The Importance of Affective Variables in EFL Writing

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Abstract

Dissimilar to the early theories of instruction, which downplayed the role of the learner, recent researches in EFL have started to approach language learning and understanding from inside the learner, giving cardinal importance to such affective factors, like personality, anxiety, self-esteem, motivation, and attitude. This paper attempts to evince some affective variables that greatly effect students' level of achievement in the writing skill, which is considered as a very important skill in language learning.

Key Words: EFL, Learning, Self-esteem, Motivation, Writing Skill

الملخص

تُركز النظريات القديمة في التعلم على التقليل من قيمة الطالب في العملية التعليمية، إلا أنّ البحوث الحديثة حول تعليم الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية أصبحت تعطي اعتبارا كبيرا للطالب و أصبحت تصيغ نظريات التعلم انطلاقا من هـذا الأخـير، معطيـة أهميـة بالغـة للعوامـل النفسية كالشخصية، القلـق، الثقـة بـالنفس، التحفيـز، وآراء الطالـب وأحاسيسه. يهـدف هـذا المقـال الى تبيـين بعض العوامـل النفسية التـي تـوثر بشكل كبير على مستوى التحصيل الدراسي للطالب في مقياس التعبير الكتابي الذي يعتبر من أهم المهارات في تعلم اللغة الابجليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعلّم، التحفيز، تقدير الذات، مهارة الكتابة، الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

Unlike traditional investigations in EFL learning, which tend to focus on the learners' cognitive predispositions as determinative of success in language learning, recent studies have identified the affective variables as fundamental to the success of any pedagogical action. There are researchers, who concede these variables as far more important than cognitive. Seki (2004:42) assumes that "affective variables have an influence over cognitive variables. It could even be said that they are in a way the basic variables influencing how well students learn a foreign language."

Writing is a very vital skill, and students are often evaluated on the basis of their competence in this skill. However, affective variables, that are very important for successful second language writing, are seldom taken into account. Many teachers tend to focus on linguistic skills and cognitive abilities. Thus, this paper demonstrates some affective factors that play a very important role in the success of EFL writing.

1-Anxiety

Anxiety is a constant companion of second language learning. For many students, anxiety negatively affects their performance, especially in exams. This is mainly because anxious students find it difficult to think clearly and need more amount of time than those who do not feel anxious. They often feel blocked, threatened and, at times, become forgetful. As a result, these students produce low level of performance in learning. Writing anxiety is an aspect of language anxiety. Rankin-Brown (2006:2) defines writing apprehension as "cognitive, anxious feelings (about oneself as a writer, one's writing situation or one's writing task) that disrupt some part of the writing process." Indeed, writing anxiety can result from a variety of factors, such as students' worry about their grades, teachers' feedback or assessment and the deadline for the paper, which might be encroaching upon many students. Whatever the cause is, anxiety is a negative attitude that may hinder many writers and lead to a cumbersome failure.

A study, conducted by Clark (2004), reveals a wide variety of factors that result in writing anxiety. Among these, four causes were most frequently mentioned by students. The first one is having their writings evaluated. This, however, can lead to criticism or failure. The second cause is students' perception that they are not good writers. In other words, they lack confidence in their abilities and potentials. The third reason is their lack of knowledge about the subject they are writing about. And the fourth reason of writing anxiety is students' anticipation that writing is a hard work.

Offering students the chance to revise their essays is likely to alleviate some of the fear of being negatively evaluated. In addition to that, providing individual meetings with the instructor for each paper helps to reduce students' anxiety. The instructor provides them with the information they need to write and explains for them the mistakes they had done and shows for them the way to avoid them. Providing feedback by seeing students privately in conferences can play a major role in overcoming students' apprehension. It gives them the opportunity to talk about their anxiety in different processes of writing. Conferences also establish trust between the instructor and his students.

