

AFFECTIVE FACTORS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING FOR PROFESSIONALS

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Abstract

This paper investigates the affective factors involved in EFL classroom consisting of a group of adult professionals of an International NGO namely personality traits, learning style, previous accumulated knowledge, lack of confidence, high expectation about the course, frequent switching from target to native language, effect of learning plateau, classroom anxiety, autonomy of dominant speaker and motivation for real life learning and reward in job. This paper also suggests some possible solutions for raising the confidence level of average participants, stimulating team spirit and building a good rapport between teacher and students.

Introduction

Since language competence is linked with career options, status and reward presence of psychological and interpersonal barriers among the students who are receiving English language training for specific purpose has to be acknowledged. For this, the rationale of this paper is to investigate a number of factors affecting in a mix ability classroom consisting of a group of professionals who work in different development programs of BRAC. They are receiving an English language training conducted by Centre for Languages of BRAC University to develop their English communication skill within a very short time since they want to go abroad for work. It is found that some external and internal factors affect the learning behavior of these BRAC professionals. Since the participants of this English language course are not only adults but also professionals they naturally possess a very complicated psychology of their own and for this reason the affective factors found in the classroom of these professionals are quite different from that of the adults and young students. These affective factors are divided into five broad categories:

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Learning Factors, Motivation Factors, Anxiety Factors, High Expectation Factors and External Factors. Each of these affective factors contains a list of aspects that define the characteristics of these factors. For example, in the Anxiety Factors category there is fear of English as a subject, fear of public speaking, code-switching and transformation from Grammar Translation Method to Communicative Language Teaching. In External Factors category there is the effect of learning plateau, lack of interest in learner's autonomy and over confidence versus inferiority complex. This study surveyed both the teachers and students' affective factors and the challenges for the teachers and finally this research will take an endeavor to give some possible solutions from the study.

Literature Review

Adult education broadly refers to continuing education later in life. This can include learning in direct relation to a new or ongoing career or profession of an individual, or studies that are completely unrelated such as languages. Although the general process of teaching and learning is similar between children and adults, there are additional factors that can be seen to affect those who continue their studies into adulthood.

The work on affective factors has been greatly supported by humanism. Wang (2005) explains that humanism emphasizes the importance of the inner world of the human being and places the individual's thoughts, feelings and emotions at the forefront of all human developments. Affect is not one of the basic needs of human beings, but the condition and premise of the other physical and psychological activities. To Wang, educators should focus their efforts on the development of human values, the growth in self-awareness and in the understanding of others, the sensitivity to human feelings and emotions and the active student involvement in learning and in the way learning takes place. With regard to humanism, Stevick claims that "in a language course, success depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom" (1980, p. 4).

Although learners of foreign language classroom are exposed to the same lessons, each individual may process lessons differently, resulting in very different language learning experiences. For example, in a study of learners'

beliefs about the language learning process, some described their experience as “traveling to new places,” whereas others described their experiences as “undergoing a painful medical procedure” (Kramsch, 2003, p. 116). These vastly different interpretations of the language learning experience illustrate its uniqueness for each individual. Learner accounts, which tend to focus on the affective (emotional) responses of the learner to the language learning process, not only supply information about how different learners appraise their experiences but also provide insight into where learners focus their attention during foreign language lessons.

The term “affective” has to do with aspects of our emotional being. So, according to Jane Arnold (Cambridge 1999) “Affective factors are broadly considered as aspects of emotion, feeling, mood or attitude which condition behavior in language learning.” Affective factors should not continue being considered the Cinderella of mental functions, since they “link what is important for us to the world of people, things, and happenings” (Oatley & Jenkins, 1996, p. 122 cited in Arnold, 1999, p. 2). “The affective side of the learner is probably one of the most important influences on language learning success or failure.” (Oxford 1990:140). The affective factors related to L2 or foreign language learning are emotions, self-esteem, empathy, anxiety, attitude, and motivation. One of the most general and logical factors that affects adults more than children during education is the notion of the knowledge which they have already accumulated. This can be seen to aid the speed of learning, as they are often likely to have a prior knowledge of the subject they are studying. Alternatively, habits of bad practice can also be learned in adulthood, and methods and processes that have been learned in a now-dated curriculum can also be difficult to shake off for some adult learners.

