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Attention to Affect in Language Learning

As language teachers, we have to pay attention to many things in our work so why add “attention to affect”? Perhaps the simplest, most direct answer is that whatever we focus most on in our particular context, be it general English, morphosyntax, phonetics, literature, English for academic writing or any other special area, attention to affect will make our teaching more effective. If I want to communicate to my students my respect for and interest in what I teach and to encourage them to share this interest, I have a valuable ally in attention to affect. This article will provide a more in-depth answer to the question of why affect is important and will discuss some options for dealing with it in the classroom.

1. What is affect?

Concepts are not always easy to define but we can consider that basically affect is related to “aspects of emotion, feeling, mood or attitude which condition behaviour” (Arnold and Brown 1999, 1). However, to understand how this fits into the language classroom it is useful to reflect on Stevick’s often cited comment: “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 1980, 4). The *inside* and *between* is basically what affect is about: on the one hand, the individual or personality factors (self-concept/self-esteem, anxiety, inhibition, attitudes, motivation, learner styles...) which we can consider as *inside* the learner, and on the other, the relational aspects which develop *between* the participants in the classroom – between students or between teacher and students - or possibly *between* learners and the target language and culture. Positive affect can provide invaluable support for learning just as negative affect can close down the mind and prevent learning from occurring altogether. With his metaphor of the affective filter, Krashen (1985) warns about the problems created for learning by the negative aspect, but just as important as avoiding negative affective reactions is finding ways to establish a positive affective climate.

Any classroom situation is influenced by the relationship between learning and affect but with language learning this is especially crucial since our self image is more vulnerable when we do not have mastery of our vehicle for expression – language. Furthermore, as Williams (1994, 77) points out,

...there is no question that learning a foreign language is different to learning other subjects. This is mainly because of the social nature of such a venture. Language, after all, belongs to a person's whole social being; it is part of one's identity.

One implication here is that if teachers do not take the affective side of language learning into account, conflicts on the level of identity may well develop and make the cognitive aspect of the learning process more difficult. Affect and cognition are both part of the learner's whole-person development.

2. Is attention to affect really new?

Taking into account the importance of affective factors is not a recent fad. Reflections about aspects of affect in language learning have been with us for a long time.

At the end of the fourth century St. Augustine wrote of his unpleasant experience learning Greek as a second language by force and with severe punishment, commenting that “Clearly free-ranging curiosity leads to more successful learning than do pressure and fear” (*Confessions*, Book 1, Chapter 14). Erasmus stressed the importance of relevance and meaningfulness for memory, and in the 17th century the Moravian priest and educator Comenius wrote the first important modern text about language learning, *Janua linguarum reserata*. Like many educators concerned today with learner styles, he recommended activities which engaged the different senses of learners, such as the visual and kinaesthetic-haptic. His learner-centred outlook is very compatible with contemporary affective thinking: he recommended that “the teacher should teach not as much as he himself can teach, but as much as the learner can grasp” (in Kelly 1976, 205). Kelly states that “both intellectual and emotional factors came under Comenius’ consideration” and that he insisted “it is the responsibility of the teacher both to create and preserve the pupil’s eagerness to learn” (1976, 324), an observation that exemplifies clearly what today we would term motivation.

In the 1970s language teaching became influenced by humanistic trends in education and psychology (Maslow 1970; Rogers 1969, 1983) and this link with new areas enriched the development of the field. Writers and language teacher educators of the Humanistic Language Teaching (HLT) movement such as Stevick (1976, 1980, 1998), Moskowitz (1978) and Rinvolucri (1999, 2002) have all considered it essential to incorporate a knowledge of the learner as an individual and to focus on the affective domain in language learning. Much humanistic thought in ELT has developed within the specific context of the teaching methods that came into prominence in the 1970s: Suggestopedia, Silent Way, Community Language Learning and Total Physical Response. Though they differ in theory and practice, all embody affect-sensitive principles such as the following:

- Language learning should take place in a low-anxiety atmosphere.
- Opportunities for learners to succeed and thus raise their confidence should be built into classroom activities.
- The learner should be considered holistically: cognitive, emotional and physical aspects.
- Language learning should involve personally meaningful experience.
- Learner knowledge and resources should be drawn upon and autonomy is to be favoured and developed.

