

The Non-threatening Learning Environment

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Abstract

Given the tendency of language classrooms to promote debilitating anxiety, the promotion of a low-stress language learning environment must be an important priority for the teacher. This paper explores how language teachers in Korea might identify and address sources of anxiety in their classrooms. In addition to self-examination on the part of the teacher, this involves encouraging realistic expectations about accuracy and errors, offering training in affective strategies, to help students manage anxiety and improve performance, reassuring students that they are not alone in their affective reactions and that these feelings are normal, making or choosing appropriate learning materials, and showing that the teacher/evaluator understands the tensions caused by language learning. Self- and peer-assessment involving partner and small-group work, interviews, problem-solving, role-plays and practice of test-tasks are also an effective and relatively painless means of involving learners in the learning and assessment process and can reduce anxiety-raising competitiveness and apprehension.

1. Introduction

The study of affect (anxiety, confidence, self-esteem, motivation, attitudes to learning, etc.) has become increasingly popular recently, to the extent that Stevick (1999:43) warns against viewing it as the latest “philosopher’s stone” of applied linguistics and language teaching. Investigation into the “effect of affect” (Scovel 1978) is an extension of a question at the heart of much second-language acquisition (SLA) research (why some learners learn better than others), which Stevick (1980) answers in terms of internal processes: “success depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analysis, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom” (Stevick 1980:4). Affect (“aspects of emotion, feeling, mood or attitude which condition behaviour”, Arnold [1999]) has thus come to be recognised as a powerful determiner of learning, with Stern (1983) asserting that “the affective component contributes at least as much and often more to language learning than the cognitive skills” (1983:386). This claim is supported by a large body of recent cross-disciplinary research, showing that affective variables have significant influence on language achievement (e.g. Gardner 1985; Skehan 1989; Spolsky 1989; Gardner & MacIntyre 1992; 1993;). Damasio (1994) shows that emotions are a part of reason on the neurobiological level,

and sees emotion and cognition as partners: “minds without emotions are not really minds at all” (LeDoux 1996:25).

Some of the strongest correlations between affective variables and achievement measures involve anxiety, with research pointing to a reciprocity between anxiety and proficiency (MacIntyre *et al.* 1997:279), such that “even in optimum conditions, students can experience destructive forms of anxiety” (Reid 1999:297). Language-learning contexts are especially prone to anxiety arousal (Horwitz *et al.* 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner 1989; 1991a; Price 1991; MacIntyre 1995:90), with Campbell & Ortiz (1991:159) estimating that up to half of all language students experience debilitating levels of language anxiety, and Horwitz *et al.* (1986) finding that language anxiety can cause students to postpone language study indefinitely or to change majors. Because of this, language anxiety has been the subject of a good deal of research, on the assumption that an understanding of its causes and investigation into how to reduce language anxiety will improve learner performance and increase learning satisfaction by easing tensions and reducing demands on cognitive processing space (Eysenck 1979). Scovel (1978) provides an early review of anxiety research, which is supplemented by the excellent reviews of MacIntyre & Gardner (1991b), and Gardner & MacIntyre (1993). More recently, Oxford (1999) has investigated whether language anxiety is a short-term or lasting trait, whether it is harmful or helpful, which factors correlate with language anxiety, and how anxiety can be identified in the language classroom. Building on these sources of information, the present discussion focuses on the Korean situation and examines how a “non-threatening learning environment” might be constructed in language classrooms through attention to the teacher, the learning environment, the learning materials, and assessment methods, thus offering a means of overcoming disruptive emotions (anxiety, fear, stress, anger, depression, negative reactions) which make teaching techniques ineffective (Arnold & Brown 1999:2), and of promoting the sort of constructive, learning “climate” (Fraser 1986:182) which has been shown to be conducive to learning, as well as being a worthwhile end in itself.

