

## The affective aspect in the teaching and learning of english as a foreign language to elderly people

O aspecto afetivo no ensino-aprendizagem de inglês  
como língua estrangeira para idosos

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**Abstract:** The present article aims to understand the role of emotion (affective aspect) in the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to elderly people. The data of this research were generated through reflective reports and a face-to-face interview with students from the Open University to Maturity (in Portuguese, *Universidade Aberta à Maturidade - UAMA*) at the State University of Paraíba (in Portuguese, *Universidade Estadual da Paraíba - UEPB*). We base our study, mainly, on Moita Lopes (2009), who brings the concept of Indisciplinary Applied Linguistics by promoting the study and exchange of knowledge of marginalized groups; Immordino-Yang and Faeth (2010), who argue in favor of the role of emotion in the learning process; Pizzolatto (1995), who presents a deep reflection on foreign languages teaching and learning to the elderly in view of some affective

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factors that need to be considered, among other authors. We concluded that taking the affective aspect into consideration, more specifically the role of emotion in the classroom, is essential to promote a meaningful, inclusive and learner-centered experience to elderly students.

**Keywords:** Teaching and learning. English language. Elderly students.

**Resumo:** O presente artigo tem como objetivo compreender o papel da emoção (aspecto afetivo) no ensino-aprendizagem de Inglês como Língua Estrangeira para idosos. Os dados desta pesquisa foram gerados por meio de relatórios reflexivos e de uma entrevista presencial com alunos da Universidade Aberta à Maturidade (UAMA) na Universidade Estadual da Paraíba (UEPB). Baseamos nosso estudo, principalmente, em Moita Lopes (2009), que traz o conceito de Linguística Aplicada Indisciplinar ao promover o estudo e a troca de saberes de grupos marginalizados; Immordino-Yang e Faeth (2010), que argumentam a favor do papel da emoção no processo de aprendizagem; Pizzolatto (1995), que apresenta uma profunda reflexão sobre o ensino-aprendizagem de línguas estrangeiras para idosos tendo em vista alguns fatores afetivos que precisam ser considerados, entre outros autores. Concluímos que levar em consideração o aspecto afetivo, mais especificamente o papel da emoção em sala de aula, é essencial para promover uma experiência significativa, inclusiva e centrada no aprendiz idoso.

**Palavras-chave:** Ensino-aprendizagem. Língua Inglesa. Alunos idosos.

## Introduction

The process of getting old or, as one may say, entering the “best age” has been facing some changes lately. Day by day, elderly people are finding their place in society due to the effort of professionals and volunteers from different areas, including the educational one. Because of that, inclusive programs have been implanted in Brazil and in other countries with the objective of (re) socializing this group of individuals and also, promoting learning and sharing of knowledge.

This inclusive education to elderly people can deal with cultural and leisure activities, health and citizenship discussions and engagement, the learning of new skills such as a foreign language and so many other options. This concern shows that, in fact, the elderly must be taken into account in every sphere of society, as established by the Brazilian Senior Citizen’s Law N<sup>o</sup>. 10.741 (BRASIL, 2003).

By knowing all that and desiring to promote learning experiences to elderly people in the city of Campina Grande and surrounding cities in Paraíba, the State University of Paraíba (in Portuguese, *Universidade Estadual da Paraíba - UEPB*) has developed a project entitled Open University to Maturity (in Portuguese, *Universidade Aberta à Maturidade - UAMA*), which, in turn, has been working on various sub-projects which aim to enlarge the socialization of elderly people through the acquisition of knowledge with a social commitment.

Due to this, this study was motivated by the direct involvement of the researchers in this context through an extracurricular project named “Let’s speak English: teaching and learning experience of English Language in elderly age”<sup>1</sup> at UAMA that aimed to promote the teaching and learning of the English language to elderly students in which we both participated, one as a teacher and the other as a coordinator.

In this article, in turn, as part of the final paper presented as a graduation requirement, we outline as an objective to understand the role of emotion (affective aspect) in English teaching and learning to elderly people.

This study aimed at intervening in a group of elderly students at UAMA through the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in order to analyze the possible implications of this experience to the students. It is mainly characterized as a qualitative action research, for, according to Moreira and Caleffe (2008), an action research is a small-scale intervention in a given specific context, in other words, it is a very close test to the effects of this intervention.

The English classes described in this paper took place at UAMA, which is one of the institutions that intends to (re)insert elderly people in society by providing them with better life quality. In other words, UAMA is a project that aims to:

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1. Original name: “*Let’s speak English: experiência de ensino-aprendizagem de língua inglesa na maturidade*”.

