

Research Issues

Students' Emotional and Cognitive Responses to Teachers: How can we better understand them?

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In her powerful article "Lessons from Students on Creating a Chance to Dream", published in 1994, Sonia Nieto advised that what schools need is transformation rather than change and that transformation will not be possible "without the inclusion of the voices of students, among others, in the dialogue". Nieto regrets that "research that focuses on students' voices is relatively recent and scarce".

As if addressing Nieto's concern, in 1996 comes out "Voices from the Language Classroom", edited by Bailey and Nunan. The book is devoted to qualitative research in second language learning. Several studies in this volume (Clark Cummings, M., Peck, S., Hilleson, M., Snow, M. et al., Sturman, P.) vividly present students' perceptions of aspects relevant to the educational process.

Two years after this publication, I was fortunate enough to participate in a most productive colloquia at the 1998 Annual TESOL Convention in Seattle, WA: "Students' Emotional and Cognitive Responses to Teachers". Rebecca Oxford, the organizer, opened the session citing Levin (1995): "What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?" and she anticipated a synthesis of the presentations by claiming that "Students' voices need to be heard. Emotional and cognitive responses will not be the same from student to student. Therefore, we need to focus on the responses of individuals [....]".

My colleague panelists for the colloquia addressed issues related to teacher/students relationship: "Style conflicts in the classroom" (Amany Saleh, Arkansas State University, USA); students' beliefs and perceptions of teachers: "Teaching according to students" (Ana Barcelo, University of Vicosa, Brazil); and student styles and learning processes: "Using narratives to listen to students" (John M. Green, Salem State College, Salem, Massachusetts, USA).

Personally, I looked at what communication theories have to say that help us -teachers of foreign languages- better understand some of the factors that may affect students' voices, may bring students closer to teachers, and consequently to learning, or draw them apart, hindering success. This paper poses some questions that call for reflection on these topics and the need -for the foreign language teacher- to further research them.

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One such theory, that applies to student / teacher relationship and how it relates to learning, is the Emotional Response Theory. Reviewing the literature I found that the Theory of Emotional Response may in fact illuminate the treatment of topics that have to do with student/teacher relationship, raising, at the same time, further questions. I think teachers should, for example, try to find out about personality trait and learning style harmony or clash between herself/himself and hers/his students. And also search for students' beliefs about language learning and the role of the language teacher. I will illustrate my points with examples taken from a corpus consisting of 20 narratives of American high school students. The narratives were elicited prompting the students to discuss a "bad experience with a teacher".

Beebe and Butland (1994) measured students' emotional response to teacher behaviors taking as a basis for their study the theory of implicit communication. Simply put, "implicit communication" refers to meanings that are not overtly expressed, but rather indirectly revealed. These researchers found that teacher use of affinity-seeking behaviors correlated positively with cognitive and affective learning as well as with student liking of the teacher. Simply put, "affinity-seeking" behavior refers to what one does when trying to get others' sympathy. Beebe and Butland held that students' emotional response help explain why teacher affinity-seeking behaviors enhance learning.

Beebe and Butland's (1994) state that their findings were supported by previous research that had already explained the meaning of teacher behavior from a student's perspective, also using students' emotional response.

Affinity-seeking behavior had been defined by Bell and Daly (1984) as "the active social-communicative process by which individuals attempt to get others to like and feel positive toward them", and it is defined by Butland and Beebe (1992) as "efforts to implicitly communicate liking".

These authors take Mehrabian's explanation of implicit communication which considers that head nods, use of personal space, facial expression, and body posture as well as paralinguistic features such as tone, rate, pitch and volume are all used to communicate meanings and feelings. These behaviors communicate implicit messages because they are often unintentional or implied expressions of underlying emotions, they explain. (Mehrabian, 1981 in Beebe and Butland, 1994)

Butland and Beebe (1992) and Beebe and Butland (1994) state that whether or not emotions are expressed explicitly through words and overt behaviors, they often manifest themselves in the form of implicit messages to which others consciously or subconsciously respond. Emotions manifest themselves in a positive or negative attitude toward the subject, they explain. And they maintain that approaching or avoiding behaviors -that is getting close to the object or subject, or drawing apart from it- are based on these attitudes, because one's emotions are affected by the implicit messages one receives. And putting it more simply they say, "one pursues things that one likes, one likes things that one feels positive emotions for".

Now, one such "thing" that a student "feels positive emotions for" could be a teacher who uses affinity-seeking strategies, that is, who tries to show that she/he cares by smiling, joking, telling anecdotes and patting shoulders, for example. As I see it, this raises a question: what can be the effect of unspoken messages on the part of a teacher attempting to be liked, when the recipient is a student with a style different from the teacher's or holding different views

The narratives I examined show instances of a clash between student expectancies about the teacher's role and the actual teacher behavior.¹

Kevin wrote:

"... she was easily overrun by students opinions and feelings. I feel that she was more concerned with playing counselor (sic) than history teacher."

And Mindy also seemed to know what she expected from a teacher:

"... This teacher who tried to take back the class was not cut out to be a teacher. This person was more cut out to be a counselor..."

McCroskey and Wheelless (1976) cited in Beebe and Butland (1994) identified seven strategies that people use which result in increased liking or affinity: 1) controlling physical appearance, 2) increasing positive self-disclosure, 3) stressing areas of positive similarity, 4) providing positive reinforcement, 5) expressing cooperation, 6) complying with others' wishes, and 7) fulfilling other's needs. And Bell and Daly (1984) expanded this classification with a list of 25 affinity-seeking behaviors that, in their view, improve interpersonal closeness.

