HOW

Addressing Emotional Aspects in the Second Language Learning Processes

Aspectos Emocionales en los Procesos de Aprendizaje de Segunda Lengua

Luis F. Cisneros[1]

Colegio Colombo Británico, Envigado, Colombia.

Abstract

Learning a foreign language incorporates cognitive, communicative, emotional, and social aspects. Some of these aspects have to do with the structure of the language being studied; some others deal with social and psychological issues that influence the environment where the learning process takes place. This reflection paper addresses various emotional aspects that can bring up positive outcomes along the foreign language learning stages. Elements such as motivation, attitudes, levels of anxiety, acculturation, ethnicity, and personality are considered for this work. Readers should be able to find useful ideas for their ESL/EFL classes.

Keywords: acculturation, affective filter, anxiety, ethnicity, motivation

Resumen

El aprendizaje de una segunda lengua implica asuntos cognitivos, comunicativos, emocionales y sociales. Algunos de ellos tienen que ver con la estructura de la lengua; algunos otros tratan con asuntos sociales y psicológicos que afectan el medio donde sucede el aprendizaje. Este trabajo de reflexión se enfoca en presentar algunos aspectos emocionales que pueden hacer más eficaz el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras. Entre los aspectos a considerar, se tendrán en cuenta elementos tales como la motivación, actitudes, aculturación, niveles de ansiedad, etnicidad y personalidad. Este artículo presenta ideas aplicables en las clases de inglés como segunda lengua, o como lengua extranjera.

Palabras Clave: aculturación, ansiedad, etnicidad, filtro afectivo, motivación

167

Introduction

Globalization integrates languages and cultures throughout the world; this integration implies the acquisition and use of foreign languages in different scenarios. Teaching a foreign language, particularly in the academic context of school or college addressed in this reflection paper, is a process that involves several stages for learners to reach proficiency, aiming ultimately at the consolidation of communicative and cultural competence. Different teaching methodologies can have a definite impact on the learning processes of students, regardless of their academic context (school or college). Effective foreign language competence brings about a sense of adequacy and ability when interacting in the global village.

There are fair differences between learning a foreign language at school or college. Nevertheless, for this reflection paper, the learning of the target language is approached considering both contexts, since both settings involve cognitive, communicative, and affective factors. The concepts presented throughout this paper can be considered within the context of school or college ESL/EFL lessons equally. It is important to mention that, although students are regularly engaged in formal academic contexts and learners may not, for this paper the concepts of students and learners will be used equivalently.

Learning a language implies a chain of steps that encompass the development of linguistic consciousness and communicative skills, as well as the realization of language and culture differences. Learning another language is much more than a cognitive/memory process that enables students to obtain passing scores in exams. Krashen (1982) suggests that practice for exams does not necessarily lead to deeper acquisition of the second language. Testing, from his perspective, aims at measuring language or course requirements; it does not always demonstrate linguistic and communicative competence.

What happens inside the classroom is mediated by factors like group size, adequate resources, teacher-student ratio, fitting locations, and the learners' emotional conditions (among others). The considerations presented in this paper mainly approach some emotional and cultural aspects associated with the ESL/EFL classroom. Although this reflection paper is presented within the context of teaching English as a foreign language, the emotional aspects developed here apply to any target language learning process as well.

Going back in time, constructivism was considered one of the most embraced educational insights for teaching languages. Szabo (2023), mentions Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, and Gardner as early scholars who set the foundations for this approach, in which students actively construct meaning by interacting with knowledge. Constructivism is a theory developed in the late 70s and early 80s, and it sets up a specific framework for student-teacher roles: teachers facilitate the building blocks for students to actively build up their knowledge. Although its origins date from a long time ago, the core concepts of constructivism still

apply to the ESL/EFL classroom today. The essentials of the constructivist theory are well summarized by Bodner (1986), concluding that constructivism requires a shift from being passive learners (students) to active learners.

Constructivism sees students as the main, active participants in the learning process; they build their knowledge as they progress through different stages. Teachers are the facilitators, who in turn provide students with the 'building blocks' that they need to develop their knowledge. This approach also revamps educators with a shift from teaching a one-way lesson (lecturing) to facilitating learning.

Constructivism implies a reformulation of the teachers´ role, giving them a high sensitivity to meet their students' needs, not only in terms of concepts being "acquired", but also dealing with internal and external factors that could affect the language acquisition process. Teachers are expected to observe the stages in the learning process that students engage in, and to pace the delivery of the learning 'building blocks.' This idea assumes a class environment where teachers can check how students regularly progress to assess the new elements that they can incorporate into the language consolidation processes.

Another important characteristic of a constructivist class is that teachers consider students' feelings as they acquire and consolidate the target language. Students' feelings inside the classroom relate to the concept of the affective filter hypothesis, one of the variables that Krashen (1982) includes in his research about second language acquisition. Krashen considers that there are several affective variables related to language learning, in which motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety stand out.

