Reasons for Failure: Are you Aware? [1]

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Have you ever had students who you thought of as having little or no aptitude for foreign languages? Who went blank and could not respond to your question ? Students, who no matter how hard they tried, could not succeed in learning English or another foreign language? This paper will offer no solutions, only an awareness of various problems which could possibly be effecting these students in the EFL class. This paper represents a portion of a larger project funded by the Universidad de las Americas-Puebla and by *CONACYT.*[3] The ultimate goal of this project is to locate these "at-risk" students, without labeling them as such, and help them. We as language teachers do not usually recognize these learners for one or two months into the course and by that time the student probably has serious problems in the foreign language. Even if the teacher sees that a problem exists, we usually do not have the expertise to know exactly what the problem is nor the time to provide help.

Recent literature in the area of Foreign Language (FL) research has dealt with the problem of why some people learn a FL quickly and easily while others given the same opportunities to learn, fail at the task. These students have commonly been referred to as "underachievers". Aptitude for FL learning as well as motivation and attitude toward learning the language have been concerns of researchers in trying to understand individual differences in FL ability. Learner anxiety in the FL situation has been suggested as an important factor contributing to failure.

The purpose of this article is to: (1) present a general review of three factors which have been found to positively or negatively effect the acquisition of a foreign language; and, (2) provide information concerning instruments which have been proved to be effective in detecting problems in the three areas.

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Motivation

The first factor to be discussed, that of motivation, is the most recognized and has been repeatedly found in second language research to be the principle determinant of L2 learning achievement. It determines the extent of active, personal involvement in the L2 learning process. Motivated students have a larger repertoire of strategies to access and use more effectively. For many years motivation has been a very thoroughly studied phenomenon in education in general. Maslow provided a basis in 1970 when he wrote about what he called the *Hierarchies of Need Theory*. This theory identified needs in a hierarchical manner beginning with biological needs and progressing through the psychological ones.

Hierarchy of Needs

1. physiological (food, clothing, shelter)
2. safety and security
3. belongingness and love
4. esteem
5. self-actualization

Maslow's theory states that people will regress to lower level needs if the higher order ones are not met. For language teachers this can be interpreted that learners will not be risk-takers until they feel psychologically secure in their EFL classes. For EFL students, the most basic level would be the second (Safety and Security) in Maslow's hierarchy. This means that L2 learners can regress in their needs, motivation, and performance if their requirement for psychological security such as self-esteem, is not met. L2 students who feel insecure about their chances of success in the learning process can become very anxious in what they feel to be a threatening classroom situation and their motivation would be lowered.

The need for esteem (level 4) and self-actualization (level 5) are directly connected to the need for achievement which in turn is related to "fear of failure". Past successes or failures in a particular situation would make a student more likely to behave similarly in the future. For example, repeated

failures in an L2 situation generate fear and stifle achievement behaviors eventually leading to a cycle of failure.

The Expectancy Theory (Atkinson 1964), focuses on the individual's expectancy of receiving a valued reward which can either be internal or external. This theory states that people will put into the work/learning situation what they feel they can get out of it. This reward could be grades, praise, money or promotion; however, the reward must be viewed as equal to the amount of effort put into it or the activity will be demotivating. This can serve as a motivation for success, or in the case of previous repeated failures especially one in which ridicule or punishment is used, there will be a tendency to avoid the failure by avoiding the situation (i.e. not attending the EFL class).

The Expectancy Theory is similar to the behaviorists' Reinforcement Theory which attributes individual behavior to the association of stimulus, response and reward. The stimulus could be the goal good learners set to regulate their learning of the L2 followed by self-monitoring and self-evaluation. As in the Expectancy Theory, the stimulus and the reward can be intrinsic from within to complete a task or extrinsic, a such as praise from others. However, if after repeated attempts which are not considered by the learner as successful and are not rewarded, neither intrinsically nor extrinsically, the learner will feel that failure is the only outcome.

The Attribution Theory (Weiner 1992, 860-865) states that individual learners self-appraisal of what they can or cannot accomplish is based on past successes and failures which effect their goal expectancies. If a learner has experienced more failures than successes, he becomes resigned to failure and pessimistic of his chances to succeed. The learned helplessness cycle begins and success becomes more improbable. The resulting pattern causes a deterioration of cognitive performance which further confirms the learner's negative view of his abilities in the L2 situation.

Gardner and Lambert (1972) were prominent in dividing ESL motivation into two basic types: instrumental and integrative. Working in Canada, they developed an instrument called the Attitude/Motivation Battery Test (AMBT) which has been the most widely used motivation test for L2 situations. It consists of three sections. The first is to detect the attitudes which the learner has towards the L2 culture, language and people. It was proposed that if a learner cannot identify with the culture and has no motivation to

know the people due to prior experiences, then the chance that the student will succeed is greatly lessened. Gardner and Lambert suggested that students with motivation to learn and with positive attitudes toward the target language and its speakers were more successful than were students with less positive attitudes and lower levels of motivation.

