

Reducing Affective Filters in the Classroom

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My most successful English activity has been the one that I use to begin every new class. I walk into the classroom with a small rubber ball and write, “Please give me the ball” on the blackboard. I repeat the sentence several times with the students, and then I hold out the ball, as though I am offering it to the class. Usually, it only takes a few seconds before one of the kids shouts out, “Please give me the ball!” I throw him or her the ball, then say, “Please give me the ball!” and they throw it back. Instantly, all of the students are shouting in English, laughing and clamoring for the rubber ball, and I spend a minute or two throwing the ball back and forth.

It is my simplest activity, but the results have been considerable. I transferred from the EPIK program to a new elementary school in Seoul this September, and during the first week, I opened all of my introductory classes with that activity. Later that week, my co-teacher came to me and said, “I saw some of our students on the soccer field. They were saying, ‘Please give me the ball.’ In English.”

The first time I tried that activity, I was surprised. I was just looking for a way to teach the sentence, “Please give me the _____.” Yet, when it worked so well, I was able to turn it into an entire dialogue – “Please give me the ball. Here. Thanks. You’re welcome. Can you pass me the ball? I want you to throw me the ball.” Not only were all of the students learning the material, even the low-level students, they were able to incorporate it outside of the classroom. If they wanted candy, they would say, “Please give me the candy.” If they were handing me something, they would say, “Here.” It was ingrained in them after only a few exposures. That first year of teaching, I couldn’t understand why such a simplistic activity was getting results with a speed that hours of complicated activities, nonstop drilling, and countless exercises weren’t.

The answer, according to linguist Stephen Krashen, is in the students’ affective filters, and it’s how we manage those filters which determines how effective we are as language instructors.

Stephen Krashen was the father of the natural order approach to language teaching, which was based on a few simple concepts. The first concept stated that

acquisition of the language was more important than learning. He argued that it was only through acquisition that language skills could truly be developed and called upon in necessary situations. Krashen's theory had five parts: 1) the natural order of language acquisition, 2) acquisition of language versus learning about language, 3) conscious learning as a monitor, 4) learning language through comprehensible input, and 5) the presence of affective filters in second language students. It is the fifth part of his theory, the Affective Filter Theory, that I've focused on in this paper, because it's a fundamental component of effective classroom management for language learners. It is also one of the weakest areas for native English teachers, and one of the least addressed areas in Korean English education as well.

What is an affective filter? The affective filter is defined as a psychological factor that filtrates the amount of language received by a second language learner's brain. These factors can include all types of emotions, from motivation to self-doubt to boredom. When the filters are up, the student has a lower ability to receive new language inputs, and the inputs that are received will have difficulty being acquired by the language-processing part of the brain.¹ Krashen posited that managing the affective filter of a language learner was crucial to "acquisition" of the language, which he argued should be the main goal of language instruction.

According to Krashen's theories, the reason my ball activity was working so well was that it was a "comprehensible input" for the students, meaning that the input was just above their current level of competence. The kinesthetic aspect of the activity was lowering their affective filters enough to be absorbed by part of the brain responsible for language acquisition.

In Krashen's writings, he defined an effective language teacher as "someone who can provide input and help make it comprehensible in a low anxiety situation." Krashen's main hypothesis in terms of second language acquisitions was that our "goals should not only include supplying comprehensible input, but also creating a situation that encourages a low filter."² In his estimation, this idea of increasing "comprehensible input" in low-stress situations provided the greatest opportunity for learners to improve their language competence. In this essay, I will examine some of the characteristics that are common to English classrooms in Korea and analyze whether these characteristics raise or lower the affective filter of Korean students.

There are countless psychological factors which affect a student's ability to digest new language instruction, but the affective filter theory has been commonly broken down into three main categories: motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. It is useful to take a look at the current model of English education in Korean public

¹ Xiaoyan Du. "The Affective Filter in Second Language Teaching" *Asian Social Science Journal*. Vol. 5, No. 8. August 2009.

² Stephen Krashen. http://www.sdkrashen.com/Principles_and_Practice/

schools to see if there are any deficiencies in each area with regards to the students' affective filters, and how those deficiencies can be addressed.

