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The Pertinence of Addressing the Affective Filter in EFL Costa Rican Classrooms
and Strategies to Lower It

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The Pertinence of Addressing the Affective Filter in EFL Costa Rican Classrooms and Strategies to Lower It

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Abstract

This paper explains the relevance that the affective filter has on students' learning processes and the different approaches that can be implemented to reduce its negative effects. At this time, several studies have confirmed the role that the affective spectrum plays on students' proficiency in a foreign language and how necessary it is to address this issue. In order to collect information about the negative impact of the affective filter and the strategies that can be used, an exhaustive analysis of different studies was carried out. This analysis shows that when students' affective filter is 'high'—e.g. feeling anxious, frustrated, stressed—students eventually become uninterested and unmotivated about the subject matter and the activities carried out in class. Also, they could become apathetic to the relationships that could be built with other classmates due to the fear of being criticized, and as a result, students' learning process would be hindered. Moreover, some effective methods are discussed as well, such as using humor as a tool in the class, having discussions about the topics that are to be introduced, using English captions, applying relevant topics to teach, implementing songs and games, introducing self-soothing strategies, and creating teacher-student rapport to encourage a healthy and comfortable environment within the classroom. Overall, it is concluded that students having a 'high' affective filter leads to a learning process being negatively affected. Then, the importance of examining possible procedures

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to help students succeed is emphasized as well.

Keywords: The Affective Filter hypothesis, effects, foreign language, learning process, strategies

Introduction

Can the way students feel inside a classroom facilitate or hinder their learning process? This is an issue that has been debated over time and that needs to be contemplated in the development of language classrooms. When it comes to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes, it is fundamental to take into account several factors that tend to influence students' learning process. Learning a foreign language is a difficult task that requires specific cognitive abilities that sometimes have to be developed in the class to reach proficiency; however, this process can be even more difficult if instructors overlook significant external and internal elements of students' linguistic development. One of the most decisive aspects complementing the learning process of students is the affective domain; as a matter of fact, several studies nowadays prove this reality in spite of the hesitation that has surrounded this topic. For example, Shao et al. conveyed that "anxiety may also interact with linguistic ability and task demands in predicting L2 learners' performance, and the correlation often becomes negative when language tasks are complex" (2019, p. 8). It should be noted that progressing and achieving goals in language learning can be primarily attributed to what people feel when they are learning and how they relate to other peers in the classroom; hence, the Affective Filter hypothesis becomes tremendously relevant in the process of learning a language.

The Affective Filter from Stephen Krashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition refers to the emotional "barriers" students can unconsciously pull up when they are learning a language (Krashen, 2013). When people learn a new language, they can come across different feelings that could impact their learning process negatively; for instance, if they feel

anxious, afraid, or have a low self-esteem, they could understand the input provided in class, but it would not necessarily reach their language acquisition devices. For instance, Dover (2011) noted that students starting the English major at Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica showed different reactions including “fear, nervousness, involuntary movements on legs and hands, shaking and quivering” (p. 180). Also, students reported feeling phobia, nervousness, and stress, as well as forgetting the information they had to talk about in presentations.

There is also Díaz-Ducca (2015) who carried out a study in an English language program offered by a public university in Costa Rica; he declared that students usually expressed that the anxiety they sometimes feel when using English originates from previous negative experiences they went through in the classroom and that also this anxiety comes from their personalities.

In general, students could feel motivated to participate in a class that is relaxing for them, that is, having a teacher that supports them, does not make fun of them, and does not get angry if they make mistakes since this could reduce students’ anxiety or fear within the class. These factors can hinder students’ learning process, so it is necessary to address the topic to understand why this phenomenon takes place in the first place and also discuss possible strategies to help students lower the affective filter. Overall, being a teacher does not mean that the ultimate goal is to transmit knowledge to students, but rather, it means that teachers must acknowledge that learners are human beings inside the classroom, whose learning processes could also be altered by affective factors. This situation is a major responsibility for teachers, and it requires them to comprehend and improve their praxis to help students as much as possible. Altogether, this paper aims to provide English teachers with information regarding the academic implications of the affective filter within the classroom, as well as possible suggestions that language instructors could employ to lower students’ stress and anxiety levels in order to promote more successful language learning processes.

