

The Role of Teachers in College English Classroom

— From the Perspective of Affect

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Abstract

Modern college English classroom has seen a gradual shift from teacher-dominated to student-centered one and therefore affective factors plays a crucial part of the bidirectional communication between teachers and students. This thesis attempts to investigate the roles teachers should perform at class and then give some advice of affective strategies in college English teaching.

Keywords: Affective factors, College English, Teachers' role

Introduction

College English teaching in China has been paid great attention since the language of English, as a world-wide one, is of great importance in international communication. Following the traditional teaching strategy, most people regard language learning as a result of imitating and practicing. However, more and more teachers and researchers emphasize that affective factors of students in English learning should be concerned in the college English classroom. Teachers should develop students' positive affection to learn English, make sure full participation of students. Since then, the teaching strategy is changed from teacher-instructing to student-centered teaching. After taking research of previous studies and practical teaching, this paper points out affective factors, language teaching methodology, and teacher's task to boost college English teaching in China.

1. Rationale of Affective Factors

1.1 The Definition of Affect

Actually, it is hard to give an accurate definition of affect as Fehr and Russell (1984) once noted "Everyone knows what an emotion is, until asked to give a definition". Affect refers to emotion or feeling (H.D. Brown, 1987). Dickinson (1987) describes it as being concerned with the learner's attitude towards the target language and users of it, and with his/her emotional responses. Damasio(1994) differentiates the term emotions as "changes in body state in response to a positive or negative situation" from the term feelings as "perceptions of these changes. Arnold (1999) defines affect as "aspects of emotion, feeling, mood or attitude which condition behavior". It can be seen that the term "affect" sometimes replaced by "emotions", "feelings" or "affectivity" was defined from several perspectives such as educational one, psychological one. However, from the aspect of language teaching, Walter Apelt and Heike Koering (1997) demonstrate that affectivity is the totality of all components of foreign-language instruction that influence the emotional attitude toward learning a foreign language and toward using it, as well as the foreign language atmosphere in general and the success of the learning and teaching process in particular. Not only those components that promote intensive and language-activating emotions, but also those that inhibit or evoke negative emotions, should be given special consideration. This definition is more reasonable, because it covers both learning and teaching, clarifies positive affect and negative one and connects affect with cognition.

1.2 Affective Factors

Though affect cannot be separated as a complex system in some sense, studies tend to name different aspects of affect in order to carry out specific research of each aspect. In general, emotions which affect language acquisition can be classified as personality factors and factors between learners themselves and their relationship with teachers. Personality factors involve self-esteem, motivation, anxiety, and inhibition while the other involves empathy, classroom transactions and cross-cultural processes. Among these factors there are positive ones which can encourage learners and negative ones as well which will be hindrance to English learning such as anxiety, sadness.

2. The Role of Teachers in College English Classroom

As Pine and Boy (1997) express "pupils feel the personal emotional structure of the teacher long before they feel

the impact of the intellectual content offered by that teacher". It is evident that teachers' performance at class will give an influence for their students. A teacher who lacks self-esteem will find it difficult to make self-esteem of his students. A teacher who does not lead a warm atmosphere at class will find low spirits of students to learn. So the teachers' role is very critical in language teaching. According to Yan & Zhang (2002), there are three basic roles for teachers: "lecturer", "teacher", and "facilitator". They made distinctions among the three based on the theory of affective factors. "Lecturers" are those who solely consider their professional skills but neglect teaching methodology. "Teachers" here refer to those who possess professional skills and teaching methodology but seldom care students' affective experience. "Facilitators" are like those who not only take characters of the former two but also care students' affective state and learning process to help them in language learning by self-consciousness-raising. Through comparison, it reflects that lecturers lack flexibility during their teaching and there are less interaction between students and lecturers as if there exists an invisible wall. It is better for teachers to realize how to turn burdensome language class into dynamic one but they pay less attention to the students' involvement or do not perform enough to release the capacity of students because of individual differences. As facilitators, they try to break the invisible wall and communicate with students in time so that the previous opposite two sides can be changed into a harmonious group. Both learning and teaching go on smoothly without tension. It is no doubt that such facilitators can be successful ones for they explore attentively students' psychological feelings, skillfully manipulate students from loving language classes and attract students to participate actively.

