Affective Factors Influencing Oral English Teaching

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ABSTRACT: This paper mainly studies the affective factors influencing learners’ oral English learning: attitude, motivation, anxiety and personality with a view to ascertaining the relationship between the affective factors and the second language learners’ oral English proficiency. It has been found that motivation, anxiety and personality prove the key factors influencing the achievement of oral English proficiency to a great extent. They somewhat promote or obstruct the oral English learning process. The paper scans and lists the previous and current research centering affective factors at home and abroad while endeavoring to explore the specific influence of the affective factors on the non-English majors’ productive skills of speaking. A survey is accordingly conducted among the non-English major sophomores in Wuchang Institute of Technology. The results of the survey disclose and prove the correlation between affective factors and oral English learning. Then, on such a basis some implications or solutions to alleviate or even rid the students of such negative influence resulting from the affective factors have been put forward.

Keywords: affective factors; oral English; correlation; solution

1 INTRODUCTION

Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication (Hu Zhuanglin, 2002; 12). Hardly can any moment pass without anyone speaking or people talking. Accordingly, the aim of foreign language learning should be to obtain the ability to communicate, to express and receive information, to equip oneself with the necessary skills for establishing social relationship. Oral English is playing an increasingly significant role in modern education and the construction of economy and cultural exchange. Furthermore, as one of the four basic language skills, speaking should be given priority to in the process of second language teaching and learning.

However there does exist a serious problem in the teaching and learning of oral English in China for decades. And learners’ oral communicative competence of English is low in our country. Most graduates, even postgraduates still fail to be able to communicate in English efficiently and appropriately after many years of English study. They only acquire some “Dumb English”, which will frustrate their confidence and may prevent them from hunting for a satisfactory job in the future. Learners’ oral proficiency somewhat lags behind the development of other three skills.

Hence, it is meaningful and necessary to explore the factors which are likely to pose great obstacles to students’ oral English acquisition. What on earth accounts for the hindrance of learners’ oral English acquisition? Affective factors seem to exert great influence on the second language acquisition, especially the oral English acquisition.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Researches on affective factors dated back to the 1950s. Up to the 1960s, the researches on affective factors have become the concern of both second and foreign language teachers and researches. Especially in the 1970s, researchers realized that individual factors including affective variables play a very important role in language acquisition. Meanwhile, psycholinquistics began to experience remarkable progress ever since, and humanism was once again the focus of language teaching profession. Dulay and Burt proposed the concept of an “affective filter” in 1977; the terminology “Monitor Model” was adopted by Krashen in the early eighties when he tried to explain
different efficiency among learners in the same language input environment.

Krashen’s hypothesis about “affective filter” is so convincing that it attracted a wide interest of SLA researchers and theoretician, and studies on affective filter were also inspired hereafter. And more researchers and teachers began to realize that in language acquisition, affective variables were closely related to learners’ oral language proficiency.

In recent years, the correlation between affective factors and oral English acquisition has been extensively investigated as well. Some researchers found that personalities also have some effect on learners’ achievement in oral English in second language learning (Larsen-Freeman 2000). Some other researchers also found that motivation have some strong influence on learners’ acquisition of speech (Ellis 1999: 508-513).

Some domestic researchers have also conducted numerous researches on affective factors in relation to second language acquisition. Affective factors play an important role in foreign language teaching, determining the effect of SLT. A lot of English teachers ignored these factors which reduces the efficiency of SLT (Zhou Rong, 2005). For language learners, affective factors like motivation, attitudes mean much to success language acquisition (Lu Jiamei, 2000).

However, these studies mainly take high school students as subjects. Hardly can many studies focused on oral proficiency of undergraduates be found, who learn English as a foreign language. What’s more, not any systematic study of the effects of affective factors on non-English majors’ oral ability have been conducted either home or abroad.

3 THEORETICAL BASIS

(1) Krashen’s Monitor Model
Krashen put forward his monitor model in the late 1970s after its main claim about the role of monitoring in language learning. It was expanded into a broader-based model, consisting of five connected hypotheses: the Acquisition-learning Hypothesis, the Natural Order Hypothesis, the Monitor Hypothesis, the Input Hypothesis, and the Affective Filter Hypothesis. Among the five, the focus lies in receptive phase of SLA process, which is the affective filter.