[...] meet the educational demands of the elderly, contributing to the improvement of personal, functional and social capabilities, through training and social care, which aims to create and regularly stimulate social, cultural, educational and convivial activities, encouraging improvement in quality of life (Our translation, extracted from UAMA's official website <http://sites.uepb.edu.br/uama/>)<sup>2</sup>.

Through the disciplines of Arts and Leisure, those students had the opportunity to learn foreign languages (French and English). The project was a pioneer one in regards to English teaching at UAMA. It was divided into two semesters, one class of 2 hours per week. A coordinator professor and two pre-service teachers from Modern Languages Course (English/UEPB) participated in the extracurricular project.

To this paper, we used some of the reflective reports written by the pre-service teachers who taught English at UAMA as well as some answers of the interviews done with 4 (four) elderly students from the group of the first semester of 2016.

Although the group of students was heterogeneous, it had similar learning and personal characteristics. The profile of the students who agreed to participate in this research reveals the heterogeneity of the group: they come from different educational and social backgrounds (some of them had contact with English only during school years, while others had traveled abroad or

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2. “[...] atender à demanda educativa de idosos, contribuindo na melhoria das capacidades: pessoais, funcionais e sociais, por meio da formação e atenção social, que visa a criar e dinamizar regularmente atividades sociais, culturais, educacionais e de convívio, favorecendo melhoria na qualidade de vida”. From UAMA's official website: <http://sites.uepb.edu.br/uama/> Accessed on May 1st, 2016.

used to watch movies and listen to music in English, for example), which is typical in UAMA's classroom, however they were equal in terms of willingness to learn the target language.

In order to understand the implications of the aspect chosen to be analyzed, this research has followed two steps: (1) the participative (and systematic at some points) observation (which then took the form of written reflective reports produced by the pre-service teachers involved in the project), and (2) a recorded face-to-face interview with the students (which was done by one of teachers).

In the next paragraphs, we will present some discussions related to: (1) the foreign language teaching in the light of the new perspective of Applied Linguistic (The Indisciplinary Applied Linguistics); (2) the reflection about the Communicative Language Teaching approach; (3) some considerations on age and learning; (4) the affective aspect when teaching EFL to elderly people; and (5) the role of emotion in EFL class in this context.

## New insights on Applied Linguistics

Nowadays, with regard to the production of knowledge with implications related to changes in society, Moita Lopes (2009) claims that a new perspective is emerging, it is called the Indisciplinary Applied Linguistics. This line of scientific thought believes that one has to draw attention to “[...] the necessity of hearing the

voices of the periphery or of those who were casted out from the benefits of modernity [...] (*op. cit.*, p. 21 - our translation)<sup>3</sup>”.

To the author, these “voices of the periphery” are the group of people composed by those whom society has left out, even in terms of production of knowledge in the various areas of academic research and theories. We need to listen to the southern voices; as Moita Lopes (*op. cit.*) explains, these voices are the unheard ones, since only the occidental voices of those located above in the global map are the most prestigious ones.

We understand that the elderly can also be considered as a component of this group of individuals, due to the social exclusion they still face in society. That’s the reason why we definitely believe in the necessity of listening to them, and, in the case of the English course, we believe we could do this by teaching elderly students a foreign language as a means of producing not only academic knowledge about how these learners learn EFL, but mainly as a way of producing knowledge about them as well as about life. In Moita Lopes’ words (2009, p. 21):

[...] not only as a way of producing knowledge about them [this group of individuals], but most importantly because of the interest of understanding how their knowledge, desires and experiences can present alternatives to our world. (our translation<sup>4</sup>)

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3. “[...] ouvir as vozes da periferia ou daqueles que foram alijados dos benefícios da modernidade [...]”

4. “[...] não só como uma forma de produzir conhecimento sobre eles, mas principalmente pelo interesse em entender como suas epistemes, desejos e vivências podem apresentar alternativas para o nosso mundo.” (MOITA LOPES, 2009, p. 21).

Now, taking into account that the voices of the elderly need to be heard, we draw our attention to the advantages of the Communicative Language Teaching approach when listening to the learner inside the language classroom.

## Communicative Language Teaching and the learner's voice

Throughout the years, teachers and researchers desired to develop ways of teaching second/foreign languages. The goal always was to know how students could learn a language to communicate. According to some scholars, such as Hymes (1971, *apud* LARSEN-FREEMAN, 2000), to communicate effectively a person needs to know when and how to say what to whom. In Larsen-Freeman's (2000, p. 121) words: "[...] being able to communicate required more than linguistic competence; it required communicative competence".

