

# AGE-RELATED DECLINE IN THE USE OF AFFECTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES

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**Abstract:** *The paper outlines the results of a search study aimed at comparing the use of affective strategies in different age groups of learners. The research involved 204 students aged 10 to 30. The results show that there are significant statistical differences between the groups and that the use of affective strategies declines with age.*

**Keywords:** *affective factors, affective strategies, age, language learning strategies*

## 1. Introduction

It is well-known that success in learning foreign languages may depend on a number of factors, such as the age of learners, their cognitive abilities, styles and strategies of learning, the learning environment and the learner's personality.

It was not until the 1970s that the important role of affective factors was truly recognised and given adequate attention in teaching methodology. A shift of trends that took place in the last decades of the twentieth century with the arrival of the Humanistic Approach, followed by the Comprehension Based Approach and the Communicative Approach, resulted in a greater awareness of, and a stronger focus on the learner's feelings and emotions in the process of learning.

Consequently, the language teaching methodology of the last two decades has been increasingly oriented towards creating a learning environment that provides an affective affirmation of the student and not only a good presentation of the language. Although work on affective factors may seem the sole responsibility of the teacher, much can also be done by the learner through the employment of adequate learning strategies. Good language learners are often those who know how to control their emotions and attitudes about learning (Oxford 1990: 140).

The aim of this paper is to investigate the overall use of affective strategies and the differences in their usage between five generations of students who are learning English as a foreign language in Serbia.

## 2. Affective factors in foreign language learning

The affective filter hypothesis was originally proposed by Dulay and Burt (1977) in the form of "affective delimiters," and then built on and revised by Stephen Krashen (1982), Krashen and Terrell (1988). The hypothesis states how affective factors relate to the second language acquisition process and recognises the impact of three personal variables – self-confidence, anxiety and motivation.

Self-confidence, or self-esteem, is defined as a personal judgement of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes that individuals hold towards themselves (Coopersmith 1967). It is considered to be one of the central drives in human beings. When their level of self-esteem is low, students may avoid taking the necessary risks to acquire communicative competence in the target language; they may feel deeply insecure and even drop out of a class (Rubio 2007: 7). On the other hand, relevant studies show that high self-esteem positively influences the

process of language learning and makes students willing to communicate (Lawrence 1996; MacIntyre et al. 1998).

Another important factor that determines success in language learning is motivation. Its significance is briefly summarised by Dörnyei (1998: 117):

Motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate learning the L2 and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process; indeed, all the other factors involved in L2 acquisition presuppose motivation to some extent.

Distinctions are often made between instrumental and integrative motivation in social-psychological approach (Gardner 1985) or between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 1985, Deci et al.1991). In field literature, one type of motivation was usually favoured over the other, but recent studies in language methodology have taken a more multidimensional approach, considering the results of several different lines of research into motivation in order to identify types and enhance them in the learning environment.

Anxiety is defined as a feeling of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension or worry (Scovel 1978: 134). It is considered to be one of the most significant factors that may seriously affect the process of language learning, regardless of whether the setting is informal or formal (Arnold 1999: 59). A number of studies on anxiety in second language acquisition have confirmed its negative influence on language achievement (Horwitz et al. 1986; Horwitz and Young 1991; MacIntyre and Gardner 1991). Three types of foreign language anxiety have been identified: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety (Horwitz et al. 1986). Since test anxiety as well as fear of negative evaluation may hinder any other kind of learning, communication apprehension seems to be the biggest obstacle in developing the communicative competence of learners.

Research data as well as practical experience in the classroom have supported the affective filter hypothesis and lead to conclusions that are currently widely accepted as general principles – reducing anxiety as well as raising motivation and self-esteem in the classroom may considerably contribute to better performance in second language learning. These goals have been clearly set in recent developments in language teaching methodology, but modern approaches also emphasise the learner's autonomy and responsibility for raising their own self-efficacy in language learning.

## 2.1. Affective strategies

Language learning strategies, variously defined in the relevant literature (Stern 1983, O'Malley et al. 1985, Wenden and Rubin 1987, Richards and Platt 1992, Oxford 1990), could simply be understood as steps that learners take to make their learning of a second language faster, easier and more efficient. Since interest in language learning strategies first began in the early 1970's, a number of taxonomies have been proposed, but it was not until the 1990's that affective strategies were classified as a separate group and given appropriate attention.

In Rubin's classification, affective strategies were not even recognised as a separate category (Wenden and Rubin 1987), whereas O'Malley et al. (1985) combined affective and social strategies into one group. However, what "socio-

affective strategies” in their taxonomy practically involved was some sort of interaction (whether with peers or teachers) rather than controlling feelings, so there was still little emphasis on the affective domain of language learning.

