Affectivity and learning of foreign language: the teaching of the Italian language in the state university of Rio de Janeiro

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Article info

Received 29.05.2018

Accepted 29.06.2016

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55 21 98881-3296

Aparecida Cardoso (2018). Affectivity and learning of foreign language: the teaching of the Italian language in the state university of Rio de Janeiro. Fundamental and applied researches in practice of leading scientific schools, 27 (3), 3–6.

Learning a foreign language can be determined by factors such as work need, academic interest or personal interest. However, regardless of the first motivation for the study, learning is strongly linked to questions that involve the level of the affective filter that acts to determine the type of relationship that the student will develop with the language he or she studies. The higher the affective filter, the greater the barriers to learning. In the case of the students of Italian of the State University of Rio de Janeiro, one has the fact that about 40 percent of the total of students do not choose the Italian language as a first option. This fact is an important challenge that focuses on the creative capacity of the teacher to create mechanisms that develop the interest of the student. In our teaching practice, especially in the didactic classes of Italian as a foreign language, we create mechanisms of motivation through theoretical reflection that becomes practice allowing the student to become a subject of his own formation allowing him to establish a positive bond of affection with the Italian language.

Keywords: teaching; learning; Italian foreign language, effectivity, motivation.

Introduction

The process of learning a foreign language can be determined by several factors ranging from personal interest, from academic interest to job needs. In either case, however, the learning will be unequivocally influenced by the degree of affection that the learner establishes with the language he is learning.

In this article, we intend to start from the distinction between acquisition and learning advocated by Krashen focusing on the issue of the affective filter and its role in a controlled environment for the transmission of linguistic knowledge. We draw a brief distinctive parallel between the affective filter of Krashen (1985) and the affection of which Osimo speaks, to draw a quick overview of the context of learning the Italian language at the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro. We do not intend to present closed conclusions, but to generate reflections that depart from the daily practice in an environment not always favorable in view of the Brazilian reality and how the students enter in a superior course of Letters. We emphasize, however, that we will not make a libel of a sociopolitical or political-social nature although these questions are pertinent to the understanding of the analysis that we propose here because they directly affect the academic choices of the students and their permanence in the course until the conclusion. We

clarify that, given the space allocated to the article, we will not present anything that goes beyond the scope of this article, which is to illuminate and share the perception of the processes of teaching, learning and acquiring a foreign language¹ involving young adults.

Acquisition, learning and affectivity

Krashen (2009) states five hypotheses that support his research on learning a foreign language. The first hypothesis deals with the distinction he makes between acquisition and learning; the second hypothesis introduces the idea of the monitor; the third deals with the natural order; the fourth focuses on the role of input; and the fifth presents the question of the affective filter.

The first hypothesis - the acquisition-learning distinction - holds that "adults have two distinct and independent ways of developing competence in a second language." For him, there is a fundamental difference between acquisition and learning that lies at the basis of concepts. In other words,

The first way is language acquisition, a process similar, if not identical, to the way children develop ability in their first language. Language acquisition is a subconscious process; language acquirers are

¹ We refer here to the Italian language with which we operate.

not usually aware of the fact that they are acquiring language but are only aware of the fact that they are using the language for communication. The result of language acquisition, acquired competence, is also subconscious. We are generally not consciously aware of the rules of the languages we have acquired. Instead, we have a "feel" for correctness. Grammatical sentences "sound" right, or "feel" right, and errors feel wrong, even if we do not consciously know what rule was violated. [...]

The second way to develop competence in a second language is by language learning. We will use the term "learning" henceforth to refer to conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them. In non-technical terms, learning is "knowing about" a language, known to most people as "grammar", or "rules". Some synonyms include formal knowledge of a language, or explicit learning. (KRASHEN, 2009, p. 10).

The second hypothesis is the monitor hypothesis that presupposes the presence in the student of an internal system responsible for the conscious linguistic elaboration. The monitor varies according to the age, cognitive ability and methods used in the teaching-learning process of the foreign language.

