AFFECTION AS AN ARGUMENT FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING OF THIRD AGE STUDENTS

CLÁUDIA ESTIMA SARDO [1]

ABSTRACT: This research proposes a qualitative study of students of the third age in order to understand the role of affection in their foreign language learning processes. Two groups of Brazilian third age students studied English as a foreign language under the communicative approach, having group 1 a focus in the development of the basic linguistic abilities and group 2, a focus in learning through affection. The analysis of the two learning situations have the objective of verifying the role of affection, the way it comes in the interlanguage of the students, in the activities developed in class, in the students' needs and in the necessary knowledge the teacher in such situation needs to handle as well as the theories involved. The data suggest that an approach which interweaves cognition and affection offers the most adequate learning situations for old students of foreign languages.

KEY-WORDS: elderly students, cognition, affection

[1] Doutora em Estudos da Linguagem, Professora de Língua Inglesa da Universidade Estadual do Oeste do Paraná, Membro do GEPSEB – Grupo de Pesquisa em Secretariado Executivo Bilíngüe. csardo@unioeste.br

A AFETIVIDADE COMO ARGUMENTO PARA O APRENDIZADO DE LÍNGUA ESTRANGEIRA PARA ALUNOS DA TERCEIRA IDADE

RESUMO: Esta pesquisa propõe o estudo qualitativo de duas situações de ensino de língua estrangeira com alunos da terceira idade, diferenciados pela abordagem de ensino a que estão expostos. Os dois grupos são constituídos de aprendizes brasileiros idosos que estudam uma língua estrangeira (inglês) mediante uma abordagem comunicativa, sendo que, no Grupo 1, a abordagem privilegia o desenvolvimento das habilidades lingüísticas, enquanto, no Grupo 2, a ênfase está no uso da afetividade visando a um maior desenvolvimento lingüístico. As análises das duas situações de ensino têm por fim verificar o papel da afetividade, o modo como ela se manifesta na progressão da interlíngua dos aprendizes, nas atividades desenvolvidas na sala de aula, nos interesses dos alunos e os conhecimentos necessários que o professor, inserido em contextos similares aos que são descritos neste trabalho, precisa dominar, assim como estar fundamentado e consciente de certas teorias. Os dados levam a crer que uma abordagem de ensino para idosos que entremeie cognição e afetividade apresenta melhores condições de aprendizado.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: alunos da terceira idade, cognição, afetividade

1 INTRODUCTION

A growing population of the elderly in Brazil has generated awareness about the need for continuous cognitive development in the later stages of life so that higher quality life conditions are created. Literature in general, however, reveals the limitations that these students have, which can be noticed by popular sayings like *children learn another language better* or *learning is meant for young people.* For this reason, there are prescient needs to expose the positive aspects of the process of learning a foreign language by elderly students. With this in mind, the present research proposes a qualitative study of two foreign learning situations with elderly students, differentiated by the language learning approach to which they were exposed. The communicative approach was used by both groups of elderly students in order to learn a foreign language (English), but with different focuses: in Group 1 (G1) the approach was directed at the development of linguistic abilities, while Group 2 (G2)

emphasized the use of affection as a means to develop linguistic learning. The objective of the analysis of the two learning situations is to verify the role of affection, the way it is manifested in the development of the students' inter-language, in the activities developed in class, and in the students' discourses. The data collected reveals that an approach that intertwines cognition and affection presents better learning conditions for elderly students group.

2 THE LEARNING PROCESS OF THE ELDERLY

The understanding of foreign language learning of elderly students involves issues like the ideal input conditions, the characteristics of the processes of memory, the discourse of the elderly, the relations the elderly have between cognition and affection and the concepts related to their education which will be discussed below.

2.1 MEMORY AND THE MEMORY OF THE ELDERLY

Studies about memory have focused on researching memory trajectories, the relation between memory and the selection of information and its relation to the learning process.

