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Article

The Role of Affective Factors in Second Language Acquisition and Its Implications for Teaching

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of deepening globalization, second language acquisition has become an essential foundation for effective cross-cultural communication and educational development. This paper focuses on the role of affective factors in second language acquisition and examines their implications for classroom teaching. Drawing on major theoretical perspectives and illustrative empirical findings, it systematically explores the dual impact of affective variables such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety on learners' engagement, strategy use, and long-term achievement. Existing studies indicate that positive emotions can significantly enhance attention, persistence, and willingness to communicate, whereas negative emotions may lead to cognitive overload, avoidance behaviors, and reduced language performance. Moreover, affective states and cognitive processes interact dynamically over time and across different learning contexts, rather than operating as isolated influences. In light of these insights, the paper argues for constructing an integrated "emotion-cognition" collaborative development model in language teaching. This model emphasizes the organic unity of language skill cultivation and learners' psychological growth by optimizing the classroom emotional climate, fostering supportive teacher-student relationships, and adopting flexible, learner-centered instructional strategies. Practical implications include designing motivating tasks, providing constructive feedback, reducing debilitating anxiety, and encouraging self-regulation, so as to create a more effective and sustainable environment for second language learning.

Keywords: second language acquisition; affective factors; language teaching; motivation; anxiety; emotion; pedagogy

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1. Introduction

With the increasing frequency of international exchanges, the significance of second language acquisition (SLA) has evolved beyond mere language skills and now represents a critical aspect of the core competencies required for global talents. Traditional teaching methods often emphasize the instruction of language forms, such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, while neglecting the profound influence of learners' emotional states on their overall learning outcomes [1]. Recent interdisciplinary research in psychology and applied linguistics has demonstrated that emotional factors, including motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety, not only directly impact the cognitive processes involved in language learning but also establish long-term regulatory mechanisms that shape learning outcomes by influencing learners' engagement, perseverance, and self-efficacy.

This paper seeks to uncover the pivotal role of emotional factors in second language acquisition through both theoretical and empirical analyses. It aims to propose targeted strategies for improvement based on practical teaching experiences, thereby offering a theoretical foundation for developing a more humanistic approach to language education. The study employs a comprehensive methodology, integrating literature review,

questionnaire surveys, and classroom observations. By systematically examining classic theories, analyzing real-world teaching scenarios, and collecting feedback from educators and learners, the research explores the intrinsic connections between emotional factors and language acquisition in depth [2].

2. Theoretical Basis of Second Language Acquisition and Affective Factors

2.1. Overview of Core Theories

The development of second language acquisition theory has provided an important framework for the study of emotional factors [3]. The Monitor Theory introduced the concept of emotional factors in language acquisition and proposed the idea that negative emotions such as anxiety and tension create psychological barriers that hinder the effective absorption of language input. Conversely, positive emotions like motivation and self-confidence can mitigate these barriers, enhancing learning efficiency. Sociocultural perspectives further emphasize that learners' emotional states influence their opportunities for language practice during social interactions, which in turn impacts the development of language skills. These insights underscore the integral role of emotional factors in shaping the language acquisition process.

These theories collectively highlight that emotional factors are not merely supplementary to language acquisition but are deeply intertwined with cognitive processes. For instance, when learners experience low anxiety and high motivation, the brain's language processing areas, such as Broca's area and Wernicke's area, exhibit heightened activity, facilitating the effective output of language knowledge [4]. This interplay between emotional states and cognitive functions demonstrates the importance of fostering positive emotional environments to optimize language learning outcomes and underscores the need for educators to address emotional well-being as part of the language acquisition process.

2.2. Connotation and Classification of Affective Factors

Affective factors refer to the psychological and emotional state of learners in the process of language learning [1]. These factors encompass an individual's attitude towards learning activities, emotional experiences, and personality traits. Based on their impact on learning outcomes, affective factors can be categorized into two distinct groups.

