Emotions and their effects in a language learning Mexican context

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ABSTRACT

With the exception of the research on the expressions of emotions in a second language, the link between emotions and motivation has not received enough attention in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). This article aims at reflecting on the relationship between emotions, motivation and the social context where these are experienced. It is argued that the effect of emotions on any language learning process is mediated by motivation levels, self-regulation and the social context where learning takes place. The study was carried out with a qualitative perspective using personal narratives, journals and semi-structured interviews. The results show seven different sources of motivation for students and, surprisingly, it seems to show that some students are able to turn negative emotions into motivational energy. Supportive interpersonal interactions – or the lack of these – in the social context seem to play a paramount role in managing emotions in a language learning setting.

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1. Introduction

Affective aspects have been considered to be as important as language aptitude in language learning success (Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1972). However, the study of emotions in language learning research is rather limited (Imai, 2010; Mercer, 2011; Méndez, 2011b). Although emotions can be labelled as being positive or negative, emotions *per se* are not detrimental or beneficial for learning processes (Imai, 2010; Méndez & Peña, 2013; Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002). It can be argued that it is the interplay of emotions with other factors what could lead to outcomes that can be either beneficial or detrimental. Emotions are individually experienced; a single situation can evoke different emotional reactions in learners. Emotions continuously regulate the motivational energy foreign language learners display in classrooms. Thus, the relevance of emotions to learners' motivational behaviour is defined by the convergence of individual differences, emotional events and the socio-cultural factors of the context in which learning takes place. In this article, it is argued that the social context plays a crucial role on the way language learners perceive positive and negative emotions, and the effect of these on the motivation exercised by language learners. This paper aims to start filling the gap suggested by Linnebrick-Garcia and Pekrun (2011) by providing findings on the way emotions are contextualised in specific settings.

Data comes from a qualitative study that documented the emotional experiences of 18 Mexican language learners in their second year of an English Language Teaching (ELT) programme (Méndez, 2011a). Although participants reported a mixture of

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positive and negative emotions, negative emotions predominated. However, the study reported here seems to show that the effects of negative emotions on the participants' motivation were not always detrimental. Thus, this article aims to analyse the reasons for this apparently positive effect on a small group of Southern Mexican language learners' motivation. Among the factors emerging from the analysis as having a fundamental role on the maintenance of a positive attitude towards negative emotions and impacting positively in learners' motivation were the contextual factors.

The next sections present, the theoretical background that frames the study and the methodological procedures, followed by a discussion of the contextual factors that force language learners to change negative emotions into positive motivational energy.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Emotions

Emotions are embedded in the particular situation that causes them. In language classrooms emotions might be caused because of interaction with the teacher, with peers or with learning materials, or they may be a reaction to students' own feelings (Hascher, 2008; Sansone & Thoman, 2005; Scherer, 2005). Emotions can also result in particular motivational behaviours from students: to continue trying to solve a particular learning task, or to stop trying because of a negative emotion (Scherer, 2005). Emotions may vary in the intensity of the feelings being experienced, and this intensity variation might explain students' individual appraisal and their subsequent actions (Scherer, 2005; Hascher, 2007, 2008). On that regard, Barret, Mesquita, Ochsner, and Gross (2007, p. 376) state that "…an adequate account of emotion experience requires more than a specification of cause; it also requires a description of content (i.e., of what is felt)…". Although no clear conclusions have been established about the shaping effects of intensity and frequency of emotions in learning (Hascher, 2007), negative and positive emotions have been found to enhance not only learning processes but also learners' development (Imai, 2010). For instance, Imai (2010) found that during task preparation language learners' mental processes were structured through the verbalisation of their emotions, which then developed into common group feelings. Thus, emotions felt by the three members of a group served to construct the same feelings towards the activity through negotiation of their reactions to the learning task they were carrying out.

2.2. Individual differences as a response to emotions

Emotions are elicited because of the individual value given to a particular situation, person or object. Emotional situations may provoke different reactions in students according to the importance they give to the effect of a particular situation, object or person on the achievement of their particular goals (Do & Schallert, 2004; Scherer, 2005; Varlander, 2008). As a result, emotional experiences in language learning classrooms engender feelings, physiological responses and observable behaviour in reaction to them. In this way, emotions influence the motivation energy language learners exhibit during learning activities.

