

Karla Jensen, Travis Jensen & Heiner Böttger (Eds.)

Room 2 Grow

Safe Spaces in (Language) Education

Heiner Böttger, Gizem Günaydın, Bianca Höppner, Karla Jensen, Travis Jensen,
Jasmin Peskoller, Andrea Steinbach



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Preface

Every act of learning takes place somewhere

Karla Jensen, Travis Jensen, and Heiner Böttger

Sometimes it begins in a classroom, with chairs, tables, windows, light, walls, and a door. Sometimes it begins outside, under trees, on a path, in the presence of air, weather, movement, and distance. Sometimes it begins between people: in a conversation, in a pause, in a question asked carefully enough that someone dares to answer. Sometimes learning begins even deeper, in the private interior of a learner who thinks, *I might try, I might belong here, I might have something to say.*

This book, *Room 2 Grow: Safe Spaces in Language Education*, begins with that simple but powerful idea: learners need room in order to grow. Yet room alone is not enough. A room may contain teaching without allowing learning. A classroom may be full of language and still silence voices. A seminar may be academically excellent and still leave learners guarded, anxious, or invisible. The question, therefore, is not only where education happens. The deeper question is what kind of space education creates.

Safe spaces are necessary because learning has become increasingly complex, public, vulnerable, and relational. In education, learners are rarely asked merely to receive information. They are asked to show themselves. They are asked to speak before they are certain, write before they are finished, think before they are confident, listen across difference, encounter perspectives that may unsettle them, and make mistakes in the presence of others. In language education, this vulnerability becomes especially visible. To learn another language is to place one's voice, identity, accent, memory, body, and confidence into a space where they are still forming. The learner must verbally express themselves in spite of limited language competence. For that reason, safe spaces are not soft spaces. They are not comfortable bubbles, conflict-free zones, or places where challenge disappears. Quite the opposite: a truly safe space is one in which challenge becomes possible. It is a space where mistakes can be repaired rather than hidden, where uncertainty is supported rather than punished, where feedback points forward rather than wounds, and where difference becomes material for growth rather than a source of exclusion. Safe spaces do not remove the risk of learning; they remove unnecessary humiliation from the risk of learning.

The chapters in this volume grew out of a shared seminar journey in the summer of 2026 and a shared editorial conviction: safe spaces in language education must be understood as a multi-dimensional ecology. They are physical, social, emotional, inner, creative, cultural, and digital. They are made through architecture and atmosphere, through communication and silence, through feedback and repair, through memory and imagination, through culture and technology. Safe spaces are not declared once; they are built, noticed, negotiated, broken, repaired, and built again.

Our own editorial collaboration reflects this movement.

Travis invites us to begin with the outer world: with land, room, nature, movement, and the physical conditions that allow bodies to learn. A physical safe space is never only a container. It is an invitation. It asks whether learners can breathe, hear, see, move, concentrate, gather, withdraw, and return. It asks whether classrooms, libraries, outdoor spaces, and alternative learning environments can become more than locations. Can they become places of attention, belonging, and language action? From this perspective, the first safe space is often not psychological at all. It is material. It is sensory. It is environmental. It says, before any lesson begins: *You are welcome here.*

Karla then guides us toward the space between people. Language does not grow in isolation. It grows in the vulnerable space of interaction: in listening, turn-taking, cooperation, disagreement, encouragement, laughter, patience, and trust. Social safe spaces emerge when communication becomes intentional enough for courage. In such spaces, learners are not merely performers; they are participants in a community that can either protect or endanger voice. While a group dynamic can easily diminish an individual learner, it also possesses the power to amplify their voice. Social safety therefore asks: How do we speak to one another? How do we respond to error? How do we invite quieter voices without forcing exposure? How do we create collaboration that is not just task management, but a practice of dignity?

Heiner's work brings us into the emotional and inner dimensions of learning. Fear, anxiety, shame, perfectionism, and the fear of negative evaluation are not marginal issues in language education. They are central to whether learners participate at all. A learner may know the word and still remain silent. A learner may have an idea yet not risk sharing. A learner may be competent and still be blocked by the body's protective systems. Fear-free education, as we understand it, does not mean education without effort, standards, or accountability. It means challenge without humiliation. It means designing learning environments in which the nervous system does not have to treat participation as danger.

Our book's journey moves to an exploration of inner safe spaces where the teacher, the group, and the classroom are no longer physically present. Chapter 4 explores the inner spaces where learners develop capacity for self-trust, reflection, motivation, and resilience, which leads to their identity as a speaker of the new language. Inner safe spaces appear when learners can say, *A mistake is information, not identity.* These spaces expand when learners' inner language is supportive, not demeaning. And, these spaces deepen when learners no longer ask, *Am I good enough?* but instead begin to ask, *Who am I authentically becoming through this language?* In this sense, safe spaces are not meant to keep learners dependent on protection; they are meant to help learners internalize safety as agency.

Creativity opens another room. In creative safe spaces, language becomes more than correctness. It becomes action. Learners tell stories, perform roles, write, draw, move, sing, improvise, design, and play. Creativity matters because it allows learners to try on language before they fully own it. It gives them permission to experiment, to exaggerate, to hide safely behind a role, to express ideas through metaphor, and to discover that meaning can be made with incomplete resources. Crucially, creativity is not about artistic skill or producing an aesthetically pleasing product – instead creative application of the language itself transforms the language from an object of evaluation into a medium of expression.

Next, cultural safe spaces remind us that language never arrives alone. Every language carries histories, identities, values, hierarchies, memories, stereotypes, and possibilities. To teach language is to open cultural worlds, and this responsibility requires care. A cultural safe space does not flatten difference into politeness. It does not ask learners to represent entire nations, ethnicities, religions, genders, or communities. Instead, safe spaces protect cultural complexity, allowing learners to encounter and express difference without being reduced to a stereotype. Such spaces value multilingual biographies, intercultural questions, and respect the dignity of individuals to choose how much to disclose and to evolve as learners.

Finally, digital and hybrid safe spaces extend these questions into contemporary learning environments. Screens, platforms, apps, cameras, chats, artificial intelligence tools, recordings, and asynchronous spaces can open access—or intensify vulnerability. Digital participation can give learners time, privacy, multimodal support, and flexible pathways. It can also create feelings of exposure, exclusion, fatigue, or the sense of being under surveillance. The task is not to either romanticize or eschew technology, but to design digital and hybrid learning communities with the same ethical care we demand of physical classrooms where accessibility, security, inclusion, presence, and motivation are intentionally built.

Across all chapters, one conviction remains constant: safe spaces are conditions for growth. Safe spaces protect learners for learning not from learning. They do not lower expectations; they make meaningful expectations reachable. They do not eliminate difficulty; they make difficulty survivable, discussable, and transformative. Safe spaces do not silence disagreement; they allow disagreement to occur without dehumanization. They do not promise that every learner will always feel comfortable; they promise that discomfort will not be carelessly turned into shame.

The title *Room 2 Grow* therefore carries several meanings. It refers to the physical room in which education takes place. It refers to the social room we make for one another in communication. It refers to emotional room for fear, courage, and repair. It refers to inner room for reflection, motivation, learner identity, and resilience. It refers to creative room for imagination and play, cultural room for difference and belonging, and digital room for new forms of access and participation.

But most of all, *Room 2 Grow* is a pedagogical promise.

It promises that learners do not have to be finished before they are welcomed.

It promises that voices may tremble and still matter.

It promises that mistakes may happen and still lead forward.

It promises that language learning can be rigorous without being humiliating.

It promises that education can be demanding and deeply humane at the same time.

We offer this volume to teachers, researchers, students, teacher educators, and all those who care about learning as a human practice. We hope it invites reflection, discussion, experimentation, and further research. We hope it gives readers concepts, examples, and courage. Above all, we hope it helps create learning environments in which people have enough room—not only to learn a language, but to grow into voice, relationship, imagination, culture, and self.

Because every act of learning takes place somewhere.

And when that somewhere becomes safe enough, brave enough, and alive enough, it can become a room to grow.

Eichstätt, July 2026

Three handwritten signatures in black ink, arranged horizontally. The first signature on the left is 'Karl Jans', the middle one is 'Lorenz', and the one on the right is 'Heidi Bötz'. The signatures are fluid and cursive.

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Editorial notes

Heiner Böttger

This book *Room 2 Grow: Safe Spaces in Language Education* offers a theoretical introduction and expanded chapter framework. It conceptualizes safe spaces not as comfortable rooms or conflict-free zones, but as multi-dimensional learning ecologies that enable language learners to participate, take risks, encounter difference, make mistakes, and grow. It begins by differentiating key spatial terms such as room, space, place, learning environment, setting, affordance, safe space, brave space, third space, and inner safe space. It then develops a taxonomy of physical, social, emotional, inner, creative, cultural, and digital-hybrid safe spaces for language education. The central argument is that language education requires safe spaces because language learning is a highly embodied, social, emotional, cultural, and identity-forming activity. A room can host teaching, but only a carefully cultivated space can support communicative courage, belonging, and sustained development.

Theoretical Introduction: Room, Space, and Safe Spaces in Language Education

The title *Room 2 Grow: Safe Spaces in Language Education* is more than an inviting metaphor. It captures a central pedagogical claim: learners need room in order to grow, yet a room alone does not make growth possible. A classroom can be technically well equipped and still feel unsafe; a poorly furnished room can become generative when it is shaped by trust, respect, meaningful tasks, and caring relationships. The word *room* points to the material container of education, whereas *space* points to the relational, cultural, emotional, and symbolic conditions through which learning becomes possible. The difference is crucial for language education because foreign language learning is never only the acquisition of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. It is also the public testing of voice, identity, competence, and belonging.

The structure of the book invites a theoretical move from a single idea of safety to a layered ecology or architecture of safety. Safe spaces in language education are physical, because speaking and listening happen in bodies located in rooms, libraries, outdoor spaces, and digital interfaces. They are social, because communication requires interlocutors, trust, rules of interaction, and shared norms. They are emotional, because anxiety, shame, enjoyment, and encouragement strongly influence participation. They are inner, because learners interpret themselves as capable, legitimate, resilient, or deficient language users. They are creative, because language becomes powerful when it is used for storytelling, drama, writing, art, music, and performance. They are cultural, because language always carries histories, identities, perspectives, and power. They are digital and hybrid, because contemporary communication increasingly takes place across platforms, devices, learning management systems, artificial intelligence tools, asynchronous media, and flexible learning environments.

Spatial thinking is especially useful because it resists the reduction of learning to a purely mental process. Humanistic geography distinguishes between abstract space and lived place, arguing that places emerge when spaces are endowed with experience, memory, and value (Tuan, 1977; Cresswell, 2015). Critical spatial theory further emphasizes that space is produced through social relations, institutional routines, power, and practice (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005). These perspectives matter for language teaching because every classroom contains visible and invisible spatial arrangements: who sits where, who speaks first, whose language counts as legitimate, which accents are valued, which errors are tolerated, which technologies mediate participation, and which identities are protected or exposed. A safe space is therefore never simply found. It is made, maintained, repaired, and redesigned.

The notion of safe space has sometimes been misunderstood as a wish to avoid difficulty, disagreement, or intellectual challenge. That misunderstanding must be avoided from the beginning. In education, safety should not be equated with comfort, censorship, or the absence of friction. Learning languages inevitably involves vulnerability: learners must pronounce unfamiliar sounds, negotiate meaning with limited resources, expose partial knowledge, listen across difference, and tolerate ambiguity. The pedagogical task is not to remove all challenge, but to remove avoidable humiliation and exclusion so that challenge can become developmental rather than threatening. For this reason, safe space and brave space are best understood as complementary rather than opposing concepts. Safe space emphasizes protection, respect, belonging, and predictability; brave space emphasizes honesty, accountability, disagreement, and courageous participation (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Holley & Steiner, 2005).

In language education, the safe-space concept can be defined as a designed and continuously negotiated learning ecology in which learners experience sufficient physical, social, emotional, cultural, digital, and identity-related security to take communicative risks. This definition contains three important implications. First, safety is not a fixed property of a room, platform, task, or teacher personality. It is an experience that emerges between learners, teachers, materials, technologies, institutions, and histories. Second, safe spaces are not identical for all learners. A task that feels liberating to one learner may feel exposing to another; a circle arrangement may invite participation for some and increase visibility pressure for others. Third, safe spaces are dynamic. They require routines for participation, repair, feedback, reflection, and redesign.

The theory of safe spaces in language education can also be connected to ecological and sociocultural views of learning. From an ecological perspective, learning emerges from affordances: opportunities for action that learners perceive, interpret, and take up in context (Gibson, 1979; van Lier, 2004). From a sociocultural perspective, learning is mediated through tools, signs, interaction, and participation in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998). A safe language-learning space is therefore an ecology rich in legitimate affordances for participation. It allows learners to speak in pairs before speaking to the whole

group, to rehearse before performing, to use multimodal support before producing extended discourse, to repair errors without shame, and to connect language with personal meaning. The present volume should therefore avoid treating the seven space types as isolated categories. Physical, social, emotional, inner, creative, cultural, and digital-hybrid spaces overlap constantly. A flexible seating arrangement changes social interaction. A respectful peer culture lowers emotional risk. Digital anonymity can protect participation or intensify insecurity. Creative drama can support fluency while also exposing bodies and voices. Cultural inquiry can deepen intercultural learning while also producing identity threat if it is poorly facilitated. The book's theoretical ambition is to show how these dimensions can be integrated into a pedagogy of growth: a pedagogy that turns rooms into spaces, spaces into safe spaces, and safe spaces into opportunities for language action, identity development, and intercultural agency.

Defining Room, Space, Place, Safe Space, and Related Spatial Terms

A coherent book on safe spaces requires conceptual precision. In everyday language, room, space, place, environment, setting, classroom, and context are often used interchangeably. In educational theory, however, each term highlights a different aspect of learning. *Room* is the most concrete term. It refers to a bounded physical enclosure or, by metaphorical extension, to a bounded digital meeting environment. A room can be measured, furnished, booked, cleaned, secured, and equipped. It has light, sound, surfaces, entry points, seating, technological infrastructure, accessibility features, and institutional rules. Yet a room does not automatically support learning. The same room can host silence, anxiety, laughter, experimentation, exclusion, or belonging.

Space is more relational and dynamic. Space refers to a field of possible movement, interaction, interpretation, and power. Lefebvre (1991) argues that space is socially produced rather than merely given; Massey (2005) similarly describes space as relational, open, and constituted through coexistence. A language classroom, then, is not only an architectural unit. It is a social production shaped by teacher authority, peer relations, institutional expectations, assessment regimes, cultural norms, linguistic hierarchies, and learners' histories. The word space helps educators ask not only „Where are learners?“ but „What is possible here, for whom, under which conditions, and at what cost?“

Place emphasizes meaning, attachment, and lived experience. Tuan (1977) famously distinguishes space as more abstract and place as space made meaningful through experience. In language education, a classroom becomes a place when learners associate it with recognition, growth, fear, failure, companionship, creativity, or possibility. This distinction is pedagogically powerful because teachers often design rooms and lessons, but learners remember places. They remember the corner where pair work felt safe, the circle where their voice mattered, the screen where they were mocked, or the library table where a difficult language project finally became possible.

Learning environment is a broader ecological term. It includes the physical setting, instructional design, social relations, emotional climate, institutional rules, materials, technologies, assessment practices, and cultural meanings that shape learning. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective is useful here because it reminds educators that learners are influenced by nested systems: the classroom, school, family, community, media, and policy environment. A safe space in language education therefore cannot be reduced to teacher friendliness. It also depends on curriculum pressures, grading practices, platform design, language ideologies, accessibility, and the broader culture of the institution.

Setting refers to the concrete configuration of an activity. A „discussion setting“ may include chairs in a circle, a shared text, turn-taking norms, time limits, roles, and expectations for disagreement. A „workshop setting“ may include tables, laptops, coffee, peer feedback, and draft texts. The setting mediates participation by making certain actions easier than others. A well-designed setting can reduce the cost of speaking, scaffold interaction, and make support visible. A poorly designed setting can create performance pressure, anonymity, hierarchy, or confusion.

Affordance describes what a space makes possible from the learner's point of view. In Gibson's (1979) ecological theory, affordances are possibilities for action in an environment. Van Lier (2004) applies ecological thinking to language learning and emphasizes that learning opportunities must be perceived and acted upon. This is important because a teacher may intend an activity to afford communication, while learners may perceive it as affording embarrassment, surveillance, or failure. Safe-space design therefore requires attention to learner perception, not only teacher intention.

Safe space should be defined as a relational condition, not as a protected bubble. In this volume, a safe space is a continuously negotiated pedagogical condition in which learners experience sufficient protection, respect, predictability, and belonging to take meaningful interpersonal, linguistic, cultural, creative, and intellectual risks. The word sufficient is important. No classroom can guarantee complete emotional security, cultural harmony, or equal comfort for every learner at every moment. What teachers can do is design conditions that lower unnecessary threat, make expectations clear, distribute participation fairly, respond to harm, and normalize repair.

Safe space in education refers to an educational environment intentionally designed to reduce avoidable harm while enabling learning, inquiry, and growth. Holley and Steiner (2005) show that students perceive safe classroom environments as affecting both what and how much they learn. In this sense, safety is not a soft add-on to rigorous education. It is a condition of rigorous participation. Learners who fear ridicule, stereotype threat, teacher anger, peer exclusion, or digital exposure will often protect themselves by silence, minimal risk, memorized responses, or avoidance. Safe spaces are therefore necessary for intellectual seriousness because they allow learners to become present.

Safe space in language education adds the specific vulnerability of communicating in a non-dominant or not-yet-secure language. Foreign language speaking can intensify self-consciousness because pronunciation, fluency, speed, grammar, vocabulary, accent, and identity become publicly audible. Horwitz et al. (1986) describe foreign language classroom anxiety as a situation-specific anxiety related to the uniqueness of the language-learning process. A safe space for language learning is therefore a space in which imperfect language is not treated as personal failure, but as evidence of learning in progress.

Brave space complements safe space by highlighting courage and accountability. Arao and Clemens (2013) argue that learning about difference and social justice requires a frame that does not promise comfort. For language education, brave space is needed whenever learners encounter difficult topics, unfamiliar perspectives, cultural complexity, or feedback on their own communicative habits. A brave space is not unsafe; it is safe enough for meaningful risk. It protects persons while allowing ideas, assumptions, and practices to be questioned.

Third space names the hybrid zone where identities, languages, and discourses meet and change. In cultural theory, Bhabha (1994) uses third space to analyze hybridity, while Soja (1996) develops thirdspace as both real and imagined. In literacy education, Gutiérrez (2008) links third space to sociocritical literacy and transformative learning. For language education, third space is central because learners often move between home languages, school languages, digital languages, peer languages, and target languages. A safe cultural and linguistic third space allows learners to combine resources rather than experience their repertoires as deficits.

Inner safe space refers to the learner's internal capacity for self-trust, reflection, motivation, and resilience. It is not a private escape from the social world, but an internalized resource that helps learners remain engaged during uncertainty. Learners with a stronger inner safe space can tolerate pauses, errors, correction, and ambiguity without interpreting them as evidence that they do not belong. This inner dimension connects to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), language learner identity (Norton, 2013), and strategic self-regulation (Oxford, 2017).

Working Definitions for the Volume

Term	Definition
Room	A materially bounded and locatable enclosure, such as a classroom, library room, seminar room, studio, or online meeting room metaphor. A room can be described by walls, doors, furniture, acoustics, lighting, technology, accessibility, and institutional ownership. It becomes pedagogically meaningful only through use.
Space	A relational field of possible action, perception, interaction, power, and meaning. Space is not merely empty volume; it is produced through social practice, material arrangements, histories, bodies, languages, and expectations.

Place	A space that has become meaningful through experience, memory, attachment, identity, and repeated practice. A classroom becomes a place when learners associate it with belonging, risk, discovery, or exclusion.
Learning Environment	The designed and emergent ecology of physical, social, emotional, cultural, digital, and institutional conditions that make learning more or less possible.
Setting	The concrete situational arrangement in which an activity occurs: participants, roles, norms, tools, tasks, time, room layout, and interactional expectations.
Affordance	A perceived possibility for action. In language education, a space affords speaking, listening, movement, silence, collaboration, revision, or performance when learners recognize those possibilities as available and legitimate.
Safe Space	A continuously negotiated pedagogical condition in which learners experience sufficient protection, respect, predictability, and belonging to take meaningful interpersonal, linguistic, cultural, creative, and intellectual risks.
Safe Space in Education	An educational environment intentionally designed to reduce avoidable harm and humiliation while enabling participation, critical inquiry, accountability, and growth.
Safe Space in Language Education	A language-learning ecology in which learners can speak, listen, err, repair, imagine, negotiate meaning, encounter difference, and develop identity without fear of ridicule, exclusion, or identity threat.
Brave Space	A complementary frame that emphasizes courage, disagreement, accountability, and honest engagement. Brave space prevents safe space from becoming a demand for comfort or avoidance.
Third Space	A hybrid, in-between, and often transformative space where established identities, languages, discourses, and cultural meanings are combined, contested, and reauthored.
Inner Safe Space	The learner's internal capacity to meet communicative uncertainty with self-trust, reflective distance, resilience, and a positive language learner identity.

Note. The definitions synthesize spatial theory, educational safe-space scholarship, language-learning psychology, and the chapter architecture of the seminar-based book project.

A Taxonomy of Safe Spaces in Language Education

The taxonomy proposed in this volume organizes safe spaces into seven primary dimensions plus a synthesis dimension. The categories are analytical rather than absolute. They help chapter authors focus their arguments, but they should not be read as separate compartments. Language learning is an ecological event in which material arrangement, social interaction, affect, identity, creativity, culture, and technology are constantly entangled. A learner's willingness to speak may

depend at the same time on acoustics, peer trust, anxiety level, cultural topic, digital recording rules, and the learner's inner narrative of competence.

The sequence of chapters follows a movement from external to internal and from concrete to integrative, although the dimensions remain recursive. Physical safe spaces address the rooms and locations in which language learning happens. Social safe spaces address the group dynamics that allow communication and collaboration. Emotional safe spaces address anxiety, error culture, appreciation, and fear-free learning. Inner safe spaces address reflection, motivation, resilience, and learner identity. Creative safe spaces address imagination and expressive language action. Cultural safe spaces address diversity, intercultural learning, identity, and power. Digital and hybrid safe spaces address technologically mediated participation, accessibility, security, and flexible learning. The synthesis chapter connects these dimensions into a design framework for language education.

This taxonomy also allows the volume to hold together two ideas that are sometimes separated: safety and growth. A safe space is not simply a place where learners feel good. It is a space where learners can grow because the necessary risks of language learning are made pedagogically bearable. Growth may involve discomfort, but it should not involve humiliation. It may involve challenge, but it should not involve identity threat. It may involve correction, but it should not involve shame. The central design question for every chapter is therefore: What conditions make meaningful communicative risk possible?

Conceptual Taxonomy of Safe Spaces in Language Education

Space Type	Core Dimension	Design Question
Physical	Built, sensory, and material arrangements	How does the room invite concentration, comfort, movement, and language practice?
Social	Peer relations, group norms, collaboration, and trust	How do learners become willing to speak with and learn from one another?
Emotional	Affect, anxiety, error climate, appreciation, and encouragement	How is fear reduced so that communicative risk becomes possible?
Inner	Self-efficacy, reflection, motivation, resilience, and learner identity	How do learners develop a stable inner basis for participation and growth?
Creative	Play, imagination, storytelling, drama, writing, art, music, and performance	How can language become action, expression, and experimentation?
Cultural	Intercultural encounter, identity, representation, diversity, and power	How are differences valued without essentializing or exposing learners?
Digital and Hybrid	Online, blended, distance, and digitally mediated learning ecologies	How can digital participation be accessible, secure, inclusive, and motivating?
Synthesis	Integrated design across all dimensions	How do the dimensions work together as a sustainable ecology for language education?

Physical Safe Spaces in Language Education

Physical safe spaces are the most visible dimension of the taxonomy, yet they are often underestimated because classrooms are treated as neutral containers for teaching. A physical safe space in language education is a built and sensory environment intentionally arranged to support concentration, comfort, audibility, visibility, movement, interaction, and participation. It includes classrooms, libraries, outdoor spaces, studios, corridors, learning commons, alternative learning locations, and mobile arrangements. Its central theoretical claim is that the body is always present in language learning. Learners listen with bodies, speak with bodies, gesture with bodies, sit or stand in relation to others, and experience safety through light, sound, temperature, density, distance, and movement.

Research on learning environments suggests that physical conditions can influence behavior, attention, comfort, and learning. Barrett et al. (2015), for example, connect classroom design features with pupil learning, while Higgins et al. (2005) synthesize evidence on factors such as air quality, temperature, noise, light, and spatial organization. Woolner (2010) likewise emphasizes that learning-space design links architecture, pedagogy, and relationships. Cheryan et al. (2014) further show that classroom design can communicate belonging or exclusion by signaling who is expected to succeed in a space. For language education, these insights are particularly relevant because speaking and listening require acoustically and visually supportive arrangements. A noisy room, rigid seating, poor sight lines, or harsh lighting can increase cognitive load and reduce willingness to participate.

Physical safe spaces are not merely comfortable spaces. Comfort matters, but safety also requires flexibility and alignment between space and pedagogy. Whole-class discussion, pronunciation practice, role-play, peer feedback, silent writing, reading circles, and performance all require different spatial affordances. A room that supports one mode may inhibit another. Therefore, Travis's chapter can develop the idea of spatial repertoire: the teacher's capacity to convert a room into multiple learning settings. Movable chairs, accessible paths, clear sound, small-group zones, quiet corners, visible materials, and predictable transitions all help learners understand what kind of participation is possible at a given moment.

Accessibility is central to physical safe-space design. Universal Design for Learning emphasizes reducing barriers and offering multiple means of engagement, representation, and action or expression (CAST, 2024). In a physical language classroom, this means that learners should not need to ask for permission to access basic participation. Microphones, captions, readable visuals, flexible seating, lighting options, mobility access, sensory breaks, and alternatives to standing performance can make language learning safer for diverse bodies. Accessibility should not be an accommodation after difficulty appears; it should be built into the room as a form of hospitality.

Physical safe spaces also include semiotic and symbolic dimensions. Objects, posters, books, flags, maps, digital displays, and seating hierarchies communicate values. A room may display cultural diversity superficially while still centering one linguistic norm. It may include motivational quotes while punishing mistakes. It may arrange the teacher's desk as a control center or remove boundaries in ways that increase uncertainty. Hall's (1966) work on proxemics reminds educators that interpersonal distance is culturally interpreted. A „friendly“ close circle may feel supportive to some learners and intrusive to others. Physical safe-space design must therefore remain culturally and personally responsive.

Alternative learning locations can expand the meaning of physical safety. Libraries can provide quiet literacy-centered spaces; outdoor spaces can reduce performance pressure and increase sensory openness; learning commons can support informal peer exchange; studios can support performance and recording; corridors and campus spaces can invite language walks, interviews, and situated vocabulary work. Oldenburg's (1999) concept of third places is useful because language learning often thrives in semi-formal spaces that are neither fully institutional nor fully private. The challenge is to make these spaces pedagogically purposeful without over-controlling them.

The chapter can conclude that physical safe spaces are designed through attention to the body, senses, mobility, accessibility, symbolism, and task alignment. The key question is not whether a room is beautiful, modern, or expensive. The key question is whether it affords the language practices the teacher values and whether diverse learners can recognize those affordances as available to them. A safe room becomes a learning space when it invites learners to listen, speak, move, pause, collaborate, and belong.

Social Safe Spaces for Communication and Collaboration

Social safe spaces concern the interpersonal conditions that make communication and collaboration possible. Language learning is fundamentally social because language is learned through participation in meaningful practices, not only through individual study. A social safe space is therefore a classroom community in which learners can interact with respect, trust, mutual support, and shared responsibility. It is created through norms, routines, roles, feedback practices, peer relationships, teacher modeling, and opportunities for cooperative meaning-making.

Sociocultural theory provides an important foundation for this chapter. Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes that higher psychological functions develop through mediated social activity, while Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) conceptualize learning as participation in communities of practice. In a language classroom, learners do not simply practice forms; they become participants in communicative communities. They learn how to ask for help, repair misunderstanding, build turns, manage face, negotiate meaning, and support others. Social safe spaces make such participation possible by reducing the interpersonal costs of imperfect language.

Psychological safety is also central. Edmondson (1999) defines team psychological safety as a shared belief that a group is safe for interpersonal risk taking. In language education, interpersonal risk is not an occasional feature; it is the medium of learning. Every attempt to speak a new language risks error, silence, mispronunciation, misunderstanding, and loss of face. If the group treats errors as ridicule-worthy, learners will minimize risk. If the group treats errors as shared opportunities for repair, learners can participate more fully. Social safe-space design therefore requires explicit norms for listening, turn-taking, feedback, disagreement, humor, and repair.

Cooperative learning theory offers concrete design principles. Johnson and Johnson (2009) show that cooperative learning is most effective when positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, social skills, and group processing are intentionally structured. In a language classroom, cooperation should not simply mean „work in groups.“ It requires tasks in which learners need one another’s contributions, roles that distribute participation, accountability that prevents social loafing, and reflection that helps groups improve. A socially safe group is not a group without conflict, but a group with enough trust and structure to transform conflict into learning.

Peer support is particularly important for language anxiety. Learners often fear peer judgment more than teacher correction because peer groups define belonging. Social safe spaces should therefore cultivate appreciative listening, dialogic patience, and peer scaffolding. Think-pair-share, rotating partners, peer rehearsal, structured response stems, listening roles, and collaborative drafting can reduce exposure while increasing participation. These routines allow learners to test language in low-stakes settings before moving into more public forms of communication.

Social safe spaces also require attention to power. Not all learners enter the group with equal linguistic confidence, social capital, cultural legitimacy, or institutional familiarity. Some learners may dominate because they are fluent, extroverted, locally privileged, or comfortable with the teacher’s norms. Others may withdraw because they have been marginalized, mocked, or labeled as weak. The teacher’s task is to democratize participation without forcing visibility. This requires flexible grouping, multiple participation channels, rotating leadership, explicit norms against ridicule, and careful attention to whose voices are heard, interrupted, translated, ignored, or amplified.

The chapter can frame social safe spaces as communicative communities of practice. Such communities are built through relational predictability: learners know how they will be addressed, how mistakes will be handled, how disagreement will be moderated, and how support can be requested. They are also built through shared joy. Coffee, informal talk, humor, collaborative discovery, and collective problem solving can create the social warmth necessary for academic courage. A socially safe language classroom is therefore not only orderly; it is hospitable, dialogic, and accountable. Noddings’s (2013) relational ethics of care is useful here because it frames educational safety as an ethical relation rather than a classroom-management technique.

Emotional Safe Spaces and Fear-Free Language Learning

Emotional safe spaces address the affective dimension of language learning: fear, shame, enjoyment, confidence, frustration, appreciation, and courage. A language classroom becomes emotionally safe when learners can take communicative risks without experiencing errors, pauses, accents, or incomplete understanding as threats to their worth. Emotional safety is not the absence of challenge. It is the presence of an appreciative climate in which challenge becomes possible because learners are not reduced to their mistakes.

