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Self-narratives in Pre-/Post-visualization: Raising Language Learners' Emotivation and Awareness

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Awareness

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1. Focus on Self-narratives

The self-narratives object of the present investigation are taken from the P.Æ.C.E. Corpus (Landolfi, 2012a), which gathers authentic class-driven texts (details below) where students are given the opportunity to express, in writings collected before and after a guided visualization (GV), aspects of themselves. They convey this information in a narrative modality, which motivates the need to call their texts self-narratives. Their self-narratives contain inner self-representations and self-interpretations of who they think they are as students of foreign languages and who they would like to become in the future.

Self-narratives allow investigators to look into students' inner perspectives about second language learning (LL2), their classmates, the educators they interact/ed with and the formal language learning context(s) embedding the event(s). P.Æ.C.E self-narratives present unexpected perspectives and offer personal insights that can be of help to language educators and language researchers in general. In particular, these self-narratives may be relevant for those scholars who look at self-narratives as repositories of valid and unique information that may be hard to gather/be gathered mainly because, as declared in the corpus, students, are not often given the opportunity to express freely what they think about their learning path and about their choices as learners.

Indeed, collecting self-narratives may be difficult in some learning/teaching contexts due to a number of reasons such as class size, time limitations, and so on. This is particularly true, for

example, when dealing with large classes in academic teaching environments, like in Italian public universities (such as UNIOR) where, depending on the subjects (e.g., English Language and Linguistics), it is not rare that even more than 150/200 students are present in class per lesson.

Other contingent factors may play against self-narrative collections. Program completion, educational barriers, classroom arrangements, and incredulity about self-driven investigations are all factors that limit action research and make them difficult, time consuming, and initially unrewarding for goal achievements and career development. Further obstacles preventing analyses on inner aspects of self-representation and self-awareness, as a Neapolitan professor of Philosophy suggested, are rooted in the difficulty to investigate human variables (e.g., ego factors, colorful interpretations of reality, arrays of (dis)comfort with the pedagogical system, just to name a few). They are largely relegated into the realm of: 'too complex or embarrassing, too wide or poorly relevant for education,' (his personal comment).

Despite possible barriers, interest in the literature on self-narratives has deep roots. The insights that analyses carried on what experiencers state, whether teachers, learners or language researchers, indicate that there is much to discover in relation to personal awareness and self-representation. Findings become even more relevant when narrators are allowed to share personal features anonymously. With different goals in mind, Barkhuizen (2008; 2014), Bell (2002), Kinginger (2004) and Pavlenko (2002; 2007), just to name a few, have all used narrative inquiry in their scholarly studies and highlighted its relevance for educational purposes.

While Smith (2007) suggests that there is not a precise definition of what a narrative research is, Barkhuizen (2014) offers an ample viewpoint on narrative literature specifically devoted to learning and teaching. Kramp (2004, p. 108) highlights "the absence of any single universal" approach to developing narrative research while Pavlenko (2002) distinguishes between investigations that are carried on the text of narration (narrative inquiry) and analyses on the form/structure of the text (narrative study).

The present approach adopts Barkhuizen and Hacker's position and considers self-narratives as "*stories of experience*" activated by human actions considered as "practices, desires, imaginings" (2008, p. 36) that disclose experiencers' realities. Their vision nicely fits the self-narratives that P.Æ.C.E. clusters. In the corpus, students' lives and experiences, certainties and

doubts, feelings and emotions are conveyed in a way that allows investigators to run empirical and reflective inquiries both at a linguistic, surface level as well as at an emotional, deep level.

Students' self-narratives open doors to personal recounts on histories with English, language teachers, classmates, family members and much more. Personal approaches to language learning transmute into stories of joy and sorrow, ease and disease. They become public and safely unravel/unveil what anonymous narrations allow narrators to do: state the truth or better what is perceived as truth in one's own relationship with the process of learning an L2. Neither fear for bad reactions nor reluctance for self-expressions, not even anxiety for bad grades prevent students to go deep into their own realities and share their visions about the academic world they are embedded in. In so doing, they share their desiderata about the L2 they are learning and the language they would like to use in a future to come (English in the present case). They trace an identikit of their present Self, who they think they are *sic et nunc*, and envision their projected Self, who they would like to become.