However, I would like to make the point that the impact of these affinity-seeking strategies must depend on how harmonious the personality traits of the people involved are. In our narratives, we can see, for example, students responses to what can be signs of self-disclosure -considered by researchers as an "affinity-seeking strategy"- on the part of the teacher.

This is what Tim wrote:

"... She made every morning more difficult and more boring. She talked and talked and talked about her sicknesses and things that were giving her pain. We were like, 'I'm sorry, but we really don't care ...'"

And Alice expressed:

"... and I can't stand when she stops in the middle of a problem and gossips. Drives me crazy!"

McCroskey, Richmond and Stewart (in Beebe and Butland, 1994) contend that affinity-seeking strategies help explain how interpersonal communication develops, especially during the early stages of relationship development. This finding appears as most interesting for our sake, since, given the time a student spends with a single teacher, student /teacher relationship could be considered to rarely go beyond early stages.

These authors found that the affinity-seeking strategies that teachers use more often are: physical attractiveness, sensitivity, elicitation of other's disclosure, trustworthiness, nonverbal immediacy, conversational rule keeping, dynamism and listening.

Citing Mehrabian (1981), Beebe and Butland (1994) agree that an individual's emotional response is partly based upon the way he or she perceives implicit information about feelings and attitudes from others. They tried to measure and explain student motivation by assessing student's emotional response to teacher affinity-seeking strategies. They argued that "directly measuring student emotional response to teachers may provide a more fruitful ap-

¹ See Barcelo, A. (2000) for a discussion on *teachers' and students' language learning beliefs*

proach to help explain why certain teacher behaviors enhance student learning”.

Beebe and Butland (1994) and Beebe and Ivy (1994) found that researchers in the field seem to agree in describing all emotional states in terms of three independent dimensions: 1) pleasure/displeasure 2) arousal/non-arousal, and 3) dominance/submissiveness. Each dimension is of continuous nature, and has within its range positive and negative values as well as a neutral point. Combinations of various values on each dimension characterize different emotions, they affirm. This means that an individual can experience feelings caused by, for example, a bit of pleasure, some excitement and some sense of control. Or disgust, no excitement and a strong sense of control, for another example. And in all possible cases the emotions felt will be different.

Language use has assigned pair of adjectives to the different emotional states. But emotional states are not only expressed in words, they are also disclosed by paralinguistic signs such as gestures, postures and actions. Following Merhabian (1981) Beebe and Ivy (1994) explain that the pleasure/displeasure dimension is defined by adjective pairs like happy/unhappy, pleased/annoyed, or satisfied/unsatisfied. They hold that the presence or absence of a desire to approach an object or a person indicates the level of pleasure associated with that person or object. In the second place, the arousal/non-arousal dimension is defined by adjective pairs like stimulated/relaxed, excited/calm, or frenzied/sluggish. Mental alertness, for example, indicates the degree to which someone is stimulated or excited. And behavioral indications for this dimension would be physical actions. Lastly, the dominance/submissiveness dimension is defined by adjective pairs like controlling/controlled, influential/influenced, or in-control/cared for. These authors affirm that psychological indications of this dimension are feelings of power and control. In this case, behavioral indications would be a relaxed posture, body lean, reclining angle while seated or asymmetrical positions of the limbs.

Biggers (1990), supported by previous research, suggested that the combination of pleasure, arousal and dominance predicts “a higher order construct called liking”. And if someone likes something it is very probable that he will try to approach what he/she likes. The “dominance” dimension, however, seems to require a different conceptualization when the setting is the classroom and the participants student and teacher.² Our data show evidence that some students would feel more at ease and would like school better when it is the teacher who is in-control.

This is how Fred, Steph and Becky expressed what they felt:

Fred: “ ... This teacher was nice and I liked her and all, but the teacher just couldn't teach. The teacher let the students control the classroom....”.

Steph: “... I am accustomed to more “controlled” classroom environments in which the teacher teaches without interruption.”.

Becky: “...To correct the problems I had in these classes, my teacher could have shown more authority over the class..... in a classroom the teacher is the boss and the class should be run that way.”

¹ See Oxford et al. (1998) for a discussion on *classroom control*

As for the effect of emotional response on gains, when they applied statistics to their data, Beebe and Butland (1994) found that "students who felt pleasure and arousal also self-reported more learning" but "dominance did not achieve significance and, therefore was not included in the regression model." When they tried to correlate cognitive learning and learning loss with arousal, pleasure and dominance, "dominance failed to achieve significance and was excluded".

Beebe and Butland (1994) claim that teacher affinity-seeking strategies may function by eliciting emotional responses either conducive or detrimental to liking, and, by extension to learning. Adding to this, Richmond (in Beebe and Butland, 1994) suggests that the underlying construct that explains why affinity-seeking strategies enhance learning is motivation. Student motivation to learn - he says - may be significantly influenced by students' emotional response to the teacher, subject matter, and teaching strategies.

Summarizing, communication theories help us understand the relations between liking, motivation and learning. Language teachers and researchers should take advantage of these contributions and further examine these relations in our field. We should look at whether appreciation of the EFL teacher and his/her pedagogical practice enhances or inhibits motivation and, consequently, learning. In trying to do this we will have to look for coincidence or difference in teacher-student personality traits and learning styles, as well as get students to disclose their beliefs about language learning and language teachers' roles.

Student learning is the thriving force of all our efforts. That is the reason why we should look at aspects in the student/teacher relationship that influence or even determine students' opinions. Looking at what it is that affects students' views and feelings can be of benefit for teachers, teacher educators and trainee teachers alike.

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