Foreign language anxiety is one of the most important theoretical anchors for this chapter. Horwitz et al. (1986) identify foreign language classroom anxiety as a distinct situation-specific anxiety connected to communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) further show that anxiety can affect cognitive processing during language learning and performance. In practical terms, anxiety consumes attention and working memory, narrows participation, and can produce avoidance. Learners may know a word privately but be unable to retrieve it publicly because emotional threat interrupts access to competence.

Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis remains influential because it expresses a simple pedagogical intuition: learners acquire language more readily when emotional barriers are lowered. Contemporary research complicates any simple opposition between anxiety and learning, but the pedagogical point remains relevant; work on language anxiety continues to show that emotion, identity, classroom practice, and teacher response are closely connected (Gkonou et al., 2017). Fear can prevent learners from noticing input, attempting output, asking questions, and receiving feedback. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) add an important positive dimension by showing that foreign language enjoyment and foreign language classroom anxiety are related but distinct experiences. Emotional safe spaces should therefore not only reduce fear; they should actively increase enjoyment, curiosity, humor, and pride, all of which support learner engagement in contemporary classrooms (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

Error culture is a central mechanism of emotional safety. In many classrooms, mistakes are formally described as normal but interactionally treated as embarrassing. Learners quickly notice whether the teacher's face, peer laughter, grade comments, or correction style communicates patience or disappointment. A fear-free language classroom requires predictable, non-humiliating feedback. Correction should be timely, specific, proportionate, and oriented toward growth. Recasts, delayed feedback, self-correction prompts, peer repair, and portfolio reflection can all support emotional safety when they are embedded in a culture of appreciation.

The emotional chapter can also distinguish between protective safety and expansive safety. Protective safety reduces avoidable threat: ridicule, sudden exposure, public shaming, unclear expectations, excessive correction, and punitive grading. Expansive safety increases agency:

choice, preparation time, meaningful topics, supportive feedback, recognition of effort, and opportunities for successful communication. Both are necessary. A class may avoid humiliation but still fail to inspire speech; conversely, a class may encourage performance but expose learners too abruptly. Emotional safe spaces require calibrated challenge.

Teacher language is one of the most powerful tools for emotional space-making. The teacher can normalize difficulty, narrate errors as learning data, model self-correction, praise risk-taking, and separate performance from personhood. Statements such as „Let us build on that,“ „That was a brave attempt,“ „Can someone help us repair this sentence?“ or „Take a moment; your idea matters“ shape the emotional climate. These micro-practices matter because safe spaces are often created in seconds. A learner who is protected during one vulnerable moment may participate differently for the rest of the semester.

Heiner's chapter can therefore argue that emotional safety is foundational for language action. It is the condition under which learners can move from knowing about a language to using it with others. Fear-free language learning does not mean easy language learning. It means that difficulty is held within appreciation. Learners are invited to speak before they are perfect, to repair without shame, and to experience speaking as growth rather than exposure. The chapter's signature message could be: language learning begins where fear no longer speaks louder than language.

Inner Safe Spaces: Reflection, Motivation, and Learner Identity

Inner safe spaces shift attention from the external learning environment to the learner's internal world. An inner safe space is the learner's capacity to remain connected to self-worth, motivation, and agency while facing communicative uncertainty. It is not an innate personality trait. It is cultivated through repeated experiences of support, reflection, success, repair, autonomy, and meaningful participation. Inner safety helps learners say: „I can try,“ „I can learn from this,“ „My accent does not erase my voice,“ and „A mistake is not the end of my identity as a language learner.“

Self-efficacy is a central concept for this chapter. Bandura (1997) defines self-efficacy as beliefs about one's capability to organize and execute actions required for desired outcomes. In language learning, self-efficacy influences willingness to participate, persistence after difficulty, and interpretation of feedback. A learner with low self-efficacy may interpret a pause as proof of inability; a learner with stronger self-efficacy may interpret the same pause as a normal part of speaking. Safe spaces contribute to inner safety when they provide mastery experiences, meaningful feedback, models of improvement, and opportunities to reflect on progress.

Self-determination theory adds the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These needs can guide the design of inner safe spaces. Autonomy means learners experience some ownership over topics, strategies, pace, partners, or modes of expression. Competence means learners can see their progress and receive achievable challenges. Relatedness

means learners feel connected to teachers and peers. When these needs are supported, motivation becomes more internalized and sustainable. A safe language-learning space should therefore not only reduce anxiety but also nourish the motivational conditions under which learners choose to continue.

Language learner identity is equally important. Dörnyei's (2005) work on the psychology of the language learner emphasizes that individual differences, motivation, and self-related beliefs shape language-learning trajectories. Norton (2013) argues that language learning is connected to identity, investment, and access to symbolic and material resources. Learners do not merely ask, „Can I learn this language?“ They also ask, often implicitly, „Who can I become through this language?“ An inner safe space is strengthened when learners can imagine themselves as legitimate future users of the language. It is weakened when they see the target language as belonging only to native speakers, highly fluent peers, elite travelers, or culturally distant identities.

Reflection is the pedagogical bridge between external experience and inner safety. Reflection journals, learning biographies, language portraits, anxiety maps, confidence scales, goal-setting, and portfolio narratives help learners make their development visible. Oxford's (2017) work on self-regulation supports the idea that learners can develop strategic awareness of cognition, affect, motivation, and social interaction. Inner safe spaces are cultivated when learners learn to name what helps them speak, what blocks them, what kind of support they need, and how they recover after communicative difficulty.

Resilience should be framed carefully. It should not mean that learners must adapt silently to unsafe conditions. Resilience is not a substitute for good pedagogy. Instead, it is the learner's growing capacity to return to agency when difficulty occurs within a supportive environment. A learner can become resilient when mistakes are repairable, feedback is respectful, and effort leads to meaningful progress. If the environment remains humiliating, asking learners to be resilient becomes ethically problematic. Inner safe spaces must therefore be cultivated together with social and emotional safe spaces.

The chapter can argue that inner safe spaces are the internalization of pedagogical safety. Over time, supportive rooms, respectful peers, appreciative feedback, and meaningful language use become internal resources. Learners begin to carry safety with them into new contexts: exams, presentations, study abroad, professional communication, and intercultural encounters. The ultimate goal is not that learners always need a perfectly safe classroom, but that they develop the confidence and strategies to create communicative safety for themselves and others.

Creative Safe Spaces for Language Action

Creative safe spaces foreground language as action, expression, imagination, and performance. They include storytelling, drama, creative writing, visual art, music, movement, role-play, improvisation, podcasting, video, poetry, and performance. A creative safe space is a learning ecology

in which learners can experiment with language beyond correctness, using it to imagine worlds, inhabit roles, express feelings, negotiate meaning, and produce shared artifacts. It is safe because creativity requires vulnerability; it is creative because safety enables experimentation.

Vygotsky's (2004) work on imagination and creativity provides a strong theoretical anchor. Creativity is not limited to artistic genius; it is a human capacity to recombine experience and generate something new. In language education, this means that learners can use limited linguistic resources creatively. A beginner can tell a powerful story with simple structures; an intermediate learner can create humor through gesture and timing; an advanced learner can explore identity through voice and genre. Creative safe spaces protect the legitimacy of such experimentation.

Winnicott's (1971/2005) concept of play is also relevant because play occupies an intermediate area between inner and outer reality. In language learning, creative tasks can function as transitional spaces. A learner may speak more freely as a character than as the self, may explore difficult emotions through fiction, or may use poetry to express what ordinary classroom discourse cannot hold. Drama techniques in language teaching have long used role, situation, and embodied action to create communicative need and fluency practice (Maley & Duff, 2005). The key is to structure creativity so that it supports rather than overwhelms learners.

Creative safe spaces are closely connected to multiliteracies. The New London Group (1996) argues that contemporary communication involves multiple modes, media, languages, and cultural contexts. Language action is therefore not confined to spoken sentences or written paragraphs. It includes visual design, spatial arrangement, sound, gesture, digital composition, and performance. A creative language classroom allows learners to make meaning through multiple semiotic resources and then gradually expand the linguistic resources attached to them.

Creative work can, however, be risky. Drama exposes bodies and voices; storytelling exposes memories; writing exposes thought; art exposes taste; music exposes emotion; performance exposes timing and confidence. Creative safe-space design therefore requires clear boundaries, consent-sensitive participation, choice of roles, rehearsal time, alternatives to public performance, group trust, and appreciative feedback. Learners should be invited into creative risk, not pushed into exposure. The difference between invitation and exposure is one of the ethical centers of this chapter.

Creative safe spaces also shift assessment. If creative tasks are assessed only for grammatical accuracy, learners may avoid experimentation. If they are assessed only for creativity, learners may feel judged on personal talent. A balanced approach values communicative effectiveness, risk-taking, collaboration, revision, and reflection. Feedback can ask: What did the language make possible? How did the group create meaning? Where did the learner stretch? Which linguistic choices could be developed further? This maintains academic rigor while preserving creative safety.

The chapter can develop the concept of language action: the movement from language as object to language as social, aesthetic, and embodied practice. Creative safe spaces allow learners to experience the target language not only as a school subject but as a medium of voice. They can make jokes, invent characters, write scenes, perform identities, design posters, compose multi-modal stories, and imagine futures. In doing so, they learn that language is not merely something to be correct in; it is something to live with, move through, and create with.

Cultural Safe Spaces in Foreign Language Teaching

Cultural safe spaces address the relationship between language, identity, diversity, representation, intercultural learning, and power. A cultural safe space in foreign language teaching is not a space where all cultural differences are simplified, celebrated, or made conflict-free. It is a space where learners can encounter difference with respect, complexity, curiosity, and protection from stereotyping or identity exposure. It values cultural diversity while resisting the temptation to reduce learners to representatives of fixed groups.

Language education has long recognized that language and culture are inseparable. Kramsch (1993) argues that culture is not merely background information but central to meaning, context, and discourse. Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence similarly emphasizes knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Risager (2007) extends this perspective by situating language-and-culture pedagogy beyond purely national frames. Cultural safe spaces are therefore not optional additions to communicative teaching. They are necessary because every act of language use positions speakers in relation to norms, values, histories, and identities.

Culturally responsive pedagogy provides a second foundation. Gay (2018) argues that teaching should draw on learners' cultural knowledge, experiences, and frames of reference. Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasizes culturally relevant pedagogy as a way to support academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. In foreign language education, this means that learners' home languages, migration histories, accents, family literacies, media practices, and cultural experiences are not obstacles to be corrected. They are resources that can support meaning-making, comparison, critique, and identity development.

At the same time, cultural safe spaces must avoid essentialism. Teachers sometimes ask learners to „share their culture“ in ways that expose personal histories or reinforce stereotypes. A learner should not be expected to speak for a nation, religion, ethnicity, gender, or migrant group. Cultural safety requires choice, privacy, and multiplicity. It allows learners to engage with cultural topics through texts, cases, art, media, fiction, and research without requiring personal disclosure. When learners do choose to share personal perspectives, the class needs norms for listening, questioning, and responding with care.

Third-space theory is useful because intercultural learning often occurs between established categories. Bhabha (1994), Soja (1996), and Gutiérrez (2008) each, in different ways, highlight hybrid spaces where meanings are negotiated rather than simply transmitted. In language classrooms, learners often inhabit multiple linguistic and cultural worlds. They may mix languages, shift identities across settings, or use digital cultural forms that do not fit textbook categories. Canagarajah's (2013) work on translingual practice supports a view of language users as strategic negotiators across codes and contexts. A cultural safe space recognizes this hybridity as competence.

Cultural safe spaces also need criticality. A space that protects learners from all difficult cultural questions may become shallow. Intercultural learning requires engagement with inequality, colonial histories, racism, gender norms, linguistic hierarchies, stereotypes, and global power. Steele's (2010) work on stereotype threat is relevant because learners' performance and participation can be affected when they fear being judged through a negative group stereotype. Brave-space principles are especially relevant here because learners need both protection and challenge. The teacher's role is to frame difficult topics carefully, provide language for disagreement, distinguish critique of ideas from attacks on persons, and support repair when harm occurs.

This chapter can conclude that cultural safety in foreign language teaching is a balance of recognition and complexity. Learners should feel that their identities are visible enough to matter but not exposed in ways they cannot control. They should encounter other cultures as dynamic, contested, and human rather than exotic, homogeneous, or distant. A cultural safe space helps learners become intercultural speakers who can listen, compare, question, empathize, and communicate across difference without erasing their own identities or simplifying those of others.

Digital and Hybrid Safe Spaces for Language Learning

Digital and hybrid safe spaces concern online platforms, learning apps, virtual classrooms, digital communication tools, and combinations of physical and distance-learning environments. A digital or hybrid safe space is not simply a technologically functional environment. It is an accessible, inclusive, secure, and motivating ecology for language interaction across time, place, modality, and media. It supports learners who speak through microphones, cameras, chats, forums, collaborative documents, recordings, avatars, subtitles, translation tools, and mobile devices.

The Community of Inquiry framework is a useful foundation for this chapter. Garrison et al. (1999) argue that meaningful online learning involves social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. For language education, all three are crucial. Social presence helps learners experience others as real interlocutors rather than distant usernames. Cognitive presence helps learners engage in inquiry, meaning-making, and reflection. Teaching presence structures tasks, expectations, feedback, moderation, and support. A digital safe space fails when learners are technically connected but socially invisible, cognitively passive, or pedagogically unsupported.

Digital spaces create new forms of safety and new forms of risk. Asynchronous forums can give learners time to prepare and reduce speaking anxiety. Chat can allow shy learners to participate without taking the floor. Captions and recordings can support comprehension and revision. Collaborative documents can make peer feedback visible. At the same time, cameras can intensify self-consciousness, recordings can create privacy concerns, chat can enable side comments, platforms can exclude learners with weak connectivity, and public digital artifacts can expose language errors beyond the classroom. Digital safe-space design must therefore address access, privacy, moderation, identity, and technological reliability.

Universal Design for Learning is especially relevant in digital and hybrid environments because technology can either reduce or multiply barriers (CAST, 2024). Multiple means of engagement might include synchronous discussion, asynchronous reflection, polls, collaborative boards, and optional camera use. Multiple means of representation might include written instructions, audio explanations, visuals, captions, and examples. Multiple means of action and expression might include voice recordings, chat responses, slides, podcasts, written posts, or multimodal products. The aim is not to make tasks easier, but to make participation pathways more accessible and equitable.

Hybrid safe spaces require careful integration of physical and digital participation. A hybrid class can easily produce two unequal groups: those in the room and those online. The in-room group may have richer social cues, informal talk, and teacher attention, while online participants become peripheral. A safe hybrid space therefore needs explicit turn-taking, shared documents, visible online presence, chat monitoring, high-quality audio, purposeful grouping across modalities, and rituals that include remote learners. Hybrid pedagogy should not be an emergency compromise; it should be a design practice.

Digital language learning also changes the meaning of audience. Learners may record themselves, post comments, exchange messages with partners abroad, interact with artificial intelligence tools, or create multimedia products. These practices can be motivating because they make language use authentic and multimodal. They can also increase vulnerability because products can be replayed, downloaded, copied, or judged outside the intended learning context. Digital safe spaces therefore need clear rules for recording, sharing, consent, data protection, peer response, and deletion. Safety is partly technical, partly ethical, and partly pedagogical.

Andrea's chapter can frame digital and hybrid safe spaces as flexible language ecologies. Their strength lies in expanding when, where, and how learners can participate. They can provide preparation time, multimodal support, global communication, individualized practice, and continuity beyond the classroom. Their risk lies in invisibility, surveillance, distraction, inequitable access, and platform-driven interaction patterns. A digital or hybrid space becomes safe when technology serves communication, inclusion, and agency rather than merely delivering content.

Synthesis: Designing Safe Spaces for Language Education

The synthesis chapter should connect the seven dimensions into a coherent design framework. Its central claim is that safe spaces in language education are ecological, not additive. Teachers cannot first create a physical safe space, then separately create a social safe space, then add emotional safety, and so on. Each dimension shapes the others. A circle of chairs changes peer visibility; peer norms change emotional risk; emotional safety supports inner confidence; inner confidence enables creative experimentation; creative work opens cultural questions; cultural complexity often requires digital resources; digital tools reshape physical and social presence.

A useful synthesis framework is the movement from room to space to safe space to growth. *Room* is the material or digital container. *Space* is the relational field of affordances. *Safe space* is the pedagogically cultivated condition that makes risk meaningful rather than threatening. *Growth* is the learner's expanding capacity for communication, reflection, identity, and intercultural action. The title *Room 2 Grow* can therefore be read as a design principle: provide enough physical, social, emotional, cultural, digital, and inner room for learners to become more capable language users.

The synthesis chapter can propose several cross-cutting principles. First, safe spaces are designed before the vulnerable moment occurs. Waiting until a learner is humiliated is too late. Teachers should establish norms, structures, alternatives, and repair routines from the beginning. Second, safe spaces are co-created. Teachers can design affordances, but learners help determine whether those affordances are experienced as safe. Third, safe spaces require transparency. Learners need to know what is expected, why activities matter, how feedback will work, and how support can be accessed. Fourth, safe spaces require flexibility because learners differ. One pathway to participation is never enough.

Fifth, safe spaces require criticality. They should not become avoidance spaces where difficult topics disappear. Language education prepares learners for real communication, and real communication involves misunderstanding, disagreement, identity, power, and ambiguity. The aim is not to remove difficulty but to provide respectful conditions for engaging it. Sixth, safe spaces require repair. No class will be perfectly safe at every moment. A teacher may misread a situation, a peer may laugh, a digital tool may fail, or a cultural topic may cause harm. The quality of a safe space is visible not only in prevention but also in the speed, honesty, and care of repair.

The synthesis chapter should also address assessment. If assessment rewards only speed, accuracy, and public performance, it can undermine safe-space pedagogy. Assessment should also value preparation, strategic risk-taking, peer support, revision, reflection, intercultural interpretation, multimodal communication, and growth over time. This does not lower standards. It broadens the evidence of language learning to include the processes through which learners

become able to communicate. Safe-space assessment asks not only „How correct is the product?“ but also „What conditions supported this learner’s communicative development?“

Finally, the synthesis should articulate an ethical stance. Safe spaces are not a trend, slogan, or decorative addition to pedagogy. They are an ethical response to the vulnerability of learning with and through language. Every language learner is asked to speak before mastery, listen before certainty, and appear before others in a not-yet-complete form. The responsibility of language education is to make that appearance possible, dignified, challenging, and hopeful. To design safe spaces is to design conditions in which learners can risk becoming more articulate, more reflective, more connected, and more free.

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Chapter 1

Let's Get Physical

Travis Jensen

Introduction – Visualization

Imagine you are enrolled in an introductory level course in a language completely new to you. On the day of your initial class meeting, you find the correct classroom and walk in. As you do, you look around and take stock of the physical surroundings. The room smells of feet and is starkly illuminated by seemingly innumerable fluorescent lights buzzing and blazing overhead. The walls are as bare and sterile as the inside of a microwave oven. Dominating the far side of the room is a large teacher desk. Rickety student desks are lined up along the other three walls. Rather than facing toward the middle of the room, the student desks face - in fact are pushed up against - the other three walls. The middle of the room is open and bare and in need of a mop. You are the only person in the room.

Even after only being in that space for a few seconds, and even before interacting with another human, how do you imagine you might feel in such a room? Does the physical makeup of the space feel welcoming? Does the space suggest you will get the support you'll need to undertake challenges? Does the space seem like the kind of place where you can step outside your comfort zone and try new things and risk failure because you won't be shamed for failure but rather commended for pushing through challenges? If your answer to any of those questions is „No!“ then you are proving the central point of this chapter:

When it comes to creating safe spaces for learning, the physical space matters.

The title of this volume, „Room 2 Grow: Safe Spaces in Education“ is especially resonant with the topic of physical space because of the inherent ambiguity of the word „room“ in the English language. Without additional context, most who read the word „room“ by itself would first imagine a physical structure with walls, floor, and ceiling. Even if you were to expand from „room“ to „classroom“ more likely than not, people would still envision a basic box-like structure but they would add some items that suggest a school setting - student desks, educational posters, whiteboards (or if they're old enough, chalkboards). But that is not the definition of „room“ that is most central to this volume, it is „room“ as in an opportunity - an opportunity to grow.

The word opportunity is significant because it underscores the notion that having „room to grow“ doesn't just automagically happen; it requires action. As noted in the opening lines of the theoretical introduction to this work, „A safe space is therefore never simply found. It is made, maintained, repaired, and redesigned.“ And when it comes right down to it, who is responsible for taking the actions to make the physical space of a learning environment as conducive to learning as possible? Who makes, maintains, repairs, and redesigns? The teacher.

Teacher - Host

The essence of hospitality in any context, including an educational context, is helping the hosted feel seen and safe in the hosted space.

Boiled down to its essentials, teaching is hosting, and it is incumbent upon the teacher/host to configure the physical space that holds the learning community, so learners can learn.

This kind of learner-centered focus requires intentionality and adaptability on the part of the teacher - intentionality in that the teacher must consider multiple factors when making decisions about a physical space and adaptability in that student needs are continually in flux. It's a tall task, but it's a worthy one.

For over twenty-five years I've taught English to a wide range of students. I've taught basic composition to academically struggling 7th graders, literary analysis to high school and university students, a required literature survey course to adult undergraduate students sometimes twice my age, and I've been a mentor/tutor for graduate students. Regardless of the level, and regardless of the lesson topic, I have found that one variable that can influence a student's success also happens to be a variable I can most realistically reliably control - my own mindset. Over the years, the mindset that has worked best for me is that of host.

The examples I will use in this chapter are mostly drawn from my teaching literature to native speakers of English rather than language acquisition, but I believe they are applicable to language acquisition by non-native speakers of English because, in many ways, discussing literature asks students to use terminology and methods with which they're likely not very familiar; this can cause stress. In fact, when people find out I'm an English teacher, they'll often respond with something like, „Ugh! English was NOT my favorite subject in school!“ Or even, „I hated English!“ Generally those visceral reactions stem from an English class they were in that made them feel stupid, lost, bored, scared, and as a result, unwelcome. As such, a significant part of my job as an English teacher has been to do all I can to help make my students' educational environment a safe space, and a good place to start is the physical place where we will be.

Small Changes - Big Differences

Clearly there is no single way to make everyone feel completely safe all of the time, but there are things teachers can do to the physical space that can increase the likelihood of maximizing learner confidence and helps learners manage the fears they'll no doubt experience in a way that they will bravely take meaningful risks that will ultimately maximize performance.

The good news is, there are plenty of simple things one can do to improve the safety of a physical learning space that don't take a tremendous amount of work, money, or time. This is important to note because, clearly, there are plenty of factors outside a teacher's control that limit what can

be done. A teacher wanting to create additional space for small group work can't simply expand the classroom space by moving walls, unless they're teaching at Hogwarts, of course.

But a teacher can think carefully about how the instructional space might be reconfigured to better meet the needs of learners and take action. Although it was an intentionally extreme example, consider the horrible space described in the opening paragraph of this chapter. What is one thing any teacher could quickly do (at no cost and in very little time) about that physical space that would communicate to the students, even when they first enter the room, that they will be seen and heard rather than feel isolated and ignored, and that the ensuing educational experience will be collaborative? Turn the student desks around to face inward, right? Or better yet, group them into pods where small group conversation work can occur. Again, this is an extreme example, but it's not as far-fetched as one might think. It's likely that anyone reading this has found themselves in a physical space, educational or otherwise, that was unnecessarily unwelcoming - a space that, with a few simple modifications to the arrangement of a room could have been made much more inviting and safe.

In an educational context, not only is room arrangement important with respect to the logistics associated with an educational activity - arranging student desks to foster small group discussion, for example - room arrangement also sends a message of what students can expect to be doing even as they enter the space. If you walk into a traditional classroom with student desks in rows and columns facing toward a teacher desk/podium at the front of the room, what do you expect will happen? Many would justifiably assume that they're in for a lecture, and likely won't be called upon to actively contribute. But, if you enter a room that is set up for small group conversations, it's easy to speculate that that's what you'll be doing.

As already noted, sometimes factors outside a teacher's control make it difficult for a teacher to completely optimize the physical configuration of an educational space. But as has also been noted, sometimes it doesn't take much to make a positive change. In my first year of teaching 10th grade English, I did not have my own classroom the whole day; I used a colleague's for one section. While she was a kind colleague, and a good teacher, her teaching style was much different than mine. She was much more of a „stand at the front of the classroom and deliver wisdom to students who were to dutifully soak it up and not ask questions“ sort of teacher. That is to say, „the sage on the stage“ approach. In contrast, I have more of a „guide on the side“ style of instruction that encouraged whole-class dialogue and discussion as well as small group discussion. Had I been teaching each section in my own room, I would have adjusted the furniture each day according to what I had planned.

This was a challenge in the shared space though because the teacher with whom I shared the space was adamant about keeping desks in neat and tidy rows and columns, and because I had very limited time before and after my class, there was never time to get things back to how she

wanted it for her class that followed mine if I did major furniture moving, and since I was the new person and she was the veteran, I deferred to her wishes and kept things in the rigid grid - for about a month.

My students were attentive, and I hope they were learning something, but I know they weren't interacting with each other. They were looking to me to provide all the answers. And why wouldn't they? I was standing right in front of them and was the only person in the room with whom they could make easy eye-contact. So one day, I decided to go rogue. As soon as the bell rang signaling the start of class, I said to one side of the room, „Please pivot your desks 90 degrees to your left.“ To the other side, „Pivot 90 degrees to the right.“ Suddenly, mine were no longer the only eyes they saw. The other half the class was looking back at them. Then, before proceeding into the lesson, I explained, briefly, that I had them make that change because I wanted our class to be more of a shared experience where we could exchange ideas more freely, and part of that was being able to see each other. All in all, it took about 2 minutes, and then we began our discussion of the day's reading. Then, at the end of class, we quickly shifted back into the tidy rows, and my colleague was none the wiser.

It was remarkable how much more engaged they were, and I don't think it was because I was asking better questions, or providing better guidance, or that they suddenly became smarter or more insightful, it was that they felt they had more ownership in the experience than when they were just looking at me. They somehow felt more empowered and safe, and as a result, more engaged and willing to contribute. I continued to do this shifting - as well as variations that resulted in small group pods - for the remainder of the term, and it got to the point that students expected to move their desks, and they would even do so before I asked them to. But that wasn't all.

The whole thing was interesting from an accidental research perspective because I had stumbled upon an experiment of sorts. Truth be told, I taught two other sections of the exact same course that semester (using the same lesson plans, materials, etc.). The only difference was I taught those sections in a different room where I had much more flexibility to modify the space as I wished from the beginning. This is what made my experience in the „shared“ room puzzling for that first month. I would do and say the same things, but I could not elicit the kind of student interaction that I could get in my other room. I tried modifying in other ways, but nothing seemed to make much of a difference . . . until I made the most basic modification one could make; I rearranged the furniture.

Novelty - Consistency

After that first semester, I was fortunate to usually have full control of the physical space of my classroom for the rest of my high school teaching career, and that made it much easier to structure physical environments that I felt best met the ever-changing needs of my students. As a result, my students were routinely met with a newly configured space when they came into our

classroom. And that was good, I thought, because it kept things fresh and interesting. But not entirely good, as it turned out.

I soon realized that the novelty of shifting furniture arrangements and the steady influx of new visual aids and the like was a bit overwhelming for some learners. That shouldn't have surprised me because I also knew, deep down, that learners, of all sorts, crave some level of consistency. If everything is all new, all the time, every time, it can be disorienting and disquieting and as a result, uncertainty and fear will naturally increase, and that will adversely affect their ability to learn. But, I had already seen how adjusting the physical nature of the space could positively affect their learning, so I was a bit stuck. Then, as so often happens in teaching, I inadvertently found a way that helped me better balance novelty and consistency.

During my second year of high school teaching, I initiated a new activity in all of my classes - the Question of the Day (Q.O.T.D). There wasn't anything particularly unusual about this activity in and of itself, but I decided to make it a prominent, and consistent, feature of my students' experience. Each day I would write a question on the whiteboard. Generally, the questions could be answered in a word or two, and it was absolutely required that each student answer the question. I took it very seriously and explained that they should as well. It's how we started every class meeting, no exceptions.

Sometimes the questions were a bit silly and didn't have much, if anything, to do with the day's lesson, or even anything remotely academic. For example, something like „What's the best kind of donut?“ Students would respond because it was an easy way to participate. Plus, such questions offered opportunities for a low-stakes „debates“ such as on the relative merits of glazed donuts vs. cinnamon rolls. I also imagine they thought something like, „Well, that's a weird question, but whatever. I'll answer to earn my participation points for the day.“

As time went on, I would start to introduce more complicated, and frankly sometimes controversial questions. These questions also increasingly connected - albeit sometimes quite subtly - to the day's main activities. And sometimes, unbeknownst to them, the Q.O.T.D. was the day's main activity because I intended it to be so! After a couple of weeks, I could tell that as students entered the room, the first thing they would do was look for the Q.O.T.D. on the board, and if it was a question that was confusing to them for one reason or another - such as a word that was unfamiliar to them (e.g., „dystopia“) - they would start asking questions about the question. Of course, I would ask them to wait until everyone was there and then we'd process the question together as a group. It became a central ritual of the overall educational experience, and that ritual was centered in the space on the whiteboard where the Q.O.T.D. was written.

But remember, this was also in the context of me frequently shifting the room setup around as well, and when I did so, I would often change the location of the Q.O.T.D.. I started to notice that when the Q.O.T.D. was in a new spot, some students would be visibly frustrated when they

couldn't find it right away. I was puzzled that they should get so agitated, but I decided I would thenceforth always write the Q.O.T.D. in the exact same spot in the room. As it happened, I selected a spot not on the board at the front of the room, but off to the side. I did this so I could have the whole front board for other things later, but it also turned out to be a great way for me to notice how Q.O.T.D.-focused students were as they entered the room. Almost without fail, as students entered the room, even if the desks had been moved or other adjustments had been made since our last class session, they would immediately turn their heads to the Q.O.T.D. to see what we'd be talking about in a few minutes. This was always the case over the years, in multiple classrooms, with many different types of students. It was something students grabbed on to.

I first realized the extent to which they were attached to the Q.O.T.D. one day when, because I had to be out of town for a conference, I did not include a Q.O.T.D. for the substitute teacher because, frankly, I figured it would be hard to explain and the teacher would have their hands full with other things. But I learned my lesson! Upon my return, in her notes to me, the substitute thanked me for leaving good plans and notes, and she said, all in all, things went well, with one exception. She said the students were baffled, and a little angry, that there was no Q.O.T.D. to consider that day! She said, „I didn't know what they were talking about, but they sure did!“ And sure enough, when I then saw my students, that was the first thing they wanted to say - the substitute forgot to do the Q.O.T.D.. When I explained it wasn't her fault and that I had left that part out, you would have thought I directed her to set the room on fire.