Freeman (2002) suggests that narrative inquiry is reflective inquiry and indeed, this is what corpus texts show. In the process of their self-narrations, even within the limitations set by the research protocol (see below), students introspectively interrogate themselves on the tasks set by protocol directions and freely write about themselves and their own histories unveiling, more or less harmoniously, those complexities and facets that characterize the process of L2 acquisition as seen by authentic acquirers in a specific momentum of their life thus snapping a synchronic photo of the learning process. Through deconstructing, analyzing and interpreting their stories, first students, then investigators get the opportunity to reflect and understand, to improve and design successful changes. Constructing and thinking about self-narratives in this way involves both introspection and interrogation.

Johnson and Golombek (2002, p. 4) suggest that "inquiry into experience ... can be educative if it enables us to reflect on our actions and then act with foresight." This is, indeed, what corpus participants have done in the two self-narratives they have written (soon to be discussed). In the process of articulating their stories, students go far beyond personal self-description: they make sense of their own stories unraveling complexities unseen before. Thanks to the GV, their own practice and desiderata are interpreted through insights and foresights. A new self-discovered awareness appears and highlights factors of change sustained by an unexpected *emotivating* pulse (as described below) that generates a novel

attitude toward English and the process of acquiring it. A difference that might truly make the difference in students' future connections with the TL.

2. Data source and protocol description

The P.Æ.C.E. Corpus (Landolfi, 2012a) contains more than 110.000 words and constitutes what Larry Selinker defines a "culturally rich" pool of information where texts "go far beyond the merely linguistic into the self-expressed affective factors of attitude, motivation, identity and awareness but coupled with linguistic form" (Selinker 2012a: xi). The corpus unobtrusively invests the emotional micro-worlds and self-made belief systems in which EFL learners are embedded.

It is articulated in five collections (one per each of the five years of data collection) of self-narratives produced by almost five hundred Italian EFL learners (freshmen) for a total of nearly 1000 texts. Volunteer participants attended the first year of an English course in the period from 2005-06 to 2009-10 at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" in the southern of Italy. Their self-narratives present the authentic *voice* of EFL learners who deal with their learning process, fatigue, needs, and more or less disciplined efforts to reach what some of the corpus participants named a "*dream competence*" in English: a functional competence in the occupational world of tomorrow.

Corpus participants were required to write two texts, self selecting the language (either English or Italian), the style and the length they preferred but conforming to anonymity and time span (production could last no longer than eight minutes per text); after the given time, texts would be collected and another phase started. The structure for data gathering was articulated in three phases; the production of written texts in Phase One and Phase Three was spaced out by a guided visualization.

Self-narratives written before the visualization (Phase One) looked backward and forward. They functioned as mirrors of the students' past experiences with English and beamers for the life to come. The information they shared dealt with prior types and lengths of English courses, as well as prior interactions with language educators, pre-enrolling attitudes, and feelings toward the TL. Corpus participants wrote about their fears, high or low expectations, self- or other-sustained motivation, and various other aspects allowing a screening of their set of beliefs, language desiderata, and presuppositions.

These self-representations and self-images made their enrollment choice transparent, described who they thought they were as EFL learners, who they would like to be, and how they would like to achieve their goals. They also made it possible to advance some hypotheses about the impact that these aspects would have on their emotional worlds, limiting or enhancing their pedagogical evolution in the TL.

Phase Two consisted in being treated with a visualization (see below) carried out observing the Neuro-Linguistic Programming guidelines. They require all the five senses to be involved and aim at having each participant under treatment work on his/her own set of beliefs in order to change what needs to be changed, if anything, and transform whatever has proven not to be efficient in prior histories of language acquisition. The visualization was carried out in Italian and completed in 8 minutes.

During Phase Three, self-narrators were to write a new text (time limit 8 minutes) and describe the mental journey they had lived through detailing their experience as much as they wanted and expressing the sensations, feelings, discoveries and whatever else they wanted to share with me, the language researcher.