The affective filter, as one of the items related to language learning, can be defined as the emotional stress produced when learning a new concept. The awareness about this affective filter implies, for teachers, understanding that the amounts of stress that learners may experience when approaching new concepts/tasks can vary from person to person. Teachers' goal is to lower students' affective filter - level of stress - to have a more relaxed environment, where the different learning stages can happen easily. Addressing the variables of motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety properly can foster better learning processes as well.

The reflections shared in this paper focus on learners' emotional state as a prevailing element that influences the effective acquisition of any language. A high affective filter creates barriers in students and consequently hinders their learning processes. Similarly, a low affective filter relaxes the class environment, and it allows students to learn naturally and without stress. To expand on this idea, this paper explores the concepts of motivation, attitudes, acculturation, levels of anxiety, and personality. These concepts are developed in this paper since they have a significant impact on students' language learning processes. Closing reflections present several ideas related to ethnicity providing useful strategies

to address emotional and cultural factors related to the second language acquisition and consolidation processes.

Motivation

Gardner and Lambert (1972) are researchers frequently associated with the concept of motivation in the ESL/EFL classroom. Their early findings present two kinds of motivation: integrative motivation, defined as a desire to identify with the target language group, and instrumental motivation, which is a desire to use the language to obtain practical skills to communicate effectively. Gardner and Lambert's considerations have been quoted in education several times, validating the theory of motivation as a crucial element in the second or foreign language learning process.

Brown (2000) quotes researchers such as Dörnyei and Csizer (1998) approaching these types of motivation. He notes that, for learners who want to live abroad, integrative motivation is generally stronger than instrumental; integrative motivation is a powerful influence in opening the student's mind to new linguistic and cultural aspects. However, in the last decades, the interest in foreign languages as a work tool has increased; therefore, better job openings validate instrumental motivation for learning another language. In addition to being an asset for better job opportunities, the ability to use a foreign language competently has had an impact on the person's social and cultural contexts.

MacIntyre and Mercer (2014) indicate that:

Many language educators are aware of the importance of improving individual learners' experiences of language learning by helping them to develop and maintain their motivation, perseverance, and resiliency, as well as positive emotions necessary for the long-term undertaking of learning a foreign language. (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014, p. 156)

These authors concur that learning a foreign language is not an easy task, and it takes time and consistency to attain competence; similarly, they validate the importance of motivation and resilience throughout the process. They also state that motivation needs to be developed and maintained if students are engaged in learning or consolidating their foreign language.

The benefits coming from consistent drive and continuous effort help learners balance their emotional condition, knowing that they are building up their communicative competence. This realization helps them understand that it could be acceptable to make mistakes while language consolidates and keeps their eyes on the goal: language attainment. Consistency and effort are the key.

These insights show that integrating both motivation and resilience is important as part of the student's emotional components in the ESL/EFL classroom. Either the motivation

derived from the identification with the target culture, or the professionally oriented motivation will encourage learners along their second language processes. Teachers could use generating questions that not only bring learning down to the students' real life but also motivate them in their academic journey. Once students engage, it is highly possible that they feel at ease with the topic of conversation, thus reducing anxiety. Likewise, and along the lines of the constructivist theory, having students participate actively in the selection of class material can increase their motivation.

Students feel more willing to interact in class if the topics relate to personal experience, or if they carry a positive emotional connotation for them. Once teachers are aware of elements that can stir up their students' motivation (integrative or instrumental), they can focus on one or the other, accordingly. Integrative motivation can be used within the context of multicultural awareness, helping students understand the benefits of integration with the target culture, while they appreciate specific aspects of both local and foreign cultures. Instrumental motivation can also help students set specific goals, like elaborating academic papers, crafting personal statements for college, or obtaining passing scores in international certifications. Preparation towards that specific goal, along with a sense of adequacy, can motivate learners to make the most out of their target language lessons.

Attitudes

The second element to consider when learning languages is the attitude of learners toward different aspects associated with the process: attitudes toward themselves, attitudes toward teachers and the class, and attitudes toward the target language and its culture. They all have an impact on the consolidation and use of the language. Consequently, they can affect learners' emotional condition. Each one of these elements is approached separately as follows.

Attitudes toward the Learner

Brown (2000) presents three levels of self-esteem resulting from learners' attitudes and experiences towards themselves. These levels have to do with global, situational, and task-oriented self-esteem. Brown (2000) notes that self-esteem appears to be an important variable in second language acquisition. Addressing each one of these levels positively can have a supportive impact on learners' emotional condition when consolidating a foreign language.

