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Assessing Advanced EFL Students' Proficiency at Producing Affect-laden Discourse

1. Introduction

A proficient foreign language user should be able to express attitudinal stance, conveying personal attitudes or feelings in speech, likes and dislikes, and evaluate personal experiences and events. Although the *Common European Framework of Reference* (Council of Europe 2001: 76) (henceforth *CEFR*) stresses the ability to “express and respond to feelings” (B1) and “convey degrees of emotion and highlight the personal significance of events and experiences” (B2), most French secondary school directives still favor argumentative discourse over the expression of affect. French University curricula in English as a foreign language often emphasize linguistic, literary or civilization expertise and an interpretative and argumentative treatment of authentic materials rather than the ability to communicate emotions and feelings¹. This dichotomy between the cognitive and the affective facets of language acquisition is also an outcome of the discrepancy between learning situations and real-life events triggering emotional responses. Research so far has shown that foreign learners and late bilinguals are often linguistically less proficient at expressing emotions in their L2 (cf. Pavlenko 2008 for an overview). To what extent can an academic environment help English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students build an emotional linguistic repertoire? Are communicative tasks efficient to develop learners' appraisal proficiency? After a review of the main trends in the fields of psychology and psycholinguistics as regards emotion, this article presents an experiment to assess the discourse of French students of English reacting to affect-laden aesthetic objects.

2. Literature Overview

This research in foreign language discourse draws upon the fields of psychology, pragmatic linguistics and Second Language Acquisition (henceforth SLA). A psychological generic definition of affect would be “aspects of emotion, feeling, mood and attitude which condition behavior” (Arnold 1999: 1). Psychological research differentiates feelings, characterized as long-lasting states, from emotions regarded as short-term spontaneous responses to an event with valences of varied intensity. However, there is no general consensus as to the number and types of emotions. Johnson-Laird/Oatley (1989: 87) and Damasio (1994) acknowledge five families of emotion words relative to happiness, sadness, fear, anger and disgust, while Eckman (1992) lists six basic emotions (fear, anger, sadness, disgust, joy and surprise); others distinguish between basic emotions and mixed emotions like surprise plus fear or joy (Cosnier 2006; Plantin 2011). This research aims to move beyond typologies and focus on the dynamic ongoing process of appraisal from a psycholinguistic point of view. Processing theories describe a serial chain of cognitive mechanisms, from perception to instantaneous appraisal, as the core component to emotional reactions. For example, Roseman/Smith (2001: 6) state that:

¹ This is particularly true of Foreign Languages, Literatures and Civilizations French curricula (LLCE-Langues, Littératures et Civilisations Étrangères).

it is interpretation of events rather than events themselves that cause emotion. [...] Because appraisals intervene between events and emotions, different individuals who appraise the same situation in significantly different ways will feel different emotions.

Multi-component appraisal serial models also include cognitive and emotional assessment of the event, preparation to action and corporal and behavioural responses, including verbal ones (Syssau 2006: 26). While cognitive schemata display an ordered chain of phases, verbal responses do not reflect it, and discourse moves back and fro between spontaneous responses and verbal exploration of possible meanings and rationalisations. To account for this apparent discursive disorder, it is therefore convenient to view discourse as a network of emotion and emotion-related linguistic markers. Ortony/Clore/Foss (1987) propose a definition of emotion words in English as expressing internal states and referring to being X or feeling X, *i.e.* adjectives and nouns mostly. This definition has been disputed by Pavlenko (2008: 148) as being too restricted, since languages like Russian and Polish express emotions with verbs – as dynamic processes. She enlarges upon it by including emotion-related words such as “tears”, “tantrum” or “to scream”, *i.e.* words that describe behaviors related to particular emotions without naming the actual emotions, and emotion-laden words which “do not refer to emotions directly but instead express or elicit emotions from the interlocutors”, for instance endearments, aversive words (“spider”, “death”), and interjections. She also claims that some words that do not denote emotion can acquire emotional connotations in context. Although our study makes use of Johnson-Laird/Oatley’s (1989) 590 emotional words as a reference lexical list in English, we have also found useful discourse categories derived from the field of pragmatic linguistics: for instance, Plantin (2011), drawing on Caffi/Janney (1994), contends that spontaneous reactions induce ‘emotional’ discourse markers, such as interjections, filled and silent pauses, truncated questions and exclamations and adjectives, and that the experience of emotion is also expressed by descriptive and persuasive ‘emotive’ discourse directed to a real or fictional interlocutor. This categorisation of discourse in ‘emotional’ and ‘emotive’ production accounts for the emotionality of modal forms and syntactic structures (as well as phonological traits).

