett & Young, 2009; Imai, 2007, 2010; Miyahara, 2015; Piasecka, 2013; So & Dominguez, 2005; Swain, 2013; Wang et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). Bown and White (2010) found that university students experienced a range of emotions in the language course, including more negative emotions such as frustration, shame, anxiety, and despair than positive ones such as enjoyment, hope and pride. Looking at emotions from a different setting, Imai (2010) explored how a group of ESL students constructed and shared their emotional attitudes in collaborative learning and how such emotional intersubjectivity affected the group work. He focused on the students' manifestation of emotions in their verbal communication while working together to prepare for their group presentation. The findings showed that as the students participated in the group discussion to pursue their task goals in the immediate learning setting, they verbally manifested, shaped and constructed various emotions, such as confusion, boredom, frustration, regret, and empathy (Imai, 2010).

A few of these researchers have begun to look beyond identifying direct cause and effect to investigate the role of emotions in language learning. The literature on emotion has become more complex and challenged the traditional notions of detrimental and beneficial effects of negative and positive emotions on language outcomes. Imai (2010, p. 278) has found that the unpleasant emotions in his study

did not hinder the group from realizing their goals; rather, he saw them as able to “mediate development” in knowledge co-construction. Despite the negative emotions, the participants in Imai’s study continued working to complete their assignment, interacted with each other, co-constructed their knowledge and developed their language.

The idea of mediation is also reinforced in Miyahara’s (2015) study. She explores identity formation among Japanese EFL learners and examines how emotion is involved in the learning process. Her study seeks to fill the gap between the social and psychological dimensions of identity construction, focusing on learners’ emotions and experience in their language learning. By conceptualizing emotions as socially constructed and focusing on the learners’ emotional experiences in their L2 learning process, Miyahara (2015) sees how emotions mediate the learners’ transitions in their experiential world. The findings of the research show that both negative and positive emotions can “prompt a learner to act”. However, learners with positive emotions tend to be more flexible and strategic in their language learning (Miyahara, 2015, p.162).

These studies suggest the need for further research on the role of emotions in the language learning process, which goes beyond the typical view on the cause and effect relationship between emotions and language learning proficiency or outcomes.

### *2.2.3. Social Dimensions of Emotion*

SLA researchers (e.g., Garrett & Young, 2009; Imai, 2010; Miyahara, 2015; Swain, 2013) have theorised emotions as socially and contextually constructed. Complexifying the linear cause and effect paradigm, they view emotion shaped from social interactions as partly influencing the language learning process.

Contexts are taken into consideration in a social paradigm. Edwards (2009, p.3), for example, challenges the typical definition of context as “a bounded container within which the learning takes place or a more fluid and relational set of practices”. For him, the educational context involves various school settings and is expanded to the relationship between people, which is mediated through a variety of social, organizational and technological factors. As stated by Schutz et al. (2006), emotion is not shaped in a vacuum. It is constructed when people are interacting with each other.

From a social view, emotion researchers have demonstrated that emotions emerge from teacher-student and peer relationships in language classroom contexts. Swain (2013) analysed a very short conversation between two language learners and saw changing emotions of self-pride, pleasure, pride and admiration, trust, frustration, excitement, exhilaration, joy, and a sense of satisfaction in each turn as they exchanged their ideas to construct knowledge. The emotions in this instance were interpersonally and socially constructed. In the context of individualized instruction programmes at an American university, Bown and White (2010) have found that the students' various emotions also emerged from the interactions with teachers and other learners.

Although there has been interest in investigating the social dimensions of emotions, for the most part, research has focused on the local events in the classroom at specific times rather than the emotional experiences that have accumulated over time.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Research Paradigm and Research Design***

In order to explore how emotion is perceived to play a role in the English oral communication of the EAL students, an interpretive paradigm was adopted as this paradigm is concerned with people, what they think, and how they see the world, feel about it, and act within it (Neuman, 2012; Thomas, 2009).

This study fits in a mixed methods research design involving quantitative and qualitative approaches. In this design, quantitative data is collected first, followed by a collection of qualitative data. In the view of numerous scholars, the qualitative data helps to explain the results of quantitative data (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Creswell et al., 2006; Hesse-Biber, 2010). In other words, the voices of the participants elaborate on quantitative findings. Thus, qualitative methods are central to the research design, and the quantitative component plays an auxiliary role. This type of research design offers a new way of “understanding the complexities and contexts of social experience, and for enhancing our capacities for social explanation” (Mason, 2006, p.10).

