

Institute for Christian Teaching
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

**THE AFFECTIVE DIMENSION IN
ADULT FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING:
A CHRISTIAN TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE**

by
Erica Hole
Newbold College
Bracknell, England

**592-05 Institute for Christian Teaching
12501 Old Columbia Pike
Silver Spring, MD 20904 USA**

Prepared for the
33rd International Faith and Learning Seminar
held at
Helderberg College, South Africa
January 30 – February 11, 2005

INTRODUCTION

I teach English to foreign students who come to England to learn the language. My student groups are multicultural and multilingual. The students are adults, a number of them denominational workers who want to improve their English skills in order to fulfil their desire to be more effective in their work for the church. I regard myself as privileged to teach a language to my students and note with interest that Martin Luther said,

In short, the Holy Spirit is no fool. He does not busy himself with inconsequential or useless matters. He regarded the languages as so useful and necessary to Christianity that he oft times brought them down with him from heaven (Luther 1962:358).

My purpose in writing this paper was a personal one but I trust that it can be of some help to other language teachers taking the same journey. I wanted to find a biblical framework within which to articulate my thinking and practice regarding ways of dealing with affective issues in my classroom. This is a particular area where I seek to integrate faith and learning.

THE AFFECTIVE DIMENSION OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

What is the affective dimension?

The affective dimension refers to aspects of emotion, feeling, mood or attitude (Arnold and Brown 1999). "Emotions are not extras. They are the very center of mental life ... [They] link what is important for us to the world of people, things, and happenings" (Oatley and Jenkins 1996:122). Linda Caviness explains how emotion touches every thought,

As sensory data enters the brain via the brain stem, it proceeds to the limbic area where emotion and memory are further transacted. According to what is currently known about the transference of sensory data from receptor organs and ultimately to the cortex for higher-order processing, sensory information does not enter the cortex without first being processed by the limbic system. In essence, it can be said that all sensory data is touched by emotion prior to being processed as conscious thought (Caviness 2001).

Arnold and Brown (1999:1) point out that “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”. Ellen White emphasizes the holistic nature of true education – “the harmonious development of the physical, mental and spiritual powers” (White 1903:13).

How does the affective dimension relate to adult foreign language learning?

Professor Stern asserts that “the affective component contributes at least as much and often more to language learning than the cognitive skills” (Stern 1983:386). Adult language learners are especially vulnerable on affective issues such as self-esteem, confidence, anxiety, inhibition, fear of failure, need for respect, need for their home culture to be valued. This year we had a mature student in our lower level English language classes – when asked to feed back to the teacher how he had felt when he first came to our college and how he felt now, he showed the teacher that he had felt like a butterfly when he first came and now due to negative emotions involved in learning a new language and living in a foreign country, he felt like a worm.

Why should Christian language teachers pay special attention to affective issues in the adult foreign language learning classroom?

In the seventeenth century, Comenius, the influential Christian educational thinker and language teacher, believed that the teacher should behave in a way that made the students love and admire him/her and that in the process he/she would be modelling a particular attitude towards others. I too believe that

1. by God's grace and with His strength I can model the love of God to my students by the way I treat them, and that the Holy Spirit can use this to draw the students to Him.
2. when I treat all students in a loving respectful way, as valuable and valued individuals, this encourages my students to treat each other in a similar way. I can teach Christian values by example.
3. if I can maximise the facilitative effect on learning of positive emotions and minimise the debilitating effects of problems created by negative emotions, I can increase the effectiveness of the language learning process for my students.

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Does the Bible offer any helpful perspectives related to the needs of foreign language learners such as my students? Smith and Carvill (2000) suggest that the metaphor of hospitality to the stranger creates a useful biblical framework within which to explore some affective issues relating to foreign language education.

God commands the Israelites to care for the stranger

The Israelites who had been in Egypt knew first hand what it was like to be surrounded by people speaking a foreign language, a people unresponsive to their cries. In Deuteronomy God reminds the Israelites of how it felt to be aliens, misunderstood and mistreated in a foreign land. The laws of the Israelites as they developed, embodied care and respect for strangers. In Leviticus God commands, "When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19:33-34).

Language imperialism and the devaluing of strangers who are different and speak another language are not recent phenomena. In the Greek world alien speakers were referred to as "*barbaroi*" – barbarians, people of lesser worth (Smith and Carvill 2000). In the West, the Romans sought to preserve the supremacy of Latin over the vernacular languages. The attitudes of the Western Christian church prolonged the supremacy of Latin for centuries. In our modern world the English language has a dominant position and perhaps one day Chinese will be a world language. The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 14:11, puts an interesting slant on who a stranger or foreigner actually is. Regardless of the host environment, we can be foreigners to each other: "If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me".

