

High School Students' Affective Reaction to English Speaking Activities

La reacción afectiva de estudiantes de secundaria hacia las actividades de expresión oral en inglés*

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This study aims to measure fifty-two high school students' affective reactions after doing individual and pair-based speaking activities then completing a semantic differential scale of nine bipolar adjectives. Results do not show significant statistical differences between the two types of

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activities or the schools involved in this study, but participants from both schools present a similar affective reaction towards individual and pair-based speaking activities.

Key words: Affective reaction, semantic differential, speaking.

Este estudio tiene como objetivo medir las reacciones afectivas de cincuenta y dos estudiantes de secundaria después de realizar una actividad de expresión oral individual y otra en parejas, y posteriormente completar una escala de diferencial semántico de nueve adjetivos bipolares. Los resultados no muestran diferencias estadísticas significativas entre los dos tipos de actividades y las dos escuelas que participaron en el estudio; sin embargo, los participantes de ambos establecimientos muestran una reacción afectiva similar hacia las actividades de expresión oral individuales y en pareja.

Palabras clave: diferencial semántico, expresión oral, reacción afectiva.

Introduction

In the social and educational fields, people's affective dimension is perhaps one of the most difficult to study. Today, thousands of learners study a second language because it is necessary to communicate with people from other countries and cultures. However, learner differences can contribute to the success or failure of this task, being the affective factor the one that will be looked at in this study. Affective factors are not studied as the cognitive ones, despite the importance of affection to create better classroom atmospheres, student-centered lessons, and better uses of language materials and activities.

Research has evidenced that there is a need for understanding to what extent affective factors influence and correlate with language achievement and how they also impact the selection of teaching methodologies, materials, resources, and ways of assessment (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). As a starting point, this study is an attempt to identify high school students' affective reaction towards individual and pair-based speaking activities.

Theoretical Framework

Affective language learning has appeared “as a new paradigm, far beyond language teaching” (Arnold, 2000, p. 12). The term *affect* is related to emotions, feelings, moods, and attitudes, in a wider spectrum influencing language learning. The affective side is not in opposition to the cognitive side; therefore, both are essential parts of learning (Scovel, 2000). In fact, Oatley and Jenkins (1996) state that “emotions are in the very center of human life” (p. 122), and they may be the most influential aspect of learning.

Affect is defined as a “neurophysiological state consciously accessible as a simple primitive non-reflective feeling most evident in mood and emotion but always available to consciousness” (Russell & Barrett, 2009, p. 806). Examples of affect are:

Extremes as feeling good or bad, energized or enervated, pleased or displeased, tensed or relaxed, energetic or tired. Affects influence reflexes, perception, cognition, and behavior and are influenced by many causes internal and external, but people have no direct access to these causal connections. (Russell, 2003, p. 145)

According to Plutchik (2001), one of the most perplexing topics in psychology is emotions and the affective domain. He estimated almost a hundred definitions exist for emotion in the past century. Among those definitions, Goleman (1995) attempts to define an emotion as: “a feeling and its distinctive thoughts, psychological and biological states, and range of propensities to act.” (p. 289) Damasio (1994) separates two terms: an emotion, which corresponds to the biological response to stimuli, and a feeling, which is the self-awareness of those changes. Although cognition seems to be a fundamental part of reasoning, it has been demonstrated that cognition has a strong influence on affect and so does affect on cognition (Bless & Fiedler, 2006; Forgas, 2008).

Several studies on stimuli illustrate how affective reactions accompany, and sometimes precede, cognitive judgment, and how like-dislike ratings can be made before or in the absence of old-new judgments (Brett, Smith, Price, & Huitt, 2003; Damasio, 1999; Lang, 1995; LeDoux, 1996). Similarly, Arnold (2000) affirms that an emotion is a key aspect in reasoning, since studies on neurobiology have observed how the absence of emotion compromises our rational capacity. In the neurobiological field, Damasio (1994) and LeDoux (1996) consider emotions as inseparable from reason; for them, there is no empirical division between both in the learning process (Arnold & Fonseca, 2004; Bless & Fiedler, 2006; Forgas, 2008; Jensen, 1998; Schumann, 1994).

