

FACTORS CREATING POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR ENHANCING SUCCESS OF STUDENTS IN EFL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

The learning process is complex and energy-intensive; as such, it requires both the student and the teacher to be highly intelligent and willing to learn. This research is an attempt to define and substantiate the effectiveness of factors that create a positive learning environment, in which students develop positive attitude to the goals, objectives, and outcomes of learning. The proposed factors are: a positively focused dialogue between the actors of the learning process; stimulating the cognitive activity of students; facilitative teaching. What makes this study so important is that positive learning environment is fundamental to the rejection of reproduction-based learning; it drives personal growth and expands the methodology of efficient learning.

Methodology

Experiments were carried out in two phases (indicative and formative), involving a population of 59 students. As part of the indicative phase, the research team developed the informative and the interactive criteria, and formed 1 control group and 3 experimental groups. The null observation reveals lack-luster performance in terms of informative and interactive criteria in all the four groups, with 70% to 89% of students performing poorly, 10% to 28% having medium performance, and none performing well.

The formative phase (2016-2017) was aimed at testing the proposed complex of factors intended to improve student performance in English as a foreign language; three observations were made. The null observation data was collected at the end of the fall term from freshmen; the interim observation was made at the end of the second year; the final observation was made at the end of the second year. The control group did not have any of these factors in their classes; Experimental Group 1 had positively focused dialogs between the learning-process actors; Experimental Group 2 also was stimulated to have better cognition. Experimental Group 3 had all the three factors combined.

Findings

Interim/final observation data show positive dynamics in all the English performance indicators. The greatest improvement was observed in EG3, where all the proposed factors were involved to improve performance in English as a foreign language. The interactive criterion score was low in 1/6%, medium in 5/33.33%, and high in 9/60%; the informative criterion score was low in 0/0%, medium in 6/40%, and high in 9/60%.

Significance

The research results could be of use for teachers of English as a foreign language in Bachelor programs. This research shows how to arrange positive learning environment for better student performance in English as a foreign language.

Keywords: positive learning environment, dialog, cognitive activity, facilitative teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization and integration processes have boosted intercultural communication in all aspects of life/ Pursuant to the Bologna Agreement of 1993, Russia had completed its transition to the Bologna system of higher education by 2010. Having this system in places completes the integration of higher education in all European countries to enable all of their citizens to study and work in any such country. Therefore, the today's higher education seeks to adapt people to global social culture, i.e. to train young people to live in a polycultural society. This has altered the role foreign language has to play in higher education. Once an ordinary subject, it became baseline. Language skills show how well-educated a person is and how good a specialist they could be. Unfortunately, the modern education systems lack tools to motivate students to learn. Some students are either not motivated to study foreign language due to misunderstanding its importance, or not motivated to study at all. The research team has identified and explained three factors, each of which contributes to learning success; those are: a positively focused dialogue between the actors of the learning process; stimulating the cognitive activity of students; facilitative teaching.

Positively focused dialog of the learning-process actors implies the teacher must be able to communicate well. This is a professional skill that enables teachers to make contact, share information, stimulate students to act, and invoke their empathy. Positive dialog is essentially about a full contact and understanding of the learning-process actors. What characterizes a dialog is the equality of parties and their ability to influence each other and "to get in each other's shoes", to not judge, to fully accept, respect, and trust all the communicants.

Another factor that contributes to a positive learning environment consists in stimulating students' cognitive activity. What is meant here is the intensification of learning, e.g. creating special didactic and psychological conditions for meaningful learning and engagement in the learning process, which shall involve not only intellectual, but also social and personal activity. "Intensification of learning is the teacher's purposeful effort to develop and use such forms, contents, techniques, and tools that will contribute to the student's interest, independence, and creativity in learning and skill acquisition for practical applications, as well as to their ability to predict and make independent decisions."

Various methods for intensifying students' cognitive activity are referred to as active learning (discussion in groups, brainstorming, case studies). Those are based on the principles promoting productive thinking: soft competition, collaboration, non-graded activities, etc.

