

Positivity by Design: Setting the Scene for Situated Language Practice

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Abstract (Deutsch)

Sprachenlernen wird oft auf einen rein kognitiven Vorgang reduziert; tatsächlich umfasst es jedoch einen emotionalen, zwischenmenschlichen und sinngebenden Prozess, der in soziale und räumliche Umgebungen eingebettet ist (Sambanis & Ludwig, 2025). Mit anderen Worten: Der physische Raum ist keine passive Kulisse, sondern gestaltet die Lernerfahrung der Lernenden aktiv mit. Er kann Sicherheit, Offenheit und Motivation fördern – oder Druck, Angst und Rückzug auslösen (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020; Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). Dieses Kapitel stellt daher wichtige räumliche Grundlagen für die Schaffung einer positiven (Sprach-)Lernumgebung vor. Es skizziert, wie unterschiedliche Faktoren, wie Akustik, Gerüche, Lichteinfall und Elemente der Innenraumgestaltung (z. B. Pinnwände), die in verschiedenen Lernumgebungen und Sitzanordnungen verwurzelt sind, gemeinsam die Voraussetzungen für ein sinnvolles und emotional unterstützendes Sprachenlernen schaffen können. Parallel dazu werden beispielhafte Formate (z. B. Brainstorming-Spaziergänge im Freien, Schreibseminare in der Bibliothek und TedTalk-Konferenzen) hervorgehoben, die die Eigenverantwortung der Lernenden fördern. Insgesamt zielt das Kapitel darauf ab, Fremdsprachenlehrkräfte darin zu bekräftigen ein gesteigertes Bewusstsein für die räumlichen Dynamiken zu entwickeln, die ein positives, nachhaltiges Sprachenlernen unterstützen, sowie darauf basierend gleichzeitig damit zu beginnen bzw. zu vertiefen, entsprechende Elemente und vielfältige Umgebungen bewusster in die Gestaltung von Unterrichtsaktivitäten einzubeziehen.

Abstract (English)

Language learning is often reduced to a purely cognitive act; yet, it really encompasses an emotional, relational, and meaning making process embedded in social and spatial environments (Sambanis & Ludwig, 2025). In other words, the physical space is not a passive backdrop but actively co-creates the learning experience of students. It can foster safety, openness, and motivation – or trigger pressure, anxiety, and withdrawal (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020; Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). This chapter therefore introduces key spatial foundations for creating a positive (language) learning environment. It outlines how divergent factors, such as acoustics, scents, exposure to light and interior design elements (e.g., poster boards) rooted in diverse learning settings and seating arrangements jointly provide the conditions for meaningful and emotionally supportive language learning. In parallel, it highlights exemplary formats (e.g., outdoor brainstorming walks, library writing seminars, and TedTalk conferences) that foster learner agency. Combined, the chapter aims to encourage educators to not only develop a heightened awareness of the spatial dynamics that support positive, sustainable language learning, but also to start

incorporating respective elements and diverse settings more intentionally into the design of classroom activities.

14.1 Public Learning Spaces: Designs of Inspiration

Coffee shops, bookstores, and coworking spaces have long served as popular learning hubs for younger and older generations. While some enjoy the smell of fresh coffee, others are drawn to the sound of many people typing on their laptops simultaneously or the feeling of having shelves full of books surrounding them. Thereby, the choice of such a place is deeply personal and often depends on the task at hand: quieter settings for close reading or research (e.g., for this chapter), lively cafes for creative work (e.g., for transferring the spatial notions of the research background into concrete and easily adaptable classroom practices, cf. subchapter 14.3).

Despite sensory differences, all these learning hubs are set to establish a sense of community, evoke (positive) emotions and memories, thereby creating an affective baseline for productive sessions (Böttger, 2024a, 2024b). This raises the question why many (foreign language) classrooms are not yet incorporating more multisensory layers for establishing similar atmospheric and communicative conditions that such public spaces thrive upon. Put differently, if language learning is always situated – spatially, sensuously, and emotionally –, why do classroom environments and institutionalized learning settings so often underrepresent these factors?

Interestingly, prominent teacher responses to this question not only point to institutional constraints (e.g., availability of spaces) and a perceived lack of time for changing settings (e.g., outdoor learning), but they also reveal a deeper reasoning: many educators seem to not yet be aware of the learning essence that spatial foundations can foster.

