

Belonging in the Language Classroom

By Dr. Nikki Ashcraft, University of Missouri

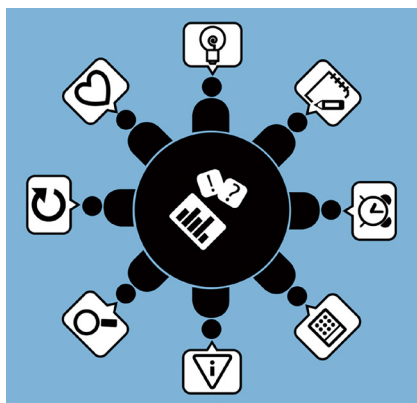
Do you belong to any groups? A club, a church, a professional association? How do you know that you belong to this group? Is it only because you paid your dues and go to meetings? Or is it something else?

For most of us, *belonging* is a feeling or experience. Strayer (2019), who writes about belonging among college students, defines belonging as

students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)

When learners feel that they are part of a learning community, it not only supports their physical and mental well-being but also leads to stronger persistence towards their learning goals. In other words, when learners feel they belong, there are fewer dropouts and more graduates. Additionally, belongingness promotes higher levels of academic achievement (Felton & Lambert, 2020). Learners learn more!

Figure 1. A schematic representation of Dr. Ashcraft's featured session.



Second language acquisition (SLA) research also points to a potential role for learners' sense of belonging in the learners' language acquisition process. For instance, willingness to communicate (WTC) in a second language (L2) has been identified as a factor

facilitating second language development. WTC, which has been conceived of as both a personality trait and a state, is defined as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, as cited in Zhang et al., 2018, p. 227). There are a number of variables that influence whether a learner experiences lower or higher levels of WTC in any given situation. One of these situational variables is the learner's familiarity with their speaking partner. Not surprisingly, learners feel more comfortable talking with people with whom they have established relationships. Additionally, a classroom environment where classmates participate and interact in a cooperative manner encourages a learner's WTC (Zhang et al., 2018). These findings suggest that enhancing a learner's sense of belonging within the classroom community can lead to increased language production and eventually to higher levels of language proficiency!

Likewise, relationships with peers support a learner's persistence in learning English in spite of obstacles they may encounter. For example, Cui and Yang (2022) surveyed Chinese EFL learners three times over the course of a year using a peer closeness

scale and a grit scale. They found that "peer relationships and EFL students' grit were positively and reciprocally related across time points" (p. 9). In the U.S. ESL environment, Garza et al. (2021) analyzed the responses of 6,872 English language learners to questions on the Community College Survey of Student Engagement. They discovered that both campus relationships and campus support services

contributed to learners' sense of belonging, which in turn, "had significant and positive direct effects on ELs' persistence based on reenrollment decisions" (p. 43). These studies on WTC and persistence demonstrate the impact of a learner's sense of belonging on their engagement in learning activities in both the short and long run.

As teachers, then, we have a strong academic justification for striving to create a classroom environment where all students feel they belong. Collaborative activities, which are a hallmark of communicative and task-based learning, not only promote a sense of belonging but *depend on* learners' sense of belonging to achieve their aims. So go ahead – sing those songs, play those games, and engage in community-building activities on a daily or weekly basis! You are not wasting time; you are fostering belonging. I will speak more about belonging and the other conditions required for productive classroom collaboration in my talk on "Laying the Foundation for Classroom Collaboration."



A classroom environment where classmates participate and interact in a cooperative manner encourages a learner's WTC.

References

- Cui, T., & Yang, Y. (2022). Social relationships and grit in English as a foreign language learning among high school students: A three-wave longitudinal study. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, Article 1038878. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1038878>
- Felton, P., & Lambert, L. M. (2020). *Relationship-rich education: How human connections drive success in college*. John Hopkins University Press.
- Garza, T., Huerta, M., García, H. A., & Lau, J. (2021). Exploring sense of belonging, socioacademic integrative moments, and learning communities related to ELs' persistence based on reenrollment decisions in community colleges. *Community College Review, 49*(1), 30–51.
- Strayer, T. L. (2019). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Zhang, J., Beckmann, N., & Beckmann, J. F. (2018). To talk or not to talk: A review of situational antecedents of willingness to communicate in the second language classroom. *System, 72*, 226–239.