2.3. The socio-cultural factors

The social context has been recognised as a powerful source of students' attributions and emotions (Pekrun et al., 2002; Williams & Burden, 1999). Studies have been dedicated to investigate the effects of the environment on learning in general and also in specific fields; including the social contexts necessary for language learning in children (Hemmeter & Kaiser, 1990), academic achievement in Literacy, Reading and Math (Eamon, 2005) and specific academic subject areas such as learning Latin among German students (Goetz, Pekrun, Hall, & Haag, 2006). Goetz et al. assert that:

> Although academic emotions represent important outcomes in their own right due to their impact in their wellbeing, quality of learning, achievement, and social interaction in the classroom, little is known about the antecedents of these emotions and their occurrence in specific academic subject areas. Further, the antecedents and domain' specificity of academic emotions are likely to play an important role in the evaluation and development of educational practices with respect to the effect that students' academic environment has on their emotional experiences and consequent learning and achievement outcomes (p. 290).

Goetz et al. (2006) found that students' cognitions and social environment significantly impact students' emotions and vice versa. They argue that "clear relationships can be discerned between students' cognitions and their emotional experiences" (p. 298).

Eamon (2005) found that "youths whose parents provided cognitively stimulating home environments (books, a musical instrument, and a computer), were involved with them academically (discussed school-related issues and events outside of school), and engaged in less conflict over common family rules (such as television and homework) had higher reading and mathematics scores" (p. 171).

On the other hand, the effects of cultural values in a society are considered to be socially inherited among the members of such a community. Latino families, and Mexican families in particular, have also been studied in the context of Latino immigrants and their culture values compared to the values in the USA (Farrugio, 2010; Resee, 2001, 2002). Hispanics are seen to have a strong moral Ethos to keep family unity and show respect for elders and their authority. Therefore, Farrugio (2010) contends

that "the concept of moral education fits within the collectivist cultural orientation common in Latin America. It preserves the value of group identification and filial responsibility and addresses the precariousness of immigrant life in urban settings" (p. 8).

Thus, the social environment in which this particular study was carried out can offer some insights into the impact of emotions on foreign language learners' motivation. In Mexico, education is highly valued and access to university education is obtained through an ability test. By being able to obtain a place at the state university, participants in this study knew they were in the position of fulfilling a dream, not only for themselves but also for their families. Hofstede (2010) considers that Mexico is a collectivist society and Ryan and Deci (2000) assert that the social environments in which people develop are crucial aspects for the enhancement or diminishment of motivation. This study seeks to investigate to what extent the socio-cultural setting influences the way participants face positive or negative affective experiences. The next section explains the procedure to carry out the study.

3. The inquiry

This article presents how a group of southern Mexican language learners' emotions impact on their motivation to learn English, the factors that influence these emotions, and how the social context modified the effect of negative emotions on their learning processes.

3.1. Participants

This study was conducted in a public university in Chetumal, Quintana Roo. The state university offers a degree in English language teaching (ELT), and students from different nearby rural towns and cities come to the capital city to study for the degree. Although the focus of the degree programme is on the preparation of English teachers, students with the desire to work as translators, or in the tourism sector, are also attracted to the degree. The development of the English language is considered to be important in the state because the state has emerged as an important tourist destination, with visitors coming from different countries to visit its white sand beaches, jungles, archaeological sites and Mayan towns. English is an important means of communication and people who have the ability to speak a foreign language find employment in hotels, restaurants, resorts and bars.

Most students in the study were from a low socio-economic level, which may have given them some unpleasant experiences throughout their lives, as well as the strength to be able to cope with negative experiences. These life encounters may have contributed to making them stronger when going through difficult times and, consequently, the negative experiences were considered as another challenge they had to overcome in order to succeed in life. It might be that the environment of scarcity in their lives had given them the extra impulse to try to maintain their motivation at good levels, so they could complete their programme and obtain a university degree that would allow them to secure a better economic future. The benefits a student expects from earning a university degree have been found to be a source of motivation (Beard, Clegg, & Smith, 2007).