Therefore, this chapter aims to synthesize central research insights that underline the importance of spatial factors for (language) learning and translates them into easily adaptable, resource-saving classroom practices. While subchapter 14.2 outlines essential effects that several spatial factors can evoke and how these function as the environmental baseline for positive (language) learning, subchapter 14.3 presents concrete learning formats that activate, shape, and sustain these spaces. Together with chapter 14.4, which highlights key first steps for actively considering and adapting environmental factors in one's own classroom and school setting, these passages give support to the argument that appealing spatial conditions jointly create learning environments that foster engagement, safety, and linguistic growth – the “lesson” that public learning hubs implicitly teach about designing environments that invite (language) learning.

14.2 Positive (Language) Learning Spaces: Why Design Matters

Classrooms are institutionalized spaces for learning. Yet, they offer by no means neutral places, but – in the tradition of the Reggio Emilia approach – *a third teacher*: Classrooms, and learning spaces more generally, can enable openness, movement, resonance, and self-efficacy or trigger

pressure, stress reactions and withdrawal (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020; Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). They can establish an open, warm and welcoming atmosphere that offers the backbone of meaningful conversations and, thus, the foreign language learning process at large, or contribute to feelings of time pressure, stress and strict supervision that easily leads to obstructive spirals of thoughts (e.g., “My English is horrible.”) and, with this, limitations in academic success.

As a foreign language educator, it thus seems vital to pay close attention to the effects spatial dimensions bear and to learn how to incorporate conducive elements into daily practices – whether it be sensory (e.g., poster boards) or communication-shaping (e.g., seating arrangements). Together, they constitute central elements of the learning environment, the “particular place where individuals can learn by using a variety of information resources and tools that are designed and allocated in the pursuit of learning objectives“ (Seel, 2012, p. 1849). They are the backbone of the overall learning atmosphere – that elusive but deeply felt “learning climate” that determines whether learning flows or stagnates.

14.2.1 Sensory Elements



Abbildung 4: Spaces with Positive vs. Negative Atmospheric Cues

Rooms speak. Even before a word is spoken, they generate atmospheric signals that are processed in the limbic system. A cold, bare room with neon lighting and rigid rows says, “Control reigns here.” A bright room with room to move, colors, plants, and clip boards for posters says, “You can be creative here.”

From a neuroscientific perspective, Immordino-Yang (2015) explains that emotional states and spatial contexts are linked via the hippocampus (memory formation) and the amygdala (emotion

processing). A space that signals security reduces cortisol, opens the prefrontal cortex, and activates dopamine – the “learning hormone” or “happiness hormone.” Especially in foreign language teaching, where shame and fear of making mistakes are common, the design of the room determines whether the brain works in approach or avoidance mode (Hüther, 2017).

Bright, colorful rooms, open spaces, or “hygge” environments more generally (e.g., fireplaces, outside theatres, or cozy cafeterias) invite students to focus; and also to participate in active daydreaming – a process often considered a distraction. Yet, permitting students to let their thoughts wander, encourages creative processes (e.g., in areas of speech production, such as coming up with original metaphors) and supports language learning related processes, including self-corrections during conversations or the memorizing of new words and chunks (Böttger & Költzsch, 2019). In addition, this by no means unproductive, even if unfocused, state of mind allows for implicit and procedural language learning, fostering an instinctive, instead of a rule-bound use of a foreign language – a crucial component for fluency.

Yet, what sensory dimensions make for an appealing learning environment that fosters openness, willingness to communicate, and evokes meaningful interactions? And how can these be incorporated into institutionalized learning settings? Here is a compact answer that incorporates three major sensory inputs (sounds, scents, visuals) in addition to light conditions:

Acoustics:

Sound is one of the fastest atmospheric signals. When noise levels are high or reverberation is strong, learners need substantial cognitive resources simply to filter speech or focus on relevant learning contents. This makes it difficult for students to stay attentive for long, oftentimes leading to reduced comprehension, increased fatigue, and lowered willingness to participate. It is hence of little surprise to find that excessive noise is associated with weaker learning outcomes and impaired speech processing (Fretes & Palau, 2025).

