

The Affective Filter role in the English language acquisition

El rol del filtro afectivo en la adquisición del idioma inglés

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Abstract

The necessity of this study lies on the predicament that English language acquisition is usually difficult to develop. Some factors such as limited class time, inadequate exposure to the language, or emotional issues such as scarce motivation, anxiety, language shock among others can become a barrier that stops learning from being acquired. Hence, students do not attempt to use the foreign language, preventing them from interacting, which leads to low levels of English language competence. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to establish the impact that the application of the Affective Filter Hypothesis and its variables have on the English language. To do so, the general objective of this research is to distinguish the affective filter variables and the relationship between those and language acquisition. That being the case, the design of this study is quasi-experimental because of the application of a pre-posttest to 61 students from the third year of high school in a private school in Riobamba a city of Ecuador. The pre-posttest showed how the affective filter contributes to students in the English language acquisition, as well as to obtain relevant information of the students' progress after the intervention.

Keywords: affective filter; anxiety; English language acquisition; motivation; teacher role.

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Resumen

La necesidad de este estudio radica en el problema de que el idioma inglés suele ser difícil de adquirir. Algunos factores como el tiempo limitado en clase, la exposición inadecuada al idioma o problemas emocionales como la falta de motivación, la ansiedad, el choque lingüístico, entre otros, pueden convertirse en barreras que impiden la adquisición del aprendizaje. Debido a esto, los estudiantes no utilizan este idioma extranjero, lo que les impide interactuar y puede conducir a niveles bajos de competencia en el idioma inglés. Por lo tanto, es de suma importancia establecer el impacto que la Hipótesis del Filtro Afectivo y sus variables tienen en el idioma inglés. Para ello, el objetivo general de esta investigación es distinguir las variables del filtro afectivo y la relación entre estas y la adquisición del lenguaje. En este caso, el diseño del estudio es casi experimental debido a la aplicación de una prueba antes y después de la intervención a 61 estudiantes del tercer año de bachillerato en un colegio privado de la ciudad de Riobamba en Ecuador. Las evaluaciones aplicadas antes y después de la intervención demostraron que el filtro afectivo contribuye a mejorar los índices de aprendizaje del idioma inglés en los estudiantes, asimismo se obtuvo información relevante sobre el progreso de los estudiantes después de la intervención.

Palabras clave: adquisición del idioma inglés; ansiedad; filtro afectivo; motivación; rol del docente.

Introduction

English has been a global language since the Industrial Revolution. According to Melitz (2016), there has never been in the past a language spoken more widely in the world than English is today. As a result of that, there are around 1.35 billion people who speak English either natively or as a second language, slightly more than the 1.12 billion Mandarin Chinese speakers (Szmigiera, 2021).

Considering the above, the outcome that the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education seeks is a B1.2 English level at the end of the third year of bachillerato. However, the reality in schools differs from what is expected. For instance, the results of the last English Proficiency Index speak for themselves, Ecuador has the lowest English level in all of South America, with an overall score of 411 points (EF, 2020). Contrasting that score with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) standards, it corresponds to the A2 level of English proficiency.

This reality may respond to many factors that could be external or internal. Within the external factors students have to face, it was found that numerous Educational institutions in Ecuador have large classrooms (35 to 40 students per schoolroom) which is definitely an impediment for the learning process (Calle, 2012), due to the fact that it is not only challenging for all of them to produce the language during the short class time, but also educators have a hard time trying to give students the feedback they needed. Besides, the level of exposure is another issue in the Ecuadorian context, students do not receive a great amount of natural or meaningful language input which is the exposure to the English language that teachers must provide in class. For this reason, Calle (...) affirmed that 49.3% of the Ecuadorian English teachers translate everything to students. In addition, some internal factors also could lead to this deficit of English proficiency among students. Motivation, anxiety, self-confidence, and the teacher's role play vital factors when learning a foreign language.

Considering the aforementioned, it is vital to continue improving some aspects of the educational process to increase the communicative competence mentioned in the Ecuadorian Curriculum. A reliable way to increase second language acquisition in students is to find ways that really encourage and motivate them in the learning process.

The acquisition of a new language has been a topic of concern for many psycholinguistics such as Noam Chomsky who designed a model of acquisition to have a better understanding of how our brain works when acquiring a new language. He named it the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) which is an abstract system located in our brain where the input is processed.