(2) The Input Hypothesis
Humans acquire language in only one way—by understanding messages, or by receiving comprehensible input. Language acquisition depends upon the learner’s attempt to extract meaning from the language input, to comprehend understand what are addressed to him. In order to comprehend, the input should be meaningful speech, and the learner must focus on the meaning instead of the form of the meaningful input. For acquisition to advance rather than stay static, the input should be neither too difficult nor too easy to understand. It must include new forms beyond the learner’s current level of competence. i, called i + 1. The gap between i and i + 1 can be bridged through the learner’s attempt to derive meaning form the parts beyond his existing knowledge with the help of context, which includes extra-linguistic information, our knowledge of the world, and previously acquired linguistic competence.

(3) The Acquisition—learning Hypothesis
Two distinctive ways identified of developing competences in second language. The relationship between these two terms is non-interface since acquisition is a subconscious process for the purpose of real communication with the language, while learning is a conscious process that results in knowing about language.

(4) The Natural Order Hypothesis
It is believed that people acquire the rules of language in a predictable order. Language learners progress continually along this pre-set series of steps, from i to i + 1 by receiving comprehensible input.

(5) The Monitor Hypothesis
The Monitor Hypothesis claims that it is acquired knowledge that really works in developing our ability to produce utterances in the target language, while learnt knowledge is only useful serving as a monitor; when the learner knows the language rules well and is consciously concerned about correctness. Everything we say comes from our acquired knowledge, and we turn to our learnt knowledge to make corrections, to change output of the acquired system before or after actual output. There are over-users, under-users, and optimal-users of monitoring due to factors like personality.

(6) The Affective Filter Hypothesis
The term was coined by Dulay and Burt and developed by Krashen. It believes that there can be a mental block that prevents acquirers from fully utilizing the comprehensible input they receive for language acquisition. This mental block caused by affective factors is called the affective filter. When the filter is up, the acquirer is psychologically on the defensive. He may understand what are addressed to him, but the input will not reach the LAD. This occurs when the acquirer is unmotivated, e.g. lacking confidence or feeling anxious. When the acquirer is, on the contrary, not concerned with the possibility of failure in language acquisition and when he considers himself to be a potential member of the group speaking the target
language, the filter is down and the input will get through and be fully utilized.

The above-mentioned theories belong to Krashen’s Monitor Mode, which is one of the most influential theories. Apart from Krashen’s elaboration of the effect of affective filter on speaking performances, further researches in this domain can hardly be found.

4 AFFECTIVE FACTORS AFFECTING SPEAKING

Affect, according to some psychologists is defined as the “emotions and an even wider range of phenomena that have anything to do with emotions, moods, dispositions and preferences” (Arnold 34). One’s affect toward a particular thing or action or situation or experience is how that thing or that situation or that experience fits in with one’s needs or purposes, and its resulting effect on one’s emotions. In the course of learning a foreign language, one’s success depends mainly on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom, namely the affective factors. Affect has gradually been accepted as an influential determinant of learning. To some extent, it exerts more influence on language learning than the cognitive skills. Positive affective factors can facilitate the language learning process and improve learners’ language performance, while negative affective factors will hinder language learning and cause learning reluctance, especially speaking reluctance. More exactly, affective factors refer to those emotionally relevant characteristics of the individual that influence how one will respond to any situation. In the language situation, affective factors can influence foreign language learning in the form of attitude, motivation, personality, anxiety etc. The author mainly talks about the affective factors as the focus of the research which affects the oral performance of the language learners.

(1) Attitude

Attitude is defined as an individual’s reaction about or toward something based on their beliefs or opinions. Learners’ attitudes affect their success in speaking and play a significant role in language learning. Attitude can serve as barriers or bridges to learning a new language and positive and active attitudes are essential for language learning. Learners with positive attitudes, e.g. those with success learning experience, will have their attitudes reinforced. In contrast, learners’ negative attitudes may be strengthened by lack of success. According to Johnson, four kinds of attitudes may be relevant to language learning, among which the most important one is the attitude towards the speaker and the culture of the target language. It is often influenced by a learner’s level of the target language. The other attitudes include attitude towards success, attitude towards teacher and attitude towards one’s own country. Attitude towards success is the extent to which a student tries to achieve his goal in life. English language learners with positive attitude will do well in learning to speak English. A good attitude towards the teacher will make the students learning oral English more actively.

(2) Motivation

Motivation refers to the learners’ orientation with regard to the goal of learning a second language. A language learner’s motivation behind learning a foreign language to a great extent decides whether someone can learn oral English well or not. It also influences the speed of learning oral English and the degree of proficiency to be achieved. It involves the arousal and maintenance of curiosity and can ebb and flow due to such factors as learners’ particular interests and the extent to which they feel personally involved in oral English learning activities. Motivation consists of two types: integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. In language learning, the former refers to the learner’s desire to learn the language well so as to become part of the L2 speaking community, which is a key component in assisting the learner to develop some level of oral proficiency in the language. The latter refers to the desire of the learner to obtain something practical or concrete from the learning of the L2, such as meeting the requirements set by school, applying for a job or demanding higher pay based on good linguistic competence.