So we see that attention to affect in language learning could be considered a diachronic process that in a sense began centuries ago. Today, however, interest in affect has taken on great importance for language teaching research and practice. For example, the

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages includes, among the competences involved in language learning, the *Existential competence* (*savoir-être*), which is basically composed of elements of the affective domain: attitudes, motivations, values, beliefs, personality factors (such as self-confidence, self-esteem, anxiety/fear). According to the Framework (5.1.3), these aspects significantly influence language learners and users both in their communicative acts and their ability to learn.

3. What is the relationship between affect and cognition?

Stern (1983, 386) wrote that “the affective component contributes at least as much and often more to language learning than the cognitive skills”. However, if teachers include attention to affect, this does not mean that they are less concerned with cognition. Though affective learning is sometimes contrasted with cognitive learning as if the two were totally separate, research shows this is not true. Reviewing studies on the relationship between affect and cognition, Forgas (2008) emphasizes the key role played by affect in how we create mental representations about the world and retain them in memory, and how we process information. According to Bless & Fiedler (2006), empirical evidence shows that affect has a direct influence on cognition, on how people think.

Neurobiological research (Damasio 1994; LeDoux 1996) has made it clear that reason and emotion should not be considered independent; indeed, they are inseparable in the brain, and in no way can we justify making artificial division between affect and cognition in the learning process. Jensen (1998, 72) gives a good example of the complementary nature of the two functions when he explains how our logical, thinking side may tell us to set a goal but it is our emotional side that gets us involved enough to act, to work towards the goal. The amygdala, the part of our limbic system that is responsible for emotions, has a strong effect on the frontal lobes, which are in control of our thinking processes. A very active area of scientific research is affective neuroscience and it tells us that our frontal lobes help us work out the details of our goals and plans, but it is our emotions then that push us to execute them.

In educational contexts it is important to keep in mind that emotions, thinking and learning are inextricably linked. LeDoux (1996) refers to two important areas of activity affected directly and strongly by emotions: attention and the creation of meaning, both of which are essential parts of learning. The brain receives so many stimuli that it cannot process all input and so it filters out that which is not of interest. To get the necessary attention for learning to occur, the brain needs to connect to meaningful experience. One way to do so is through emotions: they engage meaning. This can be explained neurobiologically by the chemical reactions in the brain. As emotions are experienced, neurochemicals are released which activate the brain and facilitate recall. With the experiencing of emotions, peptide hormonal substances are released rapidly into the bloodstream, bringing about highly dramatic changes in our brain functions and our body state, which can facilitate or impede learning.

In his work on a neurobiologically-based model of language acquisition, Schumann (1994, 232) points out that

the brain stem, limbic and frontolimbic areas, which comprise the stimulus appraisal system, emotionally modulate cognition such that, in the brain, emotion and cognition are distinguishable but inseparable. Therefore, from a neural perspective, affect is an integral part of cognition.

He explains that “the brain evaluates the stimuli it receives via the senses from the language learning situation... and this appraisal leads to an emotional response” (Schumann 1999, 28). In teaching we must, of course, never lose sight of the cognitive functions, but we recognize that thinking processes will develop more effectively if the emotional side of learners is also taken into consideration. So it is a question of how affect can maximize cognition, of how an integration of affect and cognition can enhance learning. For example, research consistently shows that for the brain to work optimally it must be free from threat or stress (Damasio 1994) and it must be engaged with the material to be learned (Caine and Caine 1994).