This may not be true for students in other parts of the country, for example in Mexico City, where students are being raised in a different environment, where the pace of life is faster than in small towns of the country and where other values have replaced family values. However, the need to reenergise this core family value in some urban Mexican families seems to have led to the current campaign in the Mexican media entitled 'everything is better with your family', where a strong emphasis is placed on the need to return to traditional family values in order to preserve this sense of closeness and belonging and to eradicate the social problems currently affecting Mexican society.

Students starting their second year of the ELT programme were invited to take part in the study because they have already had a year of basic courses and it is on the second year when their programme courses are all in their target language, English. Therefore, it was considered these students could offer more information about the emotions generated by the challenges of learning contents and language, as in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and how their emotions influence their motivational energy.

After authorisation to carry out the study was obtained from the teacher in charge of the English class, the research purpose was presented to students. 18 students of the 24 enrolled in the class agreed to participate in the study ($N = 18$; female = 14, male = 4). The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 24. The group selected was chosen because access was given to one of the two groups enrolled every year; thus, convenience sampling was also exercised (Bryman, 2009). Consent was obtained from students and they were asked to choose a pseudonym to use throughout the whole study and in the report of the findings.

3.2. Data collection procedures

This research mainly adopted a qualitative approach using journals and semi-structured interviews. In order to under-stand the impact of students' emotional experiences on their motivation, the participants were required to write an emotional journal focussing on those events students experienced during classroom instruction that triggered in them an emotional reaction that affected their motivation. According to Hascher (2008), self-reports about emotions in educational settings should not be 'weighted' but contextualised, since emotions originate because of specific situations. Thus, no limit on the range of emotions to describe was imposed on students since according to Pekrun et al. (2002):

Emotional diversity implies that theory-driven approaches to students' emotions that limit the range of emotions considered for theoretical reasons may be in danger of missing important parts of students' affective life (p. 93).

In addition, to provide in-depth data a semi-structured interview was developed. The interview protocol was used only as a general guide so that issues that had not been previously raised in the journal entries could be addressed. The interviews were conducted by the first author at the end of the study period (16 weeks). Each interview lasted for about 30–40 min. All interviews were taped with the consent of the participants and then transcribed for analysis.

3.3. Data analysis

A total of 250 journal entries and 18 interviews, which yielded transcriptions between three to six pages long, were analysed using the functions of NVIVO7, an electronic tool useful for systematic analysis of narratives and qualitative data (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Through open, axial coding and memoing, a theory was developed to explain the different changes in motivation students went through during the study period and how these changes interacted with other processes. Data was carefully read to identify meaningful units of text relevant to the research foci. Units of text dealing with the same topic were grouped together in analytic categories and given a tentative definition. Some text units were included in more than one analytic category because of their relevance to more than one of them. Data was systematically reviewed to ensure that references under analytic categories supported these. During the reassessment of analytic categories some were collapsed and their titles refined. This process was continually carried out during the entire stage of analysis. Throughout the analysis, our approach was to let themes and a core phenomenon emerge naturally from the categories.

