

LOWERING AFFECTIVE FILTERS IN SPEAKING

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Abstract: In the process of learning a language, naturally, most learners encounter language barriers, which serve as a general term for "affective filters". The main goal of the research work is to study the influence of affective filters, in particular motivation, attitudes, self-confidence and language anxiety. This article also aims to study the factors that reduce the performance of first-year students and offer the most appropriate solutions by questioning and analyzing their oral responses.

Keywords: Language learning, speaking skill, affective filters, mental block, comprehensible input, language barriers, language anxiety, motivation, self-confidence, attitude.

Introduction

Language learning is a process that requires not only linguistic skills from the learners but also psychological and physiological factors. "With the development of applied linguistics and psychological analysis, linguists are no longer satisfied with the surface-level linguistic description but turn to seek deeper psychological factors, that is, affective factors in English learning"(Hui Ni 2012, p.1508). The importance of these affective factors in language learning and teaching is not deniable. A close observation of the affective factors highlights the fact that behind language learners' failure or challenge, there is the influence of affective barriers to language learning. According to Hui Ni (2012), "these factors include emotion, feeling, mood, manner, attitude". More importantly, affective factors may impact on comprehensible input of the learners, if there is a "mental block" that prevents learners from acquiring the language. The filter is up when the acquirer is unmotivated, lacking in confidence, or concerned with failure or low language anxiety. The filter is down when the acquirer is not anxious and is trying to become a member of the group speaking (Xiaoyan Du, 2009). In the field of SLA, "The affective filter hypothesis" was introduced by Dulay and Burt early in the 1970s, further this hypothesis was developed by Stephan Krashen in 1987. In his theory, Krashen put forward the idea that people acquire second languages only if they obtain comprehensible input and if their affective filters are low enough to allow the input 'in'. In his theory, affect includes motivation, attitude, anxiety, and self-confidence (Xiaoyan Du 2009, cited in Krashen 1987). Based on Krashen's theory, this study is also focused on investigating the affective filters such as motivation, attitude, self-confidence, and language anxiety of the learners and their influence on learners' speaking skills. Specifically, the present study explores the relationship between the classroom atmosphere and the learners' performance. Therefore, the objectives of the research are to identify the affective

filters which act as obstacles in developing speaking skills and suggest various ways to the EFL teachers to improve the students' weaknesses. More specifically, this study is addressed to answer the following research questions.

- a. What kind of affective filters does influence more on students' speaking skills?
- b. What measures can be taken to enhance their English-speaking proficiency?

The significance of the present research is that there was paid little attention to this field by Uzbek linguistics, and this issue has not been explored in-depth. The chief aim of this study is to show the teachers the importance of reducing the affective filters through the analysis of the connection between affective filters and students' challenges in speaking.

Literature review

Affective filters and Foreign language learning.

The impact of the affective filters on learning has been captured by many foreign language researchers' attentions. Dulay and Burt were the first scientists who proposed the notion *Affective Filter Hypothesis* to the SLA. They claim (1977) that "people with high affective filters have a lower intake of language as compared to people having a lower effective filter and greater intake". However, this hypothesis was popularized by Stephan Krashen, involving in his five input Hypotheses in 1985. Since then, the interest in the affective filters in language acquisition and learning has been raised. One of them was prominent Russian linguist Irina Arnold. She emphasized in her works the two reasons why teachers should concentrate on learners' affective filters. Firstly "the attention to affective aspects can lead to more effective language learning". Secondly, attention to affective aspects can contribute to the whole-person development, which is "beyond language teaching and even beyond what has traditionally been considered the academic realm" (Hui Ni 2012, cited in Arnold 2000). As mentioned Krashen (1985) "The foreign language learning process involves four different affective domains, such as motivation, anxiety, attitude, and self-confidence". These four major factors are essential notions of the current study.

Motivation

As one of the significant influential factors in language learning, motivation has been examined by many researchers in the field of SLA and showed controversial results. On the one hand, Brown (2001) defines it as, "Motivation is the extent to which you make choices about goals to pursue and the effort you will devote to that pursuit". On the other hand, Yazigy (1991) does not find a strong relationship between students' motivation in English learning and their performance in this language. Furthermore, Crookes and Schmitz (2001) acknowledge that "Motivation has been identified as the learners' orientation with regards to the goal of learning a second language". More precisely, in terms of the division of Gardner and Lambert

(1972), there are two types of motivation, integrative and instrumental. In the latter one, learners of a foreign language motivate themselves by the benefits of getting more professional status or educational goals offered by the second language. In Uzbekistan, more and more young people are learning foreign languages like English, in order to pace with time and as it gives access to many universities abroad.