Studies of metacognition also point to the interrelated nature of emotions and cognition. Williams and Burden (1997, 155) conclude that a focus on metacognition will of necessity take in awareness of affective aspects of the person:

Metacognition . . . includes not only a knowledge of mental processes, as these are necessarily linked to and affected by emotions and feelings. It must also encompass a knowledge of factors relating to the self, and the way in which these affect the use of cognitive processes. Thus, an awareness of one's personality, feelings, motivation, attitudes and learning style at any particular moment would be included within such a concept of metacognitive awareness.

We can thus affirm that concern with affect could be considered as a prerequisite for the optimal cognitive work of learning to take place. Teachers, then, who think that being concerned about what goes on *inside* and *between* their learners is not part of their job are not placing learning on the firmest foundation.

In this regard, one belief that should be dispelled is that with attention affect is just making students feel good. Nothing is further from the truth. Hooper-Hansen (1999) has stressed that teaching which is concerned with affect and based on humanistic, holistic principles must be extremely rigorous. She points out how in Suggestopedia, one of the humanistic methods, many games and fun activities are included but always with a clear learning goal because teachers are not respecting their students if they are wasting their time by not providing adequately for their learning.

4. What about the diversity in our classrooms?

In many educational contexts today we are concerned with the topic of diversity. One of the advantages of attention of affect is that it can make it much easier to address learner diversity. To begin with, a seemingly small change in attitude on the part of the teacher can make a big difference (Underhill 1989). If we are aware of our students as individuals, each a representative of diversity and having a unique identity, we can communicate to them in subtle ways acceptance of and respect for their individuality. This can facilitate a positive classroom climate and the creation of a well-functioning

group in which the learning process can unfold. There, diversity may be seen less as a problem than as a natural part of life, an interesting challenge and a resource.

Diversity often seems to be taken as meaning “good” students (intelligent, hard-working, successful, attentive) mixed with “bad” students (dull, lazy, failing, problematic) but from an affective, humanistic perspective, there are other, more productive ways to look at diversity, as, for example, with learning styles. Some students learn best through visual means, others auditory and others haptic/kinaesthetic. If teachers vary their activities to take the different styles into account, at some point they can give all learners the opportunity to achieve in ways that are easiest for them. Similarly, Gardner's (1983, 1993) Multiple Intelligence Theory points out that intelligence is not limited to that which can be measured verbally and numerically on typical IQ tests and that success in life is often determined to a much greater degree by other intelligences, such as the musical, visual-spatial, kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, which are not always given enough prominence in our educational programs. Multiple Intelligence Theory, however, can easily and profitably be adapted to the language classroom (Fonseca, 2002, Arnold and Fonseca 2004, Fonseca, Toscano and Wermke, this issue) to take advantage of different entry points for the language concepts and skills to be acquired. Reid (1995) offers many suggestions for working with learning styles in language classes to use all learning capacities and all types of intelligence in order to support language learning

Choice is inherently motivating. When we are forced to do something, our feeling of autonomy is limited and we are not going to be intrinsically motivated. One way teachers can motivate learners and at the same time respond to diversity is to look for ways to build choice into their classes. Using group projects requiring different kinds of skills or offering varied options for homework assignments are ways of recognizing learner diversity and enriching our classrooms. Diversity is, then, also a question of encouraging students to develop their learning resources by giving them increasingly open-ended tasks which may involve work in small cooperative groups, to develop social responsibility in a community of learners, leading to responsible citizenship education as emphasized by the CEFR.

