CHAPTER ONE

The Adolescent Language Learner: Setting the Scene

Introduction

In this book you will read inspiring examples of theory translated into practice by foreign language teachers. You will see examples of teachers reflecting on language learning and teaching, interpreting the benefits of their practices for their adolescent students. What works? What doesn't work? In this chapter, we look 'behind the scenes' as a starting point for effective learning and teaching. No matter how good the theory and methods or how well organised and carefully selected the lesson plan and materials, it may all come to little effect without a supportive learning environment. What makes for a positive learning environment in the foreign language classroom? What roles do teachers and students play in creating that environment? Why does this make a difference for language learning? We reflect on and explore some of the questions based on current research in classrooms. In this first chapter, we highlight key aspects of the classroom environment, based on educational research conducted in schools. Before we do this however, we need to consider the learners in our classrooms. What do we know about adolescents and their needs? How might they be different to other learners we might teach or have taught?

What Do We Know about Adolescents?

Adolescence is a time of enormous physical, cognitive, emotional, and social change. This period of transition starts, according to child psychologists (Duchesne & McMaugh, 2016), at approximately 12 years of age. It finishes when the dependent child has become an independent or autonomous adult (Damon, 2004 as cited in Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Interestingly, adolescence is largely a phenomenon of western or industrialised countries; many cultures don't have the concept of adolescence but rather consider that adulthood starts with puberty.

Adolescence is a time of *physical development*; girls will tend to have a growth spirt until approximately the age of 16/17, boys until 19/20. The

physical changes that accompany puberty may cause insecurity and a lack of confidence, or even feelings of shame (Robins et al., 2002). Adolescents undergo changes that affect their sleeping patterns: the hormone melatonin that regulates the wake–sleep cycle causes them to feel tired around two or three hours later than adults (Randler & Wicke, 2014), meaning that they sleep less even though they need the same amount of sleep as younger children because of the enormous physical changes they are experiencing. For the teacher, there can be significant consequences: students may be tired, pay less attention, achieve less, and even be in a bad mood! The later that the school day starts during adolescence, the better.

Adolescence is a time of *cognitive change and development*. The brain is still malleable, but it is a time where synaptic connections are strengthened and unused synaptic connections are eliminated. Because cognitive functions may be lost or diminished if not used, the cognitive stimulation of the adolescent is important. The pre-frontal cortex is a part of the brain that undergoes significant development during this period. It is responsible for functions like attention, setting priorities, repressing impulses, and making plans, and its development is not complete until around adulthood. Because of this, teenagers can have difficulty with goal-oriented acting and thinking (Crone, 2011). Duchesne and McMaugh (2016) hypothesise that the slow development of this cortex makes the adolescent prone to risky or impulsive behaviour. Another part of the brain that grows dramatically during adolescence is the amygdala, a region that is responsible for regulating anger and fear. Because development in this cortex is not complete, the adolescent is less able to process and control emotion.

Developmental psychologists (Elkind, 1967) identify, as typical of the period of adolescence, the 'imaginary audience phenomenon'. Young people can assume that their behaviour and appearance is the focus of those around them, with the result that they feel like they are living life on a stage. Of course, this means that the adolescent can feel acute embarrassment when they make mistakes. This may account for the fact that adolescents often experience anxiety speaking in front of others. Their desire to avoid speaking increases with age, peaking at around 15–17, and with the formality of the situation, for example, in front of the whole class (Sumter, Bokhorst, & Westemberg, 2009).

Despite the many changes that the adolescent is experiencing, adolescence is an ideal period for language learning. As we have already seen, the adolescent brain is particularly plastic or malleable. Adolescents

develop the ability to think abstractly and have increased metalinguistic awareness. This means that they can reflect on and talk about language. They can go beyond literal understandings of language and both use and understand figurative speech, sarcasm, and multiple meanings (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2013). They are better able to make comparisons between their first language and their second or additional languages. Another reason why adolescents make good language learners is that their memory skills improve (Duchesne & McMaugh, 2016). They are also better able to multi-task, shifting attention from one task to another.

Adolescence is a time of *social development and change*. Teenagers are both the children they were and the adults they will become (Lemke, 2003) and it is during adolescence that they experiment with and establish their identity. Adolescents are often exploring and asserting new expressions of self, in terms of, for example, their music preferences or commitment to sport and other social activities (Legutke, 2012). At the same time, they are likely to reject rules and values that they may perceive others have determined for them. This is associated with detachment from family and the increasing importance of friendship and peers. Peers become more significant than parents (Cook, Deng, & Morgano, 2007; Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004) as adolescents look for emotional stability outside of the family. Belonging to a peer group gives the adolescent more confidence and a greater sense of security. This may account for the fact that they are more willing to take risks, a fact we have mentioned earlier (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005).