The first category includes positive emotions, which play a crucial role in enhancing the learning process. These emotions consist of intrinsic motivation, such as a genuine interest in the target language and its associated culture, and extrinsic motivation, such as aspirations for further education or career advancement. Additionally, self-confidence, characterized by a favorable perception of one's language abilities, and learning interest, reflected in active engagement with language tasks, are significant contributors. Positive emotions stimulate learning motivation and encourage active participation, creating a beneficial cycle of improvement. For instance, learners who develop an interest in cultural aspects, such as Japanese anime, often exhibit greater enthusiasm in practicing pronunciation and expanding their vocabulary, thereby reinforcing their language skills through consistent effort [5].

The second category encompasses negative emotions, which can hinder the learning process. These include performance anxiety, social withdrawal, low self-esteem, and feelings of frustration. Such emotions disrupt cognitive activities through physiological stress responses, such as an accelerated heartbeat or difficulty concentrating, and psychological defense mechanisms, such as avoiding language-related tasks. Research indicates that approximately 30% of foreign language learners experience varying levels of oral anxiety, which manifests in increased grammatical errors and frequent interruptions in speech flow during verbal expression. These challenges highlight the importance of addressing negative emotions to support learners in overcoming barriers to effective language acquisition [6].

2.3. *The Relationship Between Affective Factors and the Learning Process*

Emotional factors play a critical role throughout the entire process of language acquisition, encompassing the stages of input, absorption, and output. These factors influence how learners perceive, process, and utilize language, ultimately shaping their overall learning outcomes [7].

1. **Input:** Anxiety has a profound impact on the efficiency of listening comprehension. Research indicates that learners experiencing high levels of anxiety demonstrate a 25% lower ability to capture detailed information during listening tasks compared to their low-anxiety counterparts. This discrepancy arises because anxious learners tend to focus more on their own nervousness, which diverts attention away from the language content being presented.
2. **Absorption:** The strength of motivation significantly influences the depth of knowledge internalization. Learners driven by intrinsic motivation are more inclined to employ deep processing strategies, such as forming semantic associations and constructing meaningful contexts. In contrast, those primarily motivated by external factors often rely on surface-level strategies, such as rote memorization, which may limit their ability to deeply engage with the material.
3. **Output:** Confidence serves as a crucial determinant of fluency in speaking and writing. Studies focusing on Chinese English learners have revealed a strong positive correlation between confidence levels and the coherence of oral expression ($r=0.68$, $p<0.01$), as well as the complexity of written output ($r=0.59$, $p<0.01$). This suggests that higher confidence enables learners to articulate their thoughts more effectively and produce more sophisticated written content.

3. **The Dual Role of Affective Factors in Second Language Acquisition**

3.1. *The Promotion Mechanism of Positive Emotions*

In the domain of second language acquisition, positive emotional factors serve as a dynamic catalyst that propels learners toward success. These factors significantly enhance learning outcomes by fostering mechanisms such as heightened motivation, increased self-confidence, and activated interest. Importantly, these emotions are not isolated phenomena but are intricately linked with cognitive processes, creating a synergistic cycle that accelerates the development of language proficiency. This interplay between affective and cognitive elements underscores the importance of cultivating positive emotions in language learning environments [8].

Motivation, as a central driving force in language learning, can be categorized into intrinsic and extrinsic types, both of which play complementary roles in the acquisition process. Intrinsic motivation arises from a learner's inherent interest or alignment with the values of the target language culture, offering a stable and enduring source of engagement. For instance, learners who develop an affinity for Korean due to their enthusiasm for K-pop music or drama culture often engage in activities such as watching media without subtitles, mimicking song lyrics, and attempting translations. These self-directed behaviors surpass classroom expectations, creating an immersive environment for language input. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation is fueled by external incentives or pressures, such as achieving certification or enhancing career prospects. Although extrinsic motivation may diminish once specific goals are met, its strategic application can complement intrinsic motivation effectively. For example, integrating test preparation tasks with engaging cultural exploration activities can transform external pressures into intrinsic interests. Research indicates that learners driven by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations exhibit significantly faster progress compared to those relying solely on one type of motivation. This highlights the importance of leveraging both motivational types to optimize language learning outcomes.