Global self-esteem comes from the awareness of students' value within the context of a family, classroom, social group, etc. Concepts such as self-value, self-competence, and adequacy need to be incorporated by teachers in their classes regularly. Considering school

and college as the context of this paper, self-value can be understood as the person's sense of personal worth. Likewise, self-competence refers to the balance between self-awareness and efficacy. Adequacy has to do with being capable of doing something. If ESL/EFL students understand these concepts and assess themselves taking them into account, self-value, self-competence, and adequacy can play a positive role in the learning process. Students can identify how effective or competent they are, and how capable they feel when using the target language.

In addition to global self-esteem, promoting a safe learning environment policy inside the classroom benefits all students; they realize that they are active participants in the processes that take place in their classes. They feel less shy, and more relaxed to use the language in different contexts. This situation, in turn, generates stronger bonds among them, who realize that they are in the same conditions. A safe learning environment reduces anxiety and encourages competence, not perfection (although linguistic and communicative accuracy need to be kept in perspective).

Situational self-esteem is a concept derived from the assertiveness with which students can manage different learning contexts. It might be useful to start with familiar, informal environments to consolidate the earlier stages of the target language use so that they can increase their situational self-esteem when interacting in those situations appropriately. Once they feel competent enough to communicate in informal environments, they challenge their language competence to engage in more serious (formal/demanding) contexts. Progressive attainment, and the feeling of adequacy while facing new situations, empower students, reducing their emotional distress.

The reader can take as an example of this concept of accomplishment the progression in the overall descriptors presented in the Common European Framework of Reference, CEFR (originally published in 2001 and expanded in 2018), which starts from basic, immediate contexts of communication, increasing their levels of complexity towards academic, work-oriented contexts. The updated version of the CEFR, released in 2018, provides further descriptions of each competence descriptor, ranging from breakthrough levels up to mastery. These descriptors can be used informally in class so that each student can self-assess their competence in each one of the skills. The feeling of attainment after evaluating each person's competence will have a positive impact on self-esteem by helping them understand what has been achieved so far while motivating them to move forward.

Task-oriented self-esteem is directly related to the levels of confidence that students experience when engaging successfully in specific classroom tasks. For instance, some students might feel that they have stronger writing skills and weaker listening comprehension skills, and this awareness affects how they face specific classroom activities. Consistent, authentic practice in multiple contexts can help students get more and more familiar with

specific tasks, empowering them to engage with lower levels of stress. First, students should be able to feel comfortable interacting with the language, and then confidence will start to be consolidated.

Identifying where students stand regarding self-esteem can help them better assess how a positive approach to themselves might boost their confidence in learning. Teachers should be able to identify students' attitudes and self-esteem concepts inside and outside the language classroom; these feelings can be addressed in class by generating (meaningful) questions before engaging in specific classroom activities. Likewise, self-esteem and its implications for a particular student can be addressed within the context of informal teacher-student conversations.

If students possess high self-esteem, this feeling may lead to a better performance in languages. This happens because, in most cases, self-esteem leads to self-confidence. Alam et al. (2021) consider that self-confidence and foreign/second language acquisition are deeply connected; their studies assume that any kind of learning, success, and achievement, are influenced by self-confidence. This reflection agrees with individual perspectives that come up after having shared with school and college students in different ESL/EFL classrooms for almost thirty years.

Furthermore, Brown (2000) implies that teachers can have a positive influence on students' linguistic performance and emotional well-being. When students see that they can communicate effectively in the target language, their self-esteem grows stronger, and it encourages them to continue working on their skills. A positive attitude can surely result in a more positive performance, thus reducing anxiety.

Self-confidence is another aspect that influences the development of students' linguistic knowledge. They need to realize that a language is acquired progressively; it is a chain of steps that requires time and reinforcement to be internalized in terms of new linguistic patterns and structures. Once they feel that they have acquired new grammar/vocabulary, and they see using them effectively, their self-confidence levels make them feel that second language proficiency arises. Linguistic empowerment can reduce levels of stress when using the language.

173

Mechanization, perceived as drilling and repetition of specific grammatical structures, could be considered useful here if it aims at accuracy in the use of the target language. Drilling has had negative connotations when approached as the useless completion of grammar and vocabulary exercises out of context. Needless to mention, mechanization processes are not the core of the ESL/EFL lesson, since teachers should aim at competence and real-life language, going beyond repetition and mechanical application of structures. Gamification and interactive strategies can make the consolidation of grammar and vocabulary friendlier, and

consequently, more engaging. Once structures are mastered, the feeling of self-confidence empowers students to go further in communication.

Once students see that they can manage specific grammatical structures efficiently when sharing their own life experiences in the target language, they understand that practice ´pays off´. The effort and time involved in language consolidation activities have enabled them with strong foundations to face real-life situations with confidence. In this way, self-confidence can increase students' willingness to communicate while decreasing levels of anxiety.

