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**HOW AFFECTIVE FACTORS CAN INFLUENCE
TEENAGERS' RELUCTANCY TO SPEAK ENGLISH
IN THE CLASSROOM**

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PROPOSAL: How affective factors can influence teenagers' reluctance to speak English in the classroom.

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INTRODUCTION:

Among the four skills learners have to develop, Speaking is the most difficult one to achieve with teenagers, since they avoid communicating in the target language. When they are working in pairs or small groups we can see that they speak in their mother tongue: English is not their choice.

According to Gardner, anxiety is linked directly to performing in the target language. One of the consequences of this is language performance difficulties.

I have chosen this topic in order to discuss the need of different classroom techniques to improve language acquisition among students in schools of a two-hour class period a week.

OBJECTIVES:

- To investigate the effects of anxiety in foreign language learning.
- To develop different ways of coping with this problem in order to help students overcome it.

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This paper purports to explore the situation of students in one of the most difficult periods of their learning lives, that is adolescence, since this time refers to a transitional stage of development which may affect the performance of students in L2 in different ways.

Jean Piaget (1972) formulated Cognitive Developmental Stages:

- Sensorimotor (birth to 2 years old)
- Preoperational Stage (2 to 7 years old)
- Concrete Operational Stage (7 to 11 years old)
- Formal Operational Stage (11 to 15 years old)

The author states that there are a large number of physiological, cognitive, and behavioural changes which take place during the Formal Operation Stage. At this point, teenagers are capable of hypothetical and deductive reasoning along with other features that are easily identified: egocentrism, sense of vulnerability, construction of self-identity and strong desire of being accepted.

Piaget poses that intellectual development is a lifelong process but that when formal operation thought is attained, more complex schemas are necessary, because there is a constant reformulation of new schemas in order to accommodate new knowledge.

The critical period hypothesis which states that there is a period when language acquisition takes place naturally and effortlessly will now be considered. Penfield and Roberts (1959) argued that the optimum age for language acquisition falls within the first ten years of life, but other authors suggest different ages. During this period it is assumed that the brain retains plasticity, but with the onset of puberty this plasticity begins to disappear.

The present study will be devoted to analysing the multiple changes teenagers go through as regards their ability to perform in L2, especially in the Speaking tasks, since, based on Penfield and Roberts' (1959) assumption previously mentioned, motivating students to speak the language represents a challenge to all Secondary School teachers who have the role of facilitating the learning of a foreign language.

Following the Curriculum Design in Argentina the main objective of the teaching of English as a foreign language in Secondary School is to form competent users of the language so that they can communicate with others in a fluent and accurate way. Reality shows that there is a huge gap between what is proposed from the General Administration of Schools and its daily implementation in schools.

When students start Secondary School they show varying degrees of competence in the foreign language. Some do well in grammar, others handle

vocabulary in an effective way, but, generally speaking, all of them lack command of the basic structures, their vocabulary is very poor and they cannot speak the language fluently. What is even worse is that some of them are not motivated enough to learn the language. The teaching of English under these circumstances becomes a hard job for the teachers. They have to be prepared to use as many resources as possible in order to motivate students to perform tasks that can be accomplished effectively. On the one hand, teachers need to possess clear instructional goals, including cognitive objectives in order to fix realistic aims to be implemented in a weekly two-hour period. On the other hand, it represents a total challenge to teachers to devise instruments that will motivate students to become involved in their foreign language classes.

All in all, Reading, Writing and Listening are three of the four skills which are fulfilled quite successfully in schools. Reading and Writing seem to be easier for the students to manage, since they can rely on a dictionary when new words appear. In much the same way, they can take their time to practise these skills because no immediate pressure is put on them. Listening is generally welcomed by students. Their attitude to interpreting what others are saying implies a challenge which results in an advantage at the time of learning. In particular, lyrics are very helpful, since most students like singing their favourite songs in the original language, and this represents for them invaluable practice: they can easily identify sounds and words from their musical choices. Speaking is the most complicated skill to be acquired by the students since in order to become

competent speakers they have to perform in public and this represents a real challenge for them. Teenagers are not generally willing to use L2 in the class. Some of them, even if they are able to use it quite accurately, prefer not to speak it as it fills them with embarrassment to have to perform in front of other members of the class.