The trajectories traced by information in memory generate different types of memory and ways of storage, which are presented by Durão (2007). The *sensorial memory* receives several external stimuli, which are detected by vision, by hearing, by smell, by touch and by taste, retaining information for very short periods of time. All pieces of information considered unimportant by the sensorial memory are retained in short term memory.

In the event that these pieces of information are stored in short term memory in their literal content, they will disappear rapidly. However, if they are processed by verbal and visual strategies, and anchored to existing information, they are sent to long term memory (DURÃO, 2007). Long term memory, the author says, is divided in: *semantic memory*, archiving information according to classes and semantic groups, *episodic memory*, storing information related to concrete places and moments and *procedimental memory*, related to the way things are done. Learning constitutes, states Durão (2007), an association of the new pieces of information to the already existing ones in the long term memory. Robinson (2006), completes this idea, claiming that attention is also susceptible to affective factors like motivation, as well as the amount of information to which someone is exposed. The excess of

stimuli could create an interference of information, which could encounter difficulty in storage, not in terms of storage in memory, but in relation to the overload generated.

Sé et al (2004), describe the characteristics that memory acquires due to aging. *Primary memory* remains relatively stable in relation to aging; however, some changes can cause difficulties in performing simultaneous tasks when information is not stored in an efficient manner, even if there is the possibility of correcting mistakes. *Semantic memory*, which registers linguistic information, is little affected by age. *Episodic memory* is highly affected by age and it is related to the difficulty in acquiring new learning procedures about recent events that can, however, be preserved or compensated in environments in which the elderly are stimulated. *Procedural* and *sensorial memories* involve motor abilities, and existing literature does not present evidence indicating that they are affected by age. *Prospective memory* is the memory for future actions, which is frequently affected by age, because old people have difficulties in recalling information that is related to predetermined time. Besides this, prospective memory can suffer influences from factors like stress, anxiety and cognitive problems. Furthermore, many factors can affect the use of memory such as lack of motivation, low self-esteem, low sense of personal control, lack of confidence in one's own abilities, depression, fear of failure, and overuse of medicines, which also induces slowness, confusion, difficulty in learning, inactivity, low productivity, irresponsibility and apathy, as stated by Leão Junior e Resende (2004).

2.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISCOURSE OF THE ELDERLY

Among the few studies involving old people in Applied Linguistics, Coupland, Coupland and Giles (1991), in the Discourse Analysis field, point out issues related to the discursive topics of the elderly. This study presents five basic categories which describe the topics of the discourse of old people, nominated *painful self-disclosure.* The authors say that the discourse of old people can be characterized by one or more of the following categories: 1.) *reported bereavement*, referring to the loss of husbands, wives and relatives; 2.) *severe ill health*, related to health problems, hospitals and operations and worries about future hospitalizations; 3.) *immobility*, meaning the difficulties relating to walking, visiting friends and shopping, as used to in the past; 4.) *disengagement and loneliness*, reveling the physical isolation and alienation from social roles they used to have in the past; and 5.) *others*, a variety of

other motives related to family problems, financial and social situations, and the death of friends.

2.3 THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN COGNITION AND AFFECTION

Krashen and Terrel (1983), discuss the interplay between cognition and affection in language learning, stating that children present better performance when learning a second language in the long run. Adults, on the other hand, learn faster in shorter periods of time. Because adults are exposed to comprehensible input, they make negotiations during conversations, they quickly overcome the silent period, generating a larger quantity of interactions, and they have a broader world knowledge. However, the affective factors favor children because they have a lower affective filter. The affective factors do not facilitate the second language learning process in adults, state the authors, because, usually from puberty on, adults develop hyper-sensibility and self consciousness.

Carstensen and Mikels (2005), claim that old people have their cognitive capacities enlarged to the processing of information which involves affection, of positive content, when compared to information that does not involve affection, or with a negative content. Such ideas are named by the authors as *selective socio-emotional theory*. According to the authors, this fact happens due to the living motivations of old people who, as they get older, perceive the limits of time and try to direct their attention to aspects that are emotionally significant to their own lives. The *selective socio-emotional theory* has two explanations for this fact. [What are the explanations? If you are not going to elaborate two explanations, you could eliminate the previous sentence entirely.] Positive information, because it generates emotional satisfaction is, for this reason, favored. *In* this way, the emotional processes are available to compensate for the decline of other processes which contribute to the formation and retention of memory, according to Mather (2004). Therefore, memory for emotional information gets better as people get older because it demands a lower cognitive load, whereas, memory for negative information suffers a decline.