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) proposes foreign language classes in which authentic language is taught, in other words, the real language is worked into the classroom, for example, by the use of textual genres. Since language is seen as interaction, pair and group work are emphasized, always trying to promote activities similar to real communicative context (LARSEN-FREEMAN, 2000).

Through the CLT, students have the chance to "express their ideas and opinions" (*op. cit.*, 2000, p. 126) since they can negotiate the meaning of language through activities. In this way, we may say students have a voice inside the classroom to express



and use the language freely, due to this student-centered characteristic of CLT.

Therefore, we believe that this teaching approach can be considered a way to apply what Moita Lopes (2009) defends when problematizing the insertion of southern voices in teaching and learning discussions, as the student becomes the protagonist of his/her learning by actively participating in this process, exposing his/her ideas and building linguistic, social and emotional knowledge with his/her peers.

Now, in the following paragraphs, we draw our attention to some important points to be taken into consideration in regards to the relationship between age and learning.

### Considerations on age and learning

Over the years, learning a foreign language has been a path chosen by so many people from many different places, social backgrounds, and ages. There are lots of discussions, especially on the last factor mentioned (age), because of the common sense which states that the older we are, the harder it will be to learn a foreign language. Thus, in order to understand the influence of age in language learning, we present here some reflections on this issue.

First of all, it is important to have in mind that age is a neurobiological factor. The brain, throughout an individual's life, develops in all its areas and makes one able to live. According to Fround (2012), in order to understand learning, it is necessary

to know that the brain is the organ that controls all human's actions, coordinates thoughts, emotions, makes humans what they are, and, consequently, is responsible for any kind of learning, that is, the brain is the source of all human's behavior.

Following this, as Muñoz (2010) says, researchers in language acquisition have dedicated their studies to compare, and by doing that, to understand, the language acquisition process in younger and older learners. From that interest, and as a result, it was found and believed that only young people could learn another language well, for, according to some scholars, biologically speaking, the brain would work better in people at a young age.

This is known, as Pizzolatto (1995) explains, as the Critical Period in which the brain's plasticity could take place in children, teens, or young adults' brains. Later in life, this phenomenon would hardly, or never, happen. However, studies such as one cited by Muñoz (2010) have shown that actually, in some aspects, older learners outperform younger learners, which seems to be evidence to challenge and confront the Critical Period Hypothesis.

Besides, we truly believe the process of language learning deals not only with a cognitive dimension, but also with social and affective ones. Thus, in order to reinforce this perspective, the following paragraphs bring some theoretical discussions on the affective aspect related to EFL teaching and learning experience to elderly students.

## The affective aspect

An essential aspect to be considered when teaching elderly people is the affective one. We have to be careful and take the emotions' role into account in any learning process (IMMORDINO-YANG; FAETH, 2010). Although some teachers have delayed its importance, neuroscientific findings have shown emotions' crucial role in the learning process, especially when it comes to a new language. Students learn what excites them, that is, what makes them feel enthusiastic.

Thus, emotion is essential in the process of learning (GUERRA, 2013; BAIRD, *s.d*). Emotion is a tool to engage students in the topic of the class; if students are engaged, for sure they are involved in the task in an emotionally positive way. Emotion can also work as an instrument to promote motivation and to lead students to learning for it will direct them to make decisions and behave in favor of their learning process (IMMORDINO-YANG; FAETH, 2010; MACINTYRE, 2002).

One of the advantages of bringing emotion into account is that if the teacher promotes an environment in which the students can freely express and use their emotions in order to learn the new language, it will be easier for them to apply it in daily life situations. In the case of learning another language and the desire to communicate using the target language, this perspective shows that motivated students will use the new language (new

information received) better in the real world and, in this way, communicate better as well.

To reaffirm this belief, Du (2009) points out that language learning is not only objective but it is also affective, since affect may help or interfere when a learner receives an input in the target language. Following that, Krashen (1988 *apud* DU, 2009) has proposed the existence of an affective filter in human beings including feelings such as anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation.

According to this theory, this psychological filter controls how this input is received and processed in language learners' minds. That is to say, if the filter is high in terms of anxiety, the less motivated and self-confident the student will be, thus, the input will be hardly processed; however, if the filter's level of anxiety is low, the more self-confident and motivated students will feel, so the input will be well received and processed in students' brain.

