

Lowering/Eliminating Learning Barriers in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

Language input does not get access to learners until and unless barriers are addressed beforehand, and effective delivery of input is the plan of any educational institution. This paper highlights five different learning barriers that students face at school and some practical ways to lower them. The article is based on the views collected through an interactive tool called Padlet and Google forms given to students and ‘focused group interactions’ with colleagues. It is also based on my experiences in the field of teaching. It also includes some views on the causes of the barriers from related literature reviews. Barriers like boredom and anxiety could appear in all three stages of teaching. Some activities could be used to address more than one barrier.

Keywords: *Learning barriers, language input, interactive tools, focused group interactions*

Introduction

The affective filter is defined by Online World of Learning (OWL) as a psychological fence that stops comprehensible input from being processed in learners’ brains and introduces five kinds of barriers: boredom, embarrassment, anxiety, fear of judgement and low confidence. The learner or acquirer must be” open” to the input, i.e., have a low Affective Filter (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982). Hence, our teaching should address them. As OWL had offered a list of categories to choose from, I found this category to be the topic of my interest for my project. And I went on to learn more about what can be done to lower barriers.

As the barrier could occur at any stage of teaching and be in different forms, I found this topic challenging and worth discussing. The study conclusions are quite applicable and could have a prominent impact on students' achievement. In the present scenario, Grade Point Average (GPA) of students at community schools is below the desired level. As a result, the purpose this paper aims is to highlight some of the causes of the barriers as well as solutions to them.

Methodology

For the given purpose, I administered questionnaires through an interactive tool called “Padlet” and Google Forms to my school students to collect information and ideas on why those barriers occur and what could be done to address them. “Padlet” was used quite often to address all the barriers. Google Forms included ten questions related to the topic. They were ninth and tenth grade students. They were altogether fifty-five in number. I also had an online Google Meet “Focused Group Interaction” with my colleagues on Google Meets. It helped me to get a variety of ideas that they are adopting to address language barriers at different stages of teaching. Twenty-four colleagues were present during the interaction. Some of the measures cover my experiences. Thus, the observation is based on data collection, a literature review, and personal experience. My school is a community school.

Results and Discussion

My study, experience, and the interactions have led the following findings for the causes and solutions to address the learning barriers:

Boredom

Google mentions that boredom occurs when people have nowhere to direct their energy and have difficulty focusing on a task. My experience and focused group interaction with my colleagues indicate that unfamiliar content, complex and lengthy content, a lack of varied activities, and the nature of the delivery of the subjects are responsible for it. My students state that continuous teaching and learning without students’ participation and refreshing activities are responsible. Macklem (2015) mentions that boredom can occur during an activity and also when there is no activity in which to engage. My experiences say that it could occur before, during and after teaching. So we could take the following measures to stop boredom. As pre-teaching activities, we could use riddles and funny questions before content is introduced. Likewise, we could also present thoughts and quotes, and show funny pictures or pictures with messages. Sometimes sharing content related materials and videos beforehand also works well. Creating a scene by asking them to share funny facts about their friends could be done beforehand.

Likewise, my students say that mind-refreshing games are fun activities, and their inclusion in the presentation of contents should be done to avoid boredom. The barrier is also caused by lengthy and entirely new content. To address it, we could use a variety of activities as while-teaching activities. A teacher needs to bring variety to classroom activities integrating skills. Conducting group work and pair work offers meaningful opportunities to learn. Using “Wheel of names” as an interactive tool for a fair selection of participants for occasional presentations by students is also one of the fun activities to stop boredom. Making relevant contextual talks for creating fun and presenting examples from

real-life situation, presenting supporting videos and photos, making class interactive by using inquiry based technique and making frequent compliments for their responses with words like “great”, “nice idea”, “smart”, “definitely” and using varied tones for effective hold of their attention etc. are some other energising activities.

As post-teaching activities, teachers could ask students to share their understanding about the lesson contents. We could give students strips of paper after lessons to share their understanding about them. It works well with introverted students. Using games to evaluate them, writing questions on strips of paper, asking them to answer, and using them for a gallery walk understanding of a recently taught content. the following measures

Embarrassment

Google defines the term “embarrassment” as an emotional state that is associated with mild to severe levels of discomfort, and that is usually experienced when someone commits a socially unacceptable or frowned-upon act that is witnessed by or revealed to others.