The third and fourth hypotheses deal respectively with the natural order and the input. The natural order would imply the learning of the grammatical rules in an unconscious way and would be validated by this system of learning that excludes the forged consciousness in controlled situations of teaching / learning. On the other hand, the input hypothesis refers only to acquisition without establishing relationship with learning. According to this hypothesis, the learner improves and progresses when he receives input from a second language that is one step beyond his current stage of linguistic competence. For example, if an apprentice is in an 'i' stage, the acquisition occurs when he / she is exposed to 'Understanding Input' belonging to the 'i + 1' level. We can then define 'Understanding Inputs' as the target language that the student would not be able to produce but can still understand. It goes beyond the choice of words and involves presentation of context, explanation, reformulation of unclear parts, use of visual clues and negotiation of meanings. The meaning conveyed successfully is the learning experience.

The fifth and last hypothesis deals with affectivity with a component of the foreign language acquisition / learning process. For Krashen, affectivity plays the role of facilitator of acquiring a foreign language. The affective filter encompasses situations of motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. The higher the degrees of motivation and self-confidence, and the lower the degree of anxiety, the better the student's performance. The higher the affective filter, the greater the mental block and the more difficult the acquisition of language.

According to Osimo², the learning of languages is linked to the affective situation established with the place where it happens. In his own words,

Learning in general, and learning a foreign language, is tied to the affective context in which it occurs. A child learns his mother's language or the language of the people closest, by associating the necessity to satisfy primary needs with certain sounds, and the concrete satisfaction of these needs by using the corresponding sounds. Learning the so-called "mother tongue" (or mother tongues in the case of bilingual families) occurs through unconscious associations and is detached from any rational control. Given that the needs of an infant are, for the most part, tied to the satisfaction of physiological needs and that the world is explored "by mouth", the first words learnt are usually associated with the mother and with the satisfaction of the following needs: *din bdins, mummy, milky, dummy, pooh-poohs*.

Osimo's observations consider the process of learning a language in childhood. However, by making the necessary adjustments and establishing the different correspondences, it is possible to affirm that affectivity is a preponderant and determinant part for the learning process of an adult student although studies show that in this age group this process may be a little more difficult and time-consuming. Regarding the affective filter, although in a slightly opposite sense, Voluz³ (2013, p.32) postulates that it "figura hoje como uma questão muito discutida e importante no âmbito do ensino de línguas e também perceptível em todos os outros ambientes onde o objetivo seja o aprendizado em seu sentido geral". In other words, the process of learning a language, to be effective, cannot dispense with a low level of affective filtering.

However, alongside the affective filter, it is important to consider that adult student learning also occurs from the experience itself. In this sense, according to Greco de Latella (2010), learning presupposes change, growth, and will become more effective, productive and meaningful the more it involves the learner in his or her human whole, so that formation becomes trans- formation. For the authors,

Nessun cambiamento, però, può prescindere da tutte le azioni vissute e pensate, che rappresentano l'esperienza di chi si accinge ad intraprendere un nuovo processo di apprendimento. Tutto ciò è ancora più vero se gli allievi di cui si parla sono adulti, dotati non solo di un ricco bagaglio esperienziale, ma anche di un senso di sé autonomo e responsabile.

In quest'ottica il docente, abbandonando qualsiasi atteggiamento direttivo e ancor più autoritario, si dovrebbe porre come partner accompagnatore del discente verso la conquista di una maggior

² Source of the query: http://courses.logos.it/EN/1_4.html. Access in apr. 14, 2018.

³ "is today a very controversial and important issue in the field of language teaching and also perceptible in all other environments where the objective be learning in its general sense".

autonomia nell'apprendimento e verso la propria trasformazione. (p.26)⁴.