There exists an interrelationship between learning, memory, and emotion. Stevick (2005) explains that learning is the change, in the sense of improvement, in what an individual already knows, that is, learning means "some sort of change in [the] internal resources in [the] brain" (p. 45). Affect is, then, how an action, situation, or experience, namely a new language in our case, "fits in with one's needs or purposes, and its resulting effect on one's emotions" (p. 44). Whereas memory is the already retained information (the lasting one) that can be changed when learning takes place.

In the middle of this process, the individual's emotions work as the response he/she gives to this situation of learning and en-

hancement of already stored information. So, affect (emotions) influences learning and, therefore, memory when the improvement of old information occurs in the presence of a new one.

Cognition and emotions cannot be seen separately. The ability to think, retain information and therefore “learn” a new skill is associated with the emotions of a learner. A person is composed by his/her motivations, expectations, necessities, and all of this together has implications on how he/she feels (PIZZOLATTO, 1995).

Emotions in old learners are so marked since this group of learners present, in the first moment, a high level of external and internal motivation (*op.cit*). To Brown (2007), the language learner may present what the author calls intrinsic and extrinsic motivation; the former is related to the enjoyment promoted by the willingness to learn the language, whereas the latter is associated with the influence of external aspects (such as travelling, talking to a native-speaker) of the foreign language learning.

Some other types of emotions, such as self-esteem or anxiety, regarding the process of learning, can influence it in a positive or negative way, so, in this way, once again, it is proved that affect can influence the learning process.

Since this group of elderly learners shows the necessity of expressing their feelings (as a result of the social integration and inclusion, that is, the opportunity to have a sense of belonging to society), it is important for teachers to know that the classroom is a place of letting feelings flow. Also, Vygotsky (*apud* BOIANOSKI; FERNANDES, 2006) points out the importance of understanding that thinking is related to motivation and, therefore, to emotions:

The thought has to pass first through the meanings and then through the words (...) it is generated by motivation, that is, by our desires and necessities, our interests and emotions (...) To understand someone's speech, it is not enough to understand only his/her words – we have to understand his/her thoughts (p. 7). (our translation<sup>5</sup>)

It implies that teachers play an important role when guiding elderly in the path of learning a new language. Since this research is interested in understating the learning process of EFL to elderly students in an instructed setting (classroom at UAMA through an extracurricular project), we believe the aspect explained above may influence the teaching practice inside the classroom, from the lesson plan to the face-to-face interaction between teachers/students, students/teachers and students/students inside the classroom.

## The role of emotion in EFL class to elderly students

As already mentioned, we have to consider the important role played by emotion in any learning process (IMMORDINO-YANG; FAETH, 2010). CLT and Learning approaches, such as the Communicative one, have developed techniques in which humanistic aspects are taken into consideration (PIZZOLATTO, 1995).

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5. “O pensamento tem que passar primeiro pelos significados e depois pelas palavras (...) é gerado pela motivação, isto é, pelos nossos desejos e necessidades, nossos interesses e emoções (...). Para compreender a fala de outrem não basta entender suas palavras – temos que compreender o seu pensamento” (VYGOTSKY apud BOLANOSKI; FERNANDES, 2006, p. 7).

To see students as human beings means, among other things, to understand that they come to the classroom full of desires, expectations (motivations), needs that are surrounded and involved by feelings, that is, emotional behavior which can be positive and/or negative.

We know that it is a characteristic of elderly people the willingness to express feelings or to be heard, as Boianoski and Fernandes (2006) argue. Thus, we believe that EFL teachers need to deeply and carefully provide an atmosphere in which the students can feel comfortable about expressing what they feel.

Since the moment of enrollment in the course as well as during the classes, we could perceive a high level of motivation in the students. They were motivated to come to the English course at UAMA mainly because of the need to travel and speak the language or simply because they had always appreciated the language, but had few or no opportunities to learn it in the past. Also, during the interviews, some students said they had always wanted to learn English or simply enjoyed learning about the language. We may consider these interests as examples of intrinsic motivation, and the interest in communicating in the target language outside the classroom (in trips, for instance) as examples of extrinsic motivation (BROWN, 2007).

In the first place, elderly students seem to be more motivated because of intrinsic reasons (for example, for always desiring to learn the language) but, as the contact with the language grows, they start to perceive they can indeed use the language outside the classroom, may it be when traveling or when the opportunity

to help others to learn English appears (for example, to help their grandchildren with their English classes homework).