In the field of SLA, the affect content of speech is influenced by both independent and dependent variables (Dewaele 2010). Some independent variables in instructed environments relate to the parameters of the task students are engaged in (timed or untimed assignment, nature of the source², collective or one-to-one interactions, etc.). For this study, two dependent variables likely to have a strong impact on the richness of affect discourse were also selected: the first one, common to both native and non-native speakers, is the ability to make explicit affective connections between an event or source and individuals’ autobiographical memory (Pavlenko 2006). The second variable concerns non-native speakers’ proficiency in the foreign language. For instance, Dewaele’s (in Dewaele/Pavlenko 2002: 294) study of 29 Dutch learners of French concluded that general proficiency in the foreign language had a significant impact, since proficient learners produced a greater proportion of low-frequency words, particularly emotion words. The same conclusion was drawn from a four-month longitudinal observation of a class of 30 tenth grade French students (Goutéraux 2010: 111). De Cock (2007) comparing preferred appraisal sequences in native and non-native college students’ informal speech found that foreign learners lagged far behind in lexical volume and richness. A sub-study of evaluative adjectives in the Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage (LINDSEI) (Gilquin/De Cock/Granger 2010) corpus indicated that compared with native speakers, non-native speakers rely on a very limited set of affect forms (De Cock 2011). According to Skehan/Foster (2001: 189), “humans have limited information capacity and must therefore prioritise where they allocate their attention.” While native speakers seldom pay extra attention to forms however complex the task, it is quite different for learners carrying out a highly demanding task and “there will be less attention available to be devoted to its language”. Thus learners will either focus on content rather than form or avoid attention-demanding structures.

The transfer of specific features of the mother tongue can also modify the expression of affect in the target language. For instance, Pavlenko (Dewaele/Pavlenko 2002) analysed the encoding of emotions by Russian and English monolinguals on the one hand and by Russian learners of English on

² In this discussion, the word *source* (Plantin 2011) is preferred to *stimulus* (a behavioristic term) to refer to the origin of the emotional response.

the other hand. While Russian speakers favored verbs and the English used more adjectives to express states, the study reports a higher proportion of emotion verbs in the discourse of the Russian users of English. Pavlenko (2008: 153-154) later analysed the emotional interlanguage of American learners of Russian, and concluded that emotions linguistically anchored in the home culture are eventually transferred to another language both in terms of form and meaning.

So the following hypotheses have been put to test in this study:

- independent variables like the semantic nature of the source, the implementation procedures of the task and the pragmatic context have an impact on learner affect discourse;
- dependent variables like autobiographical experience, the level of general proficiency in the foreign language and the specific sub-field of affective linguistic proficiency also shape the production of emotion and emotion-laden discourse by EFL learners.

Setting up an experiment to elicit affective discourse from advanced learners was expected to bring about an amount of affect markers significant enough to identify typical emotion language features in learner speech.