At the same time, not all background sounds are necessarily detrimental. Low-threshold, non-intrusive auditory cues – such as distant ambient sound or very soft instrumental music – can help learners settle into a task; it can make simulated communicative settings feel authentic (e.g., in a cafeteria setting). In addition, the filtering of relevant auditory stimuli (e.g., statements by communication partners) from below-threshold background noises can be quite beneficial for the learning process: that is, studies suggest that background sound can become part of or stored with the learning content, which is likely to support later recall and can also lead to enhanced linguistic processing (Kurzom et al., 2025).

For foreign language learning, the implication is therefore practical rather than ornamental: use acoustics intentionally. Keep the volume low, prefer natural sound environments (e.g., outdoors), acoustically optimized indoor spaces (e.g., small seating niches with

sound-absorbing panels) or instrumental tracks, offer opt-out options (e.g., quiet corners for sensitive learners), and match the soundscape to the task – quiet for focused writing, a gentle ‘café’ ambience for relaxed literary reading or role plays, such as ordering food or interviewing peers. These minimal adjustments are set to create a positive, acoustic scene that evokes a relaxed, authentic, and open learning atmosphere.

Scents:

Scents play an underestimated, yet powerful role in learning; that is, olfactory cues are closely linked to emotion and memory. Because smell is processed in neural systems that connect strongly to autobiographical memory and affect, scents can trigger vivid associations and quickly shift a room’s emotional tone (Herz, 2004; Shepherd, 2004). In educational contexts, this does not mean ‘fragrance as a magic tool’. It means that basic conditions – fresh air, ventilation, and the avoidance of stale environments – already matter.

If teachers use scents at all, they should do so with great care: subtle, natural cues and allergy-safe routines (including a ‘no scent’ option) are essential. When used responsibly, seasonal or situational cues (e.g., oranges and cinnamon during a winter storytelling unit, natural smell of fresh coffee in a cafeteria text editing session) can foster open exchanges and make for memorable conversations or experiences. In scientific terms: the Proustian hypothesis, which outlines that olfactory cues can evoke particularly vivid memories, is then deliberately adapted for the (language) learning task (Herz & Schooler, 2002).

Visuals and Interior Design Elements:

Visual cues and interior design elements shape how learners perceive a room: as a place of surveillance or as a space they can inhabit. Research on learning environments suggests that color, order, and display decisions can influence students’ wellbeing and learning-related behavior (Barrett et al., 2015; Woolner et al., 2007). In addition, natural elements such as plants or wood textures may support attentional restoration and emotional regulation – an effect often discussed under the umbrella of biophilic design (Bringslimark et al., 2009; Kellert, 2008). For language learning, this matters because emotional safety and reduced self-consciousness are prerequisites for communicative risk-taking.

Importantly, visuals should not be decoration only; they can function as pedagogical scaffolds and identity markers. A ‘language wall’ that grows over time – student-made posters, idiom galleries, mini-infographics, class quotes, or a ‘grammar-in-use’ corner – documents progress and makes learner agency visible. When students see their work displayed and referenced in later lessons, the room tells a story: “Our ideas belong here.” In addition, learning-specific cues can be mobilized to foster curiosity (e.g., books and magazine corner), institutionalizing agency and recognition – two central drivers of participation.

In short, visuals and design elements communicate intent. They can turn the classroom into a linguistic home that invites experimentation rather than perfection.

Light Conditions:

Light conditions are equally influential, as intensity and color temperature shape alertness, mood, and sustained attention. Research on classroom lighting highlights that bright, cooler light can support concentration during cognitively demanding phases, whereas warmer, dimmer light (e.g., virtual fireplace) can foster calmer, reflective engagement (e.g., Mogas-Recalde & Palau, 2021; Lekan-Kehinde & Asojo, 2021). A practical takeaway for language teachers is therefore dynamic lighting: aligning light with activity. Usage of brighter light for listening, discussion, and performance rehearsals (e.g., outdoors); warmer light for reading circles and creative writing, or dimmed light (e.g., half-closed curtains) to create a storytelling ‘theatre mode’. This helps teachers frame different learning modes – without changing the curriculum, but by intentionally setting the scene for participation.

Taken together, the physical space’s sensory components and light conditions are meaningfully associated with students’ learning process as they can shape the emotional tone, foster interaction, induce active daydreaming, or evoke meaning-making processes (Barrett et al., 2015).

