

Heed their Affect before you Teach them

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ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to shed light over the importance of learner affect for the success of every foreign-language-classroom activity. It is intended to show that learner accommodating affect is a prerequisite for his involvement, engrossed enterprise, and success in foreign language learning and that the feeling of malaise is likely to thwart any of his learning endeavours. A quantitative research method has been conducted on a sample of English language learners in the Algerian middle and secondary schools. The sample bears different criteria which have all been taken into account for the sake of exhaustiveness in the study. The results obtained give evidence of the necessity to attach a paramount importance to learner affect in all foreign language teaching and learning activities to ensure success.

Key words: *affect, motivation, foreign language teaching, foreign language learning,*

Introduction

Foreign language learning and teaching is a broad research arena that tempted inquisitive psychologists, linguists and educationists directly concerned with its never-ending problematics as well as other researchers

whose disciplines touch on this human reserve. Foreign Language learning, being the ultimate target of specialists' research and insights makes the learner the core focus of all theoretical and empirical studies. The complex nature of the learner as a human being, as a sum of inextricable systems, has intrigued educationists and psychologists since yore. Their unceasing attempts to unfold the complexity of this creature led them to conceive different conceptions about it, which justifies the succession of the various theories of Learning and, thus, of teaching.

When tracking the historical development of the different theories which inform education, one feels exposed to a series of successive self-contained phases of research each of which focused on one of the components of the human individual. Each theory explored the human mind and psyche thoroughly seeking to unfold its complexities and to come out with the insights likely to ensure the most efficient learning possible. The earliest of these phases was dominated by behaviourism, the approach which restricted its concern to the individual's response automatisms and which limited the meaning of learning to that passive process that can be triggered off, conditioned and reinforced. The role of the teacher was, accordingly, to develop language mechanisms in the learner through drills, pattern practice, ready-made expressions, situational dialogues and techniques of this kind. With such limited scope of considerations, this approach proved inadequate to account for the learner's spontaneous productivity on fortuitous occasions, which paved the way to the advent of another approach to language learning.

The next trend of investigation was, then, cognitivism, the approach which shed light over the human's complex mental processing abilities per se. Cognitivism viewed the learner as a creature endowed with a system of mental capacities that allow him to understand, store, recall and manipulate knowledge. Learning, in this trend, was seen as an act of committing knowledge to memory where it is processed; a model which is analogous to the input processing in a computer system. Despite the novelty that the cognitivists brought about in the field of foreign language learning and teaching, their view of the learner as a computer-like creature left out the great endowments which would promote him to be autonomous in his conception and reaction and which were brought to the fore by the third theory, constructivism.

Constructivism impugned the absoluteness of knowledge upheld by the cognitivists and paid utter heed to the person's peculiar perception of the world. Constructivism presented the learner as an individual who is fully-fledged to construct his own perspective of the world on basis of his own

experience and schema. Learning is, thus, the process of the construction of individual perspectives of things, which unavoidably draws on personal previous knowledge.

The last approach seems to have reckoned the learner as a somewhat active agent in the learning process, yet that was not so satisfactory for the educationists and psychologists who believed that there was still much to discover about the nature of the learner that could be used to ease and improve teaching and learning. A new research endeavour was, then, launched and a new fertile area was discovered. Research has ultimately come to consider a new facet of the learner; one which has to do with his emotional side. Inspired by the humanistic view of man as an emotional being, the educational psychologists aroused a new concern in the human nature and put forth the urgent necessity to cater for the affective construct of the individual as a prerequisite to the success of all teaching-learning activity.

According to the new humanistic approach, the feelings of self-worth, motivation, comfort in the learning environment, aptitude, and satisfaction are likely to incite the learner to undertake the task of his own learning. The proponents of this approach brought to the fore a crucial requisite that determines, to a far extent, the chances of success or failure of both the teacher in his teaching enterprise and the learner in his own development. This requisite consists in affect: the sum of the emotional factors that may influence language learning and use. According to researchers, attendance to learner affect is a key that is likely to spare teachers precious effort and time and get them out of the malaise of their dissatisfaction with their teaching outcomes.

It is no doubt that self-satisfaction is the first and foremost target of any teacher. It is continually behind his insatiable search for the most relevant theoretical bearings, appropriate methods of instruction and effective teaching techniques that would meet the teaching contexts he is involved in. However, self-satisfaction, this so-aspired aim of any teacher, does not depend uniquely on his or her good will, know-how and artistry. Many teachers seem to be going mad over the very discouraging results they get against the precious efforts they spend on their classes. It is quite lamentable to see one's great efforts end at little or nothing. So is the feeling of most teachers in such bitter moments of disappointment when they see the way they approach teaching does not lead to their expected objectives. The techniques they judiciously select, carefully design and ardently implement in their classes loom unfruitful in most of the cases.

