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Introduction: Enacting deep learning in foreign language pedagogy

Joseph Shaules and Troy McConachy

Introduction

Language learning has long been seen as a way to enrich our lives and expand our minds. In the 13th century, the Sufi mystic Rumi is quoted as saying: ‘Speak a new language so that the world will be a new world.’ This reminds us that language learning is a psychologically powerful experience that can open up new worlds of experience to learners. This should come as no surprise. Language is central to the experience of being human—we use it to relate to those around us, to fulfill everyday needs, to express our essential uniqueness to others, and to affiliate with particular communities. Adjusting such fundamental elements of self is bound to be both eye-opening and a significant challenge. It requires not just mental effort, but also psychological resilience—time and effort to internalize foreign patterns into the self, willingness to engage in awkward exchanges, the courage to navigate unfamiliar communicative terrain, and openness to intercultural complexities. No wonder, then, that foreign language learning brings with it the potential for personal growth and change.

While few would deny this transformative potential, foreign language learning is often discussed primarily in instrumentalist terms—as a way to get a job or add value to a resume—as part of discourses that propel the tendency to see a foreign language as a commodity to be ‘acquired’ (Ushioda 2017). This encourages language pedagogy that overemphasizes ‘the transactional, the transfer of information that link(s) language learning to career opportunities and the expansion of global exchange’ (Ros-i-Solé 2016: 3). Yet this can lead to narrow definitions of ‘success’ dictated by the market demand for quantifiable language proficiency
and ‘functional’ skills (Leung & Scarino 2016) and downplay the psychological demands and rewards inherent to the language learning endeavor. As Kramsch (2009) reminds us, however, the *experience* of learning a language is ‘is neither successful or unsuccessful. It can be lived more or less meaningfully and can be more or less transformative, no matter what level of proficiency has been attained’ (p.4). So while proficiency objectives and functional needs are important goals in their own right, the transformative perspective reminds us of the importance of engaging the whole person in the learning process.

This volume seeks to refocus attention on the potential for personal enrichment spoken of by Rumi so long ago. It aims to connect with the humanistic current in language education and contribute to on-going discussions on the personally impactful nature of language learning at the theoretical and pedagogical level. It uses the notion of *deep learning* to capture understandings of language learning and approaches to pedagogy that emphasise: 1) the embodied nature of language learning and use; 2) the transformative nature of learning processes, and; 3) the wellbeing of learners and teachers. The contributions to this volume will look at deep learning in connection with these three notions—embodiment; transformation and wellbeing—as a way to generate discussions about how to promote humanistic goals of growth and development through language learning. With this in mind, this chapter will first look at the notion of deep learning more broadly and then describe the way deep learning is being conceptualized in this volume.

**A deep learning perspective**

An interest in deeper, more personally meaningful elements of the learning experience is not new. Stevick (1976) long ago emphasized the psychological stresses that result from a foreign language that feels ‘imposed on us’ and that threatens our sense of self-worth (Stevick 1980: 9). He, therefore, wrote of the need to attend to the learner as a whole person (see Oxford
A focus on the learner experience can also be found in methodologies such as Community Language Learning (Curran 1972), and Suggestopedia (Lozanov 2005). More recently, there has been increased interest in the psychology of language and learning, with many scholars now emphasizing the need to take a person-centred or ecological approach to issues such as language learning motivation (Dornyei & Ushioda 2009); Zi Wang (this volume), well-being (Mercer 2021), and identity (Block 2014). Language learning is increasingly seen as an embodied phenomenon that stimulates a range of emotions and is linked to learners’ aesthetic, somatic, spiritual, and moral sensibilities (Oxford et al. 2021). Dewaele (2019) writes of the ‘lift-off’ of emotion research in the field of second language learning, which has helped to highlight different dimensions of learners’ subjective experiences of language learning. Prior (2019) refers to ‘an expanded focus from the experimental to the experiential side of human language and life and how it shapes and is shaped by diverse ways of communicating, knowing, doing, being, becoming, belonging, desiring, and feeling’ (p.517). The field has seen increased interest not only in the role of negative emotion such as the psychological stress of foreign language anxiety (Gkonou, Daubney & Dewaele 2017) but also on learners’ experience of positive emotions such as joy, happiness, hope, and desire (Helgesen 2019; Macintyre Gregesen & Mercer 2019).