2.4 EDUCATION FOR OLD PEOPLE: AN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

A pedagogical proposal designed for adults and older students, named as participants and reflective investigation, according to Palma (2000), suggests that initially the investigator-educator should propose situations that present problems. In this way, learners learn to systematically define and analyze problems and are able to propose alternative solutions.

This pedagogical proposal to old students (PALMA, 2000), is based on eight principles: 1.) *the education of commitment*, in which the subjects have to choose their roles as agents in a way that activates their critical and participative capacities in making decisions which affect their quality of life; 2.) the *education of learning*, in which students have to develop independence in relation to their learning so that they become more autonomous, directing their own learning process; 3.) *the education of participation*, in which students intervene in the learning process participating in the decisions, in the planning and in the implementation of actions; 4.) *the education of understanding reality*, in which old students objectively analyze reality and are prepared to take a reflective action in the reality, intervening and recreating it; 5.) *the education of solidarity between generations,* which promotes intergenerational relations so that they interact and influence one another; 6.) *general education - subjects in their individual and social dimensions*, which takes into account the historical aspects and historicity of individuals, taking the learner as a subject in constant evolution; 7.) *the education of the qualitative use of free time*, besides socializing, it aims at adaptation to the environment, literacy, and learning job skills; and 8.) *the education of social insertion*, which facilitates integration and relationships between people so that they experience "the efficacy of group work, the power of collective responses and the impact of coherent alternatives" (PALMA,2000, p 123).

3 METHODOLOGY

This study presents research based on the claim that affection is a useful tool for the elderly when learning a foreign language in improving their memory capacities and cognition. In order to verify this hypothesis, this research proposes the study of two learning situations which will focus on the role of affection, the way it enters into the students' inter-language, in the activities developed in class, and in the discourse produced by the students.

4 THE DATA COLLECTED

The data was collected through the study of two foreign language (English) learning classes for the elderly, which differ in regard to the approaches to which they were exposed. G1 studied foreign language using the communicative approach with a focus on the development of linguistic abilities, while G2 also studied with a communicative approach, but with an emphasis on the aspects that involve students' affection. The communicative approach in G1 had the linguistic study centered in classroom linguistic interactions among students. In G2 students had a focus on the linguistic aspects of the language geared to the enhancement of cognition and affection to which they were exposed. A range of instruments were used to collect the data such as direct and indirect observation, the study of the class activities, and the students' diary classes so that the data could be analyzed from different angles.

4.1 GROUP 1

In group 1, there were 6 students, ages ranging from 54 to 84 years old, who had a total of 15 hours of class over the course of 2006.

The didactic material used in class comprised a book that presented a communicative approach, according to the proposal of the author. Students studied linguistic functions like personal presentations, professions, nationality and personal information, developing the four basic abilities of the language (speaking, reading, writing and listening). Also, complementary activities were provided by the professor like readings, games, pictures and audio CD-ROM activities.

Furthermore, dialogues were also used in this group because the professor observed that the reality presented in the book was too distant from the students' reality. Besides, it was necessary to include language games in order to recycle the linguistic content studied in class, as they were presented in a quantity greater than the students could handle, a problem identified by a lack of enthusiasm towards the activities with minimal confidence in regards to the content studied. For this reason, students often presented many doubts externalized by the difficulty in performing the activities or by a lack of motivation.

4.2 GROUP 2

Group 2 was composed of 11 students, from 57 to 74 years old with 30 hours of class over the course of the year of 2006.

