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Barry Chametzky, City University of Seattle, USA

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Offsetting the Affective Filter

Barry Chametzky, City University of Seattle, USA

Abstract

When forced to deal with a stressful, unfamiliar situation, how do people react? People are familiar, in a traditional setting, with sensory overload. But in an online environment, when learners are anxious, they exhibit different behaviors to help mediate their anxiety. Additionally, in an online environment, since visual clues are often lacking, how do these behaviors manifest themselves? People navigate stressful and/or unfamiliar situations by offsetting their affective filter.

Keywords: online foreign language, anxiety, discomfort, affective filter, unfamiliar situations

From 2012 to 2013, I interviewed 15 online foreign language students from various U.S. post-secondary schools. Through the constant comparison of data (Glaser, 1965), I developed a theory, offsetting the affective filter, to explain how learners behave (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as they try to address their main concern of coping with the anxiety of navigating a stressful and/or unfamiliar situation (i.e., successfully completing their online foreign language course). Since no research exists on situations causing people anxiety—and no substantive theories in foreign language—this theory helps bring foreign language “grand theories” (Glaser, 2002, p. 32) into the 21st century while filling a gap in the literature.

Background

When people step out their comfort zone, anxiety and imbalance exist. In such situations, a realignment is necessary. If a re-balancing does not occur, the tasks cannot successfully be completed. Life is, as one participant said, about balance and deciding “what are you willing to risk, walk away or slug through.”

Because online learning is relatively new (Chametzky, 2016), learners studying foreign languages online are often anxious as they do not know the environment, what to expect in the class, or know the target language. This “lack of familiarity” (according to participants) and anxiety lead to an increased affective filter—the invisible psychological barrier that raises or lowers depending on a person’s stress level thereby potentially preventing or severely limiting interaction with the task at hand. A clear relationship exists

between the psychological situation (getting out of one's comfort zone), the consequence (high anxiety and limited interaction with the material in question), and any possible "connected variables" (Glaser, 1978, p. 74).

Offsetting the affective filter

To offset an affective filter, participants demonstrated several behaviors: (a) isolating, (b) interacting, (c) motivating, and (d) settling. If none of these behaviors sufficiently helps, then the person quits.

Isolating

In an environment where individuals' senses are overloaded, they tend to isolate themselves as they process the information that overloads them. The proposed cognitive limit of 7 ± 2 is described in Miller's (1956) cognitive load theory. Yet, in an online environment, cognitive overload happens more easily and quickly because fewer senses are engaged than in a traditional learning environment (Cook, 2012). Participants commented that they are "thrown so much [they] couldn't internalize" it all. Without the skills to navigate the obstacles of a stressful environment like an online foreign language class, and extricate themselves from the quandary caused by a high affective filter, learners isolate themselves.

Interacting

When people are "feeling the strain and stress" (according to a participant), two types of interaction help them overcome an elevated affective filter: (a) verbalizing and venting and (b) peer sharing. Since they form a yin and yang, either or both behaviors may occur.

Sometimes when people are under stress, they cannot verbalize their concerns. They might not be able to process any information cognitively because either the filter is too high or other external or internal issues exist. Such frustration leads to feeling helpless. Putting into words a person's feelings is necessary to offset the affective filter because it "converts" emotions into cognition. By verbalizing and venting their concerns to anyone who will listen, people can expel some of their tension (Thomas, Cassady, & Heller, 2017).

Another way that people relieve anxiety from a high affective filter is through interacting with people who are in the same or similar situation. According to a participant, though peer sharing can result in exchanging ideas, "they could be confusing." Yet, being engaged with peers promotes in-depth learning (Chametzky, 2014) and aids people in connecting with the information on a more personal level. Thus, peer sharing "[pulled] the class together" for participants. Without the "give and take," according to one participant, learners—and people in general—are disadvantaged.

Feeling motivated

Being motivated and focusing on the objective can help decrease stress and anxiety.

Sometimes it is motivation that propels a person to succeed (Yalof & Chametzky, 2016) and “get as much as [he or she can] out of” the situation despite its challenges, as one participant stated. Another participant stated that the “course made me adventurous and interact with others.” Being motivated—due to eustress (Iqbal & Kokash, 2011)—allows people to take responsibility for the situation and feel emboldened despite feeling like a “fish out of water.”

Additionally, in an online environment, because learners can, in their words, work “at [their] convenience” and at their own pace, they are more easily able to self-direct their learning at a convenient time than in a highly-structured environment. People are motivated, according to participants, when they can “work it [the online class or task]” into their schedules and around the “cracks of [their] life.” Thus, an online environment allows people to get “as much as [they] could” provided that they were ambitious.

Settling

When a person realizes that the situation is sub-optimal, the individual settles by plodding through, adapting to, and/or hyper-focusing on the material or task. If everything fails, the individual gives up.

In challenging situations, people need to be adaptable. If something does not work one way, according to participants, it is important to make “the most of it [the situation],” go “with the flow,” or try another avenue; it was not “the end of the world” if something was amiss. People can adapt through self-negotiation; as one participant stated, “What am [I] willing to risk?” When the benefits of accomplishing the task outweigh the risks of not doing it, people adapted.

Occasionally, people need to accept the fact that the situation does not meet their expectations. Respondents came to this realization by being myopic and hyper-focusing “on one assignment [or task] at a time” rather than being overwhelmed with the “big picture” or their misguided expectations. Such myopia helps people reduce anxiety and sensory overload.

If a high affective filter cannot be alleviated because of the sub-optimal environment or situation—perhaps because there is “too much to deal with,” or the individual does not have “personal drive,” the task will be discontinued. For example, when respondents found technology to be insufficient, challenging, or inadequate for their needs (Saba, 2011), they stopped using it. Likewise, if people find that the task or situation does not meet their needs, they quit.

Implications

With online learning being a stable, permanent part of 21st century learning, educators and researchers need to explain why attrition is high and students disengage from their learning. With a greater understanding of why learner disengage—and the anxiety-reducing

manifestation of offsetting the affective filter, remedies can be put into place to help increase retention in post-secondary online courses.

Conclusion

An online course is a microcosm for life: each person's experiences are unique and varied. Additionally, lowering anxiety and the affective filter occur in different fields and walks of life, for example in medicine as students try to succeed in medical school, at job interviews when candidates are insecure, with visitors to a new country, and so on. Offsetting the affective filter is not a one-step, linear process; it requires people to employ different strategies depending on external and internal influences that exist at any given moment. Regardless of the techniques employed, the objective is to reduce the anxiety and vulnerability and regain balance so the person can successfully navigate the situation.

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