Affect is not composed of a single isolated event, but of different dimensions. Lee, Hsiao, and Ho (2014) conducted a research study with three groups of 171 undergraduate students enrolled in different e-learning courses from a private university in Taiwan. It was an experiment in which students were exposed to an e-learning curriculum that included various multimedia instructional materials. The students “compared three types of presentation methods: (a) a PowerPoint presentation, (b) a PowerPoint presentation guided by a human-like animated character, and (c) a PowerPoint presentation guided by a monster-like animated character. The results show that various types of materials result in various social cues that have a significant effect on the students’ motivation and learning outcomes” (Lee et al., 2014, p. 119). The study concluded that the presentations of various materials would eventually diminish participants’ disposition to take part in the electronic learning course if the materials were unable to elicit positive emotions.

In 2005, Backs, da Silva, and Han conducted a study with groups of 21 young adults and 21 older adults by comparing their affective experiences with pictures. Younger adults found pictures to be more pleasant and arousing than older adults did. The study concluded that this difference could be due to the fact that younger adults experienced greater affect intensity and emotional control than the older group did.

The *feedback theory* (Parkinson & Manstead, 1992) states that an emotion is a consequence of a biological response rather than cognitive appraisals from a specific situation. On the same line, the *discrete emotion theory* draws on emotions as a set of neural processes that end with a corresponding feeling and expression (Fogel et al., 1992). Campos, Mumme, Kermoian, and Campos (1994) described emotions, in the *functionalist model*, as aiming to “maintain, adapt or change the relation one has with the natural environment around, for personal benefit” (p. 285). On the contrary, for the *communicative theory* (Oatley & Johnson-Laird, 1996), conscious or unconscious cognitive evaluation originates emotions. Each evaluation produces a signal, which is processed through cognition, to produce a simple emotion. In the last decade of the 20th century, the *social-constructivist model of emotion* (Jenkins, Oatley, & Stein, 1998) made a similar reference to emotions as experiences embedded in conditions that justify them (Lottridge, 2010).

Method

This research is non-experimental and cross-sectional. It is non-experimental because its purpose is to measure public and semi-public high school students' positive or negative affective reaction by using a semantic differential scale (SDS) after completing a set of individual and pair-based speaking activities. It is cross-sectional because the activities and the corresponding SDS are applied in a specific moment in time.

Research Objective

To identify high school students' affective reaction towards individual and pair-based speaking activities.

Variable Definitions

Affective reaction. An affective reaction is defined in this study as the positive or negative affective response experienced by the participants after having completed two speaking activities.

Speaking activities. Speaking activities are divided into two types: an individual speaking activity and a pair-based speaking activity. The individual speaking activity consists

of a picture description task, and the pair-based speaking activity consists of a role-play task performed by two students.

Participants

The participants of this study are a group of students from two different high schools: public and semi-public. In Chile, public schools are owned by the municipal district and are government funded, and semi-public schools are privately owned, but they also receive some public funding. Table 1 describes participants' main characteristics.

Table 1. Participants' Characteristics

Type of school	Number of participants
Public	26
Semi-public	26
Sex	
Girls	39
Boys	13
Age	
15 Years old	15
16 Years old	18
17 Years old	13
18 Years old	4
19 Years old	2
School grades	
10th graders	16
11th graders	18
12th graders	18

Instruments

Semantic differential scale (SDS). The SDS is a type of psychometrically controlled scale designed to measure the connotative meaning of objects, events, concepts, or attitudes. This scale was originally created by Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957) to measure the connotative meaning of concepts or events. The subject is asked to choose where his or her position lies, “against a series of bipolar, seven-step scale defined by verbal opposites

(good-bad; strong-weak) and the subject judges it against each successive scale by putting his checkmark in the appropriate position” (p. 172).

