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Current perspectives of teaching English through affective learning strategies

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Abstract

This paper explores the current perspectives of teaching English taking into consideration the benefits of applying affective learning strategies. Affective strategies are a set of techniques that seek to facilitate learning by lessening the affective filter and increasing motivation to face language anxiety. The paper revises the latest discussions about the elements of the affective domain and how addressing them could increase learners' opportunities to participate more meaningfully in the learning process of acquiring and developing the skills in a foreign language.

Keywords: Affective strategies, social strategies, affective domain, learning objectives.

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1. Introduction

New educational trends are highlighting the impact of emotions and feelings in students' learning process and how addressing this affective-social aspect could improve students' performance and results. Actually, what the new trends are doing is attempting to consider the three domains of learning: the cognitive or thinking domain, the psychomotor or kinaesthetic domain and the affective or feeling domain. This paper focuses on the third domain and its factors, as well as on suggesting some ideas to introduce affective strategies into the EFL classroom setting.

The affective domain is all the feelings and emotions that affect, directly or indirectly, the learning process. Oxford (2011) claims the stronger the connections between emotions and learning, the better knowledge will be stored. As teachers of English as a Foreign Language, we need to consider these domains to address the development of our students' language skills in a holistic way. In addition, the taxonomies related to the domains help set realistic and observable learning objectives for our students. According to Henter (2014), there has been an increasing concern about the affective domain in the last few years. The author revised articles related with the acquisition of foreign languages in seven on-line international databases from 2002 to 2012. She found that motivation, attitude and anxiety were the three words more researched on this regard. As a result, Henter addresses these words as affective factors. Nevertheless, she is not the first author to coin this term since Elli (1194) had addressed empathy and anxiety as aspects that influence the affective domain of learning. The revision of the affective factors will clarify the importance of addressing them when teaching English as a Foreign Language.

2. Motivation

Cambridge Dictionary Online defines this factor as the enthusiasm for doing something. It is said to be the 'main determinant in Foreign Language Learning' (Dornyei cited by Henter, 2014). However, this element of the affective domain might vary during the learning process, in other words, it could be lost or regained. That is why it is necessary to bear in mind which behaviours might produce the loss or increase of motivation. Song and Kim (2017) researched on the factors influencing demotivation and re-motivation in 64 Korean high school EFL students. They found that 23% of students claim to have their motivation reduced due to ineffective teaching methods, learning difficulties and social pressure—negative attitudes towards the L2—while 20% of the population pointed that some external and internal factors contributed to the re-motivation effect. The external factors involved changing study methods—from memorisation to more engaging techniques—being inspired by a classmate, whereas the internal factors included awareness of the importance of the English language, interest in the English culture and experiences of success.

3. Attitude

It is the disposition our students have to face a task, and it might be positive or negative. Smiths' view of attitudes (cited by Henter, 2014) states that attitudes can be learnt and taught and they can be situational and generalised to other events. In other words, EFL teachers could promote positive attitudes towards learning a foreign language by talking about the advantages of the English language in the world, introducing interesting aspects of the English culture and providing rewarding learning experiences as have been found in Song and Kim's (2017) research.

4. Language anxiety

It is a type of anxiety related to the 'uniqueness of the process of learning a foreign language' (Horwith, 2001). This language anxiety might be good if it encourages students to take risks when using the target language, but if it does not let students interact in the L2, then it is negatively affecting learners' ability to learn. As a result, it is important to teach students how to handle those

feelings so that their anxiety does not affect their learning. Affective strategies could be a great solution. For example, Rohani (2008) discovered that students' performance improved and their anxiety level decreases after teaching the reading skill through a cognitive-affective based approach.

5. Empathy

The definition of empathy, according to the Cambridge Dictionary Online, is the 'ability to share someone else' feelings and experiences' as if they were yours. This ability is necessary for the relationships that take place in the EFL classroom. That is why teachers need to create a safe learning environment with their learners. Teaching empathy in the classroom might increase students' opportunities to succeed in school (Wilson & Conyers, 2017). Habte-Gabr (2006) found that when instructors established a safe learning environment, students are less shy to speak and more open to being corrected. In a similar study, Rossiter (2003) concluded that affective strategy instruction has better results when introduced in positive EFL settings.

6. Affective strategies

According to Oxford (2011), affective strategies help students directly 'optimise their emotions, beliefs, attitudes and motivation for the purpose of L2 learning'. The findings of the aforementioned studies stress the need to teach students some strategies to deal with difficulties when learning a foreign language. Ushioda (cited by Song & Kim, 2017) lists four strategies that might help our students keep their motivation on healthy levels: 'focusing on incentives, using goal-oriented self-regulation, seeking temporary relief and talking about difficulties with others to remain motivated as a group'. Moreover, Wilson claims the following five strategies could be used to foster empathy in the classroom:

- Modelling positive strategies
- Teaching how to deliver and receive points of view
- Using literature to teach different perspectives
- Listening actively to others
- Being metacognitive about one's state of empathy

Clinton (2015) found there is a connection between reading motivation and the reading comprehension skill. After applying a curriculum based on critical thinking during 4 years, Hu, Jia, Plucker and Shan (2016) concluded that the characteristics of such curriculum influenced on the development of deep motivation of primary school students.

7. Conclusions

This paper has attempted to raise the awareness of introducing our students to affective learning strategies as useful techniques to overcome the challenges inherent to the learning process. The probabilities of applying these strategies increase when students acquire them in a safe and positive learning environment and when they can reflect on these regards with their peers and teachers.

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