14.2.2 Diverse Learning Settings and Flexible Seating Arrangements



Abbildung 5: Exemplary Positive (Language) Learning Settings

Changing the learning environment for respective purposes – such as moving brainstorming sessions outdoors or editing writing assignments in the school cafeteria – modifies the multi

sensory input that is available to learners. Shifts in light, sound, temperature, scent, and also the social atmosphere (e.g., less hierarchical structures adhere in a school cafeteria setting) create new affective and cognitive affordances that stimulate attention, curiosity, and meaning making, enhancing memory, engagement, and emotional resonance (Herz & Schooler, 2002; Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2011); they extend the physical space beyond the classroom and transform routine tasks into novel, embodied, and meaningful language learning experiences.

Moreover, the classroom itself offers opportunities for change. For instance, flexible seating arrangements signal that movement, choice, and interaction are legitimate – i.e., they stabilize the physical space as flexible rather than controlling. For the communicative language learning context, they are best adapted for the diverse task scenarios: While a U-shaped seating arrangement or a classroom circle (sitting or standing) are well-suited for plenary discussions, sharing and brainstorming, or storytelling as they actively encourage participation and signal equality and active listening, a two-sided, adversarial seating (of the whole class or smaller teams) indicates a confrontational character that is perfectly suited for a gamified quiz or debate challenge (Barr, 2016; Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.; Wannakra & Ruhl, 2008).

Intriguingly, not only changes in, but also spatial positioning itself has been shown to play an important role here: it can support cognitive engagement and memory (Wilson, 2002). It comes down to the essence of the game memory. That is, similar to remembering the position of a memory game card, learning contents too are processed and stored in context, including spatial conditions (e.g., the coffee shop one read an article in). The physical dimension becomes part of the learning and, hence, the retrieval process – a truth too often overlooked, instead of actively utilized for learning purposes.

14.3 Positive (Language) Learning Formats: How Spaces (Can) Inspire

Designing positive language learning environments requires not only adapting or selecting the physical location but intentionally designing or choosing learning formats that activate the sensory, hence emotional, and cognitive affordances of the respective spaces. This subchapter presents a selection of approaches that draw on the atmosphere-setting elements outlined in chapter 14.2 and are inspired by study modes and settings of public learning spaces. Together, they constitute powerful pedagogical levers that modulate attention, stress, motivation, creativity and social relatedness, while at the same time allow students to experience language not as an abstract school subject but as a situated practice.

Outdoor Brainstorming Walks: A Natural Start

This approach is an adaption of the Walk'n'Talk format introduced by Böttger et al. (2024): Learners walk in pairs or small groups outdoors and orally brainstorm ideas on a previously assigned topic or question. It shifts the learning place to an open-air and oxygen-rich environment with

diverse sensory stimuli (e.g., bird sounds) and dynamic, natural light, while at the same time incorporating movement: Jointly these factors can elevate mood, reduce stress, and improve divergent thinking (Böttger et al., 2024) as well as foster creative, spontaneous brainstorming ideas to develop (Böttger & Költzsch, 2019).

Setting	Outdoor area (e.g., school yard, park, open areas)
Task	Learners walk in pairs or small groups and orally brainstorm their ideas, views, or elaborate on their prior knowledge to a given topic or task
Learning Focus	Prior knowledge activation and unrehearsed speaking in small groups
Material / Basis	Guiding question(s) or topic (orally or written)
Variation	Walk'n'Talk discussions or interviews (cf. Böttger et al. (2024) for a diverse collection of outdoor formats for language education)

Why positive? As learners walk side-by-side, social pressure decreases and cooperation increases. The horizontal social positioning further naturally fosters belonging and shared focus, while joint movement synchronizes neural patterns and promotes affiliation (Zivotofsky & Hausdorff, 2007). These conditions help learners feel emotionally safe – a prerequisite for linguistic risk-taking. From a language learning perspective, outdoor walks, furthermore, shift attention from grammatical correctness to meaning-making; they stimulate authentic vocabulary use, and make speaking a low-stakes, social act. In addition, the spatial change facilitates memory consolidation as cognitive content becomes tied to the physical outdoor context, including the respective season's characteristics (e.g., floral scents in spring) (Wilson, 2002). Summarized, brainstorming walks combine positive affect, flow, cooperation, and embodied cognition into a powerful introductory format.

