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Investigating affect in a distance language learning context

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Introduction

The investigation of affect has been moving (somewhat quietly) up the second language acquisition (SLA) research agenda for a number of years and is now beginning to make a wider impact as the place of emotions becomes more firmly embedded in theories of learning and language learning (Beard *et al.*, 2007; Putwain, 2007; Oxford, 1999; Young, 1999; Arnold, 1999). The distance language learning environment is unique in that learners have to manage to a much larger extent on their own than in classroom settings, and this can have major impact on the way they feel, sometimes exacerbating negative emotions as there is no one to give immediate feedback and reassurance (Hurd, 2006, 2007a; White, 2003, 2005).

This paper gives a brief overview of affect in a distance language context in conjunction with the literature relating to classroom contexts and discusses and evaluates research methods for investigating the affective domain.

Why investigate affect in distance language learning?

One of the key characteristics of distance learning - the physical absence of a tutor and other students - can result in feelings of isolation and loneliness in learners, which is often accompanied by uncertainty about their own abilities and effectiveness as a learner (self-efficacy), negative comparisons with other students (imagined as more successful) and fear of failure. This can lead to anxiety, demotivation, and even

subsequent withdrawal from the course. It would be wrong to say that this is the case with all students. Indeed, there is evidence (Hurd, 2007a) that some students find the private and anonymous learning setting of distance education has the opposite effect. Such students appreciate being able to practise (and make mistakes) in private and organise their study hours to suit themselves. It could be argued, nevertheless, that they are adept at self-management and cope well with the support on offer. It is the struggling students who should be our main concern, and there are plenty of them. On two main fronts – successful learning outcomes and student retention - it is vital that we consider the affective domain of learning. If we ignore this critical domain, we are not recognising a major influence on language learning and we risk losing potentially successful students who are likely to fail if we do not attend to their needs and provide appropriate support. Some go as far as to suggest that we are abdicating our responsibility as teachers if we do not address affective issues, described as ‘some of the most essential ingredients in the management of successful learning’ (Underhill, 1989: 252).

Literature review

Arnold and Brown (1999: 1) contend that: ‘the term affect has to do with aspects of our emotional being’ and can be considered broadly as ‘aspects of emotion, feeling, mood or attitude which condition behaviour’. In terms of their relationship with learning, affective factors are increasingly considered to be highly influential in the language learning process, a point made more evident by the wealth of papers published in this area in the last two decades (Dörnyei, 2001, 2005; Ehrman 1996; Horwitz, 2000, 2001; Horwitz *et al.*, 1986; MacIntyre 1999; Oxford 1990; 1993; 1999; Young 1999). Oxford (1990: 140) maintains that ‘the affective side of the

learner is probably one of the very biggest influences on language learning success or failure' and that it is impossible to overstate the importance of affective factors in terms of their influence on language learning. Arnold and Brown (1999: 8) assert that 'the way we feel about ourselves and our capabilities can either facilitate or impede our learning ...' Stevick (1999: 47) considers that 'affect is encoded to various degrees in the cognitive schemata of memory' and that 'affect participates in the process of learning ... by *interfering* with it.' (1999: 50). The way in which affect 'interferes' with learning is outlined by Ehrman (1996: 138):

... the affective dimension affects how efficiently students can use what they have. For example, strong motivation tends to help students marshal their assets and skills, whereas low motivation or intense anxiety interferes with their ability to use their skills and abilities.

In daily life there are many examples to be found which illustrate the ways in which this interference can happen: you are worried about being late for an appointment - you rush out and forget to lock the front door; you've got an essay to write and don't know what to put - your mind goes blank; you have to speak in a foreign language in front of others - you're tongue-tied, you freeze or stutter, you make basic mistakes, you talk nonsense ... These examples serve to illustrate the concept of the 'whole person' in that we are not emotion-free zones that just think and analyse, but beings with feelings and emotions which not only make us human but affect everything we do. The close link between affect and cognition is elaborated by Arnold and Brown (1999: 16) who speak of the 'difficulty of isolating the cognitive, for at many points affect inevitably enters the picture'. Le Doux (1996: 25) extends this even further in maintaining that 'minds without emotions are not really minds at all'. Affect and cognition are seen as partners in the mind where 'reason and emotion work in concert'

(Ramnani, 2006) in a bi-directional relationship in which attention to affect can have a positive influence on language learning, and at the same time the language learning setting can create the grounds for purposeful, motivated and enjoyable learning.