5. How can we give more attention to affect in the classroom?

First of all, we may want to include some new types of activities in line with suggestions mentioned above. Language teachers often say that they have enough to do trying to get through their course book and that they have no time for affective/humanistic activities. Yet, when we move lock step through the textbook, we are not necessarily favoring deep learning. When teachers become more autonomous and break away at times from the prefabricated material in the coursebook, which is written for standardized learners in a sanitized world (Wajnryb 1996), they can bring in material more open to diversity and more closely connected to the experience of their learners. Moskowitz (1978, 23) points out that humanistic, whole-person activities can be used “to supplement, review and introduce your already existing materials”. She doesn't propose abandoning what teachers are expected to teach, but rather adding personally meaningful activities. She explains the importance of these exercises:

humanistic exercises deal with enhancing self-esteem, becoming aware of one's strengths, seeing the good in others, gaining insights into oneself, developing closer and more satisfying relationships, becoming conscious of one's feelings and values and having a positive outlook on life. All of these outcomes are highly relevant to learning, for the better students feel about themselves and others, the more likely they are to achieve. It should be noted that using humanistic activities is not to the *neglect* of the target language, but to the *enhancement* of it. (Moskowitz 1999, 178)

Language teachers may have to cover a specific syllabus but doing every exercise in the textbook is certainly not the only way to do so. Teachers have the advantage of knowing their own students and being able to find material that is relevant and interesting to them in order to reinforce what they need to teach. Learners can also be encouraged to find materials to use, thus reducing the work load of teachers and stimulating learner autonomy. An important challenge – and by no means an impossible one - for teachers would be to find ways to cover any necessary course requirements while at the same time providing for “whole person learning”.

More important, however, than adding new activities is perhaps a new vision of what we as teachers want to do and can do in the classroom, a more all-encompassing view of language teaching. The proposal of Underhill (1989:260) is that

the quantum shift we search for in our ability to facilitate more effective learning lies in a shift at the level of our attitudes, our awareness and our attention to process.

6. What would be an example of work with the inside?

There is a direct and reciprocal relationship in language learning between competence and confidence. Developing greater competence leads to more confidence but also having confidence makes it easier to acquire greater competence. Work in the area of self-confidence/self-esteem in language learning of both a theoretical and practical nature has been carried out (Rubio 2007, de Andrés and Arnold 2009, Arnold and de Andrés 2010), and taking this area into account in the classroom can enhance learning.

It should be made clear, however, that it is not a question of merely telling students “you can do it!”. Quite the contrary, work with self-esteem and other affective issues is done to provide a supportive atmosphere in which we can better encourage learners to work hard to reach their learning potential. It is, of course, important to deal with any negative self-beliefs learners may have acquired, as these can severely inhibit their progress, and to encourage realistically positive views of oneself. However, experiencing real achievement in using the target language in meaningful communication is the surest route to self-esteem. Truly effective learning experiences will inevitably have a healthy influence on learner self-esteem. As Reasoner (1992, 24) states emphatically, it is not about simply telling students they are great because efforts of that nature in the long-run are not effective since

[...] they fail to strengthen the internal resources of self-esteem related to integrity, responsibility and achievement. Only by addressing these areas can one effectively build self-esteem.

Reasoner, the founder of the International Council of Self-Esteem, has developed a model with five components of self-esteem that can be dealt with in the classroom: Security (knowing that I am safe, physically and emotionally), Identity (knowing who I am), Belonging (knowing others accept me), Purpose (knowing what I want to do and achieve) and Competence (knowing I can). In our language classes we can develop these five areas at the same time as we work on students' language skills. One reason that language teaching activities that focus on self-esteem are successful is that they have strong personal meaning for learners.

A learner with a poor self-concept is not likely to have a key ingredient for successful language learning: motivation. A weak self-concept makes it harder for students to be fully on task as they may often divide their attention between learning and dealing with a concern for their worth or ability. This creates a doubly disadvantaged situation: first, there is less energy for the task to be done, and second, the negative feelings generated make the learning experience less pleasant, less motivating and thus less effective. Through work on the self there are interesting opportunities for creating greater motivation.