3. The Experimental Protocol

The experiment was carried out at Paris-Diderot University, France, within the framework of the DIDEROT-LONGDALE³ longitudinal project (a component of the international LONGDALE⁴ project, coordinated by Prof. Meunier, Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium). The general aim of the LONGDALE project is to collect longitudinal learner data over several years, and Paris-Diderot has compiled a spoken corpus of task-based conversations between college English majors studying for a Bachelor's in English studies and English native assistants. A total of forty-four participants contributed three waves of data collection over two years: at the beginning of Year 1, at the end of Year 1 and at the end of Year 2⁵. Task one was modelled on the LINDSEI protocol, minus the picture description, with the students picking one topic out of three and then moving to a free discussion task about their likes and dislikes and motivation for studying English; task two gave them a choice of three other topics to discuss, plus a free discussion task during which they talked about their academic and personal experience and their plans for the future. Since these two tasks yielded spoken productions with a smattering of linguistic markers relative to evaluative stance, the third set task (at the end of Year 2) was designed to elicit the production of affect discourse: the students were first asked to react spontaneously to four (anonymized) paintings, presented one after the other, with a thirty to sixty second reaction time between two pictures. In the ensuing discussion with a native assistant, they were asked to rate the pictures in terms of positive, neutral or negative valence, explain their choices, talk about personal experiences associated with the paintings and select one they would like to have at home and one for the cover of a book they would write⁶. The questions aimed to reconstruct the students' ability to express attitudinal speech in a foreign language and assess the way they navigated between emotional, emotive and rational language forms. The four paintings ranged from a 19th century painting to a modern work of art: Painting 1, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* (Sargent 1885-1886)⁷ featured two little girls playing at dusk in a garden lit with Chinese lanterns; Painting 2, *Nude, Appledore, Isle of Shoals* (Childe Hassam 1913)⁸ portrayed a naked woman in a landscape of rocks, sand and sea; Painting 3 was *Carcass of Beef* (Soutine 1925)⁹; and Painting 4 *The Garden*

³ <<http://www.chillac-arp.univ-paris-diderot.fr/projets/longdale>>, last visited on January 31 2014.

⁴ <<http://www.uclouvain.be/en-cecl-LONGDALE.html>> last visited on January 31 2014.

⁵ The Bachelor's curriculum (*License*) covers Year 1, Year 2 and Year 3. A fourth collection has been completed with Year 3 students and Master's participants who were abroad on Erasmus or Teaching Assistant programs.

⁶ The set task was followed by a free discussion task as in sessions 1 and 2.

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:John_Singer_Sargent>, last visited on January 31, 2014.

⁸ <<http://www.kemperart.org/permanent/works/Hassam.asp>>, last visited on January 31, 2014.

⁹ <<http://www.albrightknox.org/collection/search/piece:1782>>, last visited on January 31, 2014.

(Schulze 2009)¹⁰. None of these works were known by the students. The conversational data amounted to about 48,000 words, 35,780 of which were learners' production. The learners' transcripts ranged from 384 to 1654 words. A quantitative analysis was carried out, using *WordSmith Tools 5* (Scott 2008) to draw frequency word lists and retrieve concordances with emotion and emotion-laden words (cf. Johnson-Laird/Oatley's lexical list 1989). The qualitative analysis focused on the interaction of emotional valence and independent and dependent variables and the combinations of affect markers in learner speech.

4. Results of the Experiment and Discussion

While this experiment confirms that interrelated variables influence learner affect speech in instructed environments, three variables stand out¹¹: task specificity as an independent variable and personal relatedness and proficiency as two dependent variables. Task specificity relates to the choice of material – works-of art – but also to the order of presentation: for instance, showing Painting 3 after two paintings likely to elicit positive valence was likely to trigger contrast, surprise and intense emotion whether negative or not; the general directives incited the learners to adopt an affective stance rather than a cognitive one, and the conversation with a native speaker assistant was conducive to a more relaxing and friendly mood than if the interview had taken place in exam conditions. Also, since it was their third session over two years, the students were now used to interview formats including a set task and an informal discussion. The task content was different but they enjoyed the novelty. All in all, the task conditions were favorable to the expression of a plurality of affect and affect-laden forms. Likewise, the emotional semantic content of the pictures had an impact on the richness of spoken productions. Unsurprisingly, they tended to be more talkative when they strongly liked or disliked a painting (Paintings 1 and 3 mostly), although the semantic content did not always trigger expected positive or negative standardized reactions, an indication that there was no behaviorist stimulus-response pattern. Concerning Painting 3, the students felt compelled to elaborate on the reasons why they reacted so strongly (whether positively or negatively): the painting was often explicitly described as contrary to their expectations of what art should be like, and because the object/subject was difficult to identify and make sense of, productions often exhibited exploratory questioning and hypothesizing and a number of epistemic forms.