4. Results and discussion

The analysis of the data coming from all the instruments reported a mixture of positive and negative emotions (227 and 444 references respectively). Although negative emotions predominated, participants seem to be able to transform negative emotions into positive energy in a reflection cycle, explained below.
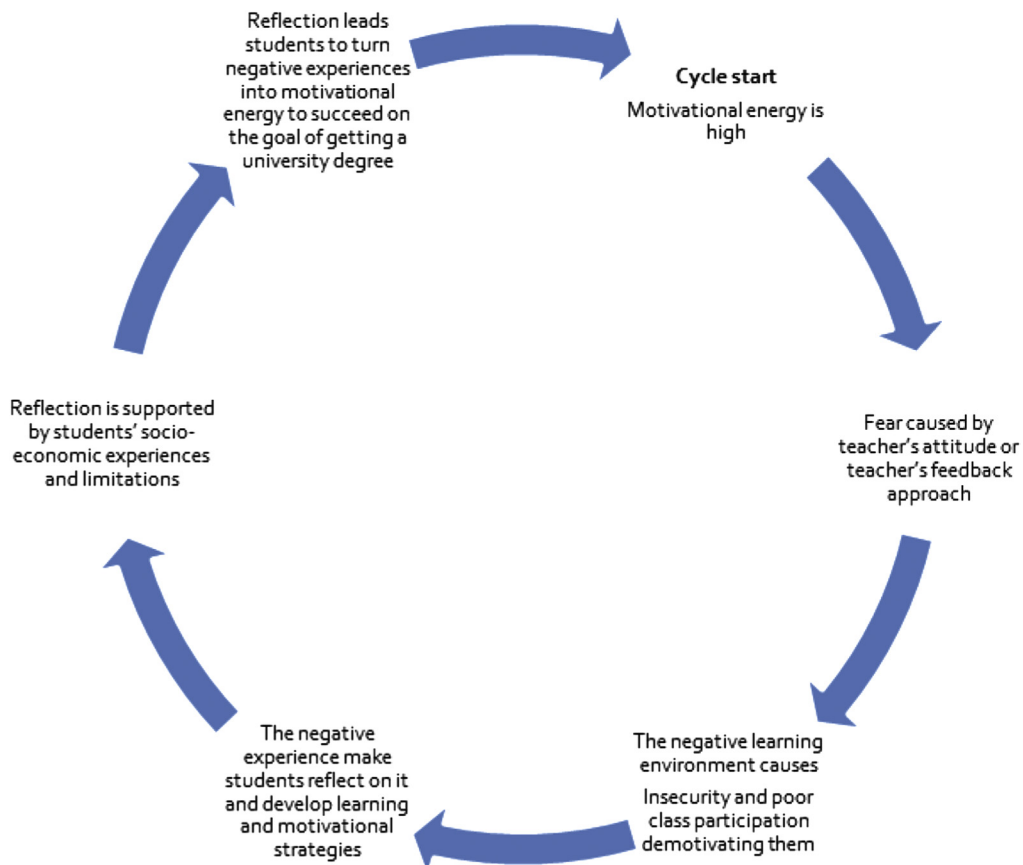

Fig. 1. Turning negative emotions into motivational energy cycle.

4.1. Turning negative emotions into motivational energy

Students in this study were from two different Mexican backgrounds: urban and rural. The students' backgrounds were powerful considerations on the way students embraced negative affective experiences in their language learning process. Of the 18 students that participated in the study, 12 were from a city background and six from nearby rural towns. Although from different backgrounds, students shared the same socio-economic class, except for Jaded and David. Jaded was from a middle-class family, and David had just come down the economic ladder because his father was suffering from a serious disease. David's father had been the only support for his family so David was experiencing economic pressures for the first time in his life. This was difficult for him, being used to having all his basic needs covered, as well as some luxuries. He was now not even able to pay for the bus to go to the university, or buy the textbooks required for his classes. Thus, some students (eight) were not only struggling to grasp the English language but also trying to manage economic pressures. Figure 1 above, shows the cycle participants of the study revealed while experiencing a negative emotion. The cycle reported by students in their journals and interviews included six stages. The cycle starts at the two initial weeks of their course which is the first stage of the cycle in which students reported to be highly motivated. A fundamental phase of this cycle is the reflection stage (third stage of the cycle) which was the one that made students transformed negative emotions into positive results as an answer to the different family situations they were experiencing.

As mentioned before students participating in this study reported positive and negative emotions; however, this article focuses on the interplay of the negative emotions experienced by this group of Mexican students and the influence of the social context on the motivational energy reported during the study period.

The most reported negative emotion was fear. Fear was engendered because of teachers' feedback, peer mocking and lack of vocabulary to express themselves. After reporting a negative event in class students went through a period of reflection that led them to recognise that they were at the university in order to fulfil a dream not only for themselves but also for other members of their family. Their filial obligations were an inner force that helped them to minimise negative emotions and continue with their language learning process. This result was surprising since negative emotions in educational settings are considered detrimental to students' motivation. However, the socio-cultural setting seemed to have positively modified the effects of negative affective experiences in this particular group of language learners. These findings support Ryan and Deci's (2000) affirmation that the social environments in which people develop are crucial aspects of the enhancement or diminishment of motivation.

The reflection process was supported by the diverse sources of motivation students expressed in the following different analytic categories: determination to succeed, having economic limitations, commitment to parents, the cultural value of education, experiencing difficult family situations, earning a university degree, and securing a better economic future. In qualitative studies it is also important to carry out a systematic and rigorous process. Table 1 is presented in an effort to show the process of "how the researcher goes about categorising the events or activities described" (Silverman, 2001: p. 40).