### 3.2. Participants

The research was conducted in the English faculty of a university of foreign languages in Central Vietnam, with 102 EAL students being invited to complete the online questionnaire. These students were in their final year of their four-year TEFL bachelor degree.

The ten students participating in interviews and reflective journals included two males and eight females recruited from questionnaire participants. Five of them began to learn English from grade three (age 8-9) at primary school and the others started from grade six at secondary school. Most came from the countryside and went to village schools where they had little access to modern learning facilities and learning materials. Until university, the majority did not have an opportunity to see and/or speak English to *foreigners*, a term they used for Westerners who were assumed to be English speakers.

### 3.3. Data Collection Methods

Questionnaire was employed in the first phase of data collection, followed by interviews and reflective journals in the second phase.

#### 3.3.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed and informed by relevant literature on emotions. It includes questions on the demographic and linguistic background of the participants and detailed questions about their experiences learning English in formal classroom settings. It provided information about the students' perceptions of the levels of emotions in their early and current experiences speaking English and in some specific communicative events, along with the influence of these emotions on their English speaking.

#### 3.3.2. Interview

There were two rounds of semi-structured interviews in the study. The first interviews were conducted after the questionnaire, prior to the first reflective journals. The second interviews occurred after the last entry of reflective journals. The main focus of the first interview was to elicit the students' perceptions of what part emotions played in English language communication. The second interview



was conducted to clarify the information from the first interviews and to request that participants elaborate on the information in their reflective journals. Vietnamese was preferred by every participant. The interviews were scheduled at a time that was most convenient to the participants and were recorded.

### *3.3.3. Reflective Journal*

The participants were asked to keep reflective journals, at least one per week for a total of six weeks, focusing on their emotions when speaking English. The data obtained from this research tool provided clues to possible interpretations of the participants' immediate emotions and helped gain greater depth of knowledge about their emotions over time, form ideas and formulate questions for subsequent interviews (Elliott, 1997; Jacelon & Imperio, 2005).

The participants were encouraged to use their cell phones or other recording devices to record their feelings immediately after speaking English. The purpose of self-recording was to record their spontaneous feelings and offset any changes over time (Bamberg, 2006). The idea of self-recording was not welcomed at first due to their lack of recording devices and discomfort talking to a machine. We reached a compromise that they could write each reflection and email it to the researcher. The journal prompts which included guideline questions for the participants to keep journals, were delivered to each participant as a hard copy after the first interview and also via email as a reminder. They were encouraged to send the researcher their entry at the end of the day after they finished one.

### *3.4. Data Analysis*

The questionnaire data was processed and analyzed using the Lime Survey programme. Frequency descriptions were employed to indicate the general trend of the range of emotions the students experienced and the perceived influences of these emotions on their oral communication.

Six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) to guide qualitative data analysis were adopted in this study. These steps involved transcribing, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas, producing the initial codes from the data, and combining codes to form themes. An ongoing analysis required the

researchers to refine, define and name each theme, and consider how it fits into the overall story. This leads to the final step, the write-up of the report. Finally, a story focusing on the students' changing emotions in their journey of learning and speaking English at primary and secondary schools and at the tertiary level was created.

#### 4. Results

The findings are based on 102 students' questionnaire responses and 10 students' interviews and reflective journals. As can be seen in Table 1, the numbers of participants' responses to each item vary because the participants selected only the emotions that they experienced in those situations.

##### 4.1. Emotions EAL Students Experienced when Speaking English: Questionnaire Data

###### 4.1.1. Students' Reported Perceptions of Types and Levels of Emotions in their Early and Current Experiences Speaking English

**Table 1**

*Students' Reported Perceptions of Types and Levels of Emotions in their Early and Current Experiences Speaking English*

	Early experiences				Current experiences			
	N	Little or none (%)	Somewhat (%)	Quite & Very (%)	N	Little or none (%)	Some what (%)	Quite & Very (%)
Content	82	32	30	38	78	8	23	69
Confident	81	44	26	30	79	9	21	70
Excited	82	16	29	55	77	3	17	80
Proud	83	49	24	27	78	18	41	41
Embarrassed	80	17	28	55	78	51	36	13
Nervous	80	26	28	46	77	57	30	13
Frustrated	80	39	28	33	76	65	22	13

Table 1 shows that positive emotions were reported by the participants more frequently than negative ones. However, the reported levels of emotions varied

depending on each emotion and their years of learning and speaking English.