Language teachers' failure to make the learner acquire the language and use it effectively finds explanation in the resolutions reached by the humanists. The latter, through their invaluable contribution, attest that if learners fail to acquire the language, it is not necessarily because they are cognitively inapt; it is rather because they are not sufficiently motivated to do. Prior to the advent of humanism, it was long believed that the success of any learning activity is determined only by cognitive factors and that scrupulous consideration of the mental processes taking place in the mind of the learner is, on its own, enough to ensure optimal learning. However, it has been found out that that conviction is obsolete and that its day is done. Evidence has aroused the importance of considering the emotional side of the learner just as the cognitive has always relished such high consideration.

In fact, research has shown that cognition and emotion are inextricably linked. The learners' mental ability to process knowledge, acquire it, retain it and retrieve it in moment of need is that precise and well-defined aim of any educational activity. To propel it and ensure it is a whole business that consists in preparing the conditions necessary for this process to take place. It is a prerequisite to provide for the feeling of comfort, to promote the experiential well-being of the learner before exposing him to any input. To get him affectively disposed to any learning task is likely to involve him as a whole person in the learning process and thus optimize his intake. Reciprocally, the successful processing of the input, including right understanding, firm retention and easy retrieval of data, is likely to be very encouraging for the learner. The subsequent positive feeling of proficiency is, on its part, an incentive to pursue further learning. It is likely to enhance the individual's affective engagement with learning. Cognition and affect are mutually enhancing.

The present study is meant to demonstrate the importance of attending to the learner positive affect, by teachers, as a prerequisite for the success of the course of learning. To the stated end, three research questions have been posited:

- 1- Does learner affect bear on his involvement in or departure from the learning activity?*
- 2- Does learner affect have any impact on data-processing in the mind?*
- 3- How does affect bear on the knowledge stored in memory?*

The primary concern of this research work is to highlight the vital role of affect in each phase of the learning cycle. To this end, some hypotheses have been suggested as tentative answers to the questions above:

- 1- *Learner affect functions as a selective filter that sieves the language data to be let in as an intake.*
- 2- *Learner positive affect can be an incentive that speeds up the processing of knowledge just as the negative can simply thwart it.*
- 3- *The learner tends to keep data that is affect-laden. Knowledge that does not affect learner emotions tends to be forgotten quickly.*

The ultimate aim behind the present study is to draw foreign-language teachers' attention to the fact that the success of their enterprise is highly contingent on the learner's optimal affective disposition. The classroom environment, the teaching material and all types of interaction that may take place among the class components have to be closely heeded and made the most accommodating to ensure the learner's full engagement, engrossment and performance in the learning activity, conditions that are so vital for the success of their teaching.

Theoretical Framework

The issue of the necessity to attend to the learner affect in education is reported to be rooted in the remote past which reaches back to the Medieval Ages or maybe further. St. Augustine who lived a bad experience being goaded to learn a second language forcibly, contended that "clearly free-ranging curiosity leads to more successful learning than do pressure and fear." (St Augustine in Jane Arnold 2011), meaning that, if left on his own, the learner's restive inquisitiveness is, on its own, enough to drive him toward acquiring the second language. Carl Rogers, the father founder of the humanistic psychology in the 1950s, brought to the fore the necessity to attend to the learner's affective construct to pave the way to learning to take place. He says, "when the teacher has the ability to understand the student's reactions from the inside, has a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seems to the student, then again the likelihood of significant learning is increased." (Carl Rogers 1969 in Fred Zimring 1994). The advent of the humanistic approach in the field of language education and the elaboration of the self-contained branch of humanistic psychology heralded the advent of an era where researchers had to overhaul their previous resolutions about the nature of the human learner and the surest approaches to make his learning the most successful and where learner affect started gaining more and more ground in the domain of education. Krathwohl D. R. (1964) developed a whole taxonomy of the affective educational objectives to set for any attempt of the

development of the human individual. The taxonomy orders the learner's affective reactions to the learning situation since his exposure, on through the the mental processes that take place in the working memory, till the installation of the new affective value system. The taxonomy proved of a great contribution to the advance of foreign language learning and teaching in particular. Gertude Moscovitz (1978) asserted that "Affective education is effective education" (Moscovitz G. 1978:14) Stevick E. highlights the importance of the psychological assets of the learner and the interpersonal rapports among the class components over the physical constituents of the learning context. He says, "Success in language learning depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom. (Stevick E. 1980:4) Zoltan Dornyei developed a whole theory around the inner and outer drives likely to engage the learner. He says that "motivation is one of the determinants of Second and Foreign language learning achievement. (Dornyei Z. 1994) Deci and Rayan evoked the idea that the suitable learning environment is a condition for the success of learning. They claim that "when the educational environment provides optimal challenges, rich sources of stimulation and a context of autonomy, this motivational wellspring in learning is likely to flourish. (Deci E.L. and Ryan R.M. in Dornyei Z. 1994) Jane Arnold, who is well-known for her studies of learner affect, upholds the belief that "positive affect can provide invaluable support for learning just as negative affect can close down the mind and prevent learning from occurring altogether. (Jane Arnold 2011).