Input is understood to be acoustic-phonetics events, in the case of speech, or graphic objects in the case of written text, produced by another individual for some purpose on a specific occasion. These events and objects are observable for third parties; they can be recorded, measured, analyzed, and hence objectively definable. (Carroll, 2001, p. 8)

This input in second language acquisition always contains a message that arrives to the language acquisition device in the receptor of the message and may or may not be comprehended according to our current level of already acquired competence. Once the comprehensible input is processed and has passed through the language acquisition device, the message is understood, and it is possible for the second language learner to give an output which basically is to produce the second language.

However, some internal factors within the process of language acquisition can affect the way students learn. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), what influences foreign language learning cannot be attributed only to cognitive abilities but also to emotions. Therefore, emotions have a huge effect and could lead to a learning process with no success where, even though the input received is comprehensive enough and with a suitable level of English competence for students. It does not reach the language acquisition device (LAD), consequently, the new language cannot be acquired.

Stephen Krashen, who is a linguist specialized in language acquisition, studies how languages are learned. He proposed his own theory of second language acquisition, within this theory he established 5 hypotheses (Krashen, 1982, 1985, 1988, 1991). The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis sets the difference between language acquisition and language learning. The Natural Order Hypothesis, which is based on the predictable order in which the parts of a language are acquired. The third theory is the Monitor Hypothesis which states that besides learning and acquiring are different when performing a second language both coexist together and alter the output. After that comes the Comprehensible Hypothesis which encompasses the understanding that we need to have of the target language to acquire it. Finally, and the one on which this study is based, the Affective Filter Hypothesis that can help teachers to understand how a second language is learned in an effective way within the classroom environment.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis

The concept of Affective Filter was first used by Dulay and Burt (1977). In their further research, Stephen Krashen adopted this term and proposed his hypothesis. He said that the Affective Filter encompasses all those factors that prevent the information from being learned. The Affective Filter Hypothesis claims that affective variables do not impact language acquisition directly but prevent input from reaching what Chomsky has called the language acquisition device, the part responsible for language acquisition. If the acquirer is anxious, has low self-esteem, does not consider himself or herself a potential member of the group that speaks that language, students may understand the input, but it will not reach their language acquisition device because “a block –the affective filter- will keep it out” (Krashen, 2013). Krashen named those internal aspects “affective variables” (2013).

The affective variables that work as an obstacle in second language acquisition increasing the affective filter are mostly emotions, it has to be said that the same set of emotions but in a positive way can improve the acquiring process by reducing the filter and letting the comprehensible input pass through it and reaching the language acquisition device. So, there is a close relationship between the affective variables and the filter’s size, “If the filter is down or weak, and if the input is comprehensible, the input will reach the acquisition device and acquisition will take place.” (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p.402)

This hypothesis not only establishes the moment in which the learner is more able to acquire the language but also explains the differences between learners who despite of receiving the same amount of comprehensible input in the same external conditions have not acquired the same language competence. The importance of the affective variables is visible, consequently, it is important to understand how those variables make the filter “open” or “close”.

Affective Variables

Stephen Krashen wrote in his work that a variety of affective variables prevent the knowledge from being processed in the LAD. He also mentioned that most of those studied could be placed into one of these three categories: Anxiety, Motivation and Self-confidence (1982, p. 31).

Anxiety: According to May (1950), during the nineteenth century anxiety had emerged as an unavoidable problem. Freud stated that the capacity for anxiety is innate in each person, and it is part of the self-preservation instinct (Freud, 1920, as cited in May, 1950, p.192). In the middle of the 20th century Orval Hobart Mowrer, a psychologist who made a significant contribution to the field of learning theory, was a pioneer in studying anxiety in the learning process.

May (1950), claimed that “Mowrer’s hypothesis has the practical merit not only of emphasizing how important and pervasive anxiety is as motivation in education, but it also sheds in healthy and constructive methods of management of that anxiety in the classroom” (p.174).