Given the power of affective factors to influence learning and behaviour, it seems obvious that we should find out as much as we can about the ways in which these factors manifest themselves among our learners. Yet affect still remains a largely neglected area, not least in the distance language context. Why might this be?

Why is it difficult to investigate affect?

Both content and process are responsible for the difficulties encountered when attempting to investigate affect. Firstly, emotions are notoriously difficult to define, let alone research, particularly with distance learners, whose physical absence gives few clues. Secondly, the affective dimensions of learning are seen to be messy, difficult to pin down, and to many, less important than cognitive considerations, despite the increasing recognition of the interplay between cognitive and affective processes. Moreover, investigating affect in a distance language learning setting is no easy task: firstly there are problems of access and secondly, many learners do not feel comfortable talking about their feelings and emotions, regarding such talk as peripheral or superfluous to the 'real matter at hand' or even as evidence of weakness.

A mixed-method approach

The most popular method used for investigation among large groups of distance language learners is questionnaires and these have been used extensively to gain information on general trends. Questionnaires can be 'very useful for giving

indications of group norms and, complemented by other tools, such as interviews, observation studies, focus groups and think-aloud procedures, seem particularly suited to research which investigates learner variables with large numbers of language students' (Hurd, 2001). However, as Skehan (1989) argues, it may be that questionnaire methods of data elicitation do not tally with actual behaviour. Kalaja (1995, cited in Cotterall, 1999) suggests that questionnaires can only measure affective variables in theory and not on actual occasions of talk or writing.

Qualitative tools, such as diary-keeping, focus groups, interviews and think-aloud verbal protocols can give depth to the broader findings of studies using quantitative tools and help to create a more comprehensive picture. They allow researchers to probe more deeply into the factors underlying answers to questionnaires, and participants to elaborate on their thoughts and reflect on their experience. There is also the opportunity when using certain qualitative tools, such as interviews, for participants to develop their ideas through interacting with another person (the researcher) or in the case of focus groups, other people (the participants and researcher). These methods can allow, therefore, a more equal balance between participant and researcher by making the investigator an integral part of the process.

A learner diary is a useful tool to help learners think about their learning in a structured way and manage all aspects of their learning, including the emotional side. It can help build awareness of the process of learning and help learners identify what personally motivates or inhibits their own learning. If shared, it can also allow teachers to help learners improve the ways in which they learn, and peers to give

mutual support. Rubin (2003: 1) sums up neatly the benefits and advantages for both learner and teacher: Writing a diary:

can help the learner begin to monitor his/her own progress and give the teacher some idea of the ways learners address their problems. It can also provide an opportunity for the teacher to scaffold, that is, to suggest other ways to address a problem for the learner to try out and/or note patterns of problems or solutions that the learner has.

Diaries encourage reflection and can also give learners a sense of control in that they alone are responsible for what is being written. It might also be the case that writing down negative emotions can help to contain them and minimise their power to interfere with learning. At the very least, in identifying and bringing them to the fore, learners are in a better position to deal with them. For a researcher, the main disadvantage is coping with the data which are likely to be very rich but also difficult to analyse in any systematic way. Qualitative software tools such as QSR N6 and Nvivo 7 can be very helpful in this respect.

The focus group method has four main advantages: (1) practical – they are more economical on time, (2) they can be useful in providing supplementary data in studies that rely on survey methods (Morgan, 1997), (3) they allow for the collection of concentrated amounts of data in one session, and (4) they encourage open discussion in a supportive atmosphere, which can help to establish a ‘climate of disclosure’ (Wilson, 1997) leading to a potentially rich data set. Disadvantages are composition of the group – if participants are voluntary they may not be representative of the larger cohort of learners. There may be gender and age imbalances, and, more seriously, domination of the group by one or more members, leading to difficulty in

managing the discussion. However, their potential to provide a more personal dimension to findings from questionnaires should not be underestimated.

Interviews can be very effective in encouraging reflection through their ability to probe and tease out deeper thought processes. As Arthur (2002, cited in Burgess *et al.*, 2006: 75) says: ‘this kind of in-depth research can be very revealing as participants become aware of their own view and attitudes ...’ In the case of studies carried out by the author into the experience of distance language learning (Hurd, 2006, 2007a, 2007b), using semi-structured interview methods, students’ personal revelations about anxiety, staying motivated, managing time effectively and ways of approaching the course materials proved particularly valuable. The use of think-aloud verbal protocols (TAPs) allowed the opportunity to gain an ethnographic perspective on the influence of context (in this case the distance environment) on learners’ emotional responses and learning behaviour, including strategy use.

