

UDC: 378.147:811.111(07)

REDUCING AFFECTIVE FACTORS IN SLA: KEY SOLUTIONS TO MAXIMIZE THE OUTCOME OF LEARNING ENGLISH

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The article deals with the factors having an effect on second language acquisition, namely affective factors; individual, cognitive and metacognitive factors; demographic variables and teacher-related factors. The author concentrates on the set of affective factors which have both positive and negative influence on SLA. The author investigates the theoretical basis for studying this problem by foreign scholars and analyses the influence of affective factors by exploring their psychological background. The article covers the key scientific and methodological guidelines on reducing the negative impact of affective factors by developing and improving empathic skills and developing assertive behaviour in order to maximize the outcome of learning English.

The author names and illustrates the principal concepts to develop both affective and cognitive empathy amongst current lesson plans. It is suggested to create the environment, set an example, include lots of stories and use literature to teach different perspectives, work on communication strategies, offer collaborative group tasks, be metacognitive about students' state of empathy. On equal terms with empathy assertiveness, a direct, strong and calm style of communication which focuses on achieving a healthy compromise that respects everyone involved is emphasized to demand advanced development. To maximize the outcome of learning it is up to a teacher to implement «I» statements, escalation, verbs change, verbal and non-verbal language control into the classroom.

Key words: second language acquisition, affective factors, inhibition, attitudes, anxiety, self-esteem, risk-taking, empathy, metacognition, assertive behaviour.

Стаття присвячена вивченню факторів, що негативно та позитивно впливають на вивчення іноземної мови. Автор визначає ключові фактори, а саме: афективні, індивідуальні, когнітивні, соціально-демографічні та ті, що залежать від особистості вчителя/викладача, досліджує теоретичні засади вивчення даної проблеми закордонними науковцями та аналізує вплив афективних факторів, досліджуючи їхнє психологічне підґрунтя. У статті висвітлюються ключові науково-методичні поради щодо зниження негативного впливу афективних факторів шляхом розвитку та вдосконалення емпатійних вмій та формування асертивної поведінки з метою оптимізації процесу опанування англійською мовою.

Ключові слова: опанування другої мови, афективні фактори, психологічний зажим, ставлення, тривожність, самооцінка, готовність прийняття ризику, емпатія, метакогніція, асертивна поведінка.

Introduction

Nowadays in the context of globalization learning a foreign language represents an intensively studied issue. As applied linguists and methodologists all over the world are no longer satisfied with surface-level linguistic description of second language acquisition (SLA), they tend to seek deeper psychological factors contributing language learning. The influence of these factors is based on the individual differences of various learners, as students' internal feelings can certainly affect the way they progress or fail, and the learning process itself.

The object of this study is to analyse the factors affecting SLA and to improve the methods of teaching English, to figure out tips to reduce negative affective factors while applying them within English teaching/learning process. Among the factors affecting SLA we may distinguish five main domains:

- affective factors (inhibition, attitudes, anxiety, self-esteem, risk-taking, empathy);
- individual factors (age, personality, motivation and cognition);
- cognitive factors (language aptitude, learning strategies) and metacognitive factors;
- demographic variables (age and a sensitive period, heredity, gender, desire to study abroad, frequency with which English was spoken at home, interest in learning English, etc.);
- teacher-related factors (teaching materials and methodology, teacher personality, teaching style, and ways of teachers' interacting with the learners).

We are to concentrate on the first set of factors, i.e. affective ones.

Affective factors are the set of emotions and attitudes people have about themselves or the surrounding environment. In SLA these factors play an important role as their impact can be positive or negative, which directly depends on the emotion or attitude the student has.

Self-esteem is the self-confidence level and self-respect a person has. Combined with low motivation and debilitating anxiety low self-esteem can increase the affective filter and form a «mental block» that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition [7].

Inhibition is a feeling of embarrassment or worry that prevents from saying or doing what you want [3]. It is the mechanism people use to protect themselves from exposure to others. Inhibited students usually feel vulnerable or even less capable than their peers.

Personal inhibition arises when a person tries to defend or protect his/her self-image. If the learner perceives the mistakes he/she makes in the second language as a threat to their emotional well-being and self-perception, then acquisition will not occur or will occur much more slowly.

Attitude is a psychological construct, a mental and emotional entity that inheres in, or characterizes a person [9]. According to W. Wood [12], it is an individual's predisposed state of mind regarding a value and it is precipitated through a responsive expression toward a person, place, thing, or event (the attitude object) which in turn influences the individual's thought and action.

A positive attitude towards anyone or anything that has to do with learning, can have a positive effect when learning a second language and vice versa. Attitude includes the way a student feels about the teacher, classmates, classroom, school, and even learning materials. It might happen that students learning English language dislike learning materials because of the topic, the voice, and even the physical appearance of a teacher.

