

‘I Feel...’: Mapping Japanese-Learner Emotion with Q Methodology

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary second language acquisition research increasingly recognizes emotions as fundamental forces shaping learning trajectories, yet systematic approaches to mapping learners’ holistic affective experiences remain underdeveloped. This study addresses this gap by employing Q methodology to investigate the complex emotional landscapes of language learners, conceptualized as “affective-motivational mosaics” that emerge from the interplay of multiple theoretical constructs. 33 Malaysian undergraduates majoring in Japanese participated in this mixed-methods investigation. A comprehensive Q-sample of 45 statements was developed through a dual procedure: deductive derivation from five established theoretical frameworks (Self-Determination Theory, Control-Value Theory, Foreign Language Enjoyment, Foreign Language Anxiety, and Positive Psychology) and inductive generation from semi-structured learner interviews. Participants systematically rank-ordered these statements according to personal salience using a forced-distribution grid. Statistical analysis through centroid factor extraction and Varimax rotation, complemented by post-sort interviews, revealed three distinct affective-motivational profiles explaining 39% of variance. The first profile encompasses intrinsically motivated learners who derive satisfaction from autonomous mastery and demonstrate remarkable immunity to external pressures. The second captures students experiencing profound frustration from perceived effort-outcome mismatches, characterized by high anxiety and dependence on external validation. The third reveals a paradoxical configuration where strong intrinsic motivation coexists with persistent anxiety, managed through individualistic resilience strategies while rejecting conventional support systems. These findings advance theoretical understanding by demonstrating that learner affect manifests not as isolated emotional states but as configured patterns where motivational needs, cognitive appraisals, and psychological resources dynamically interact. The research validates Q methodology’s capacity for capturing subjective complexity in SLA contexts and challenges pedagogical approaches that assume emotional homogeneity among learners. The proposed integrative framework offers a novel lens for understanding how multiple affective forces crystallize into the distinctive emotional realities that shape individual learning trajectories in intensive language programs.

Keywords: learner emotion, Q methodology, affective-motivational profiles, Self-Determination Theory, Japanese L2