AFFECTIVE ISSUES AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract:
Nowadays, second language learning is not merely a matter of pure educational framework, including materials and teaching methods. It deeply transcends these ‘conventional’ aspects to include other equally important factors like the socio-psychological implications, namely the affective ones. In the present paper, the researcher will shed light on key affective and motivational issues underlying second language learning. First, the focus will be on the socio-psychological implications of this learning, especially the kind of motivational drives and processes therein. Second, affective issues in connection with attitudinal conceptions – namely students’ attitudes toward themselves, the subject matter, the teacher, and the learning context – will be thoroughly discussed. The third part will dedicated to students’ either field–independent or field–dependent personality toward the learning/teaching environment, and the decisive role of the teacher to provide the particular needed structure, or guidance and support, to help students challenging their pre–dominant personality traits toward achieving a successful educational attainment.

Keywords: affective issues; motivation; attitudes; learning styles; multiple intelligence.

Introduction
It is commonly known in educational circles that affective factors are very critical to effective learning. Despite their crucial importance, they seem to be the least considered by most teachers. When the learning process does not lead to the pre–expected educational attainments, teachers, and educational authorities in general, will seek to find answers and solutions in the nature of the subject matter, the materials needed, the techniques and methodology followed…etc. Nevertheless, the key tool to deal with school achievement and success would be, primarily, to evaluate and re–evaluate students’ attitudinal and motivational drives toward the learning environment as a whole.

Compared with other educational factors, affective ones tend to be the most difficult to define and measure, which creates a major challenge for most teachers. However, for a very effective learning environment, it is extremely inevitable to deal with such factors, using every possible operational instrument at teachers’ disposal. The use of such relevant means and techniques like interviews with students, questionnaires, students’ profiles…, has proven to be very effective in assessing students’ general affect status. There are, of course, several components that constitute the essence of the affect in a second–language learning environment. However, in the present paper, the principal focus will be on motivation, and implied attitudes, as the essential, interconnected affective determinants in our school environment as a whole.

1. Motivation and Attitudinal Conceptions
1.1. Motivation
In general, and within the educational context, motivation refers to that inner drive, the feeling of intent or desire that causes students to learn or study. Psychological studies have shown that there exists, within each child/learner, an initial reservoir of motivation for learning,
as it has been noticed in most children in kindergartens. In fact, there seems to be no racial or cultural differences in these children’s initial love and aspiration for learning, especially in their early grades. The more they feel themselves respected and cared for by the family, the teacher, the peers, and the school environment as a whole, the more productive and achieving they will be in their educational attainments. However, it has been noticed that the more students advance through their schooling, the less their excitement and motivation for learning will be. This holds true whether we are dealing with an ESL class, a social studies class, a science class…etc.

Students’ motivations in an ESL class – or any other class – are closely interconnected with other socio–psychological parameters, namely their attitudes toward themselves, the subject studied (English language in our case), and the teacher (see fig. 1).

1.2. Students Attitudes toward Themselves

Socio–psychological studies have shown that motivation depends primarily on self–perception or self–image, which is a complex set of beliefs and convictions that a student holds ‘true’ about himself/herself. This self–image develops primarily out of the student’s interactions with others, and the way he/she feels these others perceive and treat him/her. There is no doubt that a positive self–image is a necessary factor toward school success, while a negative self–concept almost guarantees bad educational achievement. In terms of ESL classes in the United States, for instance, the case of many Hispanic students and the supposedly negative self–concept they hold about themselves within the mainstream culture, highly influences their motivation for learning English. Dr. Eugene E. Garcia, professor of education and psychology, and ex–Dean of the College of Education at Arizona State University, sums up this Hispanic odd situation in ten words: “culturally diverse we are, equal and united we are not!” (Garcia, 2001:15). The EST teacher’s task is monumental in this case. He/she must do all he/she can to help students overcome and change their negative self–concept, by letting them first discover themselves and their potential.