Mackay (1993) mentions that an unsupportive home environment, irregular school attendance, a lack of student motivation, and a home-school language switch cause embarrassment. Shy natured students feel themselves as the centre of focus when they are asked questions. Likewise, teacher’s abrupt negative reactions, physical or mental punishment and confusions regarding the correctness of responses for questions also cause embarrassment. Sometimes friends are also responsible for it. Other causes include nicknaming based on names, castes, and physique, bullying, performing in front of friends, friends mocking them for asking simple questions, lack of confidence in speaking English well, fear of making mistakes, and so on.

To stop their embarrassment, teachers need to create a comfortable and friendly environment for students. They could begin classes with informal discussion with them. Preceded by informal talks with them. Appreciation for students’ performance, rewards for good attempts, making general corrections rather than specific correction, making positive compliments are some other measures to address the problem. It’s better to assign work in a group rather than in pair or isolation. Teachers should also consider a variety of activities to use creative punishments rather than the anxiety rather than the activity that causes stress.

Anxiety

Google defines “Anxiety” as ‘an emotion characterised by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure’. According to Horwitz (1986), there are three main factors in the foreign language classroom anxiety experience: communication apprehension or fear about real or anticipated communication with other people, test anxiety or fear of failing in test situations and fear of negative evaluation

(Biljana Milatovic, 2012, p. 157). Students are stressed for these reasons, like heavy assignments, new tasks, examinations and tests, continuous noise in the classroom, difficult subjects and content, and confusing questions. Teachers could provide fewer time consuming assignments. Project work and supportive examples for difficult assignments, creative tasks, as models for new tasks, etc. could also be done. These measures lower their anxiety.

Fear of Judgement

Fear of judgement is a factor that varies students' performances. It creates problems for student's learning. When performing in front of others, students, especially those who are shy, prefer not to speak loudly. And later on, they feel sorry for that and they think they could have spoken louder when their answers were correct.

When they are unsure about the correctness of answers, mass corrections are less confident of having their work be less in mass, less confident of having their work less satisfactory than that of friends etc., they have fear of being judged. In addition to these, some students do not like to perform before teachers and friends either. They are shy natured ones.

We need to keep them feeling comfortable all the time using some of the activities mentioned for pre-teaching activities to relieve stress. However, some activities could be used more than once. Promoting self-correction with a teacher's support, some marks are allotted for classroom performance, assignments, etc. I have found that students show sincerity and regularity in the submission of assignments when the records are kept about their attempt. Teachers need to build up their self-confidence by encouraging using polite words and supporting them with clues. Using games for evaluation also fosters their interest in assessment.

Low self-confidence

I think that self-judgement, anxiety and low-confidence are linked. Albert Marston (1972) claims that students without confidence are socially isolated and produce poor academic results because of their failure to participate in their classroom. Students suffer from low confidence in many situations. When good work gets unnoticed by teachers, they lose confidence. Other reasons include a lack of closeness with a teacher or a new teacher, confusion about the correctness of answers, wrong pronunciation, etc. Teachers could ask them to perform in groups. They could also arrange frequent and ample opportunities for students to perform. Being friendly with them, making sandwich compliments and arranging remedial teaching are measures to raise their self-confidence.

Limitations

Learning Barrier is a broad term that covers social and cultural, practical, and personal, and emotional barriers. I believe social and cultural, practical and personal factors, to some extent, are related to their emotions and feelings, and cause emotional barriers. Therefore, I decided to focus on the barriers that are related to their emotions: boredom, embarrassment, anxiety, fear of judgement and low confidence. Furthermore, there are many ways of collecting data but I limited my study on “Padlet” and Google Forms to collect information and ideas from my school students from grade nine and ten. I also attended an online Google meet called “Focused Group Interaction”.

Conclusion

To summarise, learners’ learning needs and requirements must be addressed in the teaching learning processes. No matter how well the curriculum is designed or teachers are qualified, if the barriers are not well addressed, learning will not take place effectively. So I found this topic noteworthy for further study. I went through some related literature. I used an interactive tool Padlet and Google Forms to collect data. I had also organised a focused group of interactions with my colleagues that gave me further insights I had not thought of. I got many practical ideas to deal with the problems. I am using some of those ideas in my classes and also planning to use others. Prior to this, I had felt that a rich bond was lacking between me and my students. Adopting those ideas has helped to achieve a certain intimacy with them and I have started enjoying my teaching much more than before.

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Contributor's Details

Mallika Joshi Shrestha started her teaching career at Thakur Ram Multiple Campus, Birgunj and has been teaching English at Shree Saraswati Niketan Secondary School, Teku for the last seven years. She is passionate about enhancing her practical knowledge that directly addresses classroom problems and issues.