Classroom Board Meetings: Room for Discussion

Plenary or group board meetings turn the classroom into a professional discourse arena in which diverse contents (e.g., pro-contra exchanges) or learning and work progress (e.g., during group projects) are evaluated and discussed. In this format, learners engage in structured, goal-oriented exchanges that mirror authentic professional communication settings. More concretely, expedient task formats include letting students 1) discuss benefits and hurdles of particular ideas or viewpoints, or 2) reflect on their learning or project progress and define the next concrete steps (e.g., SMART goals), or 3) both. For either purpose, guidance is helpful with respect to content knowledge (e.g., viewpoints on AI use) and meeting structure (e.g., typical outline).

Considering the classroom setting, a U-shaped seating arrangement or conference table setup for group work is best selected as it enables mutual visibility – a detail shown to increase participation, equity, and reduce social isolation (Barr, 2016; Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.). In addition, clean desks with only meeting-relevant materials (e.g., printed agenda, notepads and pens) cue learners into a more adult, self-regulated communicative mode while at

the same time increasing their feeling of agency. If needed, a presentation area (e.g., flip chart, large screen) can be incorporated to visually support central information and provide scaffolding.

Setting	Classroom or seminar room
Task	Students meet in plenary or smaller groups and discuss diverse topics or evaluate their learning / work progress while following a clear schedule as well as communicative rules (e.g., precise contributions, polite interruptions only)
Learning Focus	Speaking and conversational skills, reflection on progress and definition of next steps
Material / Basis	Content materials, draft of a (goal-oriented) meeting agenda, communicative guidelines, beamer or flip chart (optional)
Variation	SCRUM-sprints (longer periods, e.g., 4 weeks) vs. more regular jour-fixes (e.g., weekly) with varying length (e.g., 30 minutes vs. 3 minutes) and depth of content discussions and evaluations

Why positive? In this structured discussion setting, learners are likely to co-construct ideas, negotiate meaning, paraphrase and mediate, interrupt politely, and build arguments in the foreign language. Yet, this format's success in creating a positive learning environment is rooted in more than spatial design: setting clear communicative guidelines (e.g., turn-taking, active listening, respectful interruptions) and concrete task goals are equally important components and best monitored and sanctioned by one student (role of CEO).

If communicative rules are followed, such cooperative discussions activate social reward systems and can foster a strong sense of belonging (Immordino-Yang, 2015). At the same time, the combination of spatial clarity and communicative structure promotes active, shame-free participation, which increases students' willingness to raise critical ideas and to experiment with new linguistic formulations or complex syntax (Lieberman, 2013).

Including a ritualized meeting opening structure (e.g., welcome, mindful minute, agenda with predefined goals) further enhances psychological predictability, especially important for students with executive functioning challenges, while also providing a familiar linguistic entry point (e.g., recurrent welcoming phrases). In sum, board meetings offer an authentic simulation of real-world language use, integrated with spatial cues that support focus, mutual respect, and meaningful discourse.

Coffeeshop Reading or Conversation Sessions: A Little Taste of New Insights

Coffeeshop foreign language learning sessions are situated in a café-like environment (e.g., school cafeteria with soft background music) and can, for instance, center on reading or on informal conversations. The defining feature of this format thereby is its deliberate creation of an atmosphere associated with leisure, autonomy, and authentic communication.

At the beginning of such a session, learners either transform their classroom into a coffeeshop setting – by rearranging chairs and tables, putting away school supplies, and preparing drinks or small snack brought from home – or meet directly in the school cafeteria. Within this environment, they then choose a place to sit (e.g., in small table groups) and engage in one language learning format: for instance, they either select from available text materials (e.g., short articles, magazines) and read independently, or they participate in small group conversations, exchanging ideas and viewpoints on given or self-selected topics. Regardless of the chosen mode, the café-like setting frames both reading and speaking as relaxed, yet focused forms of linguistic engagement.

Setting	School cafeteria or classroom
Task	Reading sessions: students read pre-selected or self-chosen texts independently Conversation sessions: students exchange ideas and viewpoints on given or self-selected topics in small groups
Learning Focus	Reading or speaking, reflection on contents
Material / Basis	Reading material (e.g., magazines, printed articles) or conversation cards (cards with one given topic)
Variation	Reading sessions: Silent reading vs. reading with discussion breaks; Conversation sessions: one vs. varying conversation topics, constant vs. changing conversation partners or groups (e.g., speed dating style)

Why positive? Simulating a café-like environment (e.g., school cafeteria) – through soft lighting, snacks, drinks, gentle music, and flexible seating – creates an atmosphere associated with relaxation – a perfect fit for individual reading or small group conversations. As a sensory-rich learning space, such a setting can further increase intrinsic motivation and overall comfort (Tokuhamma-Espinosa, 2011). Scents (e.g., coffee or tea) and available materials (e.g., magazines) in particular can activate associative memory and reduce affective hindrances (Herz & Schooler, 2002; Krashen, 1982).