Attitudes toward the Teacher and the Class

A second relevant aspect in the processes of language development is the learner's attitude toward the teacher and the classroom. As stated by Ha Thi Yen Nhi et al. (2022), internal and external factors contribute to speaking anxiety. Thus, a negative classroom environment can make learners uneasy, leading to drawbacks in communication. Consequently, if learners feel comfortable with their teachers (and classmates) and if they trust them, they will feel free to ask any type of questions and to make mistakes.

This is a major goal for teachers: to create an environment where the learning process takes place in a comfortable -though encouraging- way. A key element here is teachers' attitude because their examples can set the tone for the class. If teachers deal with learners' attitudes and mistakes, and if they take those mishaps as starting points for new learning opportunities, language development will be easier, and anxiety will decrease. Learning from mistakes benefits not only an individual but also the whole class.

When considering a positive classroom environment, my teaching experience underscores several considerations based on regular interaction with learners. In the first place, foreign language classrooms should be places where the stories, interests, skills, and goals of every classroom member are all used for the benefit of the group. This perspective implies validating individualities equally and making sure that all voices are often heard. Inclusion, understood as one classroom for all students, with equal access and opportunities, needs to be part of any classroom, especially ESL/EFL classrooms.

174

Secondly, teachers need to help students understand that communication styles vary from person to person, and this phenomenon carries both positive and negative connotations inside the classroom, and in real life. Some communication styles can be misinterpreted, and this is a valuable opportunity for teachers to help them overcome these confusions in a timely way. Correspondingly, introducing an awareness of register and formal or informal contexts becomes another useful tool for this purpose. Continuous feedback at the end of specific classroom activities also contributes to the identification and solution of potential confusion.

Additionally, we as language teachers, have the chance to encourage the development of friendship among students with whom we share our daily lessons. It is a fact that communication does not happen in isolation; life does not happen in isolation either. Students already spend a significant part of their lives under the school roof, which allows them to find or strengthen common interests. The closer they feel among themselves, the more willing they will be to build up their language. In like manner, if they feel that there is no barrier between them and teachers, a more positive classroom environment will be created.

Besides, across our classroom activities, we as language teachers should be able to help students find commonalities (similar national and/or cultural patterns); this needs to be done among each group or class since there are similarities among each specific class. Activities that promote sharing each person's experiences, ideas, and likes, help students identify common grounds. It can happen that students have shared the same course for weeks, or even months, but there has not been a clear, intentional opportunity to share what makes each person unique. Our ESL/EFL classes can create chances for that purpose, all of them mediated by the practice of the language.

Attitudes toward the Target Language and its Culture

A third element that affects the language learning process is the attitudes toward the target language and its culture. If students have good knowledge of the cultural elements related to the target language being learned, they will understand how the language operates in both formal and informal contexts. Similarly, students will not misjudge people from different ethnic backgrounds, because they understand cultural differences. An awareness of the culture associated with the target language will also help when it comes to understanding specific norms in their natural context. Communication is much more than sending or receiving information; awareness of cultural elements associated with the target language will reduce the risks of misinterpretation in different contexts.

Recognizing and investigating stereotypes is an important step toward developing a cooperative attitude about the target language and its culture. Students' ethnic predilections and their attitudes towards the members of the other group can influence their performance in the classroom, and real life. Going beyond stereotypes and revealing the truth about the target language culture and its individuals is a useful tool for identifying the core cultural issues embedded in the language being learned (Brown, 2000). Similarly, discarding wrong perceptions about members of the target language culture will provide a clearer picture of the real world. Teachers should help students self-assess their stereotypes, and how these can affect interaction in different contexts.

If students appreciate the relevance of learning a foreign language because of positive interaction with the culture embedded, it will be easier for them to have an open attitude toward the new culture. This cultural understanding will break down any knowledge barriers that might hinder their use of that language. Once the bias is reduced, it will be easier for students to approach both the language and the culture without any apprehension. Likewise, understanding, and eventually incorporating, specific aspects of the target language culture will provide students with appropriate tools for their interaction in the global village (Brown, 2000).

Acculturation

Early research on ESL/EFL states that learners succeed to the degree that they acculturate to the target language group (Schumann, 1986). Acculturation, viewed as the assimilation of the target language culture, can foster suitable conditions for the learning and consolidation of the target language. Furthermore, acculturation can help create a new cultural identity that results from the interaction with the target language and its embedded culture.

Aoyama and Takahashi (2020), as part of their research on effective communication in L2 and acculturation, state that "As a significant predictor of L2 WTC, acculturation contributes to L2 WTC for a reason other than enhancing the learners' L2 self-confidence" (p. 712). This statement implies that acculturation promotes the willingness to communicate ("WTC") in the second language in direct relation to confidence. The more comfortable students feel with the target language culture, the more willing to interact they will be. Therefore, an appropriate acculturation strategy (going from assimilation to separation, aiming at integration), may reduce anxiety among students.

