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## **Expressing emotions, discussing controversial issues**

The role of emotions in learning has triggered much debate in teaching circles, as has the role of debating controversial issues. The aim of this small-scale inquiry was to investigate whether debating controversial issues is an effective teaching tool, and how the ability to express emotions – having the words to do so – enhances learning. Our analysis is focused on the rich point concept as well as the linguistic performance of the students. From our observation of the classroom dialogues that emerge from two, two-hour long videos, we draw some conclusions and make recommendations for teaching/ learning emotions through controversial issues. The study is framed within critical pedagogy tenets.

Key findings include the important role of controversial issues in expressing emotions, albeit in a direct fashion on the part of the learners as well as the lack of use and maybe knowledge of phrases such as *ressentir de la douleur*. We also stress on the important role of the teacher's opinion even in university classrooms, hence a recommendation of adopting a role of a neutral guide as long as the (students') opinions do not reinforce prejudice or stereotypes.

Key words

Emotion; rich-point; pragmatic; semantic; teaching foreign language

## **Introduction**

In November 2022, a group of university teachers published an article in the major French newspaper, *Le Monde* (Chaumette, Duclert, and Hochmann 2022), where they called for action to address the growing anti-semitism evident in a number of higher education establishments (Chaumette, Duclert, and Hochmann 2022). This denunciation of the 'banality of evil' (Arendt 1998) was counterbalanced by a report (Morin and Lecherbonnier 2023) published only a few

weeks later, and also in *Le Monde* that stated the need for teachers to discuss difficult subjects with their students, as this would help them become responsible adults and citizens. This is not a new idea: for some years educators have been encouraged to include debates on major, even controversial, social issues in their teaching (CECRL 2018; European Council 2015), issues that are also core to critical pedagogy (Giroux 2020, 2021).

The present study had two primary objectives : to evaluate intermediate foreign language learners' knowledge of the emotional lexicon in order to improve this particular vocabulary; to identify what sparks rich points in a debate (Agar 2006). Both research questions were embedded in one query: can classroom debates/discussions of controversial topics achieve these two objectives? Our study is anchored in critical pedagogy theory (Shor 1992; Jutras 2010; Giroux 2020, 2021); thus, we first delineate the main tenets of such a framework, and then define our principal concepts, *controversial issue* and *rich point* (Agar 2006). Similar to earlier empirical work that adopts a “small-lens approach” (Sampson 2022, 11; Ushioda 2016), in the debates we first note and then examine in detail “the emergence of emotionally significant experiences or critical incidents” (Sampson 2022, 11) – at least , for some participants. We then present and analyse two specific moments in the classroom debate that highlighted the experimental part of our study. We first explore the expression of emotions using a lexico-semantic approach (Cavalla and Pecman 2020), and then examine the ways in which critical thinking emerges through the debates sparked by the diverse student reactions.

### **Learning to (dis)agree in a Foreign Language**

The Council of Europe published a 2015 training pack focused on teaching controversial issues in the classroom, and teaching students “ how to engage in dialogue with people whose values are different from one's own and to respect them” (Council 2015, 7). We note that this definition is one of the few to underline the socio-affective dimension, as it sees debating

controversies central to “the democratic process and essential for the protection and strengthening of democracy and fostering a culture of human rights” (*ibid*), and understands that controversies “arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society” (2015, 8).

### *Critical Pedagogy*

In the quote below, Giroux (2020) denounces the ‘manufactured consent’ of the public via the control of various ‘cultural apparatuses’ such as the social media, which increasingly take the place of educators and result in a ‘culture of ignorance’:

This reactionary educational formation includes the mainstream broadcast media, digital platforms, the internet, and print culture, all of which participate in an ongoing spectacle of violence, the aestheticisation of politics, the legitimisation of opinions over facts, and an embrace of a culture of ignorance. (Giroux 2020, 195)

Critical pedagogy strives to counter this control and encourages teachers to take risks and choose class discussion topics that will “render visible important social issues that lie on the side of social and economic justice” (Giroux 2020, 196). It calls for debate on issues that will stimulate students to seek knowledge, to be more tolerant, and to accept criticism. These goals – to hear, to confront and to discuss multi-perspectives – are educational targets of both critical pedagogy educators and language teachers instructing students in argumentation. These discussions help students question the uncritical acceptance of what is presented to them as knowledge (Orange 2003, 85) as well as what is identified as conspiracy theory (Audureau 2021), and also teach them how to express their emotions (Badouard 2015). We therefore consider debates on controversial issues as a unique opportunity to develop both critical thinking and emotional expression: such a pedagogical choice allows teaching to play a role in both civic education and language learning. Emotions can be “stepping stones or pitfalls in learning a foreign language” (Klett 2007, 41); in other words, they can be positive in offering

students confidence and empathy (Arnold 1999; Puozzo 2013), or negative in producing anxiety (Dewaele 2006; 2013 inter alia).