Within this learning space, both reading and conversation formats support key dimensions of positive language learning: during reading sessions, students can choose materials based on their interests or select from a curated set, thereby enhancing meaning (M in PERMA) and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In conversation sessions (e.g., the likely best-known format being language cafés), the informal tone mirrors real-life communication: learners discuss topics they genuinely care about or bring their own perspective on priorly selected topics, often forgetting that they are “doing English” (or the respective foreign language learned).

In short, coffeeshop formats combine informal reading and peer interaction with meaningful content engagement. At the same time, this establishes a reduced performance monitoring setting,

which can increase fluency and lexical retrieval. In this way, this format effectively turns atmosphere into pedagogy.

Library Writing Seminars: Literary Freedom to Create

Library writing seminars are extended writing formats in which students compose a written product over several sessions in a school or public library. Thereby, this format relies on “sensory minimalism” of libraries – quiet, order, soft light – combined with freedom in seating choices (e.g., a couch surrounded by bookshelves, a spot at the window front) and writing topics or genres (e.g., diverse topics, one text type). Together, this fosters deep concentration and simultaneously reduces cognitive noise, enabling sustained linguistic experimentation.

Moreover, writing processes are best supported by short editing or constructive feedback sessions with the teacher at a central “desk”: instead of evaluative, backward-looking comments (“That’s not phrased well”) or centering on correctness (“You used an incorrect tense here”), forward-oriented feedback (feedforward) or a focus on the effects of the chosen writing style (e.g., “Try using fewer passive structures to make your text more emphatic”) hereby helps students maintain motivation, perceive learning as growth and develop their own writing style. In other words: while students become authors, teachers become editors (not critiques or correctors).

Setting	School or public library
Task	Students compose one written product over multiple sessions with optional, short editing meetings with the teacher
Learning Focus	Writing, linguistic experimentation, development of individual writing styles
Material / Basis	Self-chosen or assigned content topics and text types; access to library resources; scaffolding material (e.g., characteristics of a genre, exemplary product)
Variation	Different text genres or topics, varying degrees of guidance, individual vs. collaborative writing assignments

Why positive? For one, the library setting mirrors authentic literary products (e.g., books, journals) that can inspire students to become creators of written work themselves, fostering the transition from language as a subject to language as a tool. More importantly, however, the space and format combine calm sensory conditions with freedom of writing choices, which often encourages a state of flow and linguistic experimentation, while editing sessions can bring about a forward-oriented, motivating perspective. In short, a library writing seminar therefore offers a mental retreat for deeper, meaningful text production and linguistic experimentation, supported by the sensory calm of library environments and feedforward by teachers.

TedTalk Conferences: Space to be Heard

TedTalk conferences adapt the well known TED format into the school context, where students deliver a short, structured mini-talk during a planned conference day or single session built around a clear and engaging narrative arc (a powerful opening; a focused core message; compact and precise backgrounds and reasoning; a memorable takeaway). Thereby, the conventional spatial presentation setting – a small stage, spotlight, projector (e.g., assembly hall, school theatre or musical stage) – creates an atmosphere of importance and respect. In addition, to ensure positive learning effects, students ought best be given sufficient time to develop their narratives, structure their arguments, try out rhetorical techniques and practice their talk on stage.

How can this format be adapted for shy or socially anxious students, diverse grades, and topics? For one, this approach supports differentiated participation: insecure or anxious students may pre-record their talks or use audio overlays, before slowly increasing their on-stage, live speaking time from each TedTalk to the next (e.g., beginning with letting them introduce themselves before starting the recording). Moreover, the allocated presentation time or overall (conference) topic can range from a 1-to-2-minute sales pitch (e.g., best toy or hobby) to a 3-to-5-minute topic of choice TED or a 5-to-10-minute presentation of a seminar paper (e.g., “W-Seminararbeit” in Bavaria). This leaves room for choosing, creating meaning and agency.