(3) Anxiety

Anxiety, in terms of psychology refers to an unpleasant emotional state or condition that is characterized by subjective feelings like tension, apprehension and worry as well as by activation or arousal of the automatic nervous system. Anxiety can somewhat promote or hamper learners’ cognitive ability and actions. Anxiety is intricately intertwined with self-esteem, inhibition and risk-taking. Language anxiety results from one’s performance in the target language, which belongs to the situation specific anxiety. When a language learner is expected to perform in a second or foreign language, foreign language anxiety appears in the form of fear or apprehension. It ranks high among the affective factors affecting language learning, especially oral English learning. Horwitz describes three categories of language anxiety: (a) communication apprehension, (b) test anxiety, (c) fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension is the nervousness associated with communicating with people which results from the inability to express oneself or to comprehend others. As a matter of fact, speaking in a foreign language has been regarded as more anxiety-inducing than the other three language skills.

It is known to all that foreign language learning can be divided into three stages: input, processing, and
output. Anxiety can affect the ability of an individual to process information, especially learners’ productive skill in the output stage. Foreign language anxiety is rather pervasive and it may work as an affective filter which prevents a learner from achieving proficiency in oral English.

(4) Personality

Personality also exerts some influence on language learners’ oral performance. It refers to those aspects of an individual’s behavior, attitudes, beliefs, thoughts, actions and feelings which are seen as typical and distinctive of that person and recognized as such by that person and others. (Richards 2000). The dimension of extroversion-introversion as described by Eysenek and others is regarded by the psychological community as one of the basic components of personality. The typical extrovert is sociable, has a large circle of friends, desires to communicate with people; he doesn’t like being alone. He is often carefree, easy-going, and optimistic. He tends to keep moving and doing things. On the contrary, a typical introvert is comparatively reserved. He doesn’t often feel excited. He likes to put his personal feelings under his control.

The personality of a language learner often constitutes a major factor contributing to success or failure in language learning. Furnham has proved that extroversion variable can strongly affect communicative speech. Extroverted learners are active participants in class and may have superior fluency to their introverted counterparts due to their producing more comprehensible output and having more input.

The above-mentioned affective factors seem rather pervasive phenomenon in second language learning, which prevent learners from achieving a high level of oral proficiency in a foreign language.

5 A SURVEY OF THE AFFECTIVE FACTORS IN ORAL ENGLISH LEARNING

In order to explore whether these affective factors influence Chinese college students’ oral English learning and to what extent the affective variables affect in the process of students’ oral English performance, a questionnaire is designed. It contains 11 items (See the appendix).

The questionnaire provides five degrees for the replies to all the statements. The five degrees are labeled 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, ranging from “strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “neutral”, “agree”, and “strongly agree”. Accordingly, 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 points are obtained. Altogether 65 non-English majors in Wuchang Institute of Technology took part in the interview, including 35 boys and 30 girls. The questionnaire is designed to be simple so as to be easily understood by all the subjects and the questionnaire is done within 15 minutes.

The scores of the questionnaire are as follows:

| Item | Minimum | Maximum | Mean |
|------|---------|---------|------|
| 1    | 1       | 5       | 2.79 |
| 2    | 1       | 5       | 2.31 |
| 3    | 2       | 5       | 3.64 |
| 4    | 1       | 5       | 3.80 |
| 5    | 2       | 5       | 4.00 |
| 6    | 2       | 5       | 4.20 |
| 7    | 1       | 4       | 3.80 |
| 8    | 2       | 4       | 4.30 |
| 9    | 2       | 5       | 4.00 |
| 10   | 3       | 5       | 4.00 |
| 11   | 2       | 4       | 3.90 |

Item 1 (2.79) indicates that the participating students are at different levels in the field of the affective factors. They hold different attitude and interest. Items 2 (2.31) and 3 (3.64) indicate that students attitudes towards English are blind, passive and mechanical rather than optimistic. They are not highly motivated to study English hard, let alone oral English. Items 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, and 11 show students’ high level of anxiety. Item 7 shows that students’ introverted personality to some extent passively affects their development of their speaking skills.