Risk-taking is an internal property of every learner. This part of affective domain is built in the individuals as they grow. Society, parents, family, friends, environment certainly take part in the making up of the individual itself and form the attitude of language learners. It is because learners stand in the ramification of society's norms and values, thus in some extend their belief toward what learning is and how they act to learning are different from places to places [8 pp. 401–409). Deliberate, active, good language learners prove to express willingness to guess, to take a chance of producing a «correct» utterance in the second language.

Anxiety is generally treated as an emotion characterized by an unpleasant state of inner turmoil, often accompanied by nervous behaviour. There is the distinction between trait anxiety – the permanent predisposition to be anxious – and state anxiety as the feeling that is experienced in relation to some particular situation [2]. Like state anxiety, trait anxiety arises in response to a perceived threat, but it differs in its intensity, duration and the range of situations in which it occurs. Trait anxiety refers to the differences between people in terms of their tendency to experience state anxiety in response to the anticipation of a threat. Thus, trait anxiety describes a personality characteristic rather than a temporary feeling. Many studies conducted on state anxiety indicate that foreign language anxiety can have a devastating effect on performance in oral communication. Stephen Krashen [7] hypothesized the affective filter, which credits affective factors (anxiety, motivation and self-confidence) with the ability to influence the success in learning a foreign language. He believes them mediators between the linguistic input of the classroom situation and the student's ability to learn [7]. In addition, Elaine K. Horwitz considers anxiety to a foreign language as more than the sum of its parts and defines it as a distinct complex of proprioception, beliefs, feelings and behaviours that occur during learning in the classroom because of the uniqueness of learning languages [6; 4]. It also has the same clinical picture and symptoms as any other type of anxiety: headaches, stomach upset, burning skin, difficult concentration, sweating, heart palpitations, worry, weakness in legs, shortness of breath, etc. Anxious students tend to have avoidance behaviour (they miss classes, do not do their homework, remain passive, etc.), they experience fear and even horror of foreign language class, inability to cooperate.

Coincidentally, Phillip Bailey [1, pp. 63–76] notes that a certain concern or anxiety is a positive factor. This kind of anxiety is known as facilitating the learning process as tasks without a certain amount of challenge can undermine the learner's interest, assignments without balance and enough support can be disheartening as they can submerge the learner into a state of emotional dullness or paralysis. In sum, a certain degree of concern, anticipation and curiosity can be useful and even necessary to achieve, but too much anxiety can have an inhibiting effect and impede the process of successful language learning.

Empathy is the experience of understanding another person's condition from their perspective [13]. It is also predicted to be relevant to acquisition that the empathic person may be the one who is able to identify more easily with speakers of a target language and thus accept their input as intake for language acquisition (lowered affective filter). Empathy appears to interact with other attitudinal factors. John H. Schumann [10] suggests that to the natural factors that induce ego flexibility and at the same time lower inhibitions belong to those conditions which make the learner less anxious, make him feel accepted and make him form positive identifications with speakers of the language acquired.

It is thought to be relevant to a second language learning, because acquiring a new language a learner simultaneously acquires a new personality, and a new culture. The ability to open oneself to new cultural experiences along with ability to understand other people and adopt these experiences as their own is essential in the SLA.

In psychology, there are currently two common approaches to empathy: shared emotional response and perspective taking. Shared emotional response, or affective empathy, occurs when an individual shares another person's emotions. Perspective taking, also known as cognitive empathy, occurs when a person is able to imagine herself in the situation of another [13].

On the basis of some universal strategies [4] to use with students to help them develop both affective and cognitive empathy amongst current lesson plans we suggest to follow these key suggestions:

✓ *Create the environment.* It's important that students trust their teacher and one another. If an understanding, trustworthy environment is established, then they're more likely to open up and display positive characteristics towards one another.

✓ *Be an example.* Teachers can be role models who, by example, show students the power of empathy in relationships. A caring, compassionate, understanding attitude is illustrative of a consistent example of empathy. It is the teacher who leads individuals to care for the feelings of the others in the class. As teachers model how to be positive when learning, students mirror optimistic and confident learning behaviours.

✓ *Include lots of stories and use literature to teach different perspectives.* In the classroom, personal stories and literature can be used to help students see a situation from different perspectives, they make us more human and develop our ability to understand and sympathize with others' experiences. For example, everyone knows the story «The Little Red Riding Hood». We all sympathize with the girl because we

see the wolf as a ravenous villain, but is it possible to see the story from the wolf's point of view? Make your students create a story from his point of view taking into account his intrinsic motives, background and living conditions, for instance.

✓ *Work on communication strategies.* Feelings are very different from words. It's important that attention is given to helping students find the words to explain their feelings, in both their speaking and their writing.