Hospitality to the stranger - a sign of discipleship

In the New Testament Jesus points to hospitality to the stranger as a sign of discipleship: "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in" (Matthew 25: 35).

Christine Pohl (1999:69) describes hospitality as "a practice that integrates respect and care". Henry Nouwen extends the metaphor of hospitality and suggests that the relationship between teacher and student resemble that of host and guest. The teacher "is called upon to create for his students a free and fearless space where mental and emotional development can take place" (Nouwen 1986:86). To be a host you must have a home where you can welcome guests and care for their needs. The Christian teacher can make the classroom a temporary home where foreign language students receive a loving welcome and can feel they belong, where their needs receive courteous consideration and attention.

WHAT ARE THE NEEDS OF MY STUDENTS?

Good hosts need to establish what the needs of the guests are before they can seek to address them. What needs will I need to address in order to create Nouwen's vision of a "free and fearless space where mental and emotional development can take place" ?

Need to feel welcome, respected and valued in a community of learners

In the Adventist colleges and universities that have a language institute for foreigners to come to learn the local language, it may be necessary to

encourage the students who already speak the local language as a gift of birth or due to previous learning, to be considerate of the needs of the “strangers” for friendship and respect. The foreign language students need to feel respected and valued by the college community in the same way as other students who are taking what may be considered as “more prestigious” programmes.

Need for enhanced self-esteem

Self-esteem is explained by Coopersmith (1967:4-5) as,

the evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself; it expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which an individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful and worth.

Global self-esteem is relatively stable in a mature adult. Students in a Christian college will often be reminded of the fact that they are of infinite worth to their Heavenly Father, they are a child of God, created, loved and redeemed.

The price paid for our redemption, the infinite sacrifice of our Heavenly Father in giving His son to die for us, should give us exalted conceptions of what we may become through Christ What value this places on man (White 1956:15).

As well as telling the students this, I seek to find ways of showing the students that they are valued and valuable members of the class.

Experiencing success in the language learning process can enhance specific self-esteem, in our case the individual's opinion of themselves as a language learner, and task self-esteem, the individual's opinion of their ability to succeed in carrying out particular language learning activities (Brown 1993). Is high self-esteem the cause of success in language learning or does success in language learning cause heightened self-esteem? In an overview

of the research in the area of the relationship between different levels of self-esteem and successful oral production of a foreign language, Brown (1993:138) speculates that perhaps “those good teachers succeeded because they gave optimal attention to linguistic goals and to the personhood of their students”.

Need to feel secure

Language learners put themselves in a very vulnerable position – learning another language “involves self-exposure to a degree manifested in few other endeavours” (Brown 1993:140). Brown points out that making mistakes exposes the learner to internal and external threats. Learners are critical of their own performance and may also think that others are judging not only their performance but them as persons as well.

Joan Rubin (1975), in her investigation of what the good language learner can teach us, points out that the good language learner makes willing and accurate guesses. Learners with high self-esteem may be willing to guess and risk making mistakes with the potential of being laughed at. Learners with low self-esteem may be silent in the classroom, fearful of the consequences to their ego of making mistakes.

In contrast to care and respect for the stranger and to an accepting climate to make mistakes in the foreign language, the book of Judges records that,

When the ancient Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan, they asked all who passed that way to say the word “Shibboleth” as a test of their ethnic identity. Those whose faulty pronunciation revealed them to be Ephraimites were promptly slain (Smith & Carvill 2000).

Need to be freed from undue anxiety

Foreign language anxiety can have a very negative effect on the language learning process. MacIntyre and Gardiner (1991:112) have identified three aspects of foreign language anxiety; communication apprehension, fear of negative social evaluation and test anxiety.

According to Bailey (1993), foreign language anxiety may be debilitating if the learner is too anxious but a small degree of anxiety may be facilitative as it may cause the learner to study harder and be more attentive.

Need both for empathy and to empathize

Empathy has been described as “the projection of one’s own personality into the personality of another in order to understand him or her better” (Brown 1993:143). Belonging to a community of learners in a foreign language classroom requires generosity of spirit on the part of the learners to each other, and the teacher to learner, and learner to teacher.

Communication requires a sophisticated degree of empathy In a second language learning situation the problem of empathy becomes acute. Not only must learner-speakers correctly identify cognitive and affective sets in the hearer, but they must do so in a language in which they are insecure. Then, learner-hearers, attempting to comprehend a second language, often discover that their own states of thought are misinterpreted by a native speaker, and the result is that linguistic, cognitive, and affective information easily passes in one ear and out the other (Brown 1993:144).

Negative emotions that the learner experiences in the language learning process are likely to have the greatest debilitating impact on communicative competence.