Importance of the Affective Spectrum within the Classroom

In recent years, there has been a growing necessity to analyze the effect of affective aspects in the process of language learning. Arnold (2019) emphasized the importance of evaluating carefully the methods that teachers use to guide students. She stated that “many studies from the neurosciences that deal with learning show that a positive affective environment puts the brain in the optimal state for learning: low stress and high interest in the learning process” (2019, p. 11). There is a compelling relationship that could be overlooked between confidence and proficiency in a language, and it is necessary to strengthen the way students view themselves so that they become better at coping with setbacks during the process of learning. Huang and Hwang (2013) expressed that for students who have a limited competence in a foreign language, trying to express their ideas can be very threatening for their “self-image” since they could eventually have a negative perception about themselves. Also, they said that when it comes to the affective aspects that influence students’ learning process, the main ones would be emotional reactions and motivations (Huang & Hwang, 2013). Although it is difficult to state how anxiety would influence each student exactly, the importance of the problem lies in the fact that it always hinders students’ learning process significantly.

Zayed and Al-Ghamdi (2019) expressed that there are nine different affective factors that take place in EFL classes; they are motivation, attitudes, inhibition, extroversion, introversion, self-confidence, ethnocentrism, anxiety, and social class. When dealing with these, it is not necessary to determine which is the most important aspect since they are all interrelated, and each of them constitutes an important element of students’ learning processes. They referred to how, for instance, improving students’ motivation could make them obtain good results in their language competence (Zayed & Al-Ghamdi, 2019); also, if their self-image improves, they could perceive themselves as capable individuals who have become more proficient over time in the language. As a matter of fact, Mustafina et al. (2020) explained thoroughly the way in which emotions and learning are correlated; for instance, if learners are interested in a topic (may that be due to a personal or situational

preference) they could eventually enjoy learning about it. According to them, “enjoyment is linked with joy, excitement, delight leading to concentration” (Mustafina et al., 2020, p. 320), and these tend to be called “achievement emotions,” for they usually lead to an effective learning (Mustafina et al., 2020). Hence, these emotions are responsible, or the basis, at least, for student engagement within the class.

Mustafina et al. (2020) referred to the way in which personal issues affect students’ learning process and how that could take up students’ energy and motivation to progress. Past experiences have an impact on how students approach language learning too. That is, if they had negative experiences, it will be difficult for them to have a positive attitude at the beginning of their learning process. Some examples of negative experiences are having a teacher who made jokes about them or was not patient whenever they made a mistake using the language, comparing themselves with other peers, having academic assignments that are too challenging with no guidance or support, among others. If students experience shame or fear of participating, they will hardly do any task assigned to them, and as Mustafina et al. suggested, “fear and shame are closely connected; they both aim to protect from painful emotions in future” (2020, p. 321). The downside to this matter is that students’ learning will be prevented from taking place. Needless to say, the most important aspect is for teachers to develop an environment in which students feel safe to participate and expand their linguistic skills.

It is also vital to consider the possible reasons why students tend to feel anxious, which could be attributed to various external factors, for instance, the interaction with others in the foreign language, the fear of being evaluated negatively because they fear social expectations or judgements, and the uneasiness about tests in case they do not get good grades. This uneasiness can be coined as the term called Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), which according to Jin et al. (2021, p. 3), “is of concern to both teachers and learners not only because it can be an unwelcome experience but also because it has been shown to negatively affect the learning process.” Moreover, not only do external factors affect students but also internal factors such as low self-confidence, low motivation, and high

levels of anxiety do. Hence, considering that these elements have a profound impact on students' learning process, in connection with Krashen's theory, is crucial.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis

Krashen (2013) referred to different issues pertaining to the process of second language acquisition in his theory. For example, he discussed the acquisition-learning theory, the natural order hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the comprehension hypothesis, and the affective filter hypothesis. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this paper, emphasizing the affective filter hypothesis is essential. According to Dover (2011, p. 173), Krashen "focuses his hypothesis in the relationship that exists between affective variables and the process of second language acquisition, and consequently to the strength or level of the student/learner's Affective Filter." Ni (2012, p. 1508) also declared that "Krashen argued that [the] affective filter is a kind of psychological obstacle that prevents language learners from absorbing available comprehensible input completely." Hence, this illustrates that the affective domain can affect the learning process either positively or negatively.