I've even had multiple occasions when I've run into former students, and one of the first things they'll say is that they remember the Q.O.T.D. and they miss that ritual.

I never took the time to formally and scientifically study this in depth, but from what I experienced, I am confident one of the main reasons students loved the Q.O.T.D. was because it provided an anchor of consistency in what I'm sure were often chaotic lives. One of the few things they could count on was seeing what oddball question Mr. Jensen wrote up on the board each day, and that grounded them – even if they didn't know where they were going to be sitting because the same Mr. Jensen kept changing that up.

What I learned from this was that physical space is more than furniture, it's everything in the space – including what's displayed on the walls and whiteboards. Happily, one can use that dimension of the physical space to make inexpensive and easy but still profoundly impactful modifications that help students feel welcomed and safe.

Inside - Outside

A few years ago I retired from my full-time life's work in education, but I still love teaching, and I still love learning. Fortunately, since retiring from a formal educational setting, I've managed to blend my passion for education with another life-long passion - the natural world. I now work with an NGO called Solidago Conservancy whose mission is to work with public and other private

partners to conserve natural spaces in and around our community, so they may be enjoyed by all people, forever. I am pleased to be a part of this effort for many reasons, but foremost among them springs from my prior career in education. I know, from first-hand experience, that the natural world can be more than just a source of beauty and recreation; it can be a safe physical space where transformative educational experiences can flourish. I want to clarify that, to me, the natural world doesn't have to be a wild National Park like Yellowstone, or a grand park like Central Park in New York. As Oscar Wilde is often quoted as saying, nature is „a place where birds fly around uncooked.“ I like that definition; therefore, I believe the natural world can be found anywhere outside, even right outside a classroom door.

At Nebraska Wesleyan University, the outdoor space of the campus is a crucial educational context for student learning, not just to learn about nature (studying plants for botany class or observing the actions of squirrels for biology etc.) but to tap into the intrinsic power of nature to calm us, to inspire us, to energize us. The campus itself offers many natural physical spaces conducive to learning, but I will focus on one in particular that both energized my students as well as helped them feel safe enough to really do some challenging introspection – a magnificent sycamore tree.

Over the years I have taught several sections of a course in which students read *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. (Among other things, this course was designed to help students explore their vocation - what they want to do with their life, and if you know anything about *The Alchemist*, you know it fits nicely with that theme.) The protagonist of *The Alchemist* is Santiago, and the book tells the story of Santiago's adventures as he too tries to figure out the meaning of his life, or using the terminology of the book, his Personal Legend. As it happens, a sycamore tree plays a very important symbolic role in the book because his journey begins under a sycamore tree and - without giving too much away - a sycamore factors into his quest later on.

On the final day of our discussion of *The Alchemist*, I would take my students outside our regular classroom



Fig. 1: Sycamore Tree at the Nebraska Wesleyan University

and walk them to the aforementioned sycamore tree standing before them. I would explain that we were going to recreate Santiago's journey by walking through campus and reviewing and discussing the meaning of his many adventures along the way. Invariably I could see students become energized and willing to engage in ways I'm certain wouldn't have been as likely had we done the exact same thing inside our conventional classroom. Finally, as our retracing of Santiago's steps began to close, I would guide us back to the sycamore where we started. There I would ask if any of them were aware of the symbolism associated with sycamore trees? Occasionally someone had some idea, but usually they were not aware, so I would explain that, for hundreds of years and across many cultures, sycamore trees have been symbols of strength, protection, resilience, renewal, even spiritual transformation. I encouraged them to think of this every time they passed this tree on their own journey to discover their Personal Legend at Nebraska Wesleyan.

As it happens, this sycamore tree is located within a few meters of another powerful symbol on our campus - a stone archway that was erected by the graduating class of 1896. Decades ago a new joyous tradition began where, each fall, all newly arrived students parade, as a community of learners, through the archway into the campus where they will explore new ideas, build lifelong relationships, and learn about themselves and the world. Then, on the day of their graduation with diploma in hand, they once again join their fellow classmates and parade through campus and pass through the very same archway out of campus and into the rest of their lives.

When my students and I stand under the glorious branches of the sycamore tree, on that final day of our discussion of *The Alchemist*, I point out the nearby archway and remind them of how, like Santiago and his sycamore tree, they began and will end their journey at NWU in a familiar physical space, but it won't be the same place because they will be eternally changed inside. Clearly, all of this could be said within a conventional indoor classroom - even a nightmarish one like I asked you to visualize earlier - but I'm convinced their having the experience under an actual sycamore tree, next to the arch, in a natural space, is profoundly more impactful. So why wouldn't I take the extra effort to create such a unique, welcoming, and safe space for my students?

The teacher as host

Builds physical place to learn

Safe spaces to grow

Chapter 2

Building Belonging: Nurturing Safe Spaces for Communication and Collaboration. Social Safe Spaces in Education

Karla Jensen

Introduction

The traditional classroom can unintentionally become a space of deep situational anxiety. Language learning is unique in its academic demands; it forces learners to expose partial knowledge, negotiate unfamiliar grammar, and risk public error with limited communicative skills. This chapter addresses the paradox we modern language educators face. On one hand, educational structures heavily enforce institutional mandates, dense curricula, and strict metrics that prioritize flawless grammatical accuracy on standardized assessments. On the other hand, when students leave our classrooms, our greatest hope is that they demonstrate communicative confidence, fluid interaction, and a willingness to build relationships. Instead of letting institutional anxiety filter down into the classroom, we as educators are uniquely positioned to use our communicative presence to build spaces of genuine welcome, mutual belonging, and supportive group dynamics.

Psychological safety and an intentional sense of belonging are not cosmetic additions or the emotional „frosting on top“ in a classroom. Instead, they constitute the indispensable cognitive foundation upon which all language acquisition occurs. This foundation is naturally multidimensional, and the chapters within this volume illustrate how these distinct spaces—physical, emotional, creative, cultural, and digital—layer upon and reinforce one another to support the whole learner. This chapter contributes to that collective mosaic by focusing on the social dimension, exploring how group dynamics, peer support, and cooperative trust form the relational fabric that brings these environments to life.

The Theoretical Architecture of Social Safe Spaces and Belonging

The desire for belonging is a fundamental human need rooted in our genetic architecture. For students, this need manifests as a deeply subjective perception of inclusion, connectedness, and integration across social, academic, and institutional dimensions (Strayhorn, 2018). Decades of research demonstrate that a robust sense of belonging acts as a primary lever for long-term student success; knowing that one matters within an educational space profoundly influences cognitive capacity, health, and personal happiness. To maximize this potential, we must cultivate true safe spaces that work in tandem with brave spaces—where a safe space guarantees protection and relational predictability, a brave space layers on honesty, accountability, and courageous risk-taking (Arao & Clemens, 2013). A meta-analysis confirms that the benefits of feeling welcomed into such a community are deeply intertwined (van Kessel et al., 2025). Specifically, this sense of social belonging fuels a positive feedback loop that enhances both mental well-being

and pro-social engagement. Consequently, when students feel secure, they exhibit higher class attendance, a greater willingness to actively engage in discussions, and a stronger inclination to take intellectual risks (Zumbrunn et al., 2014). Conversely, feeling like an outsider or experiencing exclusion actively impairs neurological processing, stalls intrinsic motivation, and fuels a destructive cycle of academic anxiety, loneliness, and alienation (Strayhorn, 2018).

This relational dynamic is elegantly mapped out in MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) Willingness to Communicate (WTC) model, which illustrates the profound influence educators have on a student's immediate readiness to speak a second language. The model's pyramidal base reminds us that students enter the classroom with enduring, long-term characteristics, such as stable personality traits and external, out-of-class influences. Conversely, the peak represents the immediate psychological trigger: the exact moment a student decides to take an intellectual risk and speak. The crucial transition occurs in the middle layers, where situational variables like language anxiety, state communicative confidence, and peer affiliation collide (MacIntyre et al., 1998). While we as instructors cannot easily alter a student's lifelong personality traits at the base, we possess immense control over these fluid, situational middle layers. Ultimately, a classroom environment rooted in safety, respect, and brave participation transforms these middle layers by mitigating anxiety, thus boosting the student toward the peak where they actively choose to communicate.

It is no surprise that language learners do not absorb syntax, vocabulary, and pronunciation in isolation; rather, they are becoming active participants in communicative communities of practice. Pearce and Cronen's (1980) Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) theory posits that individuals create meaning and manage social reality collectively. Applied to education, it serves as a critical reminder that the classroom environment is entirely co-constructed; regardless of their roles, every participant possesses agency over—and responsibility for—their shared relationships. It stands to reason, then, that when safe, welcoming behaviors become a standardized norm, a powerful positive feedback loop is activated (Strayhorn, 2018; Ye, 2024). Cultivating this sense of social belonging directly reduces cognitive load, minimizes anxiety, increases attendance, and serves as a primary predictor of heightened behavioral, emotional, and pro-social engagement. Ultimately, when errors are reframed as brave, communal opportunities for collaborative repair rather than objects of public ridicule, learners stop minimizing their visibility and instead proudly step into intellectual exploration within the safe and brave community.

Crucially, the intentional and ongoing cultivation of a welcoming, safe community does not compromise academic rigor. In fact, educational research demonstrates that student achievement peaks when a robust climate of social support coexists with high academic standards. Data confirms that a culture of belongingness serves as an emotional catalyst for language learning enjoyment, which directly sparks active communication (Solhi et al., 2026). When students experience

strong interpersonal connections with their faculty and peers, they perceive an environment of higher academic expectations and willingly rise to meet them (Strayhorn, 2018; Ye, 2024).

Strategies for Sustaining an Environment of Belonging

Implementing a scaffolded, personal approach to fostering belonging requires patience and cultural awareness. Readers of this chapter are invited to design and deliver methods that most authentically align with their unique classroom environments. By utilizing these initial techniques from the start of the semester, students are invited into a learning space where they are encouraged to establish relationships with one another, with the instructor, the material, and themselves. Reflecting on the academic literature, more than three decades of personal teaching experience, and the shared wisdom of trusted colleagues, I have gathered a series of adaptable techniques crafted to sustain and deepen this sense of belonging. By sharing and employing these practices, we collectively consider the long-term, transformative impacts of nourishing a vibrant learning community—mindful that our individual daily efforts ultimately shape a broader institutional culture. After all, lasting institutional change stems from what we practice intentionally day after day, year after year. This approach is deeply grounded in the foundational framework of bell hooks (1994), who famously encourages us to teach in a manner that „respects and cares for the souls of our students“ (p. 13). In that collaborative spirit, I invite you to explore the following suggestions and select the strategies that best align with your unique pedagogical needs.

The Entryway Routine, Environmental Cues, and Atmospheric Shifts. Anonymity is a primary driver of situational classroom anxiety (Strayhorn, 2018). We can mitigate this by greeting students individually at the door—using their names and offering a welcoming smile—as well as designating a rotating student ‚room host‘ to welcome peers as they cross the threshold (Jensen, in press). Simultaneously, playing upbeat music during arrival transforms the acoustic environment (Jensen, in press). The music fills the sterile silence of a traditional classroom, creating a lively, informal atmosphere that can spark spontaneous, low-stakes conversations among peers before the class formally commences. Beyond these acoustic shifts, as beautifully reviewed in a previous chapter, the physical space can be intentionally leveraged to foster „ambient belonging“—a subconscious sense of fitting into an environment driven by the objects within it (Cheryan et al., 2009). We can deliberately manipulate these identity cues by featuring a prominent, sophisticated visual fixture, such as a graphic representing collective intelligence, or as will be subsequently covered, a co-created class contract. By adding visual reminders of a unified team, we transform the physical architecture of the room into a continuous, stabilizing cognitive cue that lowers evaluation apprehension and reinforces a safe, brave space the moment our students enter.

Present-Moment Alignment: The „Face Up, Phone Down“ Contract. Digital distraction often functions as a psychological escape hatch; when students feel vulnerable, they may instinctively

retreat into their electronic devices, which can disrupt the social cohesion of the room as well as valuable learning opportunities (Jensen, in press). Rather than enforcing an authoritarian ban, consider co-creating a mindful phone policy by transparently explaining the documented, deleterious impacts of mobile devices on deep cognitive retention and community building (Wan et al., 2022). Encouraging students to live „face up, phone down“ fosters an environment of active presence. This shared commitment helps keep students anchored in the physical room, preventing them from retreating into a digital shell when communication becomes challenging. Ideally, students may also carry this mindful awareness outside the classroom context.

Feed-Forward via „Kudos, Questions, and Concerns.“ To systematically foster trust, instructors can implement brief, regular, and anonymous pulse surveys designed to track student sentiment through kudos, questions, and concerns (Jensen, in press; Strayhorn, 2018). For instance, students might share positive „kudos“ feedback („Well done!“), logistical questions („When is this due?“), or urgent concerns („Help! I don’t think I can finish the work.“). Reviewing and addressing these responses at the start of the next class session serves a dual purpose. While answering questions and adapting to logistical needs minimizes systemic friction, publicly sharing the „kudos“ builds a culture of peer validation. Recognizing student-to-student praise—like thanking a classmate for being an exceptionally patient listener—encourages students to identify strengths in one another, while the habit of anonymously identifying gaps in understanding empowers students to openly seek clarification moving forward.

Warm-Calling. Traditional cold-calling—the practice of insisting that a student instantly and unexpectedly answers a complex question in front of the entire room—can induce panic, and not just for the individual called upon. In contrast, „warm calling“ methods like the *think-ink-pair-share* model provide learners with structured processing time. This approach allows students to think silently, script a response in writing („ink“), and practice with a peer before speaking publicly (Edmondson, 1999). By ensuring that students enter the conversational arena with a prepared script, this framework significantly lowers anxiety and increases confidence (Ye, 2024). To further lower the barrier to participation, instructors can implement a brief „question of the day“ routine—utilizing either low-stakes academic prompts or community-building questions—to ensure every student routinely practices using their vocal presence in the room.

Group-Worthiness. When grading and praise focus solely on individual achievement, high-proficiency speakers have less incentive to assist peers (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). To counter competition, consider utilizing a random reporter protocol—randomly selecting one student to synthesize their team’s collective ideas for a group reward—which prompts high-proficiency speakers to ensure everyone is prepared. However, because insights from quieter students are still occasionally ignored in cooperative settings (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), fostering cooperation does not automatically guarantee equal collaboration. To help students recognize the value of each voice, we can encourage them to explicitly credit peers by name when building upon their

ideas (AERO, 2023). In such configurations, acknowledging peers audibly through rhythmic knocking, clapping, or snapping can also serve as an engaging validation method. Additionally, dominant speakers may frequently interrupt emerging learners during conversational pauses, attempting to assist them by completing their sentences (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). While well-intentioned, this rapid intrusion can inadvertently signal a lack of competence and erode confidence. To counter this, implementing a „five-second grace period“ establishes intentional silence as a core class norm. If a speaker pauses mid-thought, the group must silently count to five before offering assistance or taking a turn. This structurally reframes silence not as an academic failure, but as a protected processing window (Jensen, in press), allowing high-proficiency speakers to function as supportive allies so emerging learners feel valued as contributors.

Destigmatizing Grades. Returning exams without adequate support or context risks allowing grades alone to dictate a student’s sense of worth (Ye, 2024). To counter this and foster psychological safety, instructors can explicitly frame single-day assessments as isolated performance snapshots rather than reflections of a learner’s intrinsic intelligence, human dignity, or capacity for language acquisition. Beyond verbal reassurances, educators can enhance this mindset by using „exam wrappers“—worksheets where students can reflect on their study habits, identify areas of success and challenge, and map out a plan for future preparation. This transforms an assessment into a collaborative diagnostic tool, signaling to students that learning is an ongoing partnership where they, alongside their instructor and peers, can collectively adjust learning strategies for future success (Ye, 2024).

Student Agency and the Co-Creation of Classroom Culture

A resilient community cannot be sustained by top-down mandates alone; authentic belonging requires activating student agency (Jensen, in press; Strayhorn, 2018). Grounded in the Coordinated Management of Meaning theory (Pearce & Cronen, 1980), this framework posits that individuals co-construct their social worlds and communicative rules through interaction. When students help shape the relational conditions of their learning space, their investment deepens—converting vulnerability into shared strength (Cummins et al., 2015).

Encouraging student contributions means providing structured opportunities for them to express needs, design routines, and establish mutual accountability (Jensen, in press; Strayhorn, 2018). When students observe how their input alters the daily mechanics of the room, they experience a shift from compliance-based tasks to an empowering process of collective motivation. To bring this agency to life, consider dedicating time during the first week of class for students to collaborate on community agreements. While we provide baseline guidelines for academic integrity and mutual respect, students can co-create concrete, peer-to-peer behavioral agreements (Jensen, in press; Strayhorn, 2018). Shifting the sole responsibility of classroom culture away from the „designated leader“ and onto the collective empowers students to actively defend one another’s

psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Jensen, in press). By negotiating who they wish to be as a learning community, students transition away from viewing themselves as isolated individuals and emerge as vital caretakers of a shared community of practice (Edmondson, 1999).

While each cohort's living classroom contract is uniquely tailored and should be periodically revised to match evolving group dynamics, several common themes typically emerge designed to protect community belonging. Here are a few examples:

- **We Won't Interrupt:** We agree to give everyone time when they are talking. If someone pauses to think, we will silently count to five before jumping in or trying to finish their sentence for them. Silence isn't awkward; it just means someone is processing.
- **We Will Lift Each Other Up:** We will recognize each other during class instead of just moving on to the next thing in silence. If someone shares something difficult or gets stuck, we will support them with statements such as, „Thanks for sharing that, I know it's hard to put into words“ or „No rush, take your time, we're listening.“
- **We Know Mistakes Are Normal:** We agree that messing up is just a normal part of learning. Nobody will laugh, roll their eyes, or judge when someone makes a mistake. We are going to treat our own mistakes as progress instead of getting discouraged.
- **We Will Work Hard but Ask for Help When Needed:** We agree to give maximum effort, but we won't pretend we have it all figured out. It is acceptable to get stuck, and asking a peer or the instructor for help is not a sign of weakness—it is simply part of getting better. Because we support one another, no one has to struggle through a difficult assignment alone.
- **We Will Have Fun:** We agree to bring positive energy and humor to class every day. We will actively participate in classroom games, laugh with each other instead of at each other, and celebrate when people succeed so the environment in the room remains positive and friendly.

Closing Thoughts

Ultimately, nurturing an authentic, collaborative classroom community where students have Room 2 Grow is a profound expression of pedagogical care and a vital response to widespread social isolation. Moving beyond rigid, one-size-fits-all instructional models allows us to embrace a relational methodology that fiercely protects the intrinsic worth of individual students. As the architects of the social infrastructure students rely upon to thrive, we do not lower our academic standards when we establish authentic warmth and mutual belonging as a non-negotiable baseline; rather, we provide the robust psychological safety net students require to shift away from compliance-based tasks, find their unique voices, and use communication to connect meaningfully with the world long after the term concludes.

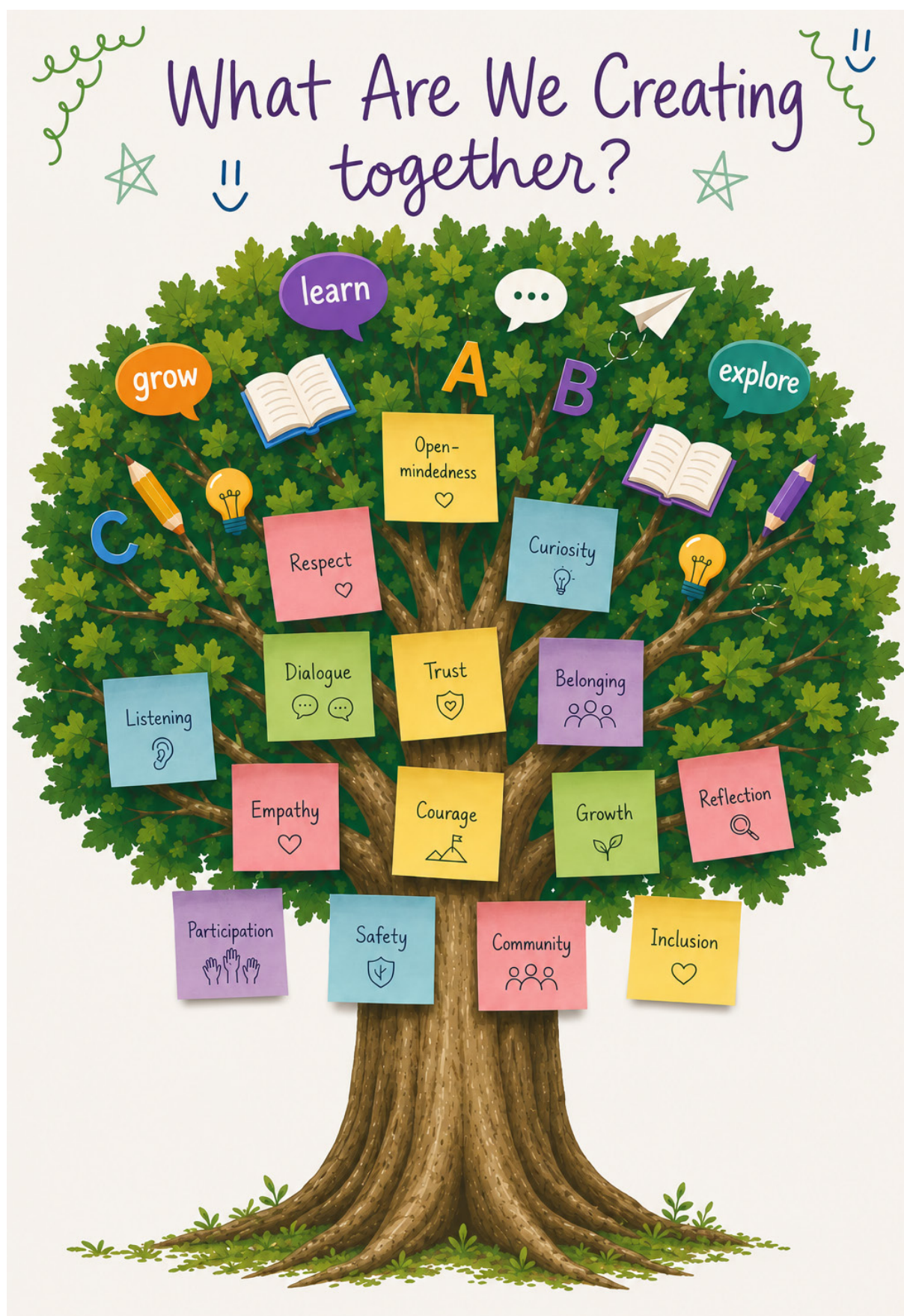


Fig. 2: What are we creating together?

Strategies for Sustaining an Environment of Belonging

Strategy	Practical Tools & Techniques	Impact on Belonging
The Entryway Routine & Atmospheric Shifts	• Individual door greetings with a name and smile • Rotating student „room host“ • Upbeat arrival music • Sophisticated visual fixtures (team graphics)	Mitigates situational classroom anonymity (Strayhorn, 2018), fills sterile silence (Jensen, in press), and fosters „ambient belonging“ to lower evaluation apprehension (Cheryan et al., 2009).
Present-Moment Alignment	• The „Face Up, Phone Down“ contract • Mindful phone policy co-creation • Transparent discussions on cognitive retention	Closes digital „psychological escape hatches,“ counters vulnerability-driven distraction (Jensen, in press), and anchors students in active, physical presence (Wan et al., 2022).
Feed-Forward Feedback Channels	• Brief, anonymous pulse surveys • Categorized tracking of „Kudos, Questions, and Concerns“ • Addressing responses publicly at the start of next class	Systematically builds trust (Jensen, in press; Strayhorn, 2018), minimizes systemic friction, and utilizes peer praise to build a culture of mutual validation.
Warm-Calling	• Think-Ink-Pair-Share model (silent thought, writing, peer practice) • Structured processing time before speaking • Low-stakes „question of the day“ routine	Replaces panic-inducing cold-calling with psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), significantly lowering anxiety and increasing vocal confidence (Ye, 2024).
Group-Worthiness Protocols	• Random reporter protocol for group rewards • Explicit peer-crediting by name • Audible validation (knocking, clapping, snapping) • Five-second grace period for pauses	Counters individualistic competition (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), encourages students to credit peer ideas (AERO, 2023), and reframes silence as a protected processing window (Jensen, in press).
Destigmatizing Grades	• Framing assessments as isolated performance snapshots • Reflective „exam wrappers“ (worksheets tracking study habits and future plans)	Decouples scores from intrinsic human dignity or intelligence (Ye, 2024), transforming evaluations into collaborative diagnostic tools and ongoing partnerships.
Co-Creation of Student Community Agreements	• First-week collaboration on community contracts • Student-designed behavioral agreements • Periodic contract revisions matching group evolution	Activates student agency (Jensen, in press; Strayhorn, 2018), applies Coordinated Management of Meaning theory (Pearce & Cronen, 1980), and shifts students from compliance to active caretakers of a shared community of practice (Edmondson, 1999).

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Chapter 3

Emotional Safe Spaces and Fear-Free Language Learning: A Theory of Educational Fear

Heiner Böttger

This chapter develops a theory of educational fear for emotional safe spaces and fear-free language learning. It brings together two preparation manuscripts for the third seminar day: a Signature Talk framework on fear-free education and a theoretical paper on fear types and fear expressions. Building on the theoretical sections of Böttger's dissertation on English Language Speaking Anxiety (ELSA), especially the differentiation of cognitive, motivational or behavioral, affective, physiological, and neurobiological anxiety components, the chapter widens the language-specific ELSA framework into a broader theory of fear-free education (Böttger, 2025). It also adapts the source model of English-speaking fear from Böttger and Költzsch (2020) to education more generally. The central claim is that fear-free education is not education without difficulty, performance, effort, or accountability. It is the intentional design of emotionally safe learning environments in which necessary challenge is preserved while avoidable threat, humiliation, exclusion, public shame, uncontrolled exposure, and chronic self-protective avoidance are reduced. The chapter defines core terms, presents a typology of educational fear, describes the temporal structure of fear before, during, and after learning performance, and translates these insights into principles for teaching, discussion, feedback, and safe-space design.

Keywords: fear-free education, emotional safe spaces, educational fear, anxiety, shame, feedback, learner identity, English Language Speaking Anxiety

Signature Message

This sentence is the guiding message of the chapter:

Fear-free education does not mean learning without challenge. It means challenge without humiliation.

A second sentence carries its emotional tone: A scared learner is not a weak learner. A scared learner is a protected learner whose nervous system has started to treat learning as threat. These two claims are deliberately demanding. They do not ask educators to lower standards, avoid correction, or remove intellectual risk. They ask educators to distinguish between the difficulty that helps learners grow and the unnecessary threat that blocks access to learning.

The professional implication is clear: educators cannot promise that learners will never feel nervous, uncertain, exposed, or vulnerable. Learning languages, solving difficult tasks, presenting ideas, reading aloud, receiving feedback, and participating in public classroom discourse all involve risk. Educators can, however, design learning environments in which uncertainty is accompanied by support, mistakes are treated as information, feedback becomes feedforward, and participation grows through dignity rather than pressure.

Toward a Theory of Fear-Free Education

Fear is one of the most powerful hidden organizers of educational behavior. It shapes what learners dare to say, what they choose not to say, what they remember, what they avoid, and how they interpret themselves as capable or incapable persons. In language education, this is often visible in the fear of speaking a foreign language. However, the same structure appears across educational domains: the child who avoids reading aloud, the student who freezes during a mathematics task, the adult learner who does not ask a question in a professional training session, or the teacher candidate who remains silent because the social risk feels too high. For this reason, the language-specific theory of English Language Speaking Anxiety can be productively widened into a more general theory of educational fear.

The aim of such a theory is not to pathologize ordinary nervousness. Education always includes uncertainty, effort, exposure, feedback, and the possibility of error. A learning environment without any arousal would not necessarily be a better one. Moderate activation can focus attention, signal importance, and support preparation, a point suggested by classic work on facilitative and debilitating anxiety and by the Yerkes-Dodson law (Alpert & Haber, 1960; Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). Yet when arousal becomes uncontrollable, humiliating, socially dangerous, or chronically anticipatory, it stops being a productive signal and becomes a barrier to participation. Fear-free education therefore means education free from unnecessary, unmanaged, and dignity-threatening fear, not education free from challenge.

This distinction is essential for emotional safe spaces. A safe space in education is not a room in which learners are protected from every demanding task. It is a space in which learners can meet demanding tasks without having to protect their dignity, belonging, or identity at the same time. This places fear-free education near psychological safety, because learners are more likely to speak, ask, try, revise, and take intellectual risks when they do not expect ridicule, punishment, or social exclusion for imperfect performance (Edmondson, 1999; Holley & Steiner, 2005). Safe spaces and brave spaces should therefore be understood as complementary rather than contradictory: emotional safety makes courageous participation possible (Arao & Clemens, 2013).

Conceptual Foundations: Fear, Anxiety, Worry, and Educational Safety

A theory of fear-free education requires precise terminology because everyday language often blurs distinctions that matter pedagogically. Fear can be defined as an affective, bodily, and action-oriented response to a perceived immediate threat. It organizes attention toward danger and prepares the organism for protective action. Anxiety, by contrast, is more future-oriented and anticipatory. It often arises when a person expects a negative outcome but cannot fully predict or control it. Worry is the predominantly cognitive component of anxiety: repetitive thinking about possible negative outcomes, often in chains of „what if“ scenarios. These distinctions

are not merely semantic. A learner who is afraid because a mistake is being ridiculed is in a different state from a learner who anxiously anticipates tomorrow's presentation or worries all night about being unable to answer.

The theoretical discussion in the dissertation emphasizes that English terms such as *fear* and *anxiety* cannot simply be mapped onto the German pair *Angst* and *Furcht* (Böttger, 2025). Anxiety may refer to diffuse concern, situational nervousness, or a trait-like tendency toward worry, whereas fear usually implies a more immediate perception of threat. For educational theory, the most useful distinction is functional: fear reacts to perceived present danger; anxiety anticipates possible future danger; worry mentally rehearses danger. All three may occur in classrooms, seminars, laboratories, workshops, digital learning environments, and workplace training.

State anxiety and trait anxiety refine this picture. State anxiety is temporary and situation-specific; it rises in response to a particular task, room, person, audience, language, or moment. Trait anxiety is a more stable disposition to experience many situations as threatening (Spielberger, 1983). In fear-free education, the primary design responsibility concerns state anxiety because educators can directly influence task design, social climate, time pressure, feedback, room arrangement, and exposure. Trait anxiety, clinical anxiety disorders, trauma histories, and severe phobic responses require sensitivity and, where appropriate, professional support beyond ordinary pedagogical intervention.

Educational fear may therefore be defined as a state-like or trait-amplified pattern of cognitive, emotional, bodily, motivational, and social responses that arises when a learner appraises an educational situation as threatening to competence, control, belonging, identity, dignity, or future opportunity. Fear-free education is the systematic reduction of such threat while maintaining meaningful challenge, agency, and growth-oriented feedback.