4.1 Source, Motivation and Productivity

The feelings expressed by the forty-four students were ranked on a five-point scale: dislike, indifference, mixed feelings, like and love. The categories are not as finely grained as they could be: for instance, the difference between *I really really like it*, *I like it a lot*, *very much* and *I love it* is not clear-cut. When students say *I don't like it at all*, *it's disgusting*, can one truly assess the intensity of their dislike? So the choice was made to first sort out the answers by word forms rather than try to interpret intentions, and then look into the discourse co-text to eventually disambiguate lexical and syntactic forms.

Painting 1, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, yielded many positive answers: 68% liked it (*n* 30) and 7% (*n* 3) loved it; 7% did not like it (*pretty but boring*) and 9% (*n* 4) were indifferent. The 9% 'mixed feelings' small group (*n* 4) liked the characters, but not the background (*weird, threatening*) and the style (*too classic*).

¹⁰ <<http://arttattler.com/archiveandreasschulze.html>>, last visited on January 31, 2014.

¹¹ Such variables as gender were discarded since there were only seven male students out of forty-four participants in this third session. As for age, it did not seem to be relevant either, since all the students were in the 21-26 age range.

Painting 2, *Nude, Appledore, Isle of Shoals*, was also positively assessed: 59% (*n* 26) liked it, 5% (*n* 2) loved it. The 20% ‘mixed feelings’ group (*n* 9) criticized the way the woman was drawn but enjoyed the connotations (holidays, freedom).

Painting 3, *Carcass of Beef*, triggered a spate of expected negative reactions: 52% (*n* 22) disliked it but 14% (*n* 7) liked it and one (a former art student) loved it; 29% of the students (*n* 12) liked the blue and red colours but not the topic, and some were too puzzled and busy trying to make sense of the painting to appreciate it, as can be seen from the short extracts reported in Example 1¹²:

(1) It seems like a horse or something (71), a piece of meat or a horse I couldn’t say (79), a dead (er) animal like a horse or so I don’t really know (96), a dog or a wolf (106) a chicken or a duck (54)

Painting 4, *The Garden*, generated less intense and more negative reactions: 25% (*n* 11) felt indifferent (*not a work of art, too modern, computer-generated*), 32% (*n* 14) ranked it negatively (*too childish, too pop, psychedelic, psychotic, drug-related*). Paradoxically, the 25% who liked it and the 18% ‘mixed feelings’ group praised the very child-like and dreamlike quality others criticized.

The analysis confirmed the individual variability of appraisal responses to aesthetic objects; even if some response trends were to be expected (more negative reactions to Painting 3, more positive ones to Paintings 1 and 2), significant variations tallied with Dewaele’s (2010) hypothesis of the inter-individual variation of affect responses.

4.2 Personal Experience and Sociocultural Representations (a Dependent Variable)

The impact of personal history on affect speech is obvious whenever the students make explicit connections between the paintings they are shown and their own experience: childhood memories, a book they have read or when they evoke artists or artistic trends they are familiar with (particularly for Paintings 1 and 2). Painting 4 was perceived as too abstract and too disconnected from real life to elicit emotional empathy but the other pictures triggered affect speech, mediated by episodic memory. Painting 1 elicited positive memories: parties, Halloween, fairy tales, bedside stories and childhood episodes (see Examples 2 and 3):

(2) [...] kind of happy it reminds me of my youth (er) when I used to go to (er) in the mountains with my parents so I feel kind of (er) nostalgic and (er) happy because (er) it reminds me of (er) happy moments and that’s all (45).

(3) You have a good time when you are a child and you play in the in the grass and (er) you are just having fun with someone not caring about anything (151).

Reactions to Painting 2 also included pleasant memories of Britain, Brittany, Normandy, the beach, family holidays, but Painting 3 elicited a few recollections of unpleasant moments (see Examples 4 and 5):

(4) Once I saw someone killing a goat and it reminds me of that (119).