Acculturation can help learners regulate their emotions, thus promoting successful intercultural effectiveness. Emotion regulation, critical thinking, and flexibility are key elements that can play an important role in acculturation. Should teachers be able to help learners regulate their emotions, while analyzing information critically, they will foster flexibility and adaptability when approaching new cultures. In the first place, teachers can guide assimilation, where learners understand and adopt elements from the new culture progressively. Secondly, there will be moments when learners' heritage may clash with the target culture, making it necessary to address this conflict as part of the learning process. Ultimately, the goal should be integration, where learners adopt some elements of the new culture while retaining their heritage.

Savicki et al. (2008) also address acculturation as an important element related to the language consolidation process. In sum, they say that high levels of anxiety resulting from ethnic differences affect effective communication; likewise, mishaps in communication

because of high apprehensiveness can perpetuate anxiety. The awkwardness resulting from this cycle of anxiety – miscommunication – inadequacy – anxiety does not contribute to any second/foreign language consolidation. Teachers need to be aware of this awkwardness and address it properly.

Zaker (2016) also refers to existing theories about an acculturation model and its effect on the language learning process. Zaker considers, essentially, that a learner's success in language learning is dependent on the amount of acculturation. When teachers accompany the language learning processes actively, they are more likely to pace language acquisition/ learning and proximity to the target group. This pacing also includes the adequate incorporation of cultural "building blocks" that go together with language acquisition/ learning.

This perception about acculturation supports the idea that second-language acquisition/ learning depends on the amount of social and psychological distance that exists between learners and the second-language culture. The more a learner is exposed to the target language, and the better this exposure is handled, the smaller this psychological distance will be. As learners become more and more familiar with the target language culture, they can understand it, and relate to it in a better way. The sooner the gap is filled, the better.

This aspect must be considered, particularly, by language teachers when planning their class activities and being intentional about opportunities to deliver 'cultural building blocks.' These 'blocks' become a part of the learning process, and they will introduce cultural differences, as well as the respect and value of the different ways to express the world through language. For instance, when warming up with a song at the beginning of a lesson, teachers can incorporate a ´cultural building block´ to share with students general information about the singer or band, their country of origin, and specific concepts from the song. Similarly, typical holidays such as St. Valentine´s, St. Patrick's Day, and others, can be brought to the ESL/EFL lessons as cultural building blocks that will help students connect the language, the culture, and today´s multicultural world. Teachers should be intentional when delivering these cultural building blocks, aiming at an acculturation that enriches learners' experience. Students are not only acquiring a target language but also getting the culture embedded within.

177

Acculturation involves a first stage in which students understand and develop a conscience of their culture. Once this is attained, they will be able to identify the main traits of the target language - culture. This realization does not mean denying or undermining their mother language culture, but just the opposite. There is a significant profit in understanding and giving value to core elements of the mother language culture as the basis for understanding other cultures.

Once there is a cultural identity firmly established, it is easier to understand and cope with cultural elements belonging to the second language and its ways. This vision does not mean a blind acceptance of foreign cultural elements, but it means having a mindset that can function properly within the contexts of both the mother and target language/cultures. This reflection can be a valuable chance to promote higher-order thinking, leading students to compare mother versus target language cultures.

Levels of Anxiety

Levels of anxiety can be defined as the stress produced as a reaction to a particular situation. These levels can be understood as a normal reaction when people are exposed to unknown or new concepts. Anxiety can result from psychological or socio-affective factors. Malik et al. (2021) address social and cultural factors associated with language acquisition processes (anxiety, restlessness, and apprehension among others). Their studies reveal that elements associated with the target culture can have a positive/negative effect on the second language acquisition/learning processes.

Among their considerations, Malik et al. (2021) state that elements such as learners' background, possible lack of exposure to a foreign language/culture, social status, self-identity, and family background can trigger anxiety. Based on this concept, it can be suggested that a holistic approach that considers those aspects might help reduce stress among learners. A teacher's positive attitude, along with a constructive classroom environment can help learners reduce their levels of anxiety. This is where teacher sensitivity plays a determining role in assessing students' emotional conditions. In turn, the assessment of the elements mentioned above can make a difference between students' engagement or detachment. Validating the impact of these elements can be done either formally through questionnaires/forms, or informally through periodical class talks.

Brown (2000) refers to the concept of anxiety when learning a second language, describing two types of anxiety among learners: debilitative and facilitative. The first one refers to the feeling of incompetence or inadequacy that learners experience when facing contexts that require the use of the target language, making them unable to use it adequately. On the other hand, facilitative anxiety is presented as the apprehension that leads to readiness when using the target language.

178

Anxiety, when approached as facilitative, presents a good opportunity for teachers to provide small 'building blocks' that can be easily articulated and used by students, an attainable challenge. This implies teacher sensitivity to identify the feelings that a particular class activity might raise, and the connection to recognize students' potential levels of anxiety, adapting to them accordingly. The teacher-sensitive role can lower this anxiety by

checking the understanding of a specific topic before introducing a new one. This is known in pedagogy as *input + 1 (i +1),* where the old knowledge is the foundation for building new knowledge.