The Multicomponent Structure of Educational Fear

Fear in education is not a single feeling. It is a network of components that can appear together but may also dominate differently across learners and situations. The dissertation's component model of ELSA distinguishes cognitive, motivational or behavioral, affective, physiological, and neurobiological components (Böttger, 2025). Generalized to education, this model provides a strong basis for analyzing how fear shows itself in learning environments.

The cognitive component includes worry, uncertainty, catastrophic thinking, negative self-evaluation, fear of losing control, and constant self-monitoring. In learning situations, the learner's attention shifts away from the task toward self-protection. Instead of thinking, „What is the next step in this problem?“ the learner thinks, „What will happen if I fail?“ Attentional control theory explains why anxiety can impair performance: worry consumes working-memory resources that would otherwise be available for task processing (Eysenck et al., 2007). In language

education, this may block lexical retrieval; in mathematics, it may block procedural reasoning; in teacher education, it may block spontaneous professional judgment.

The motivational or behavioral component concerns what fear makes learners do or avoid. Fear can produce fight, flight, freeze, faint-like reactions, and self-protective avoidance. In classrooms, these rarely look dramatic. They often appear as silence, avoidance of eye contact, nonattendance, delayed submission, strategic invisibility, overpreparation, refusal to volunteer, shortened answers, or choosing safer but less meaningful tasks. Avoidance can produce immediate relief but maintain fear in the long term because the learner never experiences the feared situation as manageable. This is one reason fear-free education must create carefully structured access to challenge rather than simply allowing all avoidance to continue unchecked.

The affective component includes nervousness, shame, embarrassment, frustration, insecurity, helplessness, and sometimes panic-like feelings. Shame deserves special attention because it is not only fear of failing but fear of becoming a failed self in the eyes of others. In education, shame can be triggered by public correction, laughter, grading rituals, cold calling, peer comparison, or the sense that one's identity is being judged through one performance. Shame is especially damaging because it can survive long after the task has ended and can become anticipatory before the next similar situation (Teimouri et al., 2019).

The physiological component includes faster heartbeat, sweating, trembling, shallow breathing, muscle tension, stomach discomfort, voice instability, blushing, and a feeling of internal pressure. These reactions are often interpreted by learners as further proof that something is wrong. The body then becomes evidence for the mind: „Because my heart is racing, I must be in danger.“ For oral performance, this is particularly relevant because the instrument of performance is the body itself. A trembling voice, dry mouth, or unstable breathing is not hidden; it becomes part of the performance and may intensify fear.

The neurobiological component explains why purely rational reassurance is often insufficient. Fear and safety learning involve systems that include the amygdala, thalamus, prefrontal cortex, hippocampus, insula, and salience networks (LeDoux, 2016; LeDoux & Pine, 2016). Contemporary fear-learning research indicates that anxiety- and stress-related disorders are associated with altered fear and safety learning, including persistent responses during extinction and extinction recall (Kausche et al., 2025). Large-scale neuroimaging work also shows that fear conditioning engages central autonomic and interoceptive salience networks and is shaped by clinical status and task design (Radua et al., 2025). Pedagogically, this means that learners do not simply decide to stop being afraid. They learn safety through repeated, embodied, socially protected experiences.

A Typology of Fear Types and Fear Expressions in Education

The following typology translates the component model into educationally observable fear types. The categories overlap, but their separation helps educators identify what kind of threat is operating in a learning situation and what kind of pedagogical response is needed.

Fear Types and Fear Expressions in Education

Fear Type or Expression	Core Definition	Typical Educational Manifestations	Pedagogical Risk and Design Response
Appraisal anxiety	Anxiety generated by low perceived control and high perceived value of a task.	„This matters, but I cannot handle it.“ Strong before tests, presentations, public tasks, or professional simulations.	Risk: avoidance and over-preparation. Response: increase control, preparation, and transparent criteria.
Performance anxiety	Fear linked to visible execution of a skill in front of others.	Speaking, presenting, reading aloud, solving at the board, performing music, teaching demonstrations.	Risk: freezing, rushing, and self-monitoring. Response: rehearsal ladders and gradual exposure.
Evaluation anxiety	Fear of being judged, graded, ranked, or compared.	Silence when grades are attached; fear of teacher comments; anxiety during peer feedback.	Risk: participation becomes risk management. Response: separate practice from assessment whenever possible.
Error anxiety	Fear that mistakes will be interpreted as incompetence.	Avoiding difficult words, questions, or strategies; giving minimal answers.	Risk: learners choose safety over growth. Response: normalize error as information.
Shame-based fear	Fear that failure will damage dignity or identity.	Embarrassment, hiding, withdrawal, rumination after class, fear of being laughed at.	Risk: long-term loss of belonging. Response: feedback that protects personhood.
Social-belonging fear	Fear of rejection, exclusion, or loss of status in the learning group.	Avoiding accents, personal examples, minority perspectives/questions that might expose difference.	Risk: learners protect identity instead of contributing authentically. Response: respectful group norms and repair routines.
Cognitive-load anxiety	Fear intensified by overload, unclear instructions, or lack of strategy.	Blanking out, losing instructions, inability to plan, difficulty retrieving knowledge under pressure.	Risk: working memory is occupied by threat monitoring. Response: chunking, modeling, and time to process.

Control-loss fear	Fear of losing voice, memory, fluency, emotional control, or bodily stability.	Panic-like moments, shaky voice, sudden silence, inability to continue despite knowledge.	Risk: bodily arousal is interpreted as incompetence. Response: breathing time, pauses, and recovery options.
Avoidance-maintained fear	Fear preserved because the learner escapes the situation and receives short-term relief.	Skipping, not volunteering, writing instead of speaking, choosing only familiar tasks.	Risk: the feared task is never relearned as manageable. Response: small successful exposures.

Note. The categories are conceptual rather than diagnostic. They translate language-anxiety theory into a broader educational framework.

The typology makes visible why a single intervention cannot solve all educational fear. A learner experiencing cognitive-load anxiety may need clearer sequencing, modeling, and processing time. A learner experiencing shame-based fear may need repair of social trust and a different feedback culture. A learner experiencing avoidance-maintained fear may need small, repeated, successful exposures. A learner experiencing appraisal anxiety may need increased control, increased competence, or a reframing of task value. Fear-free education begins by asking: What exactly is threatening here?

Fear Across Time: Before, During, and After the Educational Act

Educational fear has a temporal structure. The ELSA model distinguishes the phases before, during, and after a speaking act (Böttger, 2025). Generalized to education, these phases describe the cycle through which fear grows, becomes visible, and is remembered.

Before the task, fear is anticipatory. Learners imagine failure, rejection, blanking out, negative judgment, or bodily loss of control. The feared event may not yet exist, but the body and mind begin to prepare for it as if it were already real. This phase is crucial because educational design can either intensify or reduce anticipation. Ambiguous expectations, surprise exposure, public ranking, and unclear evaluation increase anticipatory fear. Transparent goals, preparation time, rehearsal, choice, and predictable procedures reduce it.

During the task, fear becomes performative. The learner must coordinate content, memory, attention, body, emotion, and social awareness in real time. In speaking, this means planning, producing, monitoring, listening, and adjusting simultaneously. In problem solving, it means holding task steps in working memory while monitoring possible failure. In creative work, it means producing something unfinished in the presence of others. This is the moment where fear can either narrow action or be transformed into manageable activation.

After the task, fear becomes interpretive. Learners evaluate what happened, remember feedback, compare themselves with others, and decide what the event means for future identity. A

safe educational environment therefore does not end with performance. It includes debriefing, normalization of error, feedforward, and memory repair. If the learner leaves with shame, the next task begins with stronger anticipatory anxiety. If the learner leaves with a sense of having survived, learned, and remained respected, the next task begins with more control.

This temporal perspective explains why fear-free education is cumulative. One supportive moment matters, but repeated experiences matter more. Fear is learned; safety is learned as well. The goal is not one spectacular motivational moment, but a reliable pattern in which learners repeatedly experience challenge without humiliation and error without social danger.

Sources of Fear in Education

Böttger and Költzsch's source model of xenoglossophobia identified psychological, methodological, cognitive, and social-affective sources of English-speaking fear (Böttger & Költzsch, 2020). These categories can be generalized beyond language education into a broader source theory of educational fear. This adaptation is especially useful for seminar participants because it connects individual fear with the learning environment. Fear is not only inside the learner; it is also produced, intensified, or reduced by task design, classroom climate, feedback practices, institutional routines, and group culture.

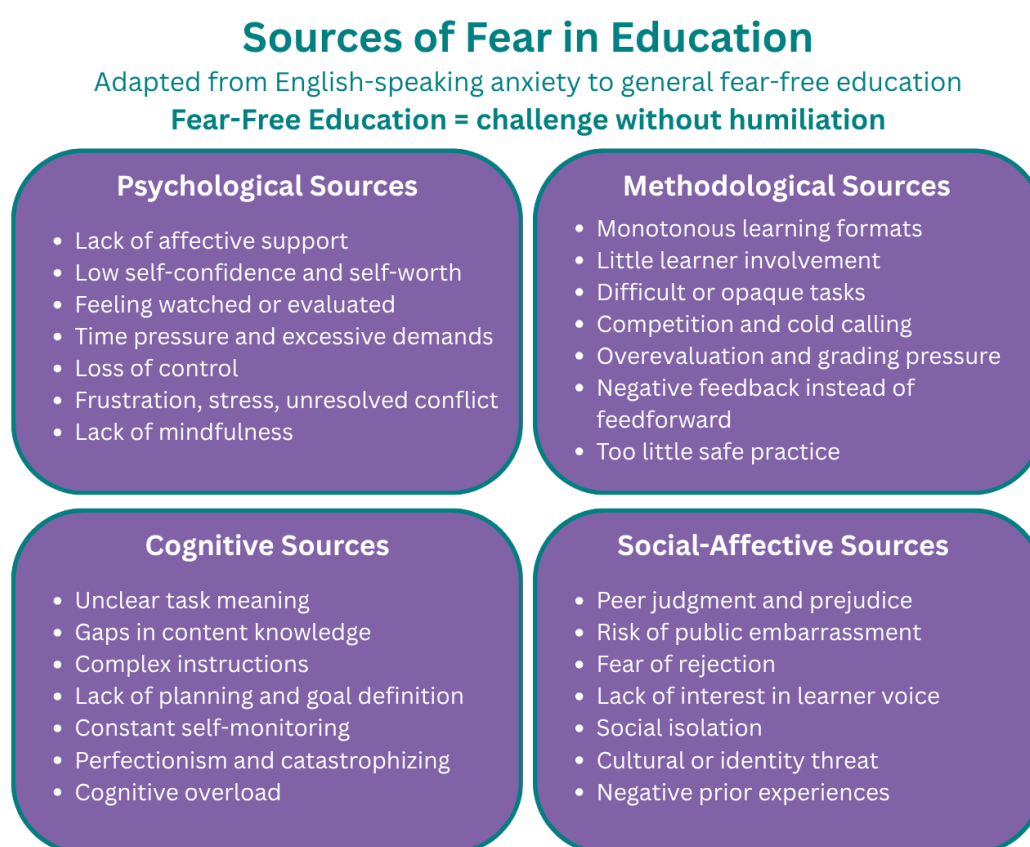


Fig. 3: Sources of Fear in Education.

Note. Adapted from the source table on English-speaking fears and anxiety in Böttger and Költzsch (2020, p. 10).

Generalized Sources of Educational Fear Based on the TLC Source Model

Source Domain	Typical Sources of Fear	Generalized Educational Meaning	Fear-Free Design Response
Psychological sources	Low self-confidence, frustration, time pressure, excessive demands, loss of cognitive control, feeling observed, unresolved conflict, lack of affective support.	Fear grows when learners do not feel emotionally held, cognitively capable, or agentic enough to meet the task.	Build agency, predictable routines, emotional check-ins, preparation time, and visible support.
Instructional and methodological sources	Monotonous lessons, low involvement, poorly scaffolded tasks, competition, cold calling, grading pressure, lack of practice, negative feedback.	Fear is intensified when instruction turns practice into exposure without preparation or treats mistakes as public deficits.	Use rehearsal, voluntary entry points, low-stakes practice, collaborative tasks, feedforward, and mastery-oriented feedback.
Cognitive and academic sources	Unclear goals, complex instructions, strategy deficits, excessive testing, self-monitoring, perfectionism, limited vocabulary or symbolic competence.	Fear increases when task demands exceed available cognitive tools and learners cannot organize their next step.	Clarify goals, model strategies, reduce unnecessary complexity, teach planning routines, and separate practice from evaluation.
Social-affective and cultural sources	Peer prejudice, hypothetical judgment, public embarrassment, social isolation, lack of interest in the speaker, cultural background, negative prior experiences.	Fear becomes social when learners expect that mistakes will threaten belonging, dignity, accent, identity, or cultural legitimacy.	Create respectful group norms, protect dignity, validate diversity, normalize accents and errors, and repair harm quickly.

Note. Adapted and generalized from the English-speaking fear source categories in Böttger and Költzsch (2020).

The key insight of the adapted source framework is interdependence. Psychological, instructional, cognitive, and social-affective sources rarely occur separately. A cold call, for example, is methodological, but it can also trigger cognitive overload, social embarrassment, bodily arousal, and avoidance. A difficult task is not automatically fear-inducing, but it becomes so when it is combined

with time pressure, unclear criteria, public comparison, and no possibility of rehearsal. Therefore, fear-free education must be ecological: it must examine the whole situation rather than blaming either the learner or the task alone.

A Four-Layer Model of Fear-Free Education

The proposed Four-Layer Model of Fear-Free Education integrates the preceding arguments. The first layer is appraisal. Learners ask, often implicitly, whether they can control the task and whether the task matters. Control-value theory is especially helpful here: anxiety becomes intense when the outcome is important but uncertain and the learner's attention turns toward possible failure (Pekrun, 2006, 2024). Expectancy-value theory adds the cost dimension: a task may be valuable, but if emotional, social, or effort-related costs are too high, learners may disengage (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

The second layer is component expression. Fear appears cognitively as worry, motivationally as avoidance or freezing, affectively as shame or insecurity, physiologically as arousal, and neurobiologically as learned threat and safety patterns. Educators need to observe all components because learners often name only one. A learner may say, „I do not know the answer,“ while the deeper issue is shame. Another may say, „I am not interested,“ while the actual problem is evaluation anxiety. A third may appear careless while actually managing overwhelming bodily arousal.

The third layer is time. Fear changes before, during, and after educational action. The before-phase requires predictability and preparation. The during-phase requires pacing, support, and permission to continue imperfectly. The after-phase requires interpretation, feedforward, and memory repair. These three phases can be used as a practical design checklist for any lesson, seminar, training, or assessment.

The fourth layer is source ecology. Fear emerges from interactions among psychological, methodological, cognitive, and social-affective sources. This layer prevents reductionism. Fear-free education is not achieved simply by telling learners to be confident. It is achieved by aligning task difficulty, feedback culture, social dignity, cognitive scaffolding, autonomy, and repeated practice.

From these four layers, a concise definition follows: Fear-free education is the pedagogical design of emotionally safe, cognitively scaffolded, socially respectful, and meaningfully challenging learning environments in which learners can encounter difficulty, error, exposure, and feedback without experiencing avoidable threat to competence, control, dignity, belonging, or identity.

Fear-Free Education as Challenge With Dignity

A central misunderstanding should be avoided: fear-free education is not comfort pedagogy. It is not the removal of standards, performance, correction, or accountability. Instead, it is the

separation of challenge from humiliation. Learners should be challenged by content, problems, perspectives, languages, performances, and creative tasks. They should not be threatened by ridicule, unpredictable exposure, chronic comparison, teacher sarcasm, peer contempt, or feedback that attacks identity rather than guides action.

Research on foreign language anxiety supports this direction. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) show that anxiety and enjoyment are not simply opposites; emotionally safe pedagogy should therefore reduce debilitating fear while increasing curiosity, pride, humor, and engagement. Work on perfectionism and language learning suggests that anxious learners may react especially strongly to their own oral performance, which makes the feedback climate decisive (Gergesen & Horwitz, 2002). Young (1991) already argued for low-anxiety classroom environments, and more recent intervention research suggests that anxiety-reducing interventions can be effective, although the field still needs more differentiated research on intervention types, age, and context (Xiong et al., 2024). Higher education research likewise points to pronunciation concerns, speaking in front of others, vocabulary gaps, lack of exposure, and insufficient confidence as common sources of speaking anxiety, while positive feedback, praise, pair work, group work, pronunciation practice, and strategy development are reported as helpful responses (Özdemir & Seçkin, 2025).

Five design principles follow. First, safety should precede exposure: learners need low-stakes rehearsal before public performance. Second, choice should precede risk: learners should have some control over entry points, partners, modalities, or timing. Third, time should precede evaluation: complex thinking and speaking require preparation and cognitive breathing space. Fourth, feedforward should replace shame-based feedback: correction should tell learners what to do next, not who they are. Fifth, community should precede comparison: a group must become trustworthy before it becomes an audience.

In this sense, fear-free education is also a theory of educational courage. Brave spaces are not produced by demanding bravery from learners. They are produced by designing conditions under which learners can practice courage without being abandoned. Emotional safe spaces are therefore not the opposite of brave spaces. They are their precondition.

Examples of Fear Sources and Fear-Free Redesign Moves

Fear Source	Threat Logic	Fear-Free Move	What Changes
Cold calling	Sudden public exposure and loss of control.	Warm calling: private think time, pair rehearsal, opt-in or negotiated invitation.	Participation remains necessary, but the path toward it is safer.
Negative correction	Shame and identity threat.	Feedforward: one strength, one next step, one immediate retry.	Errors become information rather than evidence of failure.

Excessive testing	Evaluation dominates practice.	Low-stakes retrieval before high-stakes assessment.	Students still meet standards, but fear is not the main teacher.
Perfectionism	Fear of the imperfect first attempt.	Draft culture: first attempt, peer improvement, second attempt.	Quality improves because imperfection becomes material for growth.
Peer judgment	Belonging and dignity feel threatened.	Group norms, rotating roles, protected rehearsal, appreciative response routines.	The social field becomes part of the learning support.
Cognitive overload	The learner cannot locate the task.	Chunking, modeling, visible success criteria, time to plan.	The intellectual demand remains, but confusion is reduced.
Public speaking	Body reactions are misread as failure.	Rehearsal ladder: self, partner, small group, whole group.	The body learns that exposure can be survived safely.

Implications for the Signature Talk and Seminar Preparation

For the Signature Talk on Emotional Safe Spaces and Fear-Free Language Learning, the theory can be translated into an interactive arc that remains congruent with the seminar principle „Engage - Inspire - Reflect - Act“ in the Room 2 Grow program (Böttger, 2026). Participants can first be invited to remember a situation in which they knew something but did not say it. This immediately separates competence from participation and opens the central claim: learners often do not fail because they lack ability; they fail because fear blocks access to ability.

A second step can ask participants to locate the fear: Was it cognitive, affective, physiological, motivational, or social? This makes the abstract theory personally recognizable without forcing public disclosure. A powerful surprise element is to reframe silence as an intelligent protective strategy. Silence is not always laziness, disinterest, or lack of preparation. Sometimes it is the learner's best available method of staying safe. This does not mean that educators should accept permanent silence as a final outcome. It means they should understand the function of silence before trying to change it. The educational question becomes: What would make participation safer than avoidance?

A playful but academically productive activity can ask small groups to redesign a fear-inducing learning moment. For example, a learner is suddenly called on, makes a mistake, classmates laugh, and the teacher corrects immediately. Groups redesign the same moment using the five principles: safety before exposure, choice before risk, time before evaluation, feedforward instead of shame, and community before comparison. This exercise turns theory into design action.

Before the Signature Talk, seminar participants can prepare through five reflection prompts: Which educational situation has made me feel unsafe although I was competent enough to participate? Which fear type from Table 1 do I recognize most strongly in learners, students, colleagues, or myself? Which source domain from Table 2 is most present in my own teaching or learning context? How does my feedback culture protect or threaten dignity? What would change if I designed every learning sequence through the phases before, during, and after performance?

The concluding message may be simple: Fear-free education is not about making learning easy. It is about making growth possible. Learners need difficulty, but they do not need humiliation. They need feedback, but they do not need shame. They need performance, but they do not need uncontrolled exposure. They need challenge with dignity. In this sense, emotional safe spaces are not soft spaces. They are the strongest spaces we can build because they allow learners to risk becoming more than they already are.

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Chapter 4

The Inner Room to Grow: Reflection, Motivation, and Learner Identity. Inner Safe Spaces in Education

Karla Jensen & Heiner Böttger

This chapter develops a theory of inner safe spaces for language education. It argues that safe language learning cannot remain limited to rooms, social routines, emotional climate, or digital platforms. These external conditions become educationally transformative when learners gradually internalize them as self-trust, reflective distance, motivational agency, resilience, and a positive yet flexible language learner identity. The chapter defines inner safe spaces as internalized pedagogical resources that help learners meet communicative uncertainty without losing dignity, self-worth, or the willingness to continue. Drawing on self-efficacy theory, self-determination theory, control-value theory, self-regulated learning, reflective practice, resilience research, and language learner identity, the chapter proposes a pedagogy of internalized safety. It also integrates the Inner Voice Cards and the Four Voices in the Inner Classroom role play as practical methods for turning invisible learner self-talk into visible, discussable, and transformable material. The central claim is that learners need more than protection from fear; they need repeated experiences that help them carry safety, courage, and agency within themselves.

Inner Safe Spaces in the Room 2 Grow Framework

The Room 2 Grow framework conceptualizes safe spaces in language education as multidimensional learning ecologies rather than merely physically comfortable rooms or conflict-free zones. The sequence of chapters moves from physical and social safe spaces to emotional safe spaces and then to the internal dimension of learning. This chapter focuses on what happens when learners begin to carry safety, courage, and agency within themselves. This placement is theoretically important. Physical, social, and emotional safe spaces create the external conditions for participation; inner safe spaces describe how these conditions can become internal resources for future participation. This builds upon broader frameworks of classroom safe spaces (e.g., Holley & Steiner, 2005) and team psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), which emphasize that risk-taking relies heavily on an environment free from the threat of humiliation.

An inner safe space is not a private retreat from difficulty. It is the learner's internalized capacity to meet communicative uncertainty with self-trust, reflective distance, motivation, resilience, and a positive language learner identity. In language education, uncertainty is unavoidable. Learners must speak before they are fully fluent, listen before they understand everything, and appear before others in a language that is still developing. Inner safety makes this appearance pedagogically bearable and personally meaningful.

The core message of this chapter can be stated simply: An inner safe space is what remains when the teacher, the group, and the classroom are no longer physically present. This sentence does

not reduce language education to individual psychology. On the contrary, it emphasizes the lasting responsibility of pedagogy. What teachers and peers repeatedly model in the external learning ecology can become the learner's internal language of courage. Respectful feedback becomes self-talk. A group culture of patience becomes tolerance for pauses. Repeated repair after mistakes becomes resilience. Visible progress becomes self-efficacy. Meaningful participation becomes learner identity. Inner safe spaces therefore connect safety and growth. They do not protect learners forever from risk, but help learners meet meaningful risk without interpreting difficulty as humiliation. The goal is not a learner who never feels tension, but a learner who can understand tension as part of growth, regulate it through strategies and relationships, and return to voice after uncertainty.

Conceptual Definitions for the Inner Room to Grow

Four central concepts structure this chapter: self-efficacy, motivation, learner identity, and resilience through reflection. These concepts are not separate psychological boxes. They are interdependent dimensions of internalized safety. Self-efficacy gives learners the belief that action is possible. Motivation gives them a reason to continue. Learner identity gives language a place in the story of the self. Reflection and resilience allow learners to recover after difficulty and return to agency.

Slide-Ready Definitions for the Inner Room to Grow

Concept	Core Sentence	Working Definition
Self-Efficacy	„I can do this - or I can learn how to do this.“	The learner's belief that a specific learning or communication challenge can be met through effort, strategies, support, and previous experiences of success.
Motivation	„I want to continue because this matters to me.“	The learner's willingness to invest effort, attention, and persistence because learning feels meaningful, possible, and connected to personal goals or relationships.
Learner Identity	„This language can become part of who I am.“	The evolving self-understanding through which learners interpret who they are, who they have been, and who they may become as language users.
Resilience Through Reflection	„I can recover, repair, and continue.“	The learner's capacity to regain agency after mistakes, uncertainty, feedback, or failure by making sense of the experience without losing self-worth.

Note. The definitions synthesize the chapter materials with research on self-efficacy, self-determination, language learner identity, self-regulation, and resilience.

Together, these four definitions form a practical theory of inner safe spaces. They also offer a language that learners can use. In a safe classroom, learners do not only learn vocabulary and grammar; they learn sentences about themselves. They learn to say, „I can try,“ „I can repair,“ „I can continue,“ and „I belong in this language.“

From External Safety to Internal Agency

Inner safe spaces are best understood as the internalization of pedagogical safety. The movement from external safety to internal agency is not automatic. It requires repeated, embodied, relational, and reflective experiences. Learners internalize safety when the same message is encountered across classroom routines: imperfect participation is legitimate; mistakes can be repaired; feedback is for future action; silence can be respected without becoming permanent invisibility; and every learner can become a more confident user of language. This process can be understood through sociocultural and ecological perspectives on learning. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that higher psychological functions develop through mediated social activity. What first appears between people may later become part of the individual's self-regulation. In language classrooms, this means that teacher talk, peer responses, feedback routines, and task structures may eventually become inner resources. A learner who repeatedly hears „Take a moment; your idea matters“ may eventually learn to give that permission to themselves.

The concept of agency is central here. Agency means the capacity to act intentionally, use resources, make choices, and influence one's learning trajectory. An inner safe space is not merely a pleasant feeling. It is an agency-supporting structure inside the learner. It allows learners to pause, ask for help, rephrase, choose a strategy, tolerate imperfection, and restart after a difficult moment. For this reason, inner safe spaces are not individualistic; they are socially formed internal capacities.

Reflection and Metacognition as the Architecture of Inner Safety

Reflection is the bridge between experience and inner safety. Dewey (1933) described reflective thought as active, careful, and sustained consideration of experience in relation to evidence and consequences. Schön (1983) later developed the idea of reflective practice as learning through reflection in and on action. For language education, reflection is not an optional diary task after the „real“ lesson. It is the process through which a learner transforms a difficult event into usable knowledge. Without reflection, a moment of hesitation may become an identity statement: „I am bad at languages.“ With reflection, the same moment can become a strategic insight: „I needed more time,“ „I lacked a repair phrase,“ or „I understood more than I could say.“ This distinction is one of the strongest acts of inner safety. It separates performance from personhood. A mistake remains information; it does not become identity.

Metacognition deepens reflection by helping learners notice and regulate their own learning processes. Flavell (1979) defined metacognition as knowledge and regulation of cognition, and Zimmerman (2002) described self-regulated learners as those who plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning. Oxford (2016) connected language learning strategies to self-regulation across cognitive, affective, motivational, and social domains. In an inner-safe-space pedagogy, learners do not simply complete tasks; they learn to observe what helps them complete tasks. They notice when rehearsal helps, when anxiety rises, when vocabulary retrieval breaks down, when peer support matters, and when a repair strategy works. Reflection should therefore be brief, structured, and repeatable. It may take the form of learning biographies, confidence scales, before-during-after reflection cards, voice memos, learning portfolios, or short exit prompts. The crucial point is that reflection should not become self-surveillance. It must be designed as self-support. Learners should not be asked only to identify deficits; they should be guided to identify patterns, resources, decisions, and next steps.

Self-Efficacy and Strategic Self-Trust

Self-efficacy is one of the strongest theoretical anchors for inner safe spaces. Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as beliefs about one's capability to organize and execute actions required to achieve desired outcomes. In language learning, self-efficacy influences whether learners attempt communication, persist after difficulty, interpret feedback as useful, and return to a task after a mistake. A learner with low self-efficacy may interpret a pause as proof of inability. A learner with stronger self-efficacy may interpret the same pause as part of speaking in a developing language. Bandura (1997) identified mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological or affective states as major sources of efficacy beliefs. These sources translate directly into language education. Learners need small successful speaking experiences. They need to see peers improve. They need credible encouragement. They need help interpreting bodily arousal as manageable energy rather than evidence of danger. In this sense, self-efficacy is not created by telling learners to be confident. It is created by giving learners evidence that growth is happening. Self-efficacy also differs from vague self-esteem. It is specific and task-related. A learner may not feel generally confident in English, but may develop efficacy for asking a clarification question, opening a discussion, repairing a sentence, presenting one prepared idea, or negotiating meaning with a partner. This specificity is pedagogically useful because it allows teachers to build confidence in small units. Instead of saying, „Be confident,“ teachers can help learners collect evidence: „You asked for repetition,“ „You stayed in the conversation,“ „You corrected yourself,“ or „You used a strategy.“

The chapter therefore proposes strategic self-trust as a central concept. Strategic self-trust means that learners do not have to believe they will perform perfectly. They trust that they can act, pause, repair, ask, rephrase, continue, and learn. This is a more realistic and humane goal than

permanent confidence. Many learners will still feel nervous before high-stakes communication. Inner safety means they have strategies and self-beliefs that allow them to continue anyway.

Motivation as the Need to Continue

Motivation is often misunderstood as a stable possession that some learners have and others lack. In language education, motivation is better understood as a dynamic relation among the learner, the task, the language, the teacher, the group, and the imagined future. Self-determination theory is especially useful because it identifies three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These needs explain why learners are more likely to continue when they experience ownership, visible progress, and human connection.

Autonomy does not mean that learners are left alone. It means that learners experience themselves as participants rather than objects of instruction. In language classrooms, autonomy can be supported through choice of topics, partner formats, product formats, rehearsal options, reflection prompts, and strategy selection. Autonomy reduces helplessness because learners can shape the path into participation.

Competence means that learners can see progress and experience challenge as achievable. Visible progress is crucial because anxious learners often remember threat more vividly than improvement. Portfolios, can-do statements, before-and-after recordings, confidence timelines, and mastery logs help learners recognize that growth has occurred. Relatedness completes the motivational triangle. Learners need to feel that their voice matters to someone. Communication is addressed to others; communicative legitimacy cannot develop in isolation.

Control-value theory adds an important emotional layer. Pekrun (2006, 2024) argued that achievement emotions are shaped by appraisals of control and value. Anxiety is likely to rise when learners perceive a task as important but feel little control over success. This emotional barrier is well-documented in language learning; since Horwitz et al. (1986) first conceptualized foreign language classroom anxiety, researchers have noted its detrimental impact on academic achievement across all linguistic competencies (Botes et al., 2020) and its tendency to constrain a learner's cognitive processing capacity during communication (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). This is highly relevant to language learning. Speaking another language may matter greatly, but learners may feel they cannot control fluency, accuracy, accent, speed, memory, or peer evaluation. Inner-safe-space pedagogy therefore increases perceived control without lowering meaningful value. It does so through transparent expectations, rehearsal, feedback routines, and opportunities for successful communication.