2. History of research

Attention to the importance of affect in the language learning process can be seen as originating in influential educational theories (e.g. the humanist approach to teaching and learning [Dewey 1938; Holt 1976]), which followed educational and philosophical (not psycholinguistic) rationales, and which were intended for other subject areas (Freire 1970; Stenhouse 1975), though coinciding significantly with views of applied linguists such as Widdowson (1983) and Brumfit (1984) on the open-endedness and creativity of language (White 1988:35). Thus Clarke (1991) details four “important and substantially overlapping streams of applied linguistics and educational thinking” (1991:16), all of which place the learner at the centre of the learning process, derive at least partly from a holistic approach, and focus on the learner’s affective, cognitive, and linguistic needs, his/her conscious or

subconscious strategies, and his/her own perception of the objectives, aims, and other aspects of the learning situation:

1. the largely North American experimentation with “humanistic” methodologies in ESL (Curran 1972; Stevick 1976);
2. the British EFL emphasis upon needs analysis as the basis for a Notional or Communicative syllabus, often with specific purposes in mind (Richterich 1972; Munby 1978);
3. the general increase in research into issues related to learner individualisation and autonomy (e.g. Altman 1972; Disick 1975; the CRAPEL publications);
4. the closely related investigations into the nature of learner strategies in the language learning process (e.g. Naiman *et al.* 1978; Candlin & Murphy 1987; Wenden & Rubin 1987; Oxford 1990; Dickinson 1992; Williams & Burden 1997). (Clarke 1991:16)

Recent research on affective variables has focused on naturalistic enquiry (Bailey 1983; Horwitz *et al.* 1986; Price 1991) and on the interaction between language anxiety and various moderator variables: i) classroom activity and test type (Scott 1986; Lavine & Oxford 1990; Young 1990; Crookall & Oxford 1991; Koch & Terrell 1991; Madsen *et al.* 1991; Price 1991); ii) competitiveness (Bailey 1983); iii) learning styles and personality types (Ehrman & Oxford 1990; Lavine & Oxford 1990); iv) risk-taking (Ely 1986); v) beliefs about language learning (Cotterall 1999); and vi) attitudes (Phillips 1990; Price 1991). Brown (1974) also discusses ethnocentric factors such as the learner’s willingness or unwillingness to take on a new identity related to the target language; and social factors such as empathy. Heron (1992) proposes a multi-modal learning model, with four modes of learning from experience (action, conceptual, imaginal, emotional), at the base of which is the “affective” emotional mode (awareness of learning). Aoki (1999) and Reid (1999) describe the political implications of affect, Schumann (1999) investigates the neuro-physiology of affect and learning, Kohonen (1999) and others look into implications of incorporating affect into assessment procedures, and Stevick (1999:55) describes how affect influences learning by shaping and reshaping the networks of long-term memory and by “cluttering up” processing capacity. Schumann (1975) offers an excellent review of early SLA research and literature on affective factors (including age); and Arnold & Brown (1999) provide a more contemporary perspective of the language learner as an individual (experiencing anxiety, beliefs, extroversion/introversion, inhibitions, learner styles, motivation/self-esteem issues, etc.) and as a participant in a socio-cultural situation (empathy, classroom transactions, cross-cultural processes).

Research into the learning environment (as a factor influencing affect) can be traced back to Murray (1938), whose early classroom environment instruments focussed on student perceptions of actual classroom conditions. More recent studies include student perceptions of preferred learning environments and teacher perceptions of actual and preferred

environments, the intention being to predict cognitive and affective learning outcomes from these perceptions (Walberg 1968; Anderson & Walberg 1974; Fraser 1981; Fraser & Walberg 1981). The Learning Environment Inventory (LEI - Fraser, Anderson & Walberg 1982) and the Classroom Environment Scale (CES - Moos & Trickett 1974) were early attempts to investigate such perceptions, though they excluded some individualised, inquiry-based aspects. The Individualized Classroom Environment Questionnaire (ICEQ - Fraser 1985) was developed to measure those factors which differentiate conventional classrooms from those with either open or inquiry-based approaches, and Fraser (1986) supplies a list of studies using the ICEQ, which suggests that promotion of classroom environment characteristics such as cohesiveness, goal direction and democracy has consistently positive influences on learning, and that teachers can expect students to achieve better when there is a greater similarity between actual and preferred classroom environments (Fraser 1986:137), though Moos (1974) makes the point that there is a tendency for individuals to perceive their *actual* setting as being less favourable than their *preferred* setting.