A paper written in 1993 by CHIU Mo Chi, entitled A Study of the factors affecting Attendance at Adult Education Short Courses, offers further insights into the differences between adult and child education. CHIU found a number of self esteem issues with adult learners. Those that have had a school background that lacks in academic achievement are more suited to frequent confidence boosts “because the outcome of effort is more likely to be the pain of failure than the reward of a new job, a promotion, the admiration of others, or the self-satisfaction of succeeding at the learning task.”

Acknowledging this however, others have expressed that motivation can be an important aspect in regards to the achievement of adult learners. Where students enter into adult education of their own accord, they typically realize exactly what they want to learn, and why it is important for them to continue at it – despite their difficulties.

Additionally, adult learners are often more aware, and accepting, of the financial and time implications of enrolling on a course later in life. A student perspective forum on the Adult Literacy Education Wiki (wiki.literacytent.org) offers some other information from adult learners themselves. In regards to learning foreign language during adulthood, many students seem to find the most difficult problem to overcome is fear. Problems with embarrassment among peers, and not being able to admit difficulties to other students are continuing factors that can seem to affect learning into adulthood, and this may be something that remains to be addressed by adult education centers today.

Significance

This study of the affective factors in English language teaching for professionals carries a lot of importance since during the investigation a lot of works have been found by the researcher which discuss about the affective factors of both young and adult equally but as a matter of fact, there is little work found in this field of study where the purpose of foreign language learning is only professional skill development and where the participants are not only adult but also professional. Therefore this research looks into a number of particular affective factors that belong to the teaching-learning environment of a group of professionals who have different interpersonal and psychological aspects of their own. The findings of this research will be helpful for the teachers as well as for the professional people who take English language course for specific purpose.

Background

The Population

This research was conducted with a group of officials who work in different development programs of Brac in Bangladesh. Among the programs there is Micro- finance, pre-primary and primary education, education for ethnic

children and other development programs of poverty reduction. Besides this diversity in professionalism, the participants also have different academic background. Some of them have M.S.C in Physics and Mathematics; some have M.B.A in Accounting and Management while others are from Social science background. Even there is one L.L.B graduate and a software engineer found in this special group of professional people.

The Objectives

The reason why these Brac officials take the course is that after the completion of this English language training they will be sent to different foreign countries to settle down their job over there. For this reason this special English language course has a number of objectives: firstly, to improve their social and business communication skill, secondly, to develop their cross-cultural knowledge, manner and etiquettes and finally to practice co-operative work strategies in the field of development from the perspective of theory and application.

The Duration

The duration of this English Language course is about nine months and the aim of this course is to make the English language learning more effective and sustainable. During the whole training program all these Brac officials reside in the training centre even the rooms where they live are all around their classroom.

The Course Content

The content of this English language course is designed in such a way that it can develop the participants' professional knowledge along with their English language ability. So, their particular syllabus includes reading, writing, listening and speaking activities. In business English, language of interview, meeting and negotiation are taught while on the other hand, for better use of English pre-intermediate Headway is followed. Besides all these, some movies and short documentaries of different development issues are shown occasionally to the participants during the training session.

Methodology

Two written questionnaires were prepared to conduct the survey among the professionals and the teachers of this language course. The quantitative questionnaire was for the participants and the qualitative questionnaire was intended to the respective teachers. The purpose of bringing such combination of two different methodologies is to comprise a holistic research finding that will help to come up with some ground solutions in minimizing the potential gap between teachers and students.

I) Questionnaire for the participants:

A quantitative questionnaire was administered to the Brac professionals during the training program. It was designed to gather in-depth information as it gave the participants a chance to share their feelings, experience, attitude and beliefs about foreign language learning. The survey was conducted among twenty six participants in total. Before distributing the questionnaire the participants were made aware of the fact that it is an inquiry of individual responses so, they should feel free to share what they really think, feel and believe.

II) Questionnaire for the Teachers:

A qualitative questionnaire was developed for the teachers of this English professional course. The teachers were asked to answer each question by choosing a number from 1 (The statement is very true) to 4 (The statement is not true). The statements were constructed on the basis of the researcher's survey of literature dealing with the affective domain involved in English as foreign language for professionals. The questionnaire was given to seven language teachers of Brac University who have been taking classes of English language in this professional course.