Motivation also connects to future selves. Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System describes the motivating force of imagined future language identities, while Ushioda's (2009) person-in-context relational view reminds educators that motivation is shaped by relationships,

histories, and environments. Inner safe spaces support motivation by making the future self feel possible, not humiliatingly distant.

Learner Identity and the Permission to Have a Voice

Language learning is never only the acquisition of linguistic forms. It is also a process of becoming. Learners ask, sometimes silently: Who am I when I speak this language? Do I sound legitimate? Do I belong in this conversation? What future becomes possible if I can use this language? These questions connect inner safe spaces to language learner identity.

Norton (2013) conceptualized language learning as inseparable from identity, investment, and access to symbolic and material resources. Learners invest in language practices when they believe those practices can expand who they are and what they can do. Dörnyei (2005, 2009) similarly highlighted the motivational power of self-related beliefs and future language selves. Yet future self-images can become threatening when they are too perfectionist, too distant, or too strongly tied to native-speaker norms.

Inner safe spaces help learners develop realistic, dignified, and flexible learner identities. A positive learner identity does not require learners to deny difficulty. It means they can interpret difficulty as part of becoming rather than evidence of exclusion. This is especially important for learners who fear accent, slower processing, grammatical imperfection, or comparison with highly fluent peers. A learner identity grows when learners can imagine themselves as legitimate participants in the language before they are perfect performers of it.

Voice is central to this identity work. Voice is not simply the physical act of speaking. It is the experience that one's meaning can appear in another language without erasing the self. Language education should therefore create room for learners to speak as learners, not only as future ideal speakers. Growth requires room not only for correctness, but also for becoming.

Resilience Through Reflection and the Ethics of Repair

Resilience is essential for inner safe spaces, but it must be framed ethically. Masten (2001) described resilience as „ordinary magic,“ emphasizing that adaptive development often depends on ordinary protective processes rather than extraordinary personal traits. For language education, this means that resilience grows through repeated experiences of repair, support, success, and meaningful challenge. It is not a demand that learners silently endure harmful conditions. This distinction matters. If a classroom humiliates learners, mocks accents, rewards only speed and accuracy, overcorrects publicly, or treats errors as personal failure, asking learners to become resilient becomes pedagogically irresponsible. Resilience must never become an excuse for unsafe pedagogy. Inner safe spaces require supportive physical, social, and emotional environments. A learner's capacity to recover depends on whether recovery is possible in the room.

Repair is therefore a central pedagogical practice. It includes linguistic repair, such as rephrasing or self-correction; social repair, such as addressing peer laughter or exclusion; emotional repair, such as calming and reframing after embarrassment; and identity repair, such as separating an unsuccessful performance from the learner's worth. In a safe language classroom, repair is routine rather than exceptional. Learners know how to ask for help, how feedback will be given, how errors will be treated, and how participation can restart after difficulty.

Resilience through reflection can be defined as the learner's growing capacity to return to agency after difficulty within a supportive learning ecology. This definition prevents two mistakes. It avoids romanticizing struggle, and it avoids protecting learners from all challenge. Growth needs challenge, but challenge must be recoverable. A language classroom becomes a Room 2 Grow when learners can risk, stumble, repair, and continue.

The Inner Voice Cards as a Pedagogical Method

The Inner Voice Cards translate the theory of inner safe spaces into a simple, memorable, and emotionally precise classroom method. Participants begin by choosing or writing one inner critic sentence: „I will make a mistake,“ „My accent sounds strange,“ „I should stay quiet,“ or „I do not belong in this conversation.“ They keep this sentence privately during the session. At the end, they rewrite it as an inner coach sentence: realistic, kind, and believable rather than artificially positive.

Examples of Inner Voice Transformation

Voice Type	Initial Sentence	Transformed Sentence	Pedagogical Function
Inner Critic	„I will make a mistake.“	„A mistake is information, not identity.“	Reframes error as learning data.
Inner Critic	„Others are better than I am.“	„I can grow at my own pace.“	Reduces comparison pressure.
Inner Critic	„I should stay quiet.“	„I can try one sentence first.“	Creates a low-threshold entry point.
Inner Critic	„My accent sounds strange.“	„My accent is part of my learning story.“	Affirms voice and linguistic identity.
Inner Critic	„I cannot recover from public mistakes.“	„I can repair, breathe, and continue.“	Builds resilience through repair.

Note. The examples illustrate how the Inner Voice Cards turn critical self-talk into realistic inner coaching. The activity should remain voluntary and dignity-protecting.

The method works because it makes self-talk visible without forcing disclosure. It honors privacy while giving learners a language for reflection. It also dramatizes the movement from external safety to internal agency. At the beginning, the learner meets an inner voice that may protect

through avoidance, perfectionism, or silence. At the end, the learner practices a different voice that supports participation: „A mistake is information, not identity,“ „I can pause and still belong,“ „I can repair and continue,“ or „Room 2 Grow also exists inside me.“

The Inner Voice Cards can be combined with the role play The Four Voices in the Inner Classroom. In this activity, four roles make invisible inner dynamics observable: the Learner, the Inner Critic, the Inner Coach, and the Teacher or Peer. In the first round, the Inner Critic dominates the scene. In the second round, the Inner Coach and the Teacher or Peer redesign the situation so that the learner can try again. The debrief asks what happened to self-efficacy, motivation, learner identity, and resilience. This role play is lightly entertaining, but its function is serious: it helps participants see how external support can become inner safety.

Pedagogical Design Principles for Inner Safe Spaces

A theory of inner safe spaces becomes educationally useful only when it leads to design principles. The following principles synthesize the theoretical discussion and the seminar activities. They can guide language teachers, teacher educators, and seminar facilitators who want to help learners internalize safety as agency.

Design Principles for Inner Safe Spaces in Language Education

Principle	Classroom Practice	Inner-Safety Effect
Reflective Regularity	Use short, repeated prompts before and after speaking tasks: What do I need? What helped? What will I try next?	Reflection becomes a normal support practice rather than a rare self-analysis.
Visible Progress	Use can-do statements, before-and-after recordings, confidence timelines, and small mastery logs.	Learners collect evidence that growth is real and specific.
Autonomy Support	Offer choices in topic, partner, rehearsal, modality, timing, or product format while keeping the communicative goal intact.	Learners experience participation as action they can shape.
Identity Affirmation	Invite language biographies, identity texts, multilingual resources, future-self letters, and legitimate learner accents.	The target language becomes part of becoming rather than a standard of exclusion.
Recoverable Challenge	Design speaking tasks with rehearsal before exposure, support during performance, and repair after difficulty.	Challenge remains demanding but does not become humiliation.
Feedback as Future	Name one strength, one next step, and one opportunity to try again.	Feedback becomes internalizable self-talk for growth.
Playful Dignity	Use role play, Mistake Museum, Human Barometer, or Inner Voice Cards with voluntary sharing and clear boundaries.	Humor supports courage without turning learners into objects of exposure.

Note. The principles connect self-efficacy, motivation, learner identity, reflection, and resilience to classroom design.

A Conceptual Model

The chapter can be summarized through a simple conceptual movement: external safety becomes internal agency. Physical, social, and emotional safe spaces provide conditions for participation. Through repeated experiences of respectful challenge, learners internalize these conditions as self-efficacy, motivation, reflection, resilience, and identity. The outcome is not fearless perfection, but recoverable participation.

This model can be expressed in five steps.

1. First, learners need permission: the classroom communicates that imperfect participation is legitimate.
2. Second, learners need evidence: they experience concrete progress and successful repair.
3. Third, learners need interpretation: reflection helps them understand difficulty as part of learning rather than proof of inadequacy.
4. Fourth, learners need projection: identity work helps them imagine future participation.
5. Fifth, learners need action: they use strategies, choices, and relationships to continue. Together, these steps create the inner room to grow.

Positive psychology in second language acquisition strengthens this model by reminding educators that reducing anxiety is not enough. Learners also need enjoyment, curiosity, hope, connection, and meaningful engagement (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; MacIntyre et al., 2019; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Indeed, modern ecological perspectives emphasize that language achievement is a dynamic interplay of maximizing positive emotions like enjoyment while buffering against negative states like anxiety and boredom (Dewaele et al., 2023), requiring targeted individual strategies (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). This alignment transforms resilience into a dynamic growth mindset (Dweck, 2006; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Inner safe spaces therefore grow not only from protection but from possibility. They emerge when learners experience that language is not merely something to be correct in, but something to live, connect, and become through.

Conclusion

Inner safe spaces are the psychological, reflective, motivational, and identity-related core of safe language education. They are formed when learners experience enough external safety to develop internal agency. They are sustained when learners can interpret difficulty without shame, see progress without perfectionism, and imagine themselves as legitimate language users before they are fully fluent. In this sense, the inner safe space is both an outcome and a condition of language learning: it grows through participation, and it makes further participation possible.

For Room 2 Grow, this chapter shows that safe spaces are not only around learners, but also within learners. The title of the volume can therefore be read as an inner pedagogical promise: give learners room for mistakes, room for reflection, room for motivation, room for repair, room for voice, and room for becoming. The ultimate goal of safe language education is not to protect learners from every risk, but to help them carry enough safety within themselves to take meaningful risks with dignity and hope.

Room 2 Grow is not only a room outside us. It is also the room we learn to create within ourselves.

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Chapter 5

Creative Safe Spaces for Language Action: Designing Protected Risk, Multimodal Participation, and Learner Voice

Gizem Günaydın

Creativity is not decoration, entertainment, or exceptional artistic talent, but meaningful recombination, expressive action, and socially situated meaning-making. In foreign language education, this perspective challenges the assumption that creativity belongs only to learners who produce extraordinary ideas or impressive performances. It can instead be understood as the capacity to combine available linguistic resources, experiences, emotions, memories, and imagination in ways that are new and meaningful within a particular context. A short story, a self-created dialogue, a first metaphor, or a sentence spoken through a role may therefore constitute a creative act even when it is not new to the wider world (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009; Runco & Jaeger, 2012; Vygotsky, 2004).

This everyday and participatory understanding is especially relevant because learners are often expected to use the target language before they feel fully prepared or secure. In speaking and writing, they not only display grammatical and lexical knowledge but also make themselves visible through a competence that is still developing. Their accent, errors, lexical gaps, hesitations, fluency, and confidence may become noticeable alongside the meaning they attempt to communicate. Even a simple sentence may therefore expose the learner's voice, perceived competence, and identity to classroom evaluation.

Foreign language use consequently involves social, emotional, and identity-related risk as well as academic performance. Research on foreign language anxiety links this risk particularly to speaking, making mistakes, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Learners may also negotiate whether they can become legitimate users of the target language and establish a place for themselves within it (Norton, 2013). Creative work can intensify this visibility: storytelling may reveal experience and identity, drama may expose body and voice, and writing or performance may make thought publicly available.

Creative safe spaces are necessary because creative language work is both liberating and vulnerable. They are not environments without difficulty or classrooms defined by entertaining activities. Rather, they are deliberately designed spaces in which learners can imagine, perform, rehearse, revise, and share unfinished work without being reduced to correctness, talent, or the quality of a first performance. Their purpose is not to remove visibility but to transform communicative and creative risk into protected risk through choice, rehearsal, roles, multimodal participation, supportive audiences, and creative repair.

This chapter examines how creative activities can invite learners into meaningful language action without forcing unwanted exposure. It considers creativity as meaningful recombination

and participation rather than exceptional talent; explores everyday creativity, learner legitimacy, multimodality, identity, and voice; and discusses how risk can be pedagogically protected through staged participation, appreciative response, revision, and development-oriented assessment. Creativity is therefore not the opposite of rigour. It is rigour with imagination, voice, agency, and room to grow.

Creativity as Meaningful Language Action

Creative language activities can prevent language production from remaining an academic object evaluated solely through correct and incorrect answers. Although grammatical accuracy remains important, communicative approaches understand competence not only as the ability to produce correct forms but also as the ability to communicate meaningfully (Canale & Swain, 1980; Littlewood, 1981). From this perspective, learners use language not merely to display what they know but to tell, imagine, design, perform, and express. Language thereby becomes meaningful creative action rather than correctness-centred performance.

Task-based approaches similarly emphasise using language to achieve a communicative purpose or produce an outcome rather than practising formal accuracy alone (Ellis, 2003). Creative activities extend this orientation by opening space for imagination, experimentation, personal choice, and outcomes that cannot be fully predetermined. Learners reorganise available language within real or imagined contexts to produce personal or social meaning. In doing so, they develop not only linguistic competence but also an individual mode of expression and a more active communicative presence.

A theory of creativity for language education must therefore move beyond the assumption that creativity requires exceptional artistic ability. Creativity can be understood as the capacity to produce something sufficiently new and meaningful within a particular situation. The standard definition combines originality with effectiveness or appropriateness (Runco & Jaeger, 2012), preventing creativity from being reduced either to novelty without purpose or to correct performance without transformation. A learner acts creatively when linguistic, experiential, and cultural resources are combined to generate new meaning for the learner, the group, or the task. The product need not be new to the wider world; its significance may lie in transforming familiar and limited resources into personally or contextually meaningful expression.

Vygotsky's (2004) theory of imagination provides an important foundation for this process. Creative activity does not emerge independently of experience but recombines elements of lived experience into new forms. This is especially relevant to foreign language learning, where learners often create with limited linguistic resources. They may draw on familiar words, experiences, emotions, gestures, images, and existing forms of expression. A beginner may produce a meaningful six-word story, while a more advanced learner may explore humour, irony, identity,

genre, or voice. Although product complexity varies with proficiency, creative participation is not reserved for advanced learners.

Limited proficiency therefore does not prevent creative language action. Even learners with restricted vocabulary can decide how available resources will be combined and supported through gesture, tone, or visual material. Rather than waiting for flawless production, they can focus on making meaning with what they currently have. Creativity is thus not the absence of limitation but the transformation of limitation into expressive possibility.

This understanding shifts attention from linguistic perfection to purposeful transformation. Accuracy remains relevant but is no longer the sole measure of meaningful language use. Learners become active participants in constructing meaning rather than merely reproducing expected answers. The next question is therefore how small, everyday, and personally meaningful acts can be recognised as legitimate forms of creativity in the language classroom.

Everyday Creativity and Learner Legitimacy

Understanding creativity as meaningful language action raises the question of whether this capacity belongs only to learners with particular talents. In foreign language classrooms, learners may associate creative production with art, performance, or exceptional ability and therefore exclude themselves before an activity begins. Everyday and participatory perspectives instead recognise that small, personally meaningful productions can also have creative value.

Kaufman and Beghetto's (2009) Four-C model distinguishes among mini-c, little-c, Pro-c, and Big-C creativity. Mini-c refers to interpretations or insights that are personally new and meaningful to the learner, while little-c describes creative acts that emerge through everyday participation. Both are particularly relevant to language education because they reduce pressure to produce impressive or professionally polished work. A learner's first self-created sentence, original metaphor, short dialogue, or unexpected role-play response may therefore represent a meaningful creative achievement. Even a linguistically simple production may mark the first time a learner constructs meaning independently rather than reproducing language supplied by the teacher. This perspective shifts attention from the quality of the final product alone towards participation, personal meaning-making, and development, allowing learners to experience themselves as legitimate participants rather than competitors in a talent contest.

Creative safe spaces must consequently distinguish between creativity as talent and creativity as participation. When creative tasks are framed as tests of artistic ability, learners may feel judged for not being funny, musical, visually skilled, expressive, or fluent enough. Such framing can reproduce the evaluation and exposure that creative work is intended to reduce. A creative safe-space pedagogy therefore shifts the central question from „Is this learner creative?“ to „Does this learning environment afford creative language action?“ The focus moves from measuring an assumed individual trait to examining whether classroom conditions enable meaningful contribution.

This ecological view is supported by Glăveanu's (2013) Five-A framework, which conceptualises creativity through actors, actions, artefacts, audiences, and affordances rather than isolated individual genius. In language education, creative participation emerges through the interaction among the learner, the task, available materials and modes, the audience, and the social norms that define what feels possible and safe to attempt. Creativity is therefore shaped not only by the individual but also by whether the environment provides resources, flexible participation routes, supportive reception, and opportunities to develop emerging ideas.

Creative safe spaces are thus more than classrooms containing creative tasks. They are environments in which learners can experience themselves as legitimate meaning-makers. A learner who writes a first line, draws a symbol, speaks through a character, creates a soundscape, or transforms an error into a new expression is not merely practising a language form but participating in meaning-making. This legitimises emerging language and protects learner identity from being reduced to accuracy, accent, speed, fluency, or artistic polish.

Multimodality, Identity, and Learner Voice

Creative language action can take many forms. Storytelling enables learners to construct narratives, while drama and role-play involve character, body, situation, and interaction (Maley & Duff, 2005). Podcasting and video production combine language with voice, rhythm, audience awareness, visual narrative, and performance, while creative writing and letter exchange connect it with imagination, emotion, and a real or imagined audience. Together, these activities show that creative language action extends beyond conventional spoken and written production.

Creative safe spaces are therefore multimodal. The New London Group (1996) argued that contemporary literacy must account for multiple channels of communication and cultural diversity, while Kress (2010) emphasised that meaning is produced through multiple modes rather than language alone. Meaning may begin through an image, sound, gesture, object, movement, or digital design before developing into extended speech or writing. A learner who is not ready for a lengthy spoken response may begin with a drawing and a caption or a freeze-frame and a sentence. Such modes do not replace linguistic development; they provide entry points through which learners can organise meaning and gradually attach more extensive language.

These choices can strengthen agency and ownership. Rather than following a single predetermined route of expression, learners can select modes that correspond to their interests, strengths, and ways of communicating while taking an active role in shaping the communicative process.

Multimodality also connects creativity to identity. Cummins and Early (2011) describe identity texts as multimodal products in which learners invest their identities and cultural resources. Their significance lies in making learners visible as meaning-makers rather than as deficient approximations of idealised native speakers. Norton's (2013) work is equally relevant: learners

may invest more strongly in language practices that expand what they can do and who they can become. Creative safe spaces can therefore connect the target language with learners' memories, cultural repertoires, values, relationships, and possible futures.

Multimodal expression also gives learners greater control over visibility. Not every learner has to begin through public speech. A character, image, gesture, object, or created product can form a bridge between developing meaning and expressing it linguistically, while allowing learners to regulate how they participate and how much personal information they reveal. Their voices can emerge gradually rather than being forced directly from silence into public performance.

Creativity is therefore not an add-on to serious language learning but one way of making it personally consequential. When learners create a scene, poem, poster, audio story, role-play, or visual text, they project identity, negotiate an audience, and test a developing voice. The pedagogical task is to invite this identity work without making it compulsory, excessively personal, or evaluative in ways that leave learners exposed.

Designing Protected Creative Risk

Creative or multimodal activities do not automatically create safety. Storytelling, drama, role-play, and podcasting may become compulsory performances or forms of unwanted disclosure when participation and visibility are poorly designed. Safety therefore depends not only on activity type but on how audience, choice, boundaries, and development are organised. The working model proposed here defines creativity as meaningful action emerging when learners recombine experience, language, mode, role, and audience under conditions of protected risk. Protected risk does not remove uncertainty, exposure, or error. It makes them manageable by providing varied resources, participation routes, learner-defined boundaries, and opportunities to revise or try again. Because audiences both receive meaning and increase visibility, dignity, choice, and developmental support are essential. This gradual approach to visibility can be represented through the Creative Safety Ladder shown in Figure 4.

The ladder moves learners from private preparation towards increasingly public forms of participation without making visibility premature or compulsory. Rehearsal and collaborative making allow language and meaning to be tested and refined, while optional sharing preserves learner agency and readiness. Performance represents the point at which learners present work that has become sufficiently developed and meaningful to share with an audience. It should not be understood as proof of perfection or necessarily as a final product, but as a supported act of expression emerging from the preceding stages. Roles can also create distance between the learner and the public self. Creative work becomes unsafe when learners are pushed into disclosure or performance before they are ready. A task should invite learners up the ladder; it should not throw them from the top.

THE CREATIVE SAFETY LADDER

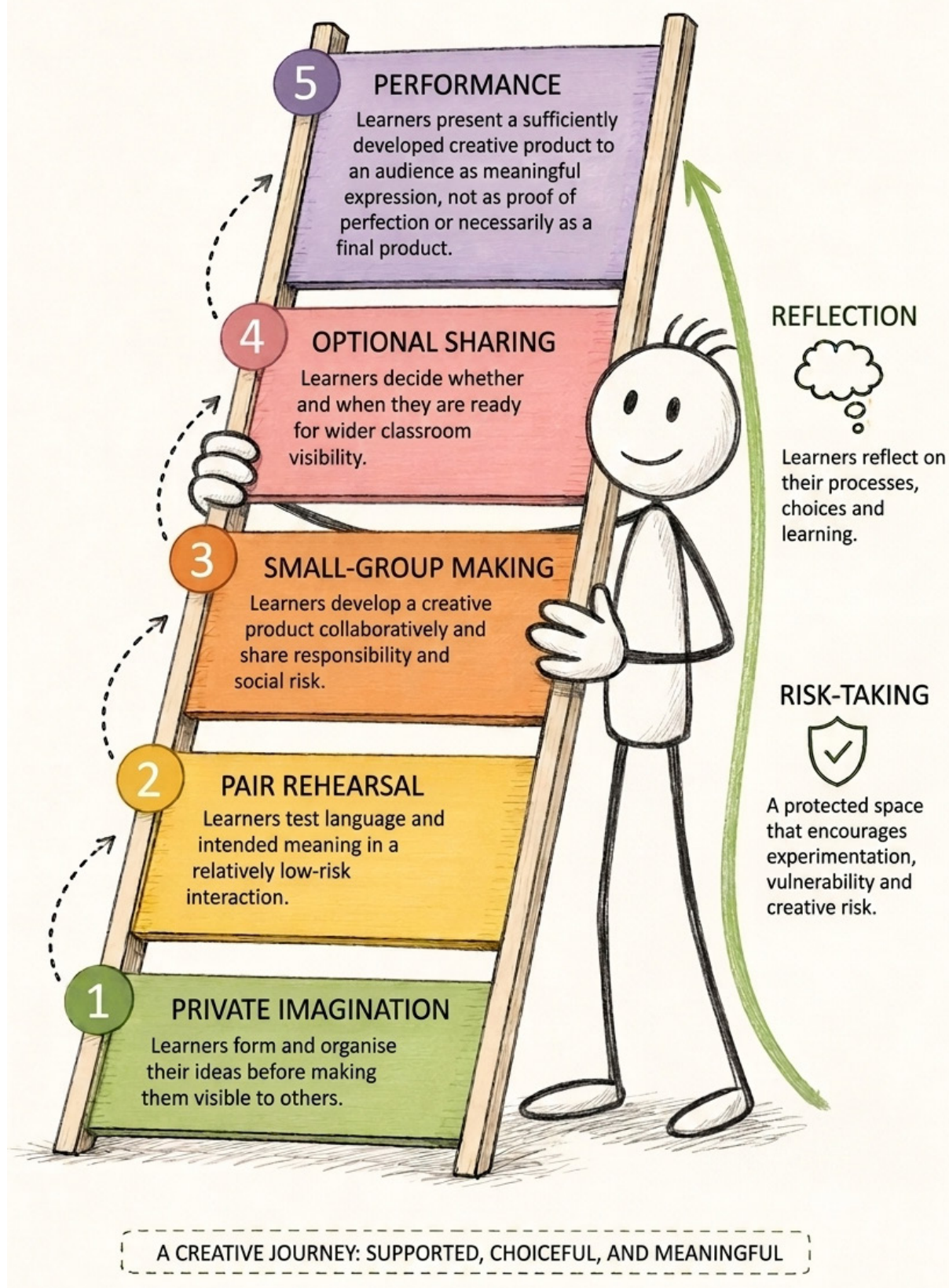


Fig. 4: The Creative Safety Ladder

Following performance, audience response determines whether the experience supports development or reproduces public judgement. Recognition of intended meaning and creative choice should precede correction. A creative audience is not a jury; it is a rehearsal community. Performance does not end the learning process, and even a presented product may remain open to further revision. Learners may rephrase, rewrite, reorganise, and perform again. Accuracy may remain one criterion alongside communicative effect, experimentation, revision, collaboration, and linguistic growth. Assessment can then help learners refine both language and voice.

Room to Grow and Become Audible

This chapter has approached creative language action not as an exceptional form of production available only to artistically talented learners, but as a process of meaning-making in which all learners can participate through their developing linguistic and experiential resources. A creative safe space is not a risk-free environment. Rather, it transforms communicative and expressive risk into protected risk by providing choice, rehearsal, roles, multimodal entry points, supportive audiences, and opportunities for revision. Learners should not be judged through their first attempt or pushed into visibility before they are ready; they need conditions in which their voices can emerge gradually.

A creative safe space begins when learners are invited into expression rather than pushed into exposure. The teacher's role is therefore not to determine the learner's voice, but to design conditions in which that voice can be explored, rehearsed, revised, and increasingly owned by the learner. Language becomes action when learners use it to tell, imagine, perform, design, repair, and connect. Room to grow means room to draft, room to rehearse, room to revise, room to laugh safely, and room to become audible.

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Classrooms as Culturally Safe Spaces: Facilitating Belonging in Diversity

Jasmin Peskoller & Bianca Höppner

Introduction

A group of fifteen learners in an Austrian lower-secondary English classroom had been working with the textbook unit Travelling Down Under (Gerngross et al., 2018). During one lesson, the class watched two short videos featuring the same presenter, one about Australia and one about Austria. The videos were not accompanied by a specific task or follow-up activity. After the second clip, the teacher initiated the following exchange:

T: Where does he come from, our presenter?

S: From the USA.

T: Yeah, he's American. And how about his family background? What would you guess? His cultural background?

S: Asia maybe.

T: Yeah, that's what I also think, some Asian background. Are we able to go more into detail? Well, I'm afraid I'm not, are you?

S: No.

T: No, no. Erm Japanese? Maybe rather not, nope. Maybe Chinese, Kor—I have no idea. I'm really, I have to say, I'm really bad at reading Asian people. [The teacher then turns to one student.] Erm, what would you say? Where does he come from? Any clue? [The student looks down.]

T: No, no. Okay, let's move on.

Note. Classroom data previously reported in Peskoller (in press-a, pp. 197–198)

This brief episode brings the issue of cultural safety into sharp focus. The presenter's appearance becomes the basis for inferring a presumed „family“ or „cultural background“, while nationality, ancestry, and culture are treated as if they were directly connected and externally readable. The class is invited to narrow down this classification, and one learner is then addressed as though they might hold particular knowledge because of an affiliation attributed to them. The student's lowered gaze and silence may signal discomfort; yet, the exchange ends with „Let's move on“ rather than with any attempt to question, reframe, or repair what has occurred.

The significance of the scene lies precisely in its ordinariness. Cultural unsafety is not produced only through overt hostility or explicitly discriminatory acts. It can emerge in everyday questions,

spontaneous comments, and seemingly minor participation structures that mark some people as culturally different, position learners as representatives, or make belonging appear conditional. Such moments can shape who feels recognised, who is made visible in unwanted ways, and who is able to participate without having aspects of their identity interpreted for them.

Culture is particularly charged in this respect. It is closely connected to identity, language, appearance, ancestry, discrimination, and belonging, and therefore carries considerable emotional and professional sensitivity. Teachers may fear causing offence or being perceived as racist, prejudiced, or culturally insensitive. Research in the German school context suggests that concern about appearing racist can be associated with greater stress and lower self-efficacy in culturally diverse classrooms (Hölscher et al., 2024; Kehl et al., 2024). Such concerns may contribute either to unreflective engagement, where culture is addressed through fixed categories and visible markers, or to avoidance, where complex questions remain unspoken or are treated only at a superficial level.

Neither response is sufficient. Ignoring difference can render learners' experiences, languages, and histories invisible, while overemphasising difference can reduce them to categories they have not chosen. The challenge is therefore to create classroom spaces in which diversity is treated as the norm, learners are recognised without being confined by cultural labels, and difficult moments are not simply passed over. This requires a movement from default exclusion towards what we term default inclusion, alongside an understanding of cultural safety as a continual practice of balancing, facilitating, and repairing.

Against this background, the chapter addresses four interrelated questions:

- What makes a classroom space culturally safe or unsafe?
- When should cultural differences be made visible, and when can emphasising them become reductive or exclusionary?
- How can teachers facilitate belonging without minimising diversity?
- How can teachers respond when culturally unsafe moments occur?

The chapter argues that cultural safety should be understood as a continual practice of balancing, facilitating, and repairing, rather than as a fixed classroom condition. Culturally safe classrooms are not spaces in which difference disappears, or culturally difficult moments never occur. They are spaces in which diversity is treated as the norm, learners are recognised without being reduced to cultural categories, and participation is invited without compelling personal disclosure. When stereotyping, exclusion, or misrecognition occurs, such moments are not simply avoided or abandoned but addressed.

The following sections first clarify the chapter's understandings of culture, identity, and interculturality. They then conceptualise culturally safe classrooms through the dialectic of difference

and the relationship between diversity and belonging. Building on this foundation, the chapter develops principles for classroom practice concerning recognition, representation, participation, default inclusion, reflexive facilitation, and repair. The central aim is to create classroom spaces in which differences can matter without determining whose belonging is taken for granted.

Conceptualising Culture, Identity, and Interculturality

Any discussion of culturally safe classrooms rests on how culture, identity, and interculturality are understood. These concepts are widely used in educational discourse; yet, they are neither self-evident nor conceptually neutral. Culture and identity are closely connected but not interchangeable. Cultural affiliations may constitute dimensions of identity, yet identities also emerge through linguistic, familial, social, regional, professional, religious, and individual positioning. Moreover, identities are both self-defined and attributed by others, making this distinction particularly important for examining cultural safety. Different understandings shape what teachers notice, how they interpret learners' differences, and which forms of belonging or exclusion become visible in classroom practice. Clarifying these concepts is therefore not a purely theoretical exercise, but a necessary foundation for examining how cultural safety is produced, challenged, and negotiated. The following sections first consider contemporary understandings of culture and their relationship to identity before turning to interculturality as a relational, reflexive, and process-oriented form of engagement.

From Culture as National Membership to Culture as Dynamic Meaning-Making

Culture is a complex concept. It is understood by everyone, yet often differently. Correspondingly, it has been defined in various ways, often depending on time and discipline (Binder, 2018, p. 19). Most centrally and common to many theories, however, is the shift from a modernist perspective that considered national cultures as the centre piece – focusing on shared histories, languages and traditions – to a more global approach of a dynamic, often unconscious and perspective-shaping understanding (Kramsch, 2009, pp. 224–226). A useful metaphor for capturing aspects of this perspective is Hofstede et al.'s (2010) description of culture as the „software of the mind“ (p. 5). We draw selectively on this wording rather than adopting the authors' broader cultural framework and extend it here to emphasise that cultural frames are neither fixed nor uniformly shared.