> There are lots of pressures out there for teenagers – I believe that having something that you can really get into, really enjoy is a good way of not letting those pressures get to you.
> – French teacher, Year 9

Legutke (2012) claims that the emotional turmoil of the teen years is played out in secondary school. What do we know then about *adolescents in the classroom*? Firstly, and not surprisingly, teachers lose the dominance they once had and are no longer central figures in the life of a teenager. Adolescents expect teachers to be respectful and friendly, but do not necessarily seek more from this relationship. Teachers need to have the professional knowledge that accompanies the subject that they teach, and they need to establish a good learning environment. Adolescents expect teachers to integrate their needs and interests into classroom activities and tasks (Kurth-Buchholz, 2011). We will discuss this further in Chapter 2. There is

a distinct preference for co-operative learning and the 'teacher-up-the-front' style can be considered boring.

What Makes the Biggest Difference to Success in Classrooms?

John Hattie and his team of researchers combined the results of literally thousands of studies from a wide variety of classrooms and subject areas. He did this to provide sufficient statistical power to identify which factors of the many actually make the biggest difference for learning. Hattie's (2009, 2012) findings were based on 800 'meta-analyses', using information from 50,000 research papers. His team of researchers explored what most contributes to success for students in primary, secondary, and tertiary contexts through meta-analyses on five topics: school, home, curricula, teaching, and students.

One of the findings was that the classroom environment itself makes a difference to success. However, it was not the physical aspects of the environment that made this difference. Class size, furniture layout, or the latest technology were not the factors that surfaced as important, but the relational factors. The combined studies found that it is the people inside the class and the kind of relationships they build with one another that are most vital to a positive learning environment.

What do these classes look like? Based on Hattie (2012), Figure 1.1 identifies ten of the key features of successful classrooms.

> Of these ten, which elements do you recognise in your own experience in classrooms (as a student, teacher, or observer)? Why would these make such a difference?

What Makes for a Positive Language Learning Environment?

As seen in Figure 1.1, researchers have identified many variables that contribute to effective learning. We focus here on four that are commonly discussed in research conducted in high school classrooms (see Figure 1.2). Each is characteristic of successful learning environments. You will notice that these four variables are all people-oriented and

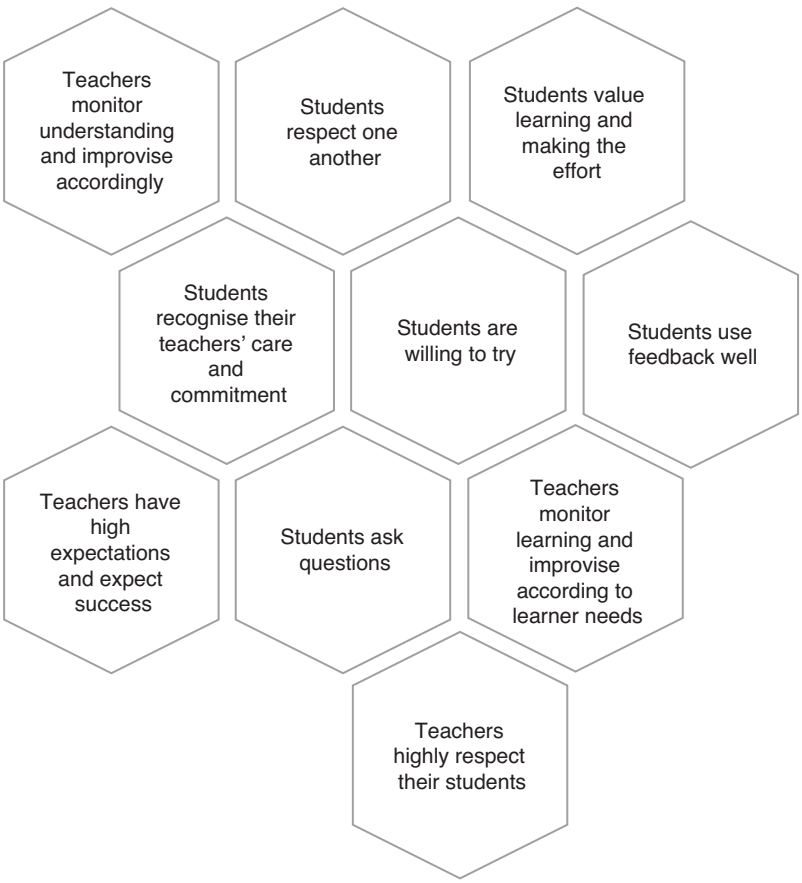

Figure 1.1 Ten indicators of a positive learning environment (based on Hattie, 2012)

predominantly to do with classroom relations: teacher–student relations and peer relations, supportive collaboration, peer feedback, and willingness to take risks (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997; Hattie, 2012; Philp, 2016; Sato & Ballinger, 2012).

