

PROMOTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

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Abstract: Affective strategies need to be put in action if full fledged learning is desired (OXFORD, 1990; COHEN, 1998; ARNOLD, 1999). The problem presented to most teachers is how to promote the development of affective strategies in students whose self-esteem is very low. New discoveries of neurosciences (DENNISON & DENNISON, 1994; VIOLAND-SANCHEZ, 1998; HANNAFORD, 2005) can shed some light into this problem by offering simple and fun exercises for improved brain functioning. Further research still need to be conducted in order to prove the efficacy of this instrument in foreign languages classrooms.

Resumo: O processo de aprendizagem desenvolve-se também por meio do emprego de estratégias afetivas (OXFORD, 1990; COHEN, 1998; ARNOLD, 1999). Muitos professores, no entanto, não sabem como promover o desenvolvimento dessas estratégias em alunos com baixa auto-estima. Novas descobertas das neurociências (DENNISON & DENNISON, 1994; VIOLAND-SANCHEZ, 1998; HANNAFORD, 2005) podem iluminar essa questão ao oferecer práticas simples e divertidas que promovem o funcionamento ótimo do cérebro. Pesquisas adicionais precisam ser conduzidas para provar a eficácia desse instrumento nas salas de aula de línguas estrangeiras.

Introduction

The issue of students being afraid, ashamed, or embarrassed to talk in a foreign language is a frequent complaint in the teaching and learning community. The fragility of students spirits when not being able to express themselves in a foreign language develops into a dead end which can prevent learning. This situation is enhanced by multilevel classes where the less advanced students sometimes seem to be unable to understand that most of their colleagues who now speak the foreign language were once learners like they are now. Recognizing learning a foreign language as a process, accepting the varied levels of interlanguage, and facing errors as a natural step towards gradually achieving more competence in the foreign language can definitely help. However, the quest for ways to help panicked students continues.

1. The influence of affect in language learning

Many authors have reflected on the effect of low self esteem and fear in the foreign language classrooms. All of them agree that affective strategies to overcome insecurity to speak in the foreign language need to be put in action if full fledged learning is desired (OXFORD, 1990; COHEN, 1998; ARNOLD, 1999). The affective factors can sometimes determine failure or success in foreign language learning. Among these factors, we can mention anxiety, fear, shame etc.

As Arnold and Brown (1999:8) say, “Anxiety is quite possibly the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process. It is associated with negative feelings such as uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension and tension.” Students often report stressful feelings when confronted to the fact that they are not producing language which would be expected from them at a certain level of advancement in their language course. This perception functions as a menace to them and, according to Hannaford,

When we are stressed, feel fear or frustration, the heart exhibits an incoherent heart rate variability pattern. In this state, the heart sends a neural message to the amygdala that causes it to function in a sympathetic state (the survival state of fight or flight). A message from the heart causes the thalamus to **shut down to any incoming sensory information**¹ that does not relate directly to survival, and the message to the pre-frontal cortex of the brain is incoherent so **we don't learn or remember**. In this incoherent state, cells within the hippocampus lose their dendritic connections and die off **resulting in poor memory, fuzzy thinking, and lack of creativity** (2005:88).

This quotation can help teachers understand what goes on in students minds when they feel confronted. It all happens in a microbiological and neural level resulting in students who fight and revolt against teachers, schools, systems etc or who flight by being mentally absent, although physically inside the class. In this situation, students are unable to listen to new information, to reason, or to remember anything. Even if the

¹ Words in bold type were stressed by the author of the paper in order to emphasize their importance.

situation is not actually so menacing, people's minds can perceive it as being so, and the consequence is oxygen filled blood cells being drawn out of the brain, establishing a vicious cycle of blocking any creative thought.

Niwa and Santos (2005) conducted a study with students who attended the research project *Ways to Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning*² at the *Universidade Federal do Pará* and revealed that affective strategies are seldom used by learners. The authors analysed the results of the SILL³ taken by students in the project and found out that they were generally unaware of the force of affective states in learning a language, in that case English or French. The affective strategies group was the second less used group of strategies employed by these subjects. One of the strategies mentioned in the SILL, writing a language learning diary, was used by only three students, out of the 82 researched. It seems that students are unaware of the possibility of using some tools to relieve feelings of uneasiness when learning a foreign language. By being unaware of their own feelings, learners cannot overcome them.

The same study (NIWA & SANTOS, 2005) revealed that in the direct group of strategies (OXFORD, 1990), the less employed group was the memory one. Students with low affective strategies use memory strategies poorly, thus making the connection affect / memory. This corroborates what we mentioned above of the impossibility of optimum functioning of memory when subjects do not feel safe in their learning communities.

Although few teachers would disagree with these assumptions, the problem presented to most of them is how to promote the development of affective strategies in students whose self-esteem is very low. In the next session we will present some suggestions that literature in the area has lately provided.