Setting	Assembly hall, school theatre, or musical stage
Task	Students prepare and deliver a short, structured talk with a clear narrative arc
Learning Focus	Speaking skills, rhetorical strategies, structured argumentation
Material / Basis	Self-chosen or assigned topics
Variation	Length (1-10 minutes), topic scope, live vs. recorded presentations

Why positive? The TedTalk conference format supports autonomy and meaning by allowing students to select their preferred topics, and supporting them to create their own, personal storyline and narrative arc, which also leaves space for linguistic and rhetoric choices. In addition to the format, the stage setting itself can heighten attention and emotional arousal in productive ways, which, in turn, can enhance memory and verbal clarity (Yerkes-Dodson principle). At the same time, the performance setting can evoke a particular feeling of being heard (“I am on stage, and my voice matters”). Hence, when students give their TedTalks during planned conference days or single sessions, they experience not only language competence, but social recognition.

Places to Remember: Sherlock Holmes’s Memory Palace

While the priorly presented formats were all rooted in one specific spatial setting, this last presented example is based on connecting diverse locations in order to support engaging, knowledge-based learning. The loci method – or in Sherlock Holmes’ words (an important selling

point for students!): the memory palace – can be incorporated into foreign language lessons to connect vocabulary words, grammar rules or factual knowledge with (imagined) physical locations. Whether one let's students assign “furniture nouns” to the classroom (via post it notes) or in a plenary session creates a roadmap of the American presidential election proceedings in the school building (e.g., first stop at a book shelf: U.S. Constitution as the legal basis, second stop at the information board: Primaries and Caucuses, ...), students will connect the physical spaces to the respective content and thus have an easier time recollecting the information (cf. also Twomey & Kroneisen, 2021).

Setting	Multiple physical or imagined locations (e.g., in the school building)
Task	Learners assign linguistic or factual content to specific spatial locations
Learning Focus	Vocabulary, grammar, factual knowledge
Material / Basis	Optional: visual aids (e.g., post-its)
Variation	Individual vs. group-created memory palaces

Why positive? Thereby, this method offers a powerful tool for positive foreign language learning as it transforms abstract linguistic items or factual information into vivid, memorable experiences anchored in concrete places. By binding vocabulary, grammar, or factual knowledge more generally to spatial cues, learners benefit from heightened emotional engagement and stronger memory consolidation – key drivers of motivation and wellbeing in language learning. As a result, the memory palace does not merely support recall; it turns the learning process itself into an imaginative, confidence building journey through spaces that learners actively inhabit.

Across these six formats, a shared pattern emerges: spaces become catalysts for emotional readiness, social trust, cognitive engagement, and linguistic risk-taking. Whether through nature, office or café ambience, library silence, stage presence, or spatial connection, each format builds a learning environment where language becomes meaningful, memorable, and embodied. In short: these formats demonstrate that positive language learning environments arise when spatial and (authentic) linguistic conditions align.

14.4 Designing Positive Lesson Settings: Where to Start

While subchapter 14.3 outlined a range of concrete formats that activate, shape, and sustain diverse learning settings, a pragmatic question inevitably follows: “Where do I start as an educator?” The good news is that designing positive language learning environments does not require radical change. Instead, it begins with learning to use existing spaces, sensory stimuli, and seating arrangements more intentionally to establish a spatial setting for authentic, engaging and interactive formats (cf. next subchapter). In addition, one can invite and guide learners to shape their own learning environment actively (cf. the following subchapter).

Using Spaces Intentionally: Starting Small and Meaningful

As a first step, it is helpful not to begin with a complex redesign, but with a single, manageable format that feels natural. For many teachers, this might be an outdoor brainstorming walk, or, on rainy days, a coffee shop reading or conversation session in the school cafeteria. A useful guiding question thereby is not “Which format should I implement?”, but rather: Which competence do I want to foster – and how would I myself enjoy learning or using this skill in everyday life? Would I come up with creative ideas while taking a walk outside or when sitting inside next to a (virtual) fireplace? Do I enjoy reading in a café or writing essays in a library? Trusting in one’s own professional intuition is central here.

