

Chapter Six

Building up Self-Esteem and Encouraging Risk-Taking in Language Classes

Affective education is a secure avenue to effective education. The study of the affective domain is related to understanding, controlling, and developing the emotional aspects of the human behaviors that influence learning processes. A greater emphasis started to be given to the affective sides of learning during the 1950s, and the 1960s (Bloom, 1956; Hilgard, 1963; Krathwhol, Bloom, and Masia, 1964; Rogers, 1951).

This interest in studying the affective domain of the human behaviors was due to the educators' realization of the importance of understanding such a theme. Ernest Hilgard, who is known for his study of human learning and cognition, mentions that purely cognitive theories of learning will be rejected unless a role is assigned to affectivity (Hilgard, 1963, p. 267).

Recently, the need for studying the affective domain's impact has started to be stressed all over the world. For example, Illinois State Board of Education identified, in a study conducted in 1992, eight goals for its public school system for the 21st century. The first two goals reflect a vision for education in Illinois. These two goals provide an outline of future expectations and aspirations for students. The other six goals deal with students' responsibilities. This framework aims at developing the students' knowledge, understanding, and skills, as well as attitudes, and self-confidence for the sake of enabling the scholars to be productive, and fulfilling. This new system stresses the role of evoking the learners' aspiration and identifying the society's expectations of these learners in the complex and changing society.

Actually, the 1990s have witnessed an increasing movement toward the study of the affective variables and their positive impact on foreign language learning (Clement, 1994; Moritz, 1996; Oxford, 1992; Oxford and Ehrman, 1993; Samimy and Tabuse, 1991, Sutarso, 1996). Nevertheless,

Head and Taylor (1997, p. 11) believe that affective factors have been often neglected on teacher education courses. These courses, from a training perspective, deal only with the knowledge and the skills required for the teaching profession. Rather, teacher education courses need, from a Teacher Development point of view, to consider the affective variables of the prospective teachers when preparing them for their continuing professional career. In other words, these courses have to offer directed effort for establishing principles of teachers' personal and professional growth.

Renner (1992) suggests that language learners, at any level, need to be given tools with which they can make language learning a personal experience. This approach, according to Renner, promotes both confidence in using the target language and studying the skills of that language. Gadman and Hanania (1991) identified 22 individual-difference variables that can affect success when learning a foreign language, at any level. However Richard-Amato (1988, p. 354) thinks that it is difficult to identify and study all

the affective variables related to language pedagogy without concentrating on individual ones.

The present chapter is concerned with two affective variables: self-esteem, and risk-taking. These factors are being studied in particular because they are very essential for any successful EFL learner.

Self-esteem

Historically speaking, self-esteem is regarded as an affective variable that has attracted the researchers' attention a long time ago. Malinowski (1923) directed the researchers' attention to the idea that all human beings require a communication to define oneself and finding acceptance that self when interacting with valued others. In 1959, White referred to self-esteem as a self-judgment of worth or value based on feelings of efficacy, which is the sense of interacting effectively with one's own environment. Maslow, in 1968, listed self-esteem as a higher requirement in his hierarchy of the human needs.

More recently, Brown (1987) borrowed a definition of self-esteem from Coopersmith (1967, p.45) since he considered this definition a well-accepted one. It refers to self-esteem as the evaluation that the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself/herself. It expresses an attitude of approval/disapproval, and indicates the extent to which one believes on oneself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy. Also, it is a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes that one holds toward oneself. Moreover, it is a subjective experience which the individual conveys to others by verbal reports and other overt expressive behavior. (Brown, 1987, pp 101-102)

The academic history reveals that self-esteem is categorized into three levels that are described below:

- a. **global self-esteem** which has been mentioned to arise at the age of eight and which is based on two factors self-

perception of competence in various broad areas such as academics, physical appearance, and conduct; and the personal assessment of the importance of these broad areas. Global self-esteem is thought to be relatively stable in mature adults and is resistant to change except by active and extended therapy. (Oxford, 1992, p.37)

- b. Situation or specific self-esteem which is a second level of self-esteem referring to one's appraisal of oneself in certain life situations such as social interaction, work, education, home; or on certain relatively discretely defined traits such as the communicative ability or the athletic ability (Brown, 1987, p.102). Even though a person may have a high level of global self-esteem, this person may still have a low level of self-esteem in a particular situation or environment (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992).
- c. Task self-esteem comes at the third level and is related to a particular task in a certain situation (Brown, 1987, p.102). In that sense, specific self-esteem may refer to English

language learning in general, while task self-esteem may be related to one's self-evaluation of a particular language skill such as speaking, or writing; or a particular performance in a certain exercise.

Field studies related to self-esteem

The 1990s have witnessed an array of researches that were conducted to find out the relationships between self-esteem and foreign language learning. Several field studies have proved the existence of a positive linear relationship between self-esteem and success in foreign language learning (Asher, et al., 1995; Hunter and Ratliffe, 1991; Swain and Miccoli, 1994). The following is a brief description of selected field studies that illustrate the positive relationship between self-esteem and foreign language proficiency level.