The First Factor of Affective Filters – Motivation

One of the most basic and obvious truths about education – of any kind – is that a motivated learner will be able to absorb more information and inputs than a similarly-skilled unmotivated learner. Yet language learning has distinctive characteristics, and one must ask what motivation with languages actually encompasses, and how teachers can pique that motivation in the students. The goal of English learning and all language learning, in Krashen's view, was "the ability to communicate with native speakers of the target language."³ The motivation to learn English, however, comes in many different forms for Korean students. It can stem from an array of different desires: to do well in school, to please parents, to avoid punishment, to gain recognition, to perform better than others, or even to gain a simple reward, such as candy or a sticker. However, these are extrinsic factors, and since learning a language is a lifetime endeavor, the focus of teachers should be on creating intrinsic motivation, which is somewhat unique.

Several researchers of language acquisition have argued that foreign language learners gained this intrinsic motivation from a need to communicate, such as with a student studying abroad in a foreign country. When this communication is successful, it gives the learner pleasure and increases motivation for further progress in the language. When activities in language classrooms recreate this need for communication, it triggers motivation in the students, increasing interest and lowering the affective filters. Without that communicative element, language teaching regresses into learning about the language, which is not as effective in developing a student's language proficiency.

The first step for Korean classrooms is to focus on acquisition activities whenever possible. This is especially true considering the presence of native English teachers in most elementary, middle, and high schools. Native teachers are generally ineffective practitioners of the standard method of language teaching – lecturing, with choral repetition, and monitoring activities afterward. Yet the native English teachers are very useful in communicative activities, because they tap into the previously mentioned idea that the primary motivation for foreign language students should be a need to communicate, and further motivation comes when they successfully do so. Since Korean students are forced to speak the target language to communicate with their native English teachers, the possibility for using effective communicative activities abounds.

³ Stephen Krashen. http://www.sdkrashen.com/Principles_and_Practice/

All Korean public elementary schools teach from the same English curriculum, which includes many movies, exercises, and activities designed to work in tandem with the textbooks and curriculum. However, judged from Krashen's criteria of communicative activities, the textbook falls short because it primarily uses choral repetition and passive listening activities. The need to communicate is absent. Teachers that exclusively use the textbook's curriculum in their classrooms risk losing out on the kind of communicative activities which create motivation in the students. All activities should be judged on the need to communicate that arises in the students within the course of an activity, and whether or not it can be carried out successfully.

The Second Factor of Affective Filters – Self-Confidence

Another widely accepted tenet of second language acquisition is the fact that students with extroverted personalities have an easier time becoming competent in another language than introverted students. Extroverted learners are more likely to test new language inputs, which leads to increased competence, and the reception of additional language inputs, thus creating a feedback model of success in communication. Introverted learners, on the other hand, are less likely to use new inputs that they have learned, therefore keeping their language competence stagnant. In language classrooms, the ideal scenario is to try to put all students on the success feedback model of testing new inputs, receiving positive feedback, and receiving additional language inputs.

Students – both with high-confidence and low-confidence – have a greater probability of testing new inputs if they have reason to expect that they will be rewarded for their efforts. There is a psychology theory called the expectancy value theory. According to this theory, a person's mindset is a function of what kind of outcome a person expects, combined with the value that the person places on that outcome. If, for example, a student receives negative or no feedback from his teacher whenever he attempts to communicate, then according to the expectancy value theory, the student will likely not value improving his language skills enough to overcome the negative feedback expected. He will not try to communicate. But if a student receives positive feedback for testing new inputs, he may begin to develop a mindset that teaches him to expect rewards for trying, even if the value he places on language improvement is low.

Positive reinforcement is an integral factor in all effective classrooms, especially in language classrooms. In Korean public schools, if English teachers can build confidence for their students by placing them on into a loop of language experimentation and positive results, it could lead to eventual fluency in the language, not just mastery of the curriculum.

The Third Factor of Affective Filters – Anxiety

A commonly cited statistic is that more people fear public speaking than death. For students, who often have less self-confidence than adults, that statement is even more applicable. If speaking in front of other people is a strong source of anxiety for certain students, then in language classrooms, it will raise the affective filters for those students high enough that anything they learn likely won't be processed correctly. Furthermore, the student might begin to fear speaking the target language, raising filters in future situations as well. Since any student gains little language competence from high-anxiety situations, language teachers should avoid forcing students to speak in situations that might be overtly stressful. Testing for mastery of the material is necessary, but should be done sporadically, so that students don't associate the feeling of being tested with the process of learning English.

If teachers want the students to produce the new language immediately, it is most effective to call for volunteers and to choose students who are comfortable with the material and with filters low enough not to interfere with the language acquisition process. Students should be confident that the teacher won't call on them at any moment. In the short-term, randomly calling on students may train them to pay more attention to the teacher, but in the long-run, it damages the students' ability to process all of the new language inputs, not just the target sentence. This methodology presents a marked departure from common Korean classroom policies, especially those that may have been employed by Korean language teachers. Language, though, is processed differently than other subjects. Many foreign language students report their language skills rapidly increasing after they've consumed alcohol. Why? Alcohol chemically lowers inhibitions and removes the barriers that prevent students from speaking a second language fluidly.

