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Affective Factors in Foreign Language Teaching: Enlightenment From *Dead Poets Society*

WAN Yuanyuan^[a]; JIANG Xiangyong^{[b],*}

^[a]Foreign Languages College, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China.

^[b]Ph.D., associate professor. Foreign Languages College, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

The focus of foreign language teaching has been changed from the teacher-centered model to the student-centered model. The traditional duck-feeding model of teaching cannot meet the requirements of the new era for it fails to activate students' affect in learning. Since students' affective factors exert a great impact on foreign language teaching, how to effectively motivate students becomes our primary focus.

This study aims to comprehensively investigate how affective factors may influence foreign language learning by taking American film *Dead Poets Society* as an example. Besides, it intends to provide some pedagogical implications for educators by analyzing Keating's teaching mode in *Dead Poets Society*. In the film, Keating is dedicated to the cultivation of the students' independent thinking and innovative ability over the teaching process. Through affective interaction with students, Keating finds a suitable way to achieve their self-actualization. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, and non-intelligence theory, Keating's teaching mode can effectively help students build up self-confidence and seek their self-actualization. As is generally recognized that affective factors like motivation, self-confidence, anxiety and inhibition play important roles in language learning. Keating's success

can have some enlightenment for foreign language teaching as well. We hold that foreign language teachers should motivate students to seek self-actualization, relieve their anxiety and build up their self-confidence, love and respect them, which can contribute to enhancing of teaching effects ultimately.

Key words: Affective factors; Foreign language teaching; *Dead Poets Society*

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INTRODUCTION

With the rise and development of humanistic psychology in the 1960s, affective issues in language teaching were increasingly valued to promote the overall development of human beings. Humanistic psychology believed that education should aim at promoting human beings' overall development. To achieve this goal, the two aspects of cognition and emotion should be unified. Since the 1970s, educational researchers have applied research results to language learning and language teaching practice. Foreign workers who engaged in foreign language teaching and psychological research have conducted a long-term study on the relationship between emotional factors and foreign language teaching, and have achieved fruitful results, such as the natural method, the silent way, suggestopedia, and total physical response, etc. They all emphasized the affective problems in language teaching. Besides, there are three theoretical foundations as follows to illustrate affective factors in foreign language teaching, such as humanistic theory, Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, and theory of non-intelligence factors.

In the west, humanistic educators represented by Rogers attached great importance to the emotional factors in teaching. They believed that “learning itself should include both cognitive and emotional aspects, so they put forward the concept of intellectual and emotional whole person learning” (Lu Jiamei, 2000). In addition, the humanistic psychologist Maslow (1981) proposed the theory, the hierarchy of needs in his book *Motivation and Personality*. Except for the most basic physiological needs including human survival, Maslow also raised human emotional needs at a higher position. According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, teachers must make students feel self-esteem and try to avoid students from being subjected to discrimination, loneliness, anxiety, and other mentality.” Taking care of students and using praise can also help students to achieve self-actualization.

Krashen (1982) proposed “an affective filter hypothesis which means that the realization of language acquisition is based on the emotion filtering of the language input.” That is to say, emotional factors, as motivation, personality, and anxiety state, play a role in promoting or hindering the speed and quality of one’s language acquisition. In hierarchical teaching, teachers should focus on inspiring students’ motivation to learn, develop learning self-confidence, and eliminate their psychological anxiety during the learning process. Krashen pointed out that the best learning occurs when learners have the lowest affective filtering.

In addition, non-intelligence factors refer to those factors other than intellectual factors, such as motivation, interest, emotion, will, and personality. It cooperates with intellectual factors and is an indispensable part of people’s mental activities (Li Min, 1992). In foreign language teaching, non-intelligence factors play an important role in the teaching process and the success of students’ learning. Teachers and students should change their teaching ideas and teaching methods, and giving full play to students’ non-intelligence factors while developing their intelligence.