However, it is true that without motivation even gifted students may fail in language learning, whatever strategies they use, whoever has taught them.

Attitude

Attitude is considered to be the second important factor, which greatly influences language learning outcomes. Naturally, the learners with high language attitudes achieve more results, whereas those who have a negative attitude towards learning and all things related to language may not progress at all. The attitude in learning means making commitments, and therefore the attitude and motivation are interconnected. According to Oller (1979, p.138) "Attitudes are merely one of types of factors that give rise to motivation which eventually results in attainment of proficiency in a second language". Similarly, Prodromou (1992) states that a successful learner is the one who possess positive attitudes towards the target language. From this point of view, it is clear that learners with positive attitude towards speaking enjoy being involved in any kind of speaking activities, while learners with negative attitude avoid dealing with the conversations and will be less willing to take participation in them.

Anxiety

Another factor is anxiety, which is correlated to some negative feelings such as stress, worry, and tension. Zafar and Meenakshi (2012) define this factor that is closely related to self-esteem, inhibition, and risk-taking. In the same line, even though it is common feeling, it is not easy to define. It comes with the feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry (Zafar & Meenakshi 2012). Mainly three components of FL anxiety are identified by researchers, namely, communication apprehension, fear of negative social evaluation, and test anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Macintyre & Gardner, 1989). Anxiety in language learning may affect all language skills, most Uzbek learners tend to have communication apprehension, and it is a real language barrier to support communication. The first component, communication apprehension, is associated with some general personal traits like shyness, quietness, and reticence. The degree of communication apprehension may vary from person to person, due to the fact that CA may also develop genetically. CA hinders the speakers from expressing their ideas and thoughts in communication. The next component is so-called test anxiety, which commonly occurs in academic sphere. According to Xiayan Du (2009), lack of preparation is factor that can contribute to test anxiety. Poor time management, poor study habits, and lack of organization can lead to a student feeling overwhelmed. Behind test anxiety, there are many other reasons, for instance, the learners' tendency to think negatively about the failures or challenges of the task and spend more time to

thinking the test, rather than preparing for it. The last one is related to a fear of negative evaluation. This is the strongest source of the language anxiety, concerning to the learners' fear of judgement by others, and most young learners face this type of anxiety while speaking, consequently this may lead to the passive learning, and the fossilization of their mistakes.

Self-confidence.

Among other personal traits, the self-confidence has a crucial role in developing learners' speaking abilities, for a number of reasons. First, a self-confident student is never afraid of speaking in front of others and never gives up experimenting with new things in the language. Secondly, this factor is correlated with risk-taking, willingness, and self-evaluation, and self-image. Also, highly self-confident students usually achieve more results in speaking, as they believe in their progress and abilities. Furthermore, self-confidence is the factor, which EFL teachers must take into consideration. According to Brown (2007), self-confidence is one of the twelve principles of language teaching. From this perspective, Hæacknowledges that it is the teacher's first and foremost responsibility to observe the students' level of self-confidence, when the student is becoming less self-confident, teachers should organize activities to motivate him/her.

All in all, on the basis of all the above-mentioned scientists' theories, this study will analyze the impact of four major affective filters on speaking, and the relationship between classroom environment and students' achievements in language learning.

Research Methodology

As the present study strived to investigate affective filters' impact on speaking, the research goes through the pre and post-tests and interview. The tests namely, pre and post consisted of the two parts in the first so-called "A" part, the subjects' personal information, including age, nationality, learning experience, and the first language, was surveyed. The second stage of the tests was the "B" part, where the participants opted for a suitable position. For the "B" part, a 16-item questionnaire, measuring the four affective filters by a five-point Likert scale was applied. The five choices were ranged from positive ones, like strongly agree, agree, and neither agree nor disagree, to negative ones like disagree and strongly disagree. If the responses were negative the smallest point was given, as negative answers mean the learner was not affected by filters. More precisely, for strongly agree 1 point, agree 2 points, neither agree nor disagree 3 points, disagree 4 points, and for strongly disagree 5 points were valued. In terms of its reliability and convenience a statement-based questionnaire was chosen as a research instrument. The research lasted about four weeks. The consent forms between researcher and participants were signed at the beginning of the research.