Yet there is little research on the use or the results of pedagogical strategies used to address controversial issues in language lessons. There is therefore a need for experimentation in this area.

### ***Key Concepts: 'Rich Point' and Emotion Lexicon***

To analyse the data collected in our experiments, we used two concepts *rich point* (Agar 2006) and *emotion words* (Blumenthal, Novakova, and Siepman 2014), as these support our 'small-lens' approach (Sampson 2022). Indeed, when discussing controversial topics, "crystallising or paralysing experiences" serve as triggers for particular emotions (Hourst 2006, 33), and these, whether positive or negative, may affect the learning process. We appropriate Agars's rich point notion (2006, 2) as we have done in previous works (Baider & Kounouni 2018) to qualify these decisive moments in the class, which he explains as "those surprises, those departures from an outsider's expectations that signal a difference between LC1 [languaculture 1 as source] and LC2 [languaculture 2 as target] and give direction to subsequent learning." Thus, rich points are these moments of surprise, good or bad, which concretely illustrate a discovery and, potentially, the learning of a language-culture. This moment of "knowledge-bridge" between the native language-culture and the targeted language-culture is foremost a feeling of strangeness. Thus, when a young Frenchman discovers a Japanese breakfast (Mangenot 2007) completely out of step with the one he eats every day, this discovery leads him to take a new look at his own eating habits and possibly to question them.

We use the rich point concept at two levels to analyse student reactions during class debates. First we observe students' arguments and explanations in the various debates, as this is essential to understanding their needs and expectations (Orange 2003, 87). Thus, during the observation

of students' verbal, written and/or para-verbal reactions, we discover the factors that favor or paralyse discussion, and potentially, affect learning the language as well. With this information the next step is to make a pedagogical decision: for example, should teachers intervene and take the side of the offended/upset student; should they offer counter arguments; or should they only correct the linguistic expressions? The educator's role as the mediator of a debate is a very important parameter when exploring rich points in a debate. Therefore, we use the concept of rich point to refer not only to a discovery by foreign language learners, but to refer also to their discovery of others' opinions and teachers' discovery of the crucial dimension of surprising statements and reactions on the part of learners. We use the concept to describe that moment when we feel surprise at discovering an unexpected element when reading written essays or watching videotaped seminars; we can then make inferences to understand the learners' cognitive and affective journey as the debate progresses.

For the linguistic analysis of our data, we used lexical semantics and corpus linguistics. We first collected the emotion words identified in the students' speech to understand the general framing, which we determined using the parameter of frequency. We then compared these emotion words / frames with those most frequent in several press subcorpora in the Lexicoscope (Kraif 2019).

### ***Research Questions***

We saw that the discussion will be of a controversial nature, there is a need to keep the balance between the emotional aspect (expression of feelings) and the cognitive dimension (learning); this requires significant work/study before, during and after the class, and by both students and teachers. We also understood that it is important to avoid reinforcing divisions or even creating rifts throughout the discussions and afterwards. When preparing the protocol for the experiment, we defined three objectives inspired by Stradling (1984, 123):

- (a) The first objective is pedagogical: does a stimulus, such as a controversial topic which should trigger debates, gives teachers the opportunity to investigate ‘emotional talk’?
- (b) The second objective is linguistic and focuses on learning emotion words: what kind of ‘emotional lexicon’ is expressed by intermediate-level learners when discussing a controversial topic? Is this lexicon of emotions used by native speakers? Can the comparison give us insights for targeting specific words?
- (c) The third objective is socio-pragmatic: what are the rich points with the potential to help students understand different opinions, and to make them better understand the feelings of others? In this case, the nonverbal linguistic expression of affect would be more evident.