Dörnyei (2009) has developed a very promising model for second language motivation: the L2 self. Markus and Nurius (1986, 954) describe the concept of possible selves: "individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become and what they are afraid of becoming... They provide the essential link between the self-concept and motivation". Related to possible selves, Markus and Ruvolo (1989, 213) bring in the notion of ideal selves: "imagining one's own actions through the construction of elaborated possible selves achieving the desired goal may directly facilitate the translation of goals into intentions and instrumental actions." Referring to language learning, the basic concept is that if our idea of the person we would like to be, our ideal self, includes the ability to engage in meaningful communication using the L2, we will want to work harder to reach our learning goals. Thus, if in our students' image of the self they want to become, they include knowing and using the target language well, this can provide strong support for the learning process. Teachers can help to develop this self-image by making it seem both attractive and possible to their students, communicating to them that if they are willing to work to learn the L2, they will be successful in doing so.

7. And what about the *between*?

Common sense and a good deal of research tell us that in general students learn best when they are in an environment that is both stimulating and non-threatening (See Nelson and Murphey, this issue). In language learning a concern for the group dynamics is extremely important, given the necessarily interactive nature of language classes. As Dörnyei and Murphey (2003, 3-4) point out,

In a ‘good’ group, the L2 classroom can turn out to be such a pleasant and inspiring environment that the time spent there is a constant source of success and satisfaction for teachers and learners alike. And even if someone’s commitment should flag, his or her peers are likely to ‘pull the person along’ by providing the necessary motivation to persist.

They suggest keeping in mind the TEAM acronym: Together Everyone Achieves More.

Some interesting research has been carried out on a topic that is closely related to the *between* aspect of the classroom, teacher confirmation, which, as Ellis (2000, 265) explains, is “the process by which a teacher communicates to students that they are valuable, significant individuals”. Research has shown that teacher confirmation has a strong indirect effect on motivation and on affective and cognitive learning.

In an innovative study dealing with the concept of teacher confirmation in the area of foreign language teaching using interviews with secondary students of English in the region of Extremadura in Spain, León (2005) established a scale of teacher behaviors that lead to a feeling of confirmation on the part of students. Among the most frequently mentioned behaviors were: transmit feelings of confidence in students; give constructive feedback and praise; pay attention to and listen to students; smile, make eye-contact ; show interest in answering students’ questions; take personal interest in students; check for understanding. In a later study (León 2008), the reciprocal nature of confirmation/disconfirmation between teacher and students was established. For example, when students feel confirmed, they are more motivated, and their behavior thus produces an effect of confirmation for the teacher.

Further work on teacher confirmation by Piñol (2007) has interesting implications for teachers. Spanish secondary school students were given a questionnaire on attitudes towards English and the learning situation. Some of the results were “I feel comfortable speaking English”(26%), “In class I can be myself “ (26%), “English is interesting” (18%). He then explained to the teachers Leon’s scale of confirming teacher behaviors and asked the teachers to incorporate these into their classroom interactions for the next six weeks. After that time students completed the questionnaire again, and for the above items the percentages of positive responses had doubled, with the only change during this period being the conscious incorporation in class of teacher behaviors which made students feel accepted and valued.

8. Assessment in HLT

In most contexts teaching is linked to formal evaluation, generally accomplished by testing. Affect relates very directly to the accuracy of our assessment of students’ real academic progress. Since testing is generally a procedure that produces anxiety and thus can influence learners’ performance in a very negative matter, affect-sensitive forms of assessment are to be recommended in order for teachers to be able to judge correctly what students know. There are many things teachers can do to make test-taking less stressful for students: they can prepare them as completely as possible for the test, both as to the material to be covered and the format of the test; they can create a supportive atmosphere in the classroom in general and for the test in particular; they can look for

ways to incorporate student input for test construction. Also, they can take into account students' reactions to their tests (Chastain 1988), and on the test they can try to find out what their students know, not what they don't know. In this respect, we should keep in mind that consistently poor performance by students on exams may be indicating something about the teaching as well as about the students. Lastly, *assessment* need not be limited to testing. The concept is much richer and can take in options such as language portfolios, projects and learner self- and peer-assessment (see Kohonen 1999 and this issue).