Positive Class Relationships

Underlying the potential benefits of all that teachers do in language classrooms is the social environment of the class itself. How do relationships between class participants – teachers, assistants, and students – actually relate to learning? Research suggests that teacher–student

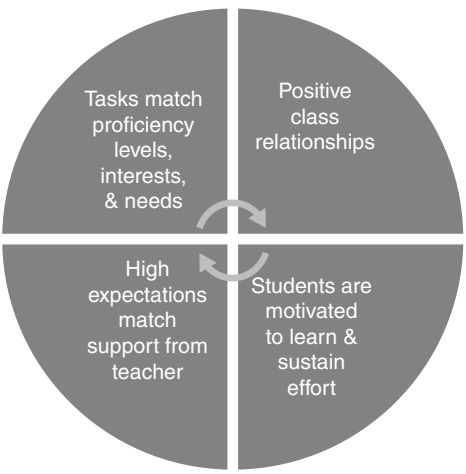

Figure 1.2 Characteristics of a successful learning environment (based on Philp and Kos, 2017; commissioned by Cambridge University Press)

relations (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997; Hattie, 2012; Philp, 2016), and peer relations in class (Sato & Ballinger, 2012; Philp, 2016) both play a crucial role in the effectiveness of learning activities, just as teacher–whole class interaction and peer interaction support learning in complementary ways (Batstone & Philp, 2013).

When students recognise that their teacher knows them, respects them, and cares about them, positive relations between teacher and students are more likely, and a benefit is that students are likely to reciprocate in kind, leading to a positive environment (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997; Hattie, 2012). When the teacher encourages an environment of inclusiveness and respect, students are more willing to take risks and to work with one another in ways that foster collaborative learning (Philp, 2016). Relations between class members play a crucial role in the effectiveness of learning activities. Teachers can explicitly train students how to work together in ways that encourage peer support, feedback, and collaboration (see Dawes, 2004; Philp, 2016; Sato & Ballinger, 2012).

> [there needs to be] time for people to build their social relationships, have every class be 'get-to-know somebody', 'get to know something', be able to share with them. People [need to] get to know each other, trust each other, or manage relationships in the second language. – Paul, researcher and Spanish teacher trainer

Paul, a Spanish teacher-trainer and researcher, highlights the importance of paying attention to 'the social stuff'. When Paul shares his teaching strategies for group work, he emphasises taking time to build classroom relations and trust between class members. Paul also emphasises the importance of monitoring group work (see also Philp, Adams, & Iwashita, 2013; Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997).

> When you put them in groups ... be active be listening in those activities. See how it's going ... sometimes monitoring. – Paul

High Teacher Expectations and Support

Teachers' expectations can foster or inhibit students' goals and willingness to succeed (Rubie-Davies, 2007, 2014). In research in schools in New Zealand and in England, Rubie-Davies and colleagues compared teachers' expectations and student outcomes in a wide range of classrooms.

They found that high teacher expectations can motivate students to try harder or to take on a challenging task a little beyond their comfort zone, buoyed up by their trust in the teacher who believes them capable. You will see examples of this in later chapters.

Conversely, low teacher expectations are more likely to be associated with low performance goals and a lack of motivation to reach higher goals. The researchers found that teachers with high expectations of their class gave students greater autonomy: learners were given choices in how they learnt. This included challenging work that took account of their own interests. Student autonomy didn't mean they were just left to their own devices, however. Teachers provided support contingent with the needs of the students, enabling them to reach their goals. This is quite different to the practices and beliefs of teachers with low expectations. In these classes, although the students were similar in ability level to their peers in the 'high expectation teacher' classes, their teachers

What Do High Expectations Look Like?

- Students are given autonomy
- Challenging work links to student interests
- Teacher support matches the needs of students to achieve their goals
- Students engage in tasks requiring higher order thinking

(Rubie-Davies 2007, 2014)

did not feel the class capable of higher-order thinking skills such as creative or critical thinking, evaluating or synthesising ideas. They saw their students as low in ability and motivation. Perhaps not surprisingly, in classrooms in which teachers had low expectations of their students, gains were less, both academically and in terms of social and emotional development (Rubie-Davies, 2015).

Motivation to Learn and Sustain Effort in a Task

We noted above the importance of teacher expectations in a class. Related to this is the affective quality of the relationship between teacher and students. Researchers in educational psychology identify the quality of the relationship between student and teacher, teacher and class, as very important: it may contribute to or impede students' willingness to engage in class, and it may help sustain their efforts when work becomes challenging (Ushioda, 2009; Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997).

In a high school English class, students were enthusiastically positive about their English teacher. Students appreciated the way the teacher treated them, feeling that they were considered as individuals with interests and opinions of their own.