More important, an ESL teacher should avoid becoming a negative motivator by fostering the student’s perception of himself/herself. The teacher, for instance, should avoid negative comments to the student or about the student, such as “you know him – he’s a hopeless case,” “her entire family is that way – dumb,” “it’s not my fault if they bring these attitudes to my class,” or “you can’t make a sculpture out of mud.” (Henson, 1988). In fact, this does not seem to be the point. The teacher has to provide a positive class environment in which students can believe in themselves, discover their strengths and experience their potentialities. In fact, a positive self–perception or self–image most probably leads to a positive educational attainment.

1.3. Students Attitudes toward the Subject

Whether we are dealing with an ESL class or any other class, students, largely speaking, are divided into two main categories: those who love and long for the subject studied, and those who simply hate it or, to put it mildly, do not respond to it. There are, of course, many individual, psychological, social, cultural, and pedagogical factors underlying such a motivational phenomenon, but we will concentrate on three out of them, which seem to be of great significance:

a. Learning Styles

A learning style is “that consistent pattern of behavior and performance by which an individual approaches educational experiences…It is formed in the deep structure of neural
organization and personality that molds and is molded by human development and the cultural experiences of home, school, and society” (Keefe and Languis, 1983:1). A learning style, then, is part of the learner’s worldview that comprehends cognitive, affective, and psychological behaviors and their interconnections with the learning environment. In other words, a specific learning style reflects the typical process a student uses to absorb information, solve problems, and create ideas, along with the thoughts and feelings associated with such a process.

Experienced ESL/EFL teachers have directly or indirectly noticed that students exhibit different learning styles or preferences. This explains why some students tend to be very receptive and enthusiastic vis-à-vis certain teaching methods, while others show some kind of resistance or disinterest. The major problem facing students, within this respect, is learning style mismatches, that is, when they face serious problems to match their learning styles with specific class norms and requirements.

The teacher’s task is, again, very crucial in this situation. He/she must use tremendous efforts to have at least a general idea about each student, or each group of students’ common learning styles, so that he/she could develop versatile teaching methodologies and strategies accordingly. In other words, and for a good motivational learning environment, the teacher must be more flexible, by using a variety of teaching styles to respond to the diversity of learning styles among his/her students. Depending on whether a student or a group of students are, for example, sensing–thinkers (logical), intuitive–thinkers (analytical), sensing–feelers (collaborative), or intuitive–feelers (creative) (Jung 1971), the teacher may develop a multitude of lesson plans to affirm different ESL/EFL students in their dominant, preferred or practiced learning styles and intelligences. The teacher, via the same process, will challenge his/her students to overcome their liabilities by using their less dominant or practiced preferences. Most of the time, teachers expect their students to learn the same way they did, which is one of the fallacious educational misconceptions that might have detrimental effects on the class environment.

b. Multiple Intelligence

According to Howard Gardner (1985), multiple intelligence refers to the human potential for learning as shaped by cultures and different kinds of contents and disciplines in the world. Learners, therefore, have not one single, fixed intelligence, but various combinations of eight basic intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. Each learner is stronger in some rather than others, and he/she can easily learn a second language or any other subject according to his/her own strengths. And here, one again, the teacher’s responsibility is crucial.

In terms of classroom management, the teacher can make use of the above multiple intelligence approach to explore his/her students’ learning potential and, using a variety of strategies, manage difficult learners. In an ESL class, for instance, to help students learn English easily, and master different language skills, the teacher can make use of his/her students’ different and diversified intelligences. For a learner or learners with logical-mathematical strengths, for example, the teacher may use logical and argumentative thinking; for those who have strong bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, the teacher might use exclusively a communicative approach/strategy basically built on role–play and artistic interaction; for interpersonal learners, the best way to learn English will be principally through group and pair work…etc. Of course, no one single technique or strategy works all the time for all ESL learners. The teacher must be constantly adjusting, shifting, and searching for the best ways to reach his/her students, and to maintain creative classroom environment leading to constructive ESL learning.
c. Relevance