In this study, the scale designed consists of two lists of bipolar adjectives with seven spaces between them, the one on the left has a positive connotation and the one on the right has a negative connotation. The seven spaces have a numerical value and represent different degrees of intensity; in the center there is the zero intensity which means the subject is not clear on his/her decision. The numerical value of each space has a specific connotation: from the center 0, towards the adjectives with positive connotation, space 1 is translated into a low degree of the emotion, 2 into a medium degree of the emotion, and 3 represents a full degree of the emotion. The same happens from the center 0 towards the adjective with the negative connotation: -1 for a low degree of emotion, -2 for a medium degree, and -3 for a full degree of emotion (see Figure 1).

	3	2	1	0	-1	-2	-3	
Calm								Nervous

Figure 1. Example of an SDS Item

In order to use a bank of adjectives previously arranged in polar sets, *Rogot's 21st Century Thesaurus* (Kipfer, 2013) was consulted. Nine pairs of adjectives were divided into three groups that belonged to three dimensions: *evaluation*, *potency*, and *activity*, abbreviated as EPA (Osgood et al., 1957), as a means to evaluate affective reactions. Each dimension can be characterized by a variety of contrasts. *Evaluation* is defined by adjectives such as “good-bad”. The “strong-weak” pair of adjectives explains the *potency* factor. The *activity* factor is verified by the adjective pair “active-passive” (Osgood et al., 1957). An example is the affective reaction towards children: people feel that they are good, weak, and noisy; while delinquents are described as bad, strong, and quiet (Heise, 2007). The adjectives used in the SDS are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. EPA adjectives Used in the SDS

Evaluation	Potency	Activity
Calm-nervous	Skillful-clumsy	Relaxed-stressed
Motivated-frustrated	Strong-weak	Active-passive
Wise-ignorant	Useful-useless	Productive-unproductive

Language activities. The individual speaking activity was intended to make each student describe a picture from his/her English course book (see Figure 2).

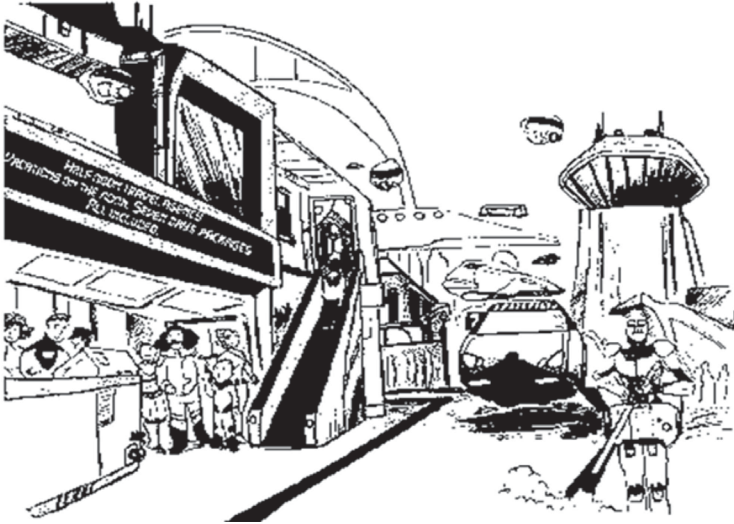


Figure 2. Picture Taken From Unit 4 of the 10th Grade *Teens Club*, Student Book (Alvarado, 2010, p. 81)

The pair-based activity was intended to make pairs of students create a role play based on a common activity (adapted from the 10th grade course book *Teens Club*) (see Figure 3).

A: Invite your partner to go dancing on Friday.
B: You do not like to dance. Politely refuse the invitation.

Figure 3. Pair-Based Activity (Role Play)

Expert judgment for the calibration of the SDS. Four reviewers were requested to revise and comment on the scale: two university professors, one PhD psychologist, and one MA psychologist. They evaluated the SDS as well-constructed, valid, based on the theory available, and quite appropriate in terms of format; it was also described as clear and easy to answer. Revision of some of the bipolar adjectives was recommended to ensure participants could understand the meaning they were supposed to convey. A further suggestion made by reviewers was that the neutral value 0 stands for *uncertainty*, and not for a *neutral* response, for there is never a neutral affective response.

