

Affective Filter Influence on Oral Production Performance in a Virtual EFL Setting

La influencia del filtro afectivo en la producción oral del idioma inglés en un contexto virtual

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Resumen

El filtro afectivo es un factor influyente en el desarrollo de la producción oral en EFL, por eso, en un entorno educativo virtual, se deben aplicar estrategias que permitan reducir el estrés y ansiedad del estudiante. Este estudio se centra en el filtro afectivo y la relación que tiene en la producción de actividades orales en un entorno virtual. El método de esta investigación fue descriptivo-cuantitativo y se aplicó a un grupo de 113 estudiantes universitarios del nivel A2 de inglés, de la Universidad Nacional de Educación y la Universidad Estatal Península de Santa Elena. Para recabar la información, se aplicaron dos encuestas estructuradas. Los resultados mostraron que la ansiedad y la autoimagen no tuvieron una influencia directa en el desempeño de la producción oral, mientras que la motivación jugó un papel importante en la misma. Se concluye que cuanto mayor sea la motivación, mayor será la producción oral.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje de inglés, filtro afectivo, entorno virtual, motivación, producción oral

Abstract

The Affective Filter is an influential factor in the development of oral production in EFL. So, in a virtual educational environment, strategies must be applied to reduce student stress and anxiety. This study focuses on the affective filter and the relationship it has with the production of oral activities in a virtual environment. The method applied in this research was descriptive-quantitative, to a group of 113 university students of A2 level of English, from the Universidad Nacional de Educación and the Santa Elena Peninsula State University. To collect the information, two structured surveys were employed. The results show that anxiety and self-confidence did not have a direct influence on the performance of oral production; while motivation played an

important role in it, leading to the conclusion that the greater the motivation, the greater the oral production.

Keywords: learning English, affective filter, virtual environment, motivation, oral production

Introduction

A considerable number of studies have demonstrated that creating a safe learning environment increases students' learning opportunities in EFL/ESL contexts. Thus, it is of great significance for instructors to have a deep understanding of how to connect the process of language teaching and learning to the students' feelings. In Krashen's theory of second language acquisition (Yule, 2014), the Affective Filter Hypothesis states that success in the process of language acquisition depends on three main factors: motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. Negative feelings create a barrier in this process. The higher the filter, the more difficult it will be for students to produce language, and this is especially true for oral learning outcomes. Not only does oral production represent a challenge for students, but their emotional state might also impede them when carrying out speaking activities. This is an issue that has often been pointed out by many teachers who believe that students with a high affective filter are less willing to communicate using English as a foreign language.

Another aspect to consider is the presence of technology and digital environments, which have become an essential part of the teaching/learning process during the COVID-19 outbreak. The way of teaching and learning the English language has changed radically due to virtual settings. During face-to-face interaction between students and teachers it is possible to have direct contact with the learners, allowing the development of oral production activities in real time and in close physical proximity. In an online class, the use of other strategies and technological tools is required in order to carry out oral production activities in an EFL context. As a result, strategies like voice recording, video production, and presentations have been implemented as some of the techniques for accomplishing speaking activities.

The present study was conducted using two surveys administered to a group of students in virtual classes, level A2, during the period April-August 2021. The participants were students at the Language Centers at Universidad Nacional de Educación (UNAE) and Universidad Estatal Península de Santa Elena (UPSE). The purpose of this study is to analyze some of the affective filter factors that influence oral production performance in virtual EFL settings.

Literature Review

According to the epistemological foundations of pedagogical models in Ecuadorian Higher Education, emotions and attitudes are part of the competencies of the professional exit profile required by the digital era (UNAE, 2015). In this line, prioritizing cooperation and creating a climate of trust appear as the privileged pedagogical strategies for the development of the cognitive components as well as the emotional and attitudinal components of the future professionals' competencies.

Emotions are likely to have an influence on students' English learning outcomes. The literature suggests that students who feel less anxious, more confident, and more motivated are likely to show greater willingness to communicate in the EFL classroom (Chotipaktanasook, 2016). In her article, Chotipaktanasook (2016) cites a number of studies which demonstrate

that students' ability to communicate needs to be combined with strategies to increase their willingness to communicate. One of the identified strategies is the integration of technological tools to encourage students to feel free to communicate in L2.

The relationship between anxiety and oral participation in EFL classrooms has also been investigated by various studies. Teachers have a great role in reducing anxiety and creating a safe classroom atmosphere. Lacking such an environment has been found to be one of the main causes of anxiety that learners may experience while performing oral tasks (Hammad Rafada & Ahmad Madini, 2017). It is not surprising, therefore, that highly-anxious students tend to perform worse than their peers with lower anxiety levels. Highly-anxious learners speak nervously, or remain silent, and they can even go blank when having to speak in the target language (Liu & Huang, 2011).