In Stern’s taxonomy, consisting of five major groups, affective strategies are classified as a separate group and their importance is clearly stated. Affective strategies are seen as valuable tools students use to face the emotional difficulties of language learning and to overcome them, by drawing attention to the potential frustrations in learning (Stern 1992: 266).

Rebecca Oxford’s taxonomy, widely employed in a great deal of research nowadays, distinguishes two major classes of strategies, each divided into three more subgroups. Direct strategies involve some form of mental processing of the target language and consist of memory, cognitive and compensation strategies, whereas indirect strategies provide indirect support for language learning, without directly dealing with the target language, and involve metacognitive, affective and social strategies (Oxford 1990).

According to Oxford (1990: 143-144), affective strategies involve:

- anxiety reduction (using progressive relaxation, deep breathing exercises, utilizing music and laughter)
- self-encouragement (making positive statements, taking risks wisely and rewarding yourself)
- monitoring emotions (listening to your body, using a checklist, writing a language learning diary and discussing feelings with others).

Unfortunately, a number of studies show that affective strategies are still considerably underused (Ćirković-Miladinović 2012, Hong-Nam and Leavell 2006, Oxford 1990, Pilipović 2014, Wharton 2000), which is quite concerning, as negative feelings can stunt progress even for the rare learner who fully understands all the technical aspects of how to learn a new language (Oxford 1990: 140).

### 3. The research methodology

The aim of this research was to investigate the use of affective strategies by different age groups of learners in Serbia. It consisted of a quantitative and a qualitative part.

The instrument used in the quantitative part was the SILL questionnaire (*Strategy Inventory for Language Learning*), designed by Rebecca Oxford (1990). This questionnaire contains 50 close-ended items, divided into six categories that measure the use of six sets of strategies: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social. The participants were asked to give their answers according to the 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 5 (denoting the frequency of use from ‘never’ to ‘always’). Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 15.0) was used for the descriptive analysis, analysis of variance and independent sample T-tests.

The quantitative part of the research involved 204 students, who study English as a foreign language: 48 primary school students aged 9-10 (G10), 40 primary school students aged 12 (G12), 20 primary school students aged 13-14 (G14), 53 secondary school students aged 15-16 (G16) and 43 university students aged 20-30 (G20+). The different age groups were chosen with a view to

investigating whether cognitive maturation and psychological changes that take place during adolescence play any important role in students' strategy employment.

The qualitative part of the research involved 10 students – five from the group of students aged nine or ten and five from the group of university students. Qualitative data collection consisted of interviews carried out with the youngest and the oldest participants so that potential differences in their attitudes towards affective strategies could be revealed.

### 3.1. Results

The first step in the data analysis was to compare the use of affective strategies with the use of all other strategy categories. Table 1 presents the data obtained:

Strategies	G10	G12	G14	G16	G20+
Memory	3,07	2,66	2,64	2,44	2,72
Cognitive	3,60	3,06	3,21	2,79	3,04
Compensation	3,15	3,06	3,28	2,92	3,03
Metacognitive	4,09	3, 69	3,80	3,16	3,37
Affective	<u>3,18</u>	<u>2,78</u>	<u>2,60</u>	<u>2,38</u>	<u>2,47</u>
Social	3,70	3,30	3,35	2,94	3,21
Overall use of strategies	<b>3,50</b>	<b>3,04</b>	<b>3,17</b>	<b>2,78</b>	<b>2,99</b>

**Table 1. The overall use of strategies**

The reported frequency of affective strategies shows a steady decline (G10 - 3.18, G12 - 2.78, G14 - 2.60, G16 - 2.38, G20+ - 2.47). In the youngest group involved in this research, affective strategies ranked fourth, in the group of twelve-year-olds they ranked fifth, whereas in all other groups they ranked sixth, being the least employed strategy group. A decrease in the use of affective strategies shown in the descriptive analysis was additionally checked with the analysis of variance that confirmed significant statistical differences between the group of ten-year-olds and all other groups (Table 2).

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
<b>Between Groups</b>	691,705	5	138,341	5,579	,000
<b>Within Groups</b>	4909,525	198	24,796		
<b>Total</b>	<b>5601,230</b>	<b>203</b>			

**Table 2. ANOVA – The Use of Affective Strategies –ANOVA**

Post-hoc tests show that ten-year-old primary school learners tend to use affective strategies much more than all the other participants (G10/G12  $p=.01$ ; G10/G14  $p=.03$ ; G10/G16  $p=.02$  G10/G20+  $p=.00$ ). Another significant statistical difference was found only between the group of twelve-year-old and sixteen-year-old students ( $p=.03$ ).

The aim of our further analysis was to find out which particular affective strategies are least used among Serbian learners of English and it shows that certain strategies are almost never used, regardless of the students' age.