Procedure

For creating the activities, the 10th grade student book was revised to find examples of speaking exercises. Previous to the application of the individual activity, the students were shown the SDS so that they could understand what the goal of the activity was. Then, they were given the instructions in their native language to focus the activity just on the students' speaking skills and not on the listening skills. At that moment, each student was given a picture with the instructions shown in Figure 4.

In this activity, you will have one minute to look at the picture below. When finished, you have to describe in English all that you can see in the picture and explain what you think is happening.

Figure 4. Instructions for the Individual Activity

After describing the picture, the learner had to fulfill the SDS. Same as in the individual activity, for the pair-based activity, students were explained the SDS again. Then, instructions were given in Spanish to again focus on the students' speaking skills. At that moment, the participants were given a paper slip with the instructions shown in Figure 5.

In this activity you will create a role play. With your partner, pick up one line (A or B). You will have one minute to prepare your dialogue with your partner
A: Invite your partner to go dancing on Friday.
B: You do not like to dance. Politely refuse the invitation.

Figure 5. Instructions for the Pair-Based Activity

At that point, the learners had one minute to prepare the role play, and after that they both had to perform it. Then, each subject had to fill in another SDS.

Data Analysis

The analysis conducted in this section was based on the calculation of descriptive statistics (media score and standard deviation) and organized according to each research objective. For the records, the acronyms *MS* and *SD* below will respectively stand for mean score and standard deviation in the data analysis.

Research Objective 1: To Identify High School Students' Affective Reaction Towards Individual Speaking Activities

Semi-public high school students. As can be observed in Figure 6, the two negative mean scores were the bipolar adjectives *Wise / Ignorant* ($MS = -0.50 / SD = 1.4$) and *Skillful*

/ *Clumsy* ($MS = -0.38 / SD = 1.3$). As for the positive affective reactions, the two highest mean scores correspond to *Relaxed / Stressed* ($MS = 1.38 / SD = 1.5$) and *Calm / Nervous* ($MS = 0.77 / SD = 1.68$); they are followed by *Motivated / Frustrated* ($MS = 0.65 / SD = 1.6$).

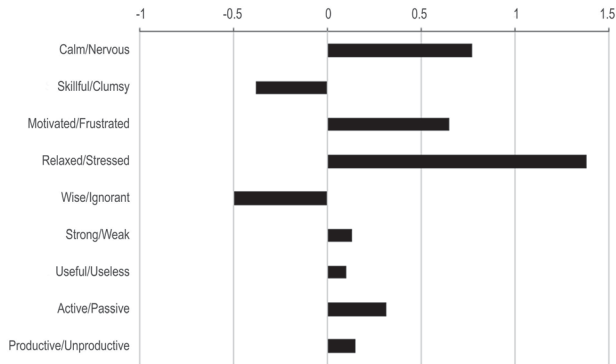


Figure 6. Semi-Public High School Mean Scores for the Individual Activity

According to Figure 7, 80% of all individual activity mean scores correspond to a positive affective reaction; in other words, participants declared they felt *Motivated, Relaxed, Calm, Strong, Useful, Active, and Productive* while doing the individual speaking activity.

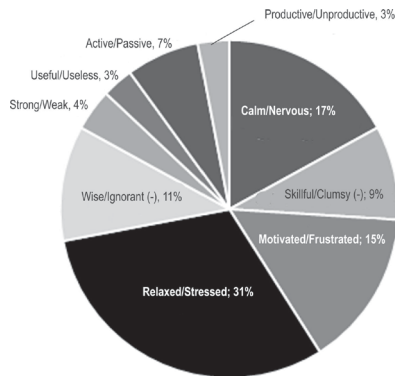


Figure 7. Semi-Public High School Percentages for the Mean Scores of the Individual Activity

Public high school students. For the individual speaking activity, Figure 8 evidences two bipolar sets of adjectives with negative mean scores: *Skillful / Clumsy* ($MS = -0.42 / SD = 1.68$) and *Wise / Ignorant* ($MS = -0.54 / SD = 1.61$)—a similar scenario to the one experienced by semi-public school students. On the line of the positive affective reactions, the highest mean score belongs to the bipolar adjective *Motivated / Frustrated* ($MS = 1.12 / SD = 1.8$). Three of the highest positive mean scores correspond to the bipolar adjectives *Relaxed / Stressed* ($MS = 0.85 / SD = 1.67$); *Calm / Nervous* ($MS = 0.81 / SD = 1.63$) and finally *Active / Passive* ($MS = 0.77 / SD = 1.3$).