Common classroom policies which increase anxiety in language students include the following:

- randomly calling on students;
- making students speak in front of the class;
- competitive situations;
- calling on students before they've fully absorbed the material;
- having introverted students work with extroverted students;
- group work with strained social dynamics;
- extremely rigid and disciplined classrooms;
- strict teaching styles;
- tests;

Some of the above policies are necessary in classroom settings, as inevitable by-products of teaching large groups. Yet language teachers should be aware that all of these situations can cause increased anxiety in students, and when used simultaneously, it may cause the affective filters of students to be raised to the point where absorbing new language inputs becomes impossible.

Based on this knowledge, the discussion turns to the question of implementing changes in Korean language classrooms to reduce affective filters. The first requirement of any improvement is that it must be able to be used by teachers with little to no experience or training. The Korea Times conducted a recent survey of 273 teachers in the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education, and found that less than 50% signed up for two consecutive years and only 11 out of 273 signed up for 3 or more years.⁴ Any improvements to our English programs must be built on the premise that Korean public schools will, at least for the foreseeable future, turnover the majority of their workforce of English teachers in the public schools every two years.

The first recommendation I would make is to train all English teachers in the public school system – both Korean and native – on the benefits of low affective filters in the language classroom. Both the EPIK and SMOE programs have orientations for incoming teachers, while Korean teachers are involved in constant training. In orientations I have attended, the focus has been on the lesson planning and specifics of the program, without much of the theory. By instructing English teachers about some of the philosophy behind second language learning, they can begin to understand their purpose in how to approach every class.

My second recommendation is to give a short outline to teachers of how affective filters function in effective language learning environments, followed by a set of guidelines that teachers could follow to reduce filters in their classrooms. Some sample guidelines might include:

- Maintain a positive atmosphere in the classroom;
- Have a set discipline system that manages the class while allowing students to feel free to speak at will;
- Always praise students to build confidence;
- Create activities which has communicative learning as its main goal;
- Make sure the target language inputs are comprehensible for the students' level;
- Use textbook material as a supplement and not the focus of the class;

⁴ ESL Daily. <http://blog.esldaily.org/2008/12/29/saudi-arabia-foreign-english-teacher-cutback-expected.aspx>

- Respect the silent period for language learners by not forcing them to produce the new material until they have had time to properly understand it;
- Never discourage communication in the classroom if its directed towards improving target language;
- Recognize that students forced to speak in front of the class may have increased anxiety which will interfere with their language production;
- Take advantage of outside activities and programs where students can learn and practice new inputs in a setting outside of the classroom;

My third recommendation is to instruct schools and districts to include affective filters as part of their teaching assessments. Teachers are regularly observed by their schools and district officials to receive feedback and evaluation. These evaluators should be aware of the importance of the atmosphere of a language classroom and look for it in their classrooms. Teachers, of course, can benefit from regular self-assessment. The primary question teachers should be asking is, “Based on the information I’ve been given, am I creating an atmosphere that is conducive to language learning?”

Within the field of second language acquisition, there exists a substantial amount of credible, useful research that should be widely employed. Korea employs a vast number of native English teachers for its public schools, but for the most part, these teachers are left to their own devices, when many have little to no training or experience in the field. Though much of Krashen’s research and ideas have been debated, his primary hypothesis – that language acquisition comes from presenting comprehensible input in a low-filter environment – is generally accepted as sound. And if we believe that hypothesis, then we can use that premise as a starting point for improving language instruction in Korea. Native English teachers can be given an overview of what factors drive language acquisition and how to create an atmosphere which is most conducive for students. Teachers can be taught how to avoid behavior which raises affective filters, and learn how to create activities which will spark intrinsic motivation in our students. It is a baseline that all teachers, regardless of training or experience, can utilize for the benefit of all English learners in our public schools: comprehensible input, motivation through communication, increased self-confidence, and reduced anxiety.

I’ve spoken to many English teachers in Korean public schools who complain about the fact that they don’t know what their main purpose is in teaching. Is it motivation? Is it to master the curriculum? Krashen would argue that our purpose, as Korean English teachers, is to provide comprehensible input to the students through acquisition activities in a low-stress environment. The curriculum is our

input, but it is our job as English teachers to foster the activities and environment best suited for the students.