Table 1 contains the sources of motivation that students reported as encouraging them to continue their language learning process in spite of the negative feelings experienced after some situations in classes. Participants reported that they had to overcome these negative events and make their best effort in order to obtain their degree. Students also reported developing resilience towards negative emotions since these were something they would have to deal with if they wanted to advance in their language learning process to earn their degree. This confirms other studies (Do & Schallert, 2004; Scherer, 2005; Varlander, 2008) asserting that emotional situations may provoke different reactions in students according to the importance they give to the effect of a particular situation, object or person on the achievement of their particular goals. As a result, emotional experiences in language learning classrooms engender feelings, physiological responses and observable behaviour in reaction to them. In this way, emotions influence the motivation energy language learners exhibit during learning activities.

4.2. Determination to succeed

Students' determination to succeed in the task of obtaining a university degree in order to fulfil other moral and economic needs was a factor that made students look for solutions to overcome the negative emotions they were experiencing in the classroom because of their teachers or peers. This is evidence of how emotions might be caused by interaction with the teacher, with peers or with learning materials, or they may be a reaction to students' own feelings (Hascher, 2008; Sansone & Thoman, 2005; Scherer, 2005). Some participants (five) reflected on the fact of feeling angry or humiliated and considered that they may have to face negative experiences throughout their lives for diverse reasons, and that it was up to them not to let people hurt them, as the following examples show:

Table 1
Sources of motivation for learning among students in the sample.

Sources of motivation	Number of students	Number of references
Determination to succeed	18	84
Having economic limitations	8	37
Experiencing difficult family situations	6	33
Commitment to parents	12	21
Cultural value of education	7	14
Obtaining a university degree	5	11
Securing a better economic future	6	11

Kenya was angry when she got her writing task back; she considered the teacher had been extremely rigid and strict in her grading system. However, after reflection she came to the conclusion that it may just be the teacher's style and that she had to learn to cope with different teaching styles during her degree and later in life. The lesson from the experience was that she had to learn not to allow anyone to make her feel bad, as expressed in the interview at the end of the term:

> …but sometimes I forget that it is up to me to allow those experiences to make me feel bad….I allowed other people to influence me…I know it should not be like that but sometimes you unconsciously let them do it…well, sometimes some people's opinions….teachers for example and even peers….as I have already said, you realise some classmates are more proficient and then you…you start to feel less…start to tell to yourself 'um, no I can't [allow this to affect me], and this and that'…and yes, but more than anything… teachers [grading style].
>
> KENYA – INTERVIEW

Ricardo reacted very strongly towards the teacher after receiving the writing feedback. He felt angry and frustrated. He is a highly motivated student who previously seemed to always make his best effort and always got good marks. This experience marked his attitude towards the teacher since, in his words, he was no longer able to act in the same way in class; he felt uncomfortable while in class with this teacher. The experience made him realise that:

> …in our life we are going to be in contact with negative experiences and we learn from them…what I mean is that negative experiences always give us a positive lesson that can help us forever…because of that I have decided to take from negative experiences what can be beneficial for me and discard what is damaging for me.
>
> RICARDO – JOURNAL/Weeks 9–12

4.3. Having economic limitations

Some (eight) students were experiencing economic pressures during the term. These students attributed their lack of concentration in class to these financial worries.

> I was lying in bed and started to think about what had happened in the class…Why had I not understood what the teacher said to me?…Then I recalled that, since early morning, I had been thinking about the economic pressures my family is facing.
>
> JIMMY – JOURNAL/Weeks 5–8

For some students, experiencing economic pressures was not new. However, for David it was something new: he had been expecting to go to a private university instead of a public one. However, a sudden serious illness had put his father in bed without being able to continue with his work. David's father had been self-employed and did not have any savings or insurance to help his family during this difficult period. However, in spite of the economic pressures that David was facing, he was able to transform this negative situation into positive emotional energy, as expressed:

> …because of the economic pressures my family is going through, sometimes it is difficult for me to go to classes and to purchase materials that teachers require from us. It may sound weird but this inspires me and gives me the strength to continue.
>
> DAVID – JOURNAL/Weeks 1–4

4.4. Experiencing difficult family situations

Many students came from a low socio-economic background and this led some to experience difficult family situations in which constant fights and lack of communication with their parents made them use the English classroom as a way to escape from their daily reality and to make their best efforts to concentrate in class. This particular situation made some (eight) students see the completion of the degree as a way to solve all the family problems they were experiencing.