Teachers are sometimes a source of anxiety if their assumptions about the nature of the writing skill and of their role in the classroom do not correspond to students' needs, assumptions, and expectations. Brandl (1987) notes that "learners' fear of being negatively evaluated in the classroom can be further intensified when the instructors believe that their primary role is to constantly correct students' errors more like a drill sergeant than that of facilitators"(1987, cited in Ohata, 2005: 137). Even if students believe that teachers' feedback is necessary, the manner of providing it may provoke anxiety. It should be added that positive feedback can reduce writing anxiety, which may emanate from other factors.

Writing journals and other types of informal, free writing may be effective ways to build confidence in oneself and to develop the writing skill. These kinds of writing must be practiced regularly by students, especially the ones whose anxiety is attributed to their lack of the writing skill. Harmer (2004:61) states that "Learners' willingness to write may derive from anxiety they have about their ability to construct sentences and paragraphs; and if this continues, then students' attitude towards writing is likely to be more negative"

The role of anxiety in learners' performance was studied by McIntire and Gardner (1994) from an interesting angle. McIntire and Gardner investigated the results in foreign language tasks and the time each student needed for processing the cognitive task in order to get these results. Students, with high anxiety, found the task that required the use of short-term memory difficult. Even in the tasks, where their success was identical to that of the non-anxious students, they usually needed much more processing time (called extra time in the study).

McIntire and Gardner (1994) believe that when the anxious students had enough time to internalize and practice the task before they were tested, or when they had enough time to complete the task, they could get similar results to those of non-anxious students. When the extra time was not given, a significant relationship was revealed between language anxiety and low achievement.

In fact, writing anxiety is a complex phenomenon that may be aroused by a cluster of events. The effect of this negative attitude on students' learning process and performance is pathetic. Hence, teachers should develop strategies that stand as defense mechanisms in front of this anxiety: for example, by providing clear, unambiguous and interesting essays. They can also avoid time pressure by giving students plenty of time to complete their essays. However, one should not blink the fact that learners' role is also important, because 'you can lead a horse to the river, but you cannot make it drink.'

2-Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to students' evaluation of themselves as capable of performing specific tasks. In Dornyei's terms, self-efficacy is "people's judgment of their abilities to carry out certain specific tasks and, accordingly, their sense of efficacy will determine their choice of the activities attempted, as well as the level of their aspiration, the amount of effort exerted and the persistence displayed" (1998:119).

A strong sense of self-efficacy enhances learners' performance, whereas learners, who have low self-efficacy beliefs, are likely to fail and give up. Pajures and Valiante(2001:367) state that "the belief that one is capable of orchestrating events that lead to favorable outcomes sets into motion a series of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses that result in healthier emotional states and higher achievement." In contrast, students, with low self-efficacy, are more likely to give up when they face obstacles and difficulties. Their disbelief in their capacities pulls them from continuing; therefore, they hardly attempt to make things happen. Further, they are more likely to experience apprehension, which also minimizes success.

Students' attitudes towards themselves influence their level of achievement as well as their attitude towards the subject they are studying. Hence, students' self-efficacy for writing effects their tendency to learn, the efforts to spend on a particular task, and the best way to perform. Lavelle states: "Indeed, making meaning in writing calls not only for advanced skills but also for self-knowledge of oneself as a writer or wearing a writer's hat"(Lavelle, 2006:79). Students' self-efficacy for writing correlates positively with their level of achievement. Self-efficacious students are more likely to persist in writing tasks than students, who do not feel competent.

Non self-efficacy may result from many factors, such as students' lack of adequate skills to perform a task. In one of their studies, Pajares and Valiante(1999:394) operationalized writing self-efficacy as "students' judgments of their confidence that they possess the various composition, grammar, usage and mechanical skills appropriate to their academic level."

Low self-efficacy may also be attributed to teachers' negative feedback. In this context, Reevers (1997:41) argues: "While high apprehensives have experienced considerable negative feedback in prior course and this is inevitable, apprehensive writers do considerable negative self-talk, but this is reversible." This means that students can have control over their self-efficacy though teachers' feedback does not meet their expectations on their attitudes towards writing. Reevers (1997:41) points out that "the self-concept is over-changing and is tied not only to interpersonal but also intrapersonal communication." Thus, it is not just a matter of someone (a teacher, for example) telling students about their writing that affects their self-efficacy, but what students themselves are telling about their works.