More than half of the students (55%) reported feeling quite and very excited and the same number embarrassed, and 46% of them experienced strong levels of nervousness when they first spoke English. Approximately half of them felt a little or not confident (44%) or proud of themselves (49%). There did not appear to be a clear trend of reported levels of being content and frustrated in the participants' early experiences speaking English. Each level was experienced by around a third of the students. In addition to the listed emotions, some added that they felt eager, worried about grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, bored, a little afraid of not being understood, disappointed, stressed, uncomfortable and shy.

Regarding their current experiences, the great majority of the students reported that they felt quite excited and very excited at speaking English (80%). The number of students who reported being quite and very content and confident increased from around a third in their early experiences (38% and 30%, respectively) to over two thirds in their current experiences (69% and 70%, respectively). More than half to nearly two thirds of the students who responded to this question felt no or a little embarrassment, nervousness, and frustration speaking English currently (at 51%, 57%, and 65%, respectively). A fair number of the students (41%) felt somewhat proud of themselves and the same percentage felt quite and very proud. Additionally, several students provided their comments. One student reported still being worried about grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary; some found it interesting, free and natural to speak English.

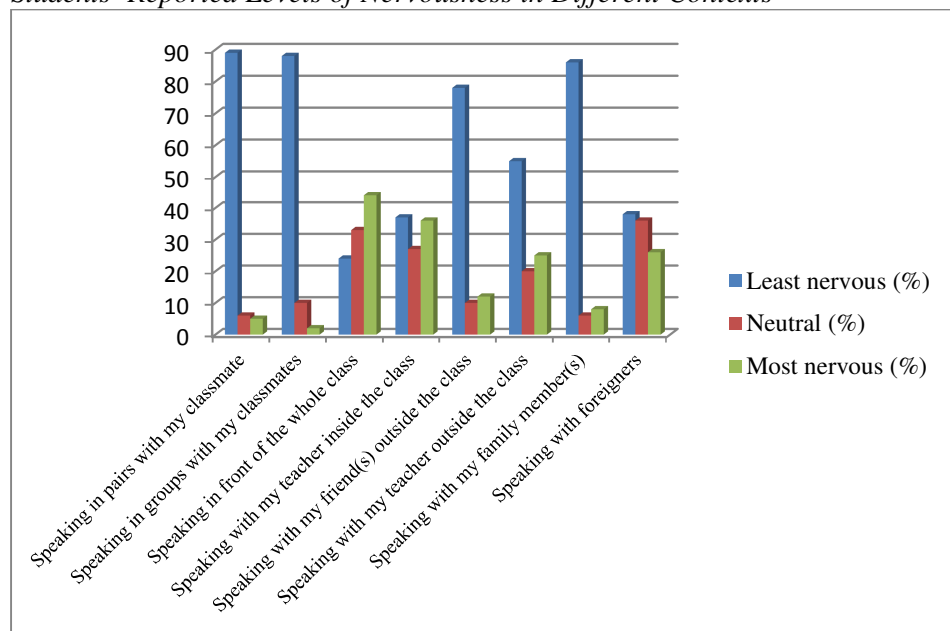
#### *4.1.2. Students' Reported Levels of Nervousness in Different Contexts*

Figure 1 indicates that a majority of students felt slightly nervous in most situations. The situations perceived to be the least nervous were speaking in pairs with a classmate (89%), in groups with classmates (88%), with family members (86%), or with their friends outside the class (78%). The situations which were reported to make between a third and nearly half of the students feel most nervous were speaking with the teacher inside the class and speaking in front of the whole class (36% and 44%, respectively). Seemingly, in the formal classroom contexts, the students were inclined to feel nervous because of being watched and evaluated by their teachers and peers. There was no prominent trend for the reported levels of

nervousness speaking with foreigners.

**Figure 1**

*Students' Reported Levels of Nervousness in Different Contexts*



For the questions related to communicative events, including working in pairs with a low-proficient student, participating in a group discussion, speaking with friend(s) outside the class, speaking with their teacher outside the class, speaking with their family member(s), and speaking with an English speaking foreigner, the students reported a wide range of emotions, and more positive emotions than negative ones in almost all situations. The results indicated that positive emotions, especially pleasure and excitement, stimulated the students to speak more, and that negative emotions prevented them from speaking English, as would be expected. Despite negative feelings, a larger proportion of the students reported finding it hard to continue speaking other than being unable to speak. This might mean that they still tried their best to communicate their message. Hence, their communication may not have broken down.