The implementation of this *i + 1* concept can be relevant for the design and implementation of entry tests that students would have to take at the beginning of a school year. These tests can not only give hints about students' competence but also reveal the potential levels of anxiety among a class when facing specific tasks (i.e., oral presentations and interviews, listening comprehension tests, standardized proficiency tests, etc.). Teachers should aim at measuring students' previous knowledge without stirring any anxiety, while simultaneously assessing any possible emotional distress. The more relaxed learners feel while facing the diagnostic test, the easier it will be for them to complete the activities without worrying about the results being achieved.

When students' anxiety is correctly handled in the classroom, it can work as an inciting feeling that produces a constant alertness in learners (helpful or facilitative anxiety); students can now give their undivided attention to the classroom activities because they do not want to miss anything. It is usually healthier to address debilitative anxiety outside the classroom, within the context of a student-teacher conference. Exposing or addressing a student's debilitative anxiety in the middle of a lesson will not help the individual at all. After all, a teacher's goal is to `facilitate' an environment that will consolidate each student's process, and this goal includes identifying and addressing anxiety (or any other issue) effectively.

In the context of second or foreign language acquisition/learning, both teachers and students can foster lower levels of anxiety by providing a sort of 'family' environment to serve as a shelter where independence and mistakes are accepted and addressed adequately. Teachers are expected to model the appropriate response when mistakes in the use of the language happen in their classes. Validating students' participation, despite grammatical inaccuracies, is the first step towards overcoming apprehension; acceptance should be evident to any student who might try to criticize a partner's outcome. The Communicative Approach encourages learners to prioritize communication over accuracy in the early stages.

Jabeen (2014) considers that what matters the most in the early stages of the second language acquisition/learning process is being able to communicate, despite inaccuracies. One of the best ways to correct a student's mistake is to repeat the phrase that the student said, emphasizing the words that the teacher wants to correct. For instance, if a student says, 'he eat pizza for dinner on Fridays'', the teacher can repeat that statement with the corresponding correction "he eats pizza for dinner... correct!''. In this way, the mistake is corrected for the student´s and the class's effective consolidation, while there is positive reinforcement for individual participation in class.

Another example can be school campaigns supported by visual aids and posters that can contribute positively toward the concept of a friendly learning environment. The use of posters and visuals that reinforce the "safe learning environment" spirit around the classroom is highly recommended as well. Upon arrival to my classroom some years ago, I observed situations in which students refrained from participating in class because they were afraid of being mocked or judged. I decided to print out phrases like "feel free to say it", "mistakes won´t matter here", and "communication rather than perfection". As the lessons progressed through the school year, shy students were able to participate more often, and they even said that those posters encouraged them to engage more and more.

Personality

Personality traits are also a relevant factor in foreign or second-language acquisition, and they can eventually trigger or lower anxiety. The willingness to take risks and the lack of inhibition could help individuals learn a language effectively. Regarding risk-taking, Brown (2000) considers that "learners have to be able to gamble a bit […] to take the risk of being wrong" (p. 149). Teachers can use students who are more willing to take risks as models to encourage the rest of the class to participate more actively when a new challenge arises. Peer work is also a useful tool to mix individuals with different personalities so that they can complement each other for specific class activities. What is more, walking towards everybody´s inclusion, and incorporating and validating different personalities inside the classroom are important in fostering a team spirit.

Another characteristic that helps create a good classroom environment is empathy. Being able to understand members of the target language, and identifying with them, is important for communication, and so is establishing a common link among all students: the desire to learn another language. Empathy is essential to remove the ego (understood as pride), and it opens people to the possibilities of a new language and a new culture. Empathy can be promoted starting from various communicative, real-life contexts where students can find common interests, likes, and experiences that create links among them. Commonalities can strengthen bonds between individuals, as they share different aspects of their lives while using the target language.

180

This common link where all students approach their language learning processes with empathy can be strengthened by developing group activities that allow student-student interaction regularly. After all, language presupposes human-to-human collaboration. In this mindset, students can share their lives and develop partnerships with their classmates on common grounds. This concept of commonalities also focuses on identifying the different personalities that each person has, validating their influence in the process of learning a second language.

Creating a Positive Learning Environment through Ethnicity

Ethnicity can be useful when it comes to addressing emotional aspects in the ESL/EFL classroom. Handling cultural aspects associated with the language processes assertively, as well as fostering interaction in class will empower students when it comes to interaction with the target language/culture. These strategies also reduce levels of stress or anxiety when using the target language. Brown (2000) considers that a positive attitude about the learner's self, the target language group, and proficiency can reduce bias. Bias and negative attitudes can be changed, for instance, by exposure to good language model speakers (not exclusively native speakers, but also competent users of the second/foreign language). There is a connection between students' cultural awareness and their emotional responses in contexts where the target language is used: the more multicultural learners are, the better equipped they feel to understand situations and to act accordingly.