3. How-tos for Being Facilitators in the classroom

3.1 Being a Humanistic Teacher

To be a humanistic teacher means a teacher's behavior should be democratic and his teaching aims at student-centered classroom in which a teacher acts as an organizer, encourager, and guide. Rogers (1969) argued that learning that combines intelligence and affection would promote the whole-person development. He regarded himself as a facilitator and asserted that significant learning can be facilitated by establishing an interpersonal relationship between the facilitator and the learner. Teachers should treat their learners as individuals with specific needs to be met and provide them with trust and emphatic understanding. Through the understanding and promotion of inner factors, students' learning strategies and even their learning outcomes would be of much distinction compared with what they did before. According to Gage and Berliner (1991), feelings are as important as facts. Much work from the humanistic view seems to validate this point and is one area where humanistically-oriented educators are making significant contributions to our knowledge base.

3.2 Motivating in English Teaching Process

It is well acknowledged that motivation is very crucial in language learning as Dornyev(1998) mentioned that motivation has been widely accepted by both teachers and researchers as one of the key factors that influence the rate and success of second foreign language learning. Motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate learning the foreign language and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process. Therefore, at class teachers should give their priority to motivation. Students will learn from their experience and keep collecting to develop their full potential. Otherwise, classroom realities increasingly ask awareness to an overlooked aspect, i.e., the motivational needs from teachers, since teachers' motivation has direct influence to students' language learning efficiency. However, ways to motivate language teachers take little amount of research but it will broaden the research area.

3.3 Designing affective course

Affective course requires teachers' large amount of time and energy contributed to make a good arrangement of class which not only develop students' academic skills but also stimulate their inner motivation. Two activities are taken from Moskowitz's illustration here:

Activity 1: I like you; you're different

For homework, students write three positive and unique things about themselves on a card provided by the teacher, e.g.: 1. I am a good cook; 2. I was on TV when I was eight; & 3. I was a tennis champion in my hometown. The teacher reads each card aloud. Students suggest three possible student identities and the whole class votes on the one most likely. The mystery students reveal themselves and answer a few questions from classmates related to the card. This activity helps students learn about each other and promotes self-esteem.

Activity 2: Fortune cookies

In groups of four, each student writes a positive fortune for another group member, folds it with the student's name on the outside of the paper and puts it in the center of the group. In turn, each student takes the designated

fortune, reads it aloud and reacts to it. To end, each group chooses one fortune to read to the class. Laughter and good feelings toward classmates ensue from these positive wishes. (Moskowitz, 1982)

By these activities the whole class integrates together with each member shows his self-esteem and empathy instead of anxiety. Sometimes teachers can arrange interesting programs, like group-discussion, role-playing and video-watching, to make full practice of students and at the same time the ability of speaking, writing, listening and reading can be developed.

3.4 Creating a Psychologically Secure Learning Environment for the Students

In the process of English teaching, teachers should pay more attention to establishing certain relationship with their students. A harmonious and pleasant climate in the classroom can help to reduce the anxiety of students, ask the focus of students when learning English and form emotional bonds between students and teachers at the same time. Teachers can create the classroom a welcoming and relaxing place where psychological needs are met and language anxiety is kept to a minimum. (Oxford & Shearin, 1994) According to Gage and Berliner (1991), students learn best in a non-threatening environment. This is one area where humanistic educators have had an impact on current educational practice. The orientation espoused today is that the environment should be psychologically and emotionally, as well as physically, non-threatening.

Conclusion

To summarize, affective factors cannot be neglected in English language teaching. Among the three basic roles, “facilitators” are the most ideal one the responsibility of which is to organize effective and efficient teaching strategies for arousing students’ awareness of affect and take their needs into consideration in order to equip them to learn with self-consciousness and efficiency. As Pine & Boy (1997) mentioned: the more the teacher humanizes his teaching, the more teaching humanizes him. The more the teacher cares for his students, the more they will care for him. The more the teacher frees his students to grow, the more he frees himself to grow.

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