From the above score we can further tell that language learning is an anxiety-breeding business. The questionnaire shows clearly that college students experience fairly high levels of classroom anxiety, especially when they are called on to respond orally in English. Indeed, one of the subjects’ main worries is, when asked to speak, they constantly feel they are representing themselves badly, showing only some of their real personality and only some of their real intelligence. In addition, students express that performing in a foreign language class is somehow more stressful. In language class, even if students get the answer right, they may still make an almost infinite number of mistakes in what they say, for example, with imperfect pronunciation of individual sounds, wrong word stress or sentence stress, and so on. For this reason, the probability of being wrong in some way or other is vastly great in language learning.

In short, the risk of making a fool of oneself in a language class is very high, and it is always possible to feel anxious in such a setting. With large amount of anxiety existing in the classroom, language learning can be inhibited. Therefore, language teachers are responsible for identifying the students who are experiencing classroom anxiety and do something to help them reduce it so that efficient and effective language learning can result.

6 IMPLICATIONS

The teachers, keeping this in mind, should help students develop positive factors and overcome negative ones in their learning process. Combining the above-mentioned theoretical basis with the author’s
own teaching practice, the author thinks the following measures can be taken to achieve this goal.

(1) Help students build positive motivation

A. Study individual differences of students to teach them accordingly

Students learn English with different affective states such as attitude, inhibition and motivation, and their learning efficiencies are different too. The teacher should study the individual differences of students in order to suit their different needs. On the one hand, teachers should be aware that students from different family backgrounds and academic settings might have different learning motivations. Even the same student may have different learning motivations at different times. Teachers should try to know about every student and be aware that they are individuals with distinct characteristics and personalities. For boys, teachers need to foster their intrinsic motivation through changing their attitudes towards English learning and towards English-speaking people gradually. For girls, teachers need to encourage them to make good use of their superiorities in language studying to maintain their intrinsic motivation and help them adopt better learning strategies.

B. Give students supportive environment

If students find that they have the risk of making fool of themselves in class, they will refuse to speak out. The psychological state of being nervous, self-doubt, and lack of interest may increase the affective filter in the language acquisition device, which may prevent the input from coming in. So, teachers should learn to elicit students’ “voice” to help them overcome psychological barriers. In a word, the teacher should create a psycho-supportive environment to elicit learners’ voice. And it involves the class atmosphere and also the environment outside the classroom.

C. Create the input-output balanced classroom

It is generally thought that Chinese learning culture is input-dominated learning culture, which is characterized by imparting and cramming knowledge into students’ brains in classroom. In other words, linguistic knowledge becomes the core of teaching and in turn language skills are neglected. Learning autonomy does not defy classroom learning. Classroom activities should invoke learners’ engagement in the learning process. Learner motivation in English learning could also be promoted at university level by introducing specific innovations into the language program and into the activities in the classroom. Students should have opportunities to apply what they have earned to practice communication, or it will frustrate students’ initiative and restrain the development of students’ potential and creativity. As a result, they may lose interest in learning English. Without motivation and interest, learning may become inefficient.

(2) Diminish students’ anxiety

Language teachers are supposed to be aware that students are individual learners and may have different levels of anxiety. Some learners are highly anxious and most need help. In order to alleviate the debilitating effects of anxiety and improve students’ oral language proficiency, it is vital to know how to reduce learners’ language anxiety to the minimum.

A. Error correction

Teachers’ old perception of students’ mistakes as sins must be adjusted or even uprooted. Errors had better be viewed as a natural part of learning process. In the analysis of the scores achieved from the questionnaire, the author finds that grades correlate high with items concerning teachers’ correction of students’ errors. As is reflected in the questionnaire, students are afraid of making mistakes in English class. To some extent, students do not mind being corrected, what matters are how and in what ways they are corrected. Instructors’ sensitivity and skills in offering corrections not only reduce learners’ anxiety but also help learners remain open to further learning. Therefore, in consideration of learners’ negative emotional reactions, it is suggested that teacher be cautious and considerate in error correction. In some cases, teachers should choose to correct errors at proper time and in an indirect way, rather than correct errors immediately after they occur, which can be anxiety-provoking for some students sensitive to the negative evaluation. The teacher should also accept the variety of answers and make sure the learners can receive necessary feedback without feeling embarrassed or intimidated in time of mistakes. Furthermore, Learners’ first language is an important resort and students should be encouraged to use it as a learning strategy when they have tremendous difficulty expressing their thoughts. Finally, the instructors should communicate to learners that making mistakes is all right by first responding positively to their effort rather than their specific performance. Teachers should empathize with the students to maintain what Stevick considers a basic learner’s need: the feeling of security. Only when students feel their volunteering in language classroom or presentation before other students will not be criticized or attacked, can they regain assurance and invest more efforts to English learning.