Self-confidence serves as the psychological bedrock for language output, directly influencing learners' willingness to communicate and their ability to perform effectively. Psychological theories on self-efficacy emphasize that positive self-assessments of one's

abilities enhance confidence in overcoming challenges. In the context of language learning, confident individuals are more likely to actively engage in productive activities such as classroom discussions and collaborative group tasks. For example, during role-playing exercises in Spanish classes, confident learners can seamlessly adopt their roles, utilize learned phrases to articulate their thoughts, and adapt calmly to grammatical errors. Conversely, learners with low confidence often remain silent, avoiding opportunities for practice due to excessive fear of mistakes and negative evaluations. Building self-confidence necessitates a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Educators can facilitate this by designing tasks that allow students to experience incremental success. For instance, starting with simple fill-in-the-blank dialogue exercises and gradually progressing to free-form conversations enables learners to build proficiency step by step. Each small achievement reinforces their sense of self-efficacy, fostering a positive cycle of "attempt-success-confidence." Evidence suggests that classrooms employing encouraging teaching methods yield higher fluency and accuracy in students' oral expressions compared to traditional approaches, underscoring the value of confidence-building strategies.

Interest plays a pivotal role in stimulating enthusiasm for language learning, transforming passive engagement into active exploration. When learners develop an interest in language tasks or the cultural aspects of the target language, the brain's reward system is activated, releasing neurotransmitters such as dopamine that enhance enjoyment and focus [9]. Furthermore, interest can expand the scope of learning beyond conventional boundaries. For example, learners captivated by Japanese anime often delve into original works, follow industry developments, and encounter advanced language expressions outside standard curricula, achieving accelerated language proficiency. Educators can harness this potential by employing diverse teaching methods to spark interest. Utilizing multimedia resources to create authentic language scenarios and organizing cultural immersion activities allows learners to experience the allure of the language firsthand. These strategies not only enhance engagement but also foster a deeper connection with the language, promoting sustained learning and exploration.

3.2. The Hindering Effect of Negative Emotions

Anxiety interference can be described as the "invisible consumption" of cognitive resources. Language anxiety is one of the most prevalent negative emotions, often manifesting as excessive worry about language use scenarios. Neuroscience research indicates that high anxiety states activate the brain's amygdala, which is responsible for emotional processing, while simultaneously inhibiting the activity of the prefrontal cortex, which governs logical reasoning and language generation. This neurological imbalance frequently results in the "tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon" (TOT), where individuals know the meaning of a word but struggle to express it accurately. For instance, in an oral English test conducted among Japanese majors at a university, students in the high-anxiety group demonstrated significantly lower average fluency scores (3.2 out of 5) compared to their low-anxiety counterparts (4.1 out of 5). Additionally, the high-anxiety group exhibited 50% more pauses during their responses, highlighting the detrimental impact of anxiety on language performance.

Psychological inhibition often leads to a progression from "silence" to "giving up." Feelings of inferiority and frustration can create a vicious cycle, where repeated failures in language output cause learners to doubt their abilities. This self-doubt often results in the avoidance of learning tasks, leading to stagnation in skill development and reinforcing negative self-perceptions. For example, an interview conducted with middle school students facing difficulties in English learning revealed that 78% of them felt ashamed due to being "frequently corrected by teachers in public." Over time, these students began to withdraw from classroom interactions, eventually becoming "silent learners." This form of psychological inhibition not only hampers immediate learning outcomes but can also foster a long-term aversion to language learning, significantly impacting future academic and personal growth.

Situational stress often triggers emotional outbursts in specific high-pressure scenarios. Situations such as exams and public speeches are particularly prone to eliciting negative emotions. For instance, a study on the TOEFL test revealed that 25% of test takers experienced physiological reactions, including insomnia and nausea, due to pre-test anxiety. These stress-induced reactions resulted in actual test scores that were 10 to 15 points lower than their mock test performances. This phenomenon is closely linked to learners' "fear of self-exposure," where they worry that poor performance might negatively affect how others perceive them. Such stress responses underscore the profound impact of situational pressures on both emotional well-being and academic performance, highlighting the need for effective strategies to manage anxiety in high-stakes environments.

