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## Supporting Social and Emotional Learning in the EFL/ESL Classroom: How the New Science of Child Development Can Inform Second Language Acquisition Theory and Practice

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## **Supporting Social and Emotional Learning in the EFL/ESL Classroom: How the New Science of Child Development can Inform Second Language Acquisition Theory and Practice**

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### **Abstract**

Research in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) generally falls within two categories: the cognitive/psycholinguistic camp, and the sociocultural camp (Fazel, 2014). These distinct approaches to empirical research in SLA have diverse epistemologies, methods, and implications for the second language classroom. Scholars within the sociocultural camp have made significant contributions to the field concerning social and emotional learning in the second language classroom. The current paper reviews recent developments in the field of developmental psychology and examines ways in which the new science of child development can inform SLA theory and practice in regard to social and emotional learning in the second language classroom. This paper examines the two most common approaches to parenting recognized by developmental psychologists (Gopnik, 2016) and relates those conceptualizations to teaching in the second language classroom. Further, developmental psychologists have identified four distinct types of play, and have investigated each in terms of how they contribute to the social and emotional development of children and adolescents (Gopnik, 2016). The author considers the importance of *play* with a second language and its role in social and emotional development in the second language learning context. Finally, the case is made for second language apprenticeship based on revelations both from the field of developmental psychology and second language acquisition.

*Keywords:* EFL/ESL education, social and emotional learning, child development, second language apprenticeship

## **Supporting Social and Emotional Learning in the EFL/ESL Classroom: How the New Science of Child Development can Inform Second Language Acquisition Theory and Practice**

In the book *The Gardener and the Carpenter: What the New Science of Child Development Tells Us about the Relationship between Parents and Children*, Gopnik (2016) discusses many of the recent discoveries in the field of developmental psychology relevant to the social and emotional development of children and adolescents. As a new parent, I read the book with great interest and personal reflection; as I continued, I discovered that I was not only reading the book through the lens of being a new parent but also through the lens of being an experienced English language teacher. Because child-rearing and teaching have many commonalities, I would like to revisit and discuss many of the concepts presented in Gopnik's (2016) book about parenting and then extrapolate those concepts and apply them to the language learning classroom in order help educators more appropriately understand and address social and emotional learning in a language learning context.

Gopnik (2016) explores two popular models of parenting: the gardener model and the carpenter model. One of the other main foci of the book was the phenomenon of play and the important role it has in the social and emotional development of children. Concerning play, Gopnik addressed recent scientific discoveries which help developmental psychologists to answer the following questions: What is play? Why do children play? What is the evolutionary role of play? What role does it have in growing up today? The phenomenon of play in childhood contributes significantly to social and emotional development, and it appears to be an essential element in the process of producing well-rounded, resilient adults that can function positively and effectively in society. In the present article, I hope to challenge the reader to consider the importance of *play* in the second language classroom, but to also consider its possibilities in contributing to language learners' social and emotional development in the second language classroom.

Finally, in Gopnik's (2016) chapter "Growing Up," she addresses the concepts of apprenticeship and what she calls *mastery learning*. Based on this discussion, I conclude by introducing the concept of the second language apprenticeship as it relates to social and emotional development and learning and how it can influence the language teacher's perspective, pedagogy, and practice.

### **From Models of Parenting to Models of Teaching**

Gopnik (2016) argues that there are two models of parenting common in modern society. The metaphors of the *gardener* and the *carpenter* are utilized to help demonstrate these models. Both the gardener and the carpenter hope to create a final product, but they have very different approaches to how they go about that process. Carpenters start with an idea; a mental image of exactly what they want the final product to look like. They carefully choose the wood according to density, texture, or fragrance. In their workshop, they can control not only the materials and tools that they use, but also the temperature and humidity of the environment, and the paints or lacquers that they envision will best contribute to their ideal. In this creative process, carpenters start with a goal in mind and exercise strict control over every aspect in the process of achieving that goal. In the carpenter model of parenting, parents start out with a goal of the kind of adult

that they would like to produce, and then they exercise strict control over all of the elements in their children's lives in order to achieve that goal.