Connecting it to the inner, in-between and outer (safe) spaces talked about in previous chapters, culture, hence, offers a central puzzle piece to the inner space, while at the same time being majorly shaped by the in-between, and oftentimes represented outwardly (e.g., clothes). Culture is understood here as lived and personally interpreted, but also as relational, socially situated, and continuously negotiated. Visible practices and expressions may carry cultural meaning, yet they cannot be treated as direct evidence of a person's cultural identity.

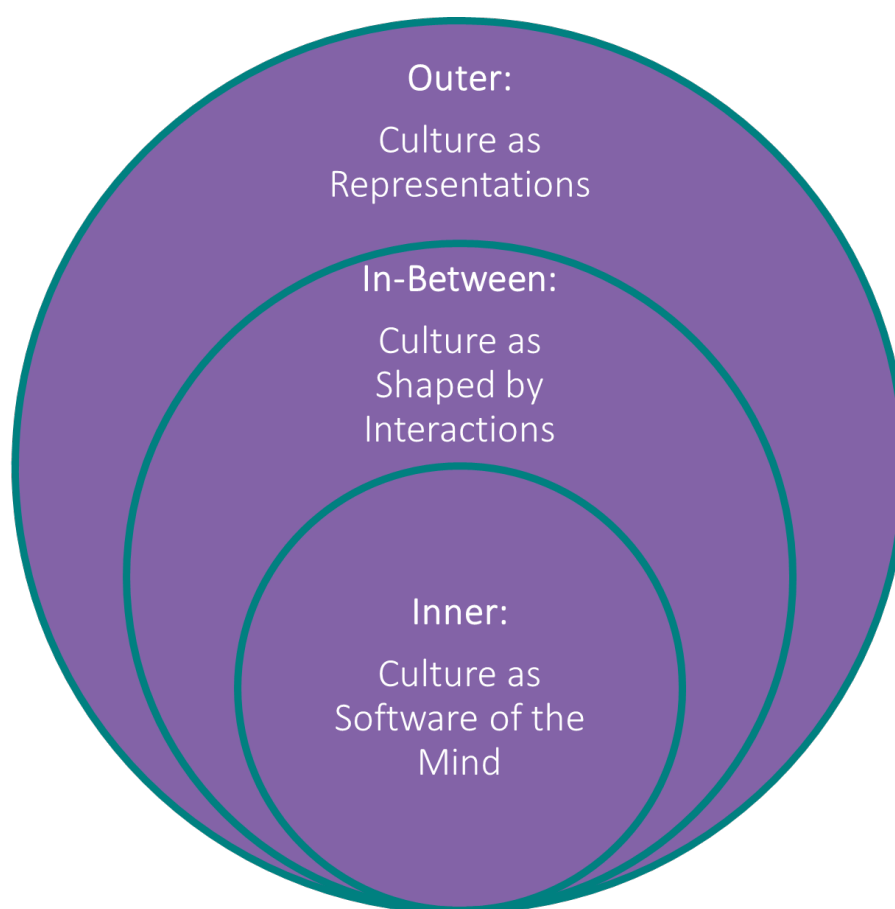


Fig. 5: Locating Culture: The Roles of Inner, In-Between and Outer Spaces

Extending Hofstede et al.'s (2010) metaphor for the purposes of this chapter, the „software“ should not be understood as fixed programming but as familiar interpretative frames that can be reflected on, revised, and renegotiated through experience and interaction. Questioning these frames may be unsettling and require time because it involves reconsidering habitual ways of perceiving, interpreting, and communicating. This dynamic, non-essentialist perspective also underpins earlier work on critical-reflexive approaches to culture and interculturality (Peskoller & Hirzinger-Unterrainer, 2024; Peskoller, in press-a).

Interculturality as Engagement, Negotiation, and Reflexivity

Building on a dynamic and non-essentialist understanding of culture, interculturality can then be approached by considering the different elements of inter-cultur-ality (Dervin, 2023). The suffix -ality foregrounds activity and process rather than a stable body of knowledge or a competence that can be acquired once and for all. The prefix inter- draws attention to what occurs between people: encounters, relationships, and interactions in which meanings are produced, challenged, and renegotiated. Interculturality is therefore understood here not as knowledge about supposedly distinct cultures, but as an ongoing way of engaging with the plurality of perspectives, experiences, and positions that individuals bring into interaction.

In this sense, interculturality involves an „active engagement with diversity“ (Svarstad, 2021, p. 41), including an awareness of how different dimensions of identity and inequality intersect. Individuals do not enter interactions as representatives of discrete cultural groups. They participate through multiple and shifting affiliations, experiences, languages, and social positions. Intercultural encounters consequently involve the negotiation not only of cultural meanings but also of identities, relationships, and the relevance attributed to particular differences in a given situation (Dervin & Jacobsson, 2021). They require attention to both commonality and difference: participants may discover shared experiences while also recognising that apparently similar situations can carry different meanings and consequences.

Such negotiation calls for reflexivity. Engaging interculturality entails examining the interpretative frameworks through which people perceive and position one another, as well as remaining open to the possibility that an initial interpretation may be partial or mistaken. It involves continuously reviewing assumptions, attending to alternative voices, and accepting ambiguity rather than seeking immediate or definitive cultural explanations (Peskoller & Hirzinger-Unterrainer, 2024). Multiperspectivity and multivoicedness are therefore not complications to be resolved but important resources through which meanings can be expanded and revised.

From this perspective, classrooms are intercultural meeting places (Freitag-Hild, 2018; Martinez, 2019), but not simply because learners from supposedly different cultures encounter one another. As microcosms of wider society, classrooms bring together diverse biographies, identities, experiences, and ways of interpreting the world. At the same time, they develop into microcultures of their own through shared routines, relationships, language, expectations, and practices. Cultural meanings are thus not merely imported into the classroom; they are also produced and negotiated within it.

The in-between created through these encounters is particularly significant. Rather than marking an empty space separating fixed positions, it can be understood as a productive relational space in which existing meanings are questioned, new connections become possible, and identities and relationships can be renegotiated. Interculturality is therefore best conceived as a situated and reflexive practice rather than a checklist of predefined competences. This processual understanding also anticipates the chapter's conceptualisation of cultural safety: not as a condition that can be established once and maintained unchanged, but as something continually negotiated through classroom interaction.

Culturally Safe Classrooms: Balancing Diversity and Facilitating Belonging

The preceding discussion has framed culture and interculturality as dynamic, relational, and continually negotiated. This raises a central pedagogical question: how can classrooms become spaces in which difference is acknowledged without becoming restrictive, and belonging is fostered without erasing diversity? Belonging is understood here as learners' experience of

being accepted, respected, included, valued, and supported within the classroom community. Cultural safety provides a useful lens for addressing this tension because it shifts attention from abstract commitments to diversity towards the lived quality of classroom relationships, interactions, and participation. The following section first outlines cultural safety as a relational and context-dependent process of recognising, reflecting, and adapting. It then turns to the dialectic of difference and the challenge of navigating the space between minimising and overemphasising difference.

Cultural Safety as a Process of Recognising, Reflecting, and Adapting

Drawing on cultural-safety scholarship from healthcare, which foregrounds critical self-examination, power relations, and the perspectives of those affected (Curtis et al., 2019), we transfer the concept cautiously to education. Here, cultural safety is understood as a relational and context-dependent quality of classroom interaction in which learners' dignity, agency, participation, and belonging are protected. It does not imply the absence of discomfort or challenge. Rather, it concerns whether differences and potentially difficult issues can be negotiated without learners being diminished, exposed, or excluded.

Cultural safety begins with recognising that individuals may interpret and experience the same situation differently. Such recognition involves attentiveness to differences without predetermining what they mean or reducing individuals to them. Cultural unawareness may prevent relevant perspectives and experiences from being noticed, while minimisation may flatten them into an assumed commonality.

Recognition alone, however, does not necessarily produce understanding. It needs to be accompanied by critical reflexivity: the examination of one's own assumptions, interpretations, language, and positionality rather than treating them as neutral or universally shared. Reflexivity creates the possibility of adaptation, understood here as the willingness to reconsider and adjust interpretations, responses, and pedagogical practices in light of the complexity of a particular situation. Adaptation does not require abandoning one's own perspective, nor does it place responsibility on learners to conform. Instead, it enables more thoughtful and context-sensitive action.

Recognition, critical reflexivity, and adaptation should not be understood as consecutive stages or as a linear progression towards an achieved state of cultural safety. They are recurring and interconnected processes through which teachers and learners continually negotiate meanings, reconsider assumptions, and shape the conditions of participation and belonging.

Figure 6 visualises these processes while also identifying possible impediments: cultural unawareness may prevent recognition, minimisation may obscure meaningful difference, and premature or reductive interpretations may interrupt reflexivity and adaptation.

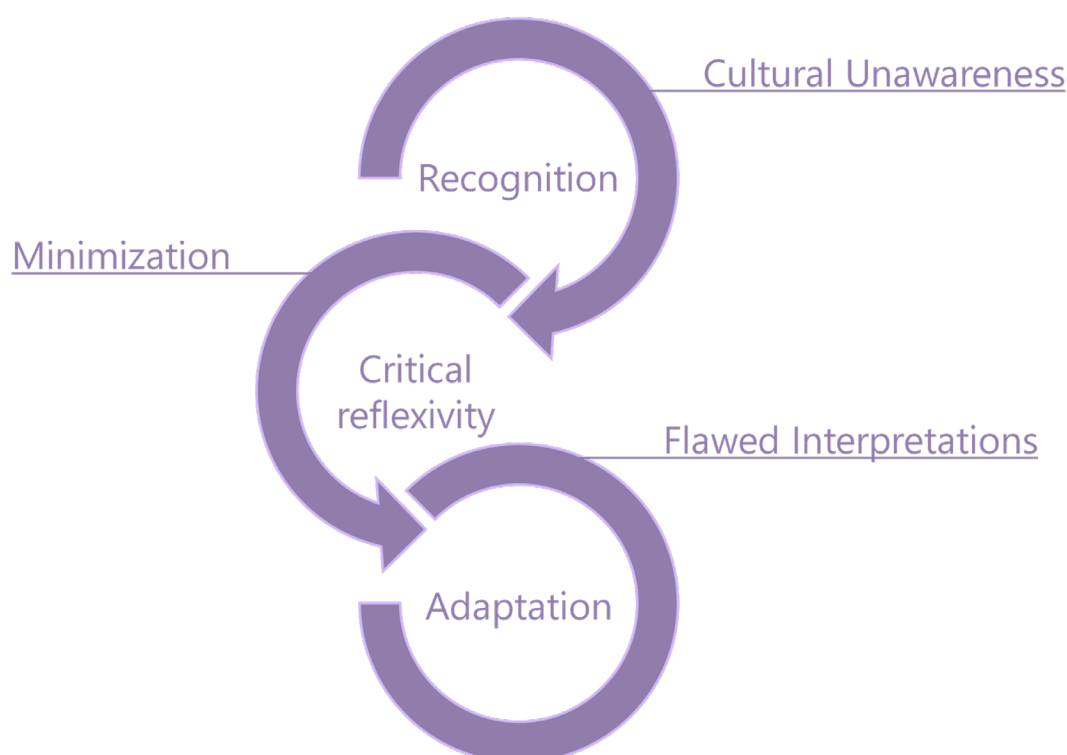


Fig. 6: A Framework of Recognising, Reflecting, and Adapting to Foster Cultural Safety

In sum, this highlights that cultural safety should not be understood as a fixed state, but as a relational and context-dependent practice through which learners and teachers continuously negotiate meaning, revise assumptions, and create conditions for participation and belonging together.

The Dialectic of Difference: Between Minimisation and Essentialisation

Culturally safe classroom practice requires teachers to acknowledge difference without either rendering it irrelevant or allowing it to become overly determining. Edelman's dialectic of difference (2008, as cited in Fereidooni, 2020) provides a useful lens for this tension between equality and difference. Learners need to be recognised as equally entitled members of the classroom community, yet their different experiences, identities, and social positions cannot simply be ignored. Problems arise when equality becomes sameness or difference becomes defining.

At one pole, an emphasis on homogeneity, universality, and equality can tip into the minimisation or erasure of difference. Treating all learners „the same“ may appear fair, yet it can obscure unequal experiences, discrimination, linguistic hierarchies, or differences in access and participation. Cultural and biographical dimensions of learners' lives may remain invisible, while dominant norms continue to operate without being named.

At the opposite pole, attention to heterogeneity and particularity can become overemphasis or essentialisation. Here, difference is not ignored but made hyper-visible. Learners may be approached through presumed nationalities, languages, names, appearances, religions, or family

histories, and these markers may be treated as explanations of who they are. Practices intended to recognise diversity can thereby turn into singling out, stereotyping, culturalization, or representative positioning. Instead of being acknowledged as complex individuals, learners risk becoming illustrations of a group or category attributed to them.

Both poles can undermine cultural safety. Minimisation can deny recognition and leave unequal experiences unaddressed; essentialisation can restrict learners' agency by defining them through differences they have not chosen or may not consider relevant. The challenge is therefore not to decide whether difference should matter, but to reflect on when, how, and with what effects it is made meaningful in classroom interaction.

Figure 7 visualises the dialectic of difference as a tension between an exaggerated emphasis on equality, which can result in the minimisation or assimilation of difference, and an exaggerated emphasis on difference, which can result in singling out, culturalisation, or stigmatisation.

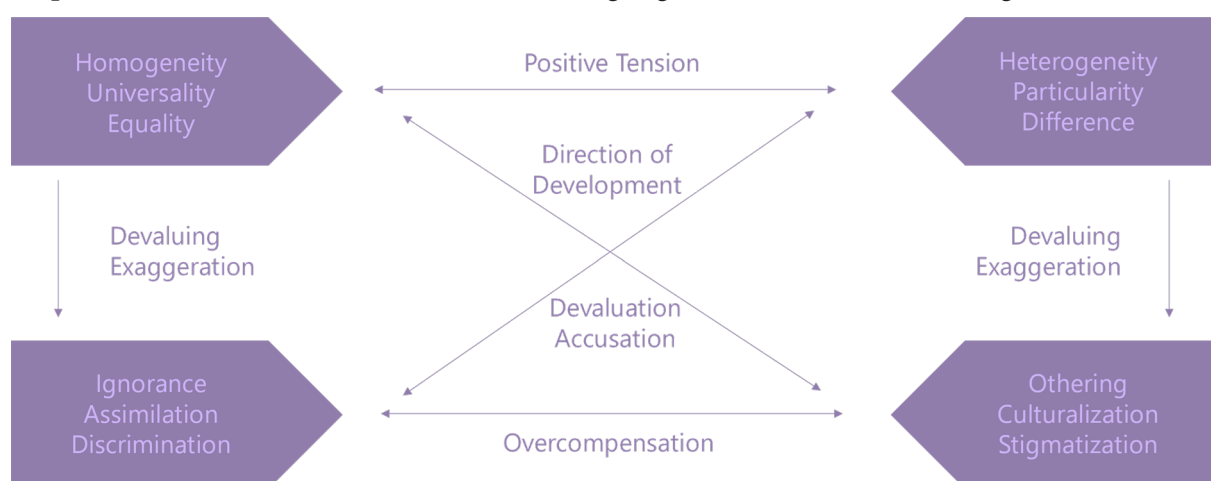


Fig. 7: The Dialectic of Difference (adapted from Edelman, 2008, p. 223; Fereidooni, 2020, p. 6)

The model should not be read as prescribing a universally correct midpoint. Rather, it highlights the need for context-sensitive judgement regarding when difference requires recognition and when its foregrounding becomes restrictive or reductive.

A critical-reflexive reading of classroom practice therefore involves asking how difference is being constructed and what consequences this has for belonging. Does an activity assume that all learners share the same experiences? Are particular learners positioned through presumed affiliations or invited to represent a group? Conversely, are relevant inequalities or experiences rendered invisible in the name of treating everyone equally?

These questions do not resolve the dialectic; rather, they direct attention to the pedagogical judgements through which recognition can become enabling or restrictive. The central task is to acknowledge diversity without fixing learners through it and to support shared belonging without turning equality into sameness. The ways in which this tension manifests in intercultural language classroom practice are examined empirically in greater depth in Peskoller (in press-a).

Facilitating Cultural Safety: Principles for Classroom Practice

Cultural safety is created through everyday pedagogical decisions: how learners are addressed, whose experiences are represented, how participation is organised, and how teachers respond when exclusion or discomfort occurs. The following six principles translate the chapter's conceptual discussion into classroom practice. They are not fixed rules but orientations that require teachers to consider the learners, relationships, topic, and wider context of each situation. The principles build on earlier work concerning critical-reflexive engagement with teaching materials, classroom strategies, and teacher beliefs (Peskoller & Hirzinger-Unterrainer, 2024), as well as empirical analyses of intercultural classroom practice (Peskoller, in press-a).

Recognition without Reduction

Cultural safety begins with recognition, but recognition becomes unsafe when it fixes learners within identities chosen for them. Students need to experience that their names, languages, histories, perspectives, and life experiences are legitimate parts of the classroom. At the same time, no single feature – whether appearance, accent, nationality, religion, family history, or linguistic repertoire – provides a complete explanation of who someone is.

Questions such as „Where are you really from?“ illustrate this tension. Although such a question may appear to express interest, the word really implies that the learner's first answer is insufficient and that their belonging lies elsewhere. Similarly, describing a name as „exotic“ marks it, and often the person carrying it, as outside an assumed norm. In both cases, the learner is interpreted before being given the opportunity to determine what is relevant to them.

Recognition without reduction therefore means leaving room for learners' own identifications. Teachers can respond to what students choose to share, use their chosen names and pronunciations, and acknowledge experiences that affect participation or wellbeing without treating individuals as representatives of a presumed group. Categories such as racism, multilingualism, or social inequality may be necessary for identifying structural patterns, but they should not be used as complete descriptions of individual learners.

Representation, Identification, and Multiple Stories

Representation supports cultural safety when learners encounter varied lives, perspectives, and forms of knowledge without any one account being presented as definitive. Classroom materials communicate whose experiences are considered ordinary, whose knowledge is valued, and whose lives appear mainly as exceptions. Teachers therefore need to examine not only who is visible in a resource, but also how people are represented and whose perspective shapes the account.

Visible diversity alone is insufficient. A textbook may include a range of names, bodies, or cultural symbols while continuing to portray people through stereotypes or from one dominant

viewpoint. Meaningful representation gives individuals voice and agency, acknowledges internal diversity, and presents communities as complex rather than homogeneous.

Representation can also create opportunities for identification, but identification cannot be assigned. A learner should not be expected to relate to a character simply because they share an attributed nationality, language, religion, or skin colour. Students may identify across apparent differences, while rejecting representations that others assume should feel familiar to them.

The „danger of a single story“ (Adichie, 2009) is therefore particularly relevant. One text, individual, or experience should not be made to stand for an entire country, community, or cultural group. Teachers can counter this by bringing different accounts into dialogue, asking which voices are present or absent, and showing how perspectives may complement, contradict, or complicate one another.

The aim is not to create a perfectly representative curriculum. It is to ensure that no single perspective silently functions as universal and that learners encounter multiple possible ways of seeing themselves and others.

Participation through Invitation and Agency

Participation is culturally safe when learners retain meaningful control over whether and how they enter identity-related discussions. Topics such as culture, language, family, religion, migration, discrimination, or belonging can invite valuable reflection. They can also pressure learners to disclose information they would prefer to keep private.

Teachers should therefore offer personal connection as a possibility rather than a requirement. Students should be able to engage with a topic analytically, imaginatively, or through research without having to speak autobiographically. Different formats—such as individual writing, anonymous responses, pair work, fictional scenarios, or whole-class discussion—allow learners to regulate how publicly they participate and how closely they connect the task to their own lives.

Particular care is required when learners are positioned as cultural brokers or representatives. A student may voluntarily share linguistic or cultural knowledge, but they should not be expected to explain what „their culture“, religion, country, or community does. Such questions place responsibility for the group's learning on one individual and risk treating personal experience as representative evidence.

Teacher authority also affects whether an invitation is genuinely optional. A publicly addressed question may be difficult to decline even when it is phrased as a choice. Genuine agency therefore requires clear alternatives and participation structures that make non-disclosure possible without signalling disengagement.

Culturally safe participation allows learners to contribute without being exposed, to share experiences without having them generalised, and to remain private without being excluded from learning.

Diversity as the Norm

Cultural safety depends on treating diversity as the starting point of classroom life rather than as an exception introduced by selected learners. Every classroom brings together different biographies, languages, family experiences, identities, interests, social positions, and ways of understanding the world. Diversity is therefore not something that enters the classroom only when a particular topic, country, or visibly different learner is present.

This principle requires a movement towards default inclusion. In this chapter, we use this term to describe a classroom orientation in which all learners are presumed to belong from the outset. Their belonging should not depend on explaining their origins, demonstrating cultural authenticity, or fitting an unspoken norm.

The difference becomes visible in everyday language. An invitation such as „Tell us what you do while we celebrate Christmas“ creates an assumed classroom „we“ and positions other practices outside it. A more inclusive formulation would not presume a shared relationship to Christmas, but would allow for different traditions, non-participation, mixed practices, and changing personal meanings.

Diversity should also be embedded throughout classroom materials and examples rather than confined to units about culture, migration, or inclusion. Different names, families, languages, living conditions, and biographies should form part of ordinary classroom content. This reduces the risk that plurality becomes attached only to particular students.

At the same time, treating diversity as the norm should not collapse into the claim that all differences are socially equivalent. Some learners experience racism, linguistic discrimination, exclusion, or unequal access in ways that require explicit recognition. Default inclusion therefore combines a presumption of belonging with attentiveness to the unequal conditions under which belonging is experienced.

Reflexive Facilitation for Belonging and Openness to Complexity

Because no strategy is automatically culturally safe, teachers need to approach classroom practice reflexively. The same activity may enable one learner to feel recognised while making another feel exposed. Reflexive facilitation therefore involves examining how language, materials, tasks, and participation structures position learners and remaining willing to adapt when their effects differ from what was anticipated.

This reflexivity operates on three levels. First, teachers need to reflect on themselves: which differences do they notice, what do they treat as normal, and how do their own experiences shape their interpretations? Second, they need to examine their practice: who is represented, who is repeatedly asked to explain themselves, and which perspectives remain absent? Third, reflexivity is

required during interaction itself: teachers need to listen carefully, notice shifts in participation, slow down premature interpretations, and change direction when necessary.

Language is particularly important because it does not merely describe classroom reality; it helps produce it. Expressions such as „foreign students“, „normal families“, or „your culture“ create boundaries between belonging and difference. Careful language use is therefore not a matter of superficial correctness but of considering how words position people and restrict possible identities.

Openness to complexity does not mean treating every interpretation as equally valid or avoiding clear positions on racism, stereotyping, or discrimination. It means combining a firm commitment to dignity and equity with humility, listening, and willingness to revise one's assumptions.

The teacher's role is not to provide final answers to every cultural question, but to create a space in which complexity can be explored without learners being reduced by the interpretations of others.

Responding to and Repairing Cultural Ruptures

Cultural safety is demonstrated not by the absence of difficult moments, but by the classroom's capacity to respond when they occur. Misrecognition, stereotyping, exclusion, or discomfort may arise even where teachers are committed to inclusive practice. The critical question is whether such moments are ignored, closed down, or used as opportunities for repair.

A cultural rupture may be explicitly named, but it may also become visible through silence, withdrawal, laughter, discomfort, or a sudden change in participation. These signals should not be interpreted automatically, but they may indicate that the interaction requires attention.

Repair begins by pausing rather than simply moving on. The teacher can acknowledge that a comment, assumption, or task has taken the discussion in a problematic direction. This may involve separating intention from impact: the absence of harmful intent does not remove a harmful effect, while one problematic statement does not have to define the speaker permanently.

Where appropriate, the teacher should apologise clearly and take responsibility. The affected learner should not be required to explain the problem, reassure the class, or turn their experience into a lesson for others. They may be invited to respond, but that invitation must remain genuinely optional.

Repair also requires reframing and follow-up. A teacher may challenge a generalisation, introduce another perspective, revise the task, return to the issue later, or change future classroom routines. Calling someone in, rather than only calling them out, can establish accountability while keeping open the possibility of reflection and changed practice.

The capacity to repair is itself a feature of cultural safety. Culturally safe classrooms are not mistake-free spaces; they are spaces in which difficult moments can be acknowledged, dignity remains central, and relationships and practices can change.

Implications for Teacher Education and Professional Learning

Preparing teachers to create culturally safe classrooms requires both tools and mindset. Tools include methods, strategies, routines, analytical models, and language for recognising and responding to stereotyping, exclusion, unwanted exposure, or discomfort. A corresponding mindset involves reflexivity, humility, openness to alternative perspectives, tolerance of complexity, and willingness to acknowledge and repair mistakes. Neither dimension is sufficient alone: methods can become mechanical without reflexive professional judgement, while inclusive intentions remain difficult to enact without practical ways of responding.

Teacher education and professional learning should therefore be grounded in concrete classroom practice. Vignettes, transcripts, observation data, video excerpts, teaching materials, and task designs can make visible how apparently minor choices shape recognition, participation, and belonging. This is important because teachers' inclusive intentions and beliefs do not necessarily correspond with their enacted practices, and potentially harmful classroom interactions may remain unrecognised even during subsequent reflection (Kehl et al., 2024). Classroom Observation Dialogues on Diversity provide one practice-based approach through which classroom moments, teacher perspectives, and learner experiences can be brought into dialogue and examined critically without prescribing one universally correct response (Peskoller, in press-b). Teachers also need opportunities to rehearse possible actions: pausing an interaction, naming an assumption, acknowledging impact, apologising, reframing the discussion, and changing subsequent practice.

Such learning requires professional spaces in which prejudice, uncertainty, and mistakes can be discussed without either shame-based silencing or avoidance of accountability. Participants need sufficient trust to make their assumptions and practices visible, but safety cannot mean protection from critical challenge or from responsibility for the effects of professional action. Calling someone in rather than only calling them out can support this balance by addressing a problematic assumption clearly while maintaining the possibility of reflection, continued participation, and change. Teacher education and professional development should thus model the same principle of cultural safety that teachers are expected to facilitate in their classrooms: dignity and belonging are protected, complexity can be addressed openly, and mistakes become starting points for responsible learning and repair.

Conclusion: Facilitating Belonging in Diversity

This chapter has argued that cultural safety is best understood not as a fixed classroom condition but as an ongoing pedagogical process of recognising diversity, engaging in critical reflexivity, adapting practice, and repairing moments of exclusion or misrecognition. Building on dynamic understandings of culture and interculturality, it has highlighted the importance of navigating

the dialectic of difference without either minimising or essentialising diversity. Creating culturally safe classrooms therefore requires more than acknowledging difference. It involves inviting participation without demanding disclosure or assigning representative roles, providing diverse and multifaceted forms of representation, treating diversity as the norm, and facilitating belonging with openness to complexity and multiple perspectives. It also requires culturally unsafe moments to be recognised, addressed, and repaired. Ultimately, culturally safe classrooms are not spaces in which difference disappears, but spaces in which diversity and belonging can become mutually reinforcing.

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Designing Digital and Hybrid Safe Spaces for Language Learning: A Multidimensional Framework

Andrea Steinbach

Introduction

Artificial intelligence is being marketed not only as intelligent but also as safe. Many educational technology companies describe the artificial intelligence in their products as *judgment-free spaces*, *safe spaces for mistakes*, or environments where learners can practise *without fear of being judged* (cf. Julia (n.d.), Promova (2025), Avantslabsglobal (2026)). The underlying promise is compelling: if learners stop fearing embarrassment, they might join in more freely, take more risks and learn more effectively.

Yet this promise raises an important question. Does interacting with an AI or generally transferring (parts of) the learning process to a digital environment automatically make a learning environment safe? At first glance, the answer is yes: anonymous discussion boards may reduce test-taking anxiety, while AI chatbots allow for unlimited practice without being judged by classmates and asynchronous communication gives learners time to formulate their thoughts. Yet none of these environments is inherently safe. The same chatbot may encourage one learner while frustrating another. Anonymous participation may foster engagement or invite exclusion. A classroom discussion may silence some learners while empowering others. Moreover, safe itself is far from a straightforward concept.

In public debates—particularly in Europe, where data protection is a fundamental right, enshrined in Article 8 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (European Union, 2012) — digital safety is frequently associated with data protection, privacy, and regulatory compliance.

From an educational perspective, however, safety also encompasses psychological dimensions such as trust, belonging, respect, and the freedom to make mistakes without fear of humiliation or negative evaluation. A learning environment may therefore be highly secure in terms of data protection while remaining psychologically unsafe in the sense of Edmondson's (1999) concept of psychological safety—or vice versa.

The question, then, is no longer whether a digital or hybrid learning space is safe, but how it can be designed to become psychologically safe.

In current discussions of digital and hybrid learning environments safety is often treated as if it were a property of places or technologies themselves. Classrooms are described as safe, online environments as inclusive, and digital tools as supportive or threatening. However, such descriptions risk overlooking the fact that learners do not experience spaces in the abstract. They experience concrete interactions, tasks, expectations, feedback practices, visibility regimes, and opportunities for participation.

Recent discussions of language education suggest that digital technologies should be understood as environments that provide opportunities for language learners to participate, act with agency, interact with others and develop language skills. Rather than asking what digital technologies can do for language learners, recent discussions focus upon how digital technologies can be designed to enable language learners, encourage them to act with agency in the classroom and to provide opportunities for language learners to participate in language learning activities (cf. Böttger & Steinbach, 2025).

This design-oriented perspective provides an important starting point for the present paper. To sum it up, the safety of the learning space is neither ensured by technology nor by the physical presence of the teacher. It is created in the way learners are invited to participate, choose, be visible, interact, receive feedback, take linguistic risks, etc. This is particularly important for language education. Language learning is an exposed activity. To speak, write, negotiate meaning, ask for clarification, make a mistake in another language, are all vulnerable actions. Learners fear the correction, the embarrassment, the misunderstanding, the loss of face, the negative evaluation by the teacher, by their peers. A safe space in language education can't just be a comfortable or frictionless space.

Terminological Note: Digital, Hybrid and AI-Supported Language Learning

Throughout this chapter, digital and hybrid language learning will be understood as pedagogical contexts.

Digital language learning refers to the use of digital technologies to help the learning of a language. This can take place in both online and offline settings and can include various digital tools and technologies.

Hybrid language learning extends this idea of language learning happening in physical and digital spaces to include the idea that learners are increasingly taking place in these physical and digital spaces. In other words, learners are moving between various learning spaces (physical and digital) to learn language. The focus of hybrid learning, therefore, is on the coordination of these physical and digital learning spaces.

Within this chapter, the concept of **AI-supported language learning** is to be understood as one possible element of digital and hybrid learning environments. AI may function as an interaction partner, feedback provider, rehearsal space, or learning scaffold. Its contribution to psychological safety depends not on the technology itself but on how it is integrated into the overall pedagogical design of the learning environment.

Accordingly, the framework proposed in this chapter does not evaluate individual technologies. Instead, it examines the pedagogical design decisions through which digital tools—including AI—may contribute to psychologically safe language learning.