(5) Let’s say my life is a chaos and it really *sho it could represent it (146).

Speakers often used art references as in Examples 6 and 7 to support their evaluative stance. To do so they employed, for instance, positive markers (*prefer, like, a fan of, like, love, like, favourite*), causative subordinates (*because, that’s why*) and complex structures (*makes me think, reminds me of*).

(6) I’m a fan of (er) of that kind of painting a bit it’s soft because the edges are not (er) very precise like in a in an impressionist painting so *that’s why* I like it (173).

¹² Example 1 presents samples of individual reactions to Painting 3. Each number refers to the speaker’s identity code. The codes were initially assigned to the original Year 1 cohorts, one starting in 2009 and the second one in 2010, with a total of 220 students. After two years, the first cohort was down to 23 (April 2011) and the second cohort followed suit with 21 students left in April 2012; 44 students only carried out the experiment over two years. This sharp drop is in keeping with the general dropout rate in French English studies, which is sometimes up to 50% at the end of Year 1 with an additional 25% at the end of Year 2, as students shift to different courses of study.

(7) It reminds me of Degas and of (er) late nineteenth century Impressionist painting (eh) which is something that I like (153).

Contrary to expectations, these students (all English majors but two) seldom mentioned the English art scene ($n = 3$ only). Their cultural representations and artistic tastes were anchored in their L1 background and they exhibited signs of cultural transfer and assimilation of the paintings to the French scene, particularly for Paintings 1 and 2, by referring to Degas, Ingres, impressionist painters like Manet, Monet, Renoir, The Pre-Raphaelites or Van Gogh. They also made a few references to literature (e.g. Maupassant, Fournier's *Le Grand Maulnes*, Modiano) and to Greek mythology (see Example 8):

(8) A Greek goddess, an illustration of Andromeda who was a prisoner in a rock, some weird Greek reference (39), Venus (54, 128).

Six speakers linked the painting with recent episodic memories, as they compared the woman in Painting 2 to the heroine of *The Awakening* (K. Chopin's novel) from their American literature class; all reacted quite positively, except for one student who explained her dislike by the fact she had failed her essay on the novel.

This supports the view that sociocultural experiences and memories woven in the texture of appraisal discourse (Kramsch 2009; Dewaele/Pavlenko 2002; Pavlenko 2006) qualify emotional scripts. They highlight the prominence of cultural transfer as even advanced learners tend to assimilate new sociocultural objects to representations formed in their native culture and to discard as strange and disconcerting those they cannot relate to it: Paintings 3 and 4 elicited very few cultural references, respectively *Dante* and *Dracula* ($n = 2$) and *Alice in Wonderland* ($n = 1$). We can infer that the more numerous the memory associations, the richer the productions, since the proficient learners in the corpus combined autobiographical and cultural references with a higher volume and variety of affect markers.

4.3 Linguistic Proficiency and Affect-laden Productivity (a Dependent Variable)

The task designed to elicit emotion responses encouraged the production of varied affect-laden forms: exclamations, intensifiers, adjectival forms, metaphors and complex structures. As no pre-test assessment of the students' proficiency at using intensifiers or complex structures such as *it reminds me of something* or *it makes me think of, feel* (+ adjective) was conducted, it seems difficult to quantitatively assess the effects of general proficiency on affect discourse. But we may infer from the presence or absence of complex accurate linguistic structures in the corpus whether the students were able to retrieve fully (or partly) proceduralized linguistic forms. The lack of proficiency was also assessed by identifying repetitive forms as well as the systematic production of a limited set of linguistic affect features (cf. De Cock 2007, 2011; Goutéraux 2010).