### ***Experimental Method***

The design of this study led on from six months of experimental teaching to prepare the protocol we finally adopted. This experimental method has been described in Baider (in press) whom explored five themes throughout the semester that we considered 'controversial' and worked with students on argumentation techniques. For the chosen topic of veganism, in this study, we viewed a conference given by an environmental activist advocating veganism and introducing her book *Planète vegan* (Véron 2019). Veron first explained that she had been a ‘meat eater’, and then discussed and refuted the arguments justifying speciesism; for example: the hierarchy among animals, such as those that are generally regarded as pets and those that we eat in our European countries, are only socially constructed categories that vary according to the culture and the time.

These sessions were the most productive for eliciting the students’ thoughts and emotions. Our data analysis focuses on that video.

### ***Methodology and Participants***

The corpus consists of two types of documents: videos of courses, and video-conferences of seminars for French as a Foreign Language (FFL) learners. There were two classes and each class had approximately 15 students at level B2-C1 enrolled in the Sorbonne Nouvelle University. The discussions with FFL learners in Cyprus at level B1 were discussed in another work (Baider in press), but we will refer to them during the discussion.

The trigger document was the same for all classes/courses – Véron’s 2019 conference talk. To organise a debate with intermediate-level learners required some pedagogical guidance, so we used a series of 10 questions below (cf. table 1) to test students’ understanding of the video (first five questions) and to understand their feelings about the experience (especially the last five questions).

**Table 1** Questions asked

<p>Questions related to the video</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Why did the speaker become a vegetarian?</li> <li>– What is the difference between a vegetarian and a vegan ?</li> <li>– How many animals are killed every 20 seconds?</li> <li>– Do you know any vegetarians? What's your reaction? Your opinion?</li> <li>– Why is 'animals eat each other' not an argument?</li> </ul>
<p>Questions related to students’ more general positions on the subject</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Are these food-only practices? Justify your answer. You can consider morals, philosophy, lifestyle, environmental awareness, etc.</li> <li>– Are these choices recent in human history?</li> <li>– What is the link between animal rights and these practices?</li> <li>– In your opinion, in which countries is the practice of veganism the most prevalent ? And vegetarianism? Why?</li> <li>– Have you read articles, seen videos, posts on these practices (before that of the class) in the media?</li> </ul>

Two teachers from the Sorbonne Nouvelle were informed of the objective of the research, and they agreed to follow the protocol remaining emotionally neutral in the discussion. The length of the seminars varied, according to the teachers; we imposed neither limits nor strict pedagogical protocol. The teachers decided to conduct their seminars in two phases: in the first



phase, after watching the video in the classroom, they guided students to *collectively* answer some comprehension questions (the first 5 minutes or so, covering the first 5 questions); in the second phase, they posed questions that were more individually targeted, and discussed these in *two small groups* of about seven students; this last phase sparked the expected debates, even though the teachers could not follow all the debates taking place during breaks. The two classroom sessions were recorded on video, and each was two hours long.

Our experimentation analysis comprised viewing and analysing the videos of the two teachers, who each independently located the rich points, i.e., the turning points in the debate that occurred because of a student’s narration of an experience, a memory that triggered both verbal and nonverbal expressions of emotions.

### Results and Data Analysis

Interestingly, if we focus on the lexicon alone, i.e., if we study only the emotional words identified in the students’ speech, we have few results. Indeed, over the entire corpus we identified only 10 emotion words, which were also repeated from one student to another (see Table 2)

**Table 2.** Emotion words used in the data

Words	Number of occurrences in the seminar (4h)	Words	Number of occurrences in the seminar (4h)
Aimer “to love”	7	Égoïste “selfish”	2
Bien être “well-being”	2	Horrible “horrible”	5

Consideration “consideration, respect”	2	Mauvais “bad”	3
Cruel “cruel”	3	Souffrance “suffering”	8
Douleur “pain”	2	S’inquiéter “worry”,	2

We can observe a negative axiological value to most of the lexicon, meaning that negativity characterised student reactions to the video, the lexicon referring to bad experiences (suffering, pain, horrible), and an extremely negative judgement (bad, selfish, cruel) which infers disagreement. We could then hypothesise that the rich points will be associated with the recounting of a bad experience and disagreement, a hypothesis we investigate along with our linguistic analysis. The low number of emotion words in this context might be explained by:

- 1) the language level of the learners, which naturally limits their vocabulary (CECRL);
- 2) the learners’ tendency to use each other's words, which is to be expected since the debate focuses on a specific theme, which would de facto limit the vocabulary used, and because the interactional rules of the debate encourage the use of similar words to align in some ways with the other speakers like in all specific discourse (Moirand 2003);
- 3) emotion words, in any case, are not used as often as indirect means of expressing emotion such as metaphors or paraverbal communication, which build an ‘emotional frame’ that serves to describe the feelings (Grossmann et al. 2008; Pavlenko 2008; Cavalla 2015).