How do students learn to speak the foreign language? This is a difficult question to answer. The natural order of interlanguage is an internal process that each student undergoes, as Krashen (1987) claims in his Input Hypothesis theory,

- Learners progress along the natural order by understanding input that contains structures a little bit beyond their current level of competence.
- Although comprehensible input is necessary for acquisition to take place, it is not sufficient, as learners also need to be affectively disposed to “let in” the input they comprehend.
- Input becomes comprehensible as a result of simplification and with the help of contextual and extralinguistic clues, the “fine-tuning” (i.e. ensuring that learners receive input rich in the specific linguistic property they are due to acquire next) is not necessary.
- Speaking is the result of acquisition, not its cause; learner production does not contribute directly to acquisition.

According to what was mentioned above, if all the stages are not fulfilled adequately, any attempt of the teacher to teach what belongs to the upper stages will be useless. Nevertheless, there are minimum requisites to help

students to go through these stages of development.

As Krashen (1985) points out in his research, there is a silent period during which learners acquiring a new language are silent and focus their attention on comprehension, and they may respond in a non-verbal way or by making use of a set of memorised phrases. True second language production may not emerge for several months.

During this stage it is of fundamental importance to provide a great quality of comprehensible input in the target language, and the teacher should respect the so called "silent period", which will eventually lead to spontaneous production.

As stated above, adolescence is a complicated stage in the students' lives, and exposure to their peers offers them great difficulty when the moment of speaking in the foreign language, which they do not manage, occurs. Because of this, teachers generally find it extremely difficult to make students take part in a conversation in the target language: sometimes they will remain in silence when they are asked a simple question, or, in some cases, even if they understand the question, they do not give a response in English but in their mother tongue. This attitude results in a slow acquisition of the oral form of the language since the oral interaction between teacher and students or among the students is non-existent at this stage.

Spencer and Vaughan (1997) have proposed two important factors to explain why teenage students are reluctant to speak:

- Age-related factors;
- Task-related factors.

As mentioned before, by and large, speaking English can be quite an embarrassing and threatening experience. Among students it may turn out to be rather meaningless for them to discuss with their peers what they did the previous weekend when they have probably already done this a few moments before in L1. Moreover, it may be frustrating for them to be unable to express themselves clearly because they do not possess the necessary vocabulary, or their pronunciation is not intelligible enough, or they do not know how to use a particular tense. Add these to the natural shyness of an adolescent who is still forming his or her own concept of himself/herself in the mother tongue, it seems obvious to understand why some students will find it easier to play around than to speak English, especially if the topic of conversation is about personal matters.

At this point of the discussion, we must not forget that CLIL model (Content on Language Integrated Learning), which is the basis of our Curriculum Design, proposes that students should have a meaningful purpose to speak, they must be interested in the topic provided by the teacher. However, as Spencer and Vaughan (1997) exposed, peer pressure adds to the problem of using L2. Two

students may want to work on a task but if a third student wants to spoil the activity the other two will be easily persuaded to do so. We should not forget that when this situation appears, the more the teacher angrily insists, “in English!” the less likely it is that teenagers will take notice.

Students are of the idea that they are the target of others’ attention, so they hate it when the teacher asks them to write on the board, even if they are one of the many students writing at the same time, because they imagine that the rest of the class are looking at their clothes and hair with critical eyes and/or judging their linguistic performance. This is worse when they are asked to answer a single question in English.

When Spencer and Vaughan (1997) speak about task-related factors, they refer specifically to pairwork and groupwork. These are types of interaction that students rarely experience in other subjects at school, since in not many subjects are they asked to formulate or express their own opinions on topics. This is a task which should be monitored by the teacher in order to train students gradually to work first in pairs and then in progressively larger groups, moving slowly from controlled to freer activities. It must not be forgotten that students quickly lose interest when there is no clear purpose to an activity (see CLIL), no tangible task to realise or only artificial reasons to communicate with one another. Nevertheless, although sometimes clear purposes are given, activities do not work since the instructions from the teacher are not a hundred per cent clear.

The CLIL method enables learners to speak in L2 about issues of their interest, but it must be remarked that there are neither easy nor difficult topics but rather easy or difficult tasks. So, if the tasks suggested by the teacher demand a level of cohesion and coherence that the students are still developing in their mother tongue it is highly probable that the chances of success will be minimal.