The gardener, on the other hand, takes a different approach. Like the carpenter, the gardener starts with a goal. The difference is that the gardener is informed by experience and accepts from the beginning the fact that in the process of gardening, that there are many variables outside of the gardener's control to allow them to determine with any certainty how the final product will eventually turn out. Gardeners admit from the start that they can't control heatwaves or floods, or the sunlight, or pests, or the wills of the surrounding foliage, or the wills of unsupervised children. Given this, the gardener decides that rather than trying to control every aspect of the gardening process, it is more worth-while to make an effort to set up the kind of environment where a garden is *likely* to flourish, and then let the chips fall where they may.

In evaluating these two models of parenting, Gopnik (2016) points out that concerning the carpenter's model of parenting, there is very little scientific evidence that shows that this approach actually produces the kind of end result that the parents hoped for. What is certain, however, is that this approach causes unnecessary strain, tension, and anxiety in the lives of parents and their children, which has a negative impact on quality of life. Contrastively, what *is* scientifically supported is the idea that the gardener's model of parenting "can help create a new generation that is robust and adaptable and resilient, better able to deal with the inevitable, unpredictable changes that face them in the future" (Gopnik, 2016, p. 19). This conclusion is supported by ample scientific evidence, which will be discussed in more detail below. Gopnik's major conclusion is:

Our job as parents is not to make a particular kind of child. Instead, our job is to provide a protected space of love, safety, and stability in which children of many unpredictable kinds can flourish. Our job is not to shape our children's minds; it's to let those minds explore all the possibilities that the world allows. Our job is not to tell children how to play: it's to give them the toys and pick the toys up again after the kids are done. We can't make children learn, but we can let them learn. (p. 20)

As you read Gopnik's (2016) main conclusions, you may have pondered your own parenting or classroom as parenting and teaching have much in common. If we extrapolate the concepts of parenting as discussed by Gopnik to the concepts of the carpenter and gardener models of teaching as language teachers, what this means is that we need to let go of the notion that we can *make* students learn. Instead we need adopt the gardener model of *teaching*, and try to set up a language learning environment where we can take a step back and *let* students learn. Just as Gopnik argues for the gardener model of parenting, in the present article I argue for the gardener model of language teaching, as it is this model which appears to be supported by scientific evidence, and it best supports social and emotional learning in the language classroom.

Viewing Gopnik's (2016) revelations from a language teacher's perspective, we can conclude that evidence from the science of child development supports many theoretical and practical teaching concepts that second language educators have been aware of for decades. In language teaching, this includes the shift away from the grammar-translation method of teaching (Daskalovska, 2018), abandoning lecturing and rote learning and moving toward the

implementation of constructivist theory and practice (Noddings, 2007), and actively engaging in the student-centered, active-learning environment that is in many language classrooms today. As competent language teachers, it is our job to implement the gardener approach to teaching, set up an environment where language learners are likely to flourish, and to support the social and emotional development of our learners in their second language through the concepts and practices that are addressed in the following sections.

### **From Social Play to *Play with Language***

“By definition, play is what you do when you’re not trying to do anything. It’s an activity whose goal is not to have a goal” (Gopnik, 2016, p. 149). Play is a fascinating and important part of growing up. It is common in other species, but it is especially characteristic of animals with long childhoods. For play to exist, scientists know that it must be voluntary and spontaneous (i.e., you can’t really *make* a child play, can you?), and that an environment of safety and security is a pre-requisite. There are four kinds of play that Gopnik (2016) discusses: rough-and-tumble play, exploratory play, pretend play, and game play. Issues that will be addressed include: What does the concept of *play* mean in the context of language teaching and learning? How can students *play* with language in the language classroom? How do educators incorporate *play* into their classrooms in order to more appropriately contribute to social and emotional learning and development?