Dover (2011) talked about how the affective filter that is sometimes "created" within an EFL class affects the information trying to reach "the language acquisition device." The term "language acquisition device" was coined by Chomsky to refer to "the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition" (Krashen, 2013, p. 4). Krashen (2013) maintained the conviction that learners have a filter in their brains that gets activated when they do not feel emotionally comfortable within the class. He specified that when students' Affective Filter is high, their motivation and confidence decrease, which causes them issues when interacting with the new language (Krashen, 2013). Overall, the main concern of this hypothesis is that anxiety, self-confidence, and low motivation could surface when students are studying English as a Foreign Language, and they could act as "barriers" that prevent students from fully emerging themselves into the learning process. Basically, if students in English classes are constantly anxious and overwhelmed, they will have a more challenging task trying to become proficient in the language.

Effects of the Affective Filter on Students' Language Learning Process

As previously stated, students' learning process can be negatively impacted by their low motivation, anxiety, and low-self confidence; these issues are intertwined with the Affective Filter. Most of the time, students aim to reach native-like proficiency, which can, as a result, make them worry whenever they have to talk in front of the class to participate or give an oral presentation. That is, the desire to use the language as a native speaker can turn into frustration and anxiety. Dover (2011) found that there are different ways in which students display their anxiety, such as "fear, nervousness, involuntary movements on legs and hands, shaking and quivering. They act without realizing what they are doing or saying; mainly during some learning activities that force them to interact in the new language" (p. 180). Also, during oral activities, students stated that they get scared and forget what to say if professors or peers ask them questions or try to interact with them. More specifically, "their feet shake and they feel butterflies in their stomach" (Dover, 2011, 180). According to Lim, whenever students dealing with a high affective filter engage in communicative activities, they try not to speak or involve themselves in situations in which there could be "follow up questions from the teacher" (2020, p. 473). As he reported, students are usually fearful that they are being judged whenever they speak their mind in class (Lim, 2020). Moreover, he indicated that students could also avoid situations in which they would have to socialize with others, which would, as a result, cause them to be indifferent to the relationships they could build with their classmates (Lim, 2020).

Students also get extremely stressed if they have to do oral presentations; as a matter of fact, they usually implement "fillers" such as "uh, well, mmm, eh" even if they have prepared well for the presentation. Dover (2011) also conveyed that when students have a high Affective Filter, they tend to feel fearful, and as a consequence, they have low motivation within the class; in fact, they show little to no interest in the classroom. For example, Dover (2011) shared that two students did not want to participate in one of the

activities developed by the professor, and that they expressed that most of the time, they were not interested in the tasks they had to carry out in class, but they would do them anyway since they needed to pass the course. Hence, considering these outcomes in students' learning process, it is necessary to address the issue by employing strategies and activities that will 'lower' the affective filter.

Lowering the Affective Filter

Sometimes, teachers tend to be excessively focused on the subject matter that is taught within the class and not so much on the way students are relating to that content and also to the language. According to Alrabai, language anxiety leads to low motivation, and these factors "influence the quality of different aspects of language learning and usually result in unsatisfactory learning outcomes even for those learners who possess high learning capabilities" (2014, p. 8). Moreover, Alrabai (2014) discussed which factors can increase this anxiety, for instance, students' personalities, the instructor's beliefs, and the procedures carried out in the classroom. He also addressed which considerations teachers should have in order to identify if a learner is suffering from anxiety, for example, avoiding participation, having a lower performance, freezing in oral activities, going blank while participating, and demonstrating physical symptoms of anxiety (Alrabai, 2014). Due to this, it is necessary to explore what strategies can work well with students in order to lower the affective filter.