3. The teacher

Reid (1999) points to the responsibility of teachers to “provide the scaffolding for more effective and efficient learning” (Reid 1999:305; cf. Guild 1994) by raising student awareness of affect, and then listening to the students as they express their needs, beliefs and perceptions. Underhill sees this act of “really listening to the student and to the content of what he or she says” (1989:256) as having a dramatic effect on the learning atmosphere, since “our students don’t necessarily need reassurance, what they need is to be heard” (1989:256). Such a student-centred approach presupposes a learning climate of trust and clarity, which Legutke & Thomas (1991:64) see as an indispensable goal, governing teachers’ choices and preceding the learning process, though depending on that process for its practical realisation. Awareness of the need for this learning climate is generally seen as more facilitating than innovative tasks, techniques, or principles, since:

... doing the same things with a different awareness seems to make a bigger difference than doing different things with the same awareness” (Underhill 1989:260).

Sano *et al.* (1984) claim that creative production is possible only in a “non-threatening environment” which encourages meaningful learning and the creative use of English. They see learning as dependent on:

... warm-hearted interaction between teachers and learners, as well as among learners themselves. This friendly interaction is, in our opinion, the most essential factor in successful language learning. (Sano *et al* 1984:171)

A number of researchers thus draw attention to the importance of the teacher in

promoting learning environments “which are cognitively and affectively expanding, ... which enable the learner to become a more adequate and knowledgeable person” (Pine & Boy 1977:iii), and which recognise the place of affect in that process (e.g. Brock 1994:51). All too often, however, curriculum, teaching methodology, textbook, assessment and research, rely heavily and sometimes exclusively on narrowly-defined academic achievement, promoting “education from the neck up” (Rogers 1951) above development of qualities (i.e. genuineness, unconditional acceptance, and empathy) described by Rogers (1951) as being possessed by everyone, but rarely developed in a systematic way:

... there is no substitute for personal warmth, tolerance and a positive attitude to people, to oneself and to others. (Legutke & Thomas 1991:35)

In the Korean context, Hofstede’s (1986) description of interaction characteristics indicates a collectivist, large power distance, strong avoidance of uncertainty, and slightly feminine society, in which students and teachers take on traditional roles. In this environment, the teacher is never contradicted nor publicly criticised, being the dispenser of “correct” information, though teachers (and students) are allowed to behave emotionally, and the teacher is typically a source of “warm-hearted interaction” (Sano *et al* 1984). Students admire friendliness in teachers, they practice mutual solidarity, and they try to behave modestly, speaking in class only when called upon by the teacher (Hofstede 1986:312-15). Given the differences with western interaction characteristics, in which learning is more student centred, but in which emotions and unquestioning respect for the teacher do not generally play a part in the learning experience, Korean learners and foreign teachers can expect a mismatch of perceptions and beliefs (personal and cultural) when they meet in the language classroom.

This mismatch is typified by the classic situation in which EFL students ask their foreign teacher how old he/she is, whether he/she is married, what his/her qualifications are, and how much money he/she earns. For the surprised language teacher (new to collectivist societies), these are startlingly insensitive questions, and the “knee-jerk” reaction (e.g. “That’s my business!”) can be counter-productive to group harmony. For the students, these questions are simply a means of extracting information necessary for the establishment of the “correct” hierarchical relationship – a hierarchy that governs not only Korean society, but the language that is used in interactions within that society. Every misunderstanding is an opportunity for clarification, however, and this situation provides an opportunity for the teacher to demonstrate that social mores are different in the west, thus offering a valuable cultural learning experience to students who are intending to travel abroad, or who wish to work for international companies. Often, however, a linguistic hegemony prevails on the part of the “alien” teacher, and explicit and implicit values, beliefs, and purposes (Phillipson 1992:73), which have brought that person to Korea, combine in a denunciation of non-western values and activities, of the sort identified by Harvey (1985) when describing the

TEFL situation in China.

