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**AFFECT IN LANGUAGE LEARNING:
UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' RELUCTANCE
TOWARDS SPEAKING ACTIVITIES**

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to investigate the importance of affect in language learning as well as to develop some understanding concerning life in the English language classroom in an attempt to improve its quality. In this study, my focus lies on the apprehension some students have to speak in the target language and how it can influence their learning process.

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1

Introduction

Adult learners have to deal with a lot of factors that influence their oral production, such as anxiety, motivation, self-esteem, perception and comprehension. According to Jane Arnold, “the affective side of learning is not in opposition to the cognitive side. When both are used together, the learning process can be constructed on a firmer foundation” (1999:1).

One of the most difficult aspects to overcome when speaking a foreign language is the anxiety generated by speaking wrongly and looking stupid in front of others, usually due to students’ limited knowledge of the language. Students can experience fear of negative evaluation which they see as a threat to their image, and a source of negative evaluation from teachers and peers.

Another stress provoking situation for some students is the evaluative characteristic of tests. A major problem of text anxiety can be its effect on thinking ability; it can cause a person to lose control of their thoughts and forget simple things.

Students’ positive reaction to another language or culture can be detrimental to the learning process. Students in this work present their viewpoints in relation to adopting a second language identity with its own way of thinking and reflecting on their behavior in the target language.

Since not too many specific studies have addressed adults, in this paper it will be analyzed how affective factors influence the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) adult learners’ ability to communicate in the target language and examine some of the reasons that may contribute to it. To better tackle these issues, I decided to investigate my classes in the light of the Exploratory Practice (E.P.) tradition. Exploratory Practice has been developed as a sustainable approach to enable practitioners to carry out ongoing investigation that will bring people together in a collegial and developmentally productive way (Allwright, 2002). E.P. was integrated into my regular classroom activities to help students and teacher understand their learning environment regarding affect.

Thus, this research has the following objectives:

- Reflect with the students the relevance of the affective factors in the learning process.
- Understand the types of affect that appear at a moment of oral production.
- Discuss how the findings of the research can contribute to the quality of life in the language classroom.

In order to meet the objectives mentioned above, the following research questions are proposed:

1. Why are some of my adult students reluctant to speaking activities?
2. What kind of feelings do my students show when asked to perform orally?

The ideas discussed in this study are divided into 6 chapters. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 discuss the theoretical background that guided this research. Chapter 2 shows some theories on affective factors and establishes the conceptual foundations of affect. Chapter 3 reviews the literature regarding the social construction of knowledge and its contribution in the process of learning. Chapter 4 presents the notion of Exploratory Practice and its focus on understanding of a lesson as being a social and pedagogic event. Chapter 5 presents the research contexts, including the explanation of the research methodology that guided the investigation, a description of the institution where the data was generated, and the participants that took part in this study. Chapter 6 presents the data as well as the analysis. And chapter 7 presents the final considerations of the study.

2

Theoretical aspects of Affect

Learning a foreign language requires more than mastering rules. This process is especially unique because it occurs through interactions with other people. The primary purpose of a language is to communicate, for an effective communication, learners, for example, have to be aware of the target language in order to avoid feelings of embarrassment and estrangement. Another consequence of interaction is that learners may have to deal with the frustration of not being able to perform or express themselves the same way they do it in their first language. Adult learners are sensible to the judgment of others which might in turn lead to discouragement and a sense of failure towards the target language.

Learning another language is not necessarily about adopting different cultural and social behaviors, however it may have a relevant impact on the emotional being of the learner. The affective side of the learner has probably the most influence on language learning success or failure (Oxford, 1996). It is said that good language learners usually know how to control their emotions and attitude about learning (Naiman, Frohlich and Todesco, 1975; Wenden, 1986 b). Negative feelings can hinder progress; on the other hand, positive feelings and attitudes can make language learning more effective and enjoyable.

The discussion conducted in this research refers to the positive and negative feelings present in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting as affect. Many scholars, psychologists, neuroscientists and linguists have investigated affect in their works. Although their definitions for affect seem to be similar, they all carry a particular view depending on the field of study the author belongs to. In other words, a psychologist will bring elements and beliefs of the psyche. A neuroscientist will give it a touch of science in his/her definition. A linguist will deal with it considering the linguistic outputs of affect, that is, the expression of affect through language choices.

According to Arnold and Brown (actual and former EFL professors), “affect has to do with aspects of our emotional being” (1991: I). Damasio, a neuroscience researcher and professor at the University of Southern California, recognizes a

distinction between emotions and feelings. He proposes that “the term feeling should be reserved for the private mental experience of an emotion, while the term emotion should be used to designate the collection of responses many of which are publicly observable” (1999:29). According to Damasio, these are the six most famous primary or universal emotions; happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise or disgust. There are also the secondary or social emotions, such as embarrassment, jealousy, guilt or pride; and there are also background emotions such as well-being, malaise, calm or tension. They are all responsible for the life of an organism as well as its maintenance. One of the biological functions of emotions is to produce a specific reaction to an influential situation. The second, though, is to prepare the body for internal changes of the organism in a way it can be prepared for the specific reaction. For example, changes in the quantity of oxygen in the muscles, changes in the blood flow and in the heartbeat or breathing system (Damasio, 1999:37). Emotions are connected with ideas of satisfaction or pain, maltreatment or encouragement, attachment or distance. Consequently, humans tend to see emotions as positive or negative. As reported by Damasio, emotions are important because they assist organisms with behaviours which are essential for survival (Damasio, 1999:37). Goleman (1995) also gathers the emotions in basic families: anger, sadness, fear, enjoyment, love, surprise, disgust and shame. In these and other classifications, the majority of the emotions are viewed as negative. In order to attenuate this negative predominance, one should stimulate the importance of the positive emotions.

Until quite recently not too much attention had been given to the matters of affect. However, with the advent of humanistic psychology in the 1960s, more interest in affective factors in the learning process has been posed. “Humanistic approaches emphasize the importance of the inner world of the learner and place the individual’s thoughts, feelings and emotions at the forefront of all human development”. (Williams and Burden, 1997:30). One of the most well-known proponents of Humanism was Erik Erikson. In his text *Childhood and Society* (1963), he proposes that the psychological development of an individual is conditioned to the way one experiences predetermined maturational stages in life and how one handles the difficulties demanded by human beings at different moments in his or her life. Erikson’s theory is crucial to educators because he claims that the learning process does not occur in chunks. All the phases in this

process are connected and the success of the next phase depends on how well the previous stages had been dealt by the individual.

Another exponent of the Humanism was Abraham Maslow (1970), whose theories emphasize the importance of fostering a secure environment where learners can develop self-respect and also receive respect from others. Both Maslow and Erikson prioritize learners' needs and feelings to have them achieve successful learning (Williams and Burden, 1997).

Rogers (1969) believes that learning that happens as consequence of self-interest and involves feelings as well as cognition tends to be extensive and long-lasting.

The importance of affect has been described in contrast to the cognitive aspects of the teaching/learning process. However, it is evident the relevance both aspects (affective and cognitive) play in this process, as we will see next.

2.1

Cognition, affect or both?

Cognition has to do with the mental processes that are involved in learning. It includes aspects of how people take in information, process it and act upon it (Williams and Burden, 1997). Specialists stress the importance of cognition in the learning process, but recent studies on how the brain works have shown the need to activate other parts of the brain in order to make learning more powerful and meaningful. Gross claims that we can accelerate and enrich our learning by engaging the senses, emotions, imagination (1992: 139).

2.2

Affect in the EFL teaching/learning contexts

It is not easy to study the role of affect in an EFL teaching/learning context because, individually, participants of this process bring a variety of experiences, beliefs and particularities, making this study really individualistic and changeable; therefore, difficult to establish a general truth about what is really happening in

terms of affect in the classroom. There are some individual factors that are part of a learner's personality and they may hinder or facilitate learning. For example, anxiety, inhibition, self-esteem, motivation and the learner's learning styles. When in a group, participants may express these same affective factors not in the same way due to the context of situation and its influence on how students make decisions. Despite the fact that all these personality traits mentioned above are important, I would like to focus more deeply into the matters of anxiety, which to my view has proved to cause greater interference in learning.

2.3

Anxiety

Arnold and Brown (1999) state that anxiety may be the most negative factor to impair the learning process. Anxiety is related to feelings of frustration, self-doubt, apprehension and tension. What about language anxiety? When does it happen? Why does it happen? Language anxiety is fear or apprehension occurring when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993). This is not any kind of anxiety; it is directly connected to performing in the specific language (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993; Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986). Language anxiety may happen because one might have been ridiculed for a wrong answer in class; it also may have been rooted in unpleasant past situations that may develop some sort of menacing reaction to present situations.