² More information on the project can be found at <http://ufpa.br/cla/caale/>.

³ Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (OXFORD, 1990).

2. Suggestions to improve students' self-esteem

“Affective strategies serve to regulate emotions, motivation, and attitudes, like strategies for reduction of anxiety and for self-encouragement” (COHEN, 1998:8). New discoveries of neurosciences (DENNISON & DENNISON, 1994; VIOLAND-SANCHEZ, 1998; HANNAFORD, 2005) can shed some light into this problem by offering simple and fun exercises for improved brain functioning.

Weaver et alii (*apud* COHEN, 1998:153) mention several affective strategies that can be timely used while presenting oral tasks. They mention some that can be used before speaking: breath deeply, talk to yourself in positive terms, visualize yourself succeeding, use relaxation techniques, visualize yourself as prepared, among others. During the presentation, students should encourage themselves to speak even though they might make some mistakes. They should also try to perceive if they are getting stressed and then find ways to relax by concentrating their energies to their brains rather than their bodies, by laughing or by breathing deeply. For after the presentation, the authors suggest that students reward themselves for their efforts. Teachers should play their part by genuinely praising successful efforts even if they are only small steps in the process of communicating in the foreign language.

We state that these actions done previously, during and after presentations should be part of routinely instructions given by teachers to students in the classrooms. They should pervade presentations preparation and some space should be given to these techniques during class time in order to practice them and explain their importance in the desirable outcomes. Crookall and Oxford more than a decade ago said that

Dealing with anxiety in an explicit and purposeful way is part of true learner training. If we spend some time of our class time not on actually teaching the language directly but rather on dealing directly with the anxiety that students

may be feeling, then the time spent on language learning will be more effective (1991:145).

According to Ellison (*apud* VIOLAND-SANCHEZ), when students are taught to breath accordingly and when they learn the relation between breathing and the process of focusing attention, they learn better. Cozy and positive environments, where students feel safe to experiment and risk, are supported by Kline (*apud* VIOLAND-SANCHEZ). He suggests activities that provoke positive thoughts among students, like saying something good that recently happened to each one. Other activities can be created, provided that they bring a nice and relaxed atmosphere to the classroom. Cooperative learning techniques can also be used in these situations.

Physical movement causes better blood circulation in the brain, thus creating optimal conditions for learning to take place. Hannaford (2005), a neurologist, explains in layman language how this happens. Her book, plentifully illustrated, can help teachers understand what takes place in a fearful brain and how these feelings prompt us not to learn anything. Denison & Denison (1994) propose a series of exercises that connect the two brain hemispheres and that help relax in order to focus attention on what is being learnt. Integrating movements of the two sides of the body, eg. left arm touching right leg, “have a positive effect on cognitive processing” (DENISON & DENISON *apud* VIOLAND-SANCHEZ, 1995:31). Teachers experimenting with this kind of exercises have noticed improvent in students attention span and readiness to learn.

Many scientists (VIOLAND-SANCHEZ, 1995, HANNAFORD, 2005, among others) also mention the need to drink water. Fruit juice and softdrinks won't replace water with the same advantages because they demand extra effort on the digestive system to process sugars and enzymes present in these kinds of beverages. Water, on

the other hand, hydrates the brain in the microbiological level providing a better environment for the electrical pulses between neurons to occur.

Eliminating stress from the classrooms by providing a proper and relaxed atmosphere, by teaching and doing some physical movements to integrate student's brain hemispheres, and by telling them to sip water every once in a while may help students develop a better learning promptitude.

Further research still needs to be conducted in order to prove the efficacy of these ideas in foreign language classrooms. We can suggest that teachers start talking about affective strategies with students and that they perform together some of the exercises that might promote a more relaxing and integrated atmosphere in the classroom.

3. Conclusion

Some teachers say that individual fears and feelings of shame and inadequacy do not belong to the foreign language classroom and do not need to be handled by the teacher. They add that they are not trained to deal with these problems, and therefore students who present these emotional characteristics should be sent to the psychologists. However, we are not referring to pathological cases, which should certainly rely on professional help to be treated. The point we are trying to make is that feelings of distress often come up in classes of perfectly "balanced" and "centered" students. These feelings will very often be there, despite our will.

We, teachers, have to master some theoretical knowledge in psychopedagogy to understand that feelings of inappropriacy that lead to stress are really present in a normal classroom. If not catered to, they may trigger biological reactions that will ultimately hinder learning. Being aware of the presence of these emotional states and being informed of ways to release tension are also part of the foreign language teacher's

roles. We cannot prevent feelings of distress to appear, but we have to try to understand them and provide the means to soften the mood in the classroom being conscious that this mood may determine success or failure of a given student.

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