Jane Arnold (1999) proposed that “affect is the experience of people’s attitudes towards whether objective things meet their own needs. In language teaching, affect refers to the learner’s emotion, feeling, mood, and attitude during the learning process. Affective factors in language learning can be divided into two types. The one concerns individual learners, including anxiety, inhibition, self-esteem, learning motivation, etc. The other is effective factors between learners and learners, learners, and teachers, such as empathy, classroom transactions, and cross-cultural processes.” When discussing the personal factors that affect foreign language learning, H.D. Brown (1977) mentioned “the affective domain, the emotional side of human behavior. The state and development of affect include various personal factors, not only emotion for ourselves but also emotion for other people we are in

contact with. The main emotional factors affecting foreign language learning are self-esteem, inhibition, anxiety, empathy, and motivation.” In addition, domestic scholar Wang Chuming (1991) mainly discussed “the needs of students from the perspective’s cognition and emotion, and the role teachers should play in meeting the needs of students.” In the teaching process, teachers should stimulate students’ interests, strengthen their confidence, respect them, and affirm their efforts. Yang Fengning (1993) explored the “inspiration of affective factors in foreign language teaching based on Krashen’s theory of affective filtering hypothesis.”

Affective factors that can directly affect the process of foreign language learning mainly includes the following four aspects: motivation, anxiety, confidence, inhibition.

Motivation is “the extent to which you make choices about goals to pursue and the effort you will devote to that pursuit” (Brown, 2001, p.34). Gardner (1985) divided “it into integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. The former refers to learners having a special interest in the target community and expecting to participate in or integrate into the social life of the association; the latter refers to learners obtaining a certain position for a particular purpose, such as passing an examination or certificate, etc.” While the presence of integrative motivation predicts a low affective filter, the presence of instrumental motivation predicts a stronger one. Based on this finding, it is proposed that “With instrumental motivation, language acquisition may cease as soon as enough is acquired to get the job done” (Krashen, 1981, p.22).

Anxiety is “a major emotional disorder that affects language learning. It refers to an emotional state of nervousness and fear formed by an individual who is expected to fail to achieve the goal or to overcome the threat of obstacles, which frustrates their self-esteem and self-confidence, or increases the sense of failure and guilt” (Wang & Wan, 2001, p.122). Anxiety is quite possibly the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process. It is associated with negative feelings such as uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, and tension. “Although it is a major obstacle to language learning, anxiety can be reduced” (Arnold, 1999, p.8).

“The person with high self-esteem is able to reach out beyond himself more freely, to be less inhibited, and because of his ego strength, to make the necessary mistakes involved in language learning with less threat to his ego” (Brown, 1977, p.352). It is hypothesized that the self-confident or secure person will be more able to encourage intake and have a lower filter. “Traits relating to self-confidence (lack of anxiety, outgoing personality, and self-esteem) are thus predicted to relate to second language acquisition” (Krashen, 1981, p.23).

Another affective factor is “inhibition, which refers to the avoidance and retreat actions taken to protect the

self-image. However, criticism and ridicule from the outside world hit the self-image greatly” (Xiang, 2003, p.24). “Strong criticism and words of ridicule can greatly weaken the ego and the weaker the ego, the higher the walls of inhibition” (Arnold, 1999, p.10). Causing negative emotions will affect students’ learning efficiency; teachers should pay heed to students’ negative emotions and make the effort to reduce the impact.

In the international environment where cultural exchanges are very frequent, European and American dramas continue to pour into China, which has a certain impact on many aspects of Chinese culture and education. The film is not only the transmission of information between two languages but also the transmission of information between two cultures. Movies are enjoyable, but they also give people great inspiration. *Dead Poets Society* revolved around a teacher who devotes himself to educating students with love. In addition, the artistic creation of portraying the characters’ hearts, aesthetic pursuits, and the shock to our hearts are similar. After watching the movie, we know that teachers should not only pay attention to students’ intelligent factors, but also emphasize students’ non-intellectual factors, such as motivation, attitude, and anxiety. During the process of foreign language teaching, teachers should fully understand students at first, change traditional teaching ideas and methods, adopt certain teaching methods, stimulate students’ learning motivation, cultivate students’ learning attitude and teach students according to their aptitude.

1. BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF *DEAD POETS SOCIETY*

The novel was shot in 1959 at the prestigious Welton Academy, a Vermont boarding school. Welton Academy of Preparatory Sciences always teaches students in traditional and conservative ways, but Keating, a new literature teacher who came to the school in the new semester, changed the school’s routine to emancipate the students’ minds and give their abilities to full play. He told students to “seize the day” and act on that principle. In the first class, Keating did not teach in the classroom. Instead, he showed his classmates pictures in the historic building to listen to the voices of the dead and to understand the true meaning of life. Keating even asked the students to tear away the stereotyped contents of textbooks and let them begin to understand their interests, hobbies, prospects, and goals in a free manner. His students even rebelled against the school’s ban and re-established the *Dead Poets Society*, a secret group that Keating had participated in as a student, to explore poetry and life in a cave far away from school. But shortly afterward, the school found out that the group was very opposed to Keating’s teaching methods.