2.3.1

Anxiety (state or trait)

Anxiety may be part of one's personality or it may come up as a reaction to a specific circumstance. According to Oxford, state or situational anxiety arises in response to a specific moment or to a specific type of situation or event (1992:60) – examinations, public speaking or classroom participation. It can also be relational, being connected to specific people, such as a teacher or a boss. Anxiety

becomes a trait if a permanent disposition to be anxious is often observed in the anticipation of specific situations.

2.3.2

Language anxiety

Students sometimes feel anxious when they have to perform in a foreign language, but this feeling of anxiety usually goes away as soon as the activity is over (language anxiety). Studies show that language anxiety may decrease with time (Gardner, 1981). Nevertheless, language anxiety may persist over time and students can associate this feeling of anticipation with language performance and, as a result, anxiety may turn into a trait rather than a transitory feeling (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993).

The following are likely signs of language anxiety (Arnold and Brown, 1999:66):

- General avoidance: Forgetting the answer, showing carelessness, cutting class, coming late, arriving unprepared, low levels of verbal production, lack of volunteering in class, seeming inability to answer even the simplest questions.
- Physical actions: Squirming, fidgeting, playing with hair or clothing nervously, touching objects, stuttering or stammering, displaying jittery behaviour, being unable to reproduce the sounds or intonation of the target language even after repeated practice.
- Physical symptoms: Complaining about a headache, experiencing tight muscles, feeling unexplained pain or tension in any part of the body.
- Other signs which might reflect language anxiety, depending on the culture: Overstudying, perfectionism, social avoidance, conversational withdraw, lack of eye contact, hostility, monosyllabic or noncommittal responses, image protection or masking behaviours (exaggerated smiling, laughing, nodding, joking), failing to interrupt when it would be natural to do so, excessive competitiveness, excessive self-effacement and self-criticism ('I am so stupid').

2.3.3

Harmful and helpful anxieties

Some language researchers propose that anxiety can be helpful. Anxiety can make students more alert and it may facilitate learning. Ehrman and Oxford (1989 in Ellis, 1994) claim that anxiety can promote higher language proficiency and self-confidence among excellent language learners. Kleinmann (1977) evidenced the use of more complex oral English structures among Arabic and Spanish speakers when undergoing anxiety. Despite the fact that some language researchers defend the idea that a positive aspect of anxiety exists, many language studies show that anxiety in most cases has a negative impact on performance because anxiety promotes negative attitudes towards the target language, decreases motivation and participation and increases self-doubt, worry and language performance difficulties (Arnold and Brown, 1999: 60). Language researchers have different viewpoints about the existence of helpful anxiety. Horwitz (1990) claimed that anxiety could only be helpful for easy learning activities, but not for language learning.

2.3.4

Social anxiety

Anxiety can also act upon one's ability to take risks. It can be noted that students who do not feel extremely anxious are more likely to engage in unfamiliar situations and tolerate the ambiguities of the language more easily¹ (Chapelle and Roberts, 1986). It is highly recommended to provide a comfortable environment so that students can be able to develop as language learners and do not feel threatened by the criticism from others or by their own. In accordance with Ely (1986), decreases in risk-taking usually occur when students feel extremely uncomfortable in the language classroom.

Another correlate of language anxiety is social anxiety. Social anxiety can include speech anxiety, shyness, stage fright, embarrassment, social-evaluative

¹ Ambiguities of the language can refer to confusing situations about meaning, pronunciation and grammar that can raise language anxiety.

anxiety and communication apprehension (Leary, 1983). Social anxiety occurs among people who are extremely concerned with other people's evaluation. They most frequently have low self-esteem and believe that external factors may interfere in their performance. These people try to prevent themselves from social interaction in order to avoid negative appreciation. In the language classroom, this can be seen through behaviours such as keeping silent, not being active, answering only when asked. People who are more reluctant to engage in conversations or initiate interactions may suffer from communication apprehension. McCroskey (1984) defines communication apprehension as a person's level of anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with other people.

Test anxiety can be a component of social anxiety, especially when the student has to communicate in the target language and be evaluated by it. However, test anxiety may happen in non-communicative situations, too. The most relevant aspect of test anxiety is that it has been shown to have a negative relationship with test performance. Test anxiety can produce somatic signs including shortness of breath, rapid heartbeat, nausea, fainting and dry mouth. Students with test anxiety frequently experience cognitive interference (Sarason, 1984). The inability to concentrate in conjunction with feelings of failure lead to poor performance.

2.3.5

Anxiety and affective filters

Krashen (1987) proposes that anxiety in language learning context is clinched in the phenomenon he designates as "group membership". He points out that motivation; self-confidence and anxiety are important factors for constructing knowledge. He claims that the affective filter of a person can be high or low according to one's self-esteem. The affective filter is "an impediment to learning or acquisition caused by negative affective responses to one's environment" (ibid, 1987:16). Krashen poses:

The affective filter hypothesis captures the relationship between affective variables and the process of second language acquisition by positing that acquirers vary with respect to the strength or level of their affective filters. Those whose attitudes are not optimal for second language acquisition will not only tend to seek less input, but they will also have a high or strong affective filter – even if they understand the message, the input will not reach that part of the brain responsible for language acquisition, or the language acquisition device. Those with attitudes more conducive to second language acquisition will not only seek and obtain more input, and it will strike “deeper”.

2.3.6

Anxiety and culture shock

Language and culture are interconnected, and a successful learning outcome could be directly linked with the learning of the culture of the speakers of that language. According to Brown, “whenever you teach a language you also teach a complex system of cultural customs, values, and ways of thinking, feeling and acting”. Some people show anxiety and stress reaction when dealing with different linguistic and cultural environments. Adler defines culture shock as “a form of anxiety that results from the loss of commonly perceived and understood signs and symbols of social intercourse” (1987:25). In line with Adler’s theory, we can say that our identity is rooted in our physical and sociocultural environment; therefore, if we leave our home culture behind, we also leave the roots that feed and sustain our personalities.

Some affective states learners have may be because of the fear of “losing oneself” in the target language, which in turn can generate anxiety related symptoms such as emotional regression, panic, anger, self-pity, indecision, sadness, alienation and reduced personality (Oxford, 1992).

2.4

Language ego

Why English? In the evolution of history, it seems to be necessary that we are able to communicate internationally through one language.

Globalization and the advent of the computer age have yielded a lot of language contact among internet users. Through this interaction, English has been chosen to be the “Lingua Franca” in the web. For that reason, an increased pressure to learn English has been largely observed. Adults sometimes feel the necessity to learn English as a second language in order to meet the requirements of today’s job market. The inability to perform in the target language could be a threat to their status quo or a loss of future opportunities. The web is turning into the largest library, containing most academic, economic and political data. Accessibility has increased rapidly but only for those who are proficient in English.

Although the adoption of English as an international language has become a world phenomenon, acculturation (process in which members of one group adopt the beliefs and behaviours of another group) and national identity crises may come along as side effects.

According to Brown (2001:61), “all second language learners develop emotional ties between language and culture”. Learners develop a type of identity based on the language they speak. Brown has come up with a principle called “Language Ego”, which can be described as:

As human beings learn to use a second language, they also develop a new mode of thinking, feeling and acting – a second identity. The new ‘language ego’, intertwined with a second language, can easily create within the learner a sense of fragility, a defensiveness and a raising of inhibitions.

This may account for difficulties some adults have when learning a second language because while a child is still in the process of developing their self-identity and “language ego”, the adult is more rooted in their primary identity, consequently having more inhibitions, barriers and conflicts. Another relevant fact is that young children who have not developed strong behaviour in relation to particular cultures, races, classes and ethnic groups may be less affected as compared to adults (Brown, 2001).

2.5

Self-Confidence

Another important affective factor is self-confidence (“A feeling that one is capable of coping successfully with any particular task with which he or she is faced” (Williams and Burden, 1997:69). Earlier, Krashen (1987) referred to self-confidence as one of the factors that can influence the affective filter. Self-confidence can be seen as a basic character trait. Feuerstein suggests that “right from birth a child’s learning is shaped by the intervention of significant adults” (Feuerstein et al. 1980). Thus, families who are very lenient or too strict and constantly disapproving of their children will produce adults with a low self-image and little confidence in them. On the other hand, parents who are supportive and strongly approving of their children, who have less rigid routines and who are more participative produce adults who are more confident in themselves. The importance of the learner’s self-image has been shown in a number of studies. Despite the fact that it is hard to prove cause-effect relationships, what is seen is that there is a strong relationship between having a positive self-image and performing well or learning tasks (Williams and Burden, 1997:72). Once again, the relationship between success and self-image may not necessarily be all one way. Although there are reasons to believe that children who have a positive self-image may do better than those who have not, there are also grounds for believing that a child’s self-image can be undermined by poor results at schools.