This inventory confirms that even if the topic is controversial and the debates are lively, learners do not spontaneously express their feelings with words. This leads to the second aspect of our linguistic inquiry: what emotion words are used by near-native speakers of French? How

can we use this information to target specific expressions and lexico-semantic fields to enhance our teaching of emotion words?

To investigate these issues we used the *Lexicoscope* corpus platform in which several sub-corpora are offered. First, we compared the words used by the learners with a press corpus dealing with ecology (*ReporTerre* from 2008-2021; 15,725,911 lemmas). Second, we worked on a generalist press corpus (*lemondedapres2*, from 2010-2020 ;103,062,851 lemmas). All the emotion words in our list are found in both corpora, where we note that twice as many nouns as verbs appear as shown below.

**Table 3.** Reference corpus

<b>The ReporTerre corpus</b>	<b>Nouns</b>	<b>Verbs</b>
<b>5000 most frequent lemmas</b>	3108872	1425716

Just as in the list of learners' emotion words, two verbs appear alongside four nouns: *to love* and *to worry*. These two verbs are present, respectively, approximately 1500 and 1300 times in the corpus, which represents 30% and 26% of the 5000 most frequent lemmas in the corpus. It appears therefore that the students often worry about animal and human welfare (in concordancer extractions from the lemma "to worry").

***Rich point 1. I do not like her!***

However, the verb ‘to worry’ is little used by learners, unlike the verb ‘to love’ in the negative form – the most frequent emotion verb in our data, but not in the *ReporTerre* corpus. In our

data it is most often used to express a negative judgement about others, such as the conference speaker or vegans:

(1) Je n'aime pas le discours de cette femme [I don't like this woman's discourse] (referring to the conference speaker)

(2) Personnellement je n'aime pas les discours de végétariens [Personally I don't like the discourse of vegetarians] (re affirming the other student's position)

(3) On n'aime pas ces discours parce qu'ils sont vrais [We don't like these discourses because they are true] (defending the conference speaker)

Interestingly, this lexis is used at the same time that rich points occur in the debates, a fact noted by the researchers. In the B1 class, one student was clearly annoyed by the speaker (quotation 1), denouncing her discourse as 'emotional blackmail' for the first 40 minutes of the class and also when working on the second question, nor did she appreciate the speaker's examples showing the different behaviors of humans and animals. One example in particular was that of rabbits eating their own excrement, which led the student to use quite a rich semantic field related to the feeling of repulsion, e.g., *dégoûtant* [disgusting] and *sale* [dirty], and also to the feeling of *manipulation*, to describe the speaker's strategy used to convince her audience – a judgement that was shared and encouraged by the teacher. The notion of blackmail was also evoked by the teacher, who referred to the fact that the speaker asked the audience to close their eyes and think of their pets, and then to realise that thousands of animals were killed during those few seconds. The interaction between the student and the teacher took almost five minutes (40mn-44 mn). This statement of emotional blackmail rang true with other students, since we observe that the next three students to speak repeated the same negative judgement, which had not been expressed before in the discussion. We qualify this statement (quote 1) as a rich point since it oriented the debate on both an argumentative and an affective level,

triggering the same (strong) negative emotions in other participants, who subsequently expressed disagreement. That this was a rich point for the teachers too came as a surprise: this strong criticism of the speaker did not occur in the first stage of the experiment (at the University of Cyprus), nor in the second class at the Sorbonne University. Interestingly, in the same B2 class and towards the end of the debate, a group of six students were debating during a break: one student was reaffirming the teacher's point about the speaker's manipulative argumentation, while another student who had been silent until then, but who had expressed some distressed facial expressions during the discussion, spoke up (2.01) to defend the speaker. She argued that most students did not like the speaker because her statistics, examples, and arguments made sense:

(4) We don't like to hear things like that because it's true (...) I think that's why we don't like this woman's conversation because that it is true and we avoid knowing. [On n'aime pas entendre les choses comme cela parce que c'est vrai (...) je pense que c'est la raison pour laquelle on n'aime pas la conversation de cette femme parce que c'est vrai et on évite de savoir.]