As for the necessary strategies that can reduce anxiety and increase motivation, Al Shehri (2012) and Horwitz (2004) suggest collaborative work, an interest in the students' context, using appropriate learning processes, providing social support ahead of assessment as well as nurturing self-confidence. Furthermore, it is said (Oxford, 2003, as cited in Jiménez, 2017) that students can use the target language to create recordings based on their feelings. The implementation of ICT tools both stimulates and moderates communication and, as a result, shy students do not feel relegated by their more dominant peers (Jiménez, 2017). In this manner, video recordings motivate students to gain self-confidence, because they have the opportunity to practice and correct mistakes, before their final oral performance (Vez López & Bertani Tepetla, 2017).

The systematic review by Uquillas and Córdova (2021) delves into the influence of the affective filter on the development of oral production in learning English. The authors state that affective factors such as motivation, emotions, and attitudes act as driving forces to improve oral production in English. The level of the affective filter in the classroom depends largely on the motivation of the teacher and the students' perception of the classroom as a safe place where they can express their ideas orally (Uquillas & Córdova, 2021). The teachers' role, the virtual environment, and ICT tools are of utmost importance when it comes to contributing to the students' growth of confidence, security and motivation.

Materials and Method

For the purposes of this study, which examines the affective filter factors that influence oral production performance in virtual EFL settings, a descriptive-quantitative method was employed. The participants of the study are students attending Universidad Nacional de Educación (UNAE), located at Cañar province, and Universidad Estatal Península de Santa Elena (UPSE), located at Santa Elena, both are Ecuadorian universities. The sample of this research comprised 113 students coming from different majors related to education. All of them were deemed to have an A2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in their corresponding language departments.

The techniques used for data collection were two surveys. The first one was adapted from a thesis dissertation related to the affective filter (García, 2021). The instrument was a structured questionnaire with a five-point Likert-type scale and contained three sections: motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence, which are the main domains related to the affective filter. The reliability and validity of the instrument (17 items) were based on Cronbach's alpha (α) of 0.744 and an Exploratory Factor Analysis of 0.762. The second instrument focused on collecting data related

to oral production activities in online settings and consisted of four questions to which the omega coefficient (ω) of McDonald (1999) was applied, which obtained a reliability value of 0.508.

Results and Discussion

The statistical analysis of the data was carried out using the SPSS 25 program (Field, 2018); in this software program, the question averages are generated according to the established dimensions; also, these averages are illustrated in an error bar diagram. In addition, a scatter diagram was generated for the significant correlation results. To test the hypothesis, a Pearson correlation was performed among the three variables studied with respect to oral production activities. The established level of significance is 0.05.

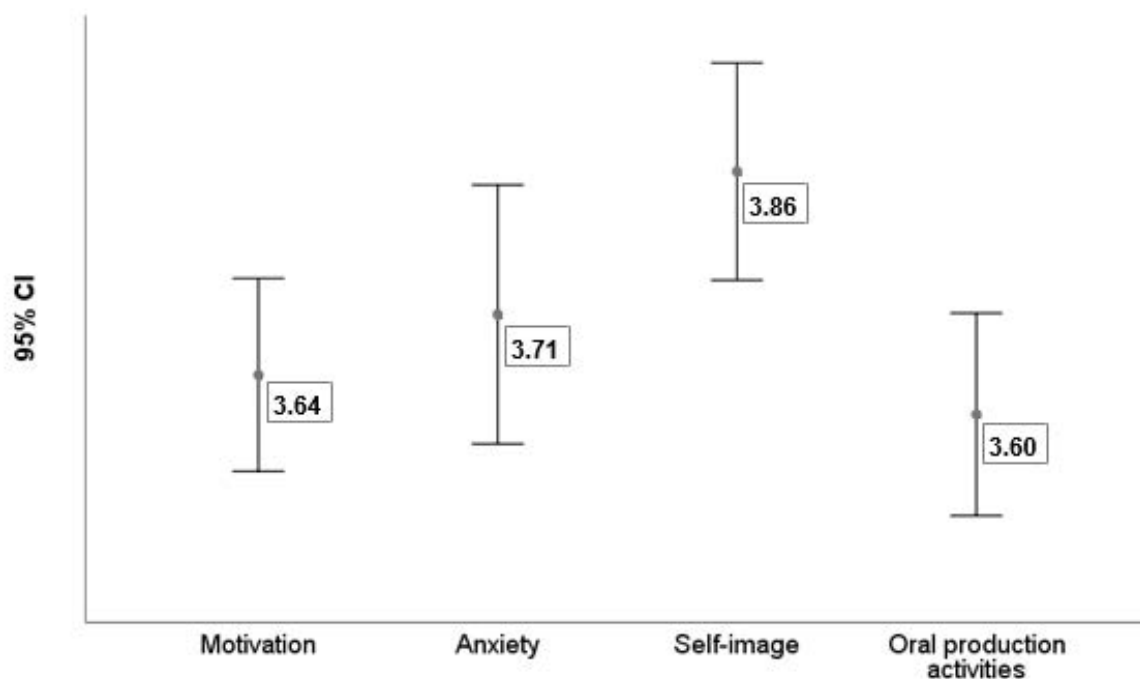
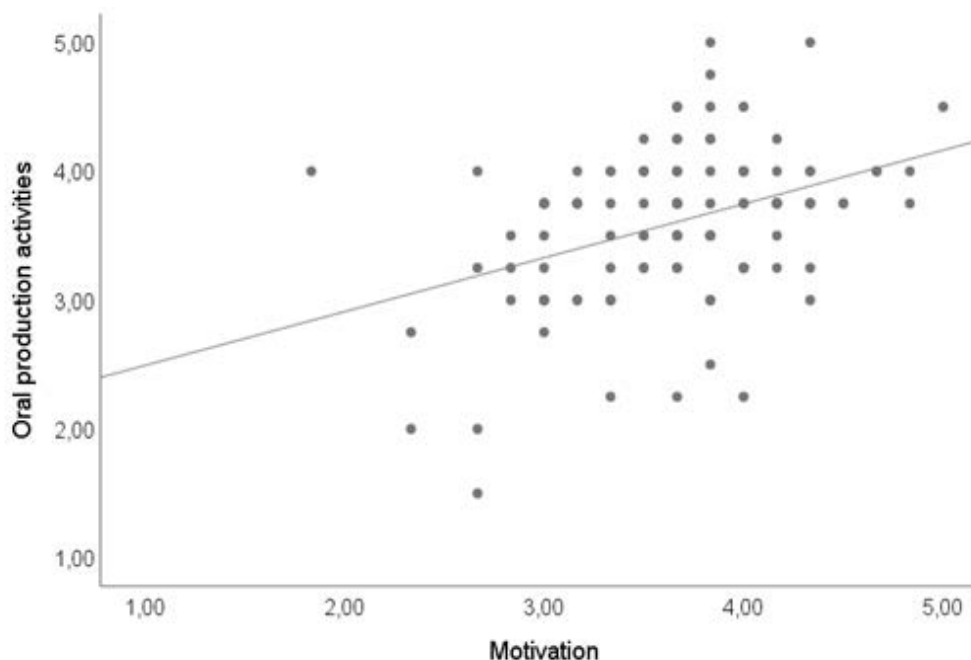