> I am from a very small town where most people do not have the opportunity to study…women are supposed to get married… and they get beaten… my brothers are working in the north and my sister is married. I was the only one living with my parents so I decided to study but I have to work because my parents can't support my studies…I am the only one who can help them in the future.
>
> ANGELICA – INTERVIEW

The lack of financial resources in these families was a source of constant fights and some students needed to work in order to support themselves. Some students (eight) attributed their lack of concentration and effort in class to the lack of rest due to their working responsibilities, or to feeling sad because of family fights:

> In my house, my mummy came home from work very upset and started to fight with my dad because of the lack of money, they were shouting in a very unpleasant manner. Then my sister didn't come home to sleep…when I woke up, I realised she was not in her bed and this made me really sad…because of all that I was very depressed in class and I didn't understand anything the teacher was saying…the truth is that thanks to all this fighting at home, because of the scarcity of money… it motivates me to continue studying so when I finish I do not have to depend on my parents and can go away from here.
>
> DAYANA – JOURNAL/Weeks 1–4

4.5. Commitment to parents

Mexican society revolves around family values, which are usually preserved by mothers and relatives. From a very young age Mexicans learn to develop special bonds with their cousins, uncles, aunts and especially their grandparents. Some family members' decisions are collectively discussed and final decisions are reached by a consensus. Thus, a commitment to parents is something most Mexicans grow up with. In the past, the eldest brother was the one who was supposed to help parents financially, while the youngest daughter was the one in charge of taking care of them. However, changes in family structures have left this commitment to whoever is available. Although in some families this may not be encouraged, most families in Mexico value respect and responsibility towards the elderly. Thus, it is not surprising that during this period of their lives these students considered that their success in obtaining a degree was going to contribute to fulfilling the moral responsibility they had towards their families, as stated by some (12) students:

> …well…yes…sometimes I thought about my emotions….and I kept on telling myself 'you have to study'…and also because of my parents who are away….and we do not have a good economic level…if I finish the degree I will be able to help them to have a better life…that motivates me greatly.
>
> HANNA – INTERVIEW

> What motivates me the most is the love for my parents…we are a very poor family from a rural town, my parents cannot support my university studies…my brothers didn't have the chance to study…our parents could not support my siblings after preparatory school so my sister got married and my brothers emigrated to work…so I am the only one who is going to be able to help them in the future.
>
> ANGELICA – JOURNAL/Weeks 1–4

The moral responsibility towards parents and the elder family members in Mexican culture proved to be a great element of students' motivation to obtain a university degree and succeed in life. This tendency seems to be in agreement with Farrugio (2010) who observes that the concept of moral education with a collectivist orientation "preserves the value of group identification and filial responsibility and addresses the precariousness of immigrant life in urban settings" (p. 8). Similarly, it seems to confirm Resee's (2001, 2002) views in relation to cultural and family values among Latinos.

4.6. Cultural value of education and earning a university degree

Education is highly valued by Mexicans. It begins with a cultural value based on respect for the experienced elderly and their authority, where a child that shows respect is showing 'good education' (Farrugio, 2010; Resee, 2001, 2002). By extension, this respect for the experienced adults is shown for experts and educators. Education is not only seen as a measure of self-worth but more importantly as a means to secure financial stability in order to help parents or family in the future. This is reflected in participants' words:

> I feel that when I finish the degree or even before finishing it, I am going to get a good job. I feel it is going to be soon. Most importantly, I will be able to keep myself… to cover my personal needs and help my mother. If in the future I decide to have a family, with a good job, I will have the financial resources to support it.
>
> JIMMY – INTERVIEW

The paramount importance of obtaining a university degree seems to be reflected in the choice students had to make when registering at university. Half of the students (nine) had to leave their hopes and vocations aside in order to be able to go to university. Due to economic limitations, these students had to choose a degree in the city where they lived. Most students wanted to pursue a degree at a university somewhere else in the country, but due to a lack of financial support, they had to choose from the degrees offered at the local University:

> The degree I really wanted to study was medicine but there was no information about this degree starting here. There was the option of studying it in Oaxaca or Taxco or Morelia but my parents didn't want me to…they roundly refused to accept the idea of me leaving the house and they said no…they said that it was a very expensive degree…that it was not going to be possible for them to sustain my studies and this and that…so I decided to choose a degree from the ones offered here at the local University.
>
> JADED – INTERVIEW

In spite of studying for a degree which was not their first choice, students were determined to finish the university programme no matter what it took, as expressed by Natalia:

> Well…I am here now. I am in this programme and I have to take advantage of this opportunity to be at the university…because I couldn't go and study what I really wanted to, but yes, it has affected me because sometimes I ask myself – what am I doing here? But then I think about how many students were left without a place at the university and then I try to make a great effort to improve and… Yes…I have to study more…Well, and in a [difficult] situation my motivation is not going to be affected….I mean I am not going to allow it to destroy me…no. You have to bear it in mind so you do not make the same mistake again. Yes, I have to study more, but a situation is

not going to affect my motivation, I mean I do not think it is going to have such an effect as to make me drop-out of the programme.

NATALIA – INTERVIEW

Natalia's words reflect the high value given to obtaining a university degree, no matter what degree it is, even though this degree may not fulfil an individual's vocation and may lead them to be in a professional field completely different to what they may have envisaged.

As expressed above, the act of getting a university degree is highly valued in Mexican society. It not only makes a person valuable and respected but it is also considered a way to ease current social or economic limitations by assigning to a university degree the hope that better times will come through obtaining it. Dayana, who was experiencing parental disagreements and fights because of lack of money, expressed:

All those problems are the ones that help me to continue…because for example…the problems at home…I say to myself: if I quit university the problems are going to become bigger… by contrast if I finish the degree I am going to have a life…I will be able to help my family…for instance financially…I could help them a lot and there would be fewer problems…so this is what helps me to continue.

DAYANA – INTERVIEW

For some (eight) students, the difficult experiences at home due to financial limitations encouraged them to get a university degree, while for others it was more a matter of enabling their parents to live a dream they had been unable to accomplish because they had not had the opportunity.

4.7. Securing a better economic future

Students' economic pressures continually mixed with some of their emotional reactions in their language classes. For some students (eight), the lack of money was a constant worry which may have stopped them from thinking about leaving the degree, and encouraged them to look for ways to be able to continue in the degree.

Well, my motivation is high because my parents have struggled really hard for me to be here…when I go to see my parents…they ask me 'why not?'. 'You have to make your best effort, you can and you have to obtain your degree,' says my father… 'because when you do and you and your sister are working you have to take your younger brothers with you so they can also study'.

ESPERANZA – INTERVIEW

I have to continue…I have to continue in the course programme …make my best effort. This is what is going to help me when I finish…this is the way to support myself…this is going to put food on my table…my mum is not going to support me all her life, is she?…when I ask myself when…when are you going to finish?…this causes a reaction and I cannot continue like this [hesitating, unmotivated].

DAYANA – INTERVIEW

Securing a better economic future is not only a sign of success but also a way to be able to face future economic responsibilities towards parents or relatives. The moral and economic responsibilities imposed by students' backgrounds contributed to enhancing their motivational energy. The socio-economic backgrounds of these students and the moral responsibilities imposed on Mexican students contributed to transforming the experience of negative emotions into a force that motivated students to achieve the goal not only of passing a course but also of obtaining a university degree which holds the key to social success.

5. Conclusions

Negative emotions might be considered unfavourable to language learning motivation, the research findings in this study seem to show that negative emotions are not always detrimental, at least for those students who decide to take obstacles as challenges to be met. However, even if these students are not defeated by negative emotions, there seems to be a risk that negative emotions in students' lives might put their success in the university at risk. The variety and frequency of negative emotions emerging from this study among Mexican university students might explain some of the drop-out statistics shown in other studies, like Lopez Ramírez, Velazquez Galvez, and Ibarra (2011) and Vries, León Arenas, Romero Muñoz, and Hernández Saldaña (2011) and in some analysis made by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean – CEPAL – which have shown the high percentages of drop-out in different Latin American contexts (CEPAL, 2007, 2010). For example, a study by CEPAL shows that "for each quintal of 27 students coming from a higher social class only one student coming from a lower status will get to finish higher education, that is, a total of only 8.3% in Latin America" (CEPAL, 2010, p. 27). Thus results in this study about emotions provide a closer look into students' lives to show how social and economic disparity affects them.