One of the best ways to promote this cultural awareness is ethnicity. Kustati et al. (2020) mention that teachers gave their students tools for understanding and guidance to increase their tolerance of ethnic diversity, and this increased their tolerance towards cultures in the classroom. This strategy promoted communication and reduced anxiety. Ethnicity considers the specific identity of a group, based on distinctive traits (e.g., language, music, literature, religion, among others). Incorporating the defining traits of the target language culture into the language learning processes results in a broader understanding of the new culture. It helps students feel comfortable, better equipped, and less anxious when facing the challenges that new contexts may present.

Understanding ethnic awareness enables teachers to implement tools that help attain multicultural awareness in their students. This attainment prepares students to cope with situations that involve both the target language and culture. Learners can obtain resources to feel at ease with cultural differences so they can cope with potential negative emotional loads. Among the stages for creating diverse ethnic awareness, the following stand out:

In the first place, ethnic psychological captivity needs to be addressed. It presupposes involving people who feel rejected for any reason, regardless of the reality of this rejection. The goal is not to ignore reality but to help students overcome rejection by empowering them with linguistic and communicative tools that broaden their chances in life. In doing this, students' levels of stress will be lower because the feeling of confinement no longer blocks them; students feel liberated and free to use the target language in different contexts.

When a person feels rejected, they can turn inward to their ethnic group and reject foreign groups. Identifying this behavior is a key element when teachers and students interact inside the classroom. Teachers should be sensitive enough to identify behaviors and reactions that can be evidence of rejection of elements belonging to the foreign language culture, and

181

to address those behaviors accordingly. Adequate guidance and support can help students not to turn inwards, but to implement strategies that make them function effectively. When this happens, and students do not turn inwards anymore, acculturation can take place more easily.

The second stage for creating a diverse ethnic consciousness has to do with ethnic identity clarification. Learners can clarify their identity about their own culture. This stage allows them to see both positive and negative aspects of their ethnic group, as well as of other cultures. This analysis can stir up feelings of self-confidence, in which learners appreciate the good things about their mother language culture and use them for their benefit. In doing so, learners can see where they stand regarding their ethnic group, and regarding the target language ethnic group. This ethnic clarification provides opportunities for conversation about learners' mother language culture versus the target language culture.

Another stage in the progression toward ethnic awareness is bioethnicity. This concept allows an individual to function successfully in two cultural groups; it leads to a multicultural and metalinguistic awareness of the elements that make part of both the native and target language. Bioethnicity involves higher-thinking processes where learners assess contexts and put into practice intercultural sensitivity, which can be seen in the pragmatic use of the mother and second language. Bioethnicity guides learners toward the implementation of specific social, cultural, and linguistic codes that will favor clear interaction, either using the mother or foreign languages.

Learners can feel adapted to diverse ethnicities, depending on the context they are living in. If the context requires learners to use the native language, they can use this language with all the social, psychological, and cultural background that belongs to it. On the other hand, when interacting in contexts where the target language is being used, learners can function effectively without leaving behind their native ethnic group background. Multiculturally competent learners can feel better equipped to take on new challenges without major stressors.

Ethnic awareness also fosters global competency. Learners achieve an ideal balance of their primary group, national, and global identifications. The person can function successfully within the contexts of the mother language, target language, and their role in the globalized world. Global competency is becoming more and more important in today's world, not only for professionals but also for students in different academic contexts. Feeling competent in global contexts can help them feel more confident and less anxious.

All these concepts associated with the ethnic awareness process help learners understand their own culture and identify the positive and negative aspects of it. Consequently, they can recognize foreign cultural patterns and understand the differences between their culture versus the target language culture. As a result, they will feel emotionally fit to engage in

situations that require the use of the target language and its embedded culture. A multi-ethnic awareness helps them reduce stressors and anxiety.

This awareness implies that, for second/foreign language learners, a situation that might seem odd in the context of the mother language can be perfectly normal for the target language culture. This realization implies a compare-and-contrast process in which they act upon the basis of similarities and differences between mother and second/foreign language patterns and cultural elements. Teachers play a key role in helping learners understand and implement these behavior adaptations. When learners can switch between languages (and cultures) without major hindrances, feelings of confidence and adequacy will reduce anxiety.

The multicultural considerations presented above should be intentionally addressed in the learning process of any language since they increase learners' general knowledge and create an environment in which they can learn a second/foreign language more effectively. Some foreign language textbooks and written materials include these concepts in their scope and sequence, while others do not. It is teachers' duty to create the space in their classes to introduce the concepts of cultural diversity in case there is none in their classes´ textbooks.