Anxiety research continued, it was defined as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (Spielberger, 1983, p. 1). In the educational field, according to Cassady and Johnson, “Anxiety is a well-documented construct traditionally defined in educational literature as a cognitive phenomenon that can affect second language performance and achievement (2002). Moreover, “In language learning, it refers to the learners’ fearfulness and uneasiness when they are supposed to express in a foreign language” (Yao & Liu, 2021, p. 4). This was explained by psychologists as an *anxiety reaction*. However, psycholinguists made a differentiation saying that when anxiety is limited to learning situations this is called *specific anxiety reaction*. Not all students face problems during the learning process, some of them can be outstanding in other subjects and only struggle when learning a new language. Horwitz in 1986, named the anxiety while learning a foreign language as “Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)” and it causes not only psychological symptoms as a direct effect in the capability that students have to use the abilities needed to receive or produce the language but also causes according to the clinical experience physiological symptoms in learners as the difficulty for concentrating, becoming forgetful, sweating and having palpitations (Horwitz, 1986, p. 4).

Language anxiety is conceived as “the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language” (MacIntyre, 1998, p. 27). Similarly, Horwitz et al. (1991), conceptualized foreign language anxiety (FLA) as a “distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 31).

Scrutinizing, not all the parts of the language produce anxiety in students, researchers have extended their investigation to the skill-based FLA. To measure their data and obtain reliable data different measurement instruments were created. Horwitz created a scale to measure FLA himself. Nowadays it continues to be used worldwide. Researchers that intend to measure skill-based FLA have created their instruments “Woodrow’s Second Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (SLSAS); Pae’s Speaking Anxiety Scale; Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) designed by Kim; Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) developed by Saito, Horwitz, & Garza and Writing Anxiety Scale by Cheng” (Ran et al., 2022, p.2).

Motivation: most of the teachers wonder how to motivate students to learn more English, how to encourage them to use the new language, and, how students can produce the language when they do not practice outside the classroom environment. This is not something new, researchers have found in motivation a great source of studies for ages. In the late 50’s the psychologist Robert Gardner started to research the role of Motivation in Second Language Acquisition. Within the socio-educational model, Gardner and Lambert (1972), divided motivation into integrative and instrumental motivation. That being the case, integrative motivation according to Gardner and Lambert refers to language learning for personal growth and cultural enrichment, in other words, integrative motivation stems from a genuine interest in the language itself and its culture. On the other hand, instrumental motivation, in the words of Chalak and Kassaian (2010), alludes to those

individuals whose primary motivation for learning a new language originates in the desire for a positive effect in the future or a need. Those goals may include success in a test or rewards. Gardner in 1985 concluded that “An integratively oriented learner would likely have a stronger desire to learn the language, have a positive attitude towards the learning situation, and be more likely to expend more effort in learning the language”. Those components were represented easily as an equation where the desire, the attitude, and the effort that an individual possesses encourage the acquisition of a new language. However, within the classroom, most of the students are in need of integrative motivation as they are more likely to have instrumental motivation. Studying English for academic reasons more than for a communication desire is common within the classroom.

It is no doubt that motivation is an important factor for succeeding in learning. It is the combination of two factors: Learning purpose and attitude; if knowledge is important for the learner, learning occurs without any need to learn it. (Seven, 2020, p. 4)

Besides motivation has been proven to have an important role in language acquisition, some teachers miss the fact that each student has a different personality and each one of them is driven by their goals. That is the real matter within the classroom, redirecting students’ needs not only fulfilling them with knowledge but also with purpose.

Self-Confidence: is defined by the Oxford Reference Dictionary as “Belief or assurance in oneself, trusting one’s abilities, judgments, or decisions, either in general or in relation to a specific situation or activity” (n.d.).

Self-confidence is an attitude about your skills and abilities. It means you accept and trust yourself and have a sense of control in your life. You know your strengths and weaknesses well and have a positive view of yourself. You set realistic expectations and goals, communicate assertively, and can handle criticism. (University of Florida, n.d.)

For a better understanding on the relationship that self-confidence has with language learning it must be said that “People with high assurance in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided” (Bandura, 1994, p. 2). Within the language acquisition, it is well known that students do not always find learning a language an easy task. For that reason, if students doubt their capabilities, they will be more likely to think about possible negative results than to focus on the task itself. This reality in a classroom may result in fear of participating.