The teacher's identification of the students' needs and cognitive capacities defined the didactic material used in class. The activities with an affective focus had the objective of raising interest in English through the involvement of people (friends, relatives and classmates) who had a significant meaning to the students and happy moments they had lived in their lives. In this way, students had to take the activities done in class and share them with friends and relatives so that they could interact with them in the English language, generating essential involvement among students and their friends/parents with the English language. The results that emerged from these activities were commented on in the beginning of the following class, serving as input for the classes. It was possible to identify the students' satisfaction with this new type of experience by their involvement and the comments generated outside the classroom. The objective was that this involvement would enlarge the possibilities for learning, overcoming the limitations which often characterize groups of old students.

The activities developed in class were classified as: *meditation* (done at the beginning or at the end of the class, in which students prayed thanking the class for the day); *relaxation* (stretching and relaxing exercises were done in class); *reporting* (students reported the activities done in class to their friends or relatives and told the class their reactions towards it); *interaction* (students took gifts, cards, notes, etc with messages in the English language and gave them to their friends and parents); *arts and games* (games, handling pictures, cutting and gluing, and singing songs, which promoted a relaxed atmosphere in class), *interpretation of texts* (a variety of texts in different genres and in areas of student with activities like filling in the blanks and numbering); *language activities* (a grammatical study of the language by written and oral exercises with the use of CD-ROM, which enables the use of language structures, having the students friends and parents as subjects of these activities); *raising self-esteem* (students brought handcrafts from home that they had made and proudly showed to their classmates creating situations for an interaction among students using the English language.); *use of previous knowledge* (activities which involved the use of students' previous knowledge of world/everyday situations, like gardening, the use of herbs for medicinal use in teas, cooking and laundry tips); and *students' diary classes* (students expressed their feeling in relation to the class, to the students, to the professor, to the didactic material and to the learning process as a whole).

5 DATA ANALYZES

5.1 THE ACTIVITIES IN G1

The activities done in G1, which had the objective of creating learning situations for linguistic development, revealed that students faced difficulties due to a variety of aspects which interfered in their learning. They were:

1. *The visual layout*: the contents of a unit, presented in their book, were displayed in large quantities of information in restricted spaces in a page by the use of boxes, outlines, substitution exercises, with arrows and lines that ended up creating more difficulties for the students through the presentation of a "visual chaos." The various pieces of information distracted students making it difficult to locate themselves in a specific exercise on a page. This situation caused a loss of visual focus of the content which was being analyzed; complicating the initial stages of retention of information captured by the sensorial memory, in this case, more specifically, the sense of vision (DURÃO, 2007). In Robinson's (2006) terms, a great amount of stimuli can lead to confusion instead of the retention of information because of the interference caused by the stream of information, as previously described, and as described in the following item.

2. *The amount of content*: several grammatical points and linguistic functions were presented in a single lesson, generating a great cognitive demand on the students, more than they usually can process. This situation does not expose students to comprehensible input, according to Krashen and Terrel's (1983) terms. As a consequence, students expended great effort to understand the language, at times beyond their capabilities, and were left unmotivated to learn. The excessive amount of information to which they were exposed generated a high demand in the process of memory selection making it more difficult to distinguish important from unimportant information. For this reason, I believe that considerable amounts of information were not stored, but were instead discarded and made unavailable for future use, as Sé et al (2004) describe.

3. *The themes proposed*: the themes proposed by the adopted book did not motivate the students because it was meant for a wide range of students, adults and foreigners. Topics like occupations and office situations did not call students' attention. Therefore, students were not motivated by the material, affecting the performance of the students' memory (LEÃO JUNIOR and RESENDE, 2004).

4. *Limited interaction*: the activities proposed in the book used in class suggest interactions limited to the classroom situation. These activities are directed at individual and group work that facilitates learning because they encourage interaction and are related to affection (CARSTENSEN and MATHER, 2005). However, ideally, and in practical terms, they could be expanded even more.

5. *The affective filter*: students had to handle a cognitive overload in the processing of the foreign language, which was not minimized by their affective filter, a concept described by Krashen and Terrel (1983). Because the focus was on learning, students were tense in class, creating an idea that learning a foreign language is an obstacle, a negative situation, which demanded a great cognitive effort of elderly people (CARSTENSEN and MATHER, 2005), creating a less favorable situation for learning to occur.