✓ *Offer collaborative group tasks.* As students work together on specific tasks or challenges, they experience a sort of group combination that brings them together. Shared victory or failure gives them a collaborative experience that requires them to exercise those empathy muscles with their peers.

✓ *Identify shared values and differences.* Discussions and activities go a long way towards helping students see how they align or differ from others. Facilitate opportunities for students to be open with one another and safely discover what others' perspectives may be.

✓ *Be metacognitive about one's state of empathy.* Be aware of your feelings and thoughts about your ability to understand and share in the feelings of others. With metacognitive awareness, we can all become more effective at taking another's perspective throughout our lives.

On equal terms with empathy assertiveness also demands advanced development. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines assertiveness as forthright, positive, insistence on the recognition of one's rights [11].

In other words being assertive means that we are able to stand up for our rights expressing thoughts, feelings, beliefs and personal ideas in direct, honest and appropriate ways. Although we should remember that being assertive we should always respect the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of other people.

Assertiveness is an important personal and interpersonal skill, which is in great demand within any group of those who teach and learn, as it is a direct, strong and calm style of communication which focuses on achieving a healthy compromise that respects everyone involved. This style, without contest, is the most effective for the teaching-learning process. Those who use the assertive communication style adheres to the following behaviours:

- Listen actively and reflectively to others.
- Offer direct eye contact.
- Have strong self-awareness and a relaxed posture.
- Communicate positively and constructively, without use of judgement and labelling.

Students with low self-esteem and a high level of anxiety need time to be ready to share their thoughts and interact in the class, but due to their teacher's help they can obtain this skill and, consequently, reduce communication barriers they have. To maximize the outcome of learning it is up to a teacher to implement the following techniques into the classroom:

«I» *statements.* Teach students by personal example to use «I want», «I need» or «I feel» instead of «It seems to me», «maybe it is...» statements to convey basic assertions and get their point across firmly. For example, when students are involved in a brainstorming activity, a dialogue or any other form of interaction and one of

them is idle you may encourage him/ her saying: «I feel strongly that we need your participation to complete this interaction, so I want you to take an active part and express your thoughts to a person you rely on to help you».

Empathy. A teacher should always try to recognize and understand how a student views the situation. Then, after taking his/ her point of view into consideration, try to paraphrase it and express what you need from him/ her. For example, if your student is once again is not ready with his/ her essay it might be reasonable to admit: «I understand that you're having trouble writing essays, but this task needs to be completed by Friday. If there are some troubles, let's sit down and come up with a plan together».

Escalation. If your first attempts at asserting yourself have been unsuccessful, then you may need to escalate the matter further. This means becoming firmer (though still polite and respectful) with the student who you are dealing with, and may end in your telling him/ her what you will do next if you still aren't satisfied with the results. For example: «Anna, this is the second time this week I've had to speak to you about arriving late. If you're late once more this month, I will activate the disciplinary process».

Encourage your students to ask for more time. Sometimes when your students might be too emotional or might not understand what it is that you want them to do it is better for them to say nothing. Encourage them to be honest and tell you or other group mates that they need a few minutes to compose their thoughts or an instruction/example to be followed. For example, you might say: «Anna, you may take extra time to pull wits together. I'll get back to you within a couple of minutes».

Change your verbs. A teacher should try using verbs that are more definite and emphatic when we communicate. This will help to send a clear message and avoid «sugar-coating» the message so much that students are left confused by what it is that you want from them.

To do this, use verbs like «will» instead of «could» or «should», «want» instead of «need», or «choose to» instead of «have to». For example: «We *are to have* the test next week, so you *will* need to prepare properly to it», «I *want* you to do it once again because I believe that it will help you to progress».

Among the other keys to assertive communication are:

- Think before speaking. It gives you the time to breathe, think and craft your response in a respectful, considerate way.

- Pay attention to body language. What your body says can be more powerful than your words. For example, try to be equals – if they're sitting down, you sit down. If they are standing up, you stand up. Levelling the playing field always supports assertive communication, etc.

- Control your tone. Speaking quickly, with a high pitch or in a whisper will come off weak, nervous and lacking self-esteem. Breathe deep and even, speak in a clear, audible tone, and avoid racing through your words.

- Use scripts when communicating: «I'm concerned about...», or «Help me to understand...», or «I'm not sure you're aware...».

It is notorious that even professionals encounter ineffective communication and interactive skills that negatively influence teaching – learning process. Nonetheless, when teachers try to reduce affective factors in the classroom, they encourage students to master a language and become more empathic and assertive, help them to create more opportunities for success in educational institutions and other aspects of their lives. It is not likely to happen overnight but, by practising these techniques regularly, students will slowly build up the confidence and self-esteem in SLA. It may also contribute greatly to students' productivity, efficiency and self-regard. These valuable skills deserve our further attention.

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Received: February, 15

Accepted: April, 30