In summary, the questionnaire data has provided the students' perceptions of the emotions they experienced in their English speaking. However, the relationship between emotion and language use is still embedded in a straightforward cause and effect paradigm. The students' stories of their emotional experiences from the

interview and reflective data may help to explain the complexity and dynamics of emotions associated with the changing contexts and social interactions with others. The following section will draw on the qualitative data to present the students' stories of shifting emotions in learning and speaking English.

#### ***4.2. Shifting Emotions in Learning and Speaking English: Interview and Reflective Journal Data***

The students' interview and reflective journal data shows that their emotions varied in different settings where they learned and used English.

##### *4.2.1. Learning English during School Time*

The participants' stories in the interviews suggested that most of them experienced uncertainty, and a lack of interest and engagement in learning English during their school years. The emotions they reported experiencing in their early English language learning process at primary schools were negativity and uncertainty associated with their teachers' teaching methods. All of the students stated that when they first commenced learning English they were too young to realise the significance of learning this language. They were not guided by their parents and their language teachers. The students reported the same negative experiences learning English in secondary schools as occurred in primary schools. Their lack of interest and engagement was associated with the language teaching methods their teachers implemented.

All of the students reported that the focus of English lessons at secondary school was predominantly grammar and vocabulary. Their negativity towards English was apparent through their use of some words with negative connotations such as *chỉ* (just / only) and *không bao giờ* (never). For example, S3 said: "My teachers only taught me how to use grammatical points exactly. So, I could master grammatical points and vocabulary" (S3, Interview 1). Other students confirmed in our first interviews that they were only taught grammar, and nothing inspired them or made them excited in English classes. The long period of learning English at school was considered by S2 as a "process of accumulating grammar, structures and vocabulary" (S2, Interview 1).

Negativity was also apparent in the students' stories about their opportunities to be exposed to spoken English inside the classroom. All the students reported seldom being exposed to spoken English in their English classrooms because their teachers spoke Vietnamese most of the time, even when giving simple instructions. S3's disappointment could be detected through her description of her English class.

Once again, these negative responses suggested the students' lack of interest and engagement in the language classroom, and it seemed that they did not have any opportunities to speak English in class. This type of experience was common to all of the students of this study, and seemed to be caused by a focus on examination preparation. S2 explained that the long-lasting focus on grammar, structures and vocabulary in secondary school was controlled by examination-oriented language learning and teaching. Speaking and listening skills were not assessed in any English examinations.

However, three students (S4, S5 and S10) reported enthusiastic teaching from several teachers who provided them with opportunities to practise speaking English in their senior secondary school years. Nonetheless, speaking was defined by S5 as saying aloud individual sentences students composed after learning a grammar point rather than communicative language teaching. S5 added that speaking was then expanded to role-play or presentation on a prepared topic (S5, Interview 1). This meant that speaking was not completely excluded from secondary classrooms but was highly controlled. According to these students, the introduction to speaking caused them anxiety instead of excitement or enjoyment. S4 clarified that not being familiar with English pronunciation prevented them from opening their mouths to speak. She stated, "We usually felt very anxious when it came to speaking" (S5, Interview 1). Alternatively, they fell into the habit of reading aloud what they had written, which was then criticised by their teacher.

In spite of their negative experiences learning English in school, five of the students pointed out that they had passion for English and were determined to learn more English outside the classroom. They reported this as due to factors such as their parents' support, their admiration of a teacher or their personal effort. These students stated they had a love for learning English from an early age. However, they may have thought they were supposed to proceed with their description of what they had learned or experienced during their school time, so no detail of their passion for English was further given in the interviews. In S3's case, she merely found it "interesting yet strange to be able to speak another language apart from my

first language. Thus, my love for English developed over time” (S3, Interview 1). Like other students, S9 said she had a passion for English at an early age and dreamed of becoming an English teacher since she was a little girl. She reported having more opportunities to practise English with foreigners than other students in her school because her parents managed a travel agency serving domestic and foreign tourists when she was in grade 5. She felt that despite this she did not make use of the advantages because her anxiety caused her to freeze.

For some students, their love for English grew when they received support from their parents to learn English outside the classroom. Their passion came from their admiration of other people or pride in themselves when they were complimented by others. S1 and S5 agreed that they were fortunate to have parents who sent them to extra English classes or to a language centre.