Digital and hybrid environments make this issue both more complex and more urgent. In the international discussions on safe digital learning environments, these concerns are addressed ever more frequently. The discourse emphasizes the well-being of the learners, inclusion, responsible

participation, as well as technical safety (Sarangi and Falt, 2023). Digital and hybrid learning environments can reduce some of these risks by allowing anonymous participation, asynchronous reflection, individualized training or interaction with non-human actors such as AI tutors. At the same time, they can create new forms of insecurity through surveillance, technical exclusion, unwanted visibility, fragmented communication, unclear norms, or intensified assessment pressure.

As Sarangi and Falt (2023) and the European School Education Platform (2025) likewise argue, designing digitally safe learning environments therefore requires attention not only to technical protection but also to learners' wellbeing, inclusion, and opportunities for meaningful participation.

Consequently, the same design decision may support safety in one context and threaten it in another. A camera-on policy, for example, may foster social presence for some learners while increasing anxiety for others. AI-generated feedback may encourage experimentation when it is formative and learner-controlled, but it may undermine safety when experienced as evaluative, opaque, or intrusive.

This paper takes a design-oriented perspective on psychological safety in language learning. The central claim is that **safe spaces are designed, not discovered**.

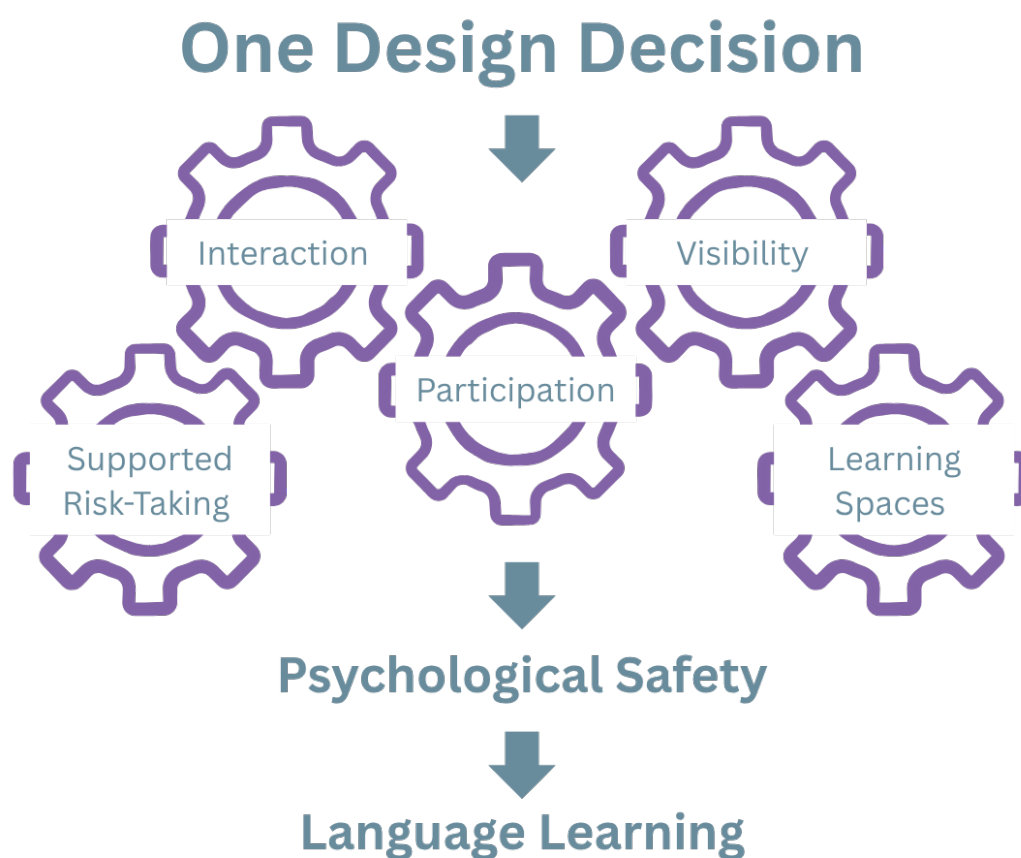


Fig. 8: Safe Space Design Decision

The paper develops five principles for such a framework: participation, interaction, visibility, learning spaces, and supported risk-taking. Using selected design decisions that may arise in a digital or hybrid learning setting—such as camera use, AI feedback, peer feedback, breakout rooms, chat functions, and assessment practices—the framework is demonstrated through examples. The framework does not aim to classify tools or settings as inherently safe or unsafe. Instead, it offers a way of asking under which conditions particular design decisions may contribute to perceived psychological safety and, ultimately, to meaningful language learning.

Why Safety Matters in Language Learning

Learning a foreign language is an inherently vulnerable activity. Unlike many other school subjects, language learning forces learners to communicate with incomplete linguistic resources. Every spoken contribution, written text, or short classroom interaction carries the possibility of misunderstanding, correction, negative evaluation, or even embarrassment. Learners are expected to express ideas that often exceed their current linguistic competence, thus making errors not only inevitable but immediately visible to teachers and peers. Language learning therefore demands a willingness to expose one's developing competence to others.

This distinguishes language learning from many other educational contexts. While uncertainty is a natural part of all learning, linguistic performance is inherently social. The errors that are produced in language learning are often performed publicly and can be corrected by others during the interaction. Consequently, successful language learning depends not only on linguistic knowledge but also on learners' readiness to participate despite the possibility of failure (cf. MacIntyre et al., 1998).

These observations are reflected in decades of research on Foreign Language Anxiety. Such research has revealed that Foreign Language Anxiety has a negative impact upon a learner's willingness to communicate, self-confidence in their language skills and finally upon the language learner's development (cf. Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 1999; MacIntyre et al., 1998; Teimouri et al., 2019). More recent studies into the topic have also revealed that the incorporation of positive emotions, learner wellbeing and supportive classroom climates into Foreign Language Education leads to the development of the language skills of the learners (cf. Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). As a result, such emotional conditions are needed for the effective development of language skills.

Psychological safety should not be confused with comfort or the absence of challenge. A learning environment that eliminates all challenge would ultimately undermine language development and simply be boring. Rather than removing risk, psychologically safe learning environments enable learners to engage in risks that are educationally productive.

For this reason, this paper uses the term productive language risk-taking to refer to learners' willingness to communicate despite linguistic uncertainty, to experiment with language beyond their current level of competence, and to accept mistakes as an inevitable and valuable part of the learning process. From this perspective, the purpose of a safe space is not to maximize learners' comfort but to maximize their readiness to participate, experiment, and communicate. Psychological safety therefore becomes a pedagogical means rather than an educational end.

If psychological safety is understood in this way, an important question follows: How can digital and hybrid language learning environments be designed to foster productive language risk-taking? Addressing this question requires moving beyond discussions of individual technologies towards a broader understanding of pedagogical design. The following section therefore argues that psychological safety should be approached as a principle of pedagogical design rather than as an inherent property of physical, digital, or hybrid learning environments.

From Safe Spaces to Safe by Design

Over the past two decades, there has been a sea change across many fields, including the movement toward *Privacy by Design* (cf. Cavoukian, 2011), *Security by Design* (cf. ENISA, 2026) and *Safety by Design* (cf. eSafety Commissioner, n.d.). The idea is simple: If security or safety are desired characteristics of a particular system, they must be embedded deliberately within the system from the start. They cannot be added retrospectively.

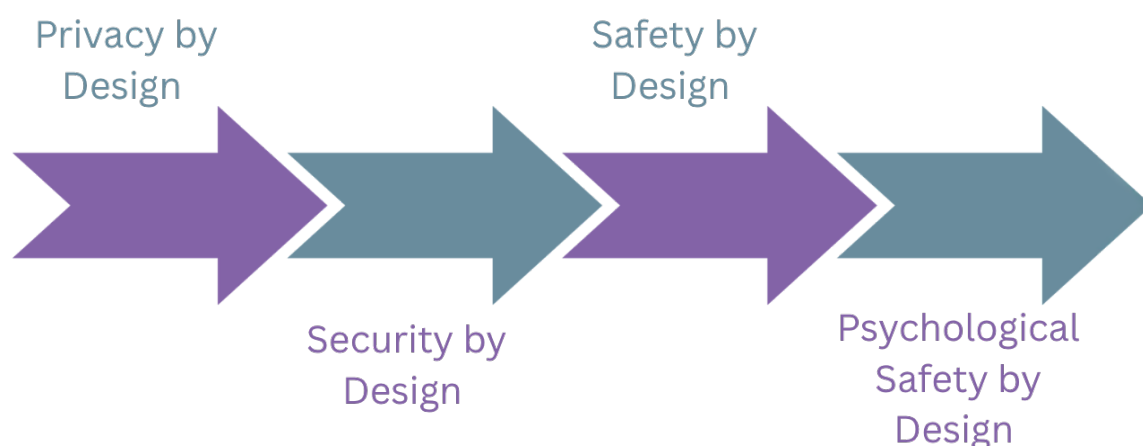


Fig. 9: From Safe Spaces to Safe by Design

This paper argues that safety is not a natural quality of any physical, digital or hybrid learning space - a classroom is no more 'automatically' safe than an AI chatbot is 'inherently' threatening - but rather, that any artificial or technological feature could support one learner while discouraging another.

Anonymous participation may lower evaluation anxiety but simultaneously reduce social connectedness. Mandatory camera use may strengthen social presence while increasing anxiety and self-consciousness. Whether learners experience a learning environment as psychologically safe

therefore depends less on the technology itself than on how that technology is embedded within pedagogical practice.

Building on this logic, this paper proposes extending this perspective to psychological safety in language education. Rather than asking whether a digital or hybrid learning environment is safe, the question now is how it has been designed to support psychological safety or how it is designed to foster psychological safety through the teachers' application. Safety is therefore intentionally created through pedagogical design.

This shift in perspective has important implications. It redirects attention away from technologies themselves towards the choices teachers make when designing learning experiences. This means not the app or the digital tool are important, but their application in the classroom. Decisions about participation, visibility, communication, assessment, feedback, collaboration, or learner agency and empowerment are no longer understood as isolated methodological choices but as interconnected design decisions that shape learners' perceptions of safety.

The following section introduces five interrelated design principles that together constitute a conceptual framework for designing psychologically safe digital and hybrid language learning environments.

A Design Framework for Digital and Hybrid Safe Spaces

Following the design-oriented perspective developed in the previous section, the question is no longer whether digital or hybrid learning environments are inherently safe. Instead, the focus shifts towards the pedagogical decisions through which psychological safety can intentionally be fostered.

Although individual technologies may contribute to learners' perceptions of safety, technologies themselves do not determine these perceptions. Rather, safety emerges from multiple interacting design decisions that shape learners' opportunities to participate, interact, become visible, navigate different learning spaces, and engage with linguistic challenges.

To operationalise this perspective, this paper proposes five interrelated design principles. The framework is not intended as a checklist or a sequence of instructional steps nor as a set of universal recommendations. Instead, it provides a conceptual lens through which teachers can evaluate and design digital and hybrid language learning environments. The five principles should therefore be understood as complementary rather than independent dimensions. Together, they describe the conditions under which learners are more likely to experience psychological safety and engage in productive language risk-taking.

Principle 1: Participation

Who can participate, and under which conditions?

The first design principle concerns participation: who is able to contribute, how they are invited to do so, and which forms of contribution are recognised as legitimate. In language education, participation is central because learning depends on active engagement with language. Learners need opportunities to speak, write, listen, respond, ask questions, negotiate meaning, and test emerging linguistic hypotheses. At the same time, participation is precisely where vulnerability becomes visible. To participate in another language is to expose one's developing competence to others.

In digital and hybrid learning environments, participation does not have to be limited to oral contributions in front of the whole group. Learners can participate through chat messages, shared documents, audio recordings and even online discussion forums. The more options that a platform offers for learners to contribute to a lesson, the more learners are likely to feel that their contributions are valid. For instance, a student who feels that they will not be able to contribute to the group in an oral way may choose to contribute through writing in a chat box, recording an audio message for the group or contributing to a shared document.

Learner agency and participation are closely connected. Empowerment-oriented approaches to language education aim to provide learners with choices in the learning process and to allow learners to become active language users. For instance, providing learners with some degree of control over when and how they contribute to language learning is likely to lead to feelings of manageability of the learning environment. However, it is also important to avoid providing learners with too much choice or too much control within the learning process, as this may lead to feelings of uncertainty or exposure to unsafe situations.

A participation-oriented design perspective, therefore, raises the questions of which learners are enabled to contribute to the learning process by this decision and which learners may be silenced by it. Also, will there be more than one way for learners to participate in the learning process? Are quieter, anxious, multilingual, remote, or technically disadvantaged learners given meaningful access to interaction (cf. European School Education Platform on digital well-being)? In this sense, participation is not simply a question of activity level. It is a question of whether the learning environment offers varied, scaffolded, and recognised ways of entering communicative language use.

Concrete design decisions such as optional camera use, chat-based participation, anonymous polling, asynchronous tasks, AI-supported rehearsal, or flexible grouping can all broaden participation. Yet none of these decisions is inherently safe. Their effect depends on how they interact with the other design principles. Chat participation, for instance, may increase access for anxious learners but remain marginal if the teacher ignores chat contributions. Rehearsal with an AI-supported conversation partner supports participation in later human interaction, but it

may also become a substitute for such interaction if not pedagogically integrated. Participation thus illustrates the central logic of this framework: the fact that a design principle influences psychological safety only inasmuch as its impact, relative to others, is taken into consideration.

Learner agency emerges from such meaningful choices and from the transparency of pedagogical decisions, as explained to learners themselves: when learners understand why their instructor favors certain participation formats over others - or certain digital tools, assessment practices - they're more likely to interpret these measures as supportive rather than arbitrary.

Principle 2: Interaction

How do learners experience communication and feedback?

While participation addresses learners' opportunities to contribute, interaction concerns the quality and structure of communication that follows. Language learning is inherently interactive. Interaction not only provides opportunities for negotiating meaning and constructing linguistic knowledge (Long, 1996), but also shapes learners' perceptions of psychological safety through the ways in which others respond to their contributions.

Interactions communicate implicit norms. They signal whether mistakes are treated as opportunities for learning or as evidence of failure, whether questions are welcomed or discouraged, and whether learners' ideas are acknowledged or ignored. In this sense, every interaction contributes to learners' perceptions of what is socially acceptable within a learning environment. Psychological safety therefore depends not only on individual relationships but also on the interactional culture established within the group.

Within digital and hybrid classrooms, the range of possible interactions increases, bringing a greater variety of conversation „partners“ such as AI-powered chatbots and automated feedback tools, in addition to peers and teachers, as well as technological affordances such as shared workspaces, group discussion boards and live chats. The same developments that offer learners unlimited opportunities to practice and receive immediate feedback and avoid the anxiety of social judgement in face-to-face discussions on asynchronous discussion boards, might also create distance or even alienation if they lack clear indicators of interpersonal connection, such as immediate turn-taking, prosody and gesture. When online discussions fail to be fully moderated, for example, learners might feel adrift among disconnected messages without access to detailed cues from their peers. The design of interaction in education should carefully balance providing learners with adequate support while maintaining a level of authenticity in the learning environment. Learners benefit from participation in authentic interaction, despite its messiness, in which they can make mistakes and experience uncertainty as their language skills unfold. The learning process is characterised not just by correction but also by disagreement - the linguistic expression of which poses an additional challenge - and must unfold within a culture of respect, trust and shared responsibility.

From a design perspective, interaction includes more than giving learners the opportunity to communicate. It includes establishing the conditions for communication. This means teachers' own explicit feedback practices, discussion protocols, peer-feedback schemes and moderation strategies and decisions around grouping, as well as the use of different digital tools as part of classroom activities. Even small aspects of interactional design - such as whether peer feedback is given explicit criteria or whether feedback generated by AI receives critical discussion and incorporation - can affect learners' perceptions of psychological safety (cf. Education and Training Foundation, 2021). In designing interaction, then, educators have a delicate balance to strike between providing support and fostering authenticity. Authentic interaction is inherently messy, unpredictable and socially embedded. Learners must participate in genuine communicative exchange, not just some didactically controlled imitation of it. This entails making mistakes and experiencing uncertainty as emerging language competence and knowledge unfold in the learning process, which includes more than correction but also - for example - disagreement, the linguistic formulation of which poses an added challenge and that must unfold within a culture of respect, trust and shared responsibility. Our proposed structure approaches interaction as a set of questions concerning the norms that govern communication within a learning environment. Who gets to interact? Who provides feedback, and how is it experienced by learners? How are digital and AI-mediated interactions connected to human interaction? To what extent do interactional structures encourage learners to communicate despite uncertainty?

As with participation, interaction cannot be considered in isolation. A well-designed interaction may increase learners' willingness to participate, but it may also alter visibility, redistribute learner agency, or reshape experiences of linguistic challenge. Its contribution to psychological safety therefore depends on how it interacts with the other design principles within the overall learning design.

Principle 3: Visibility

Who is visible to whom, when, and for what purpose?

In traditional classrooms, the question of visibility doesn't arise, because everybody is visible to the others at all times. But digital environments have different rules. During the pandemic, it became obvious that not everybody feels comfortable letting the whole course into their own private space. The digital options appear endless: learners may choose to appear on camera (with the help of a digital avatar, with a blurred background...), contribute anonymously or publicly through the chat, interact under their real names or pseudonyms, remain silent or rehearse privately with AI before entering public communication. Visibility is therefore no longer a fixed feature of the learning environment but a pedagogical variable. In digital classrooms, teachers can actively design who becomes visible to whom, at which stage of a learning activity, and for which pedagogical purpose. It might, for example, be a good idea to keep the camera on when

teaching younger kids to prevent any parents from entering the online classroom and ensuring the privacy of the other learners. But for kids in puberty it might be safer to keep their room at home private.

For language learners, visibility represents both an opportunity and a vulnerability. Camera usage may foster accountability, social presence, and meaningful interaction, but it may also increase evaluation anxiety and fear of making mistakes (cf. Lovell, 2024). Designing psychologically safe learning environments therefore does not require maximizing or minimizing visibility. Rather, it requires carefully balancing different forms of visibility according to the learner group's needs, the requirements of the task at hand or other factors.

Like the other design principles, visibility contributes to psychological safety not in isolation but through its interaction with the other principles.

Principle 4: Learning Spaces

Where does learning take place, and how are these spaces connected?

The fourth principle addresses the learning spaces where language learning happens. For hybrid and digital education, learning no longer takes place in one classroom setting. Learners can instead move constantly between connected physical, digital, synchronous, asynchronous, formal and informal learning spaces.

Classroom discussions can continue in online forums, collaborative documents might be edited from home, AI-supported rehearsal happens on personal devices and peer interaction can take place in messaging apps and social media.

Digital and hybrid language learning therefore takes place in a network of connected learning spaces rather than inside one instructional setting. This development has important implications for psychological safety.

Learners need to feel safe not only in one (online) classroom setting, but also while moving between different learning spaces. A supportive classroom discussion may lose its positive effects if learners later receive uncontrolled peer feedback in a messaging group. A speaking task, that feels difficult at first, may become easier if learners get the chance to rehearse privately with an AI tutor before joining a face-to-face discussion.

Psychological safety therefore depends not only on the features of individual learning spaces but also on how these spaces connect. This means that teachers increasingly guide learning rather than merely organising classroom activities.

Choices about where the learning happens, how learners move between different environments and which activities belong in which space become key parts of instructional design. Some learning spaces suit individual experimentation and preparation well, while others are built for authentic communication, collaboration or public performance.

Designing psychologically safe learning environments therefore involves placing learning activities across spaces on purpose based on their teaching goals. Digital and hybrid environments offer great flexibility here. Current talk about digital wellbeing also stresses that digitally supported learning should not only increase learning chances but also allow learners to move through different digital environments in healthy, purposeful and responsible ways (cf. European School Education Platform, 2025). AI-supported rehearsal, collaborative online writing, asynchronous discussion boards, shared digital portfolios and classroom interaction can support one another instead of competing.

The challenge is not to increase the number of learning spaces. It is more important to ensure that learners understand the purpose of each learning space. Learners should see these environments as connected parts of one learning process rather than as isolated activities needing constant readjustment. A learning-space view raises questions such as: Which learning spaces are part of this activity? How do they connect? Where can learners practice privately, collaborate with peers or perform publicly? How do moves between spaces affect learners' views of safety?

By looking at these questions, teachers move beyond thinking about individual technologies and instead design coherent learning environments where different spaces serve complementary roles. Although teachers cannot control learners' private digital practices, they can intentionally design moves between learning spaces and explicitly discuss expectations, boundaries and digital wellbeing.

Principle 5: Supported Risk-Taking

How can challenge remain authentic without becoming overwhelming?

The final design principle concerns supported risk-taking. At first glance, the concept of safe spaces seems incompatible with risk. But every language learner must engage in a certain degree of risk to communicate with others. If those risks were eliminated from language learning, then language learning itself would be eliminated.

The purpose of psychologically safe learning environments is therefore not to minimize challenges to the learners but to make challenges to the learners manageable. Learners need opportunities to experiment with language that is unfamiliar to them, to express ideas that are incomplete, to ask questions of their peers and teachers and to receive feedback from their peers and teachers without fearing negative consequences to their participation in the learning activities. Psychological safety enables learners to take risks in their learning activities rather than avoiding them.

The digital and hybrid learning environments offer a means of scaffolding for these risks. Learners can use AI-supported conversation partners to practice oral tasks prior to speaking in public, they can submit multiple versions of their audio responses to practice presenting in different ways, they can work in small groups to practice presenting their information before

sharing with the whole course or they can receive feedback on their formative assessments prior to their summative assessment.

At the same time, digital environments may also increase perceived risk. Permanent recordings, public leaderboards, immediate automated evaluation, or highly visible performance data that remain permanently accessible and can be revisited over time may intensify feelings of exposure and discourage learners from experimenting with language. The same digital feature may therefore either encourage or inhibit productive language risk-taking depending on how it is embedded within the overall learning design.

The question is therefore how challenge is introduced, supported, interpreted, and gradually increased as learners gain confidence. Productive risk-taking requires clear expectations, opportunities for preparation, constructive feedback (cf. Hattie & Timperley, 2007), and an understanding that mistakes represent valuable evidence of learning rather than failure. Teachers therefore design not only learning tasks but also the conditions under which learners feel sufficiently secure to attempt them.

Supported risk-taking ultimately brings together the four preceding design principles. Learners are more likely to accept linguistic challenges when they are able to participate in meaningful ways, interact within respectful communicative norms, regulate their visibility, and move flexibly between complementary learning spaces. In this sense, supported risk-taking is not an isolated design principle but the point at which the preceding principles converge. Together, they create the conditions under which learners perceive sufficient psychological safety to communicate, experiment, and develop their language competence.

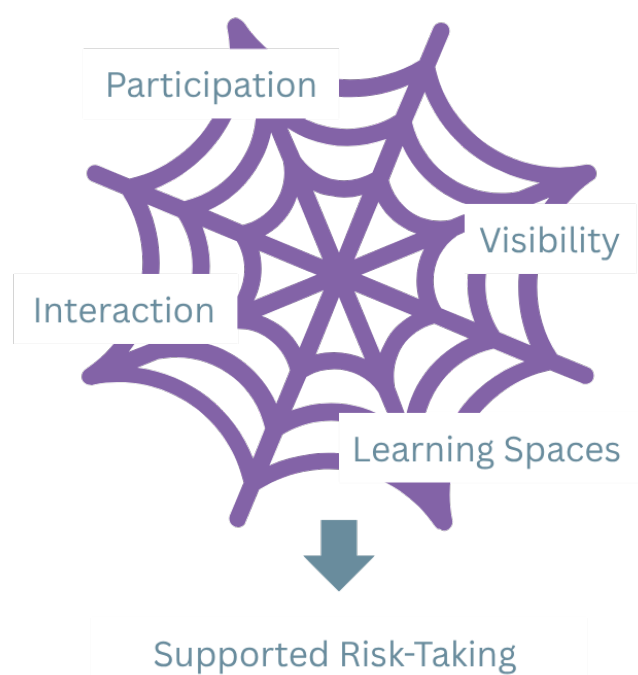


Fig. 10: A Design Framework for Digital and Hybrid Safe Spaces

Applying the Framework: Reflecting on Pedagogical Design Decisions

The value of the design perspective presented in this paper lies not in prescribing universally effective teaching practices but in providing a conceptual lens for analysing pedagogical design decisions. Rather than asking whether a particular technology, activity or strategy is inherently safe or unsafe, the framework encourages teachers to consider how any single design decision may have an impact on multiple aspects of learning that are safe for learners to learn.

The need for a structure that considers these variables in pedagogical design arises from the fact that pedagogical design decisions are rarely straightforward. A design decision that strengthens one aspect of psychological safety may simultaneously create new challenges in another. Learners, however, do not experience these pedagogical deliberations. They ultimately experience the outcome: whether they feel sufficiently safe to participate, communicate, and take linguistic risks. The framework proposed here is therefore intended primarily as a tool for teachers' professional decision-making rather than as a classification of learning technologies.

The following examples illustrate the framework's multidimensional perspective. They are not intended as best-practice recommendations but as examples demonstrating that pedagogical decisions rarely affect only one aspect of psychological safety. Instead, they shape all mentioned design decisions - participation, interaction, visibility, learning spaces - and with that ultimately also the learners' willingness to engage in productive language risk-taking in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.



Fig 11: Stepstones to Authentic Communication

Camera Use

Few design decisions have received as much attention in online and hybrid education as camera use (cf. Lovell, 2024). Mandatory camera policies may strengthen social presence, facilitate interaction, and help teachers monitor engagement. At the same time, they substantially increase learner visibility and may intensify evaluation anxiety, particularly for learners experiencing foreign language anxiety or participating from environments they perceive as private. Optional camera use, in contrast, increases learner agency and may reduce psychological pressure, but it can also decrease opportunities for spontaneous interpersonal interaction if alternative forms of participation are not intentionally supported. Camera-off participation should not be interpreted as disengagement *per se*.

Whether camera use contributes to psychological safety therefore depends less on the policy itself than on how it interacts with opportunities for participation, alternative communication channels, and the overall pedagogical design of the learning environment.

AI-Supported Feedback

Generative AI allows the learner to experiment and interact with a system that can be less threatening than real-world interactions with humans because of reduced consequences, for example if trying out a speech or practising written work before releasing it into a public space. AI feedback can reduce learners' anxiety when performing assessment tasks and provide scaffolding for development that may otherwise seem too daunting for some.

However, AI mediated feedback can also shift the focus from what is communicatively useful or meaningful to 'error free' language. There is also a reliance on trust and transparency about the purpose and accuracy of the data that will be generated. Trust requires openness and learners need to feel psychologically safe to take up opportunities that a Generative AI offers.

This means that the teacher has to be clear about what the feedback is for and learners need to understand that the teacher is responsible for making sure that the interaction and its feedback will not cause them any harm.

Even if teachers can do nothing to adjust the feedback itself, they can still control what kinds of prompts trigger which types of interaction and feedback so that the use of the AI in feedback is clear to learners. The learners can be encouraged to use it when they feel ready, rather than being forced to do so through compulsory tasks.

If learners are supposed to privately experiment with AI feedback, it is necessary to discuss processes and policies of data storage and reuse with them so that AI-facilitated feedback does not become a tool of learner surveillance or gatekeeping. This also means that learners should not be forced to engage with a Generative AI and should have a say over whether or not their voice data will be recorded and used.

In other words, a teacher needs to think about not just how Generative AI might be able to support teaching and learning (and the data used in both) but how it could be used as part of a broader set of principles and practices designed to support psychologically safe learning environments.

Overall, AI feedback for language learning can be seen as one form of autonomous activity. However, AI feedback must also be seen as the output of a co-constructed process rather than something fully autonomous. The Generative AI will respond to the kinds of prompts given by learners. So, the feedback generated by the AI depends on the quality and focus of the prompts. If the prompts are vague and not well designed, this will lead to shallow or unsatisfying - even contradictory or confusing - feedback, which is likely to be less useful for learning. On the other hand, if the prompts are carefully constructed, the AI may well generate setting-sensitive responses.

AI feedback is only autonomous to the degree that the design of the instruction and the quality of the prompts remain invisible to learners. If learners cannot understand the basis of the feedback, they are unlikely to see it as useful for understanding what they should work on next and, in fact, may not really understand the feedback at all. So the role of the teacher involves more than encouraging learners to get individualised feedback - they also need to support learners to interpret the feedback critically and to formulate their own prompts that will elicit the feedback they need to progress towards pedagogically defined goals.

In addition, AI systems don't know how they align with a teacher's expectations, how they will fit into the curriculum and assessment criteria, unless they are informed by teachers. While AI feedback can operate autonomously without a teacher, the learner's interaction with the feedback is dependent on other autonomous activities that need the support and scaffolding of the teacher to enable effective learning.

Peer Feedback

Peer feedback is another way to see how psychologically safe learning environments depend upon the interactional norms within the learning environment. Feedback from peers, provided with clear criteria for the evaluation, models and protocols for the exchange of feedback, can contribute to the development of learning communities. On the other hand, poorly provided peer feedback may increase the fear that learners experience of being judged by their peers, reinforce existing social hierarchies within the classroom or discourage learners from attempting to communicate in the target language. As such, the lack of established interactional norms within the learning environment can lead to peer feedback becoming an environment for learners to experience embarrassment, ridicule or negative comparison with others (cf. Education and Training Foundation, 2021).

Breakout Rooms

Small group interaction is frequently recommended as a means of increasing speaking opportunities in digital language learning. Breakout rooms may reduce the pressure placed upon learners to perform well within class discussions, as they can participate in group discussions before returning to the main classroom for a discussion with the whole course. Also, breakout rooms may allow learners to negotiate the meaning of certain language and to work together to use certain language.

While the effectiveness of breakout rooms is dependent upon the instructional design for that particular lesson, the effectiveness of breakout rooms can be impacted if there is not a clear design for the breakout rooms. This means that the instructor must design activities for breakout rooms that are both psychologically safe for learners as well as that help participation from all learners.

Breakout rooms therefore illustrate particularly well that reducing group size alone does not create psychological safety; rather, safety depends on the interactional structures that accompany collaborative work.

Chat-Based Participation

Digital chat functions within the online classrooms also allow for the participation of learners who are reluctant to speak in front of others. Learners can participate in the digital chats that happen within the online classrooms, sharing ideas, asking questions and providing support for their peers. So, chat functions help to increase the participation of learners within the online classrooms while decreasing the amount of pressure that is placed upon those learners.

While chat may be a means of ensuring that learners are feeling psychologically safe within the classroom environment, it is only effective if the teachers in the classroom recognize and appreciate such contributions from the learners. In cases where the teachers in the classroom overlook chat contributions to the classroom, learners may feel that chat is a secondary form of communication within the classroom. However, by making explicit that all contributions to the classroom are recognized and valued, the teachers can help to ensure that learners feel psychologically safe.

Assessment

Assessment perhaps most clearly demonstrates that psychological safety cannot be separated from broader pedagogical design. This is clearly demonstrated in formative assessment practices (cf. Black and Wiliam, 1998), which signal to learners that mistakes are helpful for learning, not a failure and that learners are valued if they are making mistakes as well as if not.