Affect-laden productivity and general proficiency can be determined by looking for affect words and speech markers located in close proximity, and for frequency of use and misuse of lexical items and grammatical structures. After compiling affect words from the corpus, three emotional categories – pleasure, fear/disgust and trouble – emerged with most word types located in the 'pleasure' field (see Figure 1, *A Wealth of Emotions*, appendix). Figure 1 shows the affect word types, regardless of the number of tokens. The semantic content of Paintings 1 and 2 elicited positive affect-laden words. Besides, the speakers seemed to have a larger array of positive words at their disposal. This may also reflect the unconscious internalization by non-native speakers of a sociocultural tendency towards positive stance in native conversation (cf. frequent use of *nice* and *good*, Biber *et al.* 1999: 968). The 'trouble' category is interesting, since it regroups forms expressing mixed emotions, combining a sense of unexpectedness and surprise with either negative (e.g. *weird, uncomfortable, uneasy*) or positive valences (e.g. *striking, intriguing, interesting, interested*). Finally, the high number of adjectives expressing states (compared with the limited number of nouns) is in keeping with native English emotional discourse (Ortony/Clore/Foss 1987; Johnson-Laird/Oatley 1989; Dewaele/Pavlenko 2002). Some lexical forms are quite specific to individual students, for instance *devil, hellish, evil*

produced by speaker 14 or *gore* uttered by speaker 106 (positive connotation here, see Example 9 further); some emotions (*sad, sadness*) were experienced or attributed to the source (the character in Painting 2) by one or two speakers only; a longitudinal case study of individual affect discourse would be worth pursuing to assess lexical sophistication.

Figure 1 in the Appendix is completed by a frequency list of emotion adjectives – and emotion-laden ones, for instance *bloody* – (Table 1). We selected forms with a minimum of seven tokens per type, which explains why such adjectives as *odd, intriguing* or *shocking* are not included.

| <i>Pleasure (n)</i> | <i>Trouble (+/-) (n)</i> | <i>Fear/Disgust (n)</i> |
|---------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| nice (60) | weird (41) | violent (21) |
| beautiful (50) | strange (36) | disgusting/ed (14) |
| good (36) | interesting (36) | aggressive (13) |
| pure (28) | disturbing (17) | scared/scary (12) |
| happy (27) | | creepy (9) |
| pretty (27) | | bad (8) |
| peaceful (26) | | bloody (7) |
| calm (25) | | hard (7) |
| funny/fun (13) | | |
| soft (12) | | |
| joyful (10) | | |
| agreeable (8) | | |
| cute (7) | | |
| cool (7) | | |

Table 1: Most frequent emotion or emotion-laden adjectives in *n* tokens.

Although a quantitative approach tends to erase individual specificities and semantic complexity, it reveals some interesting trends: for instance, the high number of tokens relative to ‘pleasure’ highlights a general tendency towards positive appraisal and the fairly large amount of tokens including a surprise feature, regardless of emotional intensity, shows that any of the four paintings could trigger a startled reaction (*e.g. a mysterious atmosphere, a naked woman, a shocking dead animal, a bizarre garden*).

Linguistic richness was also assessed by retrieving markers standing in close proximity to affect words, particularly when paintings caused surprise and puzzlement along with positive and negative emotions. Spontaneous responses often display similar patterns: they begin with interjections, silent or filled pauses, laughter followed by questions (*What’s that?*) and such epistemic markers as *guess, looks like, seem, not sure* and more frequently *maybe* (*n* 37) and *I don’t know* (*n* 60), as speakers move between ‘emotional’ and ‘emotive’ stances (naming and explaining) (see Examples 9 to 12):

(9) <laughs> Ouh! I like this I really like the colors I like the contrast blue and red it *catch the eye and the subject itself is at the same time so common and yet it’s like (er) really gore (106, positive).

(10) Wow! I guess it’s a horse well I guess <laughs> I don’t like this one it’s scary because of the colors (er) red very *strong red (20, negative).

(11) Wow! (er) what is that? (er) it looks like it’s meat like (er) like a dead (er) animal (145, negative).

(12) Oh okay (er) is that is that a rose? Is that like a chicken? Okay (er) well I think it’s kind of gross (213, negative).

Epistemic forms appear whenever students waver between liking a painting or not, and their discourse is enriched with negations + cognitive verbs (*e.g. don’t know, don’t understand*), predicative adjectives (*e.g. not sure*) and third conditionals for the most proficient ones (see Examples 13 and 14).