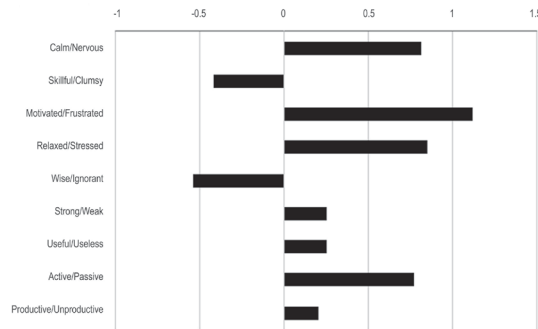


Figure 8. Public High School Mean Scores for the Individual Activity

In other words, 82% of all individual activities' mean scores correspond to a positive affective reaction (see Figure 9).

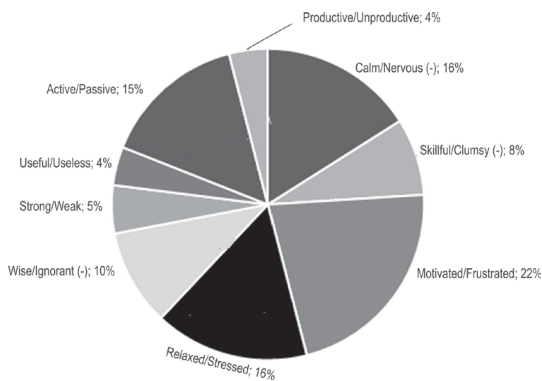


Figure 9. Public High School Mean Score Percentage for the Individual Activity

Upon comparing the two types of schools, in the semi-public high school, the highest positive mean scores for the individual speaking activity are *Relaxed*, *Motivated*, and *Calm*. Regarding the negative mean scores, the two highest ones are *Clumsy* and *Ignorant*. The standard deviation indicates a deviation that does not go beyond 1.68 spaces from the norm, thus, students react positively to individual activities to a large extent. Meanwhile, regarding the public high school, the highest positive mean scores correspond to *Motivated*, *Relaxed*, and *Calm*. Concerning the negative mean scores, same as in semi-public high school, only two affective reactions are found: *Clumsy* and *Ignorant*. The standard deviation shows a deviation that reaches 1.80, scarcely higher than the one for semi-public high school students.

Overall, these results suggest that 80% of both public and semi-public high school students react as *Relaxed*, *Motivated*, and *Calm*, but they also feel *Clumsy* and *Ignorant* (20%) when being exposed to an individual speaking activity.

However, mean scores for the individual speaking activity present slight differences in both types of schools. It is seen that the *Relaxed* mean score is higher in the semi-public high school (1.38) than in the public high school (1.12). The *Motivated* mean score is higher in the public school (1.12) than in the semi-public school (0.65). Finally, the *Calm* mean score is higher in the semi-public school (0.88) than in the public school (0.81). All in all, public school students evidence a bit higher mean scores than semi-public school students, thus, the former react more positively towards the individual speaking activity than the latter do.

Research Objective 2: To Identify High School Students' Affective Reaction Towards Pair-Based Speaking Activities

Semi-public high school students. Figure 10 presents the general mean scores for the bipolar adjectives of the pair-based activity in the semi-public high school.

We can see that only one bipolar set of adjectives is given a negative semantic value for the mean score: *Wise / Ignorant* (-0.08), and a standard deviation of 1.65, which is not a substantial dispersion of data. In other words, just 1% of all mean scores correspond to a negative semantic value. On the line of positive semantic scores, the majority of the mean scores exceed +0.5. The highest mean scores reach +1.0 for *Motivated / Frustrated* ($MS = 1.38 / SD = 1.52$), followed by *Calm / Nervous* ($MS = 1.15 / SD = 1.67$) and then *Relaxed / Stressed* ($MS = 1.15 / SD = 1.46$). On average, the standard deviation does not exceed 1.55, being *Productive / Unproductive* the one which deviates the most (1.84).

