Creating An Atmosphere Conducive to English Learning

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Abstract
Successful language acquisition depends on the learners’ feelings. Negative attitudes like a lack of motivation or self-confidence and anxiety are said to act as a filter, preventing the learner from making use of input, and thus hindering success in language learning. To wipe out hindrance, the teacher needs to create a humanistic, relaxing and motivating atmosphere by lowering the students’ anxiety, tolerating learners’ errors and respecting individual differences. Then English learning will be facilitated.

Key words: atmosphere, English learning, anxiety, error, individual differences

As is known to all, learning English is to communicate. That is why more and more English teachers attach great importance to the development of communicative skills after realizing this. However, learners’ negative attitudes and feelings hinder communication. So to enhance learning teachers need to create an atmosphere in which students feel free to communicate. In other words, an atmosphere that encourages a low affective filter is needed. Here “affective filter” refers to difficulty in learning a foreign language, resulting from self-consciousness and fear of failure. Those who suffer from a high affective filter are sure to be hindered from learning English effectively. To cite Krashen’s model of language acquisition:

“…those (learners) whose attitudes are not optimal for second language acquisition will not only tend to seek less input, but they will also have a high or strong Affective Filter. Even if they understand the message, the input will not reach that part of the brain responsible for language acquisition or the language acquisition device.” Therefore, to enhance English learning, teachers should help students wipe out anxiety and worry by creating a humanistic, relaxing and motivating atmosphere.

I. Lowering Students’ Anxiety

Some English teachers tend to pose as authorities, taking it for granted that this attitude can win students’ respect and secure their positions against challenges. But they have neglected one important point: Seeing their solemn faces, their students dare not speak or are reluctant to participate in class activities for fear of their teachers’ contempt or even scolding. There always seems to be a gap between the teachers and their students. However knowledgeable and talented the teachers are, they can only remain at a respectful distance from their students.

To avoid such problems, teachers should be humanistic, humorous and invoke cooperative learning.

1. Being Humanistic

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) emphasize the need for “humanistic” approaches to counter students’ anxiety. This implies that the teacher has the responsibility to build
self-confidence in learners.

Then the teacher is not to try to portray as someone with particular expertise, but as someone with whom sufferings, happiness and problems can be shared. The teacher is to act as students’ friend. The self-introduction including all his/her means of contact, his/her intimate greetings, amiable face and gentle voice can dissolve the students’ incredulity, indifference and worry. The objective and fair assessment of each student can elevate the teacher’s charm of personality, which highlights the charm of teaching. Chats with students for more information about their daily life, emotions, attitudes and beliefs will promote their mutual understanding and improve their friendship. Then students can turn to him/her for advice, support, encouragement and confidence. In such a humanistic and motivating atmosphere students will be freed from anxiety, hesitation and nervousness and learning will be fostered.

2. Using Humor

Teachers can use humor to shorten the distance between them and their students. Then there won’t be many differences between the teacher and the students in terms of title, age or position. Humor builds rapport between teachers and students.

Humor can relax the students into smiles or laugh. Laughter has long been regarded as the best medicine for hesitation, reluctance and anxiety. Loomax and Moosavi (1998) point out that humor is an effective tool in education and that the use of humor in the classroom reduces tension and creates a more positive learning atmosphere by breaking down barriers to communication between the teacher and the students and thus barriers to learning.

It’s true that no teacher is born with a sense of humor, but this sense can be cultivated. Teachers can arrange humor to take place. They can collect materials like anecdotes and humorous stories and keep them in mind. When they reach the part of teaching related to the humorous material in their memory, the associations will arise and come alive. Humorous teachers are usually recognized as having a wide scope of knowledge most probably because they have been devoted to collecting humorous materials.

Teachers can also create humorous moments through their body language and eye contact at proper times. This shouldn’t be overdone, or it will distract students and make them feel that the teacher behaves like a clown and doesn’t deserve their respect.

Some students can create humor in interactions in class. In one class there is always one or two students who make the right kind of joke favored by the peer students about their college life. If the teacher doesn’t make full use of them, it will be a waste of “human resources”. The teacher should make the class interactive to elicit humor from such students in case his/her own humor is exhausted.

Teachers should let humor arise naturally instead of forcing it. It should fit the teachers’ own personality and their students, or it won’t work. They should make humor an integral part of the class rather than something special or artificial. They shouldn’t overuse it or offend or hurt students by playing jokes on them. Neither should they avoid using it for fear of causing chaos in class. The use of humor mainly depends on the teaching context and the handling of humorous materials.

3. Cooperative Learning

Not only humanism and humor but also cooperative learning reduces students’ anxiety in learning English.