Findings**I. Learning Factors*****Passivity in Learning***

From the questionnaire it was found that 90%-95% of the participants learn with ease by solving handouts, listening teacher's lecture and taking notes. They do not prefer to learn through direct interaction with the teacher and the

classmates. This is because they are habituated with their previous learning system which was basically a one-way traffic of learning where they were used to receiving the learning by themselves but they were not supposed to share their learning with the whole class.

Competitive Learning

For being professionals, these Brac officials by nature possess a very competitive mind. From the survey it was found that these adult professionals learn better through competing with each other. That is why, in classroom they mostly enjoy games and quiz. Not only that, even in their group and individual presentation, they struggle their best to please the teacher to get a good impression.

Pair and Group Learning

It is very interesting to notice the fact that these adult professionals feel comfortable to work in pair and group work. The reason behind feeling such comfort is that in teamwork they can share their responsibilities. Even if, when the teacher gives any individual task to, they start talking someone next to them.

Visual Learning

Finally in learning factor it was noticed that these professional adults prefer to learn through the use of visual aids. It is because, in their own profession, they have to present their various data, findings and experiments of research on power point and multi-media. Similarly, in this professional English course of Brac, sometimes they are exposed to visual learning by watching films and documentaries about various development issues. They also present some topics given by the teachers on OHP or multi-media.

II. Anxiety Factors

Fear of English as a Subject: According to the survey conducted to the participants, it was noticed that they always possess a silent fear of English as a subject. They used to be taken over this English phobia throughout their academic life and to get rid of this fear is not that much easy for them.

Fear of Public Speaking

For the reason of their previous fear of English, they are always afraid of public speaking. It is found that except few of them, the fear of speaking before the class audience makes them dump and nervous. They are forced by the teacher to come forward and speak in English on the given topic.

Switching to L1

Regarding the use of language in classroom, these adult professionals confessed that they can express more if they are allowed to use both L1 and L2 at the same time. The use of L1, paves their way of learning English much better. This actually happens for their learning system in grammar translation method (GTM) where they used to be taught in L1 by the teacher.

Transformation from GTM to CLT

In the training centre, these adult people have been learning English through communicative language teaching method (CLT) and therefore during the whole class, they are constantly switching themselves from GTM to CLT. One of the major findings from the survey is that for this frequent transformation from GTM to CLT, they usually take time to learn anything in classroom. They never feel at home to get their learning in such complex way of learning.

III. Motivation Factors***Motivation for Reward***

In respect of motivation, two very important factors have been identified; one is motivation for reward and another is motivation for real life learning. It is very interesting to see that the motivation of these adult people is highly regulated by the desire of reward and for them the reward is either going abroad or getting promotion. So this motivation of materialistic reward keeps up their interest of receiving the training for nine months.

Motivation for Real life Learning

About their real-life learning, it was found that it is a natural tendency of adults to always think about their own benefit from the learning. So, they want to learn only those things which they can apply in their real life. Therefore, these adult professionals get highly motivated when they find the learning topic very much related to their job, working place and future plan.

IV. High Expectation Factors***Outcome-Excellent English***

There are two major issues that work behind the high expectation of these professional people. Firstly, from the very beginning of the training, they expect that they will learn English perfectly to use in real life situations right after the end of the training. This expectation of excellent English is commonly found in everyone receiving the training no matter how much they can progress during the course.

Expectation of Real life Learning

Another issue about the high expectation is that these adult people want to learn English only in the classroom since they think learning is always class room oriented. However they are not interested to practice English outside the classroom. This kind of attitude leads these adult professionals to the limitation of using English which is contrary to their expectation of learning real life English.

V. External Factors***Learning Plateau***

Plateau of learning is a terminology of educational psychology. It describes such a phenomenon that in the process of learning a new skill, the learner, “in spite of efforts and practice, makes no perceptible progress” (Collins et al. 1973: 157). On the learning curve, “big improvements come very quickly; then the rate of improvement slows right down to almost nothing” (Rowntree, 1981: 153). In case of the Brac officials, they did not have much difficulty in the early stage of learning. Because of curiosity and assumption that they can make an immediate use of what they are learning to communicate with English-speaking

people, they were highly motivated at the early stages of learning. But this plateau of EFL learning was gradually observed both in the behavior and the psychology of these professional learners. In behavior, they did not make active response to the teacher's instructions as they used to do in the very beginning. They often complained that English is too difficult to learn, and they said they could not remember new words or patterns. In psychology, they seemed to have a tendency of rejection against new linguistic input. As they were unaware of what learning plateau is, it was really difficult for them to decide what to do and how to deal with this critical situation.

