
Attitudes are like the weather: can we do anything about them?

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*It is the disposition of the thought that altereth the nature of the thing.
(John Lyly, Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit, 1579).*

Attitudes, which are the motional counterpart to beliefs, are influential in the language learning and teaching process. This article explores how teachers' attitudes toward English language and culture, teaching, and students affect the success of their English language learning students.

"Looking at the world through rose colored glasses" is a saying in the U.S.A. that describes someone who sees life optimistically, who thinks the best of everyone, and who feels that life is basically good. It also, however, contains the sense that such a view is unrealistic and likely to be wrong. Yet it is indeed true that we view the world through "cultural lenses" that color what we see and how we interpret what is going on around us. The literature discussing how our culture influences our beliefs and interpretations is widely accepted even as we struggle to identify precisely how that occurs and how it manifests itself (see Steinfatt & Rogers, 1999; Brown, 1994).

On a more individual level, a great deal of research exists on the importance of attitudes, which can be viewed on a personal rather than cultural level. Attitudes are the emotional aspect of beliefs; we believe that a friend cares about us and therefore we care for that friend. We believe that teaching is important, and we care about how well we teach. Attitudes and beliefs are very closely related, two sides of the same coin perhaps.

Some research suggests that attitudes influence learning by coloring our experiences; those with negative attitudes towards a language or

culture are likely to find learning that language more difficult than those with a positive attitude (Brown, 1994).

Attitudes are also considered to be part of the constellation of affective variables in second language acquisition research (Ellis, 1994). Affective variables include anxiety and self-esteem; Krashen (1982) went so far as to posit the existence of an affective filter, which when raised, makes learning anxiety-prone and difficult, but when lowered, makes language learning non-threatening and comfortable. Attitudes, on a personal level, may influence how we feel about education in general, language learning in particular, and may vary from activity to activity, as some students enjoy oral presentations while others feel more comfortable with written, individual activities.

As part of the body of research on attitudes, Gardner and Lambert (1972) contributed the concepts of instrumental and integrative motivation, suggesting that integrative motivation is more conducive to language learning than instrumental. Since their groundbreaking work, others have contributed research to suggest that the particular orientation is less important than the strength of the motivation itself. Perhaps internal and external motivation is a better description, some have suggested. What may matter most is how motivated the individual is to achieve a particular goal.

Given the background of research, how can our understanding of attitudes be applied to classroom situations? Teachers can attempt to assess existing student attitudes and influence them. That is, if students are taking a language class as a requirement, and have no particular motivation to learn the language, teachers can attempt to motivate them through engaging and interesting activities. Similarly, if students view certain activities, such as writing papers, with negative attitudes, teachers can try to ensure that writing is only part of the class, or focus on writing in small, discrete steps with achievement rewarded along the way. Many texts in the field of teacher training offer ideas and suggestions for improving the motivation and attitudes of our students (see, for example, Harmer, 1991).

Realistically, we might consider teachers able to affect the attitudes and motivation of students primarily on a classroom level. That is, we might change how students feel about particular activities, and we might influence their attitudes about learning English as a second or

foreign language, but we probably cannot expect to significantly alter their entire belief systems about learning in general, or languages and cultures on a broader scale. That is not to say we should not attempt to engage our students to the extent possible, only that having unrealistic expectations about our ability to change attitudes will prove disappointing.

That said, there is an area of attitudes that teachers can have a major impact on. Attitudes about learning, about language and culture, about bi- and multilingualism, about the classroom as a place to learn, and about specific techniques or principles that foster greater learning—these are amenable to change, and we can change them. I am referring to our own attitudes as teachers. Our own beliefs and attitudes are under our control; we can choose to change them. Doing so, of course, entails recognizing them in the first place.

It is true that some teachers merely teach for the steady paycheck. Some like the status accorded to teachers (in various parts of the world; in the U.S.A. teaching tends to be less well-regarded). Some like the schedule, having several months off during the year. All these rather practical reasons may go along with enjoying teaching, but we can certainly find examples of teachers who have little interest in their subjects or students and teach simply because it is a job.

There is a saying in the U.S.A., that "those who can't do, teach". It is said in particular of those in fields such as art or literature, who love to create works of art but cannot support themselves doing so (presumably because their skills or talents are insufficient). It is a disparaging remark, and implies that teachers in general are failures in their chosen fields. (Some people add that those who can't teach, become administrators, revealing even more negative attitudes about those in administration!).

Nevertheless, at the risk of looking at the world through rose-colored glasses, I believe that most teachers teach because they have positive attitudes about teaching their particular subjects and their students. I believe that most teachers feel that education is important, and that they can make a positive contribution by teaching. I think most teachers care about their students and want their students to

succeed. I think most teachers prepare for their classes because they care about the success of their lessons.