Looking at Figure 11, one can observe that a large 99% of the total mean scores for the pair-based speaking activity conducted in the semi-public school incline to a positive semantic score.

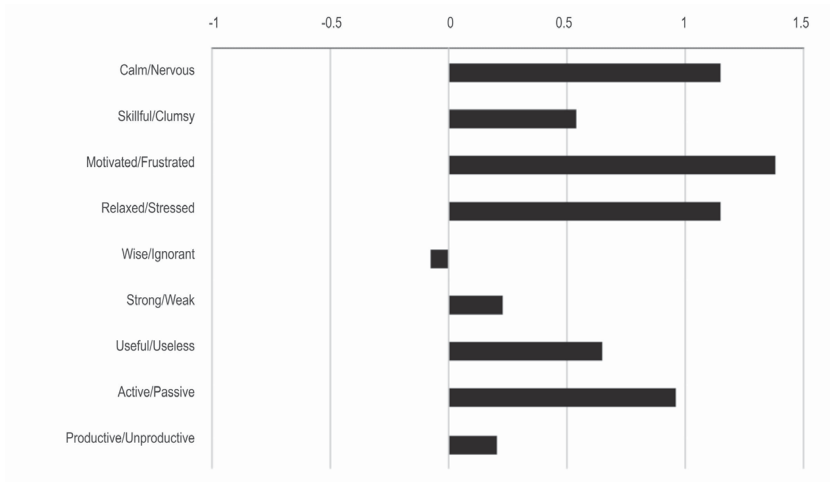


Figure 10. Semi-Public High School Mean Scores for the Pair-Based Activity

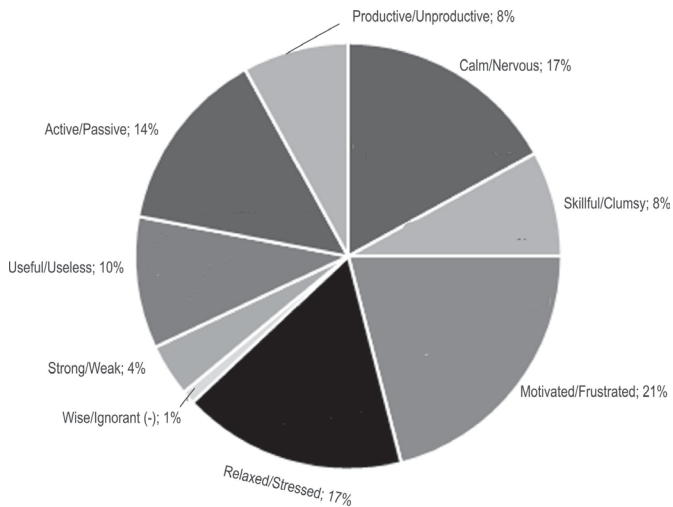


Figure 11. Semi-Public High School Percentages for the Pair-Based Activity

Public high school students. Figure 12 shows that the bipolar adjectives for the pair-based activity present no semantic mean scores on the negative side. All the mean scores correspond to a positive semantic value.

