

A Critical Look at the Status of Affect in Second Language Acquisition Research: Lessons from Vygotsky's Legacy

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Abstract

The phenomenon of affect and its relationship to second language learning is well-known and has been experienced by most language learners. One of the main debates that has recently appeared in the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature is related to the status of affective factors in this domain. The present paper attempts at mulling over the current controversies over affect with a special attention to Vygotsky's account of the matter.

Keywords: affective factors, affective filter hypothesis, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, perezhivanie, collective ZPD, dialogic thinking framework, and second language acquisition

1. Introduction

To put it in plain words, Brown (2000) argues that the affective element encompasses a plethora of psychological factors that remind the educators that learners are not abstract entities but human beings with feelings about themselves and the people they come into contact with. Overlooking this elementary observation does not mend feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and inhibition in learners and can derail the interactive aspects of even a well-crafted instructional plan.

2. On affect in SLA

The phenomenon of affect and its relationship to second language learning is well-known and has been experienced by most language learners. One of the main concepts that has appeared early in the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature is what is known as the Affective Filter Hypothesis. The Hypothesis has been intended to account, in large part, for why some people are able to learn second languages while others are not.

One way of accounting for non-learning in Krashen's (1985, as cited in, Gass & Selinker, 2008) view is to claim that learners have not received comprehensible input in sufficient quantities; another way pertains to the claim that an inappropriate affect is to blame.

Affect, from Krashen's (1985, as cited in, Gass & Selinker, 2008) perspective, is intended to include factors such as motivation, attitude, self-confidence, anxiety, etc. Krashen proposes an Affective Filter. If the Filter is up, input is prevented from passing through; if input is prevented from passing through, there can be no acquisition. If, on the other hand, the Filter is down, or low, and if the input is comprehensible, the input will reach the acquisition device and acquisition will take place. According to Krashen, the Affective Filter is responsible for individual differences and variations in second language acquisition and differentiates child or first language acquisition from SLA because the Affective Filter is not something that children have/use.

2.1. Criticisms of SLA in terms of affective factors

As said by Jordan (2004), one of the main arguments recently posed among Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers is concerned with what an SLA theory should or should not consist of, i.e., its domain. The choice of different domains is claimed to reveal fundamental incompatibilities.

In this line of argument, Jordan presents the discussion that another increasingly important disagreement about domain involves the role of Sociolinguistics. In this way, Jordan strives to take account of the debate put forward by Firth and Wagner (1997, as cited in, Jordan, 2004) that has criticized SLA research for disregarding the social context and suggested that SLA research should relinquish its preoccupations with what goes on in the learner's mind and pay more attention to the impact of the social and affective factors. As Jordan (2004) simply puts it, lurking behind this criticism is the related question of the research methodology.

In this regard, Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) Sociocultural Theory (SCT), which is conceived to be still influential in the SLA approaches, is deemed to contribute to this recent focus, as, according to Saville-Troike (2005), it views interaction as the essential genesis of language.

Despite the foregoing arguments posed in favor of affective factors, Garrett and Young (2009) accept as true that affect and emotion are terms that have been in the shadows of discussions of the classroom foreign language learning, where the primary focus has been on the development of cognition and knowledge and use of the new language. They believe that one reason for this is the ignorance of emotion by psychologists during most of the 20th century. Putting it this way, at the end of that century, Damasio (1999, p. 39, as cited in, Garrett & Young, 2009, p. 209) writes that:

Emotion was not trusted in the laboratory. Emotion was too subjective, it was said. Emotion was too elusive and vague. Emotion was at the opposite end from reason, easily the finest human ability and reason was presumed to be entirely independent from emotion.

Cordova and Perio (2010) argue that in assessing student achievement over the years, the instructional milieu can be primarily criticized on the ground that it has been merely occupied with the cognitive processes. In the second place, the affective domain has been frequently interpreted only in terms of a single factor, namely a student's motivation to learn. Measures of affective processes other than motivation, say, self-regulation and self-efficacy, which are only a few to mention, among others, have been rather neglected. Besides, the affective processes are rarely considered as interacting with the cognitive processes.

