

# The Influence of Affective Variables On EFL/ESL Learning and Teaching

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## **Abstract:**

*One of two domains of learning is the affective domain. It is defined as "the emotional side of human behavior. When instructional designers consider the affective domain, they frequently think only in terms of a student's motivation to learn. And motivation is certainly important, as a student's attitude toward a given course or subject area can be a contributing factor to his achievement in it. The interest in affective variables in language learning is reflected in some modern teaching stances aimed at reducing anxiety and inhibitions and enhancing the learner's motivation and self-esteem. These approaches could be identified within the so-called humanistic education. Humanistic education takes into consideration that learning is affected by how students feel about themselves. It is concerned with educating the whole person the intellectual and the emotional dimensions. EFL/ESL learning and teaching should be aimed at establishing meaningful communication in the classroom, and the first requirement towards this end is an affective affirmation of the student. Perhaps there is a need for further research to determine the effects of different approaches and methods; yet what is needed, is awareness that a focus on the subject matter of learning, is no longer enough to develop the ultimate aim of education: love of learning*

**Keyword:** Affective, EFL/ESL

## **Introduction**

Becoming bilingual is a way of life. Your whole person is affected as you struggle to reach beyond the confines of your first language and into a new language, a new culture, a new way of thinking, feeling, and acting. Total commitment, total involvement, a total physical, intellectual and emotional response is necessary to successfully send

and receive messages in a second language. (Brown, 1994: 1)

As Douglas Brown (1994) beautifully expressed it, the acquisition of a new language is a fascinating though colossal enterprise, encompassing a wide range of variables that may stem from neurological to psychological, cognitive and affective. In the early sixties, Benjamin Bloom (Krathwohl, Bloom and Masia, 1964) offered a comprehensive definition of two domains of learning: the

cognitive and the affective. Brown (1994: 135) defined the affective domain as "the emotional side of human behavior." By analogy, the cognitive domain could be defined as the mental side of human behavior. These seemingly clear-cut definitions for the two most important domains of learning, might suggest a division between cognition and affection, when indeed they are two sides of the same coin.

When instructional designers consider the affective domain, they frequently think only in terms of a student's motivation to learn. As Smith and Ragan (1999) have pointed out, "any 'cognitive' or 'psychomotor' objective has some affective component to it (if at no deeper level than a willingness to sufficiently interact with learning resources to achieve the learning)" (p. 250, parentheses in original). Motivation is certainly important, as "a student's attitude toward a given course or subject area can be a contributing factor to his achievement in it" (Edwards & Porter, 1970, p. 107).

Even when they are not explicitly stated, attitude objectives are pervasive in school work (Smith & Ragan, 1999). In each of the following examples, affective learning outcomes are linked to explicit cognitive goals. Although they may not always be aware of it, most teachers are involved in some form of attitude teaching. In some cases, attitude learning is the main objective of instruction. Anti-drug campaigns and corporate diversity training are examples of this type of attitude-focused instruction. Whether attitude learning is one component, or the

central focus, of instruction, specific instructional strategies may be employed to bring it about.

## Analysis

### 1. *Affective Issues*

The affective domain is the emotional side of human behavior, the development of affective states or feelings involves a variety of personality factors, feelings both about us and about others. The constructivist framework also includes the affective domain the student's feelings about learning, his or her confidence about learning, and the knowledge of how he/she learns best. Such issues may be addressed in the TELL environment through personalization of the program and positive feedback for the student. Student feelings may be enhanced not only through opportunities for collaboration, but also for autonomy and self-regulated learning (LeBow, 1993).

The latter should include error recovery activities that allow reasoning to flow out of a mistake, resulting in a positive feeling of empowerment, rather than the negative feeling that may result when students are simply given a correction with a judgment (LeBow, 1993). In a constructivist environment, students must be given the encouragement to guess at solutions and the freedom to feel some level of ambiguity about a given topic.

These encouragements may be provided within the program, in the absence of a facilitative in pharmacology, denoting a reaction arising as an indirect

result of drug action, as development of an infection after the normal micro flora has been altered by an antibiotic. Instructor, such supports may help students make intelligent inferences about meaning, increase tolerance for ambiguity, and provide motivation for the learner to take responsibility for his/her own learning.

Since the computer does not judge as humans do (unless judgments are built into the program), it can be a more encouraging medium for learning than a human instructor at times. Also, it can reinforce correct guessing, i.e., solidify formative ideas about a language concept through complex positive feedback, while providing encouragement that a teacher may not be able to provide, and it may do this ad infinitum, without tiring or losing patience.

Addressing the affective domain also implies a strategy-focused methodology. Students often have impoverished self-views regarding the reasons they fail. They adopt unreal explanations to preserve their self-esteem, which may result in unproductive classroom behaviors (Brandt, 1988; McCombs & Whisler, 1989). The computer may inform and prompt appropriate strategies, providing the opportunity for success in risk-taking in a judgment-free environment.