Brown (2001:62) says: “Learners’ belief that indeed is fully capable of accomplishing a task is at least partially a factor in their eventual success in attaining the task”.

2.6

Self-esteem

Another relevant affective-related factor to contribute to effective language learning is self-esteem. Arnold and Brown (1999) define self-esteem as “a self-judgment of worth or value, based on feelings of efficacy, a sense of interacting

effectively with one's own environment". A great number of studies have proved the relationship between performing well on language activities and positive self-image. Like anxiety, it can be a trait (a characteristic of one's personality) or a state (associated with a specific situation). According to Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), learners can feel their self-esteem threatened when learning a foreign language. This negative influence on students' self-esteem may happen as a result of learners' inability to communicate freely and accurately in another language. Language learners with high self-esteem tend to be more proficient in the foreign language than the ones with low self-esteem.

2.7

Motivation

Learning a foreign language is different to learning other subjects especially because of its social nature. Language is part of a person's social being and it is part of his/her identity too. Through language, we pass our identity to other people. The learning of a second language is more than learning the four skills; it requires a change in our self-image, and in our social and cultural behaviours (Williams and Burden, 1997).

Because language learning is affected by the whole social situation, we will find models of language learning based on social-psychological grounds. One of the most important models of social educational language learning is Gardner's. Gardner points out that the central factor in this model is motivation. Gardner has developed a way of measuring motivation – the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery or AMTB, which is consisted of a series of self-report questionnaires covering different aspects of motivation.

According to Gardner (1985) we can distinguish between integrative and instrumental orientations in motivation.

- Integrative orientation: A learner has interest in learning a second language because of his/her genuine attraction or identification with the people and culture represented by the other language group.

- Instrumental orientation: The learner has an interest in learning a second language because of the practical advantages in his/her career or academic life that will occur to someone who speaks it.

According to Skinner's operant conditioning model, for example, "human beings, like other living organisms, will pursue a goal because they perceive a reward for doing so" (Brown 2001:73). We are made to believe that many things of what we do are motivated by an anticipated reward. We all pursue goals in order to receive external rewards, and they can be: chocolate, hugs, praise, gold stars, grades, certificates, career advancements and financial independence (Williams and Burden, 1997).

So what makes a person want to learn a foreign/second language, taking into account all the effort and difficulties this person will experience? Motivation could be the key word – but what is motivation? A dictionary definition from a number of sources would define it as the extent to which you make choices about goals you pursue and the effort you will devote to that pursuit. So we may say that a motivated student will learn better than the one that is not. But can motivation be acquired, developed or subject to change?

Hermann (1980) also claims that motivation is caused by progress and good results. So motivation may be subject to change or even acquired.

A relevant point to be mentioned is that Gardner and his peers recognized the difference between the words orientation and motivation. The former means "a context or purpose for learning", and the latter "refers to the intensity of one's impetus to learn" (Brown, 2001:75). The integrative and instrumental orientation concepts created by Gardner should not be bewildered with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The integrative/instrumental orientation is a real classification that has to do with the context of learning. On the other hand, the intrinsic/extrinsic motivation indicates "a continuum of possibilities of intensity of feeling or drive, ranging from deeply internal, strong, externally administered rewards from beyond oneself.

Edward Deci (1975:23) defines intrinsic motivation as:

Intrinsically motivated activities are ones for which there is no apparent reward except the activity itself. People seem to engage in the activities for their own sake and not because they lead to an extrinsic reward... Intrinsically motivated

behaviours are aimed at bringing about certain internally rewarding consequences, namely, feelings of competence and self-determination.

Extrinsically motivated behaviours are an anticipation of a reward from outside and beyond the self, e.g. money, prizes, grades or even certain types of feedback.

Also, Abraham Maslov (1970) ranked intrinsic motivation in a higher position. According to his hierarchy of needs, we are definitely more motivated to achieve “self-actualization” whenever one’s basic physical, safety and community necessities are encountered.

It does not matter whether the reward is present or absent, we will always work hard to reach self-esteem and fulfillment. Successful language learning is not only determined by intrinsic motivation; sometimes, no matter the effort or commitment a learner has devoted to accomplish something, there are always other reasons that can make him or her fail. But if a person feels more motivated to achieve a certain goal for personal reasons he or she will have a better chance of success.

Certainly a learning/teaching approach that values affective factors must take into account that the construction of knowledge is made socially and with the use of mediation among the participants of this interaction. Next chapter will present and discuss this matter under a Vygotskian perspective.

3

Social construct of knowledge

From the time we are born we interact with others in our day-to-day lives, and through these interactions we create our own sense of the world. In order to interact meaningfully with other people, human beings adopted a system of sounds, signs and symbols through which human beings can be distinguished over other species. Social cultural activities not only have enabled social existence but also greatly contributed to the evolution of human species. Mediation of human actions by cultural artifacts (e.g. language) played a crucial role in human development.

In the 1960s the writings of a remarkable Russian psychologist named Lev Semenovitch Vygotsky, whose theories emphasized the importance of language and people's interactions, were published. However, the application and recognition of his theories became restricted because of the post Russian revolutionary period within which he lived.

Vygotsky criticized many schools of psychology of his time. Vygotsky was not satisfied with the methods used to study higher mental functions, such as rational thought and learning, he objected the introspectiveness and objectivity of these methods to investigate higher mental processes. Therefore, he developed a different method of investigation based on Engel's dialectic philosophy, which stresses the inflicting characteristic of nature upon humans and of humans upon nature. According to Engels, these two opposite forces originate new conditions for human social existence. Vygotsky grounded his theories on Engel's ideas, he writes (1978:60-61):

The dialectical approach, while admitting the influence of nature on man, asserts new natural conditions for his existence (Engels, *Dialects in Nature*, 1940). This position is the keystone of our approach to study the interpretation of man's higher psychological functions and serves as the basis for the new methods of experimentation and analysis that we advocate.

Both Engels and Vygotsky criticized those who believed that only nature affects man's historic development. They emphasized that "in the progression of

history, man also affects nature, changes it, creates for himself new conditions of existence” (1978: 132). Vygotsky states that “we need to concentrate not on the product of development but on the very process by which higher forms are established” (1978:64).

Vygotsky dialectical method is based on an investigation of all relevant aspects in the history of human mental development; he claims that “an investigation in all its phases and changes from birth to death is necessary” (1978:39). This method analyzes higher mental processes on different levels, each of them with its own principles; phylogenesis, the first one, is related to the evolutionary development of humans in terms of biological differences in brain development. Although Vygotsky accepted the relevance of phylogenesis in the developments of higher mental functions, he believed that the other levels were more important for this development. The second, the social cultural coincided, with the third (ontogenesis) in the sense that in these two levels the ability to use sign tools and sign systems by society collectively affects higher mental development individually (ontogenesis). The third level, ontogenesis, was observed according to two forces: biological and cultural. The biological force is bound to lower mental functions such as perception and involuntary attention, and the cultural force is related to higher mental functions such as rational thought, learning and voluntary attention. These two forces act separately and a different set of rules command them. The lower mental functions are controlled by the environment, and the higher mental functions are self-controlled. Vygotsky states (1978: 39):

The central characteristic of elementary functions is that they are totally and directly determined by stimulation from the environment. For higher functions, the central feature is self-regulated stimulation. That is, the creation and use of artificial stimuli which become the immediate causes of behavior.

The fourth level of Vygotsky’s historical method is called microgenesis. According to Vygotsky, in this level, higher mental functions should be analyzed not only historically, but also in a short period of time; for example, an analysis of an immediate individual’s reaction to a task or experiment is crucial in order to “grasp the process in flight” (1978: 68). This method appears to be effective to avoid fossilized behaviour. Although Vygotsky acknowledged the importance of

all four levels, most of his research was conducted at the individual level of human mental development (ontogenesis).