Research with university students (Arnold 1999b) showed that in a class which was taught with a HLT focus and which had neither a textbook nor a grammar syllabus, students' language proficiency developed as well as or better than with control groups using more traditional types of instruction. In addition, students in the class also reported important progress in other areas (for example, self-confidence, ability to speak in front of others, creativity, autonomy, ability to reflect on one's own learning, self-knowledge and knowledge of classmates) and students' intrinsic motivation was significantly higher. So when assessing their students, teachers might consider linguistic proficiency as the necessary beginning, but not the only end of what they hope to achieve.

9. Affect and the teacher

As an essential part of the classroom community, teachers need to be concerned with their affective side as well as that of their students. In the case of language teachers, teacher development could be conceptualized as a pyramid. At the top of the pyramid would be techniques and activities which teachers need to have at their disposal for the day-to-day life of the classroom; underneath this, knowledge of the language learning/teaching process to insure these activities are appropriate and effective; and, finally, forming the broad base, would be the teachers' own personal development. A good teacher *knows* and *does* but, most importantly, *is*. American educator Parker Palmer (1998, 1) has said that "we teach who we are" and adds that "technique is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives" (p. 5). So in teacher training not only do we need to work on how to teach the four skills or to present grammar. If we are aiming to have "real teachers" in our classrooms, affective aspects such as facilitation, group dynamics, teacher autonomy, reflection and active listening should be an integral part of pre-service and in-service teacher training.

Humanistic/affective language teaching is effective because in an ever more complex world which places greater and greater demands on teachers, it helps them to meet those demands. It is effective because, as Stevick (1998) says, at the same time that it brings us closer to our language teaching goals, it encourages us to pursue new life goals. As teachers develop as professionals, it also helps them to develop as persons.

We read with alarming frequency reports of massive teacher burn-out, of violence and tension in schools. Lack of student motivation is common. There are many problems facing language teachers in our classrooms today and it seems likely that we will not come closer to the solutions only by knowing more techniques or having greater information about second language acquisition, useful though these may be for other reasons, but rather by also exploring areas related to the base of teacher development, our own personal development, which can permit us to function more effectively in all

classroom situations. As educators, we may not always be in a position to try to deal with societal factors that are at the root of much of the current situation, but we can work on what Underhill (1989) calls our “presence” in the classroom, on the *inside and between* aspects of the participants, and these affective, humanistic factors can produce a ripple effect on the society we help to establish in our classes and perhaps even beyond.

10. Conclusion

We have dealt with the implications for language teaching of some of the areas of the affective domain; there is a great need for incorporating these and others into the language classroom. Arguably, one of the challenges of education today is to provide more ways to educate all aspects of the student, including greater attention to the affective aspects as well as the cognitive. There is an ever-increasing list of options for enriching educational programs which are in different ways related to affect: arts in education, character education, education in values, cooperative learning, emotional intelligence, thinking skills, environmental education, learning styles, multiple intelligence teaching, multicultural education, to name only a few. Many language professionals are finding ways to incorporate options such as these in their language teaching programs, and by doing so, they are broadening what can be achieved in the language classroom. Interestingly, it is not unusual to find that academic performance is as good or better in language classrooms that also focus on these broader concerns.

Goleman (1995, xii, xiv) has affirmed the urgent need to have a more emotionally competent citizenry, given the current “emotional illiteracy” where “the fabric of society seems to unravel at ever-greater speed”; he has stressed the central role of education, proposing “a new vision of what schools can do to educate the whole student, bringing together mind and heart in the classroom”. It is indeed important to educate students in affective matters, but also of course, as we have discussed here, attention to affect can in many ways facilitate language learning. Chomsky (1988, 181) gave great weight to the role of affect in the learning process when he wrote: “The truth of the matter is that about 99 percent of teaching is making the students feel interested in the material.” If this is true, in a sense affective issues are indeed a very central part of language teaching.

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