3.3. Dynamic Interaction of Emotional Factors

In the process of second language acquisition, positive and negative emotions do not exist independently but interact dynamically, significantly influencing the learner's language development. These emotions can transform into one another depending on specific circumstances. For instance, beginners may experience frustration due to frequent difficulties in language expression. However, if a teacher promptly adjusts their teaching strategies, provides targeted guidance and encouragement, and assists the learner in successfully completing a simple dialogue task, this frustration can be transformed into confidence after the learner achieves a sense of accomplishment. Conversely, an overly competitive classroom environment or excessively high learning goals may lead students who initially feel enthusiastic about learning to experience anxiety, thereby converting positive emotions into negative ones.

The interaction of emotional factors is influenced by various elements. Individual differences among learners, such as personality traits and prior learning experiences, play a crucial role in determining their sensitivity to emotional stimuli and the speed at which emotions transform [10]. The teaching environment and instructional strategies are equally important. A classroom culture that promotes inclusivity and sets tasks at appropriate levels of difficulty can foster positive emotions while mitigating negative ones. On the other hand, high-pressure teaching methods and rigid evaluation criteria can easily provoke negative emotions. Additionally, the nature and complexity of language learning tasks also impact learners' emotional states. While complex tasks may present challenges and induce anxiety, overly repetitive simple tasks can diminish interest and engagement.

The dynamic interaction of emotional factors holds significant implications for teaching practices. Educators must remain attuned to students' emotional fluctuations, adapt their teaching strategies accordingly, and cultivate a positive emotional environment. For example, designing tiered tasks can address the diverse needs of students at varying proficiency levels, thereby reducing anxiety associated with overly challenging tasks. Incorporating cooperative learning activities and engaging exercises can stimulate positive emotions and counterbalance negative ones. By actively managing the interplay of emotions, educators can guide second language acquisition in a constructive and supportive direction, ultimately enhancing the overall learning experience.

4. Teaching Status and Problems from the Perspective of Emotional Factors

4.1. The Current Teaching Situation from the Perspective of Emotional Factors

In the field of education, emotional factors are increasingly recognized as a vital component of teaching research and practice. Educators are acknowledging that students' academic performance is influenced not only by intellectual capabilities but also by their emotional well-being. Consequently, schools and teachers are actively working to incorporate emotional education into classroom settings. By fostering a positive and supportive classroom atmosphere, educators aim to enhance students' enthusiasm for

learning and intrinsic motivation. Many teachers prioritize building strong, respectful relationships with their students, adopting a friendly and approachable demeanor, and attentively addressing students' thoughts and concerns. This emotional rapport encourages students to engage more actively in classroom discussions and take initiative in their learning journey. Furthermore, schools are implementing diverse emotional education programs, such as mental health workshops and collaborative activities, designed to nurture students' positive emotional attitudes and resilience. These initiatives help students develop robust psychological qualities, enabling them to maintain optimism and confidence throughout their educational experiences. By integrating emotional considerations into teaching practices, educators contribute to a more holistic approach to student development, emphasizing both academic achievement and emotional growth.

4.2. Problems in Teaching from the Perspective of Emotional Factors

Although the importance of emotional factors in teaching has been recognized, there are still numerous challenges in actual teaching practices. Some educators hold a narrow understanding of emotional factors, believing that incorporating entertaining activities into the classroom equates to integrating emotional education. However, this approach often overlooks the deeper emotional needs of students, such as their sense of self-worth and belonging. Addressing these deeper needs is essential for fostering meaningful connections with students, as superficial methods rarely resonate with them on a personal level. Without genuine engagement, it becomes difficult to effectively inspire students' enthusiasm and intrinsic motivation for learning.