3.1

Social activity and human higher mental functions

Central to the psychology of Vygotsky is the concept of mediation which is used to refer to the role played by other significant people in the learners' lives, who enhance their learning by selecting and shaping the learning experiences presented to them. Vygotsky claims that higher mental functions come from social activity. This can be brought together in the general genetic law of cultural development:

Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. This is equally true with regard to voluntary attention, logical memory, the formation of concepts, and the development of volition. We may consider this position as a law in the full sense of the word, but it goes without saying that internalization transforms the process itself and changes its structures and functions. Social relations or relations among people genetically underline all higher functions and their relationships. (Vygotsky 1981: 163)

Wertsch (1985) identified three points that are helpful to understand Vygotsky's concept of interaction. First, internalization is not a process of copying external reality on a preexisting internal plane. Instead, it is a process where an internal plane of consciousness is formed. Second, the external reality is social and related to other people. Finally, the internal plane remains "quasi-social" of its quasi-social nature.

Vygotsky points out that those individuals are guided by their own mental processes as they participate in social activities. However, these processes are influenced by social experiences. Higher mental functions first begin on a social or interpsychological plane and then move to an inner or intrapsychological plane. He calls this process internalization. Internalization involves transforming social phenomena into psychological phenomena or making meaning through both external and internal interactions (Vygotsky, 1981). Vygotsky says, "When we

speak of a process, ‘external’ means social. Any higher mental function was external because it was social at some point before becoming an internal, truly mental function” (1981: 162). To clarify the relation between the interpersonal and intrapersonal plane, Vygotsky developed the idea of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which he described as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (1978: 86).

Therefore, two important levels can be pointed out: actual and potential.

When a child is able to perform a specific activity independently, it means that the mental functions associated with that specific activity have been stabilized. On the other hand, when an intervention from another person is still necessary to perform an activity, it indicates that certain mental functions have not been stabilized. Therefore, some assistance of a more capable peer or a tutor is demanded.

The use of mediation in the process of internalization is the result of dialogic interaction between children and other members of their social-cultural environments such as parents, teachers and friends. This concept leads us to another important principle: the role of semiotics (sign systems), in particular, language, in human higher mental functions.

3.2

Language and intellectual development

Since a child is born he or she has to learn how to master the use of language for his or her own benefit. Humans have used language to fulfill individuals’ and communities’ social needs. It is unlikely to think about social evolution without the use of language as a central tool that helps us solve problems, think together, make sense of new experiences and create new concepts. Language has given us an extraordinary evolutionary advantage over other species.

The most significant moment in the course of intellectual development, which gives birth to the purely human forms of practical and abstract intelligence, occurs when speech and practical activity, two previously completely independent lines of development, converge. (Vygotsky, 1978:24)

Vygotsky stresses the importance of tools such as language for cognitive development. He claims that the function of speech is at first social, used for contact and interaction with others. If we want to know how words function in an individual's behaviour, we must take into account its former function in social context. Social speech carries out the task of communication and social relations with people around you. It is speech that children use to control the behavior of others.

In this study, Vygotsky's principles will be analyzed in an EFL classroom, as a means of investigating the importance of affect in language learning.

3.3

The classroom

Any learning is affected by the environment in which it happens. Classrooms are dynamic social systems where different learning contexts are formed. Some of them are more conducive to the cognitive, affective and social development than others. That is why appropriate environmental conditions for learning should not be underestimated. By giving some time and thought to providing learners with an environment that enhances motivation, and that takes into account learners' emotional, psychological and sociological aspects, teachers can greatly improve the learning process. Language classrooms in particular need to be places where learners are encouraged to use the new language to communicate, to try out new ways of expressing meanings, to negotiate, to make mistakes without fear and to learn from others. It has been argued that a nourishing learning environment would be one where the learning/teaching community work together within what Vygotsky called: "The zone of proximal development", a plateau of teaching/learning cooperative actions which will allow a most capable peer act as a mediator to help learners build knowledge.

According to Kuschnir (2003), teachers who are involved in pedagogical processes should acknowledge that it is almost inconceivable to teach or learn without considering the social and cognitive organizations of a classroom (Kuschnir, 2003:28). Likewise, the affective factors of the interaction (teacher/learners) are important to successfully reach pedagogical goals. Kuschnir claims that it is crucial for teachers to perceive the emotional manifestations present in a classroom and from this point be able to not only act as a mediator of the cognitive process, but also act as a mediator of the affective development of the learners (Almeida, 2001 in Kuschnir, 2003).

3.3.1

The tripod of a classroom

In line with Kuschnir's proposal (2003), this investigation understands a classroom in a more holistic fashion, i.e, as a systemic structure in its totality. A system, to my view, can be defined as a group of related elements that are combined to form a unity. According to the author, the interaction among parts and elements enables the classroom to function as an organized system. This organized system is bound to a sense of harmony amongst what she considers a classroom tripod: the social, affective and cognitive dimensions having equal worth and representation in an educational context, and working as a "propelling gear" in the process of social construction of knowledge (Kuschnir, 2003: 29).

4

Understanding Classroom Life

Classrooms are social settings within which participants interact and share their experiences. The quality of this interaction is determined by the way participants (teacher and learners) make their decisions about their learning and teaching behaviors. Classrooms also function as institutional spaces where cognitive aspects play an important part. Lately, attention has been given to try to describe and understand classroom interaction in order to feel and find out what is going on inside a classroom. The humanistic tradition, for example, emphasizes the inner world of the learner placing their thoughts, feelings and emotions at a forefront position. These aspects are often neglected in the learning process, yet they are vital if we desire to understand learning in its totality (Williams and Burden, 1997). To this view, learning should integrate cognitive and affective aspects in this process. A learner should effectively take part in the learning process rather than only act as a cognitive processor.

At the time of my research, the participants were extremely dissatisfied with their oral production as well as with their grades on an oral test they had recently taken. In order to understand what was going on with these students, I started my investigation in an attempt to find some answers that could help teacher and students to cope with the difficulties and frustration felt in that English classroom.

Since the purpose of this study is to investigate the role of affective and social factors of the learners in the oral communicative tasks, some classroom issues will be investigated in the light of the exploratory practice (EP) approach.

Exploratory Practice is the name we have given to a sustainable way of carrying out classroom investigations which provide language teachers (and potentially learners also) with a systematic framework within which to define areas of language teaching that they wish to explore, to refine their thinking about them, and to investigate them further using classroom activities rather than academic research techniques, as the investigative tools. (Allwright and Lenzuen, 1997:75)

Exploratory practice focuses on the quality of life in the classroom. Thus, searching for understanding should be the primary objective when trying to

develop some awareness of the quality of the language (in my case) classroom life.

Exploratory Practice (EP) refers to a relatively new form of research developed by Professor Dick Allwright while reflecting on his own work with Brazilian teachers back in 1998. EP aims at prioritizing the quality of the learning/teaching environment despite any concern with conventional instructional competency. It also aims at developing understanding of the quality of learning/teaching life instead of simply looking for teaching techniques. EP recognizes the social nature in which both learners and teachers are involved in the pursuit of mutual understanding (Allwright, 2003:113-114).

In order to realize an investigation under the EP approach, Allwright established steps for the development of this process:

1. The Puzzle: Identify the puzzle area; refine your thinking about the puzzle area; select a particular topic to focus on.
2. The Method: find appropriate classroom procedures to explore it (group work discussions, survey, role-play, diaries, and poster sessions); adapt the classroom procedure to the puzzle you want to explore; use the procedure in class.
3. Reflection and Interpretation: interpret and reflect on the outcomes.
4. Implications: decide on implications and plan accordingly.

According to Allwright “decisions about research method must be subordinated to thinking about the ethical and epistemological perspectives of trying to understand life in language classrooms”. For that reason a list of principles had been developed for practitioner research. (Allwright, 2001:359).

The principles are:

- Put quality of life first.
- Work primarily to understand classroom life.
- Involve everybody.
- Work to bring people together.
- Work for mutual development.
- Integrate the work for understanding into classroom practice.
- Make the work a continuous enterprise.

Working within the EP paradigm, the classroom turns into a place for teachers and learners to address their questions about interpersonal relationships, identity, learning and discourse among many other issues of school life. Pedagogic activities such as texts, exercises, tests, games, narratives, diaries and debate can be used as investigative tools in the quest for understanding (Simon and Miller, 2006). Such activities are recommended to raise students' awareness towards what they are doing or should be doing to construct and deconstruct concepts in their EFL learning.

Next chapter will describe the principles underlying the methodology adopted, the context in which this investigation took place, the analyzed activity, the participant's characteristics and their classroom environment.