This statement was countered by the daughter of a butcher, who said that her father would have no issue with talking of killing animal or killing them. These exchanges triggered another debate present in both videos: is sensitivity to animal suffering a question of class? Of culture? Of personal history? This leads us to our second rich point.

### ***Rich point 2: Animal Suffering and Personal Testimonies***

The semantic field of *suffering* was extremely evident in our data, although less so in Véron's talk, as she only used the expression 'animal suffering' twice. This is the most common first collocation "suffering + adj" found in the *ReporTerre* corpus:

(4) Une course sans fin à la performance, alimentée par une indifférence totale à la souffrance animale. (*ReporTerre*) [An endless race for performance, fueled by a total indifference to animal suffering]

(5) On peut vivre sans exploiter d'animaux, sans causer de souffrance animale [We can live without exploiting animals, without causing animal suffering] (Véron 2019, 1:20:05)

Yet, while students do not use the actual collocation itself, the two paradigms (*suffer, suffering, pain*) + (animals) are evident in the student speech, which hints at their intuitive knowledge of such a collocation (Cavalla 2009). Here are two examples of their uses:

(6) Je pense que c'est mieux si on limite les produits animaux; quand on adopte un animal on pense la souffrance [I think it's better if we limit animal products; when we adopt an animal we think about the suffering]

(7) ils ont lutté contre la souffrance des animaux [They fought against animal suffering]

In the same way, the word *douleur* [pain] is not frequently used, although the teacher used it six times, the students expressed the same concept in indirect ways. For example, three times the teacher used the expression *éprouver de la douleur* [to experience, to feel pain] which the students did not use. Yet this expression is one of the most common among native speakers when expressing feelings (cf. the *ReporTerre* corpus), together with *ressentir de la douleur* [to experience, to feel pain]. The collocation *éprouver de la douleur* [experience pain] is more frequent in literature than *ressentir de la douleur* (297 occurrences in a literature sub-corpus of *Lexicoscope*), and they refer primarily to the pain experienced by the novel's protagonist and not that felt by a third person. Typically the students used the verb *sentir* [to feel, to smell] such as in "Les végétaux aussi peuvent sentir la douleur" [Plants can also feel pain] to criticise vegetarians.

When discussing suffering, the students tended to intellectualise the topic of suffering more than the speaker, discussing the notion of animals having a soul, animals having rights, human beings need to eat meat, the fact that vegetarianism is also more generally about ecology, not only about animal rights. One student brought up the subject of plants, which are also living things, asking why focus on the suffering of animals only and not all living things? If we did, concluded the student, then we could not eat anything. This interesting comment did not trigger a debate, but personal testimonies given by the students did, and even furthered the learning journey in an emotionally intense way: one South American student recalled witnessing the castration of a bull when she was young; another student spoke of his work in a company that tested pharmaceutical products on dogs and rabbits. The reactions, especially non-verbal reactions, were very rich. Indeed, emotions were evident in several ways (Blumenthal, Novakova, and Siepman 2014; Boch and Cavalla 2005):

- Indirect verbal means (telling an anecdote rather than arguing, for example): this was often used when discussing the topic of organic food and veganism. Students did not disagree in a confrontational way about vegetarianism, but mentioned the difficulty of finding restaurants when out with vegetarian friends; many anecdotes about the price of organic food led to a discussion on flex vegetarianism, which was analysed as a ‘greenwashing’ way of reviving the vegetarian movement;
- Interactional management: for example, interrupting a colleague, not responding to the theme/argument of the preceding speaker, etc., which could translate as disgust, anger, contempt or disagreement according to the situational context;
- Non-verbal means: such as tears, screams, laughter, gestures, facial expressions (Ekman 1984; Borgé 2019).

We identified both interactional management and non-verbal reactions when the student explained bull castration; some students reacted physically (disgusted faces, laughter, blocking their ears, moving away from the camera to hide their feelings). Only one student verbalised her emotion with the command “stop, “stop!”. On the expression of emotion, de Vignemont (2008) argues that emotions can only be verbally expressed if they exist in our emotional repertoire; the emotion can however be otherwise expressed, for example, by gestures and facial expressions. The bodily aspect here is extralinguistic (mentioned earlier), i.e., the bodily expression (gestures or expressions) of non-lexicalised emotions. Such reactions can create a memorable class-room experience, enhancing the dynamics and contributing to learning in the classroom.