Figure 1. Error Bar Diagram of Affective Filter and Oral Production Activities Three Dimensions

Source: self-made

Figure 1 shows the average of the three dimensions of the affective filter, as well as that of oral production, evaluated on the 5-point Likert scale. It is to be noted that motivation and anxiety obtained similar results (of 3.64 with a Standard Deviation (SD) of 0.57 and 3.71 with a SD of 0.76, respectively), while self-confidence obtained a significantly higher value of 3,86 points (SD of 0.64). The evaluation of oral production activities resulted in an average of 3.60 points (SD of 0.60). These results show that the data obtained from the dimensions of motivation and anxiety is similar to the data to oral production, while self-image has a significantly higher result. The dimension of self-confidence being higher than motivation and anxiety does not have any effect on oral production.

Figure 2. Motivation and Oral Production Activities Scatter diagram



Source: self-made

To test the hypothesis of the association between the affective filter dimensions and oral production performance, a Pearson correlation test was applied. It was found that there is no significant correlation between anxiety and oral production activities ($r = -0.077$, $p = 0.415$). Likewise, there is no correlation between self-image and oral production activities ($r = 0.066$, $p = 0.486$). However, the hypothesis according to which motivation is directly correlated with oral production activities is proven ($r = 0.398$, $p < 0.001$). In this regard, it can be noted that the higher the level of motivation, the higher the amount of oral production.

After collecting and analyzing the results, some limitations regarding the present study have also been identified. One of them is related to the size of the sample (113 students) since this number is considered too small for the validation analysis of the affective filter by Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) (17 items with three dimensions). Also, the dimension related to oral production performance was reduced to four items due to the virtual setting, which made it difficult to apply more activities for speaking production.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Regarding the initial hypothesis of this study, namely, that a high affective filter in online settings might affect performance in oral production activities, it was found that from among the three dimensions of the affective filter (motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence), it is only motivation that affected directly the students' performance in this particular group. In other words, the more motivated the students were, the better results were obtained.

The second aspect related to anxiety does not seem to have a direct influence on the performance of oral activities. As can be seen from the results, there is no straightforward connection with this factor due to the fact that anxiety in students may be caused by a number

of internal or external reasons, for instance, family issues, health problems, problems with technical resources, etc.

Self-confidence, as another variable of the affective filter, was not involved as an aspect that influenced the oral production activities in an online setting. It was noted that students felt confident when recording videos, audios, or even participating in class through the use of different strategies for oral production.

As a recommendation for future studies, this work should expand the sample in terms of level and educational settings to check the influence of the affective filter in the case of oral production activities.

Additionally, the second survey related to oral production activities should have a wider range of questions in order to improve the reliability and validity of the analysis, since the instrument applied for collecting data consisted of four items only and this has limited the generalizability of the data.

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