S5 told of how she enjoyed learning English in a self-organised group with the guidance of an enthusiastic newly-graduated teacher. Her passion guided her to learn more English at a language centre when she was in grade 7. Her reported excitement was linked with how classmates saw her language performance: “The language centre was very far from my place, a 20-minute-cycling distance. [...] What inspired me more was when I opened my mouth to speak, the older students in the class uttered, “Very good! She speaks so beautifully.” This made me feel more excited” (S5, Interview 1).

For S1 and S5, their love for English drove them to become more interested and engaged in learning English, particularly in terms of mastering grammar points and sentence structures and enriching their vocabulary. However, speaking English appeared not to be prominent in their English learning experiences during their school life.

Unlike other students, S2 stated that she had a love for English in her early years which gave her a strong determination to learn and speak the language. Her first experience of English exposure was in Grade 3. She reported that she happened to learn about English through an English song she heard, which had an impact on her later language learning.

Despite her eagerness, when she officially began learning English at school, she experienced uncertainty with the subject. She perceived herself as one of the weakest English students in the class. Nonetheless, she reported that her love for English

stimulated her to study harder after her first year of learning English at school. S2's success led her to be included in the group of gifted English students of her school. By the end of grade 7, she won the third prize in a provincial English examination, which further encouraged her to continue studying English. During the last two years at her junior secondary school, she was taught English among the members of the English gifted group, but "the teaching focus was still grammar and vocabulary" (S2, Interview 1). The milestone that she considered the most important for her was when she attended an English oratory contest at the end of grade 8.

According to S2, in spite of coming from the countryside where people have fewer opportunities to access favourable learning conditions and facilities, her success inspired her to study harder to find a place for herself. Moreover, she reported attributing her achievements to her determination and boldness when she first exposed herself to English. In addition to her love for English and her determination to learn the language, S2 stated that she owed her success in speaking English to her carefree approach to making mistakes.

In short, many of the students, despite reporting having a passion for English, tended to be greatly influenced by the traditional teaching method that did not give them an incentive for full engagement in the learning process during school. By contrast, a few students who were inspired by their parents, other important persons, and their self-perception attempted to learn the language to be successful.

#### *4.2.2. Learning English at University*

All the students made distinctions between learning English at school and at university. At school, they mainly learned English grammar and vocabulary, and developed their reading skills. At university, they were taught four English skills separately, and actively sought opportunities to speak and practice speaking English inside and outside the classroom. They felt that they did not learn much English at school. S1 stated, "I have really learned English for these three or four years now" (S1, Interview 1). Although three students had mentioned having opportunities to speak English during school, all of them still acknowledged that they started speaking English when they entered the university. As S2 remarked, "At university, I really learned speaking. I spoke a lot for the first two years and I used all chances to speak [English]" (S2, Interview 1).

##### *4.2.2.1. Emotional Experiences in Interaction with Teachers*



All of the students reported experiencing excitement, anxiety, and sometimes shame at their first stage of speaking and learning English at university. However, anxiety was the most prominent emotion the students discussed.

Talking about the first experience being taught by an English speaking teacher and speaking to her, S3 stated:

At university, I was taught by a foreigner [a volunteer English speaking teacher] and had opportunities to speak English. I felt very excited and interested in speaking at first. But later on, I felt anxious. (S3, Interview 1)

Like S3, S4 and also others who came from the countryside reported feeling “anxious” being taught by an English-speaking teacher.

I had never seen a foreigner in the countryside before. I felt really anxious. I was afraid that she wouldn’t understand me. Especially, when she asked me questions, I even felt more anxious. (S4, Interview 1)

When talking to Vietnamese teachers, the students also experienced the same feeling of anxiety. This anxiety was described as being associated with transition from rural to urban areas, from high school to university, and different relationships between teachers and students.

Most students tended to feel more stressed, “scared and anxious” (S1, Interview 1) when speaking English to their teachers and answering their questions because they felt the teachers were always assessing them and easily recognized their mistakes. They said they had to think of selecting appropriate vocabulary and structure to produce grammatically correct sentences when talking to their teachers. In the interactions with the teachers in the classroom, the way the teachers treated the students played a role in constructing their emotions. The teachers’ criticism or encouragement is apparently linked with the students’ negative and positive emotions. These emotions in turn affected the way the students perceived themselves in relation to the teachers and their peers.