Teaching teenagers to become successful English speakers, may turn out to be a difficult task for the teacher, and is a slow process as well. The Syllabus Design in Argentina states that students have to develop communicative competence which should include the knowledge and the necessary ability to use the language in an accurate way, within an accurate communicative context. But it is true that there are some basic mechanical areas of language teaching that many students do not have, even in their mother tongue.

According to Dunkel(1948), motivation is an important factor in language learning, and he differentiates between two aspects. One, to the kind of motivation, referred to the purposes of language study, and the other, the intensity of motivation, referred to the effort expended in learning the language. Students, nowadays, seem to lack both of them and teachers have to cope with this. Moreover, the absence of a systematic background in Spanish in most cases results in a serious problem that affects L2 learning.

With things as they are it seems to be that students attending state-run schools

do not have many possibilities of practising English outside the school environment. Therefore, those students who are eager to speak the language and do this at school, soon get disappointed when they find out that they do not have many opportunities to use the language with other people. These students may develop frustration which eventually can turn into lack of motivation.

The Syllabus Design in Argentina proposes that students should be able to produce a piece of discourse rather than isolated sentences, but to achieve coherent and cohesive speech in such poor conditions of knowledge may become a total challenge.

Littlewood (1995) states that we should measure the non-linguistic factors which we consider likely to affect language learning. Studies which have investigated the influence of learner's personality have found that "emphaty" or "extroversion" are traits which can be measured in order to show how learning is affected by the kind of language to which the learner is exposed. However, there are obvious difficulties involved in keeping a record of the language that the learner hears. Littlewood (1995) explores some linguistic factors which many people believe (from observation and/or statistical evidence) to influence success in L2 learning. He groups them under three main categories, on which the present paper will be based:

- Motivation for learning,
- Opportunities for learning,

- Ability for learning.

In the second language learning class as in every other field of human learning, motivation is the crucial force which determines whether a learner embarks on a task at all, how much energy he devotes to it, and how long he perseveres in doing this. It is a complex phenomenon which includes many components, such as the individual's drive, need for achievement and success, curiosity, desire for stimulation and new experience, etc. These factors play a role in every kind of learning situation. There are two important aspects when learning L2: communicative need and attitudes towards the second language community.

As regards the communicative need, Littlewood (1995) indicates that the primary motive for learning a language is that it provides a means of communication. A person is therefore most likely to be drawn towards learning a second language if he/she perceives a clear communicative need for it. So, the extent of this communicative need depends, to a considerable extent, to the nature of the social community in which the learner lives. For example, in a bilingual community, the need for more than one language is apparent in a wide range of social situations. It is also reinforced by the cultural assumptions with which people grow up. A second language constitutes, therefore, a communicative repertoire for coping with life's demands. In this respect, it is a process similar to that of the acquisition of different styles of speaking to suit different kinds of situation in a monolingual community. By their nature, some communities are

more likely to produce large numbers of learners motivated by a perceived communicative need.

This study intends to show what actually happens in Argentina, as different from the countries mentioned above, as bilingualism is not part of our culture. Therefore, the necessity to learn the language as a means of communication is non-existent. According to Gardner (1993) motivation plays a vital role in the learner's achievement; it is attributed to the ability to override other factors, such as language aptitude to affect achievement in both, positive and negative ways.

Argentine learners who attend secondary state-run schools usually have to face the everyday problem of the social-economic diversity they are immersed in. Most of them have the pre-conception of having no future and, consequently, English does not represent a communicative need in their near future. As a result, lack of motivation and curiosity to learn about the world and to experience a different culture can be perceived among most of students.

In this context, teachers have to work hard to persuade them to change their attitude, by pointing out to them the difficulties they may later encounter in life if they do not speak the foreign language.

With regards to attitude, Littlewood (1995) states that "the attitude towards the second language community is important in learning. Thus, the learner with most favourable attitudes will wish for more intensive contact with the second

language community". In this respect, on the one hand, a positive attitude fosters the need for communication. In situations where circumstances do not actually compel members of different language groups to have contact with each other, the learner's attitude may determine whether he perceives any communicative need at all. On the other hand, if this attitude is negative, there may be strong internal barriers against learning the foreign language, and if learning has to take place because of external compulsion, it may proceed only to the minimum level required by external demands such as those imposed by the curriculum. Since English has increasingly become an "international" language in recent decades, serving as a lingua franca either within a multilingual community or among people from different countries who do not speak each other's native language, it is absolutely necessary that learners study it while they are still in Secondary School. When English is learnt primarily for this "international" purpose, learners should be expected to adopt a positive attitude towards native-speaking English communities which exert such an important influence in the modern world.