More narrowly, the term deep learning is used in a variety of ways. The notion of deep learning is found in the field of educational psychology (Kirschner & Hendrick 2020; Smith & Colby 2007) where it is used to refer to more abstract, reflective and contextualized understanding, as opposed to a superficial focus on facts and information (Halbert & Kaser 2006; Rhem 1995). Shaules, writing in the context of language and intercultural education, describes deep learning as ‘the integration of complex skills into the intuitive mind in a process that is meaningful and engaging for learners’ (Shaules 2019: 60). He traces this usage to the notion of deep culture—the intuitive elements of culture that influence us largely without our
knowledge (Shaules 2007). Tochon (2010, 2014) has developed what is described as a deep approach to language learning, which is informed by a semiotics perspective, and which focuses on student-directed projects that integrate language and culture thematically and holistically in a way that is socially significant. Further afield, the term deep learning is used to refer to pattern-recognition algorithms that allow computers to learn on their own, in domains such as facial recognition and language processing (Jones 2014). A conceptual thread which ties many of these usages together is that deep learning goes beyond superficial engagement with information to develop more implicit and holistic forms of knowing.

Foundations for Deep Learning: Embodiment, Transformation and Wellbeing

The deep learning perspective in this volume concerns itself not with the quantification of learning but first and foremost with the quality of the learning experience. The notion of depth is used in two complementary senses: 1) experiences of learning that are meaningful to the individual learner, thus encouraging psychological engagement and increased potential for the experience of personal growth and transformation; and 2) pedagogy that takes into account embodied elements, particularly the affective, intuitive, somatic, aesthetic, and moral dimensions of learning, mind and self. The deep learning perspective encourages an understanding of language learning as a complex, embodied process that not only results in increased knowledge or skills, but which also creates the potential for learners to enrich their sense of self and experience greater wellbeing. This refers not just to making learning more enjoyable—having a fun class or an engaging activity—but to a foundational recognition that language learning has a psychological impact on learners. As argued by Shaules in chapter two of this volume, language learning is disruptive to socio-cognitive habits and is thus both psychologically challenging and potentially rewarding. When the learning process does not go well, it can create psychological resistance and perhaps even trauma. The deep learning
perspective encourages language educators to be more than language experts or classroom managers. They take on responsibility for helping learners navigate the personal, interpersonal and intercultural challenges of language learning. They may be experts of language, but they are also caretakers of the heart who need an understanding of the embodied nature of language body and mind.

There can be no single ‘best’ approach to achieving deep learning outcomes, given the highly complex, personal and context-dependent nature of foreign language learning. This volume proposes, however, that there are three intersecting notions that should underpin the enactment of deep learning in language education: embodiment, transformation and well-being. These ideas serve as a starting point for exploration and reflection—a way to focus our attention on key elements of learning that help orient pedagogy towards deeper more meaningful learning experiences.

**Embodiment** The notion of embodiment is central to the deep learning view and is supported by an empirical understanding of sociocognitive processes. Research in brain and mind sciences has shown that mental processes are integrated with the whole organism, rather than existing in some separate mental space (Farina 2021). Much of this research has focused on the notion of *embodied cognition*. Work in this area seeks to understand the role the body plays in cognitive processes and take as a theoretical starting point that ‘cognitive processes are deeply rooted in the body’s interactions with the world’ (Farina 2021: 74). This represents a movement away from the idea that cognition is a phenomenon that takes place largely ‘in our head’ in the realm of abstract thought, and/or as a form of information processing.

In line with this, there is increasing evidence that language is also much more than a symbolic code—its use is closely tied with physical, emotional, and moral functioning. Reflecting on shifting views of language in the field of SLA, Hall (2019) contends that
converging evidence from fields including child language development, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, and cognitive linguistics, supports a more dynamic, embodied view of language. She explains that:

(i) instead of a fixed property of human mind, language knowledge is revealed to be a complex, dynamic set of constructions that are developed from continual interaction between our neural and domain-general cognitive-emotional processes on the one hand and our varied, lifelong experiences in our social worlds on the other.

(p. 23)

This view situates language not as a discrete cognitive function, but as integral to the functioning of the whole organism in its environment, as dependent on and interrelated to more general learning abilities, and as an embodied process that is inseparable from affect and the socio-biological structures of the body.