5

Methodology

Right when I started my post-graduation studies, my beliefs concerning research were strictly grounded on statistical evidence. The assumption that a good research would have to involve some kind of quantification and would also have to be generalizable to be worthwhile was unquestionable to me. Although statistical methods of research might be very valuable, I realized there were other ways to do research. As time went by during my post-graduation studies, I was presented to a research method that professors claimed would provide us with valuable information and insights about what goes on in language classrooms: The Qualitative Method of Research. This method is characterized by the following principles (Richards 2003:10) and will:

- Study human actors in natural settings, in the context of their ordinary, everyday world;
- Seek to understand the meanings and significance of these actions from the perspective of those involved;
- Usually focus on a small number of (possibly just one) individuals, groups or settings;
- Employ a range of methods in order to establish different perspectives on the relevant issues;
- Only use quantification where this is appropriate for specific purposes and as part of a broader approach.

5.1

The qualitative method and its traditions

The qualitative approach has different types of investigation which are called “traditions”. They are: ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, case study, life history, action research and conversation analysis. For this study, I adopted the ethnographic tradition, since the researcher, myself, took the role of

an active investigator seeking to describe and understand the behavior of a particular group through extensive exposition to the field (Richards, 2003). As a participant observer I observed the object of the research, interacted with it and collected data.

5.2

The context of the research

This research took place in an English language school in Copacabana, a well-known neighborhood located in the south side of the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The institution was founded in January 14, 1937. Its premises comprise many classrooms, arranged by 10 floors.

The classrooms are comfortable and well-equipped with interactive whiteboard technology, projectors and other educational software. The school offers classes at beginner, intermediate and advanced levels for children, adolescents and adults.

5.3

The teacher

Given the context of this research, I think it is relevant to mention that I have been an anxious person all my life. However, I have been learning how to manage my anxiety a little better as I grow older. Emotional changes affect the way I solve my problems and I feel that cognitive stimuli are influenced as a response to a negative or positive emotion that I experience. I also believe that a healthy social environment is crucial for cognitive development since I am very often affected by other people's reaction, attitudes, and judgment. Consequently I assume that my students may feel the same.

I have been an English Teacher for sixteen years and, at the beginning of this research, I was convinced that my students' unsatisfactory oral performance was a response to my being in the classroom, which I believed was originating

anxiety and stress among them. However, as the research unfolded, my assumption proved to be otherwise.

5.4

The participants

The present research focused on a group of 14 elementary adult students that met twice a week for 1h30min. The participants were between 21 and 60 years old and they had been studying together for over 6 months. Some of them were studying English for the first time, and others could be classified as “false beginners” since they had previously studied some basic topics presented in the classes. This peculiar feature of this group has created not only a sense of imbalance in the group, but also a feeling of frustration and inferiority for some students. I made this assumption based on what students said about the different levels of English proficiency found among these students. Some students believed that having more proficient students in class would hinder the learning of the less proficient ones.

Another characteristic of this group was that they placed the teacher in a higher hierarchical position, assigning all the learning acquisition process responsibility in the hands of the teacher, as if learning/teaching was not a communal enterprise. I concluded by analyzing students' behavior that whenever students were asked to work in pairs or groups they would feel unsure about their performance asking the teacher to help or confirm whether they were correct or not. Students stated that they preferred to interact with the teacher because they would be certain that their learning was faultless. I was uncomfortable with the role they were inflicting on me. However, the institution I work for sees students as clients whose demands must be met. As a result of that, I was told to deliver what students wanted to receive. It seemed to be appropriate to believe that students perceived themselves as receptacles to be filled with knowledge. Furthermore, students thought that this type of teaching practice would provide them with more benefits in terms of language learning.

5.4.1

A few words about the participants

Each and every student in this research has shared certain distinctive features that might have affected their interaction and development. This class was made up of students from different social-cultural and age groups. Furthermore, their unequal knowledge level of English influenced their positioning towards themselves. Despite all their differences, they all had some things in common – the need to learn a foreign language to improve their job opportunities, the need to increase global understanding as well as the need to make travel more enjoyable and feasible.

Below I will be presenting the participants taking into account the affective social-cognitive aspects of their personality regarding their educational and cultural background. Due to the relevance of these aspects, students' traits and personal characteristics were included in the analysis of the research.

Anita, a public relations person, born in 1981.

She was one of the students in this group who publicly showed her dissatisfaction towards the marks she had gotten on her oral test. She did not usually have an accurate picture of her real competence, frequently overestimating it. She claimed that she deserved better grades on the oral exams. Anita was extremely self-confident, thus she did not feel comfortable being corrected in front of her peers. She was also determined and participative. She was usually late for classes and very often absent from classes due to the pressures and demands of her job.

Aparecida, shop owner, born in 1980.

Aparecida was hardworking and always got the best marks on the written tests. She was always attentive and very organized. She was very shy and quite often had to be encouraged to take part in the oral activities which she found difficult to accomplish.

Darlene, 1984, sales representative.

Darlene's main characteristic was being introspective. She used to be reluctant to speaking activities, being most of the time more like a listener than a speaker. She had difficulty understanding and speaking in the target language.

Ana Clara, publicist, 1989.

Ana Clara was interested and motivated and also eager to participate in all the tasks proposed. She got along very well with all the students in the class due to her outgoing personality. She showed more difficulties in the written aspects of the target language.

Elza, 1981, lawyer.

Elza was a new student in this class when this research took place, since most of the students had been together for approximately 4 months. Nevertheless, it did not seem to be a problem for the student did not appear to be part of the group due to the fact that she perceived herself as part of a higher intellectualized social group. Elza was always interested in taking part in all activities and looked really motivated to learn, despite her difficulties in performing orally.

Giovana, 1991, student.

The youngest student in this group, she was still in high school, getting herself prepared to take the Vestibular entrance exams. Giovana was extremely shy and insecure; she most frequently felt lost and could not understand what was going on in class, usually resorting to a more capable peer to help her. Despite all her difficulties, Giovana frequently forgot to do homework, which I believe would have helped her cope with all the learning difficulties she might have encountered.

Gloria, 1968, shop owner.

Gloria is a little more mature, she had great difficulty both in written and in oral activities. She was punctual, committed and motivated. She used to do all the homework assigned and rarely missed any classes. One interesting and relevant characteristic of this student is that she used to wear very fashionable clothes and accessories made by well-known international designers. This attitude seemed to

bother the other students since they argued that she wanted to show off. Gloria did not have the opportunity to study English when she was younger.

Glenda, 1989, journalist.

One of the youngest students in this class. Glenda was always attentive and self-committed to the classes. She also seemed to identify more with the younger students as she usually looked for a seat next to them. She was a little shy and did not feel confident to speak in class, even though she had very good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary.

Jardel, 1951, public official.

As well as Anita, Jardel was unhappy with his oral grades and questioned the teacher about the criterion used to assess students' oral performance. He did not have any constraints to say that he did not agree with the oral grades he had just received. Despite being the oldest student in class, he was very energetic, attentive and interested. He was an average student, having more difficulties in the speaking activities. Right after the research started, the student underwent a terrible tragedy – his son, aged 21, had a heart attack and died while playing soccer. One week after his son passed away, he started to attend classes again as an attempt to ease the pain he was undoubtedly feeling. However this time he was less confident and opinionated.

Laura, 1984, market researcher.

Laura is a young professional who works at a multinational cosmetic company. She affirmed that English is crucial for her career development due to the fact that she has to use English in every task she does at work. Laura was a little shy, however it did not interfere with her learning, mainly because she had already studied English before, which helped her feel at ease in class. She was eager to learn and, like Elza, seemed to feel a little outcast because she believed she belonged to a more intellectualized social group.

Mariana, 1977, architect.

Mariana was very dedicated, but insecure. She used to hesitate to participate in the speaking activities. She sometimes forgot to do homework and had to miss

some classes because she had a surgery. Mariana had some previous knowledge of English which helped her with grammar and written skills.

Paulo, 1988, law student.

Paulo was hardworking, never missed classes, extremely motivated and interested in the activities proposed by the teacher. He rarely forgot to do his homework and always paid attention to the lessons. Paulo was a nice and shy young man who had difficulty in speaking in the target language. As the module unfolded, he felt more relaxed to use English more naturally.

Samara, 1956, secretary.

Samara was exceptionally hardworking and she was always updated with her studies. She claimed it was really difficult for her to take part in the speaking activities. She said: “It is very hard to speak English and I feel really embarrassed to speak in class”. Samara was remarkably helpful; she used to prepare a summary of the units and send it to the students before the test. She would ask the teacher to check if the content of the summary was correct and then she would send it to her classmates. She acted like everybody’s mother. Everybody liked her very much.

Walter, 1955, retired.

Walter is Samara’s husband. He was very friendly, organized and hardworking. As well as Samara, he was always updated with his studies and always willing to help his peers. He would do really well on the written tests but not so well on the oral tests for he had difficulty speaking in the target language. Although he was aware of his difficulties, he did not feel as disappointed with his oral results as his classmates. He seemed to be more sensible to his actual oral performance.