Another issue which has received a great deal of attention from TEFL practitioners in Korea is that of plagiarism, with Korean students often being branded as academically, morally, or culturally unable to produce original compositions. As with the previous situation, the submission of plagiarised work is an opportunity for discussion, rather than an excuse for anger and expression of negative attitudes on the part of the teacher. An investigation of factors leading to the situation will often show that students perceive themselves to be the object of unrealistic teacher-expectations, or simply that they have misunderstood the assignment. It must rather be asked why the teacher has manufactured a situation in which cooperation, normally a desirable learning tool, is actively punished. Why has the teacher placed so much emphasis on the *product* of a written assignment, when current educational practice focuses on the *process* of writing? Why was the teacher not involved in that process, assisting and assessing (and discussing the issue of plagiarism on a one-to-one basis) as the composition took shape? Indeed, why is the teacher showing any negative emotions at all?

These two situations mentioned above are stereotypical, but they point to a tendency for linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1992) in EFL teachers which is implicit in their classes (impacting unfavourably on the students) and which extends to culture, principles of teaching/learning, and even political concerns. Such a hidden agenda can be a source of tension, demotivation and conflict in the language classroom. Harvey makes some interesting observations in this connection:

1. Chinese [Korean] learning methods cannot simply be dismissed as “primitive”, “old-fashioned” or “misguided”. There are a number of obvious historical, pedagogical, and psychological reasons for them.
2. “Traditional” methods and skills are not fundamentally or necessarily unworkable alongside modern EFL teaching methods.
3. EFL in China [Korea] needs western experience and expertise, not western dogma.
4. More investigation needs to be made into learner-centred behaviour in language teaching.
5. The “We’ve got it right” attitude is a waste of time in China [Korea]. Even if it is true, nobody wants to hear it. (Harvey 1985:6)

As Barrow points out:

... the teaching of English as a Second Language may properly be regarded as a service and a potential advantage to non-English speakers, rather than as a further exercise in cultural domination. (1990:9)

When addressing sources of anxiety and fear in their classrooms, it is essential, therefore, that teachers investigate their own basic assumptions and reactions before

criticising or punishing their students for late arrival in class, tardiness in submitting assignments, unrealistic expectations concerning accuracy and proficiency, or unwillingness to participate actively in the classroom. Initial self-reflection can (for example) examine to what extent these are in fact characteristics of the teacher, which are being emulated by the students. Teaching journals (an excellent tool for reflective professional development) might well be used, therefore, to note whether the author arrives in class 5 minutes late, on time, or 5 minutes early; has the lesson been prepared adequately?; what are the teacher's expectations regarding student proficiency, fluency and error-making?; have student assignments been marked and returned on time?; does the teacher participate actively in the lesson?; is the teacher learning a second language (e.g. Korean); how is it going? Self-reflection can thus be a valuable means of identifying contradictions in the teacher's daily practice – contradictions which are observed by the students, which come between them and the teacher in terms of mutual respect, and which are often a source of fear and confusion.

Having taken off the authoritarian “dispenser of correct language” hat, the “model of cultural appropriateness” hat, the “communicative methodology rules!” hat, and the “academically and ethically superior” hat, the teacher can begin construction of a dogma-free learning space, sensitive to the affective needs of the students, offering training in affective strategies, helping students manage anxiety and improve performance, and reassuring them that they are not alone in their affective reactions and that these feelings are normal. Instead of scorning traditional teaching methods, only to view their alternatives with fear and incomprehension (the “communicative” classroom is often communicative in name only), the teacher can set about mastering a new set of skills, identified by Kelly (1996) as macro- and micro-skills of language counselling (appendix A). Managing the lesson so that he/she can spend time with students individually, he/she can focus on:

- introducing new directions and options;
- helping the learner develop alternative strategies;
- developing the learner's self-awareness and capacity for self-appraisal;
- helping the learner establish boundaries and define achievement;
- creating a bond of shared understanding;
- deepening self-awareness, particularly of self-defeating behaviour. (Kelly 1996:95-96; cf. appendix A).