While many of the activities mentioned below are common, the idea that utilizing such activities contributes not only to acquisition of second language items and proficiency but these activities can also contribute significantly to the students’ social and emotional learning and development in the second language, the results of which may have profound benefits for students far in the future. These kinds of experiences in the language classroom will allow students to become more robust and adaptable, both linguistically and socially, when they are presented with real-life opportunities to interact in the second language.

### **Rough-and-Tumble Play and the Sociocultural Perspective**

Rats are one species that engage in play during their childhood. Experimental data have shown that when lab rats were either raised in isolation (i.e., no rough-and-tumble play) or raised in a social environment (i.e., allowed to play with other rats), the rats that were raised in the social environment turned out to be more robust and socially competent in adulthood than their counterparts (Pellis & Pellis, 2007; Pellis, Pellis & Bell, 2010). As adults, they also maintained more brain plasticity (i.e., they were able to learn to a greater extent) than their play-deprived counterparts. Gopnik (2016) writes, “play didn’t help the rats do any one thing in particular, it helped them to learn to do many things in a more flexible, varied way” (p. 154).

In the field of second language acquisition, there are various perspectives from which researchers and practitioners can view language learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). From the behaviorist perspective, educators emphasize repetition and memorization. On the other hand, innatists adhere to the application of Krashen’s Monitor Model, while scholars from the cognitive perspective envision the brain as a kind of limited-capacity processor in which data processing takes place. The sociocultural perspective, however, takes into account the social context of language learning. From the sociocultural perspective, knowledge is constructed through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Consideration of social interaction is imperative in

any attempt to conceptualize social and emotional learning in the second language classroom. From the sociocultural perspective, identity is considered to be fluid (Pierce, 1995). It is from this perspective that the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985) and the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) can be put into action in the language classroom. Learners develop their skills in a second language through a social and emotional process that includes interaction, output, feedback, noticing, metacognitive reflection, and engagement in negotiation for meaning. Some classroom activities that facilitate these include information gaps, jigsaw readings or listenings, spot the difference, or dictogloss activities.

Concerning social and emotional learning in the second language classroom, it is from the sociocultural perspective that *play* with language (i.e., experimentation with known language items and communication strategies through the constructivist process of social interaction) can truly come into practice. This can be done by utilizing communication activities which incorporate the three functions of Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis: noticing, hypothesis-testing, and metalinguistic reflection. Examples include information gaps, jigsaws, spot the difference, and dictoglosses. Giving students an opportunity to receive input and produce output through interaction is a necessary component in social and emotional learning in the second language classroom. Second language learners, too, need interaction in the classroom to help them develop socially and emotionally as second language speakers. Social interaction in the classroom can be considered a type of rough-and-tumble (i.e., social) *play* with language. It helps students develop socially and emotionally to become more resilient users of the second language. It does this by letting them practice in a safe environment the things that they will need to be able to do later in real-life scenarios. Language teachers must provide ample opportunities for students to engage in this kind of interaction in the second language classroom because students have a need to practice the target language and to develop their social and pragmatic knowledge in the second language, which, like the rats, will have a profound impact on the way that they interact with others later in life.

### **Exploratory Play and the Language Classroom**

Exploratory play is the kind of play that children engage in when they are trying to make discoveries about the world. Developmental psychologists tested this kind of play in the laboratory (Cook et al., 2011). Children were brought individually into the laboratory and shown a complex toy that had many different functions. For one group of children, the researcher would hold out the toy and state, "this is a toy, and this is how you play with it." They would activate the squeaker, turn the dial, give the toy to the child, and promptly leave the room. Children in the second group were given the toy without any instruction. Researchers found that children in the latter group were more likely to engage in exploratory play and discover on their own all of the toy's many functions, while children in the former group were more likely to just copy what the researcher did with the toy, leaving them with a limited knowledge of the toy's functions and the various things that they could do with it. Gopnik (2016) commented,