The nature of the P.Æ.C.E. corpus and the typology of self-narratives it is made of allow researchers to run Self-oriented investigations focused on identity recognition, individual awareness, language ownership, interactions with language educators, responsibility and autonomy in learning and much more. The present study, however, will only focus on aspects related to EFL learners and their awareness related to L2 learning. Other spheres of investigation have already been touched upon elsewhere (Landolfi, 2011; 2013; 2014), although there is much more to be discovered.

3. Visualizations in educational settings

Guided visualizations (GVs) refer to the ability to mentally project images, situations, events, people and any other form of content. They are a useful tool for building emotional awareness particularly if they are performed within NLP modalities (Dilts & DeLozier 2000) and all five senses are activated, as it has been the case for the GVs used in the five collections of the corpus.

GVs have already been used in a number of fields as tools to enhance creativity (Hall et al. 2006), potentiate memory (Richardson 1983), heal physical (Epstein 1999, Fontana 2007),

psychological (Assagioli, 1965; Jung, 1960) and psychotherapeutic manifestations (Erickson, 1982; Satir, 1972), change the Self (Denning & Phillips, 2003; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Webster, 2005), empower athletic (Porter 2003) and learning performances (Arnold, 1999, Putcha 1999). In the latter field, however, as declared by Hall et al (2006), applications have not been significant. This is probably due to the fact that in the classroom daydreaming or being enchanted by mental images would signify a detachment from the classroom reality and automatically imply lessened attention and mental focus.

Recently, however, more and more scholars (Grinder, 2004; Magid & Chan, 2012; Landolfi, 2012b; Munezane, 2015) have activated investigations on the use of GVs in educational settings and demonstrated that what has been noticed in other fields regarding mindset transformations in favor of personal performance ameliorations, proves to be efficacious in L2 learning as well and brings visible improvements in the acquisitional path (Hall, Hal & Leech, 1993; Putcha, 1999). As learning activators, visualizations (Landolfi, 2007; 2009) function not only as emotional awareness builders but also as *Emotivation* activators (see below) and self-esteem pushers (Landolfi, 2008).

The qualitative analysis carried on P.Æ.C.E. self-narratives focused on students' belief systems (e.g., preferences, hopes, expectations) and mental spheres (e.g., aspects connected to anxiety, fears, doubts, resistance, incredulity, shyness). Although there was no formal follow up with students in later phases to see if their acquisitional process had indeed been positively altered, there is evidence that the way students see themselves before and after a visualization plays a relevant role in their acquisitional process, impinges has a positive impact on the affective side of L2 learning and on the wellbeing of the learning path in general, i.e., not confined to the acquisition of English.

Evidence derives from two different sources: students' portfolios and students' spontaneous follow-ups even three years after data collection. In their portfolios, students also reported that the benefits they had gained in English proved to be also valid in other academic situations, investing both foreign languages and other subject matters. They all seemed to have recovered from the 'ugly duckling syndrome' (Landolfi, 2008) and happily headed toward a fulfilling life as academic students. In time, several of them even asked for more visualizations and activations of mental images (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), confirming what had already been expressed in some corpus self-narratives.

4. Awareness and Emotivation: Analysis of the Data

The corpus protocol, as mentioned above, foresaw three phases: an *Opening declaration* (Phase One), followed by a GV (Phase Two) and concluded via a final *Introspective momentum* (Phase Three) during which students were to describe their mental journey. Many of them, however, went a step beyond and autonomously compared/contrasted their own pre/post-visualization states. They reached some transformative conclusions that, as stated by several of them, would have never been thought of before undergoing the research project. Their self-driven interpretations and self-made associations generated by the protocol demands, opened a new way to look at GVs in pedagogical settings.

In the process of becoming aware of their learning process, corpus participants brought to light the existence of a motivational force that had appeared in other fields, mainly connected to psychology (Roseman, 2011). The force had neither been applied to SLA before nor appeared in the literature on motivation still debating between dichotomous interpretations (i.e., integrative/instrumental, intrinsic/extrinsic) finely described by eminent scholars (Gardner, 2010; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009).

The force was called Emotivation, where 'E' stands for '*Ex,*' a Latin preposition, meaning 'bringing things out' from the inner side of ourselves, from those unknown regions of human psyche where ideas, forces and desires are generated and drive personal moves in life. 'Motiv' stands for the reasons, the motives that nourish and withstand decisions toward goal-achievement pushing experiencers to take 'action.' Once actions are carried out, they sustain the motif, feed the force and work toward goal attainments. The entire emotivational process can be other-guided (consider the examples below) but must be self-generated and self-activated to become operational, overcome motivational dichotomies, and generate transformative behaviors toward goal achievement.