In this way, we can see that the students are excited to learn the language, and because of that they feel positively motivated, in other words, this excitement is a good/positive emotion that leads students to learn in a more comfortable way and help them to maintain the affective filter low so that learning can take place in an easier way, as Krashen (1988, *apud* DU, 2009) defends.

It would be completely different if the students come to the classroom with negative feelings, such as anxiety or a complex of “I know nothing and I cannot learn”. This second case was present in our classroom; however, it happened with a few students who came to class with negative emotions and, in these cases, the teachers played an important role, as it will be explained in later paragraphs.

Back to the concept of a high level of motivation plus positive emotions, we could see through the students’ behavior (smiles, comments, and very few absences during the classes) that there exists an emotional aspect involved in the EFL English class to the elderly, and it is highly related to other aspects, such as the social one.

We believe that having a voice in class (through the use of the Communicative Approach by the teacher) is a way to (re) socialize the elderly. In addition to it, we claim that listening to the students means letting their feelings flow as well. After the very first class of the first semester on February 25th, 2016 we wrote this reflective report:



That [the duration of the activities] happened because of the student's **desire** to participate. They contributed and shared knowledge and experiences related to the class, or not, sometimes a joke or story outside the context [of the class], but contributed to create a happy and relaxed atmosphere, which is conducive to learning (emphasis added - our translation<sup>6</sup>)

Here, we believed that the emotional aspects, revealed when the students felt more comfortable talking about class-related topics or life-related topics, helped a lot to build a conducive (and meaningful) learning atmosphere. Besides, their effective participation (by contributing to the class and their output during the activities) can be evidence on how emotion may help students to learn better (IMMORDINO-YANG; FAETH, 2010; MACINTYRE, 2002).

We also perceived that our decisions to adapt and personalize the class, to make it as closer to students' reality as possible and to provide them with the opportunity to express their feelings were a way of increasing student's level of motivation and, as a consequence, improving their learning process. In this sense, Immordino-Yang and Faeth (2010, p. 77) advise that teachers should "design educational experiences that encourage relevant emotional connection to the material being learned". This can be observed when we wrote in the reflection about class 6 on April 7th, 2016:

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6. "Isso ocorreu pelo desejo de participação dos alunos que contribuíram e compartilharam conhecimento e experiências relacionadas à aula, ou não, às vezes uma piada ou história fora do contexto, mas que contribuíram para a criação de um ambiente alegre e descontraído, propício à aprendizagem" (Relato reflexivo do dia 25 de fevereiro de 2016).

[...] There are a lot of students' comments in relation to the satisfaction about the classes. Speeches such as professor M.D.'s: "our classes is a party, I have 50 years of experience as a teacher and I know what a good class is" or "only when we are here we are not ill (M.R.)", to see A. taking risk to say spontaneously "has a good wi" (have a good week) at the end of the class and several others [students] who told us they recalled our classes during the moments of meals and also during other classes at UAMA, such as Pharmacy [s class], others speaking about their motivation and the sacrifice they do not to be absent in class, motivate us to continue in the same path, but adapting, reconsidering, restarting, if necessary, so that the learning process can be efficient, but smooth and natural. (our translation<sup>7</sup>)

Besides of influencing students' emotion, classes' adaptation and contextualization also helped them in terms of memory. When we wrote that some students remembered our classes during meals, it was because we had a class about food in English and we talked about the concept of healthy and unhealthy food linking it to their own food preferences and knowing that some of them had a subject at UAMA called Nutrition. We realized that since students liked to talk about their preferences in relation to food, this class led them to be involved in a positive emotional

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7. "[...] são muitos os relatos dos alunos em relação ao gosto e satisfação pelas aulas. Frases como da professora M.D "nossa aula é uma festa, sou professora há 50 anos e sei o que é uma aula boa" ou "a gente só não tá doente quando está aqui" (M.R), ver a dona A. arriscando espontaneamente um "has a good wi" (have a good week) no fim da aula e outros vários que disseram lembrar das nossas aulas nos momentos de alimentação e nas outras aulas da UAMA, como Farmácia, outros falando da motivação e do sacrifício que fazem para não perder uma aula, nos motiva a continuar no mesmo caminho, mas adaptando, revendo, recomeçando se necessário, para que o processo de aprendizagem seja eficiente porém suave e natural" (Relato reflexivo do dia 7 de abril de 2016).

way in class, which, in turn, helped them to remember what they have already studied.