Teaching is a double-edged sword. The children were remarkably sensitive to the fact that they were being taught . . . teaching seemed to discourage the children from discovering all the possibilities the toy had to offer. The children were more eager to imitate the teacher than to discover things themselves. (p. 174)

In the second language classroom, learners need to engage in exploratory play with the target language during their journey of social and emotional development as language learners. They need ample opportunities to try out what they have learned. They need to experiment with language and receive feedback in order to make discoveries about the language and how they are able to fully utilize it. Extensive personal experience in an EFL context has revealed that many of the practical classroom activities that best promote the notion of *playing* with the second language actually come from daily warm-up speaking activities that are often utilized during the first five to ten minutes of class.

One such activity is the impromptu presentation (*Just a Minute Game*, n.d.). In pairs, students take turns making a one-minute impromptu speech for their partner on a given topic. The challenge is that the speaker must continue talking without pause for one minute. In this activity, the students engage in play spontaneously and voluntarily. In fact, during a regular 90-minute class, students appear to enjoy these first five minutes. During this kind of activity, the students are engaging in play with language and therefore are potentially the recipients of all its benefits, according to Gopnik's (2016) arguments (i.e., they are able to become robust, adaptable, and resilient users of the second language). This kind of play does not seem to have a well-defined purpose; after all, it is not directly connected to the textbook, class assignments, or assessments. In that sense, it lacks a goal and falls in line with Gopnik's description of play.

Gopnik (2016) argued that play makes adults more robust and adaptable. Engaging in classroom activities which promote interaction and negotiation contributes to the students' ability to become robust users of the target language and to be more able to adapt and adjust to future socio-cultural contexts in which they will be using the second language. Additionally, the impromptu presentation activity can be easily adjusted to become an impromptu conversation, which further contributes to social and emotional learning and to the students' ability to function successfully in the second language. Impromptu conversations force students to interact socially in the second language register, giving them the opportunity to develop social skills and emotional awareness of others in the target language. Another warm-up activity that has shown success is describe-and-draw activities where one student looks at a photograph or picture and then describes it for another student to draw. Same-or-different activities are another fun activity that promote this kind of play with language (Nation & Newton, 2009).

In addition to warm-up activities, larger group projects can also be helpful in promoting this kind of play. One of these is a movie project in university-level classes. Students work in groups to write, film, and produce their own movie. Students are free to choose the genre, but are required to have a university-related theme. Learners have the freedom to exercise their agency and creativity, and they can enjoy interacting socially with their group members. Through these kinds of activities, students develop socially and emotionally in the second language as a direct result of the extended exposure to social and emotional interaction that these activities require. Through these activities, students have the opportunity to become more robust and adaptable second language users.

### **Pretend Play, Hypothetical Thinking, and Global Citizenship**

Pretend play also has a very important role in the emotional and social development of children. "Pretending is closely related to another distinctively human ability, hypothetical or

counterfactual thinking - that is, the ability to consider alternative ways that the world might be. That, in turn, is central to our powerful human learning abilities” (Gopnik, 2016, p. 162). It is evident that pretend play is also a necessary part of child development. Gopnik wrote, “Pretend play helps children think about possibilities and understand other people’s minds” (p. 170).

Pretend play with language, hypothetical thinking, and counterfactual performance in the second language often have valuable roles to play in the interactive second language classroom. Common activities such as role-plays, interviews, mad-libs, or alibi games require that students pretend to be someone else, and they have to perform in a second language in a way that they think a native speaker in a different sociocultural context might do so. This kind of hypothetical thinking and performing in the second language can contribute to language learners’ sense of global citizenship, to their understanding of intercultural communication, and to their ability to interpret and solve intercultural problems. For a detailed analysis of the benefits of intercultural communication, see Holliday (2019). From a cross-cultural and global perspective, social and emotional learning in the second language classroom through this kind of pretend play can make significant contributions to students’ ability to understand people from diverse cultural backgrounds and see the world from new points of view. It can help them to develop socially and emotionally by encouraging them to avoid the negative stereotyping that is the product of the politics of self and other. In short, pretend play in the language classroom can help students adopt a de-centered perspective in a globalized world.