Research methodology

The present empirical study is intended to probe learner affect right since his readiness to be exposed to the teaching material on till his retention or loss of the taught items. The subjects of the study can be categorized into groups of pupils who differ in their levels of proficiency in the English language, in age, and in social class. The three criteria are estimated to be so significant factors that influence pupils' schooling in general and language learning in particular. The consideration of difference in proficiency in the English language generates at least two distinct groups of learners: the well-performing and the ill-performing. Both categories' contribution to the study is important. The ill-performing pupils are expected to reveal data about the affective factors that lie behind their failure and that call for remedial measures just as the well-performing pupils are supposed to show evidence of emotional drives that are worth-fostering. Besides, age determines, to a great

extent, the learner's affective reactions to the different components of the foreign language learning situation: the target language itself, the classmates, the teacher, the material and the classroom atmosphere in general. Accordingly, the early-class pupils as well as those of the high school are incorporated in the study. The variety of the responses about their diverse affective behaviours is certainly so informative. Concerning the third criterion, for the pupils coming from high-class families, wealth implies many things: the possibility to afford language learning aids such as computers, recorders, books, magazines and things alike. It could even imply the availability of practice of foreign languages such as French, the second language in the Algerian context, by the family members. This could pave the way to another foreign language learning, particularly English which it is even more prestigious to be able to speak. For the pupils coming from low-class families, poverty is synonymous to deprivation of many facilitating means, thus less opportunity for exposure to foreign languages and less opportunity for practice. For another assumption, it is generally held in poor family circles that foreign languages are a sign of luxurious life and a high-class reserve.

To account for all the categories of pupils delimited by the three criteria that have been considered in sampling, a quantitative research method seemed the most likely to ensure objectivity and exhaustiveness. An all-encompassing investigation work makes it possible to generalize the findings. This is the rationale that underpins the choice of the quantitative method.

Research design

The tool used in this study is a questionnaire that comprises twenty questions formulated in Arabic. The intent behind this was not to exclude the low-leveled English learners from the study. Their weakness in English would undoubtedly prevent them from understanding the questions and therefore from answering appropriately; whereas their mastery of their mother tongue allows them to understand and answer the questions easily. Even for pupils of relatively accepted proficiency, the open format questions need some free expression and consequently require some vocabulary and structure which have to be terse and emphatic, thus it proved more appropriate to set the questionnaire in Arabic to make it easier for them to find succinct expressions in the mother tongue to speak out their feelings and ideas.

The sum of the questions can be divided up into three sections. The first in intended to explore the learners' affective disposition to learning English as they gradually examine learners' attitudes towards the English language, English learning, their motivation, conceptions of the ideal teacher of English, attitudes towards the present teacher, their feelings in the English language classes and finally the consistency between their predefined needs and the English language input they find themselves exposed to. The pupils' responses to this set of questions are supposed to reveal promising information about their preliminary affective disposition that is so vital for their involvement in the learning activity. Their responses to the questions posed in this phase is to either confirm or refute the hypothesis that the learner's affective readiness definitely condition his feeling of comfort in the learning situation and, therefore, his maximal intake of the material exposed to him. The second section is meant for depicting the learners' affective reactions to the data right during the processing phase and the subsequent resolutions and decisions they conceive and take during the learning process. The information collected at this phase is to meet the second assumption which is about the way affect affects the very processing of the language data in the mind. The third section is meant to discover the way learners affect influences their memories of the English language learning experiences. The subjects' responses to this set of questions are expected to be so revealing as to the validity of the third assumption. It has been hypothesized that pupils generally keep memories of their previous English classes that are affect-laden experiences the retrieval of which still instigate some emotions of either satisfaction or discomfort.

The sample

The sample consists of 339 pupils from Middle and Secondary schools. In the middle school, a class was selected from each of the four forms. Choice was done at random, yet the variety of teachers was considered so as to allow for variety of views in some particular questions in the questionnaire. The pupils of the middle-school classes total 169 with the number in each class varying between 41 and 43. In the secondary school, two classes were chosen from the first form, and the three others were terminal. Beside the variety of teachers, the variety of streams was taken into account, for the importance attached to English as a subject is contingent on the coefficient and number of sessions scheduled per week for each stream. The two first-level classes include 75 pupils: 36 in the scientific and 39 in the literary. The terminal classes were the foreign-languages class including 24; the literature-and-philosophy including 32 and the scientific with 37. With the contribution of

the teachers of the selected classes two categories of pupils were segregated on basis of their results in tests and exams. The first category is composed of 204 ill-performing pupils whose involvement in English is attested, by their teachers of course, to be unsatisfactory and whose proficiency is assessed as very limited. The second category consists of 135 pupils with acknowledged engagement and relatively agreed performance.