6. *A shorter commitment*: the distance between the teacher and the students, between the students themselves and between the students and their relatives (in regard to the learning experience) caused a shorter commitment among these students to their learning. So, students frequently came to class without having done their homework, they would forget their materials at home and be absent from class, not characterizing the *commitment to education and participation in education* as proposed by Palma (2000).

5.1.2 The themes identified in G1 students' discourse

The themes identified in the students' discourse in G1, classified from data gathered in students' diary classes and interviews, showed that students make use of the theme *diseases* as in "we don't have a very good memory to remember things", according to Coupland, Coupland and Giles (1991).

Besides this theme, the following themes were also identified in G1: 1.) *Satisfaction with the learning situation* ("Today the class was marvelous, I like it very much"); 2.) *Demonstration of affection* ("The class was very nice. It was easy and the teacher was very patient"); 3.) *Expressing difficulty in learning* ("I wanted to learn a lot, but it has been hard for me"); 4.) *Expressing moods* ("Today I loved the class, because I could answer the questionnaire"); 5.) *Reports of the class activities* ("Today the class was very objective. The activity demonstrating numbers was very good for retaining information"); 6.) *Intergenerational interaction as a product of learning* ("My cousin has a grandchild who speaks English, I get surprised. So when she comes back to visit me I want to be prepared to talk to her.")

5.2 THE ACTIVITIES IN G2

In G2, the activities done during the course were adapted to the needs and to the real capacities of elderly students. They can be characterized as:

1. *A variety of types of activities:* ten different types (meditation, relaxation, reports, games/arts, reading, language, raising self-esteem, previous knowledge and diary classes) were applied in class offering a variety of means to study the language, making the learning situation dynamic and varied. This range of possibilities led to the activation of the sensorial memory of the students by several different means (DURÃO, 2007).

2. *The amount of content*: the linguistic functions, the grammar points and the study of the textual genres were presented to the students, little by little, respecting the students' rhythms as suggested by Pires (2005). In other words, two grammatical points, at the most, in each class. When working with linguistic functions, two functions, at the most, in each class, according to the teacher's perception of the students' confidence. The textual genres were studied departing from the students' prior knowledge. These procedures created a favorable situation for the selection of information to be sent to short term memory, in which simultaneous tasks were avoided, not overloading the students' memory (SÉ et al, 2004). Interference of high streams of information was also avoided (ROBINSON, 2006).

3. *The context of the activities*: the activities proposed in class presented contexts specially chosen for the students' interests. Topics like health, food, biographies, handcrafts, gardening, religion, love, pets, family, and friends constituted some of the themes seen in class. A peculiar aspect observed in class was that the activities contextualized with the students' names, and the names of their friends and relatives, were highly appreciated. This way students approached the language activating the affective focus to learning the foreign language, thus characterizing it as comprehensible and meaningful input (KRASHEN and TERREL, 1983), and also an atmosphere to develop the commitment to education, in which the learner is the subject of this process (PALMA,2000).

4. *An expanded interaction*: the activities developed in G2 required that students extend the knowledge they had acquired in class to people outside class from their everyday life. Then, students talked to friends and relatives to have these interactions, broadening the possibilities of learning the contents studied in class because students involved cognition and affection, an ideal learning situation for older students, according to

the socio-affective selective theory (CARSTENSEN and MATHER, 2005).

5. The affective filter: the environment created in class, by having activities elaborated on an affective basis and by the affective closeness among teacher and students, has turned the dynamics of the class into an interactive dialogue. The students exposed their feelings in relation to the learning process and the teacher acted according to the pedagogical needs she identified in class. Students became motivated and made the learning situation a pleasant activity, namely as participatory education, according to Palma's pedagogical proposal (2000) for old students.

6. More commitment towards learning: the students' affective involvement in relation to the learning environment has made them more responsible in regards to their homework, in the organization of their materials, in bringing in spontaneously language materials to enrich the class, and in responding to the independence principle of learning, defined as *learning to learn education* (Palma, 2000).