An understanding of the embodied nature of language learning has important pedagogical implications. As argued in Wijaya’s chapter in this volume, the processes of understanding and creating meaning are grounded in our physical experience of the world, and thus language becomes intimately connected to sensory experience and body states, as well as metaphoric understanding of the physical and social world (see also Atkinson 2010; Bergen 2012). Embodiment is also closely linked to affect, including motivational states and emotion (Brookman 2016; Price et al. 2012). Research on dual process models of cognition has shed light on the respective roles of analytic and intuitive forms of cognition (Evans & Frankish 2009) and how they relate to decision making and motivation in social and moral domains (Haidt 2012). Embodiment is thus closely related to the subjective quality of the learning experience—our intuitive “feel” for learning and using a new language. For example, McConachy’s chapter in this volume argues that learners’ moral intuitions are highly relevant to the learning of a new language and learners’ attempts to reconcile existing assumptions about
social relationships and understandings of ‘appropriate’ language use in context, with those they are exposed to in the course of learning.

This increased understanding of the embodied nature of language, mind and learning provides an empirical foundation for a humanistic emphasis on the whole learner. It also resonates with views of learning that originate outside of Western dualist traditions and which emphasize the integrated engagement of mind and body in the cultivation of knowledge and self-improvement (Li 2012).

**Transformation** An understanding of language learning as an embodied phenomenon draws attention to the transformative potential of the language learning experience. This refers most simply to the idea that language learning is not simply an additive process of increased knowledge or new skills—it is a complex, whole-body experience that is psychologically powerful and thus ‘causes the learner to change in some way – thinking, behaviour, acceptance of the other, values, mindset, and/or emotion’ (Leaver 2021, p. 16). Leaver et al. (2021) elaborates on this by suggesting that ‘personal transformation involves cognitive, emotional, and cultural shifts occurring within the individual, that is, developing self-awareness, resolving disorienting dilemmas, identifying cognitive distortions, managing emotions, and integrating two (or more) cultures on their own terms’ (p.2). They further argue that the field of language education is currently undergoing a paradigm shift away from transactionally focused language education to education with a more transformative focus.

The transformative changes of language learning are powerful yet subtle. They are experienced not as a sudden overwhelming or shocking shift, but in the lived experience of adjusting to new ways of thinking, acting and being. This transformative change can go unnoticed by the learner, however, because it is largely an intuitive, integrative process—what was experienced as foreign or awkward starts to feel natural and even an extension of the self.
It happens moment-to-moment during language practice—e.g. an *A ha!* moment of linguistic or cultural insight; a feeling of ‘forgetting’ that one is using a foreign language—but also cumulatively, as we gain the subjective feeling of ‘being’ a foreign language user overall (Kramsch 2009). As Oxford (this volume) points out, transformative, holistic, experiential, and contemplative/reflective learning approaches emphasize the kind of deep learning that lends itself to this process of inner change. This reminds us that the transformative process of language learning is not a singular, uniform phenomenon or discrete cognitive change—it is complexly and uniquely personal to each learner. Indeed, it is the experience of personal growth itself. In line with this, Zi Wang (this volume) shows that language engagement and the experience of growth in academic, aesthetic, and ethical domains can generate a new foundation of self-confidence and self-awareness that stimulates humanistic motivation for language learning. Warner (this volume) argues for the importance of the aesthetic dimensions of language and literacy learning and shows how aesthetic reading can impact learner wellbeing in unexpected and transformational ways.

**Wellbeing** Accepting the premise that language learning is psychologically powerful focuses attention on the ethical responsibility of educators to attend to the learner’s holistic needs and overall wellbeing. This is a notion that finds wide resonance in recent work on teachers’ and learners’ well-being in foreign language pedagogy and language teacher education (e.g. Barbeito & Sánchez Centeno 2021; Gkonou & Miller 2019; Mercer 2021). We concur with Mercer (2021) that addressing well-being in foreign language learning requires an integrated approach that incorporates both hedonic and eudemonic perspectives. That is, it focuses not only on the subjective experience of positive emotion (hedonic) but also on learners’ aspirational tendencies and desires to pursue that which is personally meaningful (eudemonic).
In enacting deep learning, educators consider the need for language learning to be experienced as an intrinsically valuable experience—more than an accumulation of knowledge or skills. Cortazzi & Jin (this volume) explore the rich variety of metaphors used to make sense of this challenging yet rewarding learning journey, and argue that by understanding cultures of learning, educators can achieve more truly learner-centred pedagogy. Shaules (this volume) points out that language learning is psychologically demanding and can provoke negative outcomes—resistance—as well as increased well-being. In line with the humanistic tradition in FLL, he calls for educators to play a ‘counselling’ role that supports learners as they adjust to the adaptive demands of the FLL experience. Rebecca Oxford (this volume) argues that deep linguacultural learning should be associated with a view of well-being that goes beyond the individual learner and considers how learners function within and contribute to society. Olivero et al (this volume) also encourage us not to lose sight of teachers’ own well-being concerns, arguing for the utility of positive psychology activities for helping teachers regulate their own emotions and well-being.