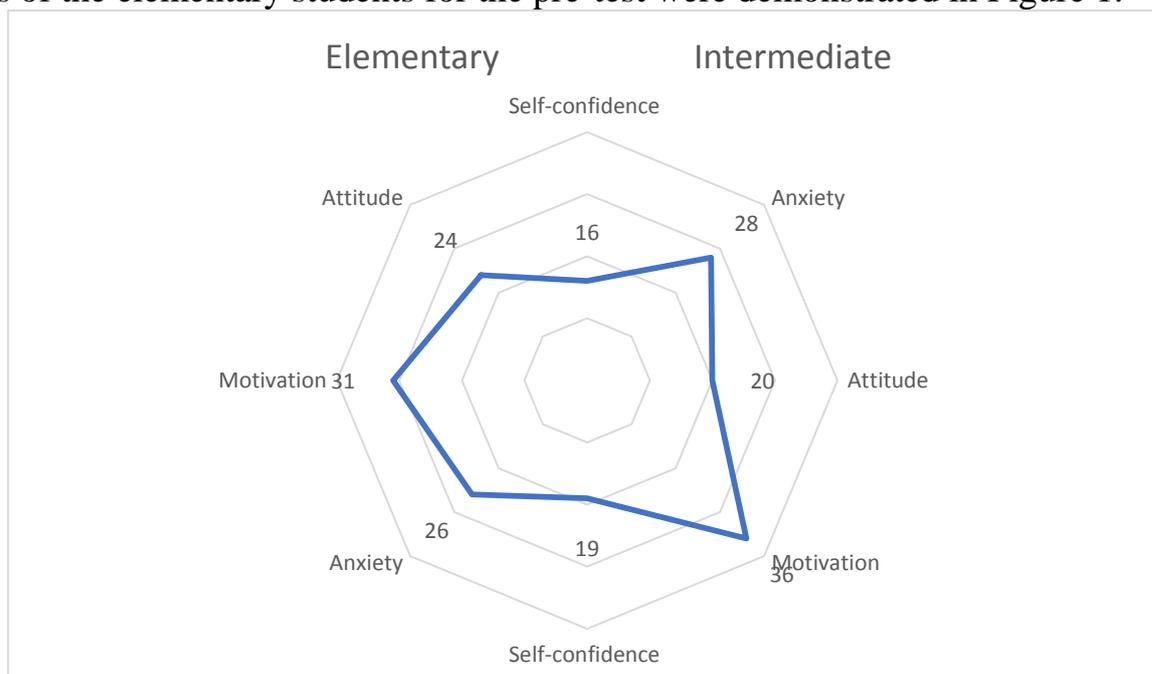
The study started with taking a pre-test. For each factor four questions were devoted, for instance, the questions 2, 4, 6, and 14 were directed to check the

influence of language anxiety. As the affective filters' influence specified by the test, the more effective activities and methods were suggested and applied during a two-week period. Then the same a statement-based questionnaire (as post-test) was checked repeatedly to identify and compare the results. Significantly, in the post-test, "A" part was excluded. At the end of the research, the participants were interviewed in order to summarize the findings. The interview was also based on the evaluation of the influence of the affective factors.

The research subjects were freshmen students of UzSWLU from three groups 2136, 2146, 2154 majoring in the English studies. The reason behind the selection of the groups was based on the degrees of participation in speaking lessons. Consequently, all participants were categorized into elementary and intermediate groups.

Analysis and results

The research data have been collected through its instruments, such as pre and post-tests, and an interview. All responses were recorded in the written form. The results of the elementary students for the pre-test were demonstrated in Figure 1.