The process of raising cultural awareness implies the disposition of classroom participants to challenge their own assumptions. Regarding culture, it is the teachers' responsibility not only to initiate the students in the acquisition of the culture of the target language the learners are being exposed to, but also to establish the relationship between the L2 culture and the culture that they bring to the language class. It is highly important that the teacher raises awareness in

her students of the background influence of the mother tongue so that she can develop the learners' curiosity in the culture of the L2. The teaching of language under different circumstances can be understood from an intercultural perspective. Such an approach assumes that the learner will eventually acquire the target language and will be able to understand and accept its culture but it does not imply making it form part of their own culture. On the contrary, he/she will retain his/her own identity, recognising and appreciating cultural diversity.

The effects of attitudes on motivation and proficiency have been investigated in a large number of studies, notably those by Gardner and Lambert (1972). These researchers have related their findings to two basic kinds of motivation, which they call "integrative" and "instrumental". These are distinguished as follows:

- 1 A learner with integrative motivation has a genuine interest in the second language community. He wants to learn their language in order to communicate with them more satisfactorily and to gain closer contact with them and their culture.

- 2 A learner with instrumental motivation is more interested in how this second language can be a useful instrument towards furthering other goals, such as gaining a necessary qualification or improving employment prospects.

The distinction is similar to that made between "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" motivation in general learning theory (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). It is clear that the two kinds of motivation do not exclude each other: most learners are under

the effects of a mixture of integrative and instrumental kinds of motivation.

When students at Secondary school finish their course of studies, they are expected to speak the language fluently if they want to get a well-paid job or to further their education abroad. Learning a foreign language acquires a special interest for them since they know it is a very important tool for their work. They feel the need to learn the language well in order to communicate with others, knowing that this will constitute a pre-requisite for their future careers.

Littlewood (1995) speaks about opportunities for learning as a relevant linguistic factor, and if it is assumed that a learner is well motivated to learn a second language, another important influence on the proficiency he achieves will be the quality of the learning opportunities which the environment offers. Here, four aspects of this influence will be discussed: the opportunities that exist for using the second language, the emotional climate of the learning situations, the type of language to which the learner is exposed (his/her "linguistic input"), and the effects of formal instruction.

It is important that the learner should have access to situations where the language is used as a natural means of communication. In some situations, this linguistic factor mentioned above, is inseparable from the communicative need. In a bilingual community, for example, the proximity of another language group may create simultaneously the communicative necessity for acquisition of the second language and the opportunities for learning it through use. On the other

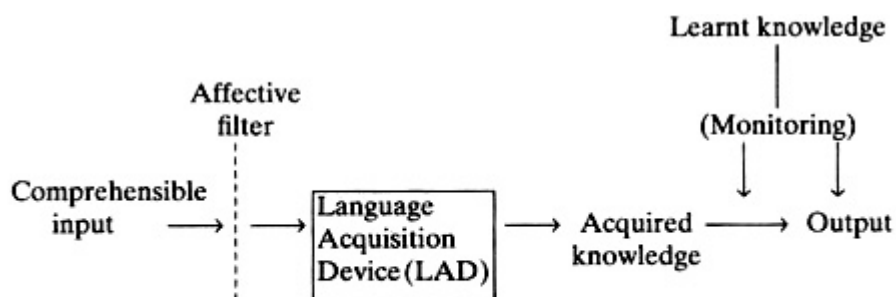
hand, taking into consideration that most of the students in our country are not forced to use the L2 for communication in an everyday context, the two-hour period that is devoted to the target language at school is not enough for them to gain proficiency.

Moreover, it is important, as Littlewood (1995) says, both for learning and for the development of a positive attitude, that learners should interact with native speakers at a personal level. This is more likely to occur when the initial attitude towards contact among them is favourable and the learners feel confident in the unfamiliar environment.