2.2. Affective versus cognitive binary oppositions

As Ellis and Larsen-Freeman (2006) put it, when considering the interface, human beings have alluded to Descartes' Dualism, namely the separation of *res cogitans*; that is, God and the human soul and *res extensa*, i.e., the corporeal world. Dualism has pervaded the scientific thinking since Descartes. Humans have divided their world into contraries and perceived and interpreted these binary oppositions as mutually exclusive. Applied Linguistics has been also driven by such either/or dichotomies. However, these contraries are also emergent attractor states. Human thinking, like nature, appears to partition things, events, and ideas into binary pairs, whereas these pairs are emergent, and they are more mutually dependent than mutually exclusive.

Accordingly, the cognitive and affective factors have not been devoid of such binary oppositions. The affective processes have been seldom considered as interacting with the cognitive processes. As Smith and Ragan (1999) have pointed out, any cognitive or psychomotor objective carries on its back a certain affective component to it.

In line with the foregoing argument, Dufficy (2005) debates that until recently, research within the field of SLA has tended to concern itself with an individual's acquisition of discrete aspects of the language and employed the notions of input and output as central organizing metaphors. Constrained by these metaphors, language has been seen to contain meanings which, when transmitted by speech or writing, could be emptied into the mind-as-container of the recipient.

For Guiora, Brannon, and Dull (1972), the issue becomes further complicated with respect to the question of the language ego, as learners engage in the process of developing new identities in the target language. Furthermore, as Gilner (2008) puts it, a learner's self-image may be strongly dependent on a mode of expression that relies on specific descriptors and semantic notions that cannot be transferred until a certain level of competency is achieved.

2.3. Spinoza's non-dualistic philosophical account of affect and cognition

The philosophical roots regarding the rapport and the dialectic relationships between affect and cognition in language learning can be traced back to the work of Spinoza (1883, as cited in, Cole & Yang, 2008), according to which affects are bonds that are said to unite the rational conduct with life. Spinoza's system of affects has constructed a coherent argument in his oeuvre, *Ethics*, and a non-dualistic system for understanding the connection between the world and the human endeavor. Spinoza's ideas have been taken up and developed by numerous philosophers and thinkers, who, according to Cole and Yang (2008), are unified in their application of affects as essential yet multifarious elements in the construction of language and thought due to the point that they provide a link between communication, cognition, and emotion.

2.3.1. Beyond cognitive/affective dualism: Vygotsky's uncompleted work

Following Spinoza, the rejection of the cognitive versus affective dualism has been also announced by Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and, unfortunately, has not been followed by a model within which a unitary conception of thinking and feeling could be discussed and implemented in the milieu of the empirical research. In this respect, Dufficy (2005) discusses that Vygotsky's idea of the mediation and the primacy of the inter-psychological processes leads to a less commonly discussed aspect of Vygotskian-inspired Sociocultural Theory, and that is the role that emotion plays in learning and development. Vygotsky is said to have been profoundly aware of the critical role of affect in learning and at the time of his death has been working on a manuscript titled *The teaching about emotions: Historical-psychological studies*. Vygotsky's uncompleted work on emotions, which has only become available in English in 1999, has had important implications for education.

2.3.1.1. Vygotsky's perspective towards affect and cognition

Vygotsky (1978) makes a distinction between psychological tools and technical tools. From Vygotsky's perspective, technical tools are employed to generate transformations in other objects, whereas psychological tools can be drawn on to direct both the mind and behavior. Affective tools are seen of social rather than organic or individual origin. Vygotsky argues that since the auxiliary stimulus possesses the precise function of the reverse action, it transports the psychological operation to the higher mental and qualitatively novel forms and authorizes the human beings to regulate and control their behavior from the outside by means of the extrinsic stimuli. Vygotsky's dialogic notion that learning is, first and foremost, a situated, inter-psychological phenomenon suggests that one needs to go beyond a predominantly cognitive theory of learning, in general, and SLA, in particular.