Might such nonverbal reactions belong to an emotional framework or script that would characterise the expression of specific emotions? Could disgust be made up of gestures and demands to stop the discourse? This remains to be verified with other corpora of the same type.

## **Discussion**

### ***Learning Phrases, Safe Space and Teacher Roles***

Our first research question focused on the role of controversial issues when encouraging learners to express emotions, this study points to the importance of expressing indirect emotions on the part of the learners, which are often conveyed in non-verbal expressions. On the other hand our research experiment pointed to a caveat in the emotional lexicon of the intermediate level learners, our second research question, when we compare with the vocabulary identified in a press corpus. Some specific lexies can be targeted, and especially collocations such as *ressentir de la douleur* [to experience pain], *bien être animal* [animal welfare], and *souffrance animal* [animal suffering], which although they were used by the teacher and the conference speaker, were not used by the students. The explanation for this



may be found in Yamaguchi (2012) . There are two types of frequency: "token frequency is the frequency of occurrence of a unit [...] in a body of text", while "type frequency is the frequency of a particular pattern in a [pattern] repertoire" (Yamaguchi 2012, 97). Thus, the token frequency of a word is the number of times it appears in a corpus; the type frequency is the number of times it appears in this type of lexical association or collocation. For a student to memorise/learn these co-occurrences, a double identification is necessary: that of the *lexies* involved in the association and that of the *syntax* of this association. Therefore, students must hear these co-occurrences often if they are to be quickly and systematically imprinted at the both the semantic and the syntactic level. This will help students memorise and use such native expressions.

The second research question was socio-pragmatic and focused on rich points, as these have the potential to teach students to understand opinions different to theirs, and help them better understand the feeling of others. Our study has shown that students sharing personal testimonies often results in a turning point in the debate, triggering reactions and other testimonies, where the nonverbal linguistic expression of affect is very evident.

Nevertheless, the Council of Europe stresses the challenges that will arise when teaching controversial issues; thus, the teachers must protect student sensitivities, ensure a friendly classroom climate, and understand the topics well to deal with spontaneous questions and remarks. In other words, "What is needed is therefore, sensitivity to context and flexibility of response " (Council 2015, 18). The aim is also to provide a safe space for the young to have discussions on issues that refer to "extremism, gender violence, child abuse, or sexual orientation" (ibid). Providing a safe space means putting in place mechanisms to protect students from different backgrounds and cultures; to prevent friction in the classroom, and; to

allow contentious material to be taught even-handedly, the teacher's own beliefs and values being put aside (Flensner and von der Lippe 2019).

The role of the teacher is very important in creating and preserving that safe space, especially when using the classroom activity of debating contentious issues (Levinson 2011, 614). The teacher must listen, be open to multiple points of view and divergent opinions, and encourage students to develop their knowledge. In fact, students enjoy debates, since it is a problem solving activity (Hess 2009, 107); but they also want fair play in the classroom. "To that end, teachers should be genuinely respectful to the other side. Students can tell through tone of voice, humor, and attitude if the teacher is disparaging a viewpoint" (Hess 2009, 108).

According to Hess and Macvay (2015), teachers can adopt one of several roles to ensure 'fair play' throughout the discussion:

- The teacher remains neutral, which potentially allows some very biased opinions to be expressed without any counter argument. This may potentially reinforce existing biases;
- The teacher plays devil's advocate, defending the opposing position to that expressed by the students. In this way the teacher demonstrates taking students' opinions seriously, but because the teacher is in a position of authority this may give the teacher's position more weight;
- The teacher takes a definite side, expressing their own opinion at some point in the debate after having argued against the opposite point of view. This can give students a model on how to answer a controversial question, but again, the teacher's authority may influence students;

- The teacher plays favourites, taking the side of a student/ group of students to help weaker students or marginalised groups make their voices heard. This can give the impression of favouritism;
- Finally the teacher may adopt the ‘official line’, promoting the side dictated by public authorities. While this offers official legitimacy, students may feel that their own discussions are irrelevant because there is only one point of view that matters.

In all cases, the most important rule is to not reinforce existing prejudices.