In a traditional classroom students compete against one another. When a teacher asks a student to answer questions, (s)he becomes the focus of attention of the whole class. Any incorrect answers may embarrass the student or make him (her) feel ashamed. (S)he has
pressure as to whether (s)he can get the answer right. Fear of failing or appearing foolish is a constant threat to interaction in the language classroom, especially when teachers ask questions which only a few can answer.” (JoAnn Crandall)

In contrast, in cooperative learning, when students work in a group, the focus of attention is diffused among the group. There is more possibility of providing a correct or acceptable answer. Students have more time to think, more opportunities to rehearse and receive feedback. In group work, students are very patient and helpful with each other as they try to think of what to say and how to say it. They all work for the honor of the whole group. Even if a mistake is made, the pressure is shared and no student in the group will suffer from loss of face. They are also more likely to succeed. Personally, I prefer small groups of 4 or 5 students where students have more ideas and give each other a lot of help and time to think of what to say. Lower level learners benefit from interaction with somewhat higher level learners. Higher level learners benefit because they help themselves to better understand what they already know in trying to explain something.

So cooperative learning reduces anxiety and can result in increased participation and language learning.

Oxford and Ehrman (1993) include cooperative learning as a classroom procedure which can lower anxiety in the language classroom.

II. Tolerating Learners’ Errors

Many English teachers lay too much emphasis on accuracy rather than fluency. They seek perfection in their students’ production. They are used to correcting a mistake whenever they detect one, even in a passionate discussion. Then the conversational flow is interrupted. Little by little the students are inhibited from expressing themselves for fear of making grammatical or pronunciation errors and being laughed at by others.

As a matter of fact, making errors is an inevitable and necessary part of language learning. It is only through making errors, and hearing the correct forms, that students can develop their own understanding of how English works. It is thus important that students have as much opportunity as possible to produce language creatively rather than simply repeating language. The more English students produce, the more errors they make. Teachers cannot expect that simply correcting an error will produce immediate results. Some errors can remain even up to very advanced levels. A strong emphasis on error correction cannot be expected to produce students who make few errors. In fact, an over-emphasis on error correction is likely to be counter-productive as students become deterred from using English.

I think if learners’ errors do not impede successful communication, teachers should tolerate them. The implication H. Douglas Brown gets from Vigil and Oller’s model for a theory of error correction is that too much negative cognitive feedback—interruptions, corrections, and overt attention to malformations—often interrupts learners in the flow of production and leads them to give up their attempts at communication. They realize that so much is wrong with their production that there is little hope to get anything right. Too much correction is viewed by learners as an affective red light—devaluing, dehumanizing or insulting their personhood.

But students do need to have their errors pointed out to them or else the errors will be reinforced and persist or perhaps eventually fossilize. The key is to limit correction to a small number of points at a time and to judge when the right moment for correction is. Teachers should differentiate what errors they are before they decide to correct them. If the
error makes the speaker’s meaning confusing, the teacher can ask the speaker to explain it again or ask him/her questions in order to clarify the meaning to the other students. But if the error is not so glaring as to hinder communication, the teacher can skip it for the time being and make a note of the errors the students make and go through them at the end of the discussion or lesson. If most students make the same errors, the teacher can organize ‘an error of the week’ activity. He/She should choose an error which most students make, tell them what it is and write the correct answer on a piece of paper on the wall. This raises the students’ consciousness about this particular error. Students then have to try not to make this error throughout this week. Students can be elicited to help each other towards self-correction instead of overlooking them. For errors in writing, students can be encouraged to build up a short list of their most common errors.

Generally speaking, correction “has to be done with tact” (Jeremy Harmer). The teacher should value learners, prize their attempts to communicate and then to provide optimal feedback for the learners to proceed. The focus should be on the process of learning, not on error correction. Only by showing tolerance for learner’s errors can teachers create an inspiring atmosphere that allows students to express themselves freely and make them feel eager to communicate.

III. Respecting Individual Differences

Every learner is unique. They have different personalities, learning styles, motivations learning strategies and so on. Understanding and respecting these differences help to improve teaching methods and create an optimal atmosphere for learning.

1. Personality

According to Douglas Brown, introverted students are quieter and more reserved, but they show high empathy—an intuitive understanding and apprehension of others. Introverts are found to be better than extroverts in their pronunciation, reading, grammar, translation and writing. They also have profound thinking and keen observation. They prefer academic teaching that emphasizes individual learning and language knowledge. They don’t like talking, so their oral production in English is weak.

The extroverts like communicative teaching that emphasizes group participation, so they benefit from oral work in small groups because their assertiveness enables them to dominate and their willingness to take risks facilitates practice, so their oral production improves quickly and they are more creative. “An outgoing, sociable person learns an L2 better than a reserved, shy person” (Vivian Cook). But extroverts are usually weak in grammar, reading and writing. Their basic skills may need to be consolidated.