We agree with the fact that there is a certain impossibility in dissociating the process of learning a language from the aspects of emotionality and life experience even though there is not always consensus on this position. In this respect, Oliveira (1992, p. 76) highlights Vygotsky's position for whom traditional psychology would fail in trying to separate the intellectual aspects of the volitional and emotive aspects since both aspects are intertwined and active in the learning processes. In other words, according to Vygotsky⁵ (1989, p. 7), every idea ends up being touched by "uma atitude afetiva transmutada com relação ao fragmento da realidade ao qual se refere". The question then posed is this: if motivation, life experience and low affective filter are important to the learning process, how to awaken them in adult learners whose entry into a foreign language course took place for reasons that go by, often far from these determinants? How can we awaken them by putting ourselves into a collaborative attitude and understanding that the adult wants and needs to immediately put into practice all that he learns?

We do not have a definitive answer and we do not know if there is a definitive answer. However, based on our teaching experience, we can say that the lack of these elements contributes greatly to the students' evasion and challenges the creativity of teachers.

The case of the State University of Rio de Janeiro

The Italian Language course at the State University of Rio de Janeiro is linked to the Institute of Letters and provides for dual habilitation with a preponderant focus on teacher training⁶. The entrance to the university is done by means of own entrance exam and during the course choice process, before taking the tests, students can choose more than one option. Rarely is Italian the first choice of many students who choose this language only to pass the entrance examination and to enter the university, often to do Portuguese- Literature or English-Literature, two very concurrent courses with a high candidate / vacancy ratio and higher rate of employability.

When we teach beginning level classes, that is, classes of students who have just arrived at university, we have the personal curiosity to know why they chose the Portuguese-

Italian-Literature course. In general, the students' answers⁷ allow us to understand that at least 40 percent of them did not choose the Italian course as the first option. Of those 40%, 20% would like to have entered the Portuguese-Literature course, 10% would like to have entered other courses offered by the Institute of Letters⁸ and 10% do not have clear answers. Generally, the group that would like to have entered the Portuguese-Literature courses or to other courses end up applying for internal transfer tests when they can - if they are approved - change course.

This scenario, while challenging⁹, may offer some advantages, such as the possibility of doing a differentiated and deeper work given the reduced number of students. This more detailed work can be verified both in the field of linguistic studies and in the field of literary studies and in the field of teacher education studies.

In the field of language and literature studies it is always possible to combine tradition with modernity, either by the dialogical mark that can be established between canonical texts and modern texts, between concepts of norm and concepts of use, or by the possibility of using communication technologies and information inside or outside Revoluti¹⁰ classrooms.

In this field of teacher training it is possible to develop very interesting and fruitful discussions about points that are present in this article. During class, it becomes possible to combine theory and practice by sharing common learning experiences with future teachers. Theoretical lectures on didactics of the Italian language as a foreign language in comparison to the teaching of the Italian language as a second language, are based on fruitful debates about the realities of each teaching modality as well as the practical content that consists of the analysis of textbooks to adjust indications to reality of the Brazilian student, elaboration of authorial material, the transformation of authentic material into didactic material and application in the classroom.

It is worth highlighting the analysis of operational models that, in addition to the process of transforming authentic material into didactic source, include the development of techniques for the development of receptive skills, techniques for the development of productive skills, techniques for the development of grammatical reflection, analysis of learning styles from the Kolb and Kolb (2014, 196) concepts that identifies "four learning styles that are associated with different approaches to learning: diverging,

⁴ No change, however, can disregard all actions experienced and thought, which represent the experience of those who are about to undertake a new learning process. All this is even more true if the students we are talking about are adults, equipped not only with a rich experiential baggage, but also with an autonomous and responsible sense of self.

From this point of view, the teacher, abandoning any managerial and even more authoritarian attitude, should be the partner of the learner towards the conquest of greater autonomy in learning and towards his own transformation.

⁵ "an affective attitude transmuted in relation to the fragment of reality to which it refers".

⁶ The double habilitation is the necessary and obligatory training in Italian Language, Portuguese Language and respective literatures. The student is not required to take the degree, however, only the baccalaureate does not guarantee entry into the job market.

⁷ We do not use precision instruments to do this quantification, but we rely on our classroom experience. For the near future, we intend to develop a more efficient evaluation mechanism for these relatively informal surveys.