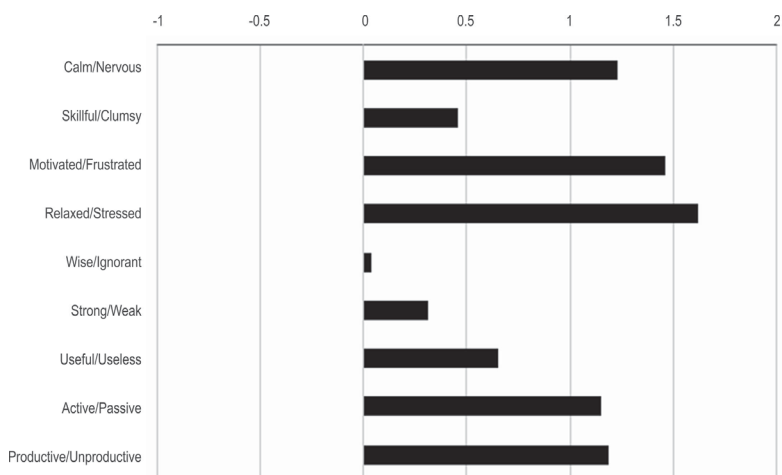


Figure 12. Public High School Mean Scores for the Pair-Based Activity

It can also be observed, in Figure 12, that five out of nine bipolar adjectives exceed the semantic score of +1.0 (*Calm / Nervous*, *Motivated / Frustrated*, *Relaxed / Stressed*, *Active / Passive*, *Productive / Unproductive*). Only two of them are rounded up to the mean score of +1.5: *Motivated / Frustrated* ($MS = 1.46 / SD = 1.73$) and *Relaxed / Stressed* ($MS = 1.62 / SD = 1.30$). The adjective set of *Wise / Ignorant* is plotted with a mean score of 0.04, which is the lowest mean score on the positive affective reaction side (*Wise*).

The average score for the standard deviation reaches 1.66, being *Calm / Nervous*, the pair with the highest standard deviation (2.08). In Figure 13, the percentages for the mean scores are illustrated.

Contrasting the semi-public and the public high schools, the highest positive mean scores for the pair-based speaking activity in the semi-public high school are: *Relaxed*, *Motivated*, and *Calm*. As for the public high school, the highest positive mean scores for the pair-based speaking activity are: *Relaxed*, *Calm*, *Motivated*, *Productive*, and *Active*, all of them over a mean score of 1.0. On the other hand, the pair of adjectives with the lowest mean score was *Wise / Ignorant*.

Mean scores for both types of schools present slight differences though. The *Relaxed* mean score is higher in the public high school (1.62) than in the semi-public school (1.15). The mean score for *Motivated* is higher in the public school (1.46) than in the semi-public school (1.38); its standard deviation is also higher in the public school (1.73) than in the

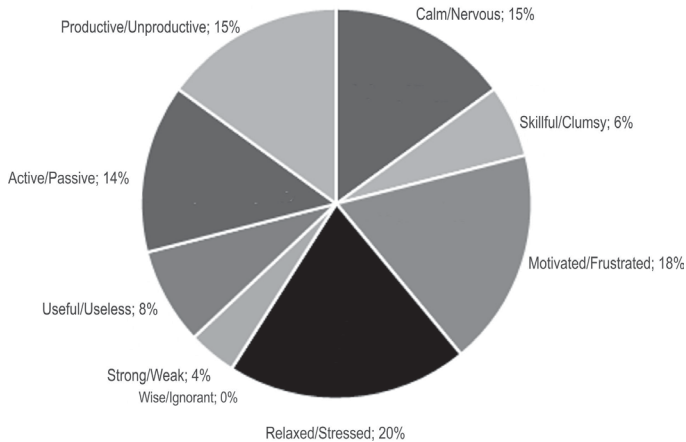


Figure 13. Public High School Mean Score Percentages for the Pair-Based Activity

semi-public school (1.53). The *Calm* mean score is higher in the public school (1.23) than in the semi-public school (1.15), although the former standard deviation is the highest (2.08), whereas the semi-public school presents 1.67.

Finally, upon attempting to compare affective reactions and to identify any correlation between the two types of activities (individual and pair-based) and the type of school variable, by means of the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U-test, the overall results do not show significant statistical differences in the SDS from public school students and that from semi-public ones.

Discussion

As has been shown, the students in both types of school present a higher number of negative affective reactions in the individual speaking activity rather than in the pair-based speaking activity. In the semi-public school, for example, 20% of the answers correspond to negative affective reactions for the individual speaking activity, and 1% for the pair-based speaking activity. In the public school, on the contrary, 18% of the answers correspond to negative affective reactions for the individual speaking activity and 0% for the pair-based speaking activity. Students from public schools then show more positive affective reactions when being exposed to speaking activities than semi-public school students.