Strategy	G10	G12	G14	G16	G20+
<i>Trying to relax when afraid of using English</i>	3.56	3.38	3.95	3.57	3.56
<i>Encouraging oneself to speak English even when afraid of making mistakes</i>	4.25	3.55	3.34	2.83	3.09
<i>Giving oneself a reward or treat when doing well in English</i>	3.31	2.48	2.34	2.11	2.02
<i>Noticing nervousness when studying or using English</i>	3.19	2.80	2.63	2.45	2.81
<i>Writing down feelings in a language Diary</i>	1.90	1.85	1.41	1.51	1.63
<i>Talking to someone else about one's feelings when learning English</i>	2.85	2.23	1.93	1.81	1.67

**Table 3. The frequency of use of particular affective strategies**

Independent T-tests showed significant differences between female and male learners in the group of fourteen-year-olds, in which girls reported a higher use of four of the six affective strategies (all but '*writing down feelings in a language diary*' and '*talking to someone about one's feelings when learning English*'). Since no significant differences in the use of affective strategies were found in other groups, these findings can most probably be ascribed to a different onset of puberty that causes certain emotional changes.

An analysis of variance was again carried out and it showed significant differences in the use of certain affective strategies between the groups involved. Namely, ten-year-old learners tend to use particular affective strategies to a much larger extent than other participants:

- *encouraging themselves to speak English even when afraid of making mistakes* ( $p=.00$ )
- *giving themselves a reward or treat when doing well in English* ( $p=.00$ )
- *talking to someone else about their feelings when learning English* ( $p=.00$ )

The qualitative part of this research was aimed at gathering more data on the use of affective strategies where a significant decline with age was observed as well as on the use of the strategy that was reported to be the lowest, regardless of the age of the learners – '*writing down feelings in a language diary*'.

Five students in the group of ten-year-old students (marked S1 to S5a) and five students in the group of university students (S1b – S5b) were asked to answer the same questions.

**Interviewer:** Do you use a language diary and do you write down your feelings in it?

**S1a:** No, I never use it!

**S2a:** I don't use it... I am not sure what it is.

**S3a:** No... Never.

**S4a:** I don't use it... We don't have language diaries... We have only a coursebook and a practice book.

**S5a:** No... the teacher doesn't ask us to do that.

Although the reported frequency of 1.90 shows that there are a few students who might sometimes use a language diary and write down their feelings, most of the ten-year-old students never use it and say that they '*do not have language diaries*'. The oldest participants were asked the same question and their answers were quite similar.

**Interviewer:** Do you use a language diary and do you write down your feelings in it?

**S1b:** No (laughing)! Should we be doing that?

**S2b:** No! It would be such a waste of time!

**S3b:** I don't think we even have language diaries. We had them a few years ago, but I didn't write about my feelings... I don't know... we wrote about what we learnt.

**S4b:** No. It seems ridiculous to me... childish in a way!

**S5b:** No, I never use it.

The responses given seem to reveal that learning diaries are not often used in Serbia and that university students are not at all eager to try them. Introducing the use of language learning diaries would probably be more effective if it were done from the very beginning of foreign language learning, because younger students seem to be more flexible and willing to adopt new styles and strategies of learning.

The interview went on with a question aimed at finding out why significant differences occur in the use of the affective strategy of '*giving oneself a reward or treat when doing something well in English*'.

**Interviewer:** Do you give yourself a reward or treat when doing something well in English and if you do, what kind of reward or treat it is?

**S1a:** Yes, I do it often. I let myself play computer games more.

**S2a:** No... My parents reward me if it is something important.

**S3a:** Sometimes I do. I buy myself a chocolate bar.

**S4a:** No... I don't do it.

**S5a:** I usually get a treat from my parents. Or I spend more time relaxing when I do something well because I know I deserved it.

Older students reported a lower use of this strategy, as reflected in their answers during the interview.

**Interviewer:** Do you give yourself a reward or treat when doing something well in English and if you do, what kind of reward or treat it is?

**S1b:** No, I am used to seeing success as 'normal' and not worth celebrating or rewarding...

**S2b:** I don't do it... I don't know why... I don't think I should, I don't need any reward... it's not a big deal.

**S3b:** I do reward myself... when I do something well... I usually go shopping.

**S4b:** No... My parents used to criticize me when something was wrong and every success was considered just normal...this is part of our culture... to focus on failures, not on achievements...

**S5b:** Not really... maybe occasionally... if it is something very important like passing an exam... then, I might buy something for myself.

Another strategy where a decline with age can be observed is *'talking to someone else about one's feelings when learning English'*. Both groups involved in qualitative data collection were asked the same question.

**Interviewer:** Do you ever talk to someone about your feelings when learning English (when you feel anxious, nervous, not really confident or satisfied)?

**S1a:** I sometimes talk to my mother, but not very often.

**S2a:** I talk to my parents before having a test, for example. I tell them if I feel worried. They usually encourage me and tell me not to worry.