In order to provide the emotional climate of the learning situation, an environment where learners feel confident is required. On the contrary, if they feel anxious or insecure, there are likely to exist psychological barriers to communication. Also, if anxiety rises above a certain level, it may become an obstacle to the learning process. Unfortunately, the two kinds of situation where second language learning takes place more often –the classroom and the second language community- can easily generate situations where learners feel overanxious.

It is important at this point to reflect on the theory of Second Language Acquisition, especially on the fifth hypothesis, where Krashen (1982) claims that

optimal input occurs when the "affective filter" is low: the affective filter is a screen of emotion that can block language acquisition or learning if it keeps the students from being too self-conscious or too embarrassed to take risks during communicative exchanges.



The Input Hypothesis Model of L2 learning and production (adapted from Krashen, 1982, pp. 16 and 32; and Gregg, 1984)

In the typical language classroom, when the speaking activity takes place, learners are often asked to perform in a state of ignorance and dependence which may engender feelings of helplessness. According to Littlewood (1995) students have to produce unfamiliar sounds in front of an audience. When they do not perform adequately, they may be subjected to comment and correction, sometimes for reasons that are not quite clear to them. Most of them do not possess the linguistic tools to express their own individuality. On top of that, there are some cases where the interaction is dominated by the teacher.

In a similar way, the second language environment may cause learners to feel anxious and constrained. With their limited communicative competence, they may have difficulties in relating to others and presenting their own selves adequately. Thus, when making casual conversation or expressing

spontaneous reactions, both of which may be difficult, the attempts to do so may result in misunderstandings and laborious efforts to explain. Unless learners have a firm confidence in themselves, they may come to feel that they project a silly, boring image of themselves, and become withdrawn. Their sense of alienation may be increased by the fact that they have to re-learn the conventions around simple daily events, which are different to those belonging to their mother tongue. To use two terms commonly applied to this kind of experience, Littlewood (1995) refers to the development of a sense of “reduced personality”, and learners experience varying degrees of “culture shock”.

It should be remembered, however, that the level of anxiety felt by the learners is only partly a result of the nature of the situation itself. It is also a result of personal factors. For example, some learners become anxious more quickly than others, whatever the situation. Others may have had experiences of failure which cause them to become anxious quickly in classroom learning situations.

Relating to the nature of the linguistic input, Littlewood (1995) assumes that it is probable that the nature of the speech addressed to second language learners is an important factor in influencing how well they learn. The ideal input for acquiring a second language must be comprehensible and relevant to their immediate interest. The input should not be too complex, but not strictly graded, either. Being exposed to the adequate input, picking out the structures for which each learner is ready at a given time, the learner’s natural acquisition

mechanisms can operate properly.

In formal instruction, teachers attempt to affect the course of learning mainly by controlling the learner's exposure to the language, by making them become aware of significant features and patterns, by providing opportunities for practising the language, and by ensuring that learners receive feedback about their performance. Within this general framework, an immense variety of teaching approaches is possible, and it is obvious that some teachers have developed more successful approaches than others. However, it is not at all clear what factors determine their success.

According to Littlewood (1995) there have been a number of studies comparing the effectiveness of different methodologies, such as grammar-translation or audio-lingual methods. These have been inconclusive, probably because no single methodology is intrinsically "better" than others in all situations. Also, attempts to make comparisons have not advanced by the fact that results are influenced by such an extensive number of factors not related to the methodology as such. These include the personality and skill of individual teachers, the ability and motivation of different learning groups, the availability of time and resources, etc. In fact, one of the most distinct conclusions to draw is that, at least in the present state of our knowledge about possible methodologies, these factors together play a more significant role than the choice between one methodology and another.

The teacher's personality also plays an important role in the process of learning a new language. On the one hand, an assertive teacher who knows exactly how to teach and how to deal with a class will surely obtain better results than a teacher who cannot solve the possible problems which may appear. On the other hand, a teacher who overcorrects his/her students, may cause the learning process to result in a failure: if a student who is doing his/her best to speak in the L2, is interrupted from the very beginning by a teacher who is more interested in focusing on "the mistake" rather than on the opportunity the student has to speak and express an idea freely, he/she will turn bashful and reserved. Consequently, to involve that learner again in the general activities of the class will become rather difficult, if not impossible. Teachers should therefore avoid becoming over-critical of their students' performance; otherwise it is likely that the student will not speak again, afraid of being corrected in public.