The next factor is facilitative teaching, i.e. such actor-actor interaction that drives the teacher's and the learner's personal growth. This learning phenomenon manifests itself in the teacher's ability to arrange the learning process in such a way as to create an air of psychological support in the class, which motivates learners to learn better, become more responsible and creative, ultimately driving their personal growth. Decisive for facilitation are the teacher's four personal qualities: attractiveness, empathy, tolerance, and assertiveness.

Together, these factors we believe are what creates positive learning environment, i.e. a combination of learning-process conditions that enable the student to develop a positive attitude to their learning goals, objectives, and outcomes.

Thus, this research is an attempt to find how efficient the proposed complex of factors could be in improving students' performance in English as a foreign language.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

First, consider the key concepts to be used in this paper. Let us discuss the definition of learning environment that is commonly used by the modern pedagogy. Environment in general is "the set of conditions of human life, a person's entourage, and all persons sharing such conditions and situations" (Batyshev, 1999).

"Environment is a human person's social space; the zone of their immediate activity, development, and action; as well as social and personal life phenomena occurring therein: past experience, communication experience, media influence, etc. (Krylova, 2000). Understanding the environment as social space and interaction with it brings us closer to considering the learning environment as part of that space where different learning processes and their components interact, where the child becomes culturally connected to the society and gains their first independent cultural experience (Krylova, 2000).

N.A. Spichko describes the learning environment as a "combination of psychological, social, and spatial-substantive factors that also includes tangible factors and interpersonal relations" (Spichko, 2004). The author notes that all the factors are interrelated, complementary, and affect each actor in the learning environ-

ment.

Review of Russian research reveals multiple approaches to understanding what the learning environment is. In the communication-oriented approach, the learning environment is a type of collaboration (communication) that creates specific learner-teacher interfaces to enable teacher-to-learner transfer of life skills, including the methods, knowledge, abilities, and skills for learning and communication that are necessary for proper functioning in their existing commonality. The researcher identifies the following components of the learning environment: spatial-substantive (architecture, equipment, attributes, etc.); social (the culture-specific "form of child-adult commonality"); and psycho-didactic (the contents of learning and the child-mastered ways of action). This approach implies the teacher shall create a communication-enabling social environment.

In the ecological-psychological approach, the learning environment is a system of social and spatial-substantive influences on, and conditions of, personal development. The learning environment functions to give rise to sociable people that are willing and able to transform their habitat in accordance with their acquired values. Values as guidance shall form by inclusion in this or that learning environment (Yasvin, 2001, Rubtsov, 1998). Of interest is the anthropological-psychological approach, which emphasizes the learning environment as a mediator of teacher-learner communication. "Environment is a space, where the actors of the learning process interact and build their relationships" (Slobodchikov, 2000).

Thus, most researchers interpret educational environment from the standpoint of human-environment interaction, which comprises

- A combination of social, cultural, and a specially arranged psychological and pedagogical setting, which cause a person to develop their personality (Tarasov, 2003).
- A pedagogically arranged system of conditions, influences, and opportunities to meet the hierarchy of personal needs and to transform such needs into values that drive students' engagement in the learning process while contributing to their personal development and growth (Panov, 2001)
- A system of influences and conditions, under which a personality is shaped to a pattern; the system also comprises the opportunities the social and spatial-substantive environment provides for personality development (Yasvin, 1997)
- A system of influences and conditions that enable a person to discover their interests, abilities, and creativity, to meet their needs, to use age-appropriate learning technologies.

This research is built upon V.A. Yasvin's definition; as such, learning environment is to be seen as a combination of conditions, influences, and opportunities that enable learners to discover their interests and abilities, to be engaged in the learning process, to attain personal development and growth.

As a pedagogical phenomenon, learning environment is mainly characterized by its focus, special arrangement of specific pedagogical activities, collaboration of all learning-process actors, integration and variability.

Accordingly, a positive learning environment is a combination of learning-process conditions that enable the student to develop a positive attitude to their learning goals, objectives, and outcomes.

Building a positive learning environment in the classroom is the foundation of Learner-Centred Teaching. It is based on the understanding that positive reinforcement and support is essential for student success in school and life. As Doug Lemov notes in *Teach Like a Champion*, "People are motivated by the positive far more than the negative. Seeking success and happiness will spur stronger action than seeking to avoid punishment" (Lemov, 2010).

