

Yoga Strategies for Lowering the Affective Filter in a Foreign Language Class

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One of the most important elements in a teaching setting is the affective filter. It determines how learners feel about the target language, impacts motivation, and eventually allows access to the process of acquiring a second language. Suggestive teaching methods propose a state of relaxation and a comfortable setting for learning, which lowers to a minimum and maximizes learning. Taking advantage of the open, nonjudgmental safe space found in a yoga class, the low anxiety level and receptive yet active setting can be used as a complementary environment for teaching a foreign language. This paper explores the influence of yoga knowledge and meditative training in the affective filter, and the feasible ways in which the 2L classroom could benefit from supplementary practices to enhance the students' learning experience and outcomes.

My experience teaching yoga and Spanish show me two different kinds of settings and how to motivate in my students. The yoga class is as a welcoming space to exercise. It is seen as a detoxifying and relaxing practice in which all the problems and insecurities are placed outside the room and it does not matter how you flow as long as you are hearing your body and your mind. The foreign language class is either an exciting subject to take and a moment in which you can learn about another culture, or a requirement for the curriculum, an uncomfortable moment that arouses boredom, anxiety and negative self-perception. The student in both classes may be the same but the response to either input is completely different because of the set of constructs around the concept of a yoga class and that of a 2L one. Investigating meditation techniques in the classroom would give us tools to manage anxiety and adjust the affective filter for a better language learning performance.

Why does it matter to do research on anxiety among college students?

There are several programs that join early education with yoga practice and meditation as part of the curriculum (i.e. Yoga4Classrooms) or high school students (*Método Fluir, Flow Method*) that aim to teach students how to manage stress, learn to focus and ultimately get better grades. However, these resources are lacking for college students and young adults still need this orientation to cope with stress and breakdowns that happen due to more responsibilities of this new independent stage and start of their careers. 2L classes are more demanding than other core subjects are because they require learning how to communicate and result in unable to express complex ideas that they can easily express in their mother tongue. When it comes to assessments and evaluations, most students get anxious, this may hinder their experience with that language, and culture and most importantly, affect their grades. Creating a safe space in which students can learn a new set of codes, express themselves freely and forget about the stressful world outside that class, is the goal of the *harmonious language learning classroom*.

How does it appear?

There are different kinds of anxiety. More specifically, situation-specific anxiety is triggered by a test, public speech or interaction among peers in the 2L classroom. Anxiety happens because of a high affective filter, which is a "construct in 2L acquisition that attempts to explain the emotional variables associated with the success or failure of acquiring a second language". Although the affective filter varies on a person-to-person basis depending on his/her context, it is normally higher when it comes to performance and output because the students are more self-conscious when working on other tasks that are less demanding. Anxiety can burst before, during and after the evaluation and impact the next test or other academic assessment, leading to a deterioration of academic performance because of the student's focus on negative thoughts about his abilities more than on the task itself. Hence, if we want to improve and progress "language learning must take place in an environment where learners are 'off the defensive' and the

affective filter (anxiety) is low in order for the input to be noticed and gain access to the learners thinking” (Krashen, 1982, p. 30).

Which methods work with a low affective filter?

In the late 70s, Lozanov proposed a method that was based on relaxation techniques and concentration to help learners to reach their subconscious and retain greater amounts of vocabulary and structures than other grammar-oriented methods; anxiety in his classes was a hindrance that severely limited learning potential. However, “Suggestopedia” may present some class format problems, limitations in input content and lack of opportunity of production. Reviews of this method such as Chastain’s proposes “pseudopassivity” (1988), referring to a relaxed physical state of heightened mental activity and concentration, which is similar to the state of the body and mind during a yoga class in which the yogui checks on alignment, balance while keeping mental tranquility and controlled breathing (p. 104).

On the other hand, for Lightbrown and Spada (2013): “not all stillness is good; a certain amount of tension can have a positive effect and even facilitate learning (85)”. The Communicative Language Teaching approach works with a more manageable affective filter, mainly because the teacher changes the role during the different segments of a class (Brandl, 2008, p. 183). He/she is a facilitator, designer, resource provider, discussion leader; he/she is no longer an unreachable evaluator, so the frontier student-teacher is not as hierarchized as before. Other helpful principles are encouraging production from the beginning, negotiating meaning with peers and allowing the student user’s native language (Omaggio, 1993, 117). Thanks to the more opening and dynamic principles of Communicative Language Teaching, the instructor could follow this approach while adding meditation techniques to phases in task-oriented classes or as an opening or closing to a session.

What practices can we implement?

If the students attended a yoga class in a only 2L practice, as an immersion, the first things one can think of are body parts, some prepositions, posture names and imperatives taught in another language. This would be beneficial to a certain extent, as the vocabulary and production are limited because it would be complicated to practice conversation or what is taught and they would just mimic what they see. However, yoga is not only about the physical part of the practice, but also mindfulness meditation and breathing exercises. The literature on the benefits of meditation to lower anxiety is vast, but more biologic data should be gathered to confirm as the results of cortisol (hormone that sets stress) are not conclusive (Butzer et al, 2015), the majority of studies of yoga, anxiety and teaching environment are based on student’s feedback on research forms and results from evaluations.

Research such as the carried out by Nemati (2013), show that yoguic practices such as *pranayama* (conscious breathing) reduce stress levels (from 60% to 30%) and students may even score higher than the people may in the control group. Allowing a small portion of time at the beginning of class for *pranayama*, would prepare the students to pay attention, set the learning environment and as a reminder to let aside any issues during the lesson. The pranayama practice was divided in three phases (slow inhale-hold-slow exhale), while internally repeating positive *mantras*.

Morgan (2011) has called the hybrid between yoga and the TEFL class *Harmonious Language Learning Classroom*. Although postures are used in her approach, she is committed to helping students to become aware of the present moment, the task at hand and to preventing students from getting easily distracted. The activity she proposes is to ring a bell to ask for silence and bring focus to the class or “gather their thoughts and consolidate their learning” (p. 5). This last example resembles the last phase of the Task-based approach (as in Ellis, 2003, and Nunan, 1993), where the post-task gathers a moment of reflection and thoughts on the activity of the class correcting, reviewing and interiorizing new concepts.

How would you put this into practice?

I would like to do my own research on beginners’ classes that I will teach in the fall 2018 as a part of my master’s dissertation. In this study I will look for the level of test anxiety of the control and experimental groups after practicing *pranayama*, the comparison between the CG and the EG, the effect of

practicing *pranayama* on a Spanish ab initio test performance and how test anxiety affects foreign language test performance. I would also include reflecting activities in task-based approaches, on not only the new elements just learned but the student's interest in the topic in general, troubles during its realization and further problems that the student may have with the use of mindfulness and conscious meditation.

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