On the contrary, teachers should encourage learners to have confidence in themselves. A student who "takes the risk" to speak in class in the target language must be respected by the teacher and by his/her peers, regardless of the mistakes he/she may make: the most important point at this stage is communication, and if this goal is achieved successfully, the corrections may come at a later stage of the learning process.

As was previously mentioned in this paper, students are expected to go through

a silent period during which they only listen to the input, so that they can eventually produce speech. As a result, if at the end of the above mentioned stage the affective filter of the learners is low, it will be easy for them to start communicating in the target language. Bearing in mind that the teacher is one of the actors in the classroom, the more friendly he/she makes the environment for the learners, the lower the anxiety they will develop. Thus, using the language will become a positive experience.

Discourse in the classroom is expected to have three main points:

- Comprehensible input
- Possibility of the use of interlanguage
- Development of learners' communicative skills

When teachers provide input, they have to make it comprehensible and meaningful so that the learners' internal mechanism of acquisition can process the information to use it later in the production of speech. The complexity of the input will depend on the level of the class. When the input is not challenging enough for the learners they will easily become uninterested. On the contrary, if it is too difficult the frustration they will feel will result in a negative learning environment. Vygotsky's ideas (1978) related to the zone of proximal development and how it helps in the acquisition of a language are important in the classroom since the teacher is responsible for structuring interactions and developing instructions based on tasks the learner is capable of performing independently. The structure used is called scaffolding, which involves providing tasks that enable the learners to build on previous knowledge and internalising

new concepts based on that.

In the course of the class, learners can make use of interlanguage, which leads them through different processes in order to acquire the target language. It is very common for students to use L1 as a resource to solve those situations where their knowledge of grammar or vocabulary is not mastered. Teachers should be aware of these difficulties and they should focus their attention on how successfully the message was delivered and definitely not on the correctness of the language used. Assessment has to be taken into account as inclusive and not exclusive from the school system, so teachers should give the class a diagnostic test and from that they have to scaffold the students' knowledge. According to the Curriculum Design in Argentina teachers have to encourage not only classroom training, but also self-access learning and independent learning out of school. Teachers should be able to create situations where students can interact in topics related to their personal interests. It is also expected that learners can read, comprehend and criticize different type of texts so that they can reaffirm or change their opinions on the topic discussed.

When teachers have to deal with assessment, they should evaluate if the students use different techniques such as scanning or skimming when reading texts or listening to recorded material. As regards speaking skills, the teacher should take into account fluency and accuracy in oral presentations. Oral performance achievement of students is also required during the assessment

stage.

Taking notes of errors in the students' performances as a kind of register may provide a productive way of their reflecting on their mistakes. Analysis on errors in vocabulary, grammar, morphology, pronunciation and spelling is the initial stage to recognise and correct the origin of those errors.

CONCLUSION

Education in the province of Buenos Aires can be divided into two main groups: Education in bilingual schools where students are immersed in the language from an early age, with all the necessary resources at hand, such as books, dictionaries, access to the Internet, access to a classroom with video recorders, and so on. These students have the opportunity to learn in a comfortable environment, with technology available in the classroom and the tools required to acquire knowledge.

On the other hand, there is another group, which constitutes the majority of students in the suburban areas of Great Buenos Aires. This group is lacking in the basic needs such as housing and food, so those schools are currently seen as places whose main objective is to cater for those necessities. We must add that the deplorable conditions in which most of the state schools are do not provide the students with the "comfortable environment" desired for the learning process. Seen in this light not all students can have the same opportunities as regards schooling. This inequity comes even clearer when students only come to school because it is the place where they meet peers so that they do not feel alone at home. All these factors inevitably lead to students in the second group being demotivated in the foreign language class. It is a fact that as consequence of what was pointed out before, students in poorer areas are negatively affected and this inhibits them to perform successfully in the L2 class.

The background students have, as regards knowledge is usually very poor and teachers end up themselves teaching contents which were supposed to be learnt at a previous stage. Through a year-course teachers try to provide a positive environment, to reach the minimum contents the Curriculum Design states and they also encourage students to change their attitude towards English.

As has been stated, adolescents go through many critical internal stages which are reflected on their performance at school. Emotional environment along with integrative and instrumental motivation are factors which affect the learners' attitude towards language.

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