Two basic types of motivation were proposed: (1) Instrumental—the FL study for the future academic or professional value it may have; and (2) Integrative—the desire and interest to learn about the FL culture and people. The second section of the AMBT evaluates the extent of Instrumental Motivation and the third the Integrative Motivation. It was their basic hypothesis that by understanding the types, teachers and curriculum developers could capitalize on the students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the ESL classroom. According to them, students with integrative motivation would be expected to work harder to develop better communicative skills in the FL because they are more likely to seek out native speakers of the language that those with instrumental motivation.

Krashen (1981) presented a relationship between attitude and aptitude in his "Monitor Model". In it, the theory of an "affective filter" is proposed. This controls the effectiveness of the FL acquisition process and enables the learner to utilize comprehensible input to acquire the foreign language. According to Krashen, "good" learners are those who acquire the language and also who have low affective filters. "Poor" learners exhibit less L2 ability and possibly may neither acquire nor learn the FL because of interference between attitude and aptitude.

Anxiety

Other affective factors have been thought to contribute to the success or failure in the learning of the FL. The role of anxiety has repeatedly been connected to how well students achieve in FL classes.

Psychologists have identified two types of anxiety: facilitating and debilitating. If the task is demanding but relatively simple for success then anxiety can be facilitating and improve performance through increased effort. However, as the difficulty of the task increases, failure can begin to occur and if the compensation or reward is not equal to the amount of effort put in, then a debilitating anxiety is initiated as a response to the apprehensive situation. As the demand further exceeds ability, the impairment caused by

the anxiety arousal worsens. According to Macintyre (1995) learners who do not experience debilitating anxiety are able to process the L2 information more effectively and quickly than those who are distracted by worry and feelings of inadequacy.

Characteristics of debilitating anxiety are feelings of tension and discomfort, negative self-evaluation and a tendency to withdraw in the presence of the stimulus which in this case is the L2 class/teacher/task.

It is Macintyre's (1995) belief that the relationship between anxiety, cognition and behavior are cyclical. If the anxiety is facilitating, then the cognition and resulting behavior are positive to learning. If the anxiety becomes debilitating, then the cognitive performance diminishes and repeated failures begin to occur causing negative self-evaluation which in turn leads to lessened motivation, poor performance and greater anxiety.

After years of negative experiences such as this, the high-anxiety L2 students will have fallen into the cycle of learned-helplessness. These are the students who can respond adequately in group exercises but freeze when asked to use the L2 in a more free speech situation. It is also the learners who "know" but when confronted which the same point on a test, forget. These are also the students who do not want to speak or write unless completely prepared because they want to be correct the first time, and cannot make a guess because they are not risk-takers. These students could have difficulty concentrating, become forgetful and actually sweat or have heart palpitations when called on to speak in the L2 class. Sometimes, they begin making jokes as a face-saving activity, experience a need for physical activity which causes them to tap the pencil, have headaches and begin to exhibit avoidance behaviors such as not doing homework and missing class (Horwitz et. al., 1986).

High-anxiety in an L2 situation principally occurs when the learner is asked to perform tasks in two basic skills: listening and speaking. Listening problems are often defined by the learner as a difficulty in discriminating sounds and structures in the target language. In other words, the words fuse together and become a blur of indistinguishable noise. Speaking, however, is the skill which has repeatedly been cited as causing the most difficulty and highest anxiety. The student literally freezes and cannot reply.

The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz et. al 1986) is a highly recognized instrument for distinguishing the extent of debilitating anxiety for foreign languages (See Appendix I). It can be used to test anxiety in any language since the test does not directly specify a particular language. The FLCAS consists of thirty-three questions using a Likert Scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). It is designed to test three main types of foreign language anxiety: anxiety to communicate, test anxiety and anxiety of being negatively evaluated.

In the summer of 1995, two language classes at the Universidad de las Americas-Puebla were given the FLCAS at the beginning of the course. One group were North American students studying intermediate Spanish as a Second Language and the other were EFL intermediate students. At the end of the semester, the results of the FLCAS were cross- checked with the final student grades and teacher comments. The Spanish students who had the highest anxiety also had the most problems adjusting to the culture and lower grades. The English high-anxiety students were those who had a past history of EFL failures and also were given low scores and in one case a failing final grade for the summer course.