From the point of view of what participants have declared, it is a striking piece of evidence that the two negative feelings of ignorance and clumsiness, both highly associated with what students experience when they try to speak in a foreign language, have vanished

from students' responses; in other words, students have felt wiser and more skillful when they have to perform an oral activity in pairs than when they do an individual oral activity.

The argument just developed in the paragraph above might have sound implications for teachers' lesson planning, material selection, and activity devising processes, which all seem to be highly sensitive for helping students to start speaking English and develop their own oral communicative competence. It might also be of help for language teachers to find out how students declare they feel when they have to perform oral activities in a foreign language, since this affective dimension could eventually constitute a strong and harsh barrier for students' progress in their oral communicative skills.

Final Remarks

Contrary to the researchers' belief regarding speaking activities, public high school students present a slightly enhanced affective reaction compared to semi-public ones. However, it can be concluded that students from both schools present a similar affective reaction towards individual and pair-based speaking activities.

It is then assumed that the public or semi-public school variable does not play a key role over the positive development of students' affective reaction towards the speaking ability. In addition, the students' free willingness to participate in this study can be regarded as an indicator of their expressing their real feelings after doing each type of speaking activity. This can also be complemented by the idea that these research participants might present lower levels of anxiety when learning a foreign language, according to the SDS results. Likewise, both public and semi-public school participants have roughly been exposed to a similar amount of English in their schools; therefore, their current language competence was relatively even and was not a variable that might have influenced the learners' responses.

The data obtained by the SDS show that students from both schools assign high positive values to the adjectives *Calm*, *Motivated*, and *Relaxed*, which proves that both groups react, to a certain extent, similarly toward speaking activities with 81% of the mean scores' choices over positive adjectives, being *Motivated* one of the most outstanding adjectives.

The analysis of the data obtained in the pair-based activity presents higher percentages of positive affective reaction than in the individual activity. These results can be supported by previous studies on foreign language anxiety establishing that students' anxiety is decreased by certain interactive, information-sharing activities (Ely, 1986; Foss & Reitzel, 1988; Koch & Terrell, 1991; Lapsopa; 2005; Nagahashi, 2007; Phillips, 1992; Somapee, 2002; von Wörde, 2003).

Gender may also play an important role in the analyzed results, considering that 39 out of 52 participants were girls. As noted by Yan and Horwitz (2008), most people regard women

as better language learners. Other researchers argue against this, and find that students' level of anxiety does not differ according to their gender (Batumlu & Erden, 2007; Dewaele, 2007).

Furthermore, *Motivated* turned out to be one of the highest mean score adjectives. In Dörnyei (1998, 2001), motivation is one of the main factors in language learning, fundamental to initiate, sustain, and succeed in the process. It may be deduced that both high schools, at least where English is concerned, have developed a class atmosphere where motivation probably plays a key role; a phenomenon, however, that cannot be conclusively stated based on the current findings.

Based on the findings, two variables seem to have an important influence on students' affective responses: motivation and collaboration during the execution of the pair-based activity. They together appear to prompt learners to react more positively when they are doing language work, as Kormos and Préfontaine (2016) pointed out when they concluded that interest and task motivation are highly correlated with speakers' fluency.

Limitations of the Study

The students from semi-public schools attended the research session very early in the morning because they were allowed time off their regular lessons, which facilitated the researchers' task enormously. On the contrary, public school students had to be interviewed after their regular school lessons, usually after 2:00 p.m. Thus, the application of the research session was not as easy as in the semi-public school, and students usually reported that they were a bit tired.

Further Research

The study of students' affective responses to English language teaching and learning is not a commonly researched focus, since studies seem to mainly focus on learners' cognitive and metacognitive development; therefore, it would be of high interest to research learners' affective responses towards language assessment, feedback, and classroom environment because they are issues that directly affect students' learning processes. Likewise, it is necessary to employ other research techniques to explore the affective domain in language learning so as to gain a more comprehensive view of how affect and emotions can foster or hinder foreign language learning.

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