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The Minds Behind SLA: Insights from Leading Scholars—Jean-Marc Dewaele

Jean-Marc Dewaele is Professor in Applied Linguistics at the VIZJA University, Warsaw, Poland; Emeritus Professor in Applied Linguistics and Multilingualism at Birkbeck, University of London; and Honorary Professor at the Institute of Education, University College London. His interdisciplinary research spans applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, sociopragmatics, social and cultural psychology, personality psychology, positive psychology, and psychotherapy. He has published over 300 papers, book chapters, and eight books on individual differences in second language acquisition and multilingualism, with a special focus on personality, emotion, and identity. Prof. Dewaele is the former president of the European Second Language Association, the International Association of Multilingualism and the International Association for the Psychology of Language Learning. He has served as General Editor of the *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* and is the current General Editor of the *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. His contributions have earned prestigious awards, including the Robert C. Gardner Award for Outstanding Research in Bilingualism and the EUROSLA Distinguished Scholar Award.

Your paper “The Two Faces of Janus? Anxiety and Enjoyment in the Foreign Language Classroom” has been influential in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. Could you define the specific area of SLA that it falls under and describe what initially led you to explore this topic?

It falls within the broad area of individual differences in SLA, and more specifically in the psychology of foreign language learning. I reached this

area following a circuitous route. My interest in interdisciplinary research led me across applied linguistics to neighbouring disciplines including social psychology, cultural psychology, personality psychology, positive psychology, and psychotherapy. I realised that many variables considered in psychological research might explain individual differences in multilingual language use and foreign language acquisition. The first strand of my research has been the study of the linguistic, pragmatic, and socio-cultural challenges multilinguals face in communicating and recognising emotions in intercultural contexts (Dewaele, 2010). Foreign language learners/users need an extended period of secondary affective socialisation to judge the emotional resonance of the foreign language correctly and to use emotion-laden words appropriately (Dewaele et al., 2025). One recent development of this line of research is the effect of language choice on moral decision-making—the foreign language effect (Dewaele et al., 2024). The second strand of my research is a continuation of the former in the context of psychotherapy. Therapists around the world are often unaware of the complex relationships between language, emotion, and identity among their multilingual and multicultural clients, and how it may affect communication and well-being (Costa & Dewaele, 2019). The final strand of my research focuses on learner and teacher emotions in the classroom. We argued in Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) that negative emotions had monopolized the attention of applied linguists and that a more holistic perspective was needed that included positive emotions. Peter MacIntyre and I were good friends with Elaine Horwitz who was a pioneer in the research on FL classroom anxiety. Moreover, she had been an external member of Peter's PhD committee. Having come across the concept of flow in Positive Psychology, we agreed that instead of just focusing on a single negative learner emotion, anxiety, we should also look at positive emotions. We developed the concept of foreign language learner enjoyment and a scale to measure it. The basic idea was that enjoyment required effort, and that enjoyment relied on both teacher and fellow students. We also wanted to prove that enjoyment and anxiety are not the two faces of Janus. They are not opposites on the same dimension but rather separate dimensions that are rather weakly negatively correlated. Crucially they are not in a seesaw relationship. Anxiety going down does not imply that enjoyment goes up. We investigated to what extent the sources of anxiety and enjoyment are learner-internal and/or contextual (i.e., the teaching method/teacher/classroom/school/societal context) in different parts of the world. It turned out that anxiety was much more learner-internal, namely, the learner's degree of Neuroticism or General Anxiety, whereas enjoyment was much more context-dependent, especially the ability of the teacher in creating a positive emotional atmosphere in the classroom where there is laughter, where everybody feels safe, valued and where there is an appropriate amount of challenge. This research has implications for foreign language education, where the role of emotions in motivating learners and teachers has long been underestimated.

Could you recommend key resources—such as textbooks, papers, or other materials—that would be particularly beneficial for graduate students and scholars looking to explore and deepen their understanding of this area of interest?

Clare, A., Gregersen, T., & Mercer, S. (2025). *Positive language education. Teaching global life skills in the language classroom*. Routledge.

Derakhshan, A., & Jin, Y. (Guest Eds.) (2025). Special issue: The role of psycho-affective factors in second/foreign language learning. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 132(1).

Mercer, S., & Gregersen, T. (Guest Eds.) (2023). Special issue: Transformative positive psychology in the acquisition of additional languages. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2023.2194869>

Pawlak, M., & Derakhshan, A. (Guest Eds.) (2024). Special issue: Examining interfaces between advances in positive psychology and L2 learning and teaching. *Porta Linguarum*, 9.