5.5

The activity

The register of relevant occurrences regarding this research was made through the proposal of Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities (PEPAs).

These selected and adapted pedagogical activities are characteristic of the EP (Exploratory Practice) Approach and they are supposed to be integrated into students' habitual classroom activities (grammar exercises, reading passages, listening tasks, pair-work, etc.) to help students and teachers understand and obtain information related to the research question. Only one specific PEPA, however, underwent analysis. For this research, it was a Halloween activity in which students had to research on Halloween symbols (witches, haunted house, bats, brooms, etc.) and associate them with classroom aspects and routine.

The idea that Halloween origins, customs and symbols could offer students a chance to express their feelings was my primary motto. As a teacher, my intention was to have students connect Halloween with the fears and frustrations they had experienced in their lives as students in an attempt to investigate any relation between these fears and their dissatisfactions with their speaking in English.

The activity had its beginning five days before the Halloween day. As a "warm-up", it was elicited from the students whether or not they knew what a Halloween party would be like and what Halloween symbols they could name. Through their interactions, students exchanged information and might have enriched their knowledge on the topic. After telling the students they would have to research on Halloween and its symbolism as part of their homework, students were also requested to bring any texts or pictures to the following day of class for further discussion. I explained that the activity was to be continued but no further details had been given since I did not want to spoil the surprise. The first thing I did on the day of the activity was to ask them if they had brought the Halloween material I had asked for. I was glad to see that most students had brought it. After that, they gathered in groups of four. I could notice that they grouped themselves with the ones they identified most.

Second, I told them that they would have to associate their feelings about Halloween with their life as students explaining that they could talk about anything that had happened or was happening with them concerning their life as learners of English or of any other subject. They could also talk about the people involved in this process as well as any other relevant aspect they might have experienced as a student.

The students received some colored paperboard to post the pictures, texts or anything else they had brought and correlate them with thoughts, feelings and situations students had undergone through their lives. While doing the activity, students seemed to be really interested and motivated. By the end of the class, an extraordinary piece of data had been produced, and it would certainly help me find out more about my puzzle.

Before the activity was carried out, I was a little anxious due to the fact that I was not sure whether the students would be able to accomplish the task the way I was expecting. One of my professors at PUC had told me not to worry about it (but I have to admit that I was a little skeptical) and that too many instructions were not necessary. To my surprise, the outcome of the activity was amazing. During the whole process of their production, the students expressed their motivation and they knew exactly what they were supposed to do.

5.6

The data

For the purpose of this study, what was taken into account as data to be analyzed were the three posters produced by three different groups of students.

The first group was composed by Elza, Glenda, Paulo and Laura. The second group was composed by Gloria, Walter, Samara and Jardel. The third group was composed by Aparecida, Darlene and Anita. On the day of the activity, Mariana, Ana Clara and Giovana were absent.

Analysis

A number of studies on second and foreign language (L2/FL) have reported the disturbing effect affective factors cast on students when they have to speak in a second or foreign language. The major purpose of this exploratory research was to find out factors that speaking a L2/FL can stem from EFL students.

As mentioned before, I chose a Halloween activity to investigate these factors. The Halloween activity was produced by the students in an English language classroom as a result of a previous argument among the participants and myself as the teacher. The students carried out the task interacting with each other as well as talking and negotiating meaning and understanding about Halloween symbols and their associations with their life as students. I could notice that the social, the affective, and the cognitive sides of the learning were presented and expressed through the participants' discourse. The students, instead of resorting exclusively to the material they had brought to class, engaged themselves in meaningful interactions and helped each other in their construction of knowledge in the ZPD.

I chose to have my students work in groups because I believe this practice can make students speak their minds more freely especially because group work provides a less controlled environment. When the students work in groups the idea of equality is propagated and the power and interference of the teacher minimized. Another reason for choosing group work was because I believe in the collaborative aspect this kind of activity values. On the day of the activity, some previous homework preparation had been required, but not all the students had done it, so these students would only be able to accomplish the task if a more capable peer could help them.

In this investigation four posters were analyzed. The first group was the only group to produce two posters. This group was composed by the older band of the class: Gloria, Jardel, Samara and Walter. Although Samara and Walter had brought printed material for the production of the posters, they decided to draw and write their comments about Halloween themselves. All the students in this

group got prepared for the class. They knew about the Halloween symbols and vocabulary. Gloria, Samara and Walter brought their contribution. Gloria brought candies in a plastic pumpkin, and pictures of herself. Samara and Walter brought printed material which the group preferred to use as reference. Jardel did not bring anything but he had researched the topic as it had been required. On the day of the activity, there were blank posters of white, orange and purple colors. There were also different colors of markers, scissors and glue. The students could choose from this assorted material.

In an attempt to be kind and to my view to be accepted by the whole class (group membership), Gloria brought candies to everyone. Gloria is a student who frequently shows high affective filters which according to Krashen (1987) (see pg. 18) has caused her “mental block” that might have been preventing her to learn the language. We could see Gloria very often saying: “Eu sou muito burra, teacher”² in front of the class. Her self-criticism may be one of the language anxiety signs previously mentioned by Arnold and Brown (1999) (see pg. 15). She confessed to me later that she came up with this strategy to lower the level of demand or expectancy of her peers for when she has to perform orally in class. On the day of the activity, she was apologizing for every comment or contribution she would give to the class as if she had to ask for permission to speak up. This student also brought pictures of herself at Magic Kingdom on a Halloween celebration in the USA. I believe that this attitude was a way she came up with to compensate for her frequent display of low self-esteem. When she brought these pictures, she was trying to value her image of a successful fashion stylist that can afford a trip to the USA. Since this activity occurred shortly after Jardel’s son’s death, he did not seem very enthusiastic about it but he engaged in the activity helping to promote a moment of social construct of knowledge. The other two components (Samara and Walter) appeared to be more involved and prepared for the task. I could perceive that Samara acted as a more capable peer for mediating the discourse and manufacturing of the posters. However her attitude did not show to be a threat to the other students. They actually welcomed her ability to share her knowledge.

² “I am very stupid, teacher”

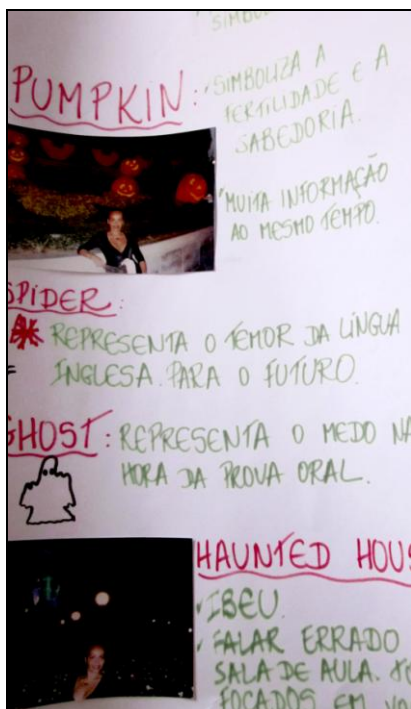


Figure 1

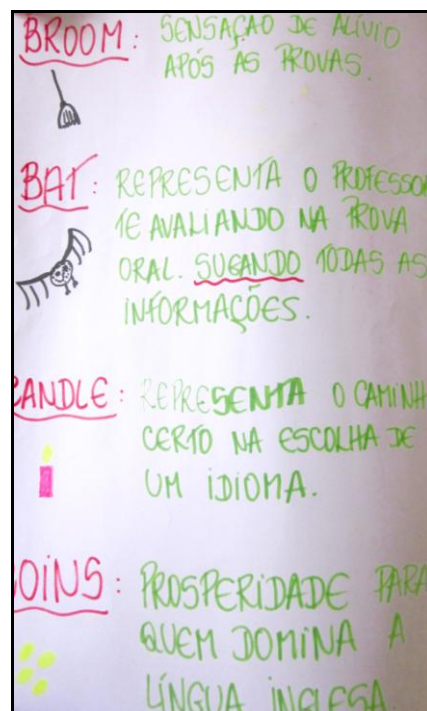


Figure 2

This was the only group to refer to the class teacher (myself) in this work. They referred to me as a wise and fertile person which I found really interesting. The symbolism of the pumpkin (see figure 1) with all its wisdom and plentifulness (according to the Halloween tradition) was a positive association with the image of the teacher as opposed to what I had thought at first. Prior to the proposal of this activity, I supposed I was generating a lot of anxiety in the students, but this investigation showed a different outcome. I found out that the fear of receiving negative evaluation from their teacher was not their main concern.