(13) Well (er) I’m not really sure I’ve I kinda like it because it represents *sea and for me it’s also holidays but it’s kinda weird so I don’t know because I don’t really understand the picture so I’m not sure (213).

(14) It was really I don't know strange and disturbing (er) and I don't know I still don't know what it was so that is I would have liked to know if it was a duck or something (151).

The qualitative analysis reveals distinctive patterns: linguistic forms common to all learners and complex semantic and syntactic-grammatical structures produced by more proficient learners. For all speakers, cognition verbs *think* (*n* 337) and *know* (*n* 409) rank first, with psychological verbs *feel* (*n* 109) and *like* coming close. There are other appreciative tokens: *love* (*n* 19) and *prefer* (*n* 17). *I like* (*n* 209) + *really like* (*n* 20) *I liked* (*n* 9) outnumber negative *I don't like* (*n* 33), *didn't like* (*n* 3), *I don't really like* (*n* 15) and *I dislike* (*n* 6). However, proficient learners prefer to use understatement to express negative feelings and combine negation, amplifiers, attenuators and repetition to emphasize the intensity of their feelings (Goutéraux 2010: 112), as in Examples 15 to 17.

(15) It's not that I dislike it but it's just that I I think that it was a bit too pop for me a bit too nine nineteen fifties nineteen sixties too psychedelic (156).

(16) I don't really like the shapes I'm not really fond of that kind of art (128).

(17) And this one I really like, it's like a child's painting I really love that kind of thing (119).

The widespread use of *very* (*n* 198) and *really* (*n* 152) is not specific to learner speech, as both modifiers rank highest in conversational English (Biber *et al.* 1999: 565). However, a narrower range of modifiers has been found in this corpus. Contrary to *really*, which retains both intensifying and truth emphasizing functions, *very* and *quite* (*n* 66) seem to be 'semantically bleached' (Paradis 1997: 64) and express degree only (with *shocking*, *disgusting*, *weird* or *violent*).

The main discrepancy between less advanced and more proficient learners concerns the use of metaphorical language and complex syntactic patterns. Emotional language being highly metaphorical in English, native speakers tend to blend emotions and metaphors, use comparisons, analogies and metonymies to express the physical effects and kinesthetic sensations produced by emotions (Kövecses 2000). Through two complementary metaphors elicited by Painting 4 – the imaginary world metaphor (*Paradise*, *candy land*, *looks like it's a dream*, *between a dream and a nightmare*) and the computer metaphor (*a computer game*, *Mario Bros game*) – experiencers highlight their perception of its childlike dimension and disconnection with 'real art'. As most metaphorical linguistic forms in the corpus are nouns, with preposition *like* or determiner \emptyset , it is nevertheless difficult to assess the impact of general proficiency. This is not true of metonymic verbalizations: the best learners try out metonymic utterances (*n* 20) to convey the bodily impact of emotions, although semantic and syntactic complexity is sometimes achieved at the expense of accuracy (see Examples 18 and 19), which is in keeping with the limited information processing hypothesis (Skehan/Forster 2001) and the idea that even advanced learners may be prone to cognitive overload while trying to juggle fluency, complexity and accuracy:

(18) I like it too because it strikes me in *a way that *it attracts my attention I'm just captivated by it it's *appealing me I feel that the third one is possessing me [...] you could have nightmares with this picture (14).

(19) I can't I can't *breath when I when I see it because it's (er) there is no space no there is no space to *to breath I don't feel very comfortable (20)

Students frequently produce causative structure *make* + *someone* + adjective or *feel* + *like* or *as if* (*n* 43), but sometimes exhibit semantic confusion between *feel* and *think* (*n* 15) or *feel like* and *feel* + *as if* (*n* 13) as in Examples 20 and 21.

(20) (It) makes me *feel of freedom, (164), *feel of escaping (106), *feel about death (96).

(21) I feel like a nightmare (138) feel like I'm in *forest (106), makes me feel *like we would (41), make me feel *like if the pain (14).