The implication for the teacher is to balance these personality differences by giving an equal share of attention and opportunity to students. In asking questions, the teacher should encourage those reserved ones more. In instructing students’ writing, the teacher should devote more attention to the extroverts. In grouping the students for discussion, the teacher can arrange the introverts and the extroverts together to compensate each other.

2. Learning style

According to Joy Reid’s classification of learning styles, students may prefer a visual (seeing), auditory (hearing), kinesthetic (moving) or tactile (touching) way of learning. Those who prefer a visual learning style like looking at wall displays, books, etc. They often recognize words by sight. They use lists to organize their thoughts and recall information by remembering how it was set out on a page. Those who prefer an auditory learning style like the teacher to provide verbal instructions. They like dialogues,
discussions and plays. They solve problems by talking about them. They use rhythm and sound as memory aids. Those who prefer a kinesthetic learning style learn best when they are involved or active. They find it difficult to sit still for long periods. They use movement as a memory aid. Those who prefer a tactile way of learning use writing and drawing as memory aids. They learn well in hands-on activities like projects and demonstrations.

Being aware of this, teachers need to use teaching methods and activities to suit different learning styles. For visual learners, there can be visual aids like wall displays, posters, flash cards, pictures, photos or PowerPoint slides. For auditory learners, teachers can use tapes and videos, storytelling, songs, memorization and drills. They should allow students to work in pairs and small groups regularly. For kinesthetic learners, teachers can use physical activities like field trips, role-plays, etc. There can be activities, which require students to sit quietly, and activities that allow them to move around and be active. For tactile learners, teachers can use card games, demonstrations, projects, role plays, etc. They can use listening and reading activities. They can ask students to fill in a table while listening to a talk, or to label a diagram while reading.

3. Motivation

Studies show that “motivation is of crucial importance in the classroom” (Tricia Hedge). Students are influenced by a variety of motivations which affect their attitude toward English learning. Some students learn English to communicate with English speaking people. Some study hard just for the pleasure gained by performing language learning tasks. Some are motivated by a better understanding of the target language people and culture. Some are motivated by a better chance of employment, status and financial reward in the job market. Some are motivated by success in the postgraduate examination. Some are motivated by a successful study in an English institution. Some are motivated by pressure from their parents. Some learners have higher degree of motivation, others don’t.

It’s important for the teacher to learn about the students’ motivation so that he/she can create successful experiences to revive motivation to make students study harder and persist longer. His/her own personality and outlook may provide students with fresh motivation. If he/she has genuine interest in students and their welfare, if he/she often smiles and gives praise when deserved, if he/she responds to students’ difficulties, if he/she shows faith in students’ abilities they will try harder to succeed in learning English. If the teacher can provide some way for students to use English outside the classroom whether through contact with native speakers or by writing to a pen pal in English, he/she will provide them with the best source of motivation of all.

4. Learning strategies

Learning strategies are general approaches, specific actions or techniques used to learn an L2. Learner’s choice of learning strategies is seen as influenced by both individual learner differences (as above) and social factors.

Research has shown that learners can be taught to use effective strategies used by successful learners. The English teacher aiming at training his students in using language learning strategies should learn about the students, their interests, motivations, and learning styles. The teacher can learn what language learning strategies students already appear to be using, observing their behavior in class. Besides, the teacher can prepare a short questionnaire so that students can fill in at the beginning of a course to describe themselves and their English learning. Thus, the teacher can learn the purpose of their learning a language, their favorite / least favorite kinds of class activities, and the reason why they learn English. The teacher can have adequate knowledge about the students, their goals,
motivations, language learning strategies, and their understanding of the course to be taught (Lessard-Clouston 1997:5).

It is a fact that each learner within the same classroom may have different learning styles and varied awareness of the use of strategies. The teacher should provide a wide range of learning strategies in order to meet the needs and expectations of his students possessing different learning styles, motivations, strategy preferences, etc. Therefore, it can be stated that the most important teacher role in foreign language teaching is the provision of a range of tasks to match varied learning styles (Hall 1997:4).

No doubt, individual differences exist and play a significant role in English learning. But the idea is not to teach each student according to his/her preferences, but rather to strive for a balance of instructional methods. If the balance is achieved, students will be taught partly in a manner they prefer, which leads to willingness to learn, and partly in a less preferred manner, which provides practice and feedback in ways of thinking and solving problems.

It’s necessary for the teacher to have an overall understanding of what students like and how they can learn best. The teacher needs to keep in mind that “Not all methods suit all students” (Cook). Then s/he can diversify the teaching methods to provide opportunities for each of them to benefit in their own way. This can be a suitable way to cater for the differences between individuals in the class.

IV. Conclusion
To facilitate students’ learning, teachers need to create a relaxing and humanistic atmosphere in which students don’t have much anxiety or worry. Teachers need to create a motivating and an empathetic atmosphere in which students aren’t afraid of failure and their individual differences are taken into account.

References
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