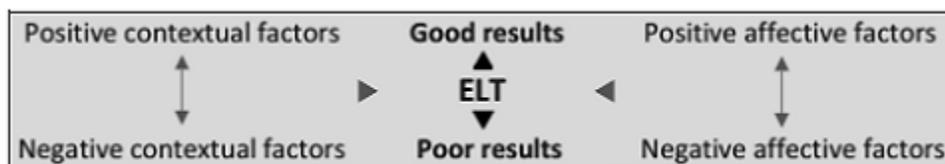


Affective factors in language learning and teaching

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In another article (Davies 2019), I wrote about the potential impact of context on the results of ELT: where English is widely spoken in an institution and students in higher courses have clearly learnt a lot of English ELT results are likely to be much better than where English is known only by the English teachers and students in higher courses clearly haven't learnt much English, and also where English is widely used and needed in the community and region as opposed to where it isn't. In this article I focus on the potential impact of affective factors on the results of ELT. Putting contextual factors, affective factors and ELT together, we have something like this:



In other words, while ELT may be considered of good or bad quality according to syllabuses, materials, methodology, teachers, etc., the effectiveness and the results of ELT depend significantly on other things also, including contextual factors and affective factors. The last two probably account to a considerable extent for the much greater general success of ELT and English language learning in Scandinavia and the Netherlands compared with France and Spain in Europe, and also Latin America, which in addition faces greater socio-economic challenges. In particular, contextual factors can have a significant impact on expectations of learning English (most Swedish and Dutch children expect to learn English successfully, most Spanish and Mexican children don't) and motivation to learn it. Expectations and motivation about learning English are, of course, among the affective factors in learning and teaching a foreign language, or almost anything.

Unfortunately, many ELT professionals largely ignore both contextual factors and affective factors and focus on the quality of ELT itself, and usually English for general purposes for any students anywhere (or English for no specific purposes for no specific students anywhere), with more learner-centred teaching only for children, who demand something more specific from teachers with any sensitivity at all, fun English at the very least.

Affective factors in language learning

Arnold (2011) writes that "basically affect is related to 'aspects of emotion, feeling, mood or attitude which condition behaviour'", and, in order to relate that more to language learning, she quotes Stevick (1980), who observed that "success [in language learning] depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analysis and more on what goes on inside and between people in the classroom". She goes on to write that "positive affect can provide invaluable support for learning just as negative affect can close down the mind and prevent learning from occurring altogether". Referring to Krashen's (1985) metaphor of the affective filter, Arnold emphasizes that "just as important as avoiding negative affective reactions is finding ways to establish a positive affective climate."

To a large extent, a positive affective climate exists now (but not 50 years ago) in and around Scandinavian and Dutch schools, though it naturally varies for individual students of English. All the school staff speak English quite comfortably, as do almost all the parents, older siblings and relatives of the younger students, and almost everyone in the community, and indeed the whole country – of course the students are going to learn English fairly well. Children, teenagers and adults play games in English, listen to songs in English (including songs by ABBA, Ace of Base, A-ha, Anouk, Björk, Robyn, Roxette, etc., etc.), watch TV and films in English, and so on – of course the students are going to use English to participate in those activities. English is a national second language and learning it is almost like learning the first language, though we shouldn't forget that some people have more trouble than others articulating their thoughts in their first language, let alone their second language, especially in front of several or many other people, so teachers still have to work at maintaining a positive affective climate in their classrooms. Much of the above may apply in some other European countries, such as Germany and Greece, and in bilingual schools everywhere, including Latin America.

However, some European countries, or parts of them, and most of Latin America are very far from that, especially in isolated rural areas and in impoverished urban areas. Few people speak English there, and few learn it successfully in school, no matter how many years of classes they receive. Students' expectations of learning English and their motivation for learning it tend to be low from the start, and as the years of English classes pass, especially where the classes are compulsory, they find their self-esteem as learners of English going down and their inhibition, anxiety, even fear, and negative attitudes in general towards their English classes and the English language going up.

Optimists and some ELT theorists assert that National English Programmes like those that have been spreading around Latin America for two or more decades now will eventually turn Latin America into an English-as-a-second-language zone like Scandinavia and the Netherlands, or at least an English-as-a-very-widely-spoken-foreign-language zone like Germany and Greece. However, realists tend to doubt that will ever happen, not because of the quality of the ELT, though socio-economic factors still hold that back in Latin America, but more because of contextual factors and affective factors.

Unfortunately, some contextual factors cannot be changed at will and are unlikely ever to change much: distances and some local isolation will always be great in much of Latin America and relatively small in Europe, and Spanish, and to a lesser extent Portuguese, are likely to continue as international languages indefinitely and most European languages as national languages only (Bulgarian, Czech, Danish, Dutch-Flemish, Estonian, Finnish, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Polish, Romanian, Serbo-Croat, Slovak, Slovenian, Swedish). The same is true of affective factors, especially where they're related to contextual factors: English language learning expectations and motivation are likely to continue generally high in much of Europe and generally low in most of Latin America, and self-esteem, feelings and attitudes related to the study of English are likely to continue generally negative in most of Latin America and generally positive in much of Europe.