Ehrman, cited in Oxford and Ehrman (1993, p.195) mentions that initial results of a sub-sample of the current Foreign Service Institute study suggest that positive beliefs about oneself and one's learning ability made a definite

contribution to learning success as measured by proficiency ratings.

In 1990, Al Halwachi conducted a field study to investigate the characteristics of the effective teachers and how they can be enhanced. The study concentrated on developing the personal qualities, professional awareness and pedagogical abilities of the teachers. It has been found that teachers' morale and self-esteem have to be raised by granting them the support and respect which they need in order to maintain positive attitudes toward their profession and their students.

Buonomo's (1990) study aimed at studying the affective domain with particular attention given to the adolescent learners. Six subjects were used as the population of the study. Questionnaires, observations, and interviews were used to collect data related to motivation, attitude, empathy, and personality. The results of the study indicated that adolescent students who are successful in the middle school foreign language program possess high level of self-esteem and self-confidence, and a mature attitude toward learning.

Pollard (1991) studied three principal factors shown to influence the language leaning process for students. Instruments used to gather information included that researcher's interview guide, an adaptation of Gardner and Lambert's list of motivational orientations, and a translation of Rosenberg's Self-esteem scale. The sample consisted of 27 ESL college-stage learners. Among other results, it was reported that there was a positive correlation between success in English and the subjects' level of self-esteem.

The studies of Paschke (1990) and Anstey (1990) revealed that the mean self-esteem of students is dependent on the communicative potential of classroom processes selected by the teacher. Processes that allow for increased interaction and negotiation of meaning with the teacher and peer group provide more opportunity for feedback from these significant others thus enhancing student self-esteem.

Risk-taking

Risk-taking has been looked at as a gambling-like process. Brown (1987-105) says that language learners have to be able to gamble a bit and to be willing to try out hunches about the language and take the risks of being wrong. Some language learners, as Beebe (1983) says, may have a low level of risk-taking and consequently resist to take risks in both classroom and natural settings. As for the classroom, language learners may not take risks because of their fear of making mistakes and consequently getting a bad grade, being punished by the teacher, feeling embarrassed in front of colleagues, or failing in the exam. As for outside the classroom, the EFL learners feel nervous about taking risks because they try to avoid looking ridiculous, failure of taking care of oneself, and feeling alienated though being around other human beings. (Beebe, 1983, p.40).

Ely (1986) and Samimy and Tabuse (1992) believe that language learners do not take frequent risks if they feel discomfort in the language classroom. As Oxford (1992) says,

students avoid risks because of their fear of anticipated criticism from others or their own self-criticism. This fear could be due to such learners' high level of global self-esteem (Brown, 1987, p.105). These learners fear to be laughed at and to look fool. This fear is also related to their level of inhibition which is building defense to protect oneself (Guiora, et al, 1972). Hence, the learners decide to stay safe without gambling. This avoidance to use the language logically affects negatively their success in language.

A learner may often blurt out meaningless verbal language which no one can understand or he/she may make unwise guessing which leads to misunderstanding. Nevertheless, this learner is not considered a successful language learner. Rubin (1975) mentions that the good language learner makes accurate guessing. In addition, Beebe (1983), Brown (1987), and Oxford (1992) describe successful language learners as those who have certain features when they take risks. These features can be summarized as follows:

1. They are moderate and not high risk takers.
2. They do not take wild or frivolous risks.
3. They do not enter into no-win situations.
4. They take intelligent risks.
5. They have some kind of control over their risks.

We can also add the following features of successful risk takers:

1. Willingness to guess meanings based on background knowledge,
2. Speaking up despite the possibility of making occasional mistakes,
3. Having a reasonable amount of impulsivity, and
4. Behaving with an un-threatening level of inhibition which builds defense to protect ego.

Field studies related to risk-taking

Samimy and Tabuse's (1991) study investigated the relationships among situation-specific affective variables and level of language learning. The sample of the study consisted

of 70 university students who were studying Japanese as a foreign language. Data were collected through direct surveys and classroom observations. It was found that risk-taking, among other affective variables, played a significant role in learners' level of achievement. In addition, the study revealed that risk-taking was the most powerful factor in success.

Samimy (1994) conducted a study to find out foreign language learners' affective needs. Among others, the following results were found:

1. Responding to the affective needs of foreign language learners helps in enhancing learners' success in Japanese,
2. The subjects, who learn Japanese as a foreign language, face many linguistic as well as psychological barriers when learning Japanese,
3. Affective variables such as risk-taking, motivation, and anxiety are significantly contributing in differential success in language learning.

Chevalier's (1995) study investigated the effects of trust between teachers and learners in foreign language classrooms.

Chevalier came out with the following findings:

1. Trust is a precursor to risk-taking and consequently to learning.
2. Trust is especially important in adult education where positive teacher-learner relationships could improve class attendance and raise both teachers' and students' self-esteem.
3. Trust is an interpersonal relationship that involves risk, vulnerability, obligations, and ethical dilemmas.

Conclusion

The present chapter dealt with two major factors that could affect foreign language learning, namely: self-esteem and risk taking. Educators need to work on developing both features in order to help foreign language students be better learners. Further research work need to be directed toward studying other affective factors that might affect the process of foreign language learning such as: level of aspiration, motivation, locus of control, and inhibition.

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