Some self-narratives extracted from the corpus can be of help, at this point, to observe both the students' level of awareness toward the TL and its actualization/transformation in pre/post-visualization as well as the emotivational force. When necessary, the extracts will be presented in the same *vis à vis* format adopted in the P.Æ.C.E. corpus. Left texts are self-narratives in pre-visualization (pre-V) and texts on the right correspond to post-visualization (post-V) self-narratives. Texts have not been manipulated in any way and no language polishing has occurred: they exactly mirror what participants handwrote. The triplet "xxx" stands for the cancellations that the original texts presented.

The sequence […] identifies missing segments in the text intentionally deleted for lack of relevance in the ongoing discussion

1_07_31_EN_(112)	2_07_31_EN_(167)
LINGUA: Inglese Well, I've been loving xxx xxx foreign languages since I've started to study them. In particular, I do love english and spanish ones because I manage to speak them well. xxx xxx xxx xxx So, I've decided to attend this faculty, the "Orientale", because I really think that it will give me a lot of possibilities that could lead me to a good future, xxx xxx xxx most of all in the field of the job. I'm sure that if I keep attending this important xxx faculty, I will improve my knowledges as concerns the languages that I've already studied at school, that is to say English and Spanish.	Well, I have to say that this experience of "travelling" with fantasy hasn't been so hard at all for me. I definitely love doing it just because it gives me the possibility of dreaming about something that I want with all my strength but it can also make me think about a different way of perceiving things around me, maybe in a better way. In this case, fantasy has encouraged me because, thanks to it, I've done things that I've never done, like going to the country I've always dreamt about, that is England, I've visited Liverpool, the Beatles' native land, but, overall, I've found into the depth of my soul the real motivation that one day will lead me to say: «I can work it, I feel I can! Not to give up, just to keep on!!!» This experience has also been important for me because it has taught me that we have to be also a little bit imaginative, neither only rational nor always schematic.

The code that titles each of the extracts identifies each extract and gives information about the text type (e.g., pre-V = 1, post-V=2), the year of collection (e.g., 07, 08), the numerical position in the collection (e.g., 31, 34), the language adopted (e.g., IT, EN), and the number of words the text contains in round brackets. Translated segments are inserted in curly brackets.

In pre-V self-narratives [1_07_31_EN_(112)], students talk about their preferences (e.g., '*I do love English and spanish*,' '*to attend this faculty*'), expectations (e.g., '*a lot of possibilities*,' '*good future*'), certainties (e.g., '*so I've decided*,' '*I'm sure*'), hopes and desires (e.g., '*it will give me*,' '*I will improve*'), positive and negative attitudes (e.g., '*I've been loving … foreign languages*'), and affective actions or reactions toward the TL (e.g., '*I do love English and Spanish*,' '*I manage to speak them well*'). They may be positive-oriented, as in the extract above or less so, as in [1_08_24_IT_(75)].

1_08_24_IT_(75)	2_08_24_EN_(74)
Non ci sto … che ci faccio qui … non capisco molto. Ho studiato inglese ma male, ho studiato inglese per 10 anni ma con professori che cambiavano e che erano distanti. Quando voi parlate inglese, capisco poco però capisco che mi piace l'inglese e che vorrei impararlo questa volta veramente. Sento e vedo gli altri che intervengono e mi sento stupida e diversa. Voglio scappare però voglio anche stare … anzi resto … {*I can't accept this … what am I doing here … I don't*	this experiment is new and I feel strange. I brush my errors with my hand. The sensation is incredible. I feel light and independent. I feel alive. My mind and body are light plus

understand much. I've studied English but not efficaciously, I've been studying English for 10 years but with instructors who would change and who were distant. When you [referred to the teacher] speak in English, I understand a little but I understand that I like English and that this time I would really like to learn it. I see and hear the others who intervene and I (a female student) feel I am stupid and diverse. I want to run away but I also want to stay … or better I'll stay … }	warm. I follow the voice–xxx xxx, I fly and smile. I see a church, a street, trees and trees around me I UNDERSTAND people in the park … a dog xxx xxx xxx xxx Where I am? WOW