Anxiety as an affective variable in FL learning is a baffling interaction between anxiety and the receptive/expressive language skills such as listening and speaking. There is also ample research suggesting that difficulties in speaking and listening skills and poor memory for language may contribute to the anxiety that students experience in the FL class. However, the age-old question is "Where does the cycle of failures begin?" Does it start with attitude, motivation, anxiety or does it begin with one or more aspects of one's own native language? Is it possible that first language learning problems contribute to poor performance in FL classes and that undue anxiety may result from L1 difficulties? The resulting behavioral manifestations such as high-anxiety and low-motivation may indicate a deeper problem.

Language Learning Diverse Students

Language processing difficulties in children appear when they begin acquiring oral language; however, not all children acquire these skills at the same rate. Often speech articulation difficulties, language delay or other language related problems are indicators of later language difficulties. Even though children with a history of language deficiencies eventually learn to speak and understand their native language with adequate results, when they

attempt to learn a FL, their earlier problems return to haunt them (Ganschow and Sparks 1991).

Learning Difficulties (LD) of varying degrees are more common than parents and teachers are aware. According to one study (Ganschow & Sparks 1991), approximately 14% of primary school students are likely to be identified as potentially LD if screened. Some learner problems are detected when entering primary but many others go undetected. Of these undiagnosed students, some are able to adapt and develop the necessary strategies to cope with the problems without ever being officially diagnosed. These students are not generally outstanding students academically but usually are able to finish and obtain an good education even though they were known by their foreign language teachers as a "underachievers". There are also students whose problems, because they are more noticeable, are diagnosed early as having learning disorders and receive the correct support or help and succeed in their studies. However, when both these groups began to study a foreign language, the problems resurfaced.

The idea that FL learning problems may occur in association with or as a result of first language learning problems has been dealt with in various studies with students who have learning disabilities (Ganschow and Sparks 1991). In the 1970s and 1980s, as greater numbers of undiagnosed (LD) students entered colleges and universities and were required to take a foreign language, references to FL learning problems of university students with LD began to appear in academic publications. Substantial numbers of students were unable to meet the FL requirement in their universities causing experts to speculate if first language problems could be the reason. These students had good performance in their other subjects but could not seem to learn the FL. They exhibited three basic types of problems: (1) difficulty with the FL written aspects; (2) inability to distinguish the sounds of the FL and, thus, difficulty with oral communication in communicative classes; and (3) memory problems for sounds and words (Levine 1987).

Since learning problems normally have their basic difficulties in early first language written or spoken skills, second language learners with LD usually have problems that are associated with reading, writing and spelling, especially at the phonological level. Carroll and Sapon (1959) became interested in the similarities between L1 and L2 language learning difficulties. Their findings showed that there were four principle variables which appeared to make the difference in L2 acquisition: phonetic coding, grammati-

cal sensitivity, inductive language learning ability and rote learning ability. These same four factors later became the core of the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) which has been the foremost instrument in distinguishing language learning success since that time.

The first empirical study to compare foreign language students with and without LDs was conducted using the MLAT by Gajar in 1987. Significant differences were found between the scores of the two groups. Students who had been previously diagnosed as LD did noticeably poorer on the subtests which involved syntactic and rote memory skills.

"At-risk" learning diverse L2 students have difficulties with the basic language skills which tend to worsen in test situations and in-class learning activities. They also report having problems with sound-symbol and sound-discrimination tasks. As with the high-anxiety learners, these students have difficulty understanding the audio tapes, cannot connect the sounds correctly order and experience problems processing the phonetic sound/symbol elements of the language. Affective variables, such as low motivation, negative attitudes, or high-anxiety, are generally regarded as by-products of an inefficient language coding system (Sparks & Ganschow 1991).

The Foreign Language Screening Instrument for Colleges (FLSI-C) was developed in 1985 after the authors had been asked to help students who performed well in their other subjects but were unable to pass the foreign language requirement (See Appendix II). A psychological profile was made of each student and many similarities were found. "They shared deficits in listening comprehension, histories of problems with reading and spelling, siblings with learning problems, and self-disclosed difficulties with the auditory aspects of the language" (Ganschow & Sparks 1991: 387). The FLSI-C contains 29 items divided into four areas: (1) developmental history, (2) academic learning history, (3) second language history, and (4) tests and classroom learning characteristics.

However, having learning disorders does not necessarily preclude not being able to learn a foreign language. In a study by Mabbott (1994), five successful LD foreign language students were analyzed. All the subjects had taken high school foreign language classes which they classified as having been unsuccessful. Complaints about their experiences are similar. They found memorization of dialogs, verb forms, and sequences as being nearly impossible. However, when experiencing L2 classes where they encountered

distinct learning situations, they were able to succeed. These accommodations for example included having been provided extra time for tests, allowing for different ways of test-taking (orally or individually with the instructor), slowing down the teacher's rate of speech, writing what was being said so the student had a visual as well as auditory cue and providing direct instruction for learning vocabulary, phonology and grammar rules.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed three factors that have been found to be important indicators of second language learning success or failure. However, many questions remain. Where does the cycle of failures start? Do learning disabilities initiate the cycle or if there are no LDs, where does it begin? These questions will not be answered by EFL teachers; however, the question of what teachers can do to break the cycle of failure that the EFL at-risk learners experiences is within our control.