Nowadays, we find most students talking and discussing about the relevance or usefulness of such and such subject or class. Of course, their concern stems partly from reality and to what extent their learning is related to practical aspects and problems in real life. In an ESL class, one of the most important theme is the relevance of studying English initially. The ESL teacher will have no problem to enumerate tens of motives and advantages to learn English. It is of great interest here, and for the benefit of students’ positive motivation, that the ESL teacher talks about his/her own experience and reasons for choosing English as a field of study. The teacher may also ask students to list all the possible reasons and advantages for learning English. This kind of technique is undoubtedly an effective motivator for students’ positive involvement in an ESL class context.

1.4. Students Attitudes toward the Teacher

Students’ attitudes toward their ESL teacher, which in turn affects their motivation toward that class, are influenced by a set of qualities that should be witnessed in their teacher’s classroom behavior. The first important quality required in an ESL teacher is his/her feelings and expectations of both students and the subject studied. The teacher should avoid making any ‘self–fulfilling prophecy’ that his/her students, especially from lower–classes backgrounds, cannot learn English, just because he/she sees low achievements in their classrooms especially in the beginning sessions. The very particular counseling role of the teacher as a facilitator of the learning process, and even as a senior partner, is worth mentioning in this respect. In addition, the ESL teacher should not foster that kind of ‘hidden curriculum’ at school, that emphasizes racial and cultural stereotypes through materials included in – or omitted – from textbooks.

Moreover, the ESL teacher should continuously assess students’ achievements in various language skills and the possible difficulties and obstacles that might face them in such achievements. He/she must also ensure that sufficient time is allocated for both in–class and out–of–class activities. All of these qualities and other related ones have to be shaped by a positive classroom environment whereby the teacher shows excitement, love, and care for both the subject studied and students. The latter are likely, then, to develop positive attitudes toward their teacher who proves to be enthusiastic, task–oriented and clear (McConnelley, 1977).

1.5. Students Attitudes toward the Learning/Teaching Context

The learning/teaching context is one of the important factors – if not the most important one – in an ESL or any other class. Depending on whether such context is a cheerful or threatening one relies the whole class success or failure. An ESL classroom should be first and foremost a setting where the learner succeeds to overcome all possible psychological barriers between him/her and the subject matter. The feeling of shame and embarrassment, and the intrinsic ‘phobia’ of making errors, and any other symptom of threatening affective filter, must be overcome and eliminated. An ESL context must be one of the most convenient opportunities for a student to foster his/her independence, development and self–realization. Chomsky makes it very clear and unequivocal when he maintains that “the truth of the matter (i.e. language teaching) is that 99% of teaching is making students feel interested in the material. Then the other 1% has to do with your methods.” (Chomsky in Pedagogical Recommendations, Lecture 4, 1996:181).

Fig. 1. Students Attitudes
2. Motivation and Students Perceptual Capacities

2.1. Integrative vs. Instrumental Motivations

*Instrumental motivation* or orientation to learn a foreign or second language serves a functional goal (e.g. pass an exam, get a better job or career…etc.), while *integrative motivation* arises from a desire to identify with the culture or community that speaks that language. Gardner and Lambert (1972) argue that integratively oriented ESL/EFL learners are *intrinsically* driven in that their desire to learn a second language stems from within themselves, rather than for an external reward. Instrumentally oriented ESL/EFL learners, on the other hand, are *extrinsically* driven, in that their learning engagement is primarily shaped by the seeking of external reward (see fig. 2).