Lack of Interest in Learner's Autonomy

"Autonomy is a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his/her learning and the implementation of those decisions"(Dickinson, 1987: 11). Learner's autonomy can be characterized by a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purpose (Dam, 1995:1). Kufer (1990) defines the autonomous person as "the one who chooses for himself what to think and what to do". Learner's autonomy is important to develop reflective learning and self-assessment and to emphasize learning foreign language. Because of being passive learners by nature, these adult professionals have lack of interest in learner's autonomy. They hardly take part in any self-driven activities. Because of their previous learning system, they commonly believe that it is the teacher who has the sole responsibility of transmitting the learning process. They are not even ready to accept any learner's autonomy in their classroom since it may threaten the security of their own comfort zone.

Over confidence vs. inferiority complex

By analyzing the research questionnaire made for the students, a very important finding has been discovered. It was noticed that there were half of the students in the class who were extremely over confident while the other half always suffer from inferiority complex because of possessing a very low proficiency level. These two contradictory feelings and attitude make the teaching environment even worse and unfriendly. The over confident students keep themselves so aloof that sometimes they feel reluctant to participate in the class

activities. On the other hand, all the struggling students always feel that no matter how much they study, they will never be able to cope up with this participatory learning system.

VI. Common Challenges for the Teachers

Lack of motivation at the mid point

At the middle of the training it was found that the motivation level of these adult professionals is gradually decreasing because of the effect of learning plateau. So after a certain period of time, these Brac officials stop showing their interest and enthusiasm in learning and eventually their motivation for learning the foreign language goes down. For this reason it becomes really difficult for the class teacher to keep up their motivation up to the end of the training.

Debate and Contradiction

Sometimes an argument was raised among the students on the topic of the discussion even in presence of the teachers. It is a very common issue found in almost every teacher's class where the students gradually enter into dispute and discourse among them. For being professionals and adults, their cognitive level is same therefore they showed a natural tendency to compete with each other in terms of logic. They tried to establish their own thoughts and beliefs by refuting the opinions of others. Sometimes they got involved into the same argument regarding the topic with their teacher. However the fact is that all these discourses and contradictions actually arise out of conflict of ego and therefore this kind of verbal interaction is not much effective for the teaching-learning environment of this training.

Hierarchy

Another important and critical issue that belongs to the students in terms of their proficiency is Hierarchy. Some of them can speak English very well; some of them cannot speak English at all; other can write well but they are not good at listening and speaking English. That is why in this training, most of the teachers feel it a challenge to deal with such mixed ability class. Even sometimes these Brac officials divide themselves into several groups according to their likeness, interest and ego-complexity.

VII. Implications for Teaching

Taking into account the importance of the class environment for English language learning, and its influence on perceived language status, teachers must see that their role is crucial and their responsibility to create a positive experience for their students is great. Teachers must be sensitive and non-judgmental towards the different learning styles of their students. The following corresponding solutions can foster positive affiliations among learners and teachers:

Making students feel successful:

Feeling of success is the greatest motivation in any field. Tasks that are too easy require too little effort and produce no feelings of success and, consequently, are not motivational. For this reason, Teachers have to give the brightest student a chance to show his talents and avoid the slow student to have the feeling of defeat. For the best students, give them a challenge. For the slow students or isolated students, give them a chance to taste the joy of success by providing more support and assistance. To encourage students to feel successful in using English, teachers should avoid setting up activities that enhance the chances for them to fail. They should also make sure whether the students are ready for the given activity and have sufficient ideas and lexis to complete the task successfully.

Incorporating effective and communicative teaching tools:

It is generally assumed that good teaching is good communication between the teacher and students and communication among students. Therefore, teachers should design and organize a rich variety of student-centered activities to fit different stages of teaching. The pedagogical tools include the use of real-world projects and hands-on activities, use of teamwork, in-class exercises, emphasis on conceptual understanding, and provision of adequate reinforcement. Advanced learning technologies also provide a means for making problem-based active learning possible.