### **Why is Play Helpful?**

Play is helpful in social and emotional learning, but we have yet to address the question as to exactly *why* it helps. An answer to that question can be found in another question from the field of robotics: How can engineers make a robot that can adjust to an ever-changing world? In the Lipson Robot Experiment (Bongard et al., 2006), researchers wanted to create a robot that could adapt to a changing environment. They found that one way to do this was to first let it just explore a table randomly and allow it a chance to discover how its body functioned. The researchers concluded that giving the robot the chance to engage in this seemingly useless activity made the robot more resilient and able to adapt to a changing environment later. For example, this first activity, a kind of exploratory play, allowed the robot to better deal with a changing environment later; for instance, when the researchers suddenly removed one of its legs or introduced an unexpected obstacle.

The parallels that can be drawn between the scientific field of robotics and the sociocultural second language learning environment are striking. Similar to the robotic “dance,” students in the language classroom have the opportunity to experience and practice the second language. They have the opportunity to explore what the language *does*, to learn about how they are able to utilize it, and about how they can capitalize on the language in a protective practice social environment. This linguistic dance gives students the background and experience with the language, which forms the linguistic foundation from which they will draw upon once they function in the outside world in the second language.

### **Social and Emotional Learning and the Argument for the English Apprenticeship**

Concerning the social, emotional, and intellectual development of children and adolescents, Gopnik (2016) issued a challenge for modern schools. According to the Gopnik,

schooling and parenting share a common dilemma. Like parents who adhere to carpenter model of parenting, educators and educational institutions often have scientifically inaccurate ideas about learning and development (Gopnik, 2016). Gopnik pointed out that “the misleading idea is that education is supposed to shape a child into a particular kind of adult” (p. 179). In the modern era, this is severely affected by the prevalence of standardized testing. Educators feel enormous pressure to produce students that score well on standardized tests. Just as the carpenter model of parenting alienates the child from their own sense of wonder and self-guided discovery, the standardized testing approach to education alienates the student from their own agency and intellectual pursuits.

Gopnik (2016) revealed that historically, childhood has taken on significantly different forms over the centuries. Today, childhood generally continues through primary school and into secondary school, where adolescents transition into the gray area of young adulthood. This type of childhood is one that has only really existed since the Industrial Revolution. For the centuries and millennia before that, childhood lasted only until the age of six or seven. At that point something really different happened. Children very often became “informal apprentices” (Gopnik, 2016, p. 181). It was at this stage that they began to learn how to be farmers or hunters, tailors or blacksmiths. As apprentices, they engaged in *mastery learning* (Gopnik, 2016). “Mastery learning is about exploiting, not exploring” (Gopnik, 2016, p. 182). This is a kind of learning where the focus is not to try to discover new things, but to become completely fluent with the things that have already been learned.

Apprenticeship and mastery learning have not entirely disappeared from schools today. In fact, they exist in some domains. Gopnik (2016) wrote that

Many of the most effective teachers, even in modern schools, use elements of apprenticeship. Ironically, though, these teachers are more likely to be found in the ‘extracurricular’ classes than in the required ones. The stern but beloved baseball coach or the demanding but passionate music teacher let children learn this way. (p. 186)

Gopnik (2016) went on to make the claim that “There is no particularly good reason why ballet or basketball should be taught through apprenticeship while science and math are not” (p. 186). Likewise, there is no particularly good reason why apprenticeship shouldn’t extend to second language learning. It is important to raise the question about second-language apprenticeship. As competent language teachers, it may be important to ask ourselves, What is an English apprenticeship? What would it look like and how could it be implemented? And how can apprenticeship contribute to students’ social and emotional learning and development in the second language?