Brown (1992) suggests that the introduction of extrinsic rewards into an intrinsically motivating situation can actually decrease the intrinsic motivation. He proposes that the only extrinsic reward that enhances intrinsically motivated learners is the provision of positive feedback, in the form of validation of their own personal autonomy, critical thinking ability, and self-fulfillment. In other words, the relationship between motivation and achievement, in this case, tends to be in the opposite direction from that which is commonly assumed. In fact, “it may be superior achievement that enhances motivation rather than high motivation leading to superior performance” (Nunan & Lamb 1996, 209). The latter is also labelled *resultative motivation* whereby the goal of motivation turns out to be the end–product of the learning/teaching process.

The above tendency meets the modern notion of instruction that focuses on the *student’s centeredness* or *low–structure learning*. Therefore, ESL/EFL learners should become self-motivated, for, ultimately, it is up to them ‘to do the learning.’ Of course, this outcome cannot be achieved without, initially, developing courses that are relevant to the needs and interests of ESL/EFL learners. An ongoing *needs analysis*, involving learners, as *co–partners* with the teacher in the *decision–making process*, is a very crucial step within this context. Unfortunately, most teachers simply ignore their students’ needs and interests, and just easily follow the textbook.
2.2. Field Independence–Dependence Students

Within an ESL classroom environment, students exhibit different kinds of personality traits and intellectual variables that, in turn, influence their motivational status vis-à-vis the subject learned. Many psychological, psycholinguistic and socio-psychological theories tackled this particular issue, each from its own perspective. One of the most commonly cited works, within this respect, is that of Herman Witkins & associates, who discussed the pre-cited issue in terms of what they called *field independence–dependence* (Witkins, Moore and McDonald, 1947).

Field–independent students are individualistic, insensitive to social environment and to others, good at abstract, analytical thought and perception of discrete parts, intrinsically motivated, and favor inquiry and independent study. Field–dependent or field–sensitive learners, on the other hand, are highly sensitive and attuned to social environment, poor at analytical thinking, but have a global perception, extrinsically motivated, favor a ‘spectator approach’ to learning, and adopt organization of information to be learned as given. While certain variables, rather than others, tend to be predominant for certain learners, some psychologists suggest that students can be helped and motivated to develop other cognitive strategies that they do not possess initially. For a good integrative and creative ESL class, for instance, it will be favorable for the teacher to create an adequate learning environment whereby field–independents might learn to become more sensitive to others by developing social skills, and field–dependents might increase their abstract thinking by developing their analytical skills, and so on.

Some investigators on ESL/ESL classes in some countries have arrived at conclusions that favor certain cognitive variables and learning orientations rather than others in specific contexts. In his investigation about the role of motivation for learning English as a Foreign Language in a Korean context, for instance, Dong–Ho Kang found that such factors like *goal salience*, *attributions*, and *self–confidence* were the main motivators, and that formal, *extrinsic*, classroom–related motivations were more important factors in second language learning than *traditional integrative* and *instrumental motivations* (Kang, 2000).

Part of an ESL student’s orientations toward motivation is the degree of structure, that is guidance and support, needed to achieve good learning attainment. Students differ considerably in relying on themselves, making choices, organizing themselves and their materials. Consequently, there are different kinds of students who need much, some, or little structure.

Fig. 2. Types of Motivation
Conclusion

Second language learning, as it is the case with ESL/EFL, is a multi-dimensional process that does not limit itself within the pure educational framework, but it deeply transcends it to meet other equally important factors like the socio-psychological implications, and more particularly, the motivational drives. A successful, efficient and constructive ESL environment necessarily provides an ongoing, ‘sustainable’ evaluation process that continuously assesses and reassesses the learner’s attitudinal and motivational drives toward the whole teaching/learning context, including its four main components, that is the learner himself (self-perception), the teacher, the subject studied, and the immediate learning/teaching environment. By the same token, a positive educational context continuously takes into consideration and valuates the students’ specific learning styles and preferences, and either their field-independent or field-dependent personality toward the learning/teaching environment, and, more particularly, tries to challenge these students’ predominant backgrounds.

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