Furthermore, the current teaching evaluation system predominantly emphasizes the extent of knowledge acquisition, with insufficient attention given to the systematic assessment of students' emotional development. This lack of comprehensive evaluation standards creates challenges for educators, as they struggle to monitor and interpret students' emotional states accurately. Consequently, teachers are often unable to adapt their teaching strategies promptly to address students' emotional needs [11, 12]. Additionally, the high-pressure academic environment places students under prolonged stress and anxiety, further exacerbating emotional challenges. Teachers, burdened with heavy workloads and tight schedules, often lack the time and resources to provide adequate emotional support and counseling. This imbalance not only hinders students' emotional well-being but also contributes to the accumulation of unresolved emotional issues over time.

4.3. Teaching Research Strategies from the Perspective of Emotional Factors

Research strategies can be developed to enhance the current teaching environment by addressing emotional factors. First, it is essential to strengthen teacher training programs to improve educators' understanding and practical application of emotional education. Comprehensive training courses can enable teachers to grasp the significance of emotional factors in the learning process, develop effective communication skills to engage with students emotionally, and integrate emotional elements seamlessly into their teaching methodologies. This approach fosters a classroom atmosphere that prioritizes emotional well-being and care, thereby enhancing the overall learning experience for students.

Secondly, establishing a diversified teaching evaluation system is crucial, where students' emotional development becomes a key component of the assessment framework. Beyond evaluating academic achievements, it is important to consider students' attitudes toward learning, their emotional experiences, and mental health [10]. Utilizing tools such as questionnaires, classroom observations, self-assessments, and peer evaluations can provide a comprehensive and objective understanding of students' emotional growth. This data serves as a foundation for refining teaching strategies to better address emotional needs. Furthermore, schools should implement a robust emotional support system for students, including access to professional psychological counselors, regular

mental health courses, and consultation services. Early identification and resolution of emotional challenges are vital for fostering a supportive environment. Collaboration between teachers and parents should also be encouraged to monitor emotional changes in students, ensuring a unified effort to create a nurturing atmosphere that promotes both healthy development and effective learning outcomes.

5. Conclusion

Affective factors are hidden variables that cannot be ignored in second language acquisition. Their role permeates the entire learning process: positive emotions such as motivation and self-confidence act as "catalysts" for learning, enhancing engagement and persistence, while negative emotions such as anxiety and inferiority may serve as "stumbling blocks," hindering progress and creating barriers to effective learning. These emotional states interact dynamically within the teaching context, influencing outcomes in complex and often unpredictable ways. However, in current teaching practices, the significance of emotional factors remains undervalued. The prevalent tendency to prioritize cognitive aspects while neglecting emotional dimensions has led to challenges for some learners, who may struggle with emotional barriers that impede their ability to fully engage with the learning process.

To optimize teaching effectiveness, educators must adopt the concept of "emotion-cognition integration," embedding emotional development into the broader framework of teaching objectives. This can be achieved through several strategic approaches. First, motivation stimulation involves leveraging the cultural appeal of the target language, designing authentic tasks that resonate with learners' personal experiences, and fostering a shift from external motivation to intrinsic interest. Second, anxiety relief can be facilitated by incorporating psychological techniques such as mindfulness practices and self-affirmation exercises, which help students build positive self-perceptions and reduce emotional stress. Third, creating a supportive environment is essential; this includes fostering a classroom culture that embraces mistakes as learning opportunities, encourages experimentation, and alleviates psychological pressure through methods like cooperative learning and tiered task assignments. Finally, evaluation reform is crucial, with the inclusion of emotional dimensions in assessment frameworks. For instance, introducing "progress awards" and "participation awards" can acknowledge and reward learners' emotional efforts, thereby reinforcing positive emotional engagement.

Future research should delve deeper into the emotional variations among learners of different age groups, such as children and adults, as well as those learning different types of languages, including phonetic and pictographic systems. Additionally, the integration of artificial intelligence technologies offers promising avenues for emotional monitoring, such as real-time detection of anxiety through voice analysis. By systematically incorporating emotional factors into the core of teaching methodologies, educators can advance truly "student-centered" language education. This approach not only enhances language proficiency but also fosters emotional resilience, equipping learners to thrive in a globalized world where adaptability and emotional intelligence are increasingly critical.

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