First, the apprenticeship in language learning should only be applicable to intermediate to advanced level learners as mastery learning involves the exploitation and mastery of previously learned language items, and not necessarily the learning of new material. In an English apprenticeship, the learner should be given the opportunity to be exposed to and to practice abundantly the language he or she has learned. They should have the opportunity to use the language, receive feedback, and to reflect and try again in order to hone-in their skills. Through the process of master-learning, English apprentices would have an opportunity to become

socially and emotionally competent individuals in their ability to use and interact in the second language. Perhaps apprenticeship is the element that is missing from so many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environments. In the ESL context, students have an opportunity to use the language everyday outside of the classroom (i.e., a kind of apprenticeship). EFL educators should give the concept of the English apprenticeship more consideration as something that is beneficial for the EFL learner.

In my own experience, I can only consider my own professional life, my students' lives, and how EFL intersects with their social and emotional development as language learners, and with their future goals. For example, I spend several hours every week doing editorial work for an academic journal. I also spend time teaching EFL in my university's business school. It might be beneficial to allow my students to shadow me as I engage in my editorial work, which I do in English via email, and perhaps then guide students as they use English to produce their own newsletter or journal. There are, of course, ethical considerations that must be taken into account here, but the possibilities are interesting. Students would have the opportunity to observe real-life business English in action and to engage in guided mastery-learning of the second language, which allows students to further develop socially and emotionally in the second language and become socially competent users of the target language. In addition to the newsletter apprenticeship, other examples might be producing a theatrical performance in English where the students are the actors and staff members, and the teacher fills the role of director, or producing and publishing a group or class book.

## **Conclusion**

How can the science of child development inform SLA theory and practice? It provides a framework with a robust scientific foundation for ESL/EFL stakeholders to better understand language learners and the developmental processes that they are engaged in, especially concerning social and emotional learning and development in the ESL/EFL classroom. Just as play is an imperative element in the social and emotional process of growing up and producing well-rounded and functional adults, play with language (i.e., experimentation with known language items and communication strategies) in the second language classroom is an indispensable part of social and emotional learning. Just as engaging in play as children benefits those children in their adult lives, play with language in the language classroom benefits learners as they develop and grow in the target language.

Discoveries in the field of developmental psychology concerning the importance of play in childhood can give second language researchers and practitioners additional scientific support and background for accelerating research and practice in SLA and language teaching in order to develop more effective teaching practices, engage in the gardener model of teaching, and create the kind of classroom environment where students are most likely to succeed. Gopnik's (2016) metaphor of the gardener model of parenting is the logical conclusion of both the historical perspective and of modern scientific discovery. Likewise, the gardener model of teaching falls in line with advancements and developments in the field of second language acquisition over the last several decades. In regard to the concepts of apprenticeship and mastery learning, competent language teachers should make an attempt to answer Gopnik's (2016) challenge: "Instead of giving adolescents more and more school experiences - those extra hours of after-school classes and home work - we could try to arrange more opportunities for apprenticeship" (p. 209). Second

language apprenticeship would greatly contribute to students' social and emotional learning in the second language learning context.

On a final note, if you have a chance to read Alison Gopnik's (2016) book, please do. In this busy world if you don't have time, I urge you to take 15 minutes to watch the TedTalk *How to Raise Successful Kids -- Without Over-Parenting* by Lythcott-Haims (2015). She has a powerful voice and message which that aligns with all of the conclusions addressed in Gopnik's (2016) book. In her TedTalk, Lythcott-Haims (2015) explores concepts central to social and emotional learning and development; concepts that are central to education, life, and growing up that are not only applicable to parenting but have important and profound implications for teachers, parents, and students alike.

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