Gloria, Jardel and Samara declared that they felt awkward when they had to speak in class. “Falar errado em sala de aula. Todos focados em você”³. They used a haunted house to portray this feeling of inadequacy and discomfort. As we can observe in this poster, the participants appeared to be blaming the classroom environment as a significant source of language anxiety. This group views this classroom as a place where their mistakes are noticed and their difficulties exposed. Expressions of fear of being negatively evaluated by their classmates in a formal classroom setting were pointed out. They viewed their classroom as a place where their performance is constantly being evaluated. According to

³ “Speaking wrongly in the classroom. Everybody focused on you”.

Vygotsky (1981) (see pg. 27), individuals are guided by their own mental processes as they participate in social activities and these processes are influenced by social experiences. Higher mental functions (learning) occur on a social or interpsychological plane and then move to an inner or intrapsychological plane. I could realize that the students were interacting in an environment which was neither receptive nor healthy for learning. So the process of internalization, essential for learning according to Vygotsky, suffered a lot of negative interferences impairing the access from one plane to another giving room for anxiety to pop up.

Another symbol used by this group was a spider. They said, “Representa o temor da língua inglesa para o futuro”⁴. In line with a new study of fear of snakes and spiders, it has been argued that such fear has been shaped by evolution of species. Returning to an earlier time when mammals had to survive and protect their offspring, the approach of a spider or a snake could be fatal. For that reason, “Their brains certainly had to be effective in identifying reptiles in the world around them” (Öhman, 2001). Students in this group linked this threatening animal (spider) with their fear of the English language and correlate it to their future accomplishments: “It is interesting to observe that the fear humans have of spiders and snakes is a form of collective consciousness – shared beliefs and feelings unifying members of a society” (Durkheim, 1897). It was used perhaps to compare their long-lasting fear of deadly animals to their not knowing English which could bring similar results in terms of career advancements, especially at their age (mature students, above 40).

The students chose the word ‘ghost’ and connected it with their fear of oral test. Ghost: “Representa o medo na hora da prova oral”⁵. One of the definitions of the word ‘ghost’ provided by the Online Free Dictionary is “a returning or haunting memory or image”. Let’s analyze the word ‘returning’. Oral tests are recurrent. Students know in advance when they will have to take them. The word ‘haunting’, for instance, can be defined as “unforgettable and capable of arousing deep emotions”. Oral tests may produce feelings and emotions that are difficult to forget as well as intense. This fear of oral tests can be part of social anxiety, especially when students’ performance in the target language is being evaluated.

⁴ “It represents the fear of the the English language for the future”.

⁵ “It represents the fear at the time of the oral test”.

Test anxiety can be defined as “the tendency to become alarmed about the consequences of inadequate performance on a test or other evaluation” (Sarason, 1984). Students with test anxiety frequently undergo cognitive disturbance (Sarason, 1984) and have a hard time to concentrate on the task (Aida, 1994). I particularly think that the students in this group suffered a lot of cognitive interference because of the language anxiety they probably felt on the day of the oral test. I say it because their performance on the written test was much better than the oral.

Although I do not administer the oral test to my own students, they reported feelings of language anxiety such as forgetting the answer, inability to answer the simplest questions, or inability to produce familiar and simple sounds. They also reported physical signs, like nervousness and stuttering.

It is noticeable in this second poster (see figure 2) that the image of a broom was linked with the positive sensation that they experience after they finish their tests. These students said that they viewed the broom as an object capable of providing mobility and consequently relief from that stressful moment when students’ oral performance is being evaluated. They alleged that when students are released from the examination room they feel like they could ride on a broom and fly away from that place. They also said that this feeling is stronger when they are taking oral tests.

These students related the oral examiner with the figure of a bat. They stated: Oral examiners suck our knowledge the same way bats suck our blood. The students in this group underlined the word “sugando”⁶ in red to stress the fact that oral examiners make students feel as if their energy had been drained. Symptoms students reported after doing the oral test were low energy, headache and dizziness.

English is one of the job requirements for higher level, better paid jobs in well-known companies. The main reason for the demand of such specialized professionals in today’s job market is probably due to the role of English in a globalized world. As a result, more and more people are aware of the fact that to advance in their careers professionals need to speak English. These students established a connection between their knowing of English with their being

⁶ “Sucking”

professionally successful. When the students used the words ‘candle’ (light) and coins (money), they not only showed that they were aware of the requirements of the job market but they also showed that their concern “representa o caminho certo na escolha de um idioma” and “prosperidade para quem domina a língua inglesa”⁷ is grounded on real facts.



Figure 3

The second group produced one poster (see figure 3). This group was composed by four women in their late twenties and early thirties: Anita, Aparecida, Ana Clara and Darlene. They were struggling to succeed in a very competitive professional market. The students in this group declared that they had got themselves prepared for the Halloween activity. I did not register which material each student brought, but during the activity they were involved with their contributions. The group chose a purple poster and a black marker to record their considerations. The components of this group knew about the symbols and the vocabulary of Halloween. The group decided to use the printed material they had brought (pictures and texts) and to write their conclusions as well.

⁷ “It represents the right way in the choice of a language” and “prosperity for those who master the English language”.

Today, black cats are as much a part of the Halloween tradition as pumpkins and witches. However, black cats have not always been associated with Halloween, and this association appears to be a relatively recent and mostly American contribution. People believe that a black cat crossing in front of them will bring bad luck. I believe that black cats' bad reputation has caused many people to dislike or be suspicious about cats. The color black itself, in most western cultures, has many negative connotations. People are scared of the dark. Black is also associated with death and funerals. When the students in this group connected black cats with "situações que cruzam o nosso caminho"⁸, they were in fact making reference to a superstition some people have about bad luck resulting from a black cat crossing one's path. I knew there was something negative about their statement but I did not know what that was. So I decided to investigate it by asking them to explain or to be more specific about the word 'situation'. I wanted to know if it had to do with something related to our class or if it was something else. Anita was the first to comment. She talked about a job-related situation which she described as being extremely frustrating because she felt embarrassed for not being capable to express her ideas due to her poor mastery of the English language. She said she had been sent to a seminar in Peru where participants would only speak in English. She stated: "Não podia ser espanhol? Não, tinha que ser inglês! Não aceito esse domínio da cultura americana"⁹! E a maioria dos participantes era da América do Sul". According to Brown (2001) this student may have had "language ego" interference (see pg 20). Her primary identity is causing a sense of fragility and defensiveness within her, promoting negative feelings. She felt her professional position threatened because she had not been able to create a positive professional impression since she could not show her full knowledge in her area of expertise for not knowing enough English. She said that instead of feeling self-pity or reduced personality, she felt really angry and disgusted. On the other hand, Aparecida (the shop owner) declared that when customers speak English with her she feels anxious because she does not know what to say and how to behave. "É como se eu fosse inferior"¹⁰, she said. As previously cited by Adler (1987) (see pg. 19), Aparecida was experiencing anxiety

⁸ "Situations that cross our path".

⁹ "Couldn't it be Spanish? No, It had to be English. I do not accept this dominance of the American culture. And the majority of the participants were from south America".

¹⁰ "It was as if I were less important".

for not identifying commonly perceived and understood signs and symbols of social intercourse (culture shock). This means that interacting with a foreign speaker can lead to the removal and loss of cultural symbols, stories and relations that have been central to her well-being. A possible reason for the feeling of inferiority that Aparecida reported having whenever she has to communicate in English with her customers can be derived from the idea of considering a dominant culture (e.g. American) more important or better than her own. Furthermore, she might think that the speakers of the dominant culture are superior because they belong to a more developed and richer society. Non-dominant societies can suffer a negative impact on individual and group development and functioning. The interaction between dominant and non-dominant groups in different sociopolitical contexts determines the ways in which individuals and groups adapt to these contexts. These adaptive patterns are, in turn, reflected in terms of ethnic identification, group boundary formation, quality of life, and well-being. Aparecida as well as Anita may have been resistant to the creation of a second identity (language ego) which, according to Brown, would facilitate their interaction with speakers of other languages. Both Aparecida and Anita seem to have their self-identity and language ego rooted in their primary identity. Consequently, they were having more inhibitions, barriers and conflicts when performing in the target language.

This group believes that their ability to obtain employment or advance in their career is strongly linked with their ability to communicate well in English. In this poster, students claimed that English proficiency and the incorporation of the American culture are compulsory for successful career advancements. “Homens e mulheres ‘são perseguidos’ pela falta do domínio do idioma”¹¹. Language learning is more effective when cultural aspects are incorporated in the learning process. When learners identify themselves with the target culture and with the speakers of the target language, learning internalizes more easily and the affective filters are lowered.