The self-narrative in [1_08_24_IT_(75)] differs from the above. Though the student expresses her desires and implicit hope that things may develop differently from the past now that she is at university (*'I like English and that this time I would really like to learn it')*, she also voices out uncertainties, doubts and perplexities about her enrollment choice (*'what am I doing here,' 'I don't understand'),* her self-perception (*'feel I am stupid, '*), and her fears (*'I've studied English but not efficaciously,' 'I want to run away'*). She also manifests a form of reversed responsibility for her previous unsuccessful results and projects them on factors external to her, rather than internal (*'I've been studying English for 10 years but with instructors who would change and who were distant'*), automatically unveiling a poor sense of responsibility.

Both examples sustain what Oxford (1995) pointed out when she claimed that giving learners the possibility to write introspectively about their language learning histories enables them to become aware of their learning process and its attached feelings. This sense of introspective awareness gets even more finely tuned in post-Vs where students are required to report their '*experience of "travelling" with fantasy,'* as said in [2_07_31_EN_(167)], or mental journey (as other students called it), describing the experiences the GV stimulated, provoked, or induced, and giving as many details as possible in the allotted time (8 minutes). Considering the self-narratives under analysis, it appears clear that students, have already manifested their willingness to become active constructors of their future worlds and become fluent users of the TL ('something that I want with all my strength'). They clearly express their joy or puzzlement (considering the use of capital letters) when they realize they can ('I UNDERSTAND people').

Their desire to become proficient/fluent in English gets fulfilled in the GV, their goals become feasible and their whole body (*'My mind and body are light plus warm'*) experiences the deriving benefits (*'The sensation is incredible,') ('I feel light and independent. I feel alive.'*). The number of extracts showing this status transformation, this mindset change, is

indisputably high in corpus self-narratives. In the mental scenarios they built during the GV, participants saw themselves successfully interacting with native speakers of English while being in their dream land and dream town. They felt the joy of being understood: flawless and fluent in English. They experienced the pleasing sensation that communicating with native speakers of the TL offers to those who are learning it, without feeling diminished by personal deficiencies or controlled by evaluators. In a word, they become emotivated.

As mentioned above and elsewhere detailed (Landolfi, 2012b), Emotivation is a magnetic and pulling force that comes from within and potentiates experiencers' determination to fulfill ones' own desires despite prior personal instances of unsuccess. It is an inner force that joins prior dichotomous visions on motivation and allows subjects to find their '*real motivation*,' '*into the depth of my/[their] soul,*' as in 2_07_31_EN_(167). Still drawing from what the student states, it is a force that '*one day will lead me to say: «I can work it, I feel I can! Not to give up, just to keep on!!!»*' Emotivation nurtures self-trust, potentiates self-esteem and allows students to believe in their capacities to the point that it makes them feel different, almost '*another person*,' '*without the fears that I xxx always have,*' as in 2_06_02_EN_(51).

> 2_06_02_EN_(51)
>
> The experiment that we have done on Friday was xxx fantastic. In that moment I felt myself another person, because for the first time I belived in my capacities, without the fears that I   xxx always have. I hope that this xxx kind of experiment can change my "student life"
>
> 2_09_47_EN_(80)
>
> […] My fears are in the sky and the scene in my hand and heart is blue and gold. Now I know why I am studying languages … I want to fly away.
>
> 2_08_19_EN_(151)
>
> […] My fears are away. In my mind I know this is a fantasy but in my heart I know this can to be reality. I want this reality. Here my dreams is joined at the end. I open my eyes but the scene is still in my heart. […]

Almost magically, fears fade away [2_09_47_EN_(80), 2_08_19_EN_(151)] and students can finally say '*Now I know why I am studying languages*' and be sustained by a new type of internal force that, even if recognizable as the result of a visualization, still it is functional. They tag as '*a fantasy*' the experience they have gone through, but in their hearts they also know '*this can to be reality*' that '*can change my "student life.*"'

Visualizations helped students to virtually live their own dream with all of their senses and

discover, independently from the language educator, a personal and inner force that could sustain their efforts and allow them to find the strength, the courage and the perseverance that are necessary when learning an L2. Their self-narratives clearly show that when students are given voice, their contributions can be of great help to language educators and language researchers.