The great advantage of TAPs is that they offer the chance to have direct access to distance students’ mental processes, which has the potential to increase the accuracy of the data; they also provide the opportunity to gain information on emotions and strategy use (Afflerbach, 2000) in addition to cognitive activity. Through allowing learners to talk about *what* they are doing *while they are doing it*, rather than afterwards, the researcher has the unique experience of hearing exactly what is going on in their heads before they’ve had a chance to change their minds. In other words, the thoughts are *concurrent* rather than *retrospective*, and therefore potentially more authentic and less structured than in a questionnaire or any other tool that requires retrospection. There is no time lapse for students to re-think or put a different spin on

their answer, nor are they in any way guided to respond to specific questions; they simply say whatever is going on in their heads and keep talking. TAPs can thus reveal insights which are difficult or even impossible to obtain by other methods.

Some methodological weaknesses of TAPs have been cited, notably automaticity, the fact that we may be unaware of our cognitive processes as many are automatic (Singhal 2001), and reactivity, the interference that can be caused by the 'heavy' or 'double' cognitive load under which students are placed in having to keep talking at the same time as carrying out the task (Matsumoto 1993; Nielson *et al.*, 2002). Both have been countered in the literature. With regard to automaticity, Ericsson and Simon (1980) contend that as processes become more automated and hence unconscious, only the final products are left in memory available for reporting and that complex and demanding tasks should, therefore, be selected as these are less likely to involve processes that are engaged in automatically. Leow and Morgan-Short (2004: 42) confirm the view of Ericsson and Simon (1993) that there is no evidence in TAPs studies that internal processes are altered, and that 'the only evidence of reactivity in studies to date is the amount of time required to complete the task.'

Another difficulty cited in the literature is the tendency of TAPs to merge into other kinds of verbal self-reports which are either reports of general behaviour or of generalised language behaviour and have in common the fact that they are retrospective. Cohen (1996) distinguishes these from think-alouds, the 'self-revelation' reports which involve stream-of-consciousness disclosure of thought processes and are strictly concurrent with actual thinking. Graham (1997), however, finds no clear-cut distinction and that the various categories have a tendency to

overlap. Students frequently provide a mix in any one utterance, e.g. they may talk about general behaviour: 'When I get really stressed, I generally take a break from my studies'; then generalised language behaviour: 'but I do find gapfill activities really motivating because there is only one possible right answer'; followed by a genuine TAP: 'I'm now trying to work out which word should go in this gap – should it be *du* or *de*?' The problem with being too rigid about definitions is that, in so doing, you may risk losing valuable data on the emotional responses that accompany task performance.

A practical disadvantage is that the data from TAPs are messy and very time-consuming to analyse, but probably no more so than interview or diary data, and this is, in any case made up for by the fact that this method of investigation gives you a real insight into what learners are thinking and doing at a micro level, in a way that no other research tool can.

Conclusion

This brief paper sets the scene for the investigation of affect in a distance language learning context. The approaches outlined above all provide a means of gaining close insights into a particular learning culture. Like all ethnographic strategies they are not designed to reveal data that can be universalised, but can give very strong indicators (particular in conjunction with questionnaires) of the factors at work in the ways in which learners relate to their learning environment and, may also, at the same time, help those who write distance language learning materials and/or tutor students to provide more targeted support. Moreover, studies using these methods can be carried out almost anywhere, making research not only interesting but adventurous. They also

provide a rich database and an end product which is a contribution to knowledge (Wolcott, 1999). In addition, they conform well to the increasing emphasis on process models in language learning where constructs such as motivation, anxiety and beliefs interrelate in a 'dynamic, ever-changing process' (Dörnyei, 2005: 66), and with the growing recognition that these interrelationships are crucial to an understanding of individual language learning. In the case of the distance environment, White's (2003: 118) contention that 'understanding the dynamics of distance learner characteristics has profound implications not only for the design of courses and learner support, but for the individual distance language teacher', also signals the need for approaches and methods that allow researchers to get a real insight into how learners think, learn and behave within this particular learning culture.

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