Creating a positive learning environment in your class-room will allow your students to feel comfortable, safe and engaged; something that all students deserve. Students need to feel that it is safe to learn because they make a personal investment in the learning process and they want to do it right. They do not like to appear either foolish or incompetent. By providing a comfortable setting and a welcoming environment that focuses on the positive aspects of learning, students will be more open to actively participate in class.

Martin Seligman, a pioneer of positive psychology, proposed 3 important building blocks of wellbeing and happiness as positive emotions, positive traits and positive institutions and he turned them into a PERMA model: P-Positive emotions (joy, gratitude, interest, hope); E- Engagement (absorbed in activities that use your skills and challenge you); R-Relationships (authentic connections); M-Meaning (purposeful existence); A-Accomplishment (pursuing success, winning achievement and mastery).

He believes that 5 elements can be applied by institutions to foster new cognitive and emotional tools, to help students to reach a life of fulfillment, happiness and meaning, it brings positivity to what you do. (Mulder, 2018).

Caroline Waldman (Waldman, 2016) offered 4 elements for creating a positive learning environment:

- Safety. It implies a safe learning environment, students must feel welcomed, supported, and respected.
- Engagement. This element means applying student-centered approach to tailor instructions to students' unique strengths and needs and it engages them in challenging, academically based content. Personalizing learning helps students develop a wide range of skills from thinking critically, to solving complex problems, and working collaboratively.
- Connectedness. The aim of this element to make students feel connected to teachers, staff, and other students. Schools can embed these connections by focusing on students' social and emotional learning (SEL), which enables students to understand and manage their emotions and interactions with others.
- Support. Students must feel supported by all those engaged in their learning experience: teachers, classmates, administrators, family, and community members. These parties should share an understanding of what positive learning climate in classes looks like so they can work together toward this common goal. They should be involved in school environment improvement work through creating school-community partnerships.

Given all of the above, we hypothesize as follows: the proposed complex of factors, namely arranging a positively focused dialog between the learning-process actors, stimulating the students' cognitive activities, and facilitative teaching, shall form a specially arranged socio-cultural and pedagogical space based on inter-conditioned and complementary communication of all the learning-process actors, i.e. a positive learning environment for students to perform better in English as a foreign language.

Let us now consider and explain each of these factors. Let's start with arranging a positively focused dialog between the learning-process participants. This factor has its theoretical foundations in the teacher's communicative competence. This is a professional skill that enables teachers to make contact, share information, stimulate students to act, and invoke their empathy. Teachers influence students to make them engaged, independent, and responsible. Thus, a positively focused dialog is defined as a process, in which the teachers deliberately influences the student's behavior, state, attitudes, activity, and actions; the teacher-student interaction shall involve feedback. Positive dialog is essentially about a full contact and understanding of the learning-process actors. What characterizes a dialog is the equality of parties, the latter being able to influence each other and "be in each other's shoes"; lack of ratings, full acceptance, respect, and trust; the actors' ability to see, understand, and actively use the diverse communication tools, including non-verbal communication. This factor uses interactive learning (discussion, role-playing games), collaborative learning (independent or team collaboration), and adjusting students' activity on the basis of feedback.

Another factor that contributes to a positive learning environment consists in stimulating students' cognitive activity. What is meant here is the intensification of learning, e.g. creating special didactic and psychological conditions for meaningful learning and engagement in the learning process, which shall involve not only intellectual, but also social and personal activity. "Intensification of learning is the teacher's purposeful effort to develop and use such forms, contents, techniques, and tools that will contribute to the student's interest, independence, and creativity in learning and skill acquisition for practical applications, as well as to their ability to predict and make independent decisions." T.I. Shamova (Shamova, 1982) identifies the following activity levels:

- Reproduction, i.e. the student's desire to understand, memorize, and reproduce knowledge, to master a method of attaining such knowledge by a model;
- Interpretation, i.e. the student's desire to understand the meaning behind the contents, to comprehend the phenomenon-process relations, to apply their knowledge in a different setting;
- Creativity, i.e. interest in, and desire for, finding a new way to understand the essence of phenomena and their interrelations, to solve the problems that may arise in cognition and practice.

