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Pilar Capaul

Lowering the Affective Filter in Digital Learning

Pilar Capaul is a teacher and ELT content creator who works with Cambridge and British Council. She's a Digital Ambassador with IHWO, piloting new AI platforms for teachers, and is also the creator of @TeachersofEnglish, on Instagram, an account where she shares her daily teaching experience and useful ideas.

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What is the affective filter?

- The affective filter → **Stephen Krashen's Second Language Acquisition theory.**
- Learners feel stressed, anxious, unmotivated, or self-conscious → **no learning**
- Learners feel calm, confident, motivated, and safe → **learning happens**

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What is the affective filter?

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What is the affective filter?

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What is the affective filter?



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In order words...

- | High affective filter | Low affective filter |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students don't take risks • They don't participate • They don't remember what they hear • They don't enjoy the process • They often say "I'm bad at this" or "I don't get it," even when they DO! | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students feel supported and safe. • Their brain is open to input. • They are more confident. • They take risks and experiment. • They notice new language. |

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What can cause this?

- 1. Motivation**
High motivation = lower filter → more effort, persistence, openness.
- 2. Self-confidence**
Confident learners take risks and experiment.
- 3. Anxiety**
Stress, fear of failure, or performance pressure block learning.
- 4. Complex instructions, cognitive overload or unclear expectations.**
Learners worry more about understanding activities than actually completing them.
- 5. Past negative experiences and (tech) issues.**
"I'm not good at using technology".

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What lowers the affective filter?

Teacher behaviours that make students feel safe:

- Clear, simple instructions
- Low-pressure tasks before high-pressure ones
- Opportunities to rehearse
- A friendly, warm tone
- Celebrating effort, not only accuracy
- Giving wait time
- Letting students work with a partner first
- Checking in emotionally ("How are you feeling about this?")
- Predictable routines
- Scaffolding + visuals
- Praise that feels genuine and specific

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Why does the affective filter matter today?

Because learning environments, especially digital ones, can accidentally cause...

- overwhelm
- frustration
- tech anxiety
- fear of being judged
- pressure from scoring/tracking systems



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Examples in digital learning scenarios

- Fear of making mistakes (especially when tracking is involved)
- Anxiety from timers, scores, and constant feedback
- Isolation (nobody to ask for help)
- Error message (Incorrect. Try again. Incorrect. Try again)
- Timers = "I knew it, but I panicked"
- Confusing interface

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Examples in digital learning scenarios

- Tech glitches
- Unclear instructions in an app task
- Gamification that backfires (Leaderboards)
- The never-ending progress bar
- Notifications that break focus.
- No pause or slow-down options.

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Some principles that can help

Clarity over complexity

Minimise cognitive load, e.g. reduce the number of steps per task.

Predictability

Tell learners what will happen next, how long a task takes, where their data goes.

Low-stakes practice first

Include warm-ups, "practice mode," or "no grade" attempts.

Friendly, non-judgmental feedback

Swap "Incorrect!" for:
-Try again - look at the verb tense!
-Close! Check the second syllable.

Chunking and micro-learning

Short tasks reduce overwhelm and increase perceived competence.

Control and autonomy

Allow learners to adjust:

- speed
- difficulty
- sound
- notifications
- feedback frequency

Accessibility = emotional safety

Clear fonts, captions, readable colours, calm colour palettes.

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Reducing stress through pedagogical design

Pre-training

Show learners what to expect before they enter the platform.

Clear instructions

Short, simple steps for each activity.

Supportive onboarding

Use videos or guided walkthroughs inside the app.

Instructor presence (even digital)

Small touches:

- a welcome message
- weekly check-ins
- personalised encouragement to reduce feelings of isolation.

Let learners personalise goals

Goal-setting lowers anxiety and boosts ownership.

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"But I'm a teacher, I can't change the platforms, tools or apps we use in class"

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Hold on!

Shall we get rid of **everything** that might affect our learners?

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Hold on!

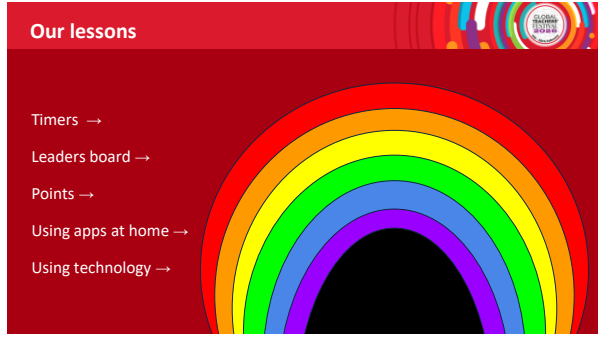
Shall we get rid of **everything** that might affect our learners?

Nope!

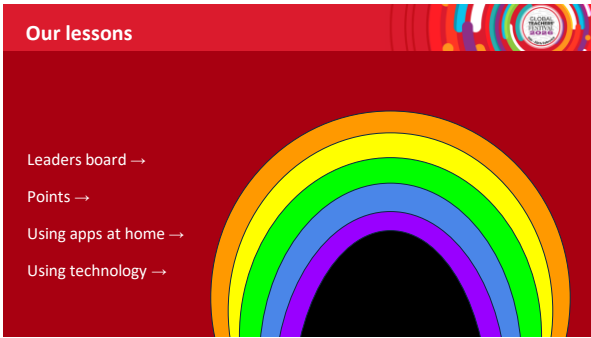
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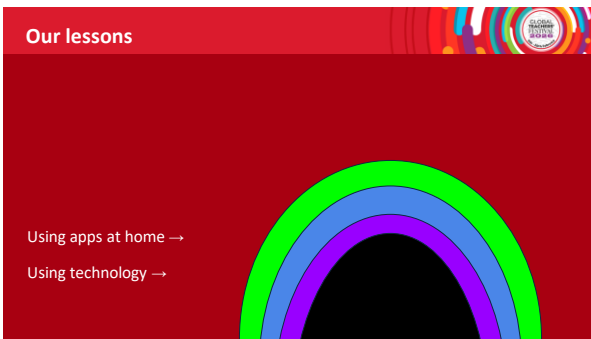
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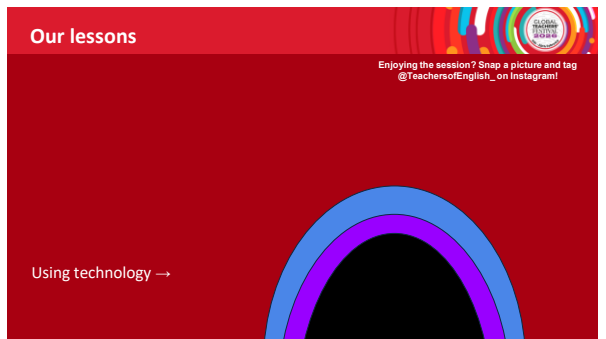
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Our lessons

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Our learners staying in their comfort zones

Our learners if we progress step by step

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Our lessons

Let's progress... step by step

Leaders board →

Using apps at home →

Using technology →

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Our lessons

Let's progress... step by step

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Timers →

Points →

Using apps at home →

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Thank you!

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