Exploring the dialectical relationship between thought, affect, language, and consciousness, Vygotsky (1987, p. 282) postulates that:

[Thought] is not born of other thoughts. Thought has its origins in the motivating sphere of consciousness, a sphere that includes our inclinations and needs, our interests and impulses, and our affect and emotions. The affective and volitional tendency stands behind thought. Only here do we find the answer to the final "why" in the analysis of thinking.

2.3.1.2. Vygotsky's concept of *perezhivanie*

Vygotsky's (1978) primary emphasis on the self-construction through and with the available tools foregrounds two critical issues. In the first place, it portrays the individual as an active agent in the social development. Secondly, it affirms the significance of contextual influences in that development takes place through the utilization of those tools, which are accessible at a particular time and in a particular place.

Technically, the social mediation helps share new formations in personality development since, according to Vygotsky (1998, p. 170, as cited in, Mahn, 2003, p. 130), the innermost transmission of external social relations between people provides the basis for the architecture of personality. Vygotsky (1994, p. 342, as cited in, Mahn, 2003, p. 130) makes use of the term *perezhivanie* that implies:

the individual unity of personal characteristics and situational characteristics.
Perezhivanie is a unity where, on the one hand, is an indivisible state, the environment is represented, i.e., that which is being experienced ... and on the other hand, what is represented is how I, myself, am experiencing this, i.e., all the personal characteristics and all the environmental characteristics are represented in *perezhivanie*.

According to Mahn and John-Steiner (2002), Vygotsky's *perezhivanie*, for which no equivalent English still term exists, is occasionally equated with the lived or emotional experience. *Perezhivanie* describes the affective processes through which interactions in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) are individually perceived, appropriated, and represented by the participants. Vygotsky describes the fundamental role played by language in an individual becoming aware of, and making meaning from, the lived experience. The emotional aspect of language and the importance of the human connection in social interactions are both integral to Vygotsky's concept of *perezhivanie*. To explain it, Vygotsky relies on the dense textures of language as motivated by feelings, enriched by previous experience, and focused on by volition. He also emphasizes the emotional aspects of social interaction and their impact on learning for the reason that the study of learning remains incomplete unless the human need to connect emotionally is integrated with the need to think and know.

To put it in plain words, Vygotsky's analysis of meaning, in which he approaches the hidden, complex, affective dimensions of thinking and speech by studying the emotional subtext of utterances-- what he refers to as sense-- is also central to his analysis of *perezhivanie*. According to Vygotsky (1987, p. 276, as cited in, Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002), a word's sense is the cumulative total of all psychological facts that come to pass in subjects' consciousnesses in consequence of the word. Sense is a dynamic, fluid, and complex formation that has several zones that fluctuate in their stability.

Mahn and John-Steiner (2002) believe that Vygotsky's concept of *perezhivanie* can play an important role in understanding the appropriation of the social interaction. They have also come to realize that this appropriation in the ZPD plays a crucial role in transformative experiences of all types and is not limited to children and other novice learners. Careful listening, intense dialogue, and emotional support sustain the cooperative construction of understanding, of scientific discovery, and of artistic forms. This is true in interaction across generations, namely in parenting, teaching, mentoring, and among the creative partners.

2.3.1.3. Post-Vygotskian legacy: *Perezhivanie* and collective ZPD

Regarding the Vygotskian-inspired *perezhivanie* and the rejection of the dichotomy between affect and cognition, Daniels's (2001) suggestion is that the term pedagogy should be construed as referring to certain forms of social practice, which shape and form individuals' cognitive, affective, and moral development. If pedagogic practices are conjured merely in terms of those which impinge upon the formation of identity as well as learning outcomes as defined in, say, just test

scores, then a form of social theory is necessitated to authorize the instructional model and explore the factors, which may be exercising a certain amount of influence.