Self-confidence is very necessary for a student to take risks and engage in the learning activities and those who have self-confidence they are assured of their abilities and are set goals for themselves and work hard to achieve their goals without worrying about the outcomes (Kanza, 2016 cited in Akbari, 2020, p. 1).

It should be noted that as well as in the case of anxiety self-confidence is not inclusive, students might be self-confident in some parts of the language and lose confidence in others.

Other relevant variables: Chen and Xiao (2022 p. 5), mentioned in their research that the teacher's role has become more important than ever. Considering that the purpose of this study is to establish the relationship between all the possible variables that influence language acquisition, it is needed to find more information about that variable.

Teacher's role: It is plausible the influence that teachers have within the classroom and consequently with the students, "Learning in classrooms is not done in isolation, but instead occurs in the context of relationships with teachers and peers" (Junoven & Knifesend, 2016). Teachers should adapt their classes to students' characteristics, learning styles, classroom size, and even to the economic aspects. They must adapt themselves to a fast-changing world where technology is improving every day, and students sometimes are more aware of those changes than teachers themselves. In the middle of all, they need to prioritize students giving them not only the knowledge they need but also the skills they need to succeed in life. So, the most important skill that a teacher needs, is the adaptability to face all those changes.

For this reason, the challenge of the teaching profession must be overcome that teachers need to provide a psychological and academic touch; teachers are expected to play a central role in facilitating and igniting the learning fires of their students. This learning facilitation has a central role in the success of student learning. Teachers must further adapt teaching techniques to suit current and future educational needs (Toker, 2021, cited in Dirsá et al., 2022).

Effective teachers know and love their subjects, and their enthusiasm is contagious. They love Learning, and they are not afraid to admit they do not know all the answers. They encourage students to question constantly, to search for answers, and to learn for the pure joy of learning (Seven, 2020, p. 68).

The importance that a teacher has is immeasurable. Teachers are capable of building by themselves the first 3 variables in students, teachers can motivate students, reduce the foreign language anxiety in each class and boost the self-confidence that students have.

Methodology

For the purposes of this study, the research employs an explanatory sequential design that emphasizes the quantitative phase, followed by the qualitative phase (Creswell, 2011). Moreover, the depth level in this study will be descriptive and correlational due to the fact that a relationship between the affective filter and the language acquisition wants to be probed. It is also longitudinal because data was collected at 2 different points, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the investigation. Apart from that, two different instruments for data collection were applied, the first one was a pre-posttest with 25 items where the four English skills were tested to identify the level of students. The second instrument used was a questionnaire with 15 questions related to the affective variables involved in this research. With this, we could measure the validity and reliabili-

ty of the results during the research. The sample taken for this study was composed of 61 students from third year of high school selected as a convenience sample from the “Unidad Educativa Vigotsky” in Riobamba, a city of Ecuador. From those participants, 34 students were male which means 55,74% of the population and 27 were female meaning 44,26% of the sample.

To obtain the qualitative data as was mentioned before a pre-posttest was applied to participants to measure language acquisition prior to the intervention. This pre-posttest was based on a standardized test for improving reliability and to compare in a better way the results among the participants. This language acquisition test was divided into 4 skills. Reading was the first part and it had 6 short real-world notices where students had to find the main message and three short texts on the same topic for matching the 7 questions with their answers, with a total of 13 items. Listening was the next skill to be tested with 10 items in total, in 5 of them participants had to identify the key information to choose the correct picture according to the question presented in each one, and 5 more items where they had to listen and complete the gaps with the information in the listening. The next part was the writing section where participants wrote a short e-mail with about 45 words with guided questions for them to answer. Finally, in the speaking part where the researcher asked questions to the participants, they had to answer by giving personal information, and in pairs with visual stimuli, they interacted by talking about their likes and dislikes and giving reasons. The performance data was collected at the beginning and at the end of the experiment, to avoid bias a different teacher from the researcher got the results.

Furthermore, as the research also aimed to measure the affective variables, a questionnaire with 15 questions was applied to participants using the Likert Scale. This instrument was divided in sections according to the affective variables explained above, 3 items for anxiety, 3 items for motivation, 3 items for self-confidence, and 6 items for teacher's role. The participants rated the questionnaire with a scale that had 5 points, where 1 stood for strongly disagreed and 5 was strongly agree. As well as language acquisition, data for this questionnaire was collected at the beginning and at the end. To validate the reliability of this questionnaire Cronbach's Alpha was calculated. The result was 0,702 which means that the questionnaire is acceptable.