5.2.1 G2 discourse themes

With respect to the G2 discourse themes collected in interviews done with the students and in their class' diary notes (as identified according to COUPLAND, COUPLAND and GILES', 1991, classification), *reported bereavement* was identified as in "I enjoy learning words: (for example) '*I adore you*', I want to put it into my head, but sometimes I get distracted, I remember my son who died," *disengagement and loneliness,* as in "I don't have anybody to talk about. I will try harder, here I do what I can."

In the G2 learning class, some other themes were identified like *satisfaction with the learning situation and showing affection*, as in utterances like "Very often I say to my husband: *I love you! I love you! My sweetheart"*; *expressing language learning difficulty*, as in "I have started to learn a little, but it is hard to me to understand"; *expressing mood*, as in "Well, I feel important, think about it, I had never had conditions to study English when I was younger"; *reports about class activities*, as in "my name is Mary. I am studying at the university for the elderly"; *expanding learning to extra class situations*, as in "People at home encourage me to study. Even my daughter says "Mom, you have to study. I play with my grandchildren. I arrive at home and ask them for 'little kisses.' They like it a lot. I speak some other words. They repeat them so that I pronounce correctly. It's very nice", *intergenerational interaction as a product of learning*, as in "My grandchild, I have written letters to her telling her that I am studying English so that when she writes to me she can write in English".

5.2.2 G2 Students' inter-language: utterances produced in the target language (English) in their classes' diaries and evaluations at the end of the course

The inter-language spontaneously produced by the students in the target language in their classes' diaries and evaluations at the end of the course was analyzed according to Seliker's (1974) definition for inter-language, stated as the knowledge of a second language that is being developed. The author claims that inter-language is influenced by the previous knowledge that a student has about other languages, by the characteristics of the target language and by some general and recurrent characteristics in the majority of the inter-language's systems. The linguistic manifestations collected in the present study are classified in regard to its language function, to its affective focus and to its grammatical class.

Among the 38 utterances produced by the students in the target language in classes' diaries and evaluations at the end of the course, 26 of them were produced in situations of real communication, which demonstrate that, besides having the perception of studying a language to use in real situations, students also produced 24 of the total utterances to express affection towards classmates: "Very good," "Beautiful, she's an artist," and "Beautiful, very nice." When addressing the teacher: "Congratulations for your organization and dedication my teacher," "My teacher is excellent and teaches much love." And when addressing relatives, "I love you, I adore you," "I love you, I love you! My sweetheart!" and "I love you, I adore you, kiss me."

The 13 remaining utterances refer to the language used to express a conscious knowledge of the grammatical points and vocabulary in the target language: "How are you? I am fine, thanks" and "Bye-bye;" and one of them made an affective reference, as in "My teacher is excellent and teaches much love."

From the analysis of these utterances, I concluded that the language utterances produces by the students - their inter-language - had mostly an affective focus or content.

6 CONCLUSION

The study of the activities performed by the students of G1 and G2, their class diaries, the interviews, the final evaluations of the course and G2 students' inter-language have made it possible to bring about the evidences indicating that affection plays not only a primary role, but is

an essential condition to the establishment of minimal conditions to a meaningful language learning among students of the third age. The data collected also indicates how the focus on affection has expanded the possibilities for the use of sensorial memory. Varied situations and opportunities have made input salient enough to be noticed in a more efficient manner to the following information storage stages.

However, the most relevant characteristic that this research reveals is the exposure to two learning situations in the Brazilian educational context. G1 presents a language learning situation very much characterized by a way of recapturing self-esteem and time spent on hobbies. In the other learning situation, in Group 2, students had the same characteristics as students in G1, in addition to the creation of a learning environment which enhanced the cognitive learning situations due to the affective emphasis on the content studied in class. Therefore, the learning situation which gives priorities to cognition allied to affection generates a learning process of inclusiveness, treating elders as participant members of society and accepting them according to their needs, instead of treating them as young adults or children.

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