3-Self-confidence in Writing

Self-confidence is a term that is alternatively used with self-efficacy. Self-confidence can be described as "self-perception of communicative competence and low levels of anxiety in using the second language" (Noels, et al., 1996:248). Indeed, researchers often make the distinction between self-efficacy and self-confidence. Dornyei (1998:123) explains the slight difference between the two terms as follows: "Self-confidence in general refers to the belief that a person has the ability to produce results, accomplish goals or perform tasks competently. It appears to be akin to self-efficacy, but it is used in a more general sense (i.e., self-efficacy is always task-specific)"

Among the key factors that may destroy learners' self-confidence is teachers' negative feedback. Reevers (1997:42) asserts that: "The lack of self-confidence often surfaces when students are unable to find anything good about their writing." It is, thus, important to point out key areas in students' writings and show them what is positive in their essays.

To recapitulate, students' success is in part determined by their judgment of what they can accomplish. Therefore, students' self-confidence and self-efficacy for writing are highly predictive of their success. Students, who are self-efficacious, are apt to succeed and perform well. These attitudinal factors may justify why academic achievement differs from normal skills and abilities. Learners' perception of their abilities in writing fosters their engagement and motivation in the task they are performing. Teachers should help learners perceive themselves as competent because those who lack self-confidence and self-efficacy are more likely to underestimate their abilities to write and to have negative expectations about their performance.

4-Motivation and Writing

Motivation is widely viewed as a basic recipe for successful learning and a pillar on which learning is based. In the process of writing a composition in English, many aspects may de-motivate, push or goad the learners into action. Adelman (2003:51) defines motivation in writing as "more frequent writing behaviors and/or a positive attitude leading to increased writing or increased participation."

Motivation is one of the key factors that influence the rate and success of ESL writing. The concepts of instrumental and integrative motivation in ESL writing have equally an influence on learners' proficiency in writing as well as on the effectiveness of the teachers' instruction. Myles (2006:6) maintains that: "|I]f students show an overall interest in the target language (integrative motivation), perceive that there is parental and social support, and have a desire to achieve their professional goals (instrumental motivation), they can become more proficient in their ability to write in English, despite the initial lack of self-motivation." Shen (1998:46; cited Weight, 2002:37) seems to agree on the impact of integrativeness when pointing out that "in order to write good English, I know that I had to be myself, which actually means not be my Chinese self. It means that I had to create an English self and to be that self."

Motivation can be switched on by a number of stimuli. The teacher may motivate his learners by choosing an interesting activity. Robert Hevang, a teacher at the Valley High School, finds that writing for a real audience is motivating for his students. To this effect, he writes:

> In my English class, I have students write an autobiography and
> then they put it on the web. The exercise is very motivating to
> the students, because they are making a product that is real and
> can be shared like many other real things on the web. When it is
> just a paper for me, they think of it as just another assignment.

When they put it on the web, they think of it as something real.
(Cited in R. E. Slavin, 2003:343).

Students' motivation, thus, can be fostered if they participate in projects that connect them to the outside world via communication technologies.

People may write because they want someone else to read what they have written. Therefore, the audience may provide the incentive for writing. Smith (1994:79) states that the "[A]wareness of a potential audience may of course play a considerable part in the original motivation for writing." However, this does not deny the fact that some students write for themselves because of an intrinsic motivation or a positive attitude towards writing. Even when writing to other people, the role of audience may come later. Indeed, Smith (1994:79) maintains that "the intention to write can long precede any decision about the audience that will be addressed. We may decide to write because we want to."

The lack of motivation for writing can stem from the nature of the writing skill, which is a demanding task that calls at all of the writer's cognitive skills. To this effect, Hidi and Boscolo (2007:2) state that "a major contribution towards understanding students' lack of motivation to write comes from studies, mainly from a cognitive approach that has shown the complexity of the writing processes and the difficulties students […] have to deal with"

5-The Choice of the Topic

It is ill advised to ask students to write about topics that are uninteresting or about which they lack knowledge. Some of the topics, proposed by the teachers for writing a composition, are dry and boring. They are prepared without regard to the learners' interests. Moreover, many of them are far away from the communicative purposes.