First, the researcher was introduced to students, and the pre-test of language acquisition was applied to students as well as an affective factors questionnaire. Participants were explained that during the next month, they were going to receive 3 hours per week, 60 minutes each, to practice the 4 skills needed to take again the post-test. During that time the intervention aimed to reduce the affective filter took place, with a total duration of 12 hours. The core of the intervention involved a series of teaching methods previously researched to specifically reduce anxiety, and boost motivation and self-confidence. While the intervention was being held the teacher tried to create a positive environment all the time giving students confidence enough to participate without the failure fear, providing positive feedback when needed. Collaborative learning activities were also used to promote support and interaction among students. Once the intervention concluded, participants were given the post-test and the post-questionnaire to find out if language acquisition had improved and if the affective filter had reduced.

Results and discussion

Based on the language acquisition test's results, descriptive statistics were obtained using a software named Jamovi. According to that, Table 1 shows that participants improved from the pre-test to the post-test. Considering 10 as the highest score, the average pre-test score was 6.70, while the average post-test score jumped to 7.70. There also seems to be a similar level of variation in scores around the average for both tests, with a standard deviation of around 0.7 for both pre-test and post-test scores.

Table 1. Descriptives about pre-posttest language acquisition

	Pretest	Posttest
N	61	61
Mean	6.70	7.70
Median	6.69	7.71
Standard deviation	0.714	0.669
Minimum	5.38	6.62
Maximum	8.06	9.63

Source: Mesias (2024).

While these numbers suggest improvement, it's important to dig a little deeper. We need to see the inferential statistics, particularly the t-value and p-value, to understand if this improvement is statistically significant. That will tell us if the difference between the pre-test and post-test scores is likely due to something more than just random chance.

The paired sample t-test was implemented to find out differences in students' performance before and after trying to reduce the affective filter in them.

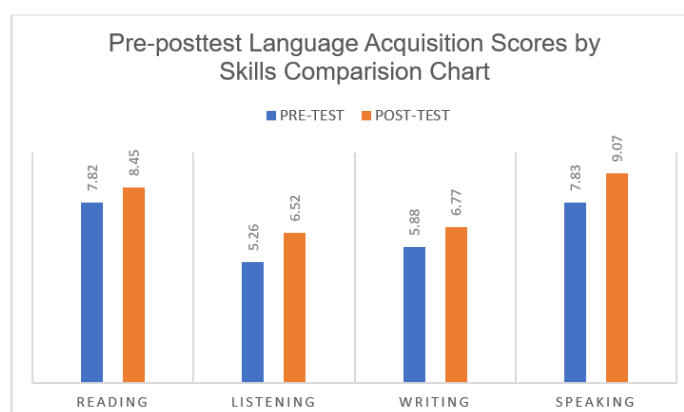
Table 2. Paired-Sample t-Test (pre-posttest) language acquisition

		statistic	df	p	
Pre test	Post test	Student's t	-14.8	30.0	< .001

Source: Mesias (2024).

The results show a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores ($t(30) = -14.8$, $p < 0.0010$). This suggests that the learning intervention led to a significant improvement in performance.

Figure 1. Paired-sample t-Test (pre-posttest) language acquisition



Source: Mesias (2024).

Chart 1 examines the language acquisition pre and post-test averages to assess its effectiveness in improving the English language skills: reading, listening, writing, and speaking. The data reveals positive changes in all four skills, with scores consistently higher on the post-test compared to the pre-test. Scores for reading comprehension increased by 0.63 points on the post-test, indicating progress in this area. A larger improvement was observed in listening skills. Scores increased by 1.27 points from the pre-test to the post-test, demonstrating a more substantial gain compared to reading. Writing proficiency also improved, evidenced by a 0.89-point increase in post-test scores. The most significant improvement occurred in speaking skills. Scores rose by 2.24 points on the post-test, suggesting a substantial boost in spoken language ability.

Once language acquisition data was analyzed, the descriptives from the questionnaire were obtained using the same software (Jamovi). Averages from the affective variables were calculated to establish insights about the perception that students faced during the experiment.

