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CREATING A POSITIVE ATMOSPHERE TOWARDS ENGLISH AS A TARGET LANGUAGE

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Abstract: The process of learning English as a foreign language is characterized by psychological barriers including stress, lack of confidence, the fear of making mistakes and being negatively evaluated. Consequently, developing a conducive environment is an essential aspect in language instruction. This study looks into the ways in which reinforcement, interaction, approachable teaching and tolerance to small mistakes may contribute to a supportive learning environment for English. Descriptive quantitative methodology was used with the participation of 150 intermediate level English as a Foreign Language learners. Data was gathered using 20-item electronic Likert scale survey and analyzed with the help of mean scores. The results reveal that supportive teaching, reinforcement, interaction and collaboration are greatly appreciated by the respondents while strict public error correction generates stress among them.

Keywords: English language learning, positive classroom atmosphere, foreign language anxiety, affective filter, motivation, language acquisition.

Introduction

English language proficiency becomes increasingly necessary in order to perform well in academics, career life, and communicating across different countries. At the same time, acquiring a foreign language is both cognitive and emotional, because many learners face psychological problems during their interaction in classes (Brown, 2007). Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) may be associated with apprehensiveness, feelings of self-consciousness, fears about making mistakes and being negatively evaluated, which might prevent learners from active participation (Gkonou, Daubney, & Dewaele, 2017). It is evident that the classroom climate may play an important role in encouraging students to speak up. A positive classroom environment implies mutual respect, emotional safety, motivation, and positive teacher-student relationships (Arnold, 1999). Under such circumstances, students are encouraged to interact in spite of possible problems with their language performance (Dörnyei, 2001). The Affective Filter Hypothesis by Krashen (1982) can serve as a theoretical basis for the above-stated correlation between emotions and language learning, assuming that such negative emotions as anxiety can set a kind of affective filter which is to prevent language acquisition, whereas pleasant atmosphere can help reduce it. Motivation is another important factor in the described process. Motivation is seen



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by Dörnyei (2001) as one of the most important forces maintaining language learning, whereas according to Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) is a positive emotional experience that can exist in parallel to anxiety. Finally, the sociocultural theory by Vygotsky (1978) also underlines the importance of social nature of the learning process and suggests that support and cooperation can be helpful in language learning. Thus, establishing a positive atmosphere is more than just a comfortable condition for the class but also a pedagogical one.

Methods

Descriptive quantitative research was used to investigate students' attitudes toward certain classroom practices and their perceived impact on the classroom climate and anxiety. The participants were 150 undergraduate students between 18 and 25 years old, who were studying intermediate level English as a foreign language. There were 85 girls and 65 boys among the participants. The data collection process was conducted through an online survey, which included 20 Likert-type questions rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questions in the survey focused on students' emotions experienced because of different educational practices, such as teacher encouragement, reward, game-like activities, group work, correcting mistakes and toleration of small mistakes in fluency-related activities. The collected data were analyzed based on the mean score to establish practices with the biggest positive effect on creating the positive learning atmosphere. The findings were categorized according to their impact on students' engagement and anxiety reduction.

Results

Results show that students have a positive attitude toward such teaching techniques that help create a supportive and stress-free learning atmosphere. An approachable and supportive teacher is ranked the highest with a mean score of 4.88 out of 5, and verbal reinforcement of positive feedback received a mean of 4.78. Interactive vocabulary games were also evaluated favorably with a mean of 4.65, whereas pair and group work received a mean of 4.52. A tolerant attitude toward the errors made in fluency-based activities received a mean score of 4.40, implying that students see tolerance of mistakes as something beneficial for their learning experience. On the contrary, a strict public correction of mistakes immediately after making them received the lowest mean score of 1.65 and was assessed negatively as it raises anxiety levels. Thus, based on the obtained data, students have a positive attitude toward teachers who are approachable and motivating as well as activities that allow for collaboration and fun interactions.

Discussion

These results are consistent with the theoretical concepts introduced in the literature. The very high level on a friendly and supportive teacher is consistent with the theory of Affective Filter Hypothesis by Krashen (1982), because a comfortable relationship between a teacher and a student will help to minimize the anxiety and make the process of language acquisition easier. Also, the high level of positive

verbal reinforcement is consistent with the theory proposed by Arnold (1999) about the fact that affect can be both a facilitator and an inhibitor of language learning. Accuracy is still very important; however, too much or public correction can make students self-conscious and unwilling to communicate (Brown, 2007). These high results on vocabulary-related games and collaborative activities are also in line with the Foreign Language Enjoyment framework developed by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014). Enjoyable activities make it easier to interact in class, while working as a group may decrease the pressure related to individual performance (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Moreover, these results are in line with the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) where interacting with other people is the key factor of learning. Generally, ensuring enjoyable, cooperative, and emotionally safe environment can help achieve better learning outcomes (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Oxford, 2016; Seligman, 2011).

Conclusion

The creation of a positive attitude towards English as the target language in question is another crucial component of successful language teaching, as emotional states can significantly impact students' readiness to engage with the language. According to the results obtained in this research, supportive attitudes of teachers, positive reinforcement, interactive activities, cooperation and tolerance of errors can contribute to a positive classroom atmosphere, but strict and public correction of errors can lead to increased anxiety among learners. Hence, English teachers should build approachable and understanding relationships with learners, apply constructive correction instead of threatening one, give ample possibilities for working with peers and engage students in fun activities.

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