If the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is redefined from a broader affective as well as cognitive perspective, as put forward by Rio & Alvarez (1995, as cited in, Daniels, 2001), then, according to Daniels (2001), a further robust and coherent concept comes into sight. This conception of ZPD would be robust thanks to the point that it is determined to embrace both cognitive and affective domains, and it would be more coherent given that it should handle these domains as highly interconnected and/or entrenched matters.

In this line of argument, certain Post-Vygotskian authors have referred to these interwoven processes as the collective Zone of Proximal Development (Moll & Whitmore, 1993). Mahn and John-Steiner (2002) present the debate that such expanded analyses of the ZPD posit the degree of complementarity as a determining factor in the success of the interaction between the participants, whether the interaction involves adult with child, teacher with student, peer with peer, or whether it occurs among a number of individuals within the ZPD.

2.3.1.4. The dialogic thinking framework

According to Fernyhough (2008), the Dialogic Thinking (DT) framework draws on Vygotskian and Neo-Vygotskian ideas in exploring the implications of the internalization of mediated interpersonal activity for the individual cognition. In so doing, it highlights an assumption implicit in Vygotsky's writings but never properly examined by him, namely that the resulting forms of cognition preserve the dialogic nature of the interpersonal and affective exchanges from which they originate. The internalization of dialogue necessarily entails the internalization of the alternative perspectives on reality manifested in that dialogue, and the consequent restructuring of cognition to enable the simultaneous accommodation of multiple perspectives upon a topic of thought.

Drawing on Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic imagination, Fernyhough (2008) acknowledges that the key to understanding how dialogue can incorporate different, semiotically manifested perspectives on reality lies in Bakhtinian-inspired perspectives. Specifically, an assimilation of the Bakhtinian concepts of voice and dialogue can provide a powerful extension of Vygotsky's theory. The DT framework is founded on one significant implication of this Bakhtinian idea, namely that, in internalizing dialogic exchanges, the individual does more than merely appropriating the utterances of the other. If Bakhtin is correct to claim that an individual's utterances in dialogue are reflective of his or her orientation to reality, then the internalization of dialogic exchanges, or, in Vygotsky's (1997, as cited in, Fernyhough, 2008) terms, their reconstruction on the intrapsychological plane, will necessarily involve a certain degree of the adoption of the other's perspective. The problem of understanding other minds thus shifts from the question of how an isolated epistemic subject could ever come to know about the non-observable mental and cognitive states of another epistemic subject, towards a reconsideration of how such mental states might be manifested in the concrete social, affective, and semiotic exchanges, which are subsequently internalized to ground the individual's mediated thinking.

Certainly, dialogue of this kind involves both the internalization of the meanings created in the inter-mental forum of discussion and the externalization of those intra-mental meanings that are constructed in response; it also constitutes a particularly clear instance of Vygotsky's (1981, as cited in, Wells, 2000) insight that the individual develops and is developed into what he/she is through what he/she produces for others, which entails a dialogical relationship between input and output.

3. Conclusion

To augment the affective factors in SLA, it seems promising to take account of Kumaravadivelu's (2006) position on the basis of which interaction as an interpersonal activity offers participants in the L2 class opportunities to establish and maintain social relationships and

individual identities through pair and/or group activities. It enhances the personal rapport and lowers the affective filter. The affective-humanistic activities involve the learner's wants, needs, feelings, and emotions. These activities are carried out mainly through dialogues, role-plays, and interviews, among others. At the initial stages of the language production, these activities begin with short dialogues that contain a number of routines and patterns although more open-ended role-plays and interviews are utilized at the later stages.

In due course, the present study has strived to present a brief tour regarding the status of affect identified in the literature of Applied Linguistics. In so doing, the domain of SLA has been criticized on the ground that it has been dominated by the binary opposing pairs. Accordingly, it has been shown that the presented classifications of language learning in the realm of SLA have not been bereft of such dichotomies, namely the cognitive versus affective factors. Drawing on Vygotsky's uncompleted work on affect and cognition, it has been attempted at establishing a dialectic relationship between affective and cognitive factors.

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