Looking at the average scores in Table 3, participants generally reported relatively high anxiety (mean: 2.61) and a neutral to slightly positive perception of the teacher's role (mean: 3.16). However, the data also highlights some individual variation. The presence of minimum scores of 1 and 2 in both anxiety and teacher role perception suggests that a portion of participants may have experienced higher levels of anxiety or held fewer positive views of the teacher's role. Conversely, the maximum scores of 4 in all categories indicate that some participants entered the intervention with moderate levels of self-confidence, and motivation.

Table 3. Pre-intervention Questionnaire Descriptives

		PreMOTI- VATION	PreSELF-CON- FIDENCE	PreTEACH- ER'S ROLE
N	61	61	61	61
Mean	2.61	4.13	3.00	3.16
Median	3	4	3	3
Standard deviation	0.919	0.499	0.632	0.454
Minimum	1	3	2	2
Maximum	4	5	4	4

Source: Mesias (2024).

As well as the descriptives in the pre-intervention questionnaire were analyzed, the statistics in Table 4 show that participants generally reported moderate levels of anxiety (mean: 2.13) after the intervention. Scores also indicate a slightly positive perception of the teacher's role (mean: 4.29) and relatively high motivation (mean: 4.26). However, the data also highlights some individual variation. The presence of minimum scores suggests that a portion of participants may have continued experiencing higher anxiety. Conversely, the maximum scores indicate that some participants reported strong agreement with statements related to motivation, self-confidence (mean: 3.35), and the teacher's role.

Table 4. Post-intervention Questionnaire Descriptives

	PosANX-IETY	PosMOTI-VATION	PosSELF-CONFIDENCE	PosTEACHER'S ROLE
N	61	61	61	61
Mean	2.13	4.26	3.35	4.29
Median	2	4	3	4
Standard deviation	0.957	0.445	0.661	0.693
Minimum	2	4	2	3
Maximum	4	5	4	5

Source: Mesías (2024).

The data suggests a potential positive impact of the intervention on participants' emotional state. The average score for post-anxiety (2.61) indicates a decrease in anxiety levels compared to pre-intervention scores. However, individual variations exist, with some participants still experiencing slightly high anxiety (minimum score of 2) and a few potentially experiencing similar anxiety levels (maximum score of 4) after the intervention. Motivation remained relatively high after the program, as evidenced by the average post-motivation score (4.26) being like the pre-intervention score (4.13). All participants reported at least a neutral stance on motivational statements.

The intervention may have also contributed to a slight gain in self-confidence. The average Post-Self-Confidence score (3.35) shows a potential increase compared to a hypothetical pre-intervention score (3.00). While some participants may not have experienced a significant boost of confidence.

Furthermore, the perception of the teacher's role appears to have improved. The average Post-Teacher's Role score (4.29) is potentially higher than a hypothetical pre-intervention score (assuming pre-intervention data was available). While a few participants' views remained neutral (minimum score of 3), some reported strong agreement with statements related to the teacher's role (maximum score of 5).

This structured approach, combining pre-test and post-test measures with assessments of the affective filter, allows researchers to evaluate the effectiveness of the chosen methods in reducing the affective filter and its subsequent impact on language learning outcomes.

Conclusions

Reducing the affective filter, which refers to the emotional barriers that make language acquisition difficult, is of vital importance for success in learning the English language. This study investigated the effectiveness of an intervention program designed to lower anxiety in students and improve their motivation and self-confidence considering that the role of a teacher inside the classroom was proved as the most important variable.

Moreover, the analysis of a pre-intervention questionnaire revealed that participants generally entered the program with high levels of anxiety and moderate motivation, and a neutral to slightly positive perception of the teacher's role. Following the intervention, a new questionnaire applied indicated a potential decrease in anxiety and a slight increase in self-confidence. Motivation remained relatively high after the program.

The subsequent impact that the reduction of the Affective Filter had on language acquisition was noticeable. In other words, the fact that the average score on the post-test is statistically higher than the average score on the pre-test provides evidence that the learning intervention was effective. This finding is consistent with the hypothesis that the affective filter does interfere with language acquisition, suggesting that the intervention program may have been successful in reducing anxiety, enhancing self-confidence, and improving perceptions of the teacher's role.

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