The same is true of the high-frequency structure *reminds me of* + noun (*n* 59); in Example 22, the omission of the preposition *of* illustrates the syntactic transfer of the French structure *cela me rappelle*.

(22) I like the first one (er) it reminds me *colors that I've seen (212); so it's different (er) it reminds me *The Little Mermaid (20).

5. Conclusions

This empirical study supports the sociocultural stand that memories and sociocultural representations are major appraisal factors at play in the cognitive-linguistic event/emotion schema and that a task including the appraisal of aesthetic objects tailored to elicit episodic memories is conducive to the production of affect and affect-laden language. It has pointed out recurrent patterns of spontaneous speech by fluent speakers – interjections, exclamations, questions and epistemic markers plus a variety of emotion adjectives and verbs – with less proficient speakers frequently resorting to *like/don't like* or *I don't know* and more proficient ones experimenting with more complex emotion-related structures. Proficiency remains a key variable for the production of emotion speech. Beside an extensive use of *really* and *very* and of adjectives common to all speakers, complex linguistic elements required for the production of authentic affect speech (*e.g.* metaphorical language, range of modifiers, use of modal functions and complex causal structures) are retrieved and present in advanced learner speech but not always fully mastered. Fuzziness and grammatical mix-ups indicate that proficient learners still experience difficulties while trying to produce accurate, fluent and complex affect speech altogether, particularly when they have to perform some 'unusual' communicative task, for instance affective appraisal rather than rational assessment of a work of art. The results of the study are currently used to give pedagogical feedback to individual participants. A new study under completion¹³ includes native speakers and bilinguals reacting to a wider range of aesthetic sources. This will offer more opportunity to reflect upon a more task-based approach to linguistic curricula by including in Bachelor's or Master's classes the comparative exploitation of native and non-native corpora regarding the use of complex syntactic structures, linguistic metaphors and affect idioms closer to the C2 level of the CEFR (Nacey 2013).

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¹³ As part of *Emphiline*, an interdisciplinary project on surprise, funded by the French National Agency for Research, one hundred participants' reactions to series of works of art are being tested, including those of twenty-five English native speakers and twenty-five English-French bilinguals.

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Appendix

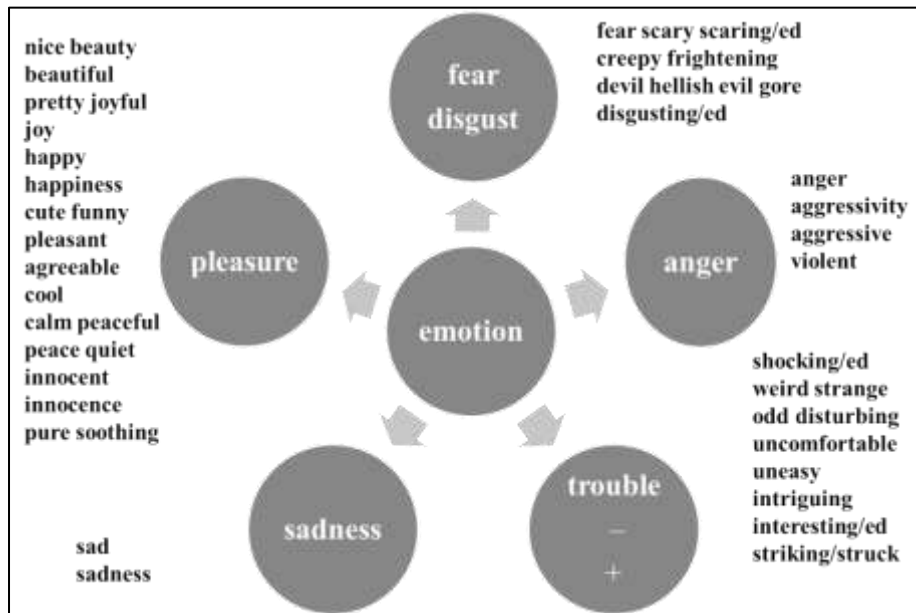


Figure 1: A Wealth of Emotions