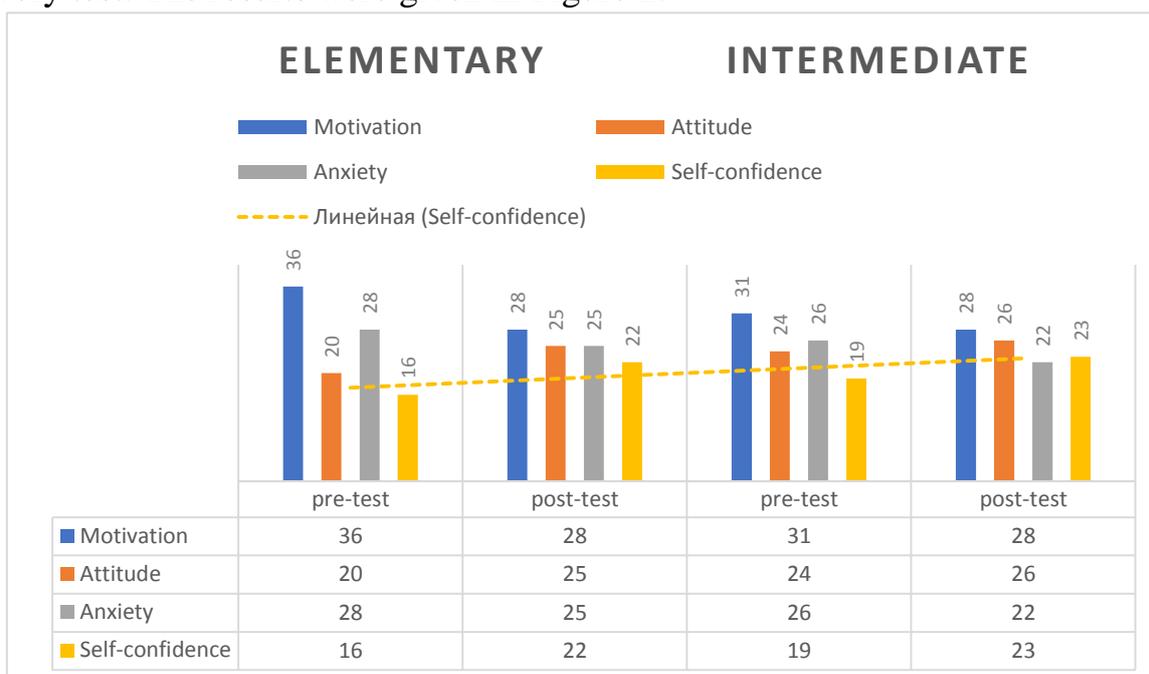


Through Comparative analysis, the results of the two categories were explored. As Figure 1 illustrated, the elementary learners were low motivated in speaking with 36

%, while their level of self-confidence was higher by 20%. The numbers were correlated to each other, as they were unwilling to communicate, consequently they were afraid of communicating with high-level students and express their own ideas. Regarding the numbers of the intermediate students, the results were slightly different, motivation accounting for 31% and self-confidence 19% respectively. On the other hand, the figures for the two factors, namely attitude, and anxiety were various in two categories. For instance, the rate of the anxiety more precisely, communication apprehension of the elementary students was noticeable reaching at

26%, perhaps this factor was also related to their age, because both participants were teenagers. Naturally, at this age, they are mostly influenced by such personal traits as shyness, nervousness, and worry. As regards the intermediate learners, they were more anxious with 26%, whereas their attitude towards learning was more positive by 2%. All in all, both types of learners were affected by low motivation and language anxiety. Accordingly, to reduce these factors the more effective speaking activities were applied. One of them using flashcards, as La Spisa (2015) mentions "use of talk cards lowers the language anxiety of adult learners, and they show the motivation to speak English". While working on speaking cards, I found many useful online sources like wordwall.com, where various cards on various topics can be obtained.

Later, different tips were offered. Dealing with language anxiety and low motivation, teachers should give more freedom. As teachers allow more autonomy in speaking the more positive the learning atmosphere will be. From this point, it is visible that the classroom atmosphere created by teachers may help to decrease the affective filters. After applying more learning atmosphere, the participants were taken the very test. The results were given in Figure 2.



Regarding the responses of the post-test, there was no marked difference between the results of the elementary and intermediate students. All affective filters reached the same percentage. Further, the interview was carried out and the answers were compared to investigate the validity and similarity of the results. The interview included 8 main questions related to the second research question. It reported that the participants "A" and "B" were impacted by the teacher's feedback and questions. Moreover, they all had a positive attitude towards the correlation of the classroom atmosphere with oral performance. All other suggestions were given in the conclusion part of the research.

Conclusion

All in all, considering all linguists' theories and the present research findings, it is clear that language learning especially the speaking aspect is greatly influenced by affective filters, in this case, low motivation, language anxiety, attitude towards learning, and self-confidence. To what extent the learners affected is dependent on the individual's traits. Additionally, dealing with the affective filters the most essential tips were suggested including the creation of the partnership, modifying the teaching methods, applying for more speaking cards, maintaining the positive learning atmosphere, and making appropriate error corrections in learners' speech. More importantly, ignoring the impact of affective filters on the learners' achievement in speaking is a certain failure. Stela Roscovan (2017) states, the teacher's major task is to identify the affective filters that apply to her learners and try hard to create a positive learning environment in class where every student's contribution is valued and appreciated. The limitations of the research are the limited number of participants and the limited scope of the research. However, this research may lay the foundation for further researches on this matter, due to this study only focused on the speaking aspect. It is suggested that future investigations include comparisons of the learners' variations or learners' language styles and strategies.

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