4. The classroom

The “business of learning” (Fraser 1986:foreword) is typically carried out in classrooms, where learners face the risk of shame before others (and self) for perceived inadequacy (Ehrman 1999:79). Disruptions of existing mental constructs, particularly those relating to the individual, often entail strong feelings, and the necessity of acknowledging ignorance and imperfection, along with the fear that one's linguistic performance will be inadequate, are sufficient reasons to feel distress. The classroom is therefore an environment

in which educational goals such as concern for community, concern for others, and commitment to the task in hand, must be promoted and modelled if they are to be acquired. This learning environment contains learners with their own personal histories, values, assumptions, beliefs, rights, duties, obligations and learning styles (cf. Donato 2000:45), for whom the learning task is a means of perceiving and using linguistic affordances as appropriate (Van Lier 2000:252), fostered by a climate of cooperative social interaction which “produces new, elaborate, advanced psychological processes that are unavailable to the organism working in isolation” (Vygotsky 1986:61).

Pine & Boy (1977:122, 156) list factors that influence and facilitate learning in terms of the classroom environment. These factors are detailed in appendix B, and reflect a humanistic, student-centred view of education, which might at first seem unsuitable for the Korean context, and might even represent further cultural imperialism (Bocock 1986:123). However, the traditional Korean teacher-student relationship is one of mutual respect, and the well-educated person (the goal of Korean education) is defined in official curriculum-policy documents (Korean Ministry of Education website, 2001) in terms of holistic development, creative ability based on knowledge and skills, and ethical contribution to the community. Korean students learn the concept of *hongik-ingan* (“contributing to the overall benefit of humankind”) in their secondary studies, so that the visiting foreign language teacher need not worry about embodying principles of “respect, trust, love, and concern for one another” (item 22, appendix B) in the classroom. Rather, he/she might do well to consider to what extent the learning environment in his/her classroom satisfies the characteristics identified by Pine & Boy. Appendix B offers a classroom-environment scale that might be used for such a reflective purpose, though it could also provide useful information for the teacher if given to his/her students.

It is interesting to note here that the very act of asking students to provide feedback on the affective climate of the classroom, itself implies an atmosphere of trust and of non-reprisal, in that the teacher is genuinely trying to identify non-cognitive factors that might be impeding learning, and is asking the students to give their opinion on these. The “observer’s paradox”¹ is thus turned on its head, as the act of observation is employed precisely so that perceptions and assumptions might be positively altered during the response to that observation.

5. The materials

Learning materials used in the EFL classroom can also be a source of stress for the EFL student, in that they frequently subscribe to theories of education long since discredited (White 1988, describing the “3Ps” method of teaching), they rarely address current educational issues (e.g. autonomy, learner-training, self-assessment, holistic process learning),

¹ i.e. that one alters situations by observing them.

they can be culturally insensitive (focusing on Caucasian [usually Christian] families in America or England, and presuming a multi-ethnic mix of students typical of ESL classrooms), and they tend to be teacher-centred (hence amenable to unskilled educators). Such texts, in emphasising cognitive rather than affective development, and the transmission of a fixed body of knowledge rather than the transformation of knowledge, tend to ignore the capacity to learn independently, to develop effective thinking techniques, and to learn how to learn (cf. Richards' [1985] "self-actualization" approach).

If the qualities of a non-threatening learning environment (appendix B) are to be fostered, therefore, what is the teacher to do when faced with such materials? One option is to take the "rocky" path of producing textbooks written "under difficult circumstances by amateurs" (O'Neill 1982), though this is extremely time-consuming and demanding. Another option is to adopt the process syllabus, with its on-going syllabus content negotiation between teachers and learners (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation 1973; White [ed.] 1981; Skilbeck 1984), and its learner reinterpretation and accommodation of new knowledge and capabilities through the sharing of ideas in group-work (Ausubel 1985; Bannister & Francella 1980; Bonarius *et al* [eds.] 1981). Finally (and particularly in the case of teachers who have no say in textbook selection), it might be that the sort of "warm-hearted interaction" that has been advocated thus far, will promote learning and self-esteem whatever the learning materials, and that misguided or ill-informed texts can serve as an opportunity for discussion and decision-making by students.