Given the fact that students might suffer from anxiety, it is imperative to analyze every aspect that could be making students' affective filter "rise." Many studies are focused on the methods and procedures that should be carried out, but they often tend to overlook the importance of teachers' personality within the class. Bilokcuoglu and Debreli (2018) conveyed how humor is an invaluable tool when teaching a foreign language. This is not to say that language classes should not be taken seriously, but rather to address how "humorous messages that the instructors utilise should lead to increase in student motivation, rise in attention and to the creation of a positive effect" (Bilokcuoglu & Debreli,

2018, p. 355). They also suggested that through the implementation of humor, motivation and attention can be activated, as well as evoking a better performance and more suitable opportunities to provide feedback from a respectful stance (Bilokcuoglu & Debreli, 2018). Nevertheless, over-using humor in the class could have negative consequences as well; hence, there has to be a balance. Overall, its implementation should be to always try to create a more comfortable environment for learners while not losing the focus of the class.

Díaz-Ducca (2015) explored different techniques that can be used to reduce language anxiety during oral tests. While learning a new language, students can face different challenges, but one of the most common issues is language anxiety. Unfortunately, this topic is not usually discussed, and students could ignore the negative effects that the affective filter could have on their learning process. Nevertheless, delving into which methods decrease students' anxiety is necessary. For instance, Díaz-Ducca (2015) stated that using relevant topics for students, using English captions, having discussions beforehand about the topics that are going to be studied, carrying out teacher and peer scaffolding, and providing students time to plan their personal notes are crucial. These activities could help students to reduce different affective issues they tend to go through.

There is also Lin (2008) who embraced the significance of employing other techniques to make classes more dynamic and lessen stress levels. She considered that using games could stimulate students' motivation within the class; Lin (2008) suggested that using games can boost students' skills to gain knowledge as they can work as experiential activities or training in the subject matter. Songs can work as great support for students' language learning as well; indeed, "songs develop students' language abilities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing and can be used to teach sentence patterns, vocabulary, pronunciation, rhythm, adjective, adverbs, and so on." (Lin, 2008, p. 117). Furthermore, using films in English classrooms can also be beneficial for students since they give students the opportunity to learn how grammatical structures, vocabulary, pronunciation, intonation, and so on take place in real-life situations. Undoubtedly, if films are to be used within a class, they should have an academic purpose, and before watching them, students should

be introduced to some vocabulary, background, and context (Lin, 2008).

Jin et al. expressed that “techniques that promote inner peace, self-awareness, and kindness and compassion towards oneself and others can also have positive effects” (2021, p. 4). That is, the implementation of self-regulation strategies is imperative in their learning process; indeed, they declared that in their study, students who were part of the experimental group and implemented these strategies, experienced a significant difference in their relationship to the language (Jin et al., 2021). For instance, these learners indicated that they have experienced specific progress when it comes to communicating, delivering speech, reading aloud, and using authentic English expressions. Also, there was an enhancement in the way they perceived themselves and the class; that is, they felt more confident and also showed more interest in the subject matter. If teachers aim to help students reach relaxation, less fear and anxiety, they should guide them on the appropriate techniques that could be used.

In addition to the strategies mentioned before, creating teacher-student rapport within the class is vital to generate a healthy classroom environment for students to feel safe and comfortable. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to specify which steps could be taken.

First, teachers should have the urgency to comprehend students’ needs; for Ratliff (2019),

Instructors who understand and meet students’ individual needs help to increase student satisfaction, motivation, and persistence. When instructors are not attuned to students’ needs, it may lead to frustration and dissatisfaction, which may also result in withdrawing from the course. (p. 33)

Moreover, teachers should try to create a “sense of community” (Ratliff, 2019, p. 39). Ratliff (2019) pointed out that students have to develop an identity within the class and recognize who they are; that is, they have to be conscious of their strengths and weaknesses, as well as trust themselves and their peers during the process. Interaction among learners should also be encouraged by teachers so they can work together to achieve shared educational objectives and promote learning. Apart from this, recognizing students’ skills is a vital action that should be adopted; for this, it is important for instructors

to carry out activities in which students develop essential problem-solving skills so that they do not feel frustrated. Overall, instructors must embrace students' skills to make them feel valued and generate a "sense of belonging" (Ratliff, 2019).