Asking students to write about topics that address their interest is more likely to foster their motivation. Boscolo and Hidi (2007:74) point out that "topic interest has been viewed as basic motivational source of writing and independent variable affecting the quality of the written text." He also adds that interest has tended to be viewed as rather static; students are thought to be interested, or uninterested in a particular topic they write about. Therefore, when there is interest, efforts and motivation follow. By contrast, asking students to write about boring topics may lead to negative attitudes towards writing. Harmer (2001: 206) argues that "Having nothing to say, [students] may find […] writing [a] painful and [a] demotivating experience, associated in their minds with a sense of frustration and failure." Thus, interest and motivation go on parallel lines, and when they are maximized, learner's level of achievement will be higher.

Indeed, what may be interesting for the teachers may not be so for their students. Some teachers tend to propose biased topics, and they sometimes find it difficult to overcome such bias. When choosing the topic, teachers should consider what topics are more likely to stimulate the learners and address their interests. Fowler (1980) considers learners' experiences, interests, and curiosities as important conditions for the choice of any topic. According to him:

> The best way to find an essay subject is to review [one's] own experiences, interest, and curiosities […], think about things that make you especially happy or angry. The purpose here is to think of a subject that interests you and that you can interest others in by providing details and examples that embellish your viewpoint. (Fowler, 1980:4)

Difficult or vague subjects, which are open to many interpretations, make the writer lose the main idea of the topic. Therefore, students need to have some knowledge and familiarity with the topic. Since their aim is not to complicate the topic, and make it beyond the reach of their students, teachers should give their students the opportunity to decide upon the topic they are going to write about. Writing on a topic they know about, students are more likely to bring their 'whole' into the task. To this effect, Trimmer (1998:8) recommends: "Select a subject you know […] about. The more you know about a subject, the more likely to make it your own, shaping it in your own perspective." Svinicki (1999:22) concurs when stating that: "Giving students 'choices about what they will do or organizing around existing student interest is a way of tapping into internal motivation with the advantages that the activities become self-reinforcing and the teachers' role is minimized."

Imposing a topic on the learners is making them feel that there is an existing authority and that their freedom is taken away. By giving them the opportunity to choose a subject they have a need or reason to talk about, teachers are more likely to arouse in the learners the willingness to write about such topic. This, in turn, influences learners' performance. That is, the content will be good in terms of quality and quantity. Still, some teachers impose the topic on the erroneous ground that students may waste time considering several possibilities.

If the teacher asks the students to write on a subject, which might not be interesting, they do not perceive writing as a useful activity. Possibly, they will think that writing does not perform any function in their daily life. Therefore, they see it as a task that is restricted to the classroom context. Those students may also have no interest in writing. On the contrary, they may assume that writing does not respond to their immediate needs.

Students' attitudes towards writing as a useless activity affect their level of achievement. Eccles (1983; cited in Marcou and Philippou, 2005: 289) argues that task value beliefs are correlated to performance. He proposes that motivating students to work on a task itself is important, interesting, and useful for them. It should be added that these students' beliefs in the task usefulness may be influenced by many factors, such as the status of writing in one's culture, which is relatively low, the status of ESL, in addition to some other learning factors.

Conclusion

Affective variables have a great impact on students' level of achievement in the writing skill. They are as important as the linguistic input. Negative attitudes towards writing, such as anxiety, demotivation, lack of self-confidence and self-efficacy, are greatly decisive of one's level of achievement. Teachers of writing skills should not believe that their only educational

mission is to increase students' knowledge and skills and that the psychology of the learner does not fall into their proper sphere of influence. In fact, teachers' role is extremely significant as they possess a great potential to foster positive attitudes, to rise motivation and, above all, to render the learning situation efficient and interesting.

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