Various methods for intensifying students' cognitive activity are referred to as active learning (discussion in groups, brainstorming, case studies). Those are based on the principles promoting productive thinking: soft competition, collaboration, non-graded activities.

Another factor of the proposed complex that helps create a positive learning environment consists in teach-

ing in such ways as not only to broadcast information, but also to cause the learning-process actors to collaborate and understand each other. This is referred to as facilitating teaching.

Facilitation in teaching is a problem covered by F. Roebuck, D. Espy, R. May, V. Frankl, J. Bugental, J. Holdt, etc. American scholar C. Rogers' studies are the centerpiece of the bulk of research on the topic (Rogers, 1969). Analysis of C. Rogers' fundamental ideas on facilitation reveals that this learning phenomenon manifests itself in the teacher's ability to arrange the learning process in such a way as to create an air of psychological support in the class, which motivates learners to learn better, become more responsible and creative, ultimately driving their personal growth.

This research uses a definition of facilitative teaching proposed by the Russian researchers E.F. Seher, L.N. Kulikova, A.B. Orlov, and V.N. Smirnov, who define the concept as actor-actor interaction that drives the teacher's and the learner's personal growth. Decisive for facilitation are the teacher's four personal qualities: attractiveness (the teacher's desire to gain positive attitude from the learner); empathy (emotional support for balancing the interpersonal relations in the group); tolerance (the art of dialog without edification for more balanced interpersonal relations); and assertiveness (integrated self-confidence manifesting at stable positive attitude to one's own skills). We believe that it is both making the learner perceive the learning process as something more significant, and the teacher's willingness to be facilitative that can enable facilitative teaching that contributes to a positive atmosphere optimal for the accomplishment of learning objectives by collaboration with learners, acceptance and support towards them, trust in their abilities, as well as mutual respect and trust. In this research, the professionalism of a facilitative teacher is modeled upon multidisciplinary education that integrates high professional skills (outstanding general, social, professional erudition; wit; knowledge of the audience; knowledge of the topic), morality (honesty, integrity, courage, fidelity to one's own principles, great civic mindedness, and objectivity), special qualities (creativity, laboriousness, and coping skills), as well as personal qualities that enable effective facilitation. Facilitative teaching as a factor of creating a positive learning environment for better student performance is something that takes place when the teacher uses the following key techniques in the class: to solve study-related and interpersonal conflict by addressing students in a warm and encouraging fashion; to respect others' opinions so as to create an air of comfort, personal security, and understanding by a multitude of various approaches to problem-solving; to pay attention to "special" opinions if well-reasoned and experience-proven; to be willing to forsake individual goals in favor of a more general goal; to be interested in the groupmates' opinions when discussing conceptual issues; to understand that the elaborated solutions will affect each discussant while recognizing the independence of opinion; to promote democracy in the group; to foster respect to coursemates' opinions and beliefs different from My Opinion even if I think My Belief is more constructive; to recognize each communicant as a unique personality while assuming that everyone contributes to collective search and is ready to take responsibility; to encourage mutual learning based on recognizing others' values, rights, and dignity.

To use this factor in English classes, it is imperative to identify and further the student's potential while enabling their self-development and self-enhancement. This gives students personal motivation to learn, create, and achieve; as part of the process, students learn to interact with teachers, parents, and peers; they become motivated to evolve in their education and life, to seek success in learning and creativity. Analyzing students' behavior in facilitative classes shows that compared to conventional classes, such students take greater initiative in communication, they ask more questions and spend more time to study; besides, they display better cognitive functioning, e.g. spend more time thinking and less time memorizing. The approach reduces absenteeism and improves academic performance across the board while being less problematic for the teacher.

Above are the factors that contribute to success in learning. The hypothesis is that combining these factors could greatly improve student performance in English as a foreign language. Experiments have been carried out to confirm or refute this hypothesis.

2. PARTICIPANTS

Experiments were carried out to verify the effectiveness of the proposed factors intended to create a positive learning environment for better student performance in English as a foreign language. The experiments involved four groups, one control group and three experimental groups. The control group did not have any of these factors in their classes; Experimental Group 1 had positively focused dialogs between the learning-process actors; Experimental Group 2 also was stimulated to have better cognition. Experimental Group 3 had all the three factors combined.