5. Concluding Remarks

The self-narratives that the P.Æ.C.E. Corpus contains are inspiring for the aforementioned reasons and the findings that students' words and the analyses of the data make manifest. Their multisensory, multi-faceted and emotion-arousing *stories of experience* photograph how they see themselves as language learners and how they experience their learning process. Their self-narratives function as unobtrusive mirrors of their language-sensitive past histories and self-images and sketch a prototypical image (the way students see themselves as learners of English) of incoming language learners at university. They shed lights on the unspoken drama they go through, often unknown to language educators.

Students seem to grow through the process of narrating themselves and they self-express this in the corpus data very clearly. They get to know exactly what they want in life, the reason(s) why they are attending a language course and why they enrolled in a specific department at UNIOR despite the fact that it is known, using students' words, as "*not that easy a university.*" Once they get to listen to their inner voice, they become empowered and self-activate attitude transformations. As Valentina, one of the students who is currently using the corpus for error-related investigations, notices:

> It's strange how fast things can change and be seen in a new light, it is probably this ongoing changing aspect of objects, thought and situations that makes everything intriguing.
> When I read the entire Corpus, I was definitely surprised. It looked like a secret diary where students' secret identities were expressed freely. Reading it, wasn't boring but fascinating, it was like going through many situations I had experienced as a language learner, sometimes it was like remembering the past. I like the idea that even if a student is told by someone he won't succeed, visualizations help him realize he isn't less intelligent than others. His awareness prevails in post-visualizations.

Functioning as activators of new operational visions, working in favor of changing unrewarding learning attitudes, GVs can be envisioned as valid tools for innovative self-induced transformative mindsets. As the large majority of corpus self-narratives attests, GVs heal fearful and doubtful approaches to L2 learning, lead experiencers to activate revisions of emotional and linguistic detachments from the TL and the academic context. Reports in

students' portfolios prove that GVs are valid educational tools for affective changes, attitudinal readjustments, and pedagogical developments.

At the moment, further qualitative analyses are being conducted on the corpus data and integrated with students' interviews on the same material. Initial findings indicate that students' self-narratives in pre/post-visualization allow them to: 1) understand the importance of becoming fluent in English (e.g., to get a job in Italy or abroad, to travel, to enjoy international interactions, to understand and have one's own music understood globally, to become a language teacher), 2) identify a self-made tendency to approach the study of English through a diminishing framework (e.g., low self-esteem), 3) recognize the presence of an inner empowering force (i.e., *Emotivation*), 4) express the desire to remove uncongruos beliefs and conflict-activating mindframes (i.e., distrust), and 5) become aware that a functional *Emotivation* favors satisfactory final grades and a time wise completion of the credits required for the degree.

Using self-narratives and growing through their own self-interpretations of what was experienced during the three project phases, students gained both implicitly and explicitly. The implicit gain can be seen in an expanded awareness that self-narratives allowed students to grasp about language learning personal needs, capabilities and possibilities. The explicit gain becomes visible through the empowerment of personal motivation due to the activation of the emotivational force, the creation and/or the establishment of a *"YES, I CAN"* mindset, and a sense of freedom/independence pushing toward self-made success.

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Self-narratives in pre/post-visualization:

Raising Language Learners' Emotivation and

Awareness

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Abstract

Self-narratives produced in pre/post-visualization by Italian learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" (UNIOR) in Italy during a five-year long project testify that visualizations, properly guided so as to focus on second-language acquisition (SLA), potentiate self-awareness and activate a special type of inner motivation, called Emotivation. They provoke a noteworthy change in language learning attitude, which in turn raises students' SLA awareness. They also have an impact on personal commitments nourishing self-sustained decisions to endure the study of EFL despite problematic past histories with the target language (TL). Focus is given to the relevance of self-narratives for investigations on issues related to Self-representations and to the use of guided visualizations (GVs) as tools to activate new inner mental transformative scenarios able to raise language learners' awareness and activate Emotivation.

Keywords: reflection, emotivation, narratives, affect, psychology