Reading Selections and Literature Anthologies for schools can also be a very effective tool in the incorporation of knowledge coming from other cultures and in the development of multicultural thinking. Literature brings along diverse elements related to ethnicities and cultures, which can broaden learners' minds. Syllabi should go past the goals of English courses as Grammar and structure, towards courses that cover both language competence and the culture of the language being learned. Similarly, literature and its connections among different cultures promote critical thinking in the classroom.

Conclusion

In sum, the reflections shared in this reflection paper suggest that reducing the levels of anxiety and discomfort that students may experience when learning a second/foreign language is possible. It may not seem to be an easy task, but it is an attainable goal that requires, from the teachers' perspective, an awareness of the elements that affect learners' intellect, emotions, and willingness to engage. By paying attention to learners' attitudes, motivation, levels of anxiety, acculturation, and personalities, teachers can lower their learners' emotional distress.

183

Once learners understand the reason why a specific culture sees the world in a certain way, they can recognize the differences between their mother and target language environments. This realization gives a clear perception of each environment, and it raises learners' self-esteem, making them feel prepared to interact with the target language/culture. In other words, when learners understand how the target language culture works, and when

they possess adequate linguistic, communicative, and cultural tools, they feel comfortable interacting in new contexts. This feeling of competence fosters communication, reduces bias and anxiety, and favors a smooth adaptation to second/foreign language contexts.

Additionally, this feeling of adequacy makes the process of a second/foreign language acquisition easier since learners' emotional conditions are not threatened by cultural factors. Learners can resort to their ´cultural awareness toolbox´ and use the resources they deem most suitable for specific situations. They will understand which linguistic structures, combined with appropriate register and cultural elements, can guarantee clear communication. This grasp can be a good way to reduce awkwardness while boosting self-esteem when interacting in any target language context.

The challenge for teachers is being able to create and keep a safe, engaging environment where individual traits are understood and valued. Once a continuous encouragement to understand language and its cultural implications in different languages is achieved, learners will feel more comfortable, and more confident. Dealing with linguistic and cultural differences embedded in both native and target languages is a must in today's ESL/EFL classrooms.

References

Alam, R., Jahan, S., Milon, R. K., Ansarey, D., & Al Hadi, S. U. F. (2021). Accelerating learners' self-confidence level in second language acquisition: A qualitative study. *International Center for Research and Resources Development: Quality Index Research Journal, 2*(3), 141-153.

Aoyama,T., & Takahashi, T. (2020). International Students´ Willingness to Communicate in English as a Second Language: The Effects of L2 Self-Confidence, Acculturation, and Motivational Types. *Journal of International Students, 10, 3I*, 712.

Bodner, G. M. (1986). Constructivism: A Theory of Knowledge. *Journal of Chemical Education*, 63. 10.

Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of language teaching and learning*. Longman.

Council of Europe (CEFR) (2001). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge University Press.

Council of Europe (CEFR) (2018). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Companion Volume with New Descriptors*. Eurocentres Foundation.

Dörnyei, Z., & Csizer, K. (1998). Ten Commandments for motivating language learners: Results of an empirical study. *Language Teaching Research 2, 203-229*.

Gardner, R., & Lambert, W. (1972). *Attitudes and motivation in second language learning*. Newbury House.

Ha Thi, Y. N., Nguyen, T. B. N., Nguyen, N. L. D., & Tran, T. N. (2022). The effects of collaborative learning on young ESL learners´ L2 anxiety and speaking performance. *International Journal of Asian Education, 3*(2), 128.

Jabeen, S. S. (2014). Implementation of the communicative approach. *English Language Teaching Journal, 7*(8), 68.

Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language*. University of California. Pergamon Press Inc. 31.

Kustati M., Yusuf, Y. Q., Hallen, Al-Azmi, H., & Sermal (2020). EFL teachers´ attitudes towards language learners: A case of multicultural classrooms. *International Journal of Instruction, 13*(1). 353-370.

MacIntyre, P., & Mercer, S. (2014). Introducing positive psychology to SLA. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching Journal*, 156.

Malik, S., Qin, H., Oteir, I., Soomro, M. A. (2021). Detecting perceived barriers in FLSA: The socio-psycholinguistic study of EFL university learners (2021). *Advances in Language and Literary Studies, 12*(1). 34-45.

Savicki, V. (2008). Intercultural development: Topics and sequences. *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 15*, 111-126.

Schumann, J. (1986). Research on the acculturation model for second language acquisition. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 7*, 379-392.

Szabo, F, & Csepes, I (2023). Constructivism in Language Pedagogy. *Hungarian Education Research Journal. 13, 405-417.*

Zaker, A. (2016). The acculturation model of second language acquisition: Inspecting weaknesses and strengths. *Indonesian EFL Journal*, 80-87.

185