Altogether, teachers need to be a positive influence on learners' beliefs, that is, making constructive comments, paying attention to students, showing interest in them, and transmitting confidence since these can be highly beneficial. Briefly, as instructors, it is necessary to motivate students and make them feel that they are appreciated and capable of becoming proficient in the new language.

Conclusions

The affective filter is an issue that has been deliberated on throughout time due to the several challenges that teachers commonly face in the classrooms; sometimes these situations are related to students' personal problems, but other times, these situations are attributed to the affective filter and its high influence on students' learning process. Overall, the main objective of this paper was to refer to the negative consequences that high levels of stress and anxiety could have on students' learning processes and also which procedures could be carried out to help students lower their affective filter so that they can improve their linguistic performance.

Although there has been some debate on the subject, it is clear that the affective spectrum influences the way students progress – academically and linguistically speaking. If learners are in a constant state of anxiety and stress, it will be difficult for them to understand and internalize the subject matter. Despite the fact that stress and anxiety are two emotions that are constantly talked about when discussing the affective filter, they can actually act as triggers to other emotions or states of being, such as motivation, self-confidence, inhibition, extroversion, introversion, and so on. As a matter of fact, the affective spectrum is extremely broad; hence, considering the way emotions are interrelated among them and also with the learning process is fundamental.

Krashen (2013) believed that emotions acting up negatively conformed the "affective

filter.” When students do not feel comfortable or safe within a class, the filter will be “higher.” Indeed, the higher the filter, the less likely it is for students to be able to understand the information; the lower the filter, the more likely it is for students to comprehend better the subject matter, and they will be open to receive input. There can be different motives for students to feel anxiety in English classes, such as fear of negative evaluation and judgment from instructors and peers, fear of public speaking due to a constant desire of a native-like proficiency, lack of self-confidence, low motivation, and an inadequate treatment from the teachers. Moreover, several courses of action have been suggested so that students’ learning process can be carried out in a pleasant environment, for instance, resorting to humor to create a light-spirited class, teaching new topics in a way that becomes relevant for students by making connections to real-life events, using different games and resources such as songs and movies, introducing students to self-regulating strategies, and creating healthy relationships with students so that they feel their needs are important and considered within the classroom.

In general, creating a classroom climate that intentionally tries to lower students’ affective filter is crucial. As teachers, it can be easy to get lost in the day-to-day tasks and expect students to be in a good emotional state every time one needs them to pick up on new information, but that is not always the case. The truth is that every student that enters one’s class is dealing with different issues, and although little can be done by teachers most of the time, there are some cases in which help can be provided. Actively looking for ways to assist students when they are learning a new language is necessary so they can progress; hence, teachers must try to develop classes in which students feel safe enough to participate even if that includes making mistakes. At the end of the day, providing a secure space to learners in order to help them feel they are capable of accomplishing different objectives is what teaching is about.

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DECLARACIÓN JURADA

Yo, María José Morales Valerio, cédula de identidad 402450395, estudiante de la Universidad Nacional, declaro bajo fe de juramento y consciente de la responsabilidades penales de este acto, que soy autor intelectual del Trabajo Final de Graduación Titulado **“The Pertinence of Addressing the Affective Filter in EFL Costa Rican Classrooms and Strategies to Lower It”**, para optar por el grado de Maestría en Educación con énfasis en Pedagogía Universitaria.

Heredia, a los 04 días del mes de setiembre del año 2022.



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Refrendo

Los abajo firmantes avalamos el Trabajo de Graduación de la estudiante María José Morales Valerio, cédula 402450395, que lleva como título **The Pertinence of Addressing the Affective Filter in EFL Costa Rican Classrooms and Strategies to Lower It**, dado que cumple con las disposiciones vigentes y la calidad académica requerida por el posgrado.

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