When designing or searching for student-centred materials which promote a non-threatening learning environment, it is important to make sure that they go "beyond the experience-activating exercises of the humanistic approaches" (Legutke & Thomas 1991:64), and of out-of-context teacher resource books, and that they focus on activities which have a language-teaching orientation, in addition to developing: i) trust-building and relaxation; ii) awareness and sensitivity training; iii) information-sharing; iv) thinking strategies and problem-solving; v) imagination-gap, fantasy and creative expression; vi) role-playing and creative dynamics; vii) interaction and interpersonality; viii) values clarification and discussion; and ix) process evaluation. It is impractical at this point to do much more than indicate the problem, since one would need to explore a whole series of learning materials in order to build a picture of an affectively and academically sensitive approach to materials design. However, an example of such an approach is offered in appendix C (Finch & Hyun 2000a). In this single page from a unit about "Chat Show" projects, a number of features are immediately evident:

1. the activities on the page are part of a sequence which focus on affective and personal exploration and development;
2. the "Homework" assignment prepares for the class activity by asking students to reflect on things that are important to them in life;

3. instructions are addressed to the students, are at their language level, and treat them as thinking and sensitive individuals (there is no attempt to use humour, though enjoyment and pleasure is a feature of the activities);
4. there is no need for the teacher to model language or to explain instructions;
5. language input is in the instructions (use of imperatives) and in the example question (e.g. “Why did you choose this?”);
6. activities explore personal realities, perceptions and experiences, which are viewed as relevant and valid in the language-learning context;
7. the activities could take place in the classroom or in a coffee-shop (the classroom is simply a convenient place for students to come together), with or without the presence of a teacher (scope for self-directed follow-up activities);
8. the only time the teacher needs to take action is in “Gestures”, when “The teacher will put a message on your back”. Otherwise, he/she is free to participate in the activities themselves, or to carry out language-counselling with individuals or small groups of students.
9. there is no need for the teacher to initiate or close the activities. They can begin when the first student enters the classroom, they can continue as long as the students find them educationally and affectively stimulating and relevant, and they can merge into each other, as the sensitive teacher identifies students who are ready to move on, and puts messages on their backs.
10. the activity “Gestures” focuses on non-verbal communication, an important aspect of formal and informal interaction, and often with emotional implications;

Appendix C thus presents an example of materials which focus on student well-being and self-esteem. In the book from which the example is taken, these activities lead on to the construction and performance of a Chat-show, and are part of a sequenced approach. However, even in isolation, they provide a non-threatening format for learning, devoid of cultural or pedagogic impositions, placing the student at the centre of the learning process, and sufficiently open-ended to promote follow-on activities. From the standpoint of textbooks which subscribe to the linear, teacher-controlled view of language learning, it might be objected that “nothing is being taught or learned” in these activities. Such a comment ignores the overwhelming evidence in support of the individual learning agenda that all learners bring to the classroom (Allwright 1984), an agenda based on learning beliefs, perceptions and attitudes. A more relevant goal for the teacher (and the learning materials) is to address these factors by engendering a positive learning environment in which personal values are respected, and in which the student is allowed to interact freely with other learners, with the teacher, and with the learning materials:

If the language learner is active and engaged, she will perceive linguistic affordances and use them for linguistic action. (Van Lier 2000:252)