In short, the deep learning perspective in this volume emphasizes that language learning is an embodied phenomenon (not simply a form of mental manipulation or information processing) that involves a psychologically demanding process of development and change (it has transformational potential). As such, it entails an ethical commitment on behalf of language teachers to concern themselves not only with instrumental goals and measurable communicative outcomes, but with the well-being of the learner as a whole person.

**Aims and organisation of this volume**

This volume introduces pedagogical approaches and empirical studies that emphasize embodied engagement with language, the transformative potential of the language learning
experience, and the importance of learner and teacher well-being. Chapters in this volume consider the enactment of deep learning from diverse theoretical perspectives, including positive psychology, embodied cognition, cognitive linguistics, motivational theory, literary theory, and moral psychology. Each chapter provides concrete discussion of ways that these theoretical perspectives can inform educators’ approaches to deep learning, supported by critical synthesis of relevant theoretical literature, analysis of empirical data, or examples from particular teaching contexts. These diverse viewpoints are offered as a way to stimulate discussion of the many forms of pedagogy that can encourage deeper learning experiences.

The volume opens with a chapter by Rebecca Oxford which explores the nature of deep linguaculture learning in relation to key theories and theorists within three learning traditions: transformative learning, holistic learning, and contemplative/reflective learning. Oxford argues that each of these modes is valuable for deep linguaculture learning and emphasizes the need for the notion of well-being, both of individual learners and society at large, to act as an ethical framework for foreign language education. She argues that deep linguaculture learning helps develop the inner talents and strengths of learners, as well as inner wells of resilience. By creating communities of support, respect and care, pedagogy focused on deep forms of learning fosters transformation not only in the learner, but in the world at large. In this way, the transformative elements of learning are intimately related to the wellbeing of the learner and humanity more broadly.

In chapter two, Joseph Shaules highlights the Janus-faced nature of foreign language learning, arguing for the need to recognize the potential for language learning to be both psychologically challenging and rewarding. The chapter argues that the psychological challenges and rewards of FL learning are intimately related, and that cross-cultural adjustment theory provides a
useful theoretical lens for understanding this interrelationship. In this view, the adaptive
demands generated by the experience of foreignness in language learning are similar to the
psychological dynamic of cross-cultural adaptation. Learners react to these demands in
motivational terms—by resisting and/or engaging with the learning process. The chapter seeks
to normalize a view of language learning as involving both engagement and resistance, and
argues that transformative learning outcomes depend on how learners and teachers manage
adaptive demands.

The third chapter, co-authored by Martin Cortazzi and Lixian Jin, considers the significance of
language learners’ metaphoric conceptualizations of language learning and how these provide
insights into the deeply meaningful and embodied nature of the learning experience from the
viewpoint of students and teachers themselves. The authors draw on an extensive corpus of
metaphors provided by Chinese learners and teachers of English to highlight cognitive,
affective, socio-cultural, moral-spiritual, and aesthetic dimensions of learning, which they
argue present a challenge to the view of language learning as the acquisition of skills. The
chapter particularly highlights key metaphors revealing concepts of teacher cultivation,
nurturing student well-being with care and concern, and students own change and
transformation of the self. This exploration sheds light on the many ways that learners make
sense of their language learning journey, the embodied nature of their own metaphoric
understanding, and the psychological import that they imbue it with.

In the fourth chapter, Zi Wang puts forward a humanistic understanding of language learning
motivation based on the experiences of Chinese learners of English and Japanese. The chapter
highlights the potential for instrumentalist ideologies of language and language learning to
obscure the possibilities for more humanistic goals in SLA research. It goes on to synthesize a
number of key concepts in motivation research that are aligned with a broadly humanistic understanding of language learning. The data from Chinese learners shows that what the author terms ‘humanistic motivation’ was emergent in learners’ language engagement as they experienced a sense of personal growth in academic, aesthetic, and ethical domains. This contributed to increased self-awareness and helped transform learners’ perceptions of themselves and their relationship with these languages. The chapter concludes with suggestions for how teachers can foster humanistic motivation in their own learners.