⁸ Currently the Institute of Letters of the State University of Rio de Janeiro offers the following unique qualifications: Portuguese-Literatures, English-Literatures. The double qualifications are: Portuguese-German and respective literatures, Portuguese-Spanish and respective literatures, Portuguese-French and respective literatures, Portuguese-Hebrew and respective literatures, Portuguese-Italian and respective literatures, Portuguese-Japanese and respective literatures. Source: <http://www.institutodeletras.uerj.br/gradhabilit.php>.

⁹ Other courses, except for those with a single qualification, have similar difficulties, but our focus here is the field in which we operate.

¹⁰ Revoluti is a flexible technological classroom used by the State University of Rio de Janeiro and other public and private universities in the State of Rio de Janeiro.

assimilating, converging, and accommodating". For the authors,

The concept of learning style describes individual differences in learning based on the learner's preference for employing different phases of the learning cycle. Because of our hereditary equipment, our particular life experiences, and the demands of our present environment, we develop a preferred way of choosing among the four learning modes. We resolve the conflict between being concrete or abstract and between being active or reflective in patterned, characteristic ways. (KOLB and KOLB 2014, p. 194-195).

In general, the diverging type favors concrete experience and reflexive observation, managing to analyze a problem from various points of view and organizing the contents into meaningful structures. The assimilating type privileges the interaction between abstract conceptualization and reflexive observation. Its ability consists in the elaboration of theoretical models through the inductive reasoning. The converging type, in turn, favors abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. He is skilled in the practical application of ideas and tends to deal with problems from hypothetical deductive reasoning. The accommodating type is skillful in applying to concrete experience of the experimentation activities. He is a practical, flexible and intuitive thinker who can establish the synthesis between concrete situations and theoretical principles.

By way of conclusion

We try to demonstrate how the affectivity issue influences the teaching and learning process of a foreign language, based on the teaching of the Italian language with which we work at the State University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. We also want to indicate how the teaching of this language constitutes a challenge to teachers who must deal with the fact that not all students choose to study Italian as a first choice. We recognize that, if on the one hand, the challenge is great; on the other, it can become an excellent opportunity to deepen linguistic, literary and didactic issues.

In fact, every challenge requires the development of creativity which, combined with competence and theoretical knowledge, helps to awaken in the pupils the interest they often lack when they join or even to increase the interest of those whose first choice was the study of the Italian language, literature and culture for wanting to work with the language whether in teaching or in other fronts that are open to them.

In this sense, the didactic classes allow the formation of students - future teachers - who discover the wealth of possibilities of action based on reflexive analyzes associated with the personal experiences of learning as well as the practical activities that involve the creation and application of activities to be students of the initial levels and with the students of the language course for the community¹¹. With motivation activated, we were able to extract from the

students the commitment and involvement necessary for an effective and efficient learning process.

We are aware of the need to develop more efficient and accurate student control mechanisms to further adjust our practice. However, based on our experience and through an informal survey, we establish goals committed to student motivation by reducing the affective filter that will allow him to develop interest and, consequently, learning, creating a circle whose operation predicts that the more motivated the learner is the more he will learn and the more he learns the more motivated he will be by identifying the appreciation of his efforts.

Our whole practice is a work in progress. For this reason, we say that we are partially concluding because our work "material" is the human being whose psychosocial complexity plays an important role in the teaching and learning process, so that classroom work cannot depend on quantification simply mathematics.

We intend, soon, to work with the application of questionnaires that will allow us to evaluate some aspects of our course. However, we are aware that there are problematizations that go far beyond the use of technologies or the success in lowering the affective filter of learners. In Brazil we need to deal with issues that are no longer so prevalent in more developed nations. These issues, which in general affect socioeconomic aspects, need to be considered since they directly affect the development of interest in humanities studies, but they cannot become a difficulty for teachers whose scope must always be to motivate and to seek to develop skills in their students.

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¹¹ It is the PLIC Project (Languages for the Community Project), a language course offered by the Institute of Letters of UERJ for the community whose teachers are trainee students who work under the guidance of a responsible teacher. Currently, courses are offered in German, Spanish, French, Koine Greek, English, Italian, Japanese, Latin, Portuguese and Portuguese for foreigners.