6. Self-assessment

Assessment is typically a source of fear and anxiety in the language classroom, whether the method be multiple-choice questions or oral performance tests. However, such assessment is often carried out for the convenience of the institution rather than the students, whereas "the ability to evaluate the effectiveness of one's own performance in a foreign language is an important skill in learning, and particularly important when the learning becomes autonomous." (Dickinson 1987:136; cf. Trim in Oscarsson, 1978:ix; Council of Europe document, 1974:7). Alternative assessment, in the form of self-assessment, peer-assessment, learning diaries, portfolios, and interviews thus offers a more personal and stress-free method of evaluating and reflecting upon linguistic achievement. Harris (1997) stresses the psychological benefits of self-assessment:

Above all, they [learners] can be helped to perceive their own progress and encouraged to see the value of what they are learning. ... The best motive to learn is a perception of the value of the thing learned. (Harris (1997:19)

and Van Lier voices the humanist perspective:

In addition to 'normal' testing, we need to pay attention to the basic moral purpose of education: promoting the self-actualization of every learner, to the fullest. (Van Lier 1996:120)

Harris draws attention to the importance of affect: "If we attend to the affective and cognitive components of students' attitudes ... we may be able to increase the length of time students commit to language study and their chances of success in it" (Harris 1997:20). Dickinson associates self-assessment with the process paradigm in language teaching (Dickinson 1987:151, cf. Breen 1987), and a number of authors stress the learner-centred nature of self-assessment (Oscarsson 1978:1; Van Lier 1996:119; Harris 1997). Harris (1997:19) sees self-assessment as a practical tool that should be integrated into everyday classroom activities, and Blanche proposes that self-appraisal "would be particularly helpful in the case of false beginners" (1988:85). Harris (1997:13) also sees self-assessment as appropriate in test-driven secondary and tertiary education, claiming that it can help learners in such environments to become more active, to locate their own strengths and weaknesses, and to realise that they have the ultimate responsibility for learning. By encouraging individual reflection, "self-assessment can begin to make students see their learning in *personal* terms [and] can help learners get better marks" (Harris (1997:13). Peer assessment (a form of self-assessment [Tudor 1996:182] and justified largely by the same arguments) is especially applicable to the classroom setting, aiming to encourage students to take increased responsibility for their own curricula and to become active participants in the learning process (Hill 1994:214; Miller & Ng 1996:134). Tudor adds that critical reflection on the

abilities of other learners with respect to a shared goal is a practical form of learner training which helps individuals to assess their own performance, and which reduces the stress of error correction through identifying them in others (Tudor 1996:182). Thus Assinder (1991:218-28) reports increased motivation, participation, real communication, in-depth understanding, commitment, confidence, meaningful practice and accuracy when students prepare and deliver learning tasks for each other. Haughton & Dickinson (1989) (cited in Miller & Ng 1996:135) found "a relatively high level of agreement between the peer assessments and the marks given by the lecturers" in their study of a collaborative post-writing assessment (cf. Fok 1981). Students were: i) able to assess their own work realistically (to a large extent), even though most felt inexperienced as testers (lack of reliability) and were not comfortable with being tested by classmates (fear of losing face); ii) they were sincere; iii) they demonstrated a similar level of assessment to that of the lecturers; iv) the scheme did not result in a lowering of standards; and v) the students benefited in their understanding of and attitude towards assessment by taking part in the study (Miller & Ng 1996:142). Peer assessment can be therefore be seen as an effective means of involving learners in formative self-assessment (Miller & Ng 1996:134), with the presence of an audience in general having a positive influence on performance (Lynch 1988). Lynch also makes the important observation that "tutors can differ widely in their response to assessment of the same oral presentation", and that "we *need* to experiment with peer-based evaluation ... to complement conventional tutor- and self-based assessment" (Lynch 1988:124).

Perceptions are an important part of self-assessment, in that student beliefs drive learning, and learners who believe themselves to be unsuccessful will engineer assessment results that prove their beliefs. It is the duty of the teacher in this situation to provide encouragement and reinforcement, realistically appraising the learner's progress and achievement, identifying with the learner's experience and perceptions, and bringing attention to discrepancies and contradictions in the learner's beliefs (Kelly 1996:95-95; cf. appendix A). This can be done within the context of trust and warm-hearted interaction, by inviting students to carry out self-assessment activities during the course of study. An example is offered in appendix D (Finch & Hyun 2000b), which students can fill in when they begin a course of study. At the end of the semester they fill in the same questionnaire, and teachers can discuss results with them, making the point that they have improved according to their own evaluation. For those who show no improvement, or who show evidence of unrealistically high or low scores, this is also an opportunity for discussion and counselling. Once students are familiar with the idea of self-assessment, they can make their own assessment instruments and monitor achievement using their own criteria.