Another behavior we could perceive in students when talking about emotion was their facial expressions during the classes. For us, as teachers, it was very important since we believe body language also works as a hint to see how the learning experience is being processed by the students. During the 5<sup>th</sup> class of the first semester of the course (March 31st, 2016), the students were asked to repeat in unison the text out loud and what we could see was the following, as we described in the report:

The student Zélia was smiling during all the moments of the reading of the text, which called out attention. It was a smile of satisfaction; it was on her face the happiness because she could comprehend. (our translation<sup>8</sup>)

As we can see, students may verbalize their motivation or not. This behavior must be considered by the teacher, since it can be highly useful to the process of learning a foreign language. We can also see that emotions can be modeled during the classes, so our role as teachers is to provide students with ways for them to model their emotions positively.

For instance, we believe Zélia's smile can be seen as a result of the comprehensible and meaningful input given by the teachers. Her smile is then a positive response to what is happening

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8. "A aluna Zélia a todo tempo sorria durante a leitura do texto, fato que nos chamou a atenção. Era um sorriso de satisfação; estava estampada em seu rosto a alegria em poder estar compreendendo." (Relato reflexivo do dia 31 de março de 2016).

at the moment (the pronunciation practice). It reminds us about the concept of emotion claimed by Stevick (2005), in which the author says emotion is the response students give during the exchange of already stored knowledge and the retention of the new one.

The interaction between the students has shown to be a great source of positive feelings; by helping each other, the students can feel more motivated to learn the target language, in other words, they socialize. Judite comments on these issues when asked about how the classroom atmosphere helped her learning process:

**Judite:** I think it is highly positive because there exists [...] a lot of interaction between the groups, the elements of the group, the bigger group, and also, I think it is very significant this interaction between teacher and student. It is really, really significant. On the other hand, we can perceive an exchange [...] exchanged learning, exchanged experiences, those who know [...] some words share them with others [...] And this exchange has been very significant [...] We see the interest of everybody, everybody who is here is demonstrating a high interest, even those who know few things about the content, but he/she has the interest in learning. This is positive [...] the motivation of being here and wanting something, we all want it so much [...]. (interview - our translation<sup>9</sup>)

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9. Judite: “Eu acho altamente positivo por que está havendo [...] muita interação entre os grupos, entre os elementos do grupo, do grande grupo, e ainda eu acho muito significativa essa interação professor/aluno, muito, muito significativa, por outro lado, a gente vai percebendo uma troca [...] aprendizagem compartilhada, experiências compartilhadas, quem sabe [...] algumas palavrinhas a mais vai repassando [...] E essa troca tá sendo muito significativa [...] A gente vê o interesse de todos, todos que estão aqui, estão demonstrando o máximo de interesse, por mais leigo que seja o aluno sobre o assunto, mas ele tem o interesse em aprender. Isso é positivo [...] aquela motivação de estar aqui e de querer alguma coisa, todos nós queremos muito [...].” (entrevista)

With regard to the teacher's role in response to the students' emotion, we may say that throughout the classes we have perceived that the teacher must be carefully prepared to deal with students' emotions, may it be during the preparation of a written activity or when giving support to the students during a task or in relation to his/her attitudes toward the student.

As we have mentioned before, students came to class with the desire to learn English, however, few of them brought with them some negative feelings about learning the language effectively. Some of them even said the following sentence in the first day of class: "An old parrot cannot learn how to speak"<sup>10</sup>, revealing their belief that learning English, although being a dream, could be very hard or even impossible. Some students emphasized a lot the idea they were "zero" in English, that is, they did not know a single word, they had a bad experience at learning English in the past and/or they said that English, even though it is a beautiful language, is too different from Portuguese, etc.

By observing these kinds of comments, we were led to show the students these comments are myths society or even they themselves had created, and although they might present some difficulties to learn new things, we were there to help them and to show them they are more able than they could ever imagine.

In this way, we perceived that empathy is indeed important to a teacher's profile when teaching elderly students. According to Ellis (*apud* PIZZOLATTO, 1995, p. 51) empathy is "the ability to

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10. In Portuguese: "Papagaio velho não aprende a falar".

put oneself in the position of another person in order to understand him/her better”.