B. Give student more waiting time in questioning

To encourage students’ participation and involvement in class, teachers should learn to train themselves in the teaching process to be careful in and sensitive to specific aspects of FL teaching. More waiting time should be given to students after teacher’s questioning. It is observed that most teachers tend to use insuffi-
cient wait time and to either answer questions themselves or call on another student to answer the question. In fact, it is agreed that increasing wait time before calling on a student to respond and after a student’s initial response often increase the length of students’ responses, increase the number of questions asked by the students, and increase students’ involvement in English learning. Questioning technique is an important classroom procedure and it is one of the most frequently used teaching techniques. In order to increase classroom interaction and students’ involvement in classroom, questions such as evaluative questions, divergent questions and referential questions rather than display questions are favored, since these questions are found to elicit more language practice from students and make classes more communicative. Most express their apprehension and nervousness in replying to teachers’ questions without good preparation. It provides penetrating light into the anxious students’ state of mind and the source of their anxiety in language classroom. Language teachers should be responsive to them, giving them enough time to prepare or providing some advice when necessary.

In fact, given enough wait time, students can well formulate their answers. The silence or gestures in answering are signs that they are trying to find the very words to explicate their ideas, so teachers should be patient.

C. Have some mental and physical relaxation
When feeling highly anxious, one can relax himself by such activities as going for a walk, listening to the soft music, and participating in a sport. At times, all they need to do is to be off the class for a few minutes or hours. Physical discomfort might induce anxiety. If he hasn’t taken good care of the body, he may be especially susceptible to anxiety. Highly anxious students should eat healthy food and get enough rest and exercise.

D. Design tasks of proper difficulty
Learning tasks function as an outside pushing force endowed by schools and society, which inevitably bring students pressure. However, too much pressure leads to negative effects and obstacles of learning, while too little pressure would not be transformed to effective drives. Therefore, designing tasks of proper difficulty is crucial. The task should be made at a level that is a little above the learners’ present competence and convenient for transmission of knowledge from lower level towards the higher, so that learners will continue to learn with efforts in willingness. Then the pushing force (the task) from outside is not completely outside anymore and has begun working as an attraction to the inside world of learners.

There are three sets of factors the teachers need to take into consideration. In the first place, there are factors to do with the data that learners are working with. The second set of factors has to do with the task itself. Finally, there are factors that are internal to the speaker themselves.

7 CONCLUSION:

Based on the Krashen’s Monitor Model, the input hypothesis, the acquisition-learning model, the natural order hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the affective filter hypothesis and affective factors in the theory of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), for example, motivation, attitude, anxiety, self-esteem, personality, etc., the author made an attempt to explore some possible affective factors influencing non-English majors’ oral English production.

To conclude, the views and solutions expressed in this paper are consistent with Krashen’s hypotheses of his SLA theory. The results of the present study replicate and extend previous research on the affective factors in the process of the oral output. In order to improve the students’ oral English proficiency, language teachers should spare no effort reducing classroom anxiety and creating safe and comfortable classroom environment for learners to learn at ease. It can’t be denied that psychological preparation is important for language learning.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

1. Basic personal information

Name:                          Sex:                            Age:

The questionnaire provides five degrees for the following each items. Click the degree which is consistent with your situation.

|                          | 1                      | 2                      | 3                      | 4                      | 5                      |
|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Strongly disagree        | Strongly disagree      | Disagree               | Neutral                | Agree                  | Strongly agree         |

2. Item:

1. I like to learn oral English well and spend much time on it. 1 2 3 4 5
2. I think good command of oral English will bring me a good job. 1 2 3 4 5
3. Learning English is just for passing exams. 1 2 3 4 5
4. Others’ appraisals of my oral English influence my confidence in speaking. 1 2 3 4 5
5. I feel nervous when I speak English for fear of mistakes. 1 2 3 4 5
6. I somewhat feel more nervous in time of mistakes. 1 2 3 4 5
7. I am shy and seldom voluntarily answer teacher’s questions in English. 1 2 3 4 5
8. I feel myself trembling when I am asked to speak English in class. 1 2 3 4 5
9. Good preparation before the oral English class reduces my tension. 1 2 3 4 5
10. I feel awkward when teachers point out my oral mistake. 1 2 3 4 5
11. I feel frustrated and bored of English when I can’t understand others. 1 2 3 4 5