Walberg (1975) and Fraser (1981) urge educators to incorporate classroom environment dimensions into their evaluations, and to view socio-psychological classroom processes as valuable ends in their own right, rather than relying exclusively on standard achievement criteria in curriculum evaluation (Walberg 1975), since classroom variables

“have differentiated revealingly among the curricula when a variety of cognitive outcome measures have shown little sensitivity” (Welch & Walberg 1972).

7. Conclusions

Given the tendency of language classrooms to promote anxiety (Horwitz *et al.* 1986), and the considerable evidence in support of the general proposition that the nature of classroom environments has an important influence on students' achievement of cognitive and attitudinal goals (Ely 1986:118), the promotion of a low-stress, non-threatening language learning environment must be an important priority for the teacher. This involves encouraging realistic expectations about accuracy and errors (Foss & Reitzel 1988), offering training in affective strategies, to help students manage anxiety and improve performance (Oxford & Crookall 1989), reassuring students that they are not alone in their affective reactions and that these feelings are normal (Foss & Reitzel 1988; Campbell & Ortiz 1991), and showing that the teacher/evaluator understands the tension caused by being anxious about appearing anxious (Phillips 1992:20). Phillips (1992:21) also points out that “alternative” evaluations involving partner and small-group work, interviews, problem-solving, and role-plays are usually enjoyed by students (Phillips 1990; Young 1990) and can reduce anxiety-raising competitiveness (Bailey 1983) and apprehension (Foss & Reitzel 1988). Familiar tasks also create less anxiety (Bailey 1983), so practice of test-tasks will encourage confidence:

Teachers can reduce anxiety and foster psychological security and feeling of belonging by: i) developing a stress-free climate; ii) helping students relax; iii) developing peer-support networks; and iv) promoting self-confidence (Moskowitz 1978; Horwitz 1990; Horwitz & Young 1991; Legutke & Thomas 1991:35; Oxford 1990; Scarella & Oxford 1992). Need theorists agree that fear of failure is usually evoked in situations in which competence or performance is the focus (Crandall 1963), and Horner (1968) describes the concept of “fear of success” shown by students who do not wish to be too successful, in order to avoid losing social affiliation and acceptance. Such fears can be addressed by designing or choosing learning materials which treat the learners and their perceptions as valid and meaningful, and which allow them to direct their own learning.

In view of these considerations, this paper suggests that language teachers need to examine their hidden agendas in the classroom. Rather than engineering situations that encourage plagiarism, misunderstanding and fear, teachers need to offer unconditional trust, which will inspire confidence, motivation, and learning. Instead of imposing their opinions of life and language learning, dictating what, how and when to study, chastising students for using the L1, accusing students of “cheating”, refusing to believe students' excuses for being late, etc., teachers need to reflect on the assumptions that they take into the classroom, and which often lead to micro-managed “communicative” activities, in which traditional roles remain unchanged:

Without a positive learning atmosphere, students may well gain little or nothing from new curricular infusions. (Mantle-Bromley 1995:383).

Teacher-training programs need to focus on counselling skills and management of affect, reflecting a holistic, affective, student-centred and socio-cultural view of language-learning as education, implying a radical reappraisal of teacher/student roles, in favour of a non-threatening “workshop” learning environment, based on mutual trust and respect, in which the teacher acts as a language resource and counsellor, and in which language learning occurs in collaborative dialogue, facilitating the “appropriation of both strategic processes and linguistic knowledge” (Swain 2000:112).

Education becomes a meaningless endeavour unless the education acquired has some impact on the human condition. (Pine & Boy 1977: 237)

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