> She's not a typical teacher where she's just like 'ok now read this and then write this down' and then you have to learn it and that's it. I think she just talks to us and when she questions us she's like she's talking to us; she's not just asking us facts which we can forget later.
> – Nita, English class.

Motivation has often been seen as something that 'causes' language learning. However, research investigating motivation in language learning has stressed the importance of the learning experience being appropriately challenging and interesting. That is, it is engaging. This allows learners to experience success and encourages them to keep going. In other words, there is a cyclical effect. Positive language learning experiences can themselves be motivating. In this way, teachers can promote intrinsic motivation in their students (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991). That is, rather than completing a task because they have to, ideally, students with intrinsic motivation engage in an activity 'because it is enjoyable and satisfying' to do so (Noels et al., 2000, p. 61). We will discuss motivation in greater detail in Chapter 2; however, in the next section we look at two factors: the importance of (1) formulating clear goals

that match students' ability level and provide appropriate challenge, and (2) having the curriculum and materials match the interests of students (Dörnyei, 2001; Tomlinson, 2014).

Learning Activities that Match Students' Interests and Needs

As with other subjects, it is typical in language classrooms to see a wide range of ability levels, varying needs, and proficiency levels. Adolescents can differ greatly in their experience of languages. Teachers can cater to different levels by varying groupings according to proficiency. For example, where the goal is the same, the material provided to each group can be differentiated in ways that supply more or less information and/or provide the information in different modes: written, oral, aural, visual, or multi-modal. (We discuss the use of digital media in the classroom in Chapter 7.) Alternatively, mixed ability groupings may be based on shared interests; for example, each group can be given the autonomy to choose their own topic (Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Tomlinson et al., 2003).

It is also important that students have the opportunity to work at tasks or activities that are aligned with their own interests. As discussed in the previous section, it is believed that the effort that students are prepared to put in to learning a language is related to the enjoyment that they experience in doing so. We will return again to this issue in Chapter 2 and discuss it in greater detail, along with the notion of learner engagement.

In a senior high school 'English as a foreign language class', the students spoke proudly of their ability to use 'only English', and gave high praise of their teacher, Anna, for making lessons interesting (and grammar classes more bearable). Indeed, in this class, activities varied from candid conversations about love at first sight (prior to reading *Romeo and Juliet*), to team relays around the room to collect facts on Shakespeare, to a TV-style quiz on grammar.

> [my teacher] is really good at connecting real life situations with stuff from school and the grammar is also very ... you can bear the 45 minutes of learning grammar. – Year 13 student, English class

A Social Environment: Teacher–Student and Peer Relations

We have considered four key characteristics of a successful learning environment. In this next section, we are going to focus in greater detail on one of these: classroom relationships, and on the role that they play in enabling a social environment that is conducive to learning.

We will examine, in particular, what research has to say about the following:

- the role of the teacher,
- the importance of peers,
- why for adolescents class relationships are so important, and
- group dynamics.

> ...I think the most important thing for teenagers is that they feel really valued in the classroom and that they are important, they are good, that the teacher and classmates value them.
> -Jessica, French teacher, Year 9

Classroom Roles and Positioning

Teacher–student relations play a different role to peer relations (Batstone & Philp, 2013; Philp, 2016), one that is often complementary in nature. This is because of the relative difference between adults and adolescents, more pronounced still for younger learners (Hartup, 1989). In contrast to their peers, who are relatively equal in footing, a teacher's positioning and authority in class typically reflects their greater maturity, superior knowledge, and valued experience (including expertise in the target language) (Laursen & Hartup, 2002). For this reason, the context of teacher–whole class interaction plays a different role to pair and group work among peers (Philp et al., 2013). Teachers provide a context in which students can benefit from their greater expertise. They can scaffold language comprehension and production in ways that fit the specific learning needs of each student (Gibbons, 2007; van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2010). As we will see in later chapters, feedback tailored to students' needs (for example, modelling language use, giving explicit explanation, or identifying key features), enables students to gradually become more independent in their language use (see Chapters 4 and 5). Underlying this provision and use of contingent support are three essential related 'ingredients':

(a) mutual respect between teacher and student;
(b) the teacher's knowledge of the student – their interests, their strengths, learning preferences, and academic needs;
(c) the student's recognition and trust of the teacher's expertise.

Of course, the relative positioning of teachers versus students is often more complex. In some foreign language contexts, 'heritage' learners, that is, students who have connections to the target language through family members or early experience in the home, are more advanced in some skills than the teacher. For example, they may have native-like pronunciation, higher receptive aural ability than their teacher, but be less knowledgeable in literacy, for example. Nevertheless, the teacher, as an adult, holds a different position to the student.