What is one prevalent misconception about second language (L2) acquisition, teaching, or assessment that you've encountered in your work?

Learning and teaching depend not just on cognition or aptitude. Emotion is the fuel that drives social interactions, learning, and teaching. A good teacher manages to elicit interest in the target language and culture, but also in the members of the group. Through playful exploration of cultural riches, through authentic interactions in the classroom, learners can slowly build the ability and the confidence to use the target language (Dewaele et al., 2025). It is akin to opening a window to an unimagined panoramic view of mountains and lakes.

How do you see the field of SLA and L2 teaching evolving in the coming years, particularly with the emergence of AI and other technological advancements?

I hope we will see more intervention studies on learner emotions. It is crucial to translate the findings into pedagogical practices. I hope that the teaching profession can find inspiration and support in our work. A good teacher can inspire learners in a way that no AI-bot can. Of course, AI will permeate all aspects of our lives and make it much harder to decide whether the work submitted is that of a human, whether the reviews obtained for papers submitted to journals are from the reviewer or from some AI software. It will be crucial to teach students how to use AI appropriately. It cannot do the critical and creative thinking for you.

How do you typically develop a research idea?

I let research ideas grow gradually until they can be put on the bench and shaped into testable research questions and hypotheses. The spark of the idea emerges while working on other things. I need a lot of walking in nature to let my ideas mature. Of course, it helps to discuss the ideas with colleagues and

students. They can add a missing piece of the puzzle or suggest an alternative approach. I love collaborative work.

Could you share a transformative moment in your academic journey?

The transformative moment was my doctoral defence at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel on December 17, 1993. It gave me the confidence that I could do research independently. I later compared it to obtaining one's driver's licence. Once you have your licence you can drive anywhere without supervision. You realise that you still have a lot to learn but you also know that you have the potential to do some good work. Once you see your name in print on a paper you've spent so much time writing and polishing, you get a huge boost and extra self-confidence. It becomes quite addictive in fact. I never expected to become the third most influential linguist in the world according to the Stanford rankings in 2023 and 2024. The ranking includes linguists with a c-score that puts them in a percentile rank of 2% or above in Scopus.

What is the most important key trait you have noticed in successful scholars, and why?

There are several which are interconnected: resilience, optimism, creativity, humour, collegiality, knowledge and skill, risk-taking, humility. Less successful scholars may lack some of the above. They may also underestimate to what degree nobody works in a social vacuum. Academic work does not appear *ex nihilo*. It builds on the work of teachers and predecessors. It co-emerges with other work and enters a dialogue with fellow researchers. It is the dialogue that journal editors are interested in. A study that may be interesting in itself but that is not connected to any current debate is less likely to be cited. It is crucial for researchers to feel the pulse of their discipline and organise their research so that it can contribute to "hot" topics in the field. A key trait of the successful scholar is thus the ability to sniff out where the field is heading next.

What advice would you give to early-career researchers looking to make a meaningful impact in the field of SLA?

Don't worry about "meaningful impact." Get your first paper(s) published in good journals, attend conferences and make lots of friends, find co-authors with complementary research skills, review papers for journals, and establish a reputation of being honest, friendly, and reliable.

Is there anything important you would like to add that our previous questions did not address?

Becoming a successful researcher has very little to do with luck. It's about creating the circumstances that help "luck" through future connections and development. Never stay in your room polishing your PowerPoint the day before your conference presentation. Go out, attend the conference dinner, and meet people: preferably the PhD students (and postdocs) of famous researchers that you admire.

Quick-fire preferences:

Teaching or research? Both, they feed off each other.

Long-term projects or short-term studies? Again, a combination of both.

Methodology-driven research or theory-driven research? Depends on the mood.

Writing or data analysis? Both are rewarding.

Writing in silence or with background voices? I love some classical music in the background.

Reading digital or printed books? Printed books. I spend enough time in front of screens already.

Small or big conference? Small (but good quality) gives it a nice family atmosphere.

Early bird or night owl? In between.

Summer or winter? Both have their charms.

City or countryside? Same here, but more countryside to relax and think.

Coffee or tea? Both.

March 13, 2025

Note: This interview was conducted via email. The responses are presented in Jean-Marc Dewaele's natural manner of expression, with minor stylistic edits for clarity and flow.

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