The questionnaire handouts were secretly marked into two different sets with colourful dots put at the bottom of the questionnaire and graduated from right to left starting in the dark colour in the first set and with the light in the second. The two different markings are so unnoticeable that pupils cannot pay attention to the difference. The handouts were distributed with the help of the teachers who know well their pupils and their level in English. The subjects have been ensured full anonymity and convinced of the importance of a painstaking contribution to the success of the operation on their part.

Findings

The questionnaire conducted with the pupils in the different streams of the different levels of the middle and secondary stages of education has been so revealing; the findings that it has yielded are very significant and the figures very emphatic. It has allowed the confirmation of the hypotheses put forth ahead and the perpetuation of the belief that affect does have decisive and effective roles in English language learning.

The division of the pupils into two categories: one including the ill-performing pupils and the other including the well-performing, which was made with the contribution of the teachers according to pupils' grades, has been of a great benefit. It has allowed the establishment of a strongly evident rapport between pupils' affect and their level of proficiency in the English language relatively to their classes. This distinction has revealed pertinent relevance between pupils' different attitudes towards English language, English learning as well as the components of the learning context on the one hand, and their disposition, engagement and enterprise of the learning activity and ultimately their success or failure on the other.

Discussion

The figures obtained after the questionnaire reveal, by and large, that the first category, the one including the ill-performing pupils, shows strong evidence of their negative affect towards English learning and, subsequently, hesitation in few cases and complete avoidance tendency in

most. Through their sequenced responses, they appear to keep at hostile stances from English classes, their teacher, their classmates and the learning tasks they happen to be assigned. It appears plain that their negative attitudes have resulted in harmful dissociation from the learning activity and entrained unsatisfactory results in performance. Negative affect, whatever sources it may stem from, appears to spawn very destructive effects on learners' enterprise, cripple their endeavour and condemn them to bad results.

The results got in the well-performing category, on the other hand, demonstrate the proportional rapport between pupils' positive affect and their readiness, engagement, and engrossment in English language learning. These results simply complement those obtained in the category of the ill-performing pupils. Maybe the first point to cite in support of the broad deduction is that all the pupils of this section answered the questionnaire, which intimates that goodwill and initiative are deeply rooted in them and gives proof of highly positive affective disposition not only to English learning but to any activity in relevance to it. Their contribution to the success of the questionnaire is a plain exemple. This category informants suggest plainly through their answers that it is their upheld affect that led them to attain satisfactory grades. Their attitudes towards English learning vary between liking and fondness; they report to enjoy English classes and take pleasure in doing learning tasks; they find abundant sources of help in their teachers and of encouragement in their classmates; they show readiness to undertake any topic they happen to find themselves exposed to, and special longing to be engrossed in topics relevant to their aspirations. All of them report to keep memories of past English classes, and gay ones precisely. All these attitudes explain eloquently their involvement and engrossment in the learning enterprise and provide strong evidence that good affect is behind their success in English learning.

Recommendations

The present study advocates that it is of a paramount importance to work on the learner's affective traits and provide for their optimal predisposition before exposing him to any foreign language education activity. The consideration of learner affect has been proved to condition his involvement, enterprise and success; its neglect undoubtedly binds any teaching endeavour to failure.

It falls to the teacher to optimize foreign language learners' predisposition and receptivity. The methods and techniques he has to set must attend pre-

eminently to their affective readiness, involvement and engrossing enterprise. The selection of the language material to teach, the methodical stratagems to implement and the metacognitive concerns to be acquired are all to be designed in ways which appeal to the learners' affective personality traits and situational states. The success of any method within this vein is measured against the extent to which it involves the learners affectively, optimizes their receptivity for the language input and engrosses them in a progressive acquisition process.

The precept which underlies the present insights is that the best form can language material take, it is not so sure it finds way into the learner's mind. One could put the input into the most eloquent and mistake-free form but for no learning to take place. There is a subtle reality governing the learning event. Every practitioner should beware this. Language input can never be designed in isolation from the learner. It should rather be designed in full accordance with his stable and fluctuating affective characteristics. A whole business is to precede the exposure of the learner to the input. It is incumbent on the teacher to provide for a positive classroom environment, to be, himself, positive and encouraging, to redress learners' attitudes into ones of acceptance and engagement, and to concoct the language input in ways that hold up learners' sense of aptitude, self-esteem, flow and satisfaction. If these prerequisites are properly met, the learner engrossment will be sure and his success surer.

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