The students reported that their teachers’ encouragement had a positive emotional impact which stimulated them to fully engage in speaking activities. S3, who perceived herself as always feeling less confident and uncomfortable speaking English in front of the class, reflected on her engagement in difficult English content thanks to her teacher’s encouragement.

In contrast to the positive impact of their teachers' encouragement of the students' speaking, the students stressed that their teachers' criticism drove away their excitement to speak English. Although the students reported admiring their teachers for their wide knowledge and commitment to their teaching profession, several students blamed them for being too demanding. These students agreed that whenever they made any mistakes, their teachers criticized them, which made them feel stressed, nervous, and disappointed. Moreover, they blamed themselves for not meeting their teachers' expectations and hence felt ashamed. As a result, these emotions hindered their eagerness to participate in the classroom speaking activities.

#### 4.2.2.2. Emotional Experiences in Interaction with Highly Proficient Students

Most students reported feeling anxious when speaking to more fluent students though half of them experienced mixed feelings of anxiety and enjoyment when learning from them. S3 stated: "I feel stressed when speaking in front of highly proficient students. (S3, Interview 2)

Similarly, S5 stated that she had the feeling of being inferior and under pressure that prevented her from speaking when talking to more fluent friends. Together with the sense of inferiority and pressure to perform, S5 felt stress and anxiety. She was afraid that her mistakes would easily be discovered by her peers. However, she revealed that her anxiety was later replaced by her enjoyment as she could learn a great deal from more proficient friends. Moreover, talking to them urged her to think of "good ideas" to match theirs so that the conversations went smoothly. Consequently, her confidence in speaking increased. S5's reported enjoyment was also shared by S6, S8, S9 and S10.

The interview and reflective data showed that the students' dominant emotion of anxiety in the classroom was gradually replaced by excitement and an awareness of the significance of being able to speak another language. This inspired them to seek more opportunities to speak to English speakers outside the classroom.

#### 4.2.3. *Speaking English in Out-Of-Classroom Contexts*

##### 4.2.3.1. Meeting Foreigners at Tourist Spots

All the students reported seeking more opportunities to practise English with

foreigners outside the classroom and experienced a range of emotions. S4 talked about her change of emotions from anxiety to excitement but could not explain the reason for that change. In contrast to S4, S3 told of her disappointment when she encountered the reluctance of some English-speaking tourists at some tourist spots.

However, S3 insisted that she did not give up. She looked for other opportunities and her confidence increased together with her effort. S3 described her later experiences:

Later, when I saw English speakers in the park or in the street, I came up and said hello to them. We talked to each other and could understand each other quite well. It was the exposure to the English speakers that made me more confident, which enabled me to think of ideas and vocabulary to express myself. (S3, Interview 2)

#### 4.2.3.2. Joining English Speaking Clubs and Chat Rooms

The most common ways of coming into contact with English speakers the students reported was joining English clubs and online chat rooms. They acknowledged gaining confidence and experiencing enjoyment and comfort participating in these speaking activities. S4, for instance, told of the change of her emotions from anxiety to enjoyment and confidence gained which facilitated her speaking.

I felt very anxious speaking English there [in an English club] though around me were my classmates, non-English major students coming from other universities, and several native English speakers. I was under pressure perhaps because I wanted to show that I was an EAL student. [...] The people there were very friendly and showed their interest in my self-introduction, which made me feel confident and speak better in the following session. I felt more interested in participating in this club and no longer felt anxious. (S4, Interview 1)

As an alternative means of seeking English speakers, S6 and several other students attended chat rooms to build up confidence. S6 stated:

I joined an online Skype programme organized by some overseas Vietnamese which aimed at teaching English for Vietnamese people. After joining it for one year, I felt much more confident. My pronunciation and speaking skills have improved a great deal. I found it interesting and very useful. (S6, Interview 1)

#### 4.2.3.3. Becoming Volunteer Tourist Guides

All the students stated that they volunteered to work as tourist guides for foreigners who came to Vietnam as visitors or official guests. As in other settings, these tour guides also reported experiencing a range of emotions with the visitors. S4 reported experiencing a lack of confidence when speaking to an English-speaking visitor who came to a conference at her university where S4 worked as a host assistant. She was uncertain if she understood the visitor properly. Her tension and embarrassment when she talked to the visitor were described in our first interview.