In addition, the following Positive (Language) Learning Architecture was developed as supportive tool to double-check central spatial foundations to consider; hereby, the material dimension was added as an individual category that shapes the learning space with respect to available learning resources:

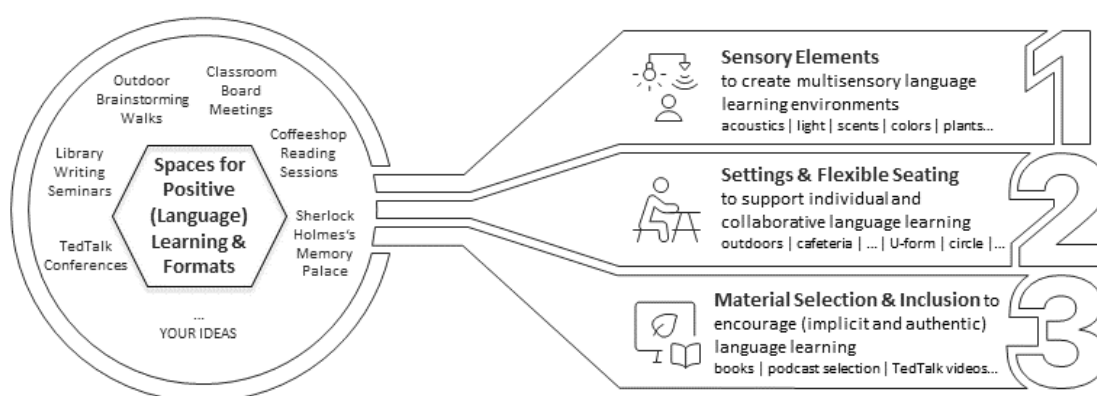


Abbildung 6: Positive (Language) Learning Architecture

Combined, this leads to the following helpful guiding questions when selecting and shaping learning spaces more intentionally:

0. What language competence do I want to foster? Which format does naturally support it?
1. Which sensory elements create the atmospheric setting of this activity and how can they be incorporated?
2. What space and seating arrangements should be chosen to foster the selected format?
3. Which resources encourage meaningful and authentic language use in this format?

Last but not least: whatever format you choose, begin with short trial phases and repeat them regularly. Learners need time to grow familiar with new settings and formats, while routine turns novelty into security and helps students use spaces purposefully for learning rather than being distracted by them.

Letting Learners Co Design Learning Spaces

Next to using divergent spaces more intentionally, one can invite learners to take part in shaping their own learning environments. That is, students can easily become active designers of their classroom, often with surprising creativity and commitment. Whether they decide on hanging quotes on the classroom walls (e.g., “Mistakes are proof you are trying.” “Let’s make English ours.”) or add plants, furniture and – in higher grades – a coffee machine, the personal touches will resonate emotionally. The classroom becomes a place of trust – a familiar and linguistic home.

Some points to consider for the (re-)designing process:

S – Safety: fire and health regulations (e.g., allergies), legal requirements, accessibility

P – Personalization: class projects, artworks, or subject related materials

A – Aesthetics: natural light, plants, open spaces, colors

C – Consensus: shared decisions and veto rights

E – Empowerment: neutral or positive changes only!

Taken together with the ideas of subchapter 14.3, this translates the theoretical insights into everyday practice in which spatial foundations are actively considered and incorporated to set the scene for positive, engaging, and authentic language learning.

14.5 Conclusion

Learning spaces are never neutral. Instead, physical environments actively frame how foreign language learning is experienced and practiced. More concretely, through their sensory qualities and spatial arrangements (e.g., seating structure), they actively shape the learners’ appraisals: whether a place feels safe or controlling, inviting or inhibiting, open or evaluative. In this sense, space does not merely host language learning – it sets the scene for it.

This chapter outlined central research findings to support this line of argumentation and translated these, compactly outlined theoretical notions into six concrete learning formats: outdoor brainstorming walks, classroom board meetings, coffeeshop reading or conversation sessions, library writing seminars, TedTalk conferences, and the memory palace method. All six thereby deliberately align tasks with physical spaces that invite learners to participate, evoking meaningful and situated practice.

Taken together, this contribution invites educators to shift their focus to spatial conditions under which language learning unfolds. By selecting or shaping spaces more intentionally, teachers can create environments that support linguistic courage, emotional openness, and sustained engagement. Positivity by design, then, is not about perfect classrooms, but about purposeful ones – places where foreign languages can be tried out, negotiated, and ultimately lived.

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