First, teachers must be aware that there are explanations for the problems the EFL student is exhibiting and that the repeated failures cannot always be attributed to not studying. The failures possibly are a symptom of a more serious problem. In order to verify this, teachers need the appropriate support personnel to which to refer the student. If this is not possible, we can attempt to help the student using some of the following techniques. If you think the problem is motivation or anxiety, try projecting the belief that they can achieve and provide activities where they will succeed, attribute their past failures to controllable factors instead of lack of ability, promote favorable self-perceptions by emphasizing what the students can do instead of what they cannot, promote learner autonomy by allowing for choices in alternative ways to attain goals and minimize external pressure such as threats or derogatory comments about their ability.

If you feel that a student could have a mild learning disability, use the chalkboard more, especially to note new vocabulary or structures, provide extra time on exams, allow for different types of test taking (i.e., oral), cue the student when moving to a different task, utilize the student's strongest learning style, use plenty of examples, begin your class by providing lesson objectives to orient the student, use clear visuals, and give homework one at a time instead of doubling up with multiple assignments. Cooperative learning activities are especially good for all three types of at-risk learners because they provide a low anxiety situation for learning. But, the most impor-

tant factor is that the teacher be aware that there are problems which extend beyond the typical explanation that the student is lazy, an underachiever or is one of "those" who cannot learn languages. And, of course, the teacher must be flexible enough to attempt to help.

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APPENDIX I

FLCAS (HORWITZ & HORWITZ 1986)

Please mark with an X on your answer sheet the alternative which most describes you in your study of a foreign language. Choose according to your history in studying any foreign language in any classroom situation. The alternatives you may choose from are the following:

Strongly Agree = SA **Agree = A** **Neither Agree nor Disagree = N**

Disagree = D **Strongly Disagree = SD**

1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in language class.
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in language class.
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in the language class.
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language.
5. It wouldn't bother me at all to take more language classes.
6. During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.
7. I keep thinking that the other students are better at the language than I am.
8. I am usually at ease during tests in my language class.
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.
10. I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language course.
11. I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language class.
12. In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.
13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.
14. I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.
15. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.
16. Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.
17. I often feel like not going to my language class.
18. I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class.
19. I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.
20. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class.
21. The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.
22. I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.
23. I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.
24. I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.
25. Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.
26. I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.
28. When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed.
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language.
31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.
32. I feel comfortable around native speakers of the language.
33. I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.

APPENDIX II

FOREIGN LANGUAGE SCREENING INSTRUMENT FOR COLLEGE FLSI-C

(GANSCHOW AND SPARKS 1991)

I. Foreign Language Learning

1. How easy has it been for you to learn a foreign language?
2. Estimate your overall grade in those languages you have taken in preparatory or university.

II. Developmental History

3. Did you have articulation (speech) or language difficulties as a child?
4. Were you early or late in learning to walk?
5. Were you early or late in learning to talk?
6. Do any of your biological brothers and/or sisters have a history of academic learning difficulties?
7. As a child, how easy was it for you to learn to tell time?
8. How easy was it for you to learn self-help skills (i.e., tie shoes, button, zip, snap clothing)?
9. How easy was it for you to distinguish right from left?

III. Learning History

10. How easy was it for you to learn to read?
11. How easy has spelling been for you?
12. How easy was phonics for you?
13. How easy was for you to understand what you read?
14. How easy was for you to learn basic arithmetic computation, such as multiplication tables?
15. How easy was elementary and secondary school for you?
16. Estimate your elementary school grades in reading.
17. Estimate your elementary school grades in spelling.
18. How easy were chemistry, biology, and/or physics in preparatory or university?
19. How easy was Spanish (native language) in preparatory or university?
20. How easy was algebra in preparatory or university?
21. How easy was geometry in preparatory or university?

IV. Tests and Classroom Learning Characteristics

22. How easy are most university tests for you.
23. How easy is it for you to complete a test in class when a time constraint is imposed?
24. How easy is it for you to learn in a class in which the professor talks fast?
25. How easy is it for you to learn to recall specific facts (i.e., names, dates, places, times)?
26. How easy is it for you to learn in a class in which the professor writes few or no notes on the board?
27. How easy is it for you to take notes in a typical university class?
28. How easy is it for you to learn through the lecture method?
29. Which phrase best describes the time you spend and the degree of difficulty you have in studying for a test?