During the interview, when asked how the teacher could help them in class, Judite, Elisabeth and Olívia answered the following:

**Judite:** [...] I think you [the teachers] will achieve the proposed objectives, considering [...] this interaction, the methodology used, it is [...] you go down to the level of each student in order to help them, using the best possible way, with the necessity of each student or each elderly [...] What we can perceive is that there exists empathy between the teacher and the student. You [the teachers] put yourselves in our shoes, in the condition of learners, in the condition of... of someone who does not know English Language, you put yourselves [in our shoes] so that learning can flow. I consider it very positive. (interview - our translation)

**Elisabeth:** The teacher has to be like that, to be human, to be a person, there [in the classroom] all are people, all are human [...] happy, communicative [...] making efforts to teach, re-teach and re-teach and re-teach us, you see? This is very viable. Now [...] those who give that class [speaking with demotivating tone], we don't even remember, then they give another [class] they don't want to know if we really learnt, sometimes they ask “have you learnt?” and we say “yes”, ashamed of saying no [...] (interview - our translation)

**Olívia:** Our memory is no longer good, you see? And you [the teachers] have a lot of patience to deal with us [...] It is this patience, this repetition, you understand that we can no longer correspond so much. (interview - our translation<sup>11</sup>)

We trust that teachers must feel empathy not only to those students that present resistance or difficulties when learning English, but also to those who have a high level of motivation too.

Students' motivation to come to class was highly influenced by the empathetic posture of the teacher. D.H said in collective feedback that the affective posture of the teacher, that is, the fact of being patient, caring and willing to be physically near to her, helped her to learn. To this student, in previous EFL learning experience, the teacher did not have this profile and it led her to give up on the course. This way, we can say that the teacher has in his/her hand a very powerful responsibility that is to enhance

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11. **Judite:** “[...] Eu acho que vocês [os professores] não conseguir os objetivos propostos, considerando [...] essa interação, a metodologia utilizada, é [...] vocês descem ao nível de cada um para atender da melhor forma possível as necessidades de cada aluno ou de cada idoso [...]O que a gente percebe é que existe empatia entre professor/aluno. Vocês [os professores] se colocam no lugar da gente, na condição de aprendiz, na condição de... de quem não sabe a língua inglesa, você se coloca pra que a aprendizagem aflore. Eu considero altamente positivo.” (entrevista)

**Elisabeth:** “O professor tem que ser assim, é humano, é gente, ali é tudo gente, tudo humano [...] alegre, comunicativo [...] se esforçando para ensinar, reensinar e reensinar a gente, tá entendendo? Isso é muito válido. Agora [...] aqueles que dão aquela aula [falando com um tom de desmotivação], a gente nem se lembra, depois passam pra outra, não quer saber se você aprendeu, muitas vezes pergunta “aprendeu?” a gente faz “aprendi” [...] com vergonha de dizer que não [...].” (entrevista)

**Olívia:** “A memória da gente já não é boa, entendeu? E vocês têm bastante paciência pra lidar com a gente [...] É essa paciência, essa repetição, você entendem que a gente já não corresponde tanto.” (entrevista)

student's motivation, in our case, as Du (2009) proposes, we created “a harmonious and light atmosphere for learning”, that is, we were attentive and caring, so the student's motivation became higher and then she could feel more comfortable to learn.

This can also be observed in the reflections of class 2 (July 21st, 2016) and class 4 (August 4th, 2016), respectively, as follows:

When I realized the negative facial expression of student A, after concluding the slides on preferences, I went to her in order to help her. She is one of the new students who emphasizes her ignorance in the language. When I asked her the reason for such negativity, she answered: “If I don't say that I don't know, who will help me?”, then, I concluded that such behavior is a way the student uses to ask for help. However, it is perceptible too that the level of motivation of A needs to be higher. (our translation)

After writing, the student practiced in trios and pairs the questions and practiced their personal answers. In this moment we could perceive the importance of the physical proximity [of the teacher] to the students so that we could evaluate their performances and, besides that, **to some students the presence of the teacher near them causes them [a sense of] sup-**



**port and security to ask questions and to continue in the right way.** (emphasis added; our translation<sup>12</sup>)

By being careful and attentive or “seeing each student with empathy and caring eyes (reflection about class 4 on March 17th, 2016)<sup>13</sup>” was a way that teachers could use to control the affective filter discussed by Krashen (1988, *apud* DU, 2009), that is mainly related to the low filter of emotions in class. In other words, when feelings of inhibition are low, it is easier for the student to receive and process the input the teacher gives.

Thus, the role of the teacher is to avoid the high filter, which, in turn, makes the students struggle during the learning process, or to maintain the filter low for those students who are learning in a more comfortable way. In the case of student A., we needed to search for strategies to lower her affective filter so that she could feel more confident and the learning could flow smoother.

