The Affective Filter in Second Language Teaching

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Abstract

Language learning is a process that involves both objective and affective factors. This paper introduces the concept of affective filter which has four factors, and then argues how to make use of them in SLT. By analyzing this topic, second language teachers can find a better way to conduct their teaching.

Keywords: Affective, Filter, Input, SLT

1. Introduction

In addition to some objective factors, there are also some affective factors in language learning that are like a filter which filtrates the amount of input in learners' brains. People with high affective filter will lower their intake whereas people with low affective filter allow more input into their language acquisition device. Affective filter hypothesis is first proposed by Dulay and Burt (1977), and is incorporated by Krashen as one of his five input Hypotheses in 1985. Krashen argued that people acquire second languages only if they obtain comprehensible input and if their affective filters are low enough to allow the input 'in'. In his theory, affect includes motivation, attitude, anxiety, and self-confidence. His main viewpoints are as follows:

- A raised affective filter can block input from reaching LAD

- A lowered affective filter allows the input to "strike deeper" and be acquired

- The affective filter is responsible for individual variation in SLA

- Note that the affective filter is not an issue for first language acquisition: children don't have it/use it

Although there are some critiques of this input hypothesis, affective factors are seen to play an important role in acquiring a L2. Comprehensible input may not be utilized by L2 acquirers if there is a "mental block" that prevents them from fully profiting from it. The affective filter acts as a barrier to acquisition. The filter is up when the acquirer is unmotivated, lacking in confidence, or concerned with failure. The filter is down when the acquirer is not anxious and is trying to become a member of the group speaking.

2. Affective factors in SLA

Krashen has mentioned that there are mainly four factors that can influence the SLA which are responsible for the individual variation.

2.1 Motivation

Most researchers and educators would agree that motivation "is a very important, if not the most important factor in language learning", without which even 'gifted' individuals cannot accomplish long-term goals, whatever the curricula and whoever the teacher. In terms of the definition of motivation, recent educational theory has tended toward the interpretation of Gardner (1985) defining motivation to learn an L2 as "the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity". So the motivation of SLA refers to the desire and impetus of the acquirers. Gardner and Krashen point out that there are two motivations, integrative one and instrumental one. With the former motivation, the L2 acquirers are interested in the target language and willing to participate in that social life. But with the latter motivation, the L2 acquirers only want to pass some examination, go overseas to study, travel or be promoted. We can easily see that these two motivations are positive and negative to the SLA respectively.

2.2 Attitude

Collins Cobuild Student's Dictionary explains that: "Your attitude to something is the way you think and feel about it". Psychological theories on attitudes refer to an evaluative, emotional reaction (i.e. the degree of like or dislike associated with the attitudinal object) comprising three components: affect, cognition, and behaviour. How attitude influences the SLA are shown as follows:

2.2.1 The acquirers with positive attitude tend to learn L2 easily and with rapid progress; while those with negative attitude make slowly progress.

2.2.2 Attitude decides the commitment. Those who give up halfway are probably passive with lower commitment whose achievements are lower than those positive and persistent learners.

2.2.3 Attitude influences the class participation. The students with positive learning attitude perform actively and can have high grade.

2.3 Anxiety

From the SLA perspective, Gardner & MacIntyre (1993) see language anxiety as "the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient", this apprehension being characterised by "derogatory self-related cognitions ..., feelings of apprehension, and physiological responses such as increased heart rate". There are correlations between anxiety and performance. Foreign language classroom anxiety has three types:

2.3.1 Communication apprehension

Communication apprehension (CA) has been defined as an "individual level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons". The question of communication apprehension becomes increasingly important. It is a prevalent impairing and chronic condition, and it has been one of mental health condition that afflicts L2 acquirers' achievement.

General personality traits such as quietness, shyness, and reticence frequently precipitate CA. When the ability and desire to participate in discussion are present, but the process of verbalizing is inhibited, shyness or reticence is occurring. The degree of shyness, or range of situations that it affects, varies greatly from individual to individual.

About one of every five persons--20 percent of all college students--is communication apprehensive. Communication apprehensive people may not appear apprehensive unless they are engaging in a particular type of communication.

2.3.2 Test anxiety

Test anxiety is a psychological condition in which a person experiences distress before, during, or after an exam or other assessment to such an extent that this anxiety causes poor performance or interferes with normal learning.

Test anxiety can develop from a number of reasons. There may be some prior negative experience with test taking that serves as the activating event. Students who have experienced, or have a fear of, blanking out on tests or the inability to perform in testing situations can develop anticipatory anxiety. Worrying about how anxiety will affect you can be as debilitating as the anxiety itself. This kind of anxiety can build as the testing situation approaches, and can interfere with the student's ability to prepare adequately. Lack of preparation is another factor that can contribute to test anxiety. Poor time management, poor study habits, and lack of organization can lead to a student feeling overwhelmed. Students who are forced to cram at the last minute will feel less confident about the material covered than those who have been able to follow a structured plan for studying. Being able to anticipate what the exam will cover, and knowing all the information has been covered during the study sessions, can help students to enter the testing situation with a more positive attitude. Test anxiety can also develop genetically.

