
In Praise of Praise: A Personal Perspective

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According to Stephen D. Krashen, factors that affect second language learning can be boiled down to whether or not there is sufficient comprehensible input and whether or not such input lowers the affective filter (a form of mental block). Mental blocks keep the language input out of the language acquisition device. He points out, "A very interesting hypothesis is that we acquire best only when the pressure is completely off, when anxiety is zero, when the acquirer's focus is entirely on communication; in short, when the interchange or input is so interesting that the acquirer 'forgets' that it is in a second language" (Krashen, 1983, p. 298).

Leaving input aside, I would like to discuss the problem of mental blocks, which has been a significant problem in foreign language learning, affecting the hopes and ambitions of learners for generations. And owing to it, many never obtain fluency; still more never reach the threshold, remaining "outsiders" all their lives.

What then, should a teacher do to help students overcome these psychological barriers so that the input becomes "so interesting that the acquirer 'forgets' that it is in a second language?" Before answering this question, let us recall a baby's mother-tongue learning and compare it with examples of traditional language instruction.

It is almost without exception that babies are all successful in learning their mother tongues. In addition to other reasons, infinite patience, tireless, smiling faces, enthusiastic encouragement, and generous praise from their parents, grandparents, relatives and neighbours obviously play a very important role. Human beings instinctly seek agreeable things and try their best to avoid unhappy ones. After endless patient demonstrations and a long, long period of time, the baby involuntarily utters something like "Papa" one day. This magic-like sound makes his parents and grandparents as happy as anything. The first attempt at speaking immediately meets so warm a welcome that he must feel it more interesting than crying. This, of course, greatly arouses his activity to learn to speak better. Otto Jespersen talked about this early in 1922 in his "Language, Its Nature, Development and Origin":

"A child's 'teachers' are greatly pleased at every little advance the child makes. Every awkward attempt meets with sympathy and encouragement, and the most difficult step on the path of language becomes the merriest game." (as quoted in Jespersen, 1983)

School children and adult students learning English are not half as lucky as babies. Second language learners find themselves no longer the center of nurturing attention, as was the case when they were babies. The teacher's patience becomes limited; smiling faces are not found everywhere; encouragement and praise are rare. Learning a language is no longer an agreeable aspect of life. In the long, miserable process of fighting against their deep-rooted mother-tongue tendencies, compulsory learning takes the place of agreeable, unconscious acquisition. Six years' hard work in school does not guarantee them an ability to communicate in English. For most of them, to speak fluent English is forever an extravagant hope.

School teachers in China provide us with a case in point. Affecting students' futures most are those in charge of junior 3 and senior 3. These students will graduate from schools soon. With the same conditions, students under a teacher who is good at encouraging and praising them are more confident in class and in exams, enabling more of them to qualify for key schools or universities. Most affected are those who are not initially considered up to the desired level, but who work twice as hard and succeed. Some of them with a chance for better education have become professionals.

Many teachers have had this kind of experience: They occasionally praise or encourage a student whose work habits, attitude or proficiency they do not appreciate very much, and it turns out that the student's enthusiasm of learning is thus aroused and in the end, to everybody's surprise, this very student chooses that subject area as his/her profession and succeeds! It is just as J.M. Eckersley has said, "By judicious praise the brighter students can be made aware of their progress, and by patience and encouragement even the dullest 'Hob' can be made to feel that he is getting on" (Eckersley, 1970, p.16).

On the contrary, things for students under a poor teacher are quite different. This kind of teacher never likes to praise the students. He often acts like a know-all fortune-teller. Instead of encouraging, he publicly predicts before a class of 50 students: "According to my experience, I am sure only three in this class can pass the entrance exam. For the rest, no way!" Like a bucket of cold water on the students' heads, this kind of discouraging remark instantly extinguishes the enthusiasm of the whole class, causing many of those who may have passed if encouraged, to resign themselves to failure, truly as the sinister fortune-teller predicted.

In Britain, though language teachers' levels of training are varied, it was my experience that they all seemed to understand clearly and implement resolutely the principle of encouraging foreign students to communicate. The local people, I might add, were also cooperative. During the year I stayed there, I never saw a teacher showing impatience when hearing foreign students' broken English. To ordinary people, this might seem to be a typical case of British good manners; to language teachers, it shows that these teachers know well enough how important it is to affirm

and encourage a student, and how natural the process of learning is from error to accuracy, and from hesitation to fluency.

Back to the issue of mental blocks. From the above examples and analysis, we can see that one of the methods to lower a student's affective filter or eliminate a mental block, is to use more encouraging and praising words, warmly, patiently helping students clear away one barrier after another on their way to learning.

Learning a second language is hard labor, and labor deserves reward. For second language learners, the reward is in the affirmation and praise of other speakers. It is a pity that there is not much chance for English learners in their own countries to be affirmed and praised by speakers of the target language. As a result, they pin their hopes consciously or unconsciously on their teachers. If the teacher fails in this regard, there is a direct effect on learning. Without students' efforts, without their cooperation, teaching can never be successful. Of course, praise can not be abused, that is common knowledge. Nevertheless, the present situation in China's schools is: many English teachers are too miserly in encouraging and praising students. They either are not aware of its importance, or never have this liking. But one thing is certain: both are harmful to second language learning.

To yearn for praise is man's instinct. Proper praise and sincere encouragement helps people feel their success, strengthens their confidence to overcome difficulties conscientiously, and costs nothing to the praisers. So if we really want our students to learn English well, we should not hesitate to encourage and praise them! It is indeed a cheap, easy, but effective method to solve the problem of mental blocks in language learning, encouraging good users to improve and poor users to try.

References

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