In recent years the importance of affective issues has become a matter of debate and extensive research among language teachers, linguists and researchers; and some variables were found as having a high impact on success in EFL/ESL learning. Defining the

affective variables is elusive, thus an overview of the ones considered to be influenced by the teachers attitude will be briefly described below:

#### **a. Self-Esteem**

Dr Stanley Coopersmith (1967: 4-5), defined self-esteem as a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in attitudes that the individual holds towards himself, and indicates the extent to which the individual believes in himself to be Capable, significant and worthy. Research has shown that a student who feels good about himself is more likely to succeed. Holly (1987) compiled a summary of many studies and pointed out that most indicated that self-esteem is the result rather than the cause of academic achievement. In addition, Dr Martin Covington (1989) from the University of California carried out an extensive review of the research on the relationship between self-esteem and achievement, concluding that *"self-esteem can be modified through direct instruction and that such instruction can lead to achievement gains."*

This statement is consistent with the experience of the writer, who has conducted two research projects (Andres, 1993, 1996) in the area of self-esteem, and the findings have led her to conclude that self-esteem can be modified and enhanced in the foreign language classroom, and that significant gains can be observed in the area of EFL/ESL learning. This point is considered to be of the utmost importance in the classroom: as teachers we can exert an influence both on the performance and well-being of our

students. As Brown (1994) says, good teachers succeed “because they give optimal attention to linguistic goals and to the personhood of their students.”

#### **b. Inhibition**

Inhibition is closely related to self-esteem: the weaker the self-esteem; the stronger the inhibition to protect the weak ego. Herman (1993) suggests that students with thick, perfectionist boundaries find language learning more difficult than those learners with thin boundaries who favor attitudes of openness and the tolerance of ambiguity. As Brown (1994) noted, language learning implies a great deal of self-exposure as it necessarily involves making mistakes. Due to the defense mechanisms outlined above, these mistakes can be experienced as threats to the self. It can be argued that the students arrive at the classroom with those defenses already built and that little can be done to remove them.

However, classroom experience shows that the teacher's attitude towards mistakes can reinforce these barriers creating, in the long run, learning blocks, or the self-fulfilling prophecy: “I can't do it. I 'm not good at it. In short, this produces in the learner a deep-seated fear of inadequacy and deficiency. Fortunately, we are witnessing that a growing number of language teachers are becoming increasingly aware that focusing on students' strengths rather than weaknesses is a powerful way to break down learning blocks and overcome inhibition.

#### **c. Motivation**

Brown (1994) defined motivation as an inner drive, impulse, emotion or desire that moves people to a particular action. Similarly, some psychologists define motivation in terms of needs or drives. In his famous “Pyramid of Needs”, Maslow (1970) presented his theory of motivation as a hierarchy of needs, which stem from basic physiological needs (air, food, shelter) to higher needs of safety, belonging, self-esteem, and the need for self-actualization. Maslow (1970) claimed that the last need placed at top of his “Pyramid” can only be achieved if all other needs are fulfilled.

A number of studies conducted in the field of EFL/ESL learning have shown that motivation is crucial to successful EFL/ESL learning. Crookes and Schmidt (1991) argued that intrinsic motivation, the one that stems from the interest in the activity itself independent from extrinsic reward, should be favored in the classroom. Conversely, Fontana (1988) argued that there are occasions when students 'intrinsic motivation is insufficient and recourse has to be made to motivation of an extrinsic tangible nature. Thus, it seems that balance should be kept between both stances, understanding that extrinsic motivation may be valid, useful and even necessary, but if overused, in the long run it can be detrimental to students' autonomy.

#### **d. Anxiety**

As learners we have all encountered this feeling, which is no doubt closely linked with self-esteem and inhibition. Any task that involves a certain degree of

challenge can expose the learner to feelings of self-doubt, uneasiness or fear. Behind these emotions lies the question: shall I succeed? As second language learning is a highly demanding task, it is very likely to raise anxiety in the learner. Anxiety can be considered a negative factor in language learning, and several teaching methodologies in modern approaches indicate that anxiety should be kept as low as possible.

Brown (1994) makes the distinction between trait anxieties the permanent predisposition to be anxious and state anxiety as the feeling that is experienced in relation to some particular situation.

## ***2. Affective Variables in EFL/ESL Language Teaching and Learning***

The interest in affective variables in language learning is reflected in some modern teaching stances aimed at reducing anxiety and inhibitions and enhancing the learner's motivation and self-esteem. These approaches could be identified within the so-called humanistic education. In her book *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Classroom*, Gertrude Moskovitz (1978, cited in Stevick, 1996: 24-25) states that: Humanistic education is related to a concern for personal development, self-acceptance, and acceptance by others, in other words making students be more human. Humanistic education takes into consideration that learning is affected by how students feel about themselves. It is concerned with educating the whole person the intellectual and the emotional dimensions.

. The latter is firmly rooted on The Monitor Model, the theory of language acquisition proposed by Stephen Krashen (1981 and 1985). Krashen posed that a low affective filter is necessary for acquisition to take place. The affective filter is a mental block, caused by affective factors: high anxiety, low self-esteem, low-motivation.

## **Conclusion**

If language is communication, EFL/ESL learning and teaching should be aimed at establishing meaningful communication in the classroom, and the first requirement towards this end is an affective affirmation of the student. Perhaps there is a need for further research to determine the effects of different approaches and methods; yet what is needed, is awareness that a focus on the subject matter of learning, is no longer enough to develop the ultimate aim of education: love of learning. The writer has presented her ideas not as a proponent of any one approach but as an advocate of an integration of the affective and cognitive domains in education. If we want our students to develop their inherent potential to learn, the affective variables such as anxiety, motivation, self-esteem and inhibition can no longer be denied, the inner needs of the learners can no longer be neglected.

As more holistic models based on current theory and practice are developed in addition to traditional, positivist models, wider varieties of learners may be reached in the TELL environment. Designing such instruction may optimize

the opportunity for second language acquisition by all students, as well as provide alternative options for success in the foreign language classroom.

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