3. SAMPLING

Experiments were carried out in two phases (indicative and formative). As part of the indicative phase, the

research team developed the criteria and formed control and experimental groups. The goal was to identify the initial learning performance. The null observation featured a similar distribution of students by the informative and interactive criteria: 70 to 89 percent of students had poor performance, 10 to 28 percent had medium performance, none performed well. Thus, preliminary analysis identified lackluster performance by the informative and interactive criteria in all four groups. This could be explained by the reproduction-focused learning, lack of motivation for personal growth, a limited set of methods and techniques for more efficient learning, and poor actualization of knowledge, abilities, and skills.

Next was the formative phase. Three observations were taken from 2016 to 2018. The null observation was made at the end of the fall term in freshmen; the interim observation was made at the end of the second year; the final observation was made at the end of the third year. The formative phase was in-tended to test the proposed complex of factors to improve student performance in English as a foreign language. The following activities took place in the English classes:

- Discussion assignments (round tables, debates, “aquarium”) to boost students’ discussion skills; to help them realize their own opinions on the discussed matter; to teach respect to the opponents’ opinions and standpoints; to help students learn to criticize the existing viewpoints in a constructive fashion, to ask proper questions, to dispute and to work in groups.
- Games (role-playing games, business games, dramatization, mocking) to bolster their teamwork and communication skills; to teach making multiple decisions and find a decision independently; to help them learn to waive individual goals in favor of broader goals; to make students ready and willing to take responsibility for a problem; to ensure students’ comfort in collaboration.
- Case studies (assignments where a solution is given to be analyzed critically).
- Project assignments to encourage initiative, independence, pursuit of self-education, motivation, and learning performance.

The obtained data characterize students’ performance in English as a foreign language by two criteria: informative and interactive.

4. ANALYSIS

Tables 1 and 2 analyze data on the informative criterion that evaluates the theoretical knowledge.

Group	Number of students	Low level	Medium level	High level
Control	15	9/60 %	4/26.67 %	2/13.33 %
Experimental Group 1	15	7/46.66	5/33.34 %	3/20 %
Experimental Group 2	14	8/57.15 %	6/27.85 %	2/15 %
Experimental Group 3	15	6/40 %	5/33.33 %	4/26.67 %

Student distribution by the informative criterion (final observation)

Group	Number of students	Low level	Medium level	High level
Control	15	5/33.33 %	6/40 %	4/26.67 %
EG1	15	4/26.66 %	6/40 %	5/33.34 %
EG2	14	1/7.15 %	7/50 %	6/42.85 %
EG3	15	0/0 %	6/40 %	9/60 %

Comparative analysis of the null/interim/final observations shows that the number of students performing well in English as a foreign language increased most significantly in EG1, EG2, and EG3.

Tables 3 and 4 present interactive-criterion data; this criterion demonstrates students’ socio-cultural and communicative skills and abilities.

Student distribution by the interactive criterion (interim observation)

Group	Number of students	Low level	Medium level	High level
Control	15	9/60 %	5/33.33 %	1/7.62 %
EG1	15	5/33.33 %	7/46.66	3/21.43 %
EG2	14	4/28.57 %	7/50.03 %	3/21.43 %
EG3	15	4/26.66 %	7/46.64 %	4/22.68 %

Student distribution by the interactive criterion (final observation)

Group	Number of students	Low level	Medium level	High level
Control	15	5/53.33	8/53.33	2/11.34
EG1	15	3/20%	6/40 %	6/ 40%
EG2	14	2/14.28 %	5/33.33 %	9/60 %
EG3	15	1/6.66 %	5/33.33 %	9/60 %

Experimental data show that all the groups improved in terms of the interactive criterion, albeit to varying extent. Interim/final observation data show positive dynamics in all the English performance indicators. The greatest improvement was observed in EG3, where all the proposed factors were involved to improve performance in English as a foreign language.

5. RESULTS

We have therefore confirmed our hypothesis that the proposed complex of factors, namely arranging a positively focused dialog between the learning-process actors, stimulating the students' cognitive activities, and facilitative teaching, shall suffice to form a specially arranged socio-cultural and pedagogical space based on inter-conditioned and complementary communication of all the learning-process actors, i.e. a positive learning environment for students to perform better.

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