S5 reflected on her mixed feeling of embarrassment, happiness and pride when being able to speak English to help two foreigners when she worked as a volunteer at an international festival in her area. She wrote in her reflection:

A young western man holding a map asked me the way to the stage where the opening ceremony was held. At first, I felt quite embarrassed because a lot of volunteers and policemen were standing around us. I quickly calmed myself and pointed at the map to show them the direction. The short conversation ended with the grateful thanks from those foreigners. Actually, I was very happy at that moment because I had just done a useful thing by using my English. Besides, other volunteers and people there looked at me with respect, which made me feel proud of myself a lot. (S5, Reflection 1)

There were different attitudes about her English performance depending on the role played by others in the immediate context. Although she admitted that she was not very concerned about accuracy when speaking to native English speakers, she still considered speaking English accurately in the presence of non-English major Vietnamese students to confirm her positive EAL learner and speaker self-concept.

The students' stories suggest that they did not really feel emotionally engaged in English speaking. Their emotional disengagement was due to the negativity and uncertainty associated with traditional pedagogical practice. It may also be related to the relative disadvantages in their social background and a possible absence of parental promotion of learning English in their early years. Anxiety was the dominant emotion the students reported experiencing across contexts in social interactions with their teacher, peers, and native English speakers.

Some evidence in the data also highlighted a change of emotions in relation to the feeling of being valued, a sense of recognition and admiration, a passion for English, strong determination and personal effort. These emotions were described

to play an essential role in determining the success in some students' English learning and speaking.

The presentation of information about the students' exposure to English outside the classroom indicates that the students have actively sought opportunities to learn and practise English. The exposure has moved them forward from being English learners to being English speakers. This process has shown shifting emotions from predominant anxiety to a wide range of emotions associated with informal settings, imagined interlocutors' attitudes and students' English learner and speaker self-concept.

### **5. Discussion**

The quantitative data confirmed the importance of a wide range of emotions in the participants' early and current experiences of speaking English. The qualitative findings, however, add considerable depth and complexity to understanding emotion in language learning across changing contexts. The qualitative findings build on the recent emotion theorising of applied linguists like Bown and White (2010), Swain (2013) and Ushioda (2009), for example. Bown and White (2010) call for theories that see "emotions as integral to the interpersonal processes that create the learning context moment by moment" (p. 441).

The qualitative data of this study show how emotion plays out in relational contexts, shedding light on the kinds of relational factors involved in language learning and use. The findings suggest a number of major interconnected themes related to participants' shifting emotions about English language and learning. They are issues of belonging, acceptance, recognition and respect, agency, positioning, cultural traditions and values. These themes appear repeatedly across the different contexts of language learning identified previously, namely, school, out-of-school and tertiary contexts. Importantly, these various environments were more than just settings for the language learners in each case. They constituted active formative forces in the emotional lives and responses of the learners, helping construct self-concept, language learning success, perceived standing in different communities, and relations with others.

One dominant feature that stands out in the English language learning lives of the participants seems to be a tension between acceptance and rejection or exclusion

from significant parties around them, depending on the particular context. This tension becomes apparent in the participants' reported interactions with fellow students and teachers and native or fluent speakers of English.

In the English language classroom, the student participants' emotions reflected their perceptions and experiences of formal English language learning. Experiences of English as a traditional school subject, as an inclusive classroom community, and / or as a site of challenges to self-concept evoked diverse emotional responses.

Teaching reforms that aimed to promote classroom interaction generated anxiety associated with a sense of losing face among students. The change in the Vietnamese pedagogical practices in which English teachers introduced speaking components to language classrooms moved them closer to a social English classroom context. It was a classroom-based English context that included interaction between teachers and students along with evaluation. Different from the traditional grammar-based teaching method, these teaching reforms could have been expected to bring about excitement and enjoyment and to move the students toward an interactive classroom English world. In effect, three student participants who talked about their teachers' attention to speaking reported that they did not become more engaged, but anxious about the English language. Contrary to an expectation that the students should be more engaged and happier in the class, this engagement was also subject to anxiety because of their teachers' evaluation. As Borton (2000) has pointed out, losing face is "unbearable" in Vietnam (p. 24), these student participants seemed to be concerned mostly with their social face and hence relational self. When they spoke in front of their teachers and peers, they may also have felt embarrassed and vulnerable for fear of negative evaluation. Their concern about face guided their thinking and behaviour in their classroom. Therefore, although they criticized the traditional language teaching method for not offering them opportunities to speak, they were hesitant to participate when their teachers gave them a chance to speak. It impacted negatively on their future perceptions about learning English when they were exposed to methods more conducive to learning English as social communication.