Exciting students with rich content:

To motivate students with rich content and to conquer adult students with the power of wisdom classroom activities should not focus on form only, but most important, on content. Content is the soul of language. Language is best taught when it is being used to transmit a message not when it is explicitly taught for conscious learning. So it is proposed that more realistic situations and more knowledge conveying teaching materials should be introduced. Teacher should try to use authentic listening and reading materials and ask real questions.

Emphasizing conspecifics than competition:

The role of an instructor is principally to provide comprehensible input to the students and to avoid creating negative feelings among them. It is not only the teacher who influences the emotional state of the language learner but the interpersonal relations between students in the classroom also affect a student's sense of well-being. Teambuilding and constructing identities for classroom peers as "conspecifics" rather than "the competition" can provide important supports for learning. Providing cooperative activities like guided discussion forum can encourage students to get to know each other in a noncompetitive, friendly way.

Promoting intrinsic motivation for alleviating anxiety:

Overemphasizing learning English for utilitarian purposes may result in (extra) pressure and anxiety in the learners, which may ultimately debilitate their performance in English. By providing students with learning experiences that meet their needs for competence, relatedness, self-esteem, and enjoyment, teachers can increase their students' intrinsic motivation for alleviating anxiety; and by giving students choices, teachers can often enhance both students' persistence and sense of autonomy (Pintrich and Schunk, 1996).

Encouraging students to have confidence to make mistakes:

As students appear to be acutely sensitive to fear of making mistakes, teachers should encourage students to have the confidence to make mistakes in order to acquire communication skills. In order to allay students' fear that their mistakes in front of the teachers will influence their end of course grades, more emphasis

should be given to formative assessment (assessment for learning) and feedback rather than summative assessment (assessment of learning) and feedback.

Developing self-regulation, self-monitoring and evaluation skill:

Too often, instructors focus solely on cognitive strategies – how to build student knowledge or their ability to perform a task – and ignore the affective and meta-cognitive domains of learning. However, in addition to helping students acquire content knowledge, instructors should also help them to develop the skills for self-regulation, self-monitoring and evaluation of their learning progress. Clear and concise learning objectives and expectations for the course are the first step towards helping students to conduct self-monitoring and evaluation.

Training learning strategies in the language teaching:

Learning strategies refer to the regulation and control of learning processes by a learner, or the measures taken for the final success of learning. Briefly speaking, learning strategies are learning methods in a broad sense. Learning will be facilitated if students are explicitly trained to become more aware of and proficient in the use of a broad range of strategies that can be utilized throughout the language learning process. When strategy training is included in the instructional package, students can learn how to learn a foreign language while they are learning the language content.

Instilling realistic expectations:

It is also recommended that teachers should confront students' erroneous and irrational beliefs by cultivating in them "reasonable commitments for successful language learning" (Horwitz, 1988: cited in Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999: 232). These beliefs can be confronted by instilling realistic expectations and reasonable performance standards in the learners and by raising their awareness regarding the speed with which fluency in the target language can be achieved. More importantly, students should be guided as to how to direct their attention away from self-centered worries when they are speaking a second/foreign language (1999: 233).

VIII. Conclusion

The study gave useful insights into some important affective factors at work among a group of mixed beginner students and the range of strategies they used to cope up with their learning system. In terms of characteristics, the study also shows that although these professional people possess a very competitive mind they do not like to take part in learner's autonomy because by nature they are all passive learners and they only like to evaluate others and give feedback on each other. Moreover it is worth mentioning that in spite of being very competitive, these adult people feel comfortable in doing pair and group work. They are afraid of taking the responsibilities of learning; rather they try to get rid of such learning responsibilities by working co-operatively. These adult people, despite having a very high expectation of learning excellent English, feel reluctant to give effort in practicing English in real life. Finally, turning to methodological considerations, the two questionnaires offered a valuable opportunity to gather data on the range of affective factors that characterize individual learners and which are intricately bound up with learning capacity and learning success, and enabled a greater focus on the human dimension of learning from the perspective of the actual learner.

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