Keating’s student Neil loved acting and was a great success in one performance. But his father firmly opposed it and took him home and decided to transfer him to another school the next day. Neil was so miserable that he could not tell. Although Neil looks like an extremely confident student as most of the others in Welton, he is afraid of his strict, overbearing father. His father, Mr. Perry, was unsatisfied with Neil’s choices and urged him to give up his extracurricular activities. He committed suicide that night. Cameron, one of the team members, betrayed them. The school forced the group members to sign the statement, shifted responsibility to Keating, and expelled him from the school. When the teacher was ready to leave the school, the students stood on the table and said, “Oh, Captain, My Captain!” to express the belief that the teacher had conveyed to them would always exist in their hearts.

2. EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS FROM *DEAD POETS SOCIETY*

After reviewing all these theories, we may conclude some pedagogical implications by relating it to the movie *Dead Poets Society*, which can be referential for teachers and researchers in the field of foreign language teaching.

2.1 To Motivate Students to Achieve Self-Actualization

Oxford et al (1994) believed that “learning motivation greatly affects learners’ ability to effectively use or practice a foreign language, and it also determines learners’ initiative in foreign language learning and learners’ confidence to overcome learning difficulties.” *Dead Poets Society* demonstrated the teaching philosophy of motivation. Despite Wilton Preparatory College’s reputation for “tradition, glory, discipline, and excellence”, Mr. Keating opposed this cramming-duck approach to education. At first, Mr. Keating led the students to the school history museum to see the graduation photos of the deceased alumni. He said, “This is a group of 16-year-old youths who are full of energy, energetic and ambitious. I believe the world is in their hands, they can make great careers, but these young people have now become a cloud of dust,” “To make your life unusual, you must pick your flower buds in time, ‘Seize the day’ to warn students to take time”. After hearing Keating’s words, most of the students looked as if deep in thought. The reason why teacher Keating could have been favored by most students is that he employed his real enthusiasm and emotions to stimulate students’ sense of curiosity, and then turn to their theoretical intelligence. Keating had successfully transferred what students need to learn with their experience in life. On the contrary, other teachers at Welton Academy make use of discipline and corporal punishment. Students are forced to learn under

the pressure. They were motivated by their innate drives to explore, to be stimulated, and above all to manipulate the authorities who enforced the rules. Their need for the security of a community of fellow human beings and to seize the day transcended threats of punishment. "They needed to make their own decisions about what to learn and how to apply it rather than letting someone else determine the course of their daily lives" (Brown, 2001, p.37).

Dead Poets Society embodies the teaching concept of self-realization. In the process of teaching, Keating always paid attention to the individual development of students. Education not only imparts knowledge but also recreates knowledge and develops students' quality in an all-round way. For example, in the film, Dead Poets Society, Neil Perry who is a warmhearted and outgoing person at Welton had a deep love for performance. As Todd's roommate, he extremely inspired Todd gradually changed from shy to confident. However, he is very afraid of his father, Mr. Perry, who had planned the rest of life for Neil and never asked Neil what he wants. According to the theory of the hierarchy of needs, "human needs present as a pyramid which include the lower needs and higher needs, such as needs for physiology, safety, love and belonging, esteem, recognition, understanding, aesthetic, and self-actualization" (Maslow, 1981). Neil's self-actualization needs are having the opportunity of self-improvement and doing what he wants to do. He had a passion for performance and participated in the Midsummer Night Dream theatrical play. On the contrary, Neil's father criticized him to take too many extracurricular activities, and hoped that Neil could be a doctor with good enough prospect that Neil's father hadn't achieved. Keating inspired Neil to talk with his father about his passion for acting instead of struggling against his father. With the encouragement of Keating, Neil led the students to reorganize the Dead Poetry Club to make life full of vitality. Even so, it's still pathetic that conflict between Neil's and his father's needs for self-actualization leads to Neil's suicide.

2.2 To Boost Students' Self-Confidence and Relieve Their Anxiety

Learners' attitude affects foreign language learning, and active and non-anxious attitudes promote it. However, students often have strong feelings of horror and disgust when they are required to do some too difficult or meaningless exercises in foreign language classes. In the Dead Poets Society, Keating breaks the convention, adopts a unique way to guide students step by step, and educates students through the interaction between teachers and students.