Drawing parallels between student motivation and teacher motivation, then, many teachers have a global positive attitude about their work and their students. More specifically, teachers also have attitudes about the subjects they are teaching. Again, I believe that most teachers have genuine interest and enthusiasm for their subject matter (as opposed to teaching language simply because it has always been an easy subject for a particular teacher). We have all experienced teachers who bring no enthusiasm at all to the classroom, and I am sure we found those classes to be dull and uninteresting, even if we as students liked the subject matter.

What about motivation and attitudes particular to language learning and teaching? How important is attitude toward a particular language teaching methodology? Specifically, with Communicative Language Teaching being promoted as *the* method across the globe, how do our attitudes toward CLT influence how well we teach using that method?

First, it is true that many teachers do not have control over the methodology used to teach languages. School administrators and even national education ministries may decide to affirm CLT, may choose to buy materials classified as CLT, and may set up standards to be reached on the basis of CLT principles. Teachers may have little or nothing to say about these decisions. For teachers with positive attitudes towards CLT, such decisions may be welcome, and those teachers may well believe and be enthusiastic about their classroom choices. Beliefs and attitudes that CLT is effective, results in teachers whose beliefs are congruent with their behaviors. They may well convince students whose experience with language learning derives from more traditional methods that the newer CLT methodology is effective and valuable. Teachers and students sharing positive attitudes about the methodology will likely be more successful (and that is usually the case no matter what the method is).

It is possible that some teachers may resent being told to use CLT in their classrooms, even if they believe it is an excellent approach. Their attitudes toward being told what to do may well influence their teaching; resistance communicates itself to the students who, receiving mixed messages (CLT is good but I don't want to use it), will find it

more difficult to engage in the methodology and do as well as they might.

Yet other teachers may resist the methodology because they do not believe it is the best way to teach language, and in addition, they don't like being told what to do in their classrooms. Teachers accustomed to traditional methods may be in this group. Teachers more comfortable with focusing on grammar may also dislike the emphasis on communication and fluency rather than accuracy. Teachers who feel insecure in their own communicative abilities are especially prone to resist CLT, pointing out, quite accurately, that indeed we do not yet have as great an understanding of how people communicate (what speech acts are used, how situational variables influence communication) as we do about how to form grammatical sentences.

In response, institutions may attempt to convince teachers that CLT is both more effective and more fun in the classroom, and when teachers are convinced, they can influence the attitudes of their students. This, however, is easier said than done. Evidence supporting the efficacy of any method over another is exceedingly hard to come by. Research just cannot control all the variables in comparing methodologies. Thus believers can assert and nonbelievers can resist, and neither have much evidence to marshal in their favor. However, statistical evidence is only one kind of support.

CLT has certain face validity, in that many language students hope to communicate in the language and not merely answer discrete point grammar questions. In addition, the activities often used in CLT are more authentic and engaging than grammar drill exercises. CLT does not forbid the teaching of grammar rules, merely asserts that such rules should be taught in the service of communication, as a means and not as an end in and of themselves. For teachers who are still unconvinced, perhaps the response of their students to CLT might encourage them to rethink their beliefs.

But the point I am trying to make is not really how to convince teachers to adopt communicative language teaching practices. Instead, it is how the teacher's attitude both matters and is amenable to change. While we may not be able to make great changes in our students'

attitudes (admittedly an important part of language learning success), our own attitudes are indeed under our control.

As teachers, we can choose to believe in what we are doing. We can compromise, creating an eclectic mix of techniques that might best help our students meet their own language learning goals. We can take what we are given and make it our own, as when we are told to teach "greetings", and we add in some grammatical and pronunciation points to enable students to perform greetings more successfully. We can identify what we know and what we don't know, and take steps to learn more.

I believe that what we do in the classroom matters, both to us and our students. When we have negative attitudes toward our profession, our work, our methodology, our classroom practices, we have no pleasure in our work and the students recognize it. The students are influenced by our own negative attitudes and may well develop their own as a result. When both teachers and students don't believe in what they are doing in the classroom, little learning takes place, and certainly the time in the classroom becomes drudgery. When our attitudes are accepting and/or positive, the students will respond with greater interest and effort. Thus I believe that it is incumbent upon us as teachers to look within ourselves, identify our own beliefs and attitudes, choose to keep or change our beliefs and attitudes in order to enrich both our and our students' language learning experiences.

When work is a pleasure, life is a joy! When work is a duty, life is slavery.
(Maxim Gorky, *The Lower Depths*, 1903).

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