In this study, negative emotions had the immediate negative effect of lowering participants' motivation; however, students seem to have transformed these into positive energy after reflecting on the moral obligations they had to their families. The culture for unity and filial responsibility encouraged in this particular setting seems to have had a positive

effect on the students, who seem to assume the responsibility to create a better future for themselves in order to try and rescue other family members living in harsh economic conditions. Thus, the study seems to confirm that the cultural context in which learners operate can play a major role on language learning motivation. However, the limited period in which the students were observed for this study makes it necessary to continue researching to verify whether the positive impact on students' motivation will allow them to concrete their goals in a sustained way until graduation or whether the socio-economic constraints will finally beat the students' best efforts. While this study reveals the great enthusiasm that young adults show against adversity it also shows the need for adequate support through social policies that increase their economic wellbeing so that students enjoy a more cognitively stimulating home environment and reduce tensions and conflict with parents. Levels of poverty that impede this support have been found to reduce student achievement (Eamon, 2005).

In a similar vein, the educational context also contributes to the emotional wellbeing of the students, but not always positively. This study seems to shed a light about how students react to perceived unfairness in relation to evaluations. Many students in this study felt that their teacher's marks and corrections on a writing task were unfair, or at least, unexpected. As the culture demands respect for authority, and the teacher represents it, these students are coming to terms, rather unhappily, with accepting these marks without discussion and put their best face for the next time. Mexican teachers could improve their practice if they set the evaluation criteria from the outset, so that students are more familiar with the expectations for the task at hand. Students enthusiasm might be damped over time as they are required to go through university for ten semesters.

It is worth mentioning that studies that investigated Latino immigrants in the USA found that Mexican parents were concerned about the preservation of cultural values among their USA-educated children and considered the loss of Spanish as a threat to the preservation of values such as family unity and filial responsibility, necessary to face harsh economic conditions. Although there is no threat for the preservation of Spanish among Mexican students present in this study, there are some parallels in the sense that some of these students have left their rural communities for the first time to attend university (in a way they are local immigrants), and the students and their families are facing harsh economic conditions, hence the strengthening of moral values. If the Mexican culture is going to change and increasingly adopt other values like individualism and self-reliance there will be generations in transition who will have to try to preserve unity values while pursuing individual success, a demanding task for young adults like the students portrayed in this study, who face social pressures, economic harshness and moral dilemmas. Because cultures and subcultures vary even within a country, the aim of this qualitative study was, not to try and generalise worldwide, but rather to try to understand a bit better how students feel and how emotions affect them in the learning place. The reader would have to consider what and how of this culture traits are common in other cultures and assess whether the results of this study apply in their own context.

Appendix A. Students' emotional experiences journals (SEEJ)

Students' Emotional Experiences Journal   Date: _____

Most learners experience different emotions during their daily learning classes. It is useful to keep a record of your different feelings, emotions and mood changes, and to reflect on the situations that made you feel that way…

1. What emotions have you felt this week in your English class?

2. Which of the emotions you have noted above did you feel the most   strongly?

3. Can you explain what happened and how you came to feel this way?

4. What effects did/has this had on your motivation to learn English?

5. What did you do about it?

Appendix B. Semi-structured interview guide

Semi-structured interview guide

1. How would you describe your language learning experience during this first year of studying the ELT programme? Why?
2. Has your experience in this first year changed your original motivation? How? Why?
3. Can you recall any emotional reactions experienced during this first year?
4. What situations originated these affective reactions?
5. How did you behave when experiencing an emotional reaction?
6. Did these emotional reactions interfere with your language learning classes? How?
7. Did any of your emotional reactions have an influence on your motivation? How? Why do you think this happened?
8. Who/what was responsible for the way you reacted?
9. What did you do about those reactions? How did you manage them?
10. Do you consider your emotional reactions were important to your language learning motivation?
11. How do you think your motivation could have been improved?
12. Who do you think is responsible for maintaining that original motivation you brought to the ELT programme? Why?
13. What keeps (or would keep) your motivational energy high?
14. Have any of your previous ideas about learning English changed in this first year? Why?
15. What have you gained from being involved in this research study?

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