Even so, much can be done in Latin America to improve the affective climate in many schools and ELT contexts, as well as in individual classrooms, and something can be done in most, though far from all. I refer you to Arnold (2011) for a comprehensive discussion of affective (and cognitive) factors in foreign language learning, and continue below with a list of some of the many practical ideas for creating a more positive affective climate in classrooms and institutions and attending to individual students.

Attention to affective factors in language learning

- Start lessons with activities that are virtually guaranteed to be successful, e.g. chatting with the group in already familiar English about already familiar topics, getting students to respond physically to familiar instructions (TPR), repeating a familiar pair or group activity. In other words, start by focusing on what the students can already do successfully rather than on what they still have to learn to do.
- Modify or substitute textbook activities to attend to what specific groups of students really need to do in English (if they actually need to anything at all in English outside the classroom) and/or what they seem to like and be good at doing. In other words, make English courses as relevant and satisfying as possible for students, not just a compulsory academic subject.
- Be encouraging and sensitive in feedback on student production, spoken and written, responding to *what* students say in English not just *how* they say it. Both recognition of success (which is often partial, not total) and attention to problems (and correction as appropriate) should be seen as processes extending through the whole course, not one-off moments or actions in a specific lesson, and different students may require slightly different approaches, more or less sensitivity.
- Work at creating a collaborative, supportive and tolerant atmosphere in your groups, with success in learning English perceived as something to be aimed at and achieved by all students in the group, to slightly varying degrees, not a notorious contrast between 'succeeding students' and 'failing students' with the rest struggling anxiously in between.
- Err on the side of generosity rather than rigorousness when giving grades, though this must be balanced against providing students, other teachers and the institution with adequate information about real levels and progress in English. This starts with tests that give credit for success in communication, receptive and productive (like most international proficiency tests nowadays), and don't focus too heavily on linguistic accuracy.
- Where only the English teachers in an institution know English above A1 level or so, encourage other members of staff to work on their English and use it around the institution: provide English courses for staff, organize English song festivals, English poster exhibitions, and other cultural and social events involving English, and so on. In other words, get the director and the staff of the institution to set an example for the students and make English 'present and normal' in the institution.

All the above ideas focus on creating a positive affective climate for groups and students in general. However, in the final analysis, language learning is a highly personal matter, with different learners affected to different degrees and in different ways by inhibition or self-assurance, anxiety or serenity, and other feelings, negative or positive, about learning English. It's important, then, for teachers to try to know their students not just as 'good', 'average' or 'bad' students of English, but also for their personalities and sensibilities, their ways of interacting with teachers and other students, and their apparent preferences in the English class (e.g. preferring some skills and activities over others).

Concluding observations

Apart from contextual and affective factors, cognitive and other differences among students should also be taken into account in ELT. Some students, and learners in immersion situations, are simply

better equipped cognitively for language learning, though almost everyone can learn to communicate adequately for essential purposes in a second language, given the right conditions. Individual students may also vary in other ways, some perhaps having imperfect hearing, imperfect eyesight, or a condition such as a degree of autism, and many people stumble or choke up when required to speak before a crowd (and a class is a small crowd), even when they may be able to write with great proficiency. Teachers shouldn't demand or expect that all students behave and progress the same in English courses and achieve the same degree of proficiency in English any more than all students should be expected to behave, progress and achieve the same in a music course, a sports course, or, for that matter, a maths course. Contextual and some affective factors can affect almost all students in an institution or a group, and affective, cognitive and other factors can affect individual students.

General and individual success-or-failure in actually learning English in a course and an institution is a powerful force. When individual students, almost all students in a group, or almost all students in an institution continually succeed in learning and progressing in English courses, expectations, confidence and motivation grow along with competence in English. When individual students, almost all students in a group, or almost all students in an institution continually fail to learn and progress in English courses, expectations, confidence and motivation stagnate along with minimal competence in English, or even decline and turn strongly negative. Where students at the end of 2, 3 or more years of English courses are still struggling beginners, the game has already been lost. Only a completely new game, started from scratch, might be able to lead to a winning result.

Arnold (2011) sums it up as follows:

- Language learning should take place in a low-anxiety atmosphere.
- Opportunities for learners to succeed and thus raise their confidence should be built into classroom activities.
- The learner should be considered holistically: cognitive, emotional and physical aspects.
- Language learning should involve personally meaningful experience.
- Learner knowledge and resources should be drawn upon and autonomy is to be favoured and developed.

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