Need to be listened to and heard

My students need to feel that the teacher and their peers in the class are listening to them and willing them on to succeed in their attempts to communicate. This is especially important when they are trying to tell us something about their culture, language, feelings or beliefs. It is sometimes a struggle to give them full attention due to all the distractions of the classroom but they need to feel that they are being listened to.

DEALING SENSITIVELY WITH THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS – SOME PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Sometimes the most urgent need the students feel as strangers when they first arrive is for practical help to survive the stress of settling into the new environment. This is an area where the teacher can show kindness and compassion and encourage the students to be kind, compassionate and supportive of each other. Although it is extremely time consuming, I try to go the extra mile in helping the students with such mundane issues as filling out numerous forms, finding work for themselves and/or their spouses, and sometimes finding schools for their children.

Identity and culture

Acquiring a second language is also to a greater or lesser degree acquiring a second culture. An individual's identity is bound up with their maternal language and culture. For Adventists, their identity will also include the culture of the church in their home country. Students learning a second language in a foreign country are likely to suffer some degree of culture shock – feelings of loneliness, homesickness, frustration and estrangement (Brown

1993). Adventist students may also find that worship practices and other aspects of the lifestyle of the community that they came from are quite different from the ones of the host culture. At first the student may be excited to be in new surroundings but that will give way to some degree of culture shock as the individual experiences increasing numbers of cultural differences which threaten their self identity. Students may not understand why they are experiencing negative feelings. At that stage the student may be very critical of the new culture. As a teacher I need to be patient and understanding with the students and help them to realise that their feelings are quite normal and reassure them that gradually they will adapt to the host culture and realise that because some things are done differently does not mean the things are, of necessity, inferior or wrong. Brown (1993:167) says, "We can learn to perceive those differences appreciate them, and above all to respect, value and prize the personhood of every human being."

Students may bring with them stereotypical concepts of individuals in the class who come from specific cultures. When the classroom becomes 'a free and fearless space where mental and emotional development can take place ' and the students have grown in friendship and respect for each other, often those stereotypical concepts are replaced by love and respect for the one who was at first a stranger.

Equality of treatment

Equality of treatment and fairness lie at the heart of the gospel and these are values that I can teach by my behaviour towards my students. Recently I conducted a brief survey of affective issues in my classroom. One issue which

I had not highlighted on my questionnaire was alluded to by a number of my students in the 'further comments' section. Several students commented that all students were treated alike in our classroom and that they were all given equal opportunities to participate and that all their contributions were valued by the teacher.

Traditionally, stereotypical extroverts have been valued in the foreign language classroom because they are talkative, outgoing and they participate willingly in class discussions. Brown (1993) points out the need for teachers to take cultural norms into consideration when assessing the apparent passivity of some students in the classroom. In some cultures it is inappropriate for students to speak a lot in class. Students need to know that they are all of significant worth to the teacher and that this is unrelated to their active participation in class or their performance on language learning tasks. More importantly, students need the affirmation that they are all equally valuable in God's sight.

Methodology and learning styles

My students are in a foreign land, learning a foreign language, and may also be dealing with unfamiliar ways of learning. As adult learners they will already have their own learning style preferences – auditory, visual, kinæsthetic. I provide a wide variety of language learning experiences so there is something that is familiar for everyone. Students do not need to be entertained but they do need to be engaged with the learning. I ensure that students have some fun in class but also make sure that we are not "off task", (or at least not for long). Music, poetry, humour, games, movement, debates,

role play and drama can all be used in a motivating way to meet the goal of learning the target language. Perhaps overstating the case somewhat, Chomsky (1988:181) says that "The truth of the matter is that about 99 percent of teaching is making the students feel interested in the material."

I try to choose motivating topics to which my students can bring their adult knowledge and views of the world. Many times discussion relating to students' views on and experience of God, arises naturally. In a friendly welcoming classroom environment where Christian love exists, personal stories of students' experiences with God have a ring of truth that has a powerful effect on other students.

The challenge learning presents

It is important that I ensure that the material being studied is at a suitable level of difficulty for the learners. When language learners are faced with material that is too advanced for them they are likely to feel overwhelmed. New learning needs to be linked to what has been learned previously. Students are more likely to experience success if the teacher helps them to prepare well before they have to produce orally or in writing, or they have to try to comprehend written or spoken language. Experiencing success will increase the self-confidence of the students and motivate them to persevere in their efforts to master the language.