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12. “Ao perceber a expressão facial de negatividade da aluna A., após concluir os slides sobre preferências, fui ao encontro dela e tentei ajudá-la. Ela é uma das alunas novatas que mais enfatiza sua ignorância quanto à língua. Quando questionei o motivo de tanta negatividade, ela respondeu: “Se eu não falar que não sei, quem vai me ajudar?”, foi então que concluí que tal comportamento é uma forma da aluna pedir assistência, porém, é perceptível também que o nível de motivação de A. precisa aumentar.” (Relato reflexivo do dia 21 de julho de 2016).

“Após escreverem, os alunos praticaram em trio e em duplas as perguntas e treinaram suas respostas pessoais. Nesse momento pudemos perceber a importância da proximidade [do professor] dos alunos a fim de avaliarmos suas performances e, além disso, para alguns alunos a presença do professor por perto causa-lhes [um senso de] apoio e segurança para tirar dúvidas e seguir o caminho certo.” (Relato reflexivo do dia 4 de agosto de 2016).

13. “[...] enxergar cada um dos alunos com olhares de empatia e carisma.” (Relato reflexivo do dia 17 de março de 2016).

The empathetic teacher also understands that both positive and negative feelings are stronger in the elderly. The aged students usually express when they are feeling good or not, sharing their problems with the classmates and/or the teacher (PIZZOLATTO, 1995). As teachers, we must understand that it happens with age, as we could see in the reflective report of class 3 on March 10th, 2016:

Mr. C, who had a good performance during the first class, declared to have had “hard days” and that “the mind today was not good”, in fact, he produced less than in the previous class. We reflected that this variation happens and it is not only exclusive to the elderly, but it can be intensified with age, factors such as tiredness and personal problems, etc., usually reflect on the performance. We have to be aware about that and to plan activities that respect the limits of each one, that can vary from one to the other, they [the students] have to be challenged, but an uncompleted task can create frustration and consequently discouragement. (our translation<sup>14</sup>)

In this way, we can say that when it comes to teachers’ minds, they have to consider students’ emotions and from that create a positive atmosphere to better learning. It is clear that all the at-

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14. “Seu C., que havia se saído muito bem no primeiro encontro, declarou ter tido ‘dias difíceis’ e que a ‘cabeça hoje não estava boa’, de fato, ele produziu bem menos que o encontro anterior. Refletimos que essa variação ocorre e não é exclusiva da terceira idade, mas pode se intensificar com ela, fatores como cansaço, problemas pessoais, etc., costumam refletir no rendimento. Devemos estar cientes disso e planejar atividades que respeitem os limites de cada um, que podem variar de um dia para o outro, eles [os alunos] devem ser desafiados, mas uma atividade não completada pode gerar sentimento de frustração e consequentemente desestímulo.” (Relato reflexivo do dia 10 de março de 2016).

tention should be on the learner's necessity, that's why the activities and methods used should be student-centered. In our case, it was promoted when, through the Communicative Approach, we provided students with activities that could meet their needs and create an environment full of empathy.

## Final Remarks

In this article, which is part of a final paper presented as a graduation requirement, we aimed to understand the role of emotion (affective aspect) in the teaching and learning of English to elderly people.

First of all, it is necessary to understand the process of (re) socialization of the elderly through some inclusive initiatives such as Open Universities. This preoccupation shows us that in fact the aged person must be taken into consideration in each sphere of society, as it is established by Brazilian Senior Citizen's Law (BRASIL, 2003).

From that perspective, firstly we consider that the elderly long to feel belonged to society, and to interact is one of the ways to do that. Language promotes interaction for it is based on communication. We have concluded that being able to learn English empowers the students because it gives them the ability to interact and to communicate by using a language of prestige such as English since it is presented all around us. We highly believe that through the learning of a foreign language the students may

have their voice heard. It seems to us that being able to speak in another language causes a feeling of freedom and empowerment

The emotional aspect present in this context was essential to us. Since the beginning of the whole process emotion was presented in the form of high motivation to learn and to share. To the elderly, being in an inclusive atmosphere where they are respected was an open door to feel satisfied and worthy. The empathetic way of teaching, in which teachers put themselves in students' shoes, was highly significant since the students could perceive their necessities were being carefully considered. We understand that it made the teaching and learning process easier and lighter.

Although the focus of this article was the analysis of the affective aspect in learning English by the elderly, we are aware of the influence of social and cognitive dimensions of this experience as well, as we can see in Borges (2016).

Our final remarks lie in the belief that if we want to meet the main goal that is to (re)socialize elderly students through the learning of the English language we must carefully promote an atmosphere in which the student is in the center of the class. It means to deeply study the surrounding circumstances that are related to this learner and allow positive emotions to flow so that their learning can be meaningful and inclusive.

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