But summative assessment can lead to a focus on avoiding linguistic risks, so as to secure grades. This holds true for digital technologies like automated scoring, learning analytics, permanent

performance records and AI-supported evaluation as well. If psychological safety is taken seriously, teachers need to pay attention to how they design assessment and feedback processes, particularly if they are based on digital technologies.

At the same time, it should not be assumed that learners will be able to take the kind of linguistic risks that are basic to any communicative process. Learners need to understand that assessment and feedback are not about judging their performance but about their potential to engage in further learning. This requires that we provide clear success indicators and opportunities for revision. Teachers need to provide opportunities for learners to reflect on their own learning processes, so as to develop self-regulated learning (cf. Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Panadero et al., 2017).

To support learners in taking linguistic risks, teachers need to provide scaffolds that enable them to make sense of assessment criteria. Scaffolds might include providing opportunities for learners to engage in self-assessment and peer assessment and ensuring that this is done in ways that are respectful and not threatening. Here again, self-assessment and peer assessment can support psychological safety if they are scaffolded in ways that encourage learners to engage in reflective dialogue (cf. Topping, 2009).

But they can also increase feelings of judgement and social comparison if the scaffolds are not carefully designed and if learners are not given opportunities to make sense of the assessment criteria. For example, self-assessment and peer assessment can be used as a means of checking whether learners have learned what is expected of them but they can also be used as a means of creating a sense of shared knowledge and understanding.

There are, of course, other ways of designing assessment and feedback processes that can increase learners' feelings of psychological safety. Designing assessment is also about designing the opportunities for learners to take linguistic risks, such as when writing for an audience or giving a talk. It is about designing the opportunities for learners to receive constructive feedback and to revise their performance based on that feedback. This will enable learners to gradually develop confidence in their own communicative abilities and in their own ability for making sense of language and communication.

AI-supported assessment raises new design considerations, for instance, whether AI can provide immediate formative feedback that learners will use in the course of composing or rehearsing their performance or whether AI can suggest revisions or provide support during a rehearsal phase, so that learners can prepare themselves for the formal assessment. At the same time, learners need to have some sense of how their data are processed and how the feedback they receive is produced. If learners have no trust in the feedback they receive or if they do not understand how the feedback is produced, then they will be unable to trust the assessment process. AI-supported assessment is not a matter of the technology alone but also requires some sense of how learners' experiences of assessment can be re-designed to enable them to take linguistic risks

and to learn from their mistakes. This requires that learners can decide when AI feedback is used as rehearsal or revision support.

Towards Reflective Design

Across all six examples, a common pattern becomes apparent. None of the analysed design decisions can be classified as inherently safe or unsafe. Rather, each simultaneously influences multiple design principles, often creating productive tensions between them. A decision that increases interaction may also increase unwanted visibility; a decision that broadens participation may reduce opportunities for spontaneous communication; a design that supports private rehearsal may need to be balanced with authentic interpersonal interaction.

The following overview illustrates how the six example decisions discussed above relate to the five design principles. Rather than providing fixed classifications, the matrix visualises which dimensions are likely to be affected by each pedagogical decision.

Design Decision	Participation	Interaction	Visibility	Learning Spaces	Supported Risk-Taking
Camera	✓	✓	✓		✓
AI feedback	✓	✓		✓	✓
Peer feedback	✓	✓	✓		✓
Breakout rooms	✓	✓		✓	✓
Chat	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Assessment	✓	✓	✓		✓

There is no single blueprint for a psychologically safe learning environment. Instead, the framework offers a structured way of reflecting on pedagogical decisions before they are implemented. In this sense, designing psychologically safe digital and hybrid language learning environments becomes less a matter of selecting the „right“ technology and more a matter of understanding the complex interactions between pedagogical design decisions and learners' experiences.

Conclusion

As learning settings have become increasingly digital and hybrid, the need to discuss and create safe learning spaces for language learning has grown. So far, this discussion has focused mainly on the technology and the teaching settings. This paper argues that such a perspective is too narrow. Classrooms, videoconferencing platforms, learning management systems and AI supported learning tools are not inherently safe or unsafe. Instead, the psychological safety of a learning environment is created by the choices made by teachers in the teaching process that shape the learning experience.

Building on this argument, the paper presents a conceptual structure for teaching design in digital and hybrid language learning settings that is based on a set of interconnected principles:

participation, interaction, visibility, learning spaces and supported risk-taking. The examples discussed throughout the paper illustrate that even seemingly simple instructional decisions simultaneously affect multiple dimensions of learners' experiences. Taken together, psychologically safe learning environments cannot be created through isolated interventions or technological solutions but require deliberate and coherent pedagogical design.

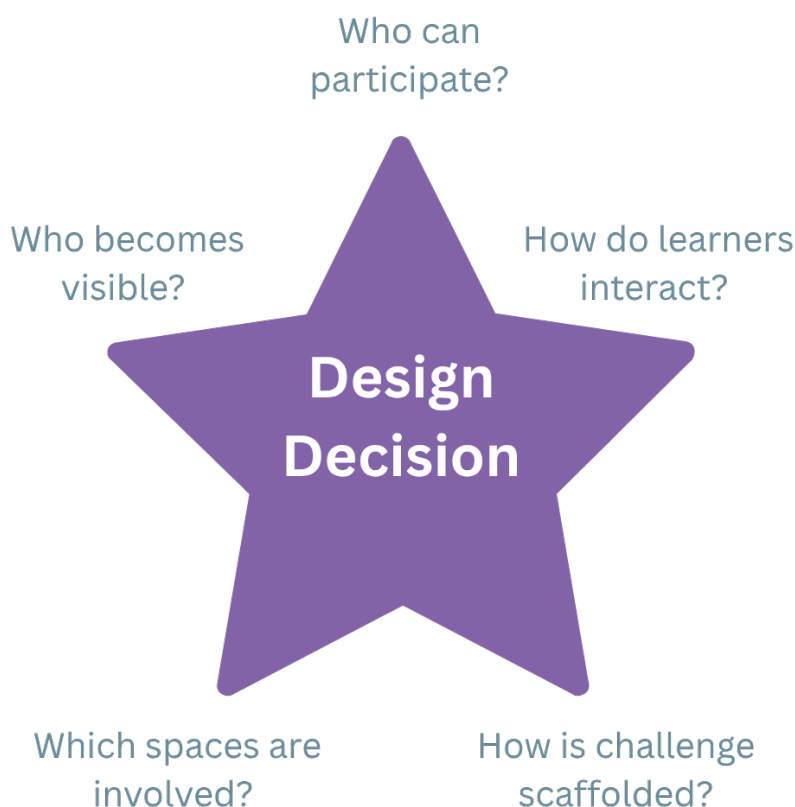


Fig. 12: Design Decisions

The framework proposed in this chapter supports teachers in reflecting on the complex trade-offs that characterise digital and hybrid language learning.

Because digital and hybrid learning environments continue to evolve rapidly—and because approved platforms, AI applications, and institutional regulations differ considerably across schools, regions, and countries—lists of recommended tools inevitably become outdated. Design principles, by contrast, remain applicable across changing technological developments. Although institutional regulations often determine which platforms, AI applications, or digital tools are available, teachers remain responsible for deciding how these technologies are integrated into learning. Design principles therefore enable teachers to evaluate available technologies according to pedagogical rather than technological criteria.

Consequently, designing psychologically safe digital and hybrid learning environments should become an explicit component of teacher education and professional development. Teachers require more than technological competence. They need opportunities to develop the pedagogical

expertise necessary to evaluate digital learning environments, balance competing design principles, and make context-sensitive decisions that respond to the needs of their learners.

This professional agency forms the prerequisite for meaningful learner agency. Only teachers who can critically evaluate and intentionally design digital learning environments are able to create the possibilities for learners to make informed and meaningful choices within them. At the same time, there are opportunities for learners to understand why particular pedagogical decisions are made. Developing learner agency in digital and AI-supported learning environments means making design decisions transparent to learners. It also means giving them the opportunity to reflect on the affordances, limitations and purposes of the technologies used in the course.

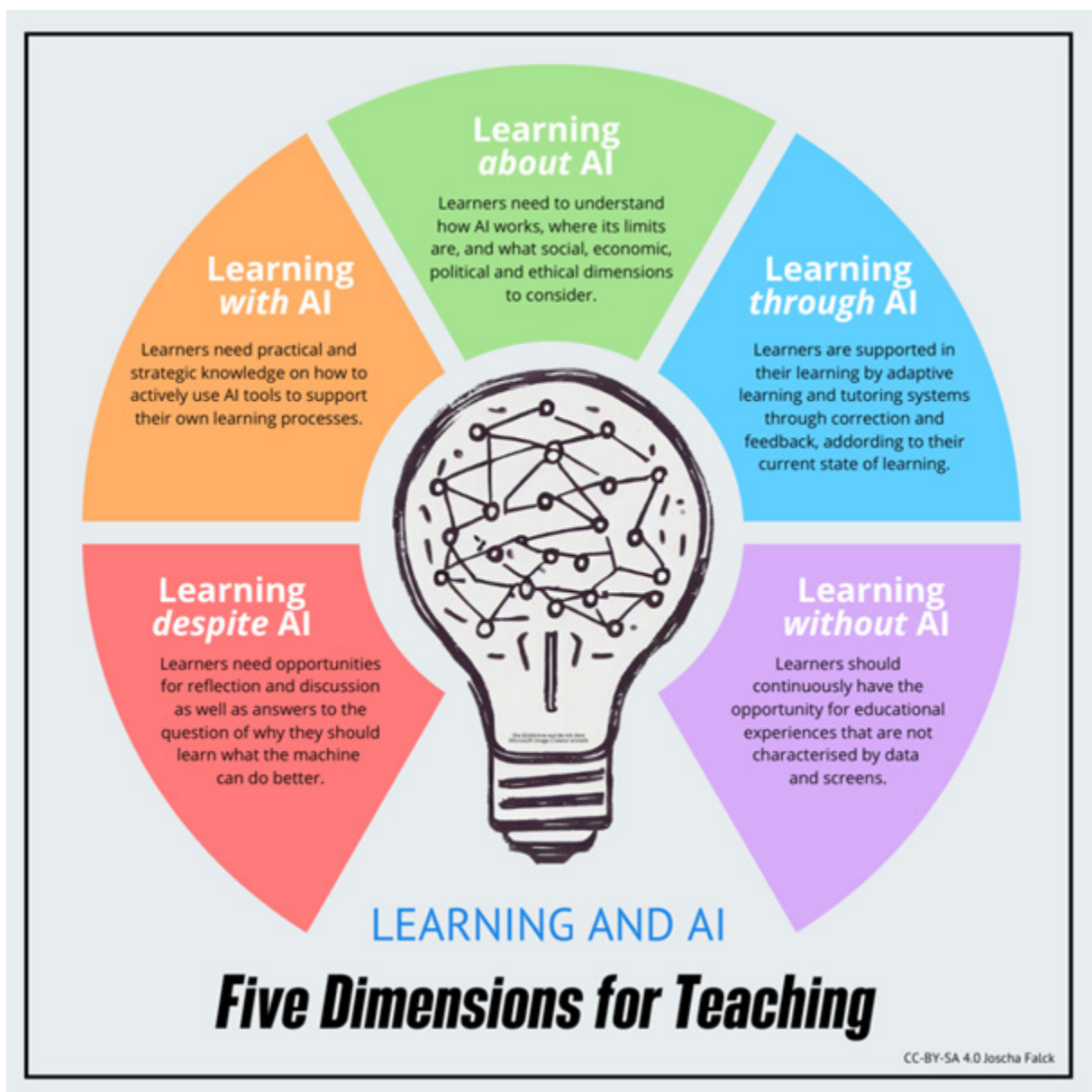


Fig. 13: Learning and AI - Five Dimensions for Teaching

Such transparency is related to discussions of AI literacy and the five dimensions of teaching with AI (cf. Falck, 2023).

Safe digital and hybrid spaces cannot be established through the use of a particular technology, platform or instructional format. They are created through the deliberate design of instruction to allow learners to participate in the course, interact with others in the course, become visible within the course, navigate the course spaces and take linguistic risks within the course.

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Chapter 8

A Synthesis: Prepared for Room 2 Grow

Heiner Böttger

This book-closing synthesis chapter connects the seven dimensions of safe spaces developed in Room 2 Grow: Safe Spaces in Language Education: physical, social, emotional, inner, creative, cultural, and digital-hybrid spaces. It argues that safe spaces in language education are not additive techniques but ecological conditions for communicative courage, dignity, and growth. A safe space is not a comfortable room without challenge. It is a pedagogically cultivated learning ecology in which learners can speak, listen, err, repair, imagine, encounter difference, and develop identity without unnecessary humiliation, exclusion, or threat. The chapter proposes an integrated design framework, the Room 2 Grow Design Cycle, which moves from noticing vulnerability to designing affordances, rehearsing risk, protecting dignity, repairing rupture, reflecting on growth, and transferring safe-space practices into future learning contexts. It also offers practical transfer ideas for classrooms, seminars, teacher education, and hybrid language-learning environments. The final claim is that safe spaces matter because language learning asks learners to appear before others in a not-yet-complete form. The responsibility of language education is to make that appearance possible, demanding, humane, and hopeful.

Synthesis as Pedagogical Design

The final chapter of Room 2 Grow has a particular responsibility. It should not merely summarize the preceding chapters; it should show how they work together. The seminar plan defines the synthesis session as a moment in which the facilitators and the seminar group connect the seven dimensions, refine seminar products, share key insights, and develop practical transfer ideas for language education. This task is more than organizational. It is theoretical, ethical, and pedagogical.

The central thesis of this synthesis is simple: safe spaces in language education are ecological, not additive. Teachers do not first design a physical safe space, then add a social safe space, then add emotional safety, and finally attach creativity, culture, or technology. Each dimension changes the others. A circle of chairs changes visibility and social risk. Peer norms change the emotional meaning of error. An error-friendly climate strengthens inner self-efficacy. Inner confidence makes creative experimentation possible. Creative work opens cultural questions. Cultural complexity may require digital resources and multimodal expression. Digital tools, in turn, reshape physical presence, social participation, and learner identity.

For this reason, safe-space pedagogy must be understood as a design ecology. The word ecology is useful because it shows that learning emerges through relationships among bodies, rooms, tasks, tools, emotions, languages, histories, identities, and technologies (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; van Lier, 2004). In such an ecology, a single design decision can have multiple consequences.

A task that appears simple to the teacher may be socially exposing for one learner, cognitively overloaded for another, culturally sensitive for a third, and digitally inaccessible for a fourth. Safe-space design begins when educators stop asking only, „What will I teach?“ and begin asking, „What will this learning situation make possible, for whom, under which conditions, and at what risk?“

This chapter therefore treats synthesis as design. It connects concepts to practice and turns the seven dimensions into a transferable framework for language education. The aim is not to produce perfectly safe classrooms. No human learning space can guarantee complete safety at every moment. The aim is to create learning environments that are attentive enough to prevent avoidable harm, structured enough to support meaningful risk, and humble enough to repair when safety breaks down.

From Room to Growth

The title Room 2 Grow offers the synthesis chapter its guiding movement: from room to space, from space to safe space, and from safe space to growth. A room is a material or digital container. It can be booked, furnished, heated, connected, decorated, and equipped. A space is more than a container. It is a relational field of possible action, perception, interaction, and power (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005). A safe space is a pedagogically cultivated condition in which learners experience enough protection, respect, predictability, and belonging to take meaningful interpersonal, linguistic, cultural, creative, and intellectual risks (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Growth is the learner's expanding capacity for communication, reflection, identity, creativity, intercultural agency, and participation. This movement is especially important in language education. Language learning is never only the acquisition of forms. It is embodied, social, emotional, cultural, and identity-forming. Learners speak with voices, bodies, accents, pauses, gestures, and histories. They must use language before they fully control it. They must become audible while still incomplete. They must accept correction without losing dignity, encounter difference without losing belonging, and practice communication before they feel fully legitimate. Safe spaces are therefore not a pedagogical luxury. They are the conditions under which the necessary vulnerability of language learning can become developmental rather than threatening.

The concept should not be misunderstood as a promise of comfort or the removal of difficulty. The best safe spaces are often also brave spaces. They protect persons while allowing ideas, assumptions, and communicative habits to be questioned (Arao & Clemens, 2013). They do not eliminate challenge; they make challenge possible. In this sense, safety and growth are not opposites. Safety is what allows growth to include risk without humiliation.

The Seven-Dimensional Safe-Space Ecology

Dimension	Core vulnerability	Design question	Integration move
Physical	The body may feel uncomfortable, exposed, immobile, unheard, or overstimulated.	How does the room invite concentration, movement, audibility, accessibility, and language practice?	Design flexible arrangements, quiet zones, visible resources, usable acoustics, and task-aligned seating.
Social	The group may judge, interrupt, dominate, exclude, or silence.	How do learners become willing to speak with and learn from one another?	Establish norms for listening, turn-taking, peer support, disagreement, feedback, and repair.
Emotional	Fear, shame, perfectionism, or anxiety may block access to competence.	How is fear reduced so that communicative risk becomes possible?	Normalize error, protect dignity, use feedforward, and separate personhood from performance.
Inner	Learners may not experience themselves as capable, legitimate, resilient, or agentic.	How do learners develop a stable inner basis for participation and growth?	Use reflection, self-efficacy routines, learner identity work, and visible progress.
Creative	Expression may feel exposing, childish, risky, or difficult to assess.	How can language become action, expression, experimentation, and play?	Use roles, storytelling, drama, writing, art, music, multimodality, rehearsal, and choice.
Cultural	Difference may become stereotype, tokenism, identity threat, or forced disclosure.	How are differences valued without essentializing or exposing learners?	Use third-space tasks, intercultural inquiry, translingual resources, respectful curiosity, and choice.
Digital-hybrid	Learners may become invisible, surveilled, excluded, distracted, or overexposed.	How can digital participation be accessible, secure, inclusive, and motivating?	Clarify consent, access, privacy, chat norms, hybrid turn-taking, recording rules, and multimodal pathways.

Note. The dimensions are analytical lenses. In practice, they interact continuously and should be designed together.

The Room 2 Grow Design Cycle

A synthesis chapter becomes useful when it gives teachers, facilitators, and learners a shared design language. The Room 2 Grow Design Cycle is proposed here as a practical framework. It can be used before a lesson, during a seminar, after a difficult moment, or when refining a chapter product. The cycle consists of seven movements: notice, afford, invite, rehearse, risk, repair, and transfer.

First, educators notice vulnerability. They ask where learners might experience threat to competence, belonging, control, dignity, identity, or access. Second, they design affordances. In ecological theory, affordances are possibilities for action perceived by learners in a given environment (Gibson, 1979; van Lier, 2004). A task affords speaking only if learners experience speaking as available and legitimate. Third, educators invite participation. Invitation differs from exposure. It creates entry points, choices, roles, and preparation. Fourth, learners rehearse. Rehearsal is not a sign of weakness; it is a safety bridge between private competence and public participation. Fifth, learners take meaningful risks. They speak, listen, perform, write, negotiate, create, disagree, and encounter difference. Sixth, the space repairs. Errors, misunderstandings, awkward silences, digital failures, and cultural tensions are treated as recoverable. Seventh, learners transfer. They carry strategies, confidence, language, and identity into new contexts.

The cycle matters because safe spaces are made in time. They are not created by a single declaration at the beginning of a course. They are created through repeated sequences of preparation, participation, feedback, reflection, and repair. A classroom becomes trustworthy when learners can predict that vulnerable moments will be handled with dignity.

The Room 2 Grow Design Cycle

Movement	Guiding question	Concrete teaching move
Notice	Where might this situation threaten competence, belonging, control, dignity, identity, or access?	Use a safe-space audit before the task. Identify the most likely threat.
Afford	What possibilities for participation does the environment actually make visible?	Offer multiple pathways: speaking, writing, rehearsing, drawing, recording, chatting, or partnering.
Invite	How can learners enter the task without sudden exposure?	Begin with private thinking time, then pair rehearsal, then voluntary or structured sharing.
Rehearse	How can practice occur before performance?	Use rehearsal ladders: self, partner, small group, whole group, public audience.
Risk	What meaningful communicative risk is worth taking here?	Keep the challenge: real interaction, authentic topic, creative product, cultural question, or feedback moment.
Repair	How will mistakes, ruptures, misunderstandings, or harm be handled?	Use feedforward, re-voicing, „try again“ routines, peer repair, apology, clarification, and reflection.
Transfer	What can learners carry into the next context?	End with a strategy, sentence, reflection card, portfolio note, or commitment to one future safe-space move.

Note. The cycle can be used as a planning, observation, reflection, or chapter-refinement tool.

Cross-Cutting Principles for All Seven Dimensions

Several principles cut across all seven dimensions. The first is anticipation. Safe spaces are designed before the vulnerable moment occurs. Waiting until a learner is humiliated is too late. Educators should establish norms, structures, alternatives, and repair routines from the beginning.

The second principle is co-creation. Teachers can design conditions, but learners help determine whether those conditions are experienced as safe. A seating arrangement, digital tool, feedback method, or creative task may feel supportive to one learner and exposing to another. Learner perception therefore matters. Safe spaces are negotiated, not imposed.

The third principle is transparency. Learners need to know what is expected, why an activity matters, how feedback will work, what counts as success, and how support can be accessed. Ambiguity can be creative, but opaque expectations often increase anxiety and inequity. Transparency reduces unnecessary threat without reducing intellectual challenge.

The fourth principle is flexibility. One participation pathway is never enough. Universal Design for Learning emphasizes multiple means of engagement, representation, and action or expression (CAST, 2024). In language education, this may include oral contributions, written chat, voice recordings, visual notes, multimodal products, rehearsal time, peer support, or asynchronous preparation. Flexibility is not lower rigor; it is wider access to rigor.

The fifth principle is criticality. Safe spaces must not become avoidance spaces where difficult topics disappear. Language education prepares learners for real communication, and real communication involves ambiguity, conflict, misunderstanding, identity, power, and cultural difference. The goal is not to remove difficulty but to provide respectful conditions for engaging it.

The sixth principle is repair. No space will be perfectly safe at every moment. A teacher may misread a situation, a peer may laugh, an activity may expose someone unintentionally, a digital platform may fail, or a cultural topic may cause harm. The quality of a safe space is visible not only in prevention but also in the speed, honesty, and care of repair.

The seventh principle is evidence of growth. Safe-space pedagogy should not remain atmospheric. Learners should see that safety helps them communicate more, revise better, take wiser risks, support others, and develop more complex identities as language users. Reflection, portfolios, drafts, peer feedback, self-assessment, and learner narratives can make growth visible (Dewey, 1933; Oxford, 2016; Zimmerman, 2002).

Excellent Transfer Ideas for Creating Safe Spaces

The following ideas are designed as transferable classroom, seminar, and teacher-education tools. They translate the synthesis into concrete practices. Each idea can be adapted to different age groups, proficiency levels, institutional contexts, and physical or digital settings.

Transfer Ideas for Integrated Safe-Space Pedagogy

Idea	How it works	Safe-space value
The Seven Doors Gallery Walk	Create seven stations, one for each dimension. Participants add one risk, one design move, and one sentence for the book chapter at each station.	Makes the whole ecology visible and prevents the dimensions from staying isolated.
Safe-Space Audit Before the Task	Before a speaking or writing task, teachers answer eight questions: Who may feel exposed? What is unclear? Where is choice possible? How will repair happen?	Moves safety from reaction to anticipation.
The Courage Ladder	Learners move from private rehearsal to pair rehearsal, small-group exchange, whole-class contribution, and public presentation.	Keeps challenge while reducing sudden exposure.
Mistake-to-Meaning Routine	After an error, the group asks: What was the intended meaning? What worked? What can be repaired? What can we learn?	Turns error culture into growth culture.
Room, Voice, Choice Cards	Before a task, learners select one room need, one voice need, and one choice need: quiet corner, partner talk, visual support, rehearsal, chat option, or more time.	Gives learners agency without allowing complete avoidance.
The Third-Space Dialogue Protocol	Learners discuss a cultural topic through texts, artifacts, and perspectives before personal disclosure is invited. Disclosure remains optional.	Protects identity while enabling intercultural inquiry.
Hybrid Hospitality Checklist	Every hybrid lesson begins with audio check, visible remote presence, chat role, shared document, turn-taking rule, and consent for recording.	Prevents remote learners from becoming peripheral or overexposed.
Inner Voice Harvest	Learners rewrite an inner critic sentence as an inner coach sentence and keep it for the next performance moment.	Connects external safety to inner agency and learner identity.
Language Action Studio	Learners create a small product: story, scene, poster, podcast, poem, performance, or visual explanation. The product must include rehearsal, feedback, and revision.	Makes language an expressive action rather than only an assessed object.
Repair Ritual	When harm, laughter, misunderstanding, or exclusion occurs, the class uses a short protocol: pause, name, clarify, repair, recommit.	Makes safe spaces credible because rupture becomes recoverable.

Note. These ideas can be used as seminar products, classroom tools, teacher-education activities, or chapter resources.

A Safe-Space Audit for Language Educators

A practical synthesis needs a tool that teachers can use quickly. The following safe-space audit can be used before planning a lesson, observing a seminar, designing a workshop, or revising a chapter product. It asks educators to examine safety across the seven dimensions without turning the process into bureaucracy.

1. **Physical:** Can learners hear, see, move, pause, access materials, and choose a position that supports participation?
2. **Social:** Are listening, turn-taking, disagreement, peer support, and feedback norms explicit and practiced?
3. **Emotional:** Are expectations clear, mistakes repairable, and feedback respectful enough to protect dignity?
4. **Inner:** Does the task help learners build self-efficacy, reflection, motivation, resilience, and learner identity?
5. **Creative:** Does the task allow experimentation, role, play, multimodality, and expression without forced exposure?
6. **Cultural:** Does the topic value difference without essentializing learners or demanding personal disclosure?
7. **Digital-hybrid:** Are access, privacy, visibility, consent, recordings, chat norms, and participation pathways clear?
8. **Synthesis:** What is the one unnecessary threat that can be reduced while keeping the meaningful challenge alive?

Assessment as a Test of Safe-Space Pedagogy

Assessment is one of the places where safe-space pedagogy either becomes credible or collapses. If assessment rewards only speed, accuracy, public performance, and isolated correctness, it may undermine the ecology of safety the teacher has tried to build. This does not mean that standards should be lowered. It means that evidence of language learning should be broadened. A learner's communicative development includes preparation, strategic risk-taking, peer support, revision, reflection, intercultural interpretation, multimodal expression, and growth over time.

Formative assessment research has long emphasized that feedback should move learning forward rather than merely classify performance (Black & Wiliam, 1998). In a safe-space framework, assessment should ask not only „How correct is the product?“ but also „What conditions helped this learner become more capable of communicating?“ Portfolios, revised drafts, recorded before-and-after performances, reflective commentaries, peer response logs, and self-assessment can document development without reducing learners to a single vulnerable moment.

A safe-space assessment culture values the process through which learners become able to communicate. It treats errors as evidence for instruction, not identity. It separates feedback from humiliation. It gives learners opportunities to use feedback. It recognizes that communicative courage, repair, revision, and intercultural responsiveness are legitimate educational outcomes. Such assessment does not make learning easier. It makes growth more visible and fairer.

Refining Seminar Products Into Book-Ready Outcomes

The synthesis session can also serve as a workshop for refining the seminar's products into book-ready outcomes. Each chapter can contribute three kinds of material. First, it can contribute a definition: a concise statement of what the specific safe-space dimension means in language education. Second, it can contribute a design principle: one transferable rule for creating that form of safety. Third, it can contribute a practice: one classroom-ready activity, routine, or protocol.

A simple editorial harvest could use the formula Definition, Principle, Practice, and Sentence. For example, the physical chapter might define physical safe spaces as sensory and material environments that invite language participation. Its principle might be flexibility before performance. Its practice might be a spatial repertoire task in which learners choose between circle, pair zone, quiet corner, or movement path. Its sentence might be: „A room becomes a safe space when learners can recognize where and how their voice may enter.“

The same format can be applied across the chapters. Social safe spaces may contribute listening norms and peer-support routines. Emotional safe spaces may contribute fear-source analysis and feedforward moves. Inner safe spaces may contribute voice cards and reflection routines. Creative safe spaces may contribute language action cards. Cultural safe spaces may contribute third-space dialogue protocols. Digital-hybrid safe spaces may contribute consent and accessibility checklists. The synthesis chapter can then show how these products form one coherent framework rather than seven separate toolboxes.

Risks, Tensions, and Ethical Guardrails

A strong synthesis should also name the tensions. Safe-space pedagogy can be misunderstood. One risk is overprotection: learners are shielded from all discomfort and therefore do not practice courage. Another risk is performative safety: the teacher declares the room safe but does not change feedback, assessment, participation, or repair practices. A third risk is individualization: learners are told to be resilient while harmful structures remain unchanged. A fourth risk is silence: difficult cultural or political issues are avoided in the name of safety. A fifth risk is digital naivety: technology is treated as inherently inclusive although it may create surveillance, distraction, inequity, or exposure.

The ethical guardrail is dignity. Safe spaces are not designed to protect learners from learning. They are designed to protect dignity while learning becomes demanding. This means that learners may be challenged, corrected, questioned, and asked to revise. They should not be ridiculed, essentialized, coerced into disclosure, publicly shamed, digitally exposed without consent, or reduced to a single performance. Dignity allows rigor to become humane.

Another guardrail is shared responsibility. Teachers have greater responsibility because they design tasks, norms, feedback, and assessment. However, learners also participate in creating the space through listening, patience, courage, peer support, and repair. Safe-space pedagogy is therefore neither teacher control nor learner comfort. It is a collaborative practice of making meaningful risk possible.

Final Conclusion

The synthesis of the seven dimensions leads to one central argument: language education needs safe spaces because language learning asks learners to risk voice before mastery. Learners must speak while unfinished, listen while uncertain, write while developing, encounter difference while still forming identity, and use technologies whose audiences and consequences are not always fully visible. In such conditions, safe spaces are not decorative. They are the ethical and pedagogical architecture of communicative growth.

Room 2 Grow can therefore be read as a design promise. It promises room for bodies, relationships, emotions, reflection, creativity, culture, and digital participation. It promises room for challenge without humiliation, feedback without shame, cultural encounter without essentialism, creativity without forced exposure, technology without exclusion, and identity development without erasure. It promises that learners do not have to be complete before they are invited to participate.

The best safe spaces are not static. They move. They begin outside the learner in rooms, groups, feedback, tasks, tools, and norms. They move between people through communication, collaboration, and care. They move inside learners as self-efficacy, motivation, resilience, and identity. They move outward again as creativity, cultural action, digital participation, and the ability to help others feel safe enough to grow. This is the deepest synthesis of the book: a safe space is not a place where learning becomes smaller. It is a place where learners become larger. A final sentence may carry the chapter forward:

Safe spaces are not the opposite of high expectations; they are the conditions under which high expectations can become reachable, dignified, and transformative.

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