In chapter five, David Wijaya presents an approach to developing understanding of English causative constructions that draws on insights from cognitive linguistics and embodied cognition. This chapter calls for recognition of the close links between linguistic knowledge, bodily experience and bodily perception, and argues that embodied learning activities provide a potentially powerful way of promoting deep learning. The chapter offers a theoretical conceptualisation of periphrastic causative constructions informed by cognitive linguistics and suggests how this could be fused with what the author sees as a deep approach to learning grammar. It seeks to move beyond the conceptualization of grammar as primarily a structural system governed by rules and abstract properties. The chapter presents a number of concrete pedagogical strategies that could be employed by teachers to teach causatives and other aspects of grammar in order to promote deep learning.

Chapter six, written by Duncan Lees, argues that while using Shakespearean texts in the English classroom might seem impractical or counterproductive according to the instrumentalist logic of much foreign language education, their very ‘strangeness’ can actually help teachers to encourage deeper learning. The chapter outlines a pedagogy that combines the collaborative, embodied and playful techniques of active or ‘rehearsal room’ approaches to
Shakespeare with an intercultural perspective on language teaching and learning. Through practical examples drawn from the author’s own classes with learners of English at universities in China and the UK, it shows how the processes of (de)familiarization and mediation involved encourage learners to reflect more deeply not only on Shakespeare’s ‘strange’ language, but also on their own linguistic and cultural assumptions and identities. This reflection encourages a richer, more meaningful engagement with the learning process as learners explore English learning as an intercultural experience.

In chapter seven, Chantelle Warner looks at deep learning from the perspective of aesthetic experience and reader response in the German language classroom. While in linguistics ‘transactional’ often denotes instrumental language use, in the reader response theories of Louise Rosenblatt it describes instead a deep, aesthetic relationship between reader and text. Using this tension as a starting point, this chapter explores the potential of a transactional approach to second language literacy in enabling learners to relate their aesthetic experiences to their emergent sense of themselves as multilingual subjects (Kramsch 2009). It argues that aesthetic reading can impact learner wellbeing in unexpected and transformational ways. A central focus of this discussion is a case study involving a creative writing composition in which the learner explores how her story and experiences intersect with the narratives she had read in class. The chapter concludes with tentative pedagogical principles for transactional literacy in language-culture teaching.

Chapter eight, authored by Troy McConachy, looks at the phenomenon of ‘pragmatic resistance’, which is a term that represents learners’ aversive reactions to target language pragmatic norms. Drawing on the author’s own experience, published examples, and insights from moral psychology, the chapter argues for the need to see pragmatic resistance and
pragmatic decision-making more broadly as an embodied phenomenon that is closely tied to individuals’ intuitions about socially and morally desirable behaviour. Whereas much existing work in the field tends to emphasize learners’ rational decision-making as a basis for agency, this chapter posits an important role for moral emotions, particularly what are known as ‘other-condemning emotions’ and ‘self-conscious emotions’ in how language learners perceive and evaluate the appropriateness of language use in context. It argues for the importance of creating space for learners to explore difficult emotions triggered by language use that seemingly violates their own felt sense of right and wrong communicative behavior. The chapter then proposes a number of pedagogical strategies which promote mindful observation of bodily sensations, emotions, and thoughts that lead to negative evaluations of pragmatic differences.

The final chapter of the volume, co-authored by Maria Matilde Olivero, Maria Celina Barbeito and Adelina Sanchez Centeno highlights the value of incorporating positive psychology activities based on holistic learning approaches into language teacher education programmes as a way of enhancing teachers’ emotion regulation and well-being. The chapter first reviews recent theoretical trends and empirical research on well-being and emotion regulation in language education as well as on holistic learning. This serves to frame the activities that are described next and to elucidate their underlying principles. It argues that in order for teachers to experience well-being throughout their careers and to care for the well-being of their language learners, it is paramount to incorporate a focus on well-being in language teacher education programs. It then offers several positive psychology-based activities that have been used in language teacher education courses with the purpose of helping future teachers regulate their emotions and enhance their well-being while learning to teach a foreign language.
As a whole, this collection of chapters challenges language teachers and teacher trainers to question instrumentalist views of language learning, to recognize the deeply impactful nature of the language learning experience, and to consider how language pedagogy can contribute to the development of the learner as a whole person. Each of them is informed by a view of language learning as an embodied, transformative process with powerful psychological consequences. Naturally, there are many roads to deep learning—each reflecting particular teaching contexts and the unique experiences and abilities of each educator. By reflecting on the various perspectives found in this volume, it is hoped that readers will be inspired to explore different aspects of the deep learning experience and contribute to an ongoing discussion of how to make FL learning the powerful, life-changing experience it has the potential to be.

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