**S3a:** I usually tell my best friend if I am afraid or worried... I am sometimes worried what my parents will say if I don't do well...

**S4a:** No... I like learning English...I don't think about my feelings.

**S5a:** Not really... The teacher is nice and I don't feel scared. I sometimes feel ashamed if I don't know something, but... I don't know... I don't talk about it.

The answers of the older participants to the same question, confirmed that their use of this strategy is even less frequent:

**Interviewer:** Do you ever talk to someone about your feelings when learning English (when you feel anxious, nervous, not really confident or satisfied)?

**S1b:** If I need some sort of encouragement, I usually rely on encouragement from teachers... I don't really talk to other people about my learning English

**S2b:** (laughing) We are not kids any more... if there is any sort of anxiousness, I deal with it myself.

**S3b:** No, never... I think I should know much better than I do... if I don't feel satisfied, this means I am responsible, I should study more...

**S4b:** If there is something really important... before the exam, for example, I might tell my friends that I am nervous, but generally, I don't think about the feelings I have when learning languages.

**S5b:** I don't feel so nervous that I have to talk about it... No, I don't.

The answers reveal that younger students tend to talk to their friends and their parents to get encouragement, yet at the same time they feel worried from time to time. On the other hand, while some older students seem to be more confident, others seem to have quite high expectations of themselves and suppress their feeling of insecurity, considering it shameful or childish. These attitudes might reveal two possible causes of the decline in the use of affective strategies: one being the higher confidence some learners feel when progress in language learning has been made, and the other being that they expect too much of themselves and are ashamed of feeling anxious. Since the analysis of variance shows that the crucial point in the decline of the use of affective strategies takes place when students are around the age of 12 (and the onset of puberty), it is reasonable to assume that greater confidence based on significant progress in language learning is not the key reason. The progress made by the age of 12 is usually not remarkably impressive, while, on the other hand, most students of this age do start feeling a sort of insecurity that is a common problem in puberty. This

may explain the change in attitude towards themselves, their success in learning and the strategies they employ.

Another reason for an insufficient use of affective strategies might be linked to the traditional teaching methods, still widely used, which fail to focus on strategy training adequately. In spite of the fact that strategies are generally steps taken by learners, most of them can be initiated and taught by teachers. However, raising strategic competence is a relatively new goal in foreign language teaching and a number of teachers are not familiar with practical techniques that might be of assistance. Rossiter (2003) points out:

Numerous authors (e.g., Campbell & Ortiz 1991, Crandall 1999, Crookall & Oxford 1991, Foss & Reitzel 1991, Hooper Hansen 1999, Medgyes 2002, Oxford 1990, Oxford et al. 1990, Phillips 1998, Rinvolucri 1999) have described activities for enhancing L2 learners' cognitive and affective experiences, such as discussion of the ideal language learner, cooperative learning activities, an 'agony column' (in which learners reply to letters expressing language learning difficulties), use of learner anxiety graphs, visualization, humour, cartoon storytelling, and rhythmic breathing exercises.

It is, however, possible that none of these techniques may be suitable for a particular learner group and a careful choice of the appropriate techniques can be best done by the teachers who have a real rapport with their students and sufficient background knowledge.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The goal of this research was to compare the use of language learning strategies by five different age groups of learners, with a particular emphasis on the use of affective strategies. The results show that the use of affective strategies (as well as of all other strategies) declines with the age of the learners and that affective strategies seem to be the least employed in most of the groups involved. Since affective factors play a very important role in foreign language acquisition, these findings require a deeper analysis, with a view to finding out the possible causes of this problem and ways of solving it.

Since a serious decline in the use of affective strategies starts with the onset of puberty, when students are not so likely to feel very confident about their language acquisition achievements, it may be assumed that the change of attitude and the lack of self-confidence that occurs in this period of emotional development might be the crucial problem that persists through adolescence, although some students may admittedly feel less need to use affective strategies, owing to their success in language learning.

Regardless of cause, affective strategies are reported to be the least employed strategy group in the teenage and adult groups of learners in Serbia, which might result in higher affective filters, and affect the development of communicative competence of these learners.

The approaches to solving this problem might involve making a greater effort in raising the strategic competence of the learners as well as in providing a supportive and encouraging learning environment, which is one of the main principles in modern language teaching.

As the findings of this study show, older learners seem to be less flexible and open to adopting new strategies, so better results might be obtained if strategic



competence is worked on from the very beginning of language learning. Chamot (2001) states that there is a continuing need for more intervention studies to determine the effects of strategy training on language learning and proficiency, but the studies so far have examined the success of strategy training over a limited period of time. Continuous, well-paced and well-chosen training would, no doubt, lower the affective filter and raise positive feelings in the classroom.

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