Todd Anderson is very shy and sensitive as a transfer student from Balincrest, which is a less prestigious school. He doesn't get along well with his parents who admire his more successful brother, Jeffrey Anderson,

the valedictorian and national merit scholar. Under this scenario, Todd was feeling overwhelmed and appearing only to promise. Because of the pressure from his family and school, Todd was the typical student who innated with strong inhibition to protect his self-image, causing that he didn't want to read poetry in public at a cave party and rarely expressed his opinions. "The less self-confident person may understand the input but not acquire, just as the self-conscious person may filter (or avoid) in other domains" (Krashen, 1981, p.23). In the beginning, the headmaster, Nolan, told Todd to hand out extracurricular assignments. Causing the activities, he took in the previous school, Todd will participate in the soccer team. Even though he preferred rowing, Todd was too shy to speak out his idea and didn't have the opportunity to choose what he likes under the administration of Welton. The headmaster just had already chosen what they should do and should not do.

After being introduced to many insightful poems, these students are required to use their imagination to create their poems and read them aloud in class on Monday. It bothered Todd to the extent that he frustrated with himself and teared up his draft. When it comes to Todd to read his poem in class, he felt everything inside of him is worthless and embarrassing and said that he didn't write a poem. Keating brought Todd to the front of the class and inspired him to compose a poem according to the picture of Walt Whitman hanging over the door. During this process, Todd who was once introverted, sensitive, and fragile built up confidence and learned to face the real-self step by step with Keating's encouragement. At the end of the class, Todd, realizing his talent in poetry, gained new confidence and became brave to get on with his classmates.

According to the affective filter theory, "attitudinal factors relating to the language will be those that contribute to a low affective filter" (Krashen, 1981, p.22). The student Todd who lacks confidence and feels anxious, put up with high an affective filter so that he would not take the initiative to present himself. Thus, the teacher Keating must take measures to solve the problem that how to decrease Todd's affective filter, improve his confidence, and reduce his anxiety in class. Also, for the reason that Todd was a student who was used to obey the rules, Keating, acting as a conductor, stimulated Todd to step out of his comfort zone by the unconventional method. Teachers must respect and trust students first, then adequately affirmed students and induced students to take advantage of their potential. At the end of the film, Mr. Keating was fired, returned to the classroom to pack up, and prepared to leave. Then Todd, the most vulnerable student, took the lead on the table and shouted, "Captain, my captain!"

2.3 To love and Respect Students

Everybody knows people who have a knack for learning foreign languages and others who are rather poor at it.

Foreign language teachers should encourage students who are not good at language learning. As the saying goes, there are no two identical leaves in the world, nor are there two identical people in the world. During the time of adolescence, these young students at Welton needed affective support. The *Dead Poetry Society* embodies the teaching idea of respecting students' aptitude. Comparing to those teachers who exclusively urged students to comply with regulations and internalize the knowledge taught by teachers, the teacher Keating opposed blind obedience to authority, strongly advocated that students should think independently and hold their views. He said, "We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion." During class, he let the students stand on the desk, look down on the world around them, and see the world from a new angle. Especially when appreciating poetry, he told the students it is not the opinions of the authors, but their own opinions. He maintained that poetry should be "felt", not analyzed. Keating's love and care for students greatly enhanced the critical spirit of the students. In addition, Keating told the students to walk freely on the campus. He taught students to stick to their own pace and maintain their individuality. During these activities, Keating showed great care for students and respect their personality, and tried to exploit every students' potential without corporal punishment. teachers should fully enhance their confidence and can be treated as consultants to supervise student activities.

For the students, the intelligence factor is correlated with students' academic scores in classroom teaching as represented by many traditional teachers in Welton. But in the long term, the key factors for cultivating students' all-round quality are not intelligence, but non-intelligence factors. As you can see, the teacher Keating focused on giving them love and respect, and cultivating students' innovation spirit, interests and motivation through the affective interaction between teachers and students. It is proposed that "to teach a foreign language well, the premise is to understand learners, how they learn, what they bring into foreign language learning, and how these things affect learning" (Wang, 2001, p.8). Therefore, teachers should pay attention to students' kinds of affective factors, such as motivation, self-esteem, inhibition and anxiety, and so on.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, affective factors play an important role in the process of foreign language teaching. First of all, Teachers should know the students, understand the students, and

stimulate students' learning motivation. Then, Teachers should take the actual situation of students into account and develop their confidence. Third, teachers should treat students as equal personality, and encourage students to solve problems by themselves.

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