Cooperative learning

High on my list of priorities is to find ways of helping the students to love, or at least like, one another (John 13:34) and to do for each other what

they would like others to do for them. Setting up competitive classroom activities where students are pitted against each other is stressful for many learners. Cooperative learning activities where students can practise language items in pairs or small groups gives students increased time to speak and builds confidence. It allows the learners to try out language in a fairly private way before being called upon to perform in front of the larger group and the teacher. God has assigned us a sacred responsibility to befriend and help each other. I point the learners to each other as sources of help inside and outside the classroom in the language learning process. The students can be a powerful resource for helping each other. Almost always there is at least one student in the class who can supply the answer to the question another student poses.

Assessment

Assessment in language learning needs to be as positive an experience as possible. Language learning is cumulative so assessment along the way should not be communicated to the learners as a kind of judgment – we are all in the learning enterprise together, teacher and students.

Students need the encouragement that they are making progress in their language skills. When they first begin to learn the target language it is easy to count the new words or phrases they have learned. At slightly more advanced stages students may not feel they are progressing at all.

When I test the students, I put the easier sections at the beginning of the test, the sections that I know all students can complete correctly. This is to

increase their confidence and to reassure them that they are making progress and they can cope with the test. I give the students plenty of advance warning of a test and I clearly specify the areas that will be tested. I encourage them to think of tests as being for their benefit, to help them to review what they have learned and to measure their own progress.

THE GIFT OF THE STRANGER

God sends us gifts by means of strangers. His word records the stories of many strangers who brought gifts to the host culture – Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon. Jesus himself was a stranger who brought us the greatest gift of all (Andreasen 2004). As with the blessed strangers of the Old Testament, adult language learners also bring gifts to the learning community.

Students are not just the poor, needy, ignorant beggars who come to the man or woman of knowledge, but they are ... indeed like guests who honor the house with their visit and will not leave without having made their own contribution (Nouwen 1986:89).

Adult language learners bring many gifts to the classroom to be shared with the teacher and their fellow students – their life experience, their mother tongue, their customs and culture, their particular understanding of God. When the Christian teacher affirms these gifts that the students bring with them and respects and values each individual, there is potential for an incredibly rich learning environment, an environment where understanding, mutual respect and tolerance between students are the norm - Nouwen's "free and fearless space where mental and emotional development can take place". In the process of learning together, students share with each other and the teacher, the immensely valuable, God-given gift of friendship.

Though learning the English language is the students' main purpose in coming to our classroom, at the end of the year the majority of the students will also hopefully leave the classroom with a knowledge of, and appreciation for the peoples, customs and culture of other lands, enriched by fellow students' views of and experiences with God, increased in both faith and learning.

Bibliography and references

- Andreasen, N.E. 2004. *Language and Faith: Teaching Languages in Faith-Based Colleges and Universities*. ACA Convention. Florence, Italy.
- Arnold, Jane and H. Brown. 1999. A map of the terrain pp1-27 In *Affect in Language Learning*. Arnold, J. (Ed.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bailey Kathleen M. 1983. Competitiveness and anxiety in adult second language learning: Looking at and through the diary studies. In Seliger, Herbert W. and Long, Michael H. 1983. *Classroom Oriented Research in Second Language Acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers.
- Brown, H. Douglas. 1993. *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* 3rd Edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Caviness, L. 2001. *Educational Brain Science as compared to E.G.White's Counsels to Educators*. UMI.
- Chomsky, N. 1988. *Language and Problems of Knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Coopersmith, Stanley. 1967. *The Antecedents of Self-Esteem*. San Francisco: W.H.Freeman & Company.
- Dornyei, Z. 2001. *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gardner Robert C. and Lambert, Wallace E. 1972. *Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning*. Rowley.MA: Newbury House Publishers.
- Holy Bible: New International Version*.
- Kristmanson, P. 2000. Reflexions. May 2000. Vol.19. No 2.

Luther, M. 1962. To the councilmen of all cities in Germany that they establish and maintain Christian schools. In *Luther's Works*, edited by H.T.Lehmann and W.I.Brandt, vol. 45: The Christian in society II, 347 -78. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press.

MacIntyre, P.D. and Gardner, R.C. 1991. Methods and results in the study of anxiety and language learning: A review of the literature. *Language Learning* 41:85-117.

Naiman, Neil, Frohlich, Maria, Stern, H.H., and Todesco, Angie. 1978. *The Good Language Learner*, Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Nouwen, H.J.M. 1986. *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*. New York: Doubleday.

Oatley, K., and J.Jenkins. 1996. *Understanding Emotions*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Pohl, C. 1999. *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Rubin Joan. 1975. What the "good language learner" can teach us. *TESOL Quarterly* 9:41-51.

Smith, D and Carvill, B. 2000. *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality and Foreign Language Learning*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans.

Stern,H.H. 1983. *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

White, Ellen G. 1903. *Education*. Mountain View, California: Pacific Press.

White, Ellen G. 1956. *Steps to Christ*. Mountain View, California: Pacific Press.