Lack of confidence, fear of failure, and other negative thought processes may also contribute to test anxiety. The pressure to perform well on exams is a great motivator unless it is so extreme that it becomes irrational. Perfectionism and feelings of unworthiness provide unreasonable goals to achieve through testing situations. When a student's self-esteem is too closely tied to the outcome of any one academic task, the results can be devastating. In these situations, students may spend more time focusing on the negative consequences of failure, than preparing to succeed.

2.3.3 Fear of negative evaluation

The feeling of negative evaluation accompanying anxiety is defined as being overly concerned with others' opinions, hiding from the negative feelings of their unfavorable impressions, avoiding situations where there is potential evaluation, and expecting others to have a low opinion of them.

Fear of negative evaluation occurs when L2 learners feel that they are not able to make the proper social impression. It is an apprehension about others' evaluation, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation. Fear of negative evaluation itself was found to be a strong source of language anxiety.

2.4 Self-confidence

L2 acquirers' personality factors relate a lot to the learning effect. Among the personality factors, self-confidence is the most important one. Those who have enough self-confidence and positive personal image succeed more. Self-confident people dare to adventure, to communicate in foreign language and can gain more. While those who lack self-confidence will lose the chances to practice their target language, for they are afraid of losing face and making mistakes.

3. How to make use of Affective filter hypothesis in second language teaching

3.1 Analyze students' learning motivation, motivate them, and help them possess a positive attitude

Some students have very poor performance on the L2, only because they have little or not enough motivation for it and there are mainly five reasons: 1) no interest. 2) No confidence. 3) Teacher's inappropriate teaching method. 4) Some negative national emotions against the target language. 5) Students think it no use to learn.

From the above reasons we can see that teachers can motivate students' learning motivation. First teachers should cultivate their interest in L2, as we all know interest is the best teacher. Teachers should introduce more diversified teaching method, use vivid and humorous language to enlighten students, create a harmonious and light atmosphere for learning, and regularly introduce some culture and background knowledge of the target language. Then more language practice is needed to inspire students' motivation, such like speaking contest, improvised speech, informal discussion with foreign language teachers, and some parties. If possible, teachers also can help students attend some social activities where they can use their target language, through which students can know their advantages and disadvantages, can know what they can do and what they can not do, and then can have a clear idea of the future SLA. It is also very important to create more chances for students to practice in the classroom. Students can be encouraged to design and organize classroom activities, which can not only inspire them but also help them better understand and consolidate what they have got and increase their efficiency. When students have both interest and motivation for the L2, they can naturally develop a positive attitude toward L2 which will help their SLA.

3.2 Boost up students learning confidence and lower their language anxiety

As is talked above, self-confidence plays a very import role in SLA. The cultivation of self-confidence depends on students themselves and teachers' help as well. Teachers should let students have the feeling that they can learn a L2 well by using more encourage and praise. Classroom atmosphere is very important, which should be delighted, lively, friendly and harmonious that can help students overcome their psychological barrier, and lower their anxiety. Teachers also should tolerate some small mistakes made by students only if those mistakes do not affect the communication process, because it can release pressure and strengthen their self-confidence. In the classroom, teachers should not only encourage students' active participation but be patient with and allow their keeping quiet. There is little use pushing or forcing them to say something they are unwilling or not ready to say. On the contrary, it can only bring more mental burden. So teachers should teach students in accordance of their individual variations.

To be more exact, some of the factors that can reduce classroom communication apprehension include: Taking time to allow classmates to get to know each other, particularly at the beginning of the year; Creating a warm, welcoming classroom environment; Promoting group projects and group discussions; Letting shy children work with whom they feel most comfortable; Encouraging social and oral activities as opposed to just pen and paper assignments.

4. Conclusion

Karshen's affective filter hypothesis is of great practical effects for SLA. Teachers can find out the effective teaching tactics which can cultivate the students' active learning affective factors through the analysis on the inner connection between the students' affective factors and L2 learning. It is found that good L2 acquires have common qualities. They have strong desire or motivation for that language; they are positive in language practicing and managing; they can adapt themselves to different language learning environments; they can overcome language anxiety; they are self-confident in the SLA process. By analyzing those common characters, L2 teacher can find some better ways to conduct their teaching and to be an efficient language teacher.

Therefore, the teaching effect is far from satisfaction, which not only results from the text book, the teacher's quality, the difficult theory but also has connection with the learners' affective factors. The ignorance of the relationship between the students' affective factors and their learning will have negative influence on the teaching and learning effect. So only teachers pay attention to the role of the students' affect in L2 teaching can the learning effect be guaranteed and can the value of L2 teaching be revealed.

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