The students' sense of self could be threatened depending on how well they could perform. The findings indicated that the student participants' sense of self was threatened by their limited speaking ability on display to their teachers and friends in the classroom. The teacher's critical comments contributed to their threatened sense of self, which in turn negatively affected their engagement in

language learning. It is likely that their concern for loss of face may have made them feel more anxious. This finding is an advance on previous research that conformed to a traditional cause and effect paradigm in terms of fear of judgement and anxiety mentioned earlier in this section. It adds to this causal relationship an explanation for the shift of the participants' anxiety to a higher level of anxiety when they linked emotion with their face in interactions with their teachers and friends in specific classroom contexts.

A change in the student participants' sense of belonging shifted their emotions and self-concept. The change occurred in the interactive classroom settings at a language centre where the students felt the sense of belonging associated with their teachers' and peers' recognition. This change was particularly noticeable in S5's case, who first felt she did not belong to the language classroom community at the language centre. For her the centre was associated with the feeling of inferiority and anxiety since she was from the countryside. However, her feeling changed when complimented by her teacher and classmates for her English performance. She felt accepted by the class. It was the compliments rather than English that made her feel comfortable and gave her a sense of belonging. Her strong sense of belonging resulting from this recognition shifted her emotions from anxiety to "pride and excitement". The shift also affected her language learner self-concept. Her self-concept moved from that of an inferior language learner from the countryside to a successful language learner who could participate in the language activities as well as other more proficient and "town" students, in her view.

This finding aligns with Garrett and Young's (2009) study of the first author's affective responses to classroom foreign language learning. Garrett reported feeling uncomfortable speaking the language in front of her peers. However, when she contributed in a collaborative speaking activity in class, her emotion shifted from anxiety to comfort and pride. Garrett's emotion shift was seen to be associated with a change in her sense of belonging as part of a group in the language classroom. Like Imai (2010), Garrett and Young have moved away from the traditional paradigm and explored emotion in relational learning settings. They align with mine. The interpretations of Garrett's and S5's experiences indicate that the sense of belonging appeared to have an important influence on the learners' emotion and self-concept, and consequently kept them engaged in language learning and language use.

Although this finding emerged for only one participant of the study, it highlights the role of the sense of belonging in people's changing emotion and engagement in language use. It is worthy of exploring in further research.

Stepping out of school contexts, the participants found themselves in an English speaking world where they could engage with native and non-native English speakers. Access was contingent on their own agency, and in some encounters they met with rejection. In other settings, however, acceptance and opportunity were less risky. In this world, there appeared to be mixed emotions of anxiety and excitement arising through the participants' agency and consequent sense of acceptance and belonging.

The current study saw a shift in the participants' emotion from anxiety and tension to enjoyment and confidence aligning with a shift in their sense of belonging and acceptance by others. Thus, attending English clubs regularly and becoming members of tour guide groups led to positive attitudes and motivation toward language engagement.

## **6. Conclusion**

To add to an understanding of emotion in SLA, from an interpretive paradigm, the current study found a wide range of emotions regarding the English language and learning, which aligns with previous research in the field (Bown & White, 2010; Imai, 2010; Swain, 2013). The results suggest that EAL teachers should be aware of the important need for all students to feel accepted and valued in the classroom and be positioned as important. The students need to be consistently supported and welcomed all through their language learning experience. Although most teachers are aware of this, its importance and attention may be overlooked in the face of myriad teaching challenges. This research has affirmed its centrality.

Emotional labour theorists (e.g., Brown et al., 2014; Schutz & Lee, 2014) underline the importance of teachers' hiding negative emotions to act in the interests of their students. Teachers who have power in the classroom need to manage themselves and regulate their emotions for their students' interest. Again, the implication is teachers gaining a greater awareness of the need for students to feel accepted and valued in the classroom, and to be viewed as important. Otherwise, teachers may make their students feel worse about themselves and about language learning.



In the Vietnamese context and in many other countries, English language competency is seen as an important educational goal for the nation. Recently, attention has been placed on curriculum, teaching capacity, testing regimes, and students' cognitive attributes. Yet the social turn in applied linguistics has laid the way for growing attention to the role of emotion in language learning. This study affirms the importance of fostering positive emotions all through language learning.

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