In our videos, the teacher’s role was first that of a guide, helping students to express their thoughts and feelings, and therefore adopting a neutral position. However at some stage, the personal opinion of the teacher was expressed as they supported several times students strong criticism of the conference speaker, turning to role number 3. As argued in the literature (Hess 2009), this choice might encourage students to share the teacher’s opinion, who is seen as an authority; earlier we saw how this triggered a snowball effect, with a student soon criticising the very example the teacher had mentioned as far fetched at the beginning of the debate. Only at the end of the two hours and in a break room did one student express a radically different opinion; since it was shared with only a few classmates, we will never know if other students had felt like she did since it was not shared with the whole class.

This small example could leads us to hypothesise that the role of a neutral guide is a good option as long as the (students’) opinions do not reinforce prejudice or stereotypes. Digital tools such as padlets could be used at some stage of a controversial issue debate to ensure student anonymity and to play down the role of the teacher (Baider in press).

### ***Controversial Issue Fostering Emotional Engagement***

We can also conclude from our observations of the lively conversations in the classroom that such controversial issues can enhance student engagement . We use the term engagement with

reference to Coffey (2010, 2015) who suggests that this notion is useful to understanding how students learn a new language. The author explains this engagement as a discovery of the Self during the acquisition of a new language. Interestingly, we used the notion of the rich point to analyse our discoveries of the student's Self / selves during the seminars, such rich points being illustrated by the expression of powerful emotions and strong or surprising opinions. Redefining one's relationship to the world, as in language learners' experience within Coffey's framework, could here be framing the experience we as researchers experience while watching and hearing the learners's discoveries. We can adopt this notion of engagement to understand how taking a position during the intense discussions in the foreign language creates/reinforces an identity. Our small-lens analysis of the dialogues and exchanges was useful in understanding the source of student engagement. Both positive and negative emotions dominated the debates; we pointed out how one student's outrage led to the engagement of other students and the teacher; we also identified the individual strategies in the student /teacher learning relationship and the important role of personal examples/testimonials in both individual and team engagement with an issue. Ushioda (2016) found that working with controversies "impacts on language learners' attentional focus and resources and on their cognitive engagement with language". Using an empirical lens, we observed more intense engagement during rich points. Like other researchers focusing on critical episodes during language learning (Tripp 1993; Ushioda 2016; Sampson 2022), we suggest that focusing on rich points as a tool of qualitative inquiry can be useful both for teacher training and for strengthening student intercultural communication. We note its value to teacher training since controversial issues vary with time and context; moreover, discussing our analysis with the teachers who lead the seminars would be quite fruitful since the teacher has much more knowledge of the learners in the classroom, and can give insights to some behaviours (is this student always passionately critical?) or within the group (does this person interrupt his or her classmates regularly or only in that incident.

Like Ushioda (2016), we would encourage the identification of rich points to be the result of exchanges between researchers and teachers and should therefore be a co-constructed enterprise.

## **Conclusion**

The present study had several objectives: 1. to evaluate intermediate-level foreign language learners' expression of emotion i.e. to assess their knowledge of the emotional lexicon, in order to enhance this particular vocabulary; 2. to identify what sparks rich points in a debate. Both research questions were embedded in a third one: can teaching controversial topics attain both of these objectives? Concerning the first question, we found that the B2-C1 level EFL learners in the two seminars did not know the two most frequent co-occurrences /collocations in our corpus (animal welfare and animal suffering). However, analysis of their exchanges revealed a degree of intuitive knowledge of the terms (Cavalla 2009), perhaps due to their frequent use by native speakers. Therefore, if the teacher were to often use such vocabulary, it would likely enhance the students' learning. Most importantly we can conclude that teaching controversial topics in language classes exposes students to multi-perspectives which is highly valuable since it allows teachers and students to work on "pragmatic and discourse competence" (CECRL 2018), including cultural references, functional use of language in defined scripts that require specific knowledge, skills and know-how that can be enhanced when discussing such topics. Giving students a voice on these issues, helping them understand how others feel and teaching them to listen to arguments other than those found on social media are among the aims of our experiment. Such 'multi-perspective learning' also enhances "critical thinking, listening and negotiating skills in the learner" (Quartermaine 2016, 18). In some ways , it can be seen as media literacy training. It would also seem appropriate to address the issue in preservice teacher

training or in special seminars, although large-scale, longitudinal and contextual studies are needed to develop the best approaches to teaching controversial issues in the classroom.

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