Another interesting consideration made by these students was related to the attribution they posited to the word ‘bonfire’. Halloween and bonfire have a common origin; they both originated from pagan times, when the evil spirits of

¹¹ “Men and women are persecuted by lack of knowledge of the language”.

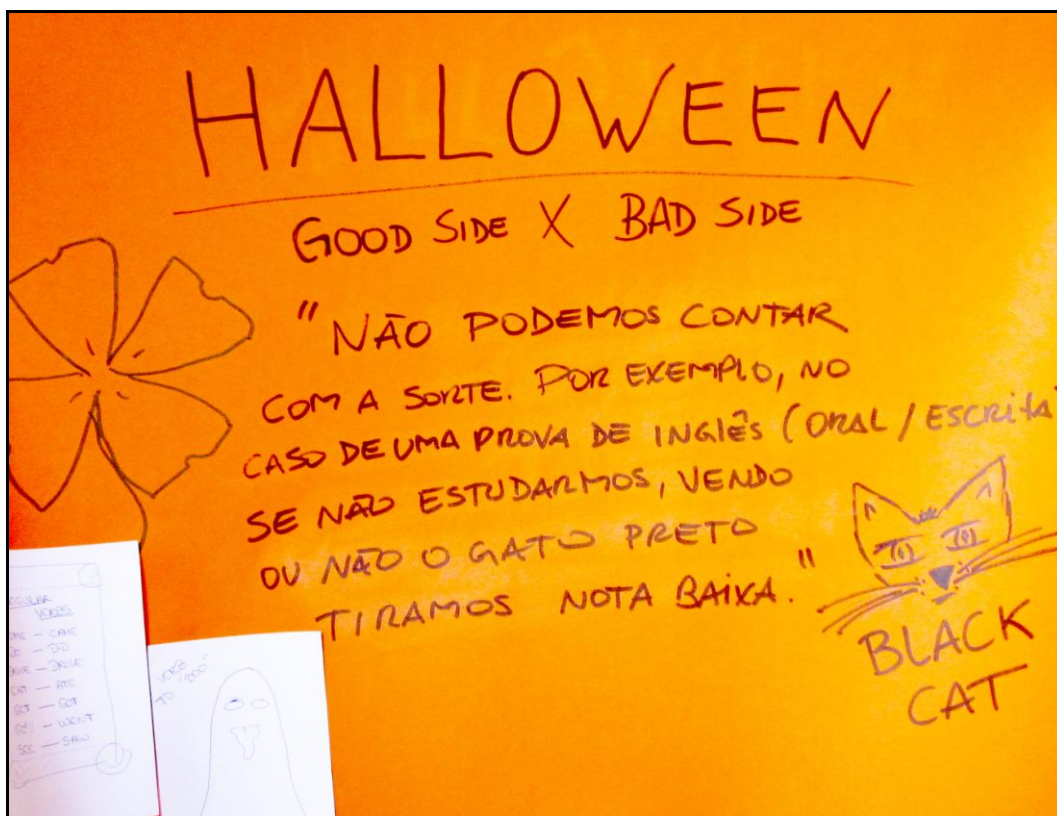
darkness had to be driven away with noise and fire. They also built bonfires to bring comfort to the souls in Purgatory (a place where souls are temporarily punished for their sins). So when students stated ‘bonfire’: “momentos antes da prova oral”¹², they were probably describing the feeling of anticipation they were undergoing. Just like in Purgatory, students were feeling punished, and only after being punished enough, they would be permitted to go to Heaven. In other words, Heaven would be when students were released from the examination room, after having done a good oral test.

The choice of the figure of a mummy to represent how the students felt in relation to their ability to speak English (“amarrados para falar ingles”¹³) may have origin in emotional factors rooted in the personality of these students. As previously mentioned in this study, there is a strong relationship between having a positive self-image and performing well or learning tasks. It is hard to say what may have negatively affected these students’ self-image. There may have been different reasons such as the negative intervention of significant others in the students’ construction of self-confidence when they were being raised, a personality trait, or low self-esteem. In spite of different reasons, the feeling of dissatisfaction and inability to develop in the English language could be noted. Students were perhaps feeling immobilized just like mummies by these emotional factors which were preventing these students from being successful learners.

The third group produced one poster (see figure 4). This group was composed by the younger band of the class: Giovana, Paulo, Glenda, Laura and Elza. I could recognize that this group was not as prepared as the other two groups for the task (they did not bring any pictures or texts). I could also perceive that they were a bit lost for not having read about the Halloween origin and symbols as I requested. They felt a little annoyed when they noticed that the other two groups were moving on well with their work.

¹² “Moments before the oral examination”.

¹³ “Tied up to speak English”.



¹⁴Figure 4

Giovana, Glenda and Paulo were still at the university, although Giulia was already working in Journalism as an intern. Giovana, Glenda and Paulo used to sit next to each other on a regular basis and when one of them was late, the ones who were present would hold a seat for the late one. I believe they were close because they had similar interests and were of the same age.

This group has made reference to the result of oral and written tests as a matter of luck and that regardless of how much they had studied they would always have a bad grade. They associated this idea with the figures of a black cat, a four-leaf clover and the ghost. The fact that they do not believe in their being successful on their oral and written tests demonstrated lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem that according to Williams and Burden (1997) (see pg. 21) complicated the realization of proposed activities.

¹⁴ "We cannot count on luck. For example, in case of an examination (oral/written) if we do not study, seeing the black cat or not, we get a low grade".

Conclusion

The main aim of this research was to try to understand the affective factors that influenced the English learning among adult students in my classes. I also investigated what made students disappointed with their oral production. The results of this study clearly suggest that the most anxiety provoking skill in second language and foreign language English learning is the speaking skill. Many researchers have acknowledged that people feel anxious when they have to speak in front of others. Some students avoid situations in which speaking is demanded either in the classroom or outside of the classroom. Apparently, speaking in public presents a threat to people's image which they have built in their first language (Horwitz et al., 1986).

The findings in the present study suggest that language classrooms tend to promote language anxiety due to its evaluative nature. Evaluation by the teachers, peers and by a learner's own "self" may interfere in the affective, cognitive and social achievement of students. Students' fear of making mistakes and the fear of being negatively evaluated can be addressed by developing peer-support networks to promote secure environment and feeling of belonging among students. It is advisable that teachers prioritize a low-stress, non-threatening language learning environment by boosting students' confidence. This action could help students overcome their feelings of embarrassment and discomfort. Many learning opportunities to improve students' performance and consequently the reduction of stress should be offered as an attempt to reduce language anxiety and to foster psychological security.

It could also be concluded that familiarity with the culture and ethnic groups of the target language could help minimize the effects of language ego and culture shock within students. The more students know about the target language/culture, the more they will be prepared to cope with new ideas and experiences. Misunderstandings due to cultural differences are a reality, but it can be diminished through a lot of awareness and sensitivity towards class members' own cultural knowledge. Relevant to mention that we should not overlook the issue of

power. English may be seen as the language of the rich and powerful society. This idea of inferiority could aggravate certain affective aspects that influence language learning: anxiety, identity, culture shock, and low self-esteem. These issues could be addressed by incorporating activities which explore aspects of both languages/cultures, showing their differences, values and peculiarities, giving equal importance for both languages/cultures.

Also, results indicate that communicative and non-communicative tests can promote a great deal of anxiety and, because of that, students frequently experience cognitive interference. Teachers can reduce test anxiety by providing equal opportunities for students to perform in the target language, reduce competition and encourage risk-taking, allow more fluency than accuracy, design tests with familiar topics, and emphasize on students' progress as part of the assessment process.

Given that affective factors can exercise crucial influence on second/foreign language learning and communication in the target language, it is especially relevant that language instructors recognize that these factors may be a major cause of students' lack of success in L2/F2. Because of that, it is advisable for teachers to adopt some practical and effective teaching resources that could involve students in class activities that could help them overcome their feelings of insecurity and stress. Teachers can affect students' learning in many different ways that go beyond the transmission of information. Teachers should teach students how to learn, enhance their self-esteem, provide appropriate learning environment, boost their confidence and show genuine interest in the learner's development. It is suggested that students become aware of and identify their needs and weaknesses as learners in order to reexamine approaches and procedures for good language learning.

From the point of view of an educator, I would like to suggest an exploratory study of the personal, social and emotional behaviours of teachers in the learning environment, and the implications generated by these behaviours. As teachers and learners vary in their affective characteristics and behaviours, it seems evident that the affective tone of the classroom can facilitate or negatively interfere with the students' achievements.

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