The Influence of Affective Factors on Second Language Acquisition

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Language learning is a complicated process which is influenced by many factors, including cognitive factors, environmental factors and affective factors. The importance of affective factors in language learning has gained increasing attention in recent years. Based on the affective filter hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), this study mainly investigates four important affective factors, namely, attitude, character, inhibition, and teacher-student empathy. Through a questionnaire survey, this study analyzes the current situation of learning affections of high school and college students, and compares their influence on second language acquisition. The results show that attitude, inhibition, and teacher-student empathy affected high school students more than college students, and character affected neither high school students nor college students. The results provide some implications for English teaching.

Keywords: affective factors, second language acquisition, teaching

1 Introduction

Acquisition of a second language is an intensively studied issue, its psychological foundation being based on the individual differences of various learners (Troike, 2012). Therefore, it is of significance to study the affective factors of foreign language learners in the course of second language acquisition, and the affective factors in second language teaching have caused much concern in recent years.

According to Chomsky (1988), everyone has the inherent mechanism for learning a language, then the acquired trigger input is extremely important. How to obtain trigger input is closely related to personal motivation, attitude, anxiety, empathy, and other affective factors. The notion of “affective filter” was first proposed to explain the process of affective factors affecting foreign language learners. Krashen (1985) proposed a complete set of affective filter hypothesis, emphasizing that learners’ affective factors play a filtering role in language input, and learners’ affective factors will accelerate or hinder language learning.

A lot of affective factors may influence the effect of second language acquisition. However, this paper explores only a few of the less mentioned factors, namely, attitude, character, inhibition, and teacher-student empathy on the basis of affective filter hypothesis. Through research, it investigates the similarities and
differences of these factors in second language learning of high school and college students. In the light of the research results, this paper explores the methods to improve the effect of English teaching.

2 Theoretical Foundation

2.1 A Brief Introduction to Affect

The word “affect” has received a lot of attention in the educational circle. From the point of foreign language teaching, Troike (2012) pointed out that affect is all the factors related to language teaching. These factors influence students’ learning attitudes, promote students’ learning and stimulate their initiative, and may also cause negative learning affections. To promote the all-round development of people, both cognitive and emotional aspects must be integrated.

Since the 1970s, educational researchers have studied the affective factors in second language acquisition. According to Arnold (2002), there are two types of affective factors in language learning: one is in connection with the language learners themselves. They will feel anxiety, inhibition, and self-confidence, and have their own motivation and character. The other is to regard learners as people in society. In a large social environment, people need to communicate with each other, involving affective factors such as empathy, classroom communication, and cross-cultural communication. Empathy is an important factor in language learning and interpersonal communication. Chinese EFL students’ affective learning was shown to be largely influenced by teacher-student rapport and teacher support (Sun & Shi, 2022).

2.2 Affective Filter Hypothesis

The notion of “affective filter” was first proposed in 1977, and defined as: An inherent processing system that prevents learners from absorbing language input, which is subconsciously referred to affective factors by psychologists. Based on this, Stephen D. Krashen (1985), a contemporary American linguist, incorporated the arguments of affective research into his five hypotheses and proposed the affective filter hypothesis. All walks of life have paid wide attention to this theory and viewed it as the core element of second language acquisition.

In Krashen’s view, there is a non-intellectual barrier restricted by affective factors between learners and the environment, and he called this non-intellectual barrier “affective filter”, which is unconscious, but controls the input that learners contact and absorb. Affective barriers prevent language learners from making full use of comprehensible input. When affective filters are strong, learners may also comprehend language input, but the input cannot get to the language acquisition device. In other words, learners do not absorb all the input of language materials (no matter from teachers or textbooks). Learners’ learning motivation, confidence in language and other factors have a filtering effect on language materials. Therefore, the smaller the barrier of affective factors, the smoother the input of knowledge, the better the effect of acquisition.

3 Research Design

Through the above discussion, we can see that affective factors play a significant role in language acquisition. Therefore, it is of much concern to study the affective factors in second language acquisition. Next, the author will examine the affective states of high school and college students, and compare the influence of affective factors on second language acquisition of them from the perspectives of attitude, character, inhibition and teacher-student empathy.
Research Questions

(1) What are the four affective states of high school and college students?
(2) What are the relationships between the four affective factors and English performance?

3.2 Research Participants

The research participants are 84 students (59 female and 25 male, aged 16-18 years old) randomly selected from a high school in Anhui Province and 115 college students (81 female and 34 male, varying in age from 20 to 22 years old) from a university in the same city.

3.3 Research Instruction

The research tool of this article is a questionnaire adapted from Sun (2013). In the questionnaire, there are five subscales used to determine the score of 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 in line with the respondents’ choice of “totally agree, agree, neutral, disagree and totally disagree”. Negative questions were scored in the opposite way.

The questionnaire consists of six parts: The first is gender and English score (Items 1-2); high school students were instructed to fill in the average score of the last three English tests, and college students should fill in the result of the CET-4 (College English Test, Band 4). The second part (Items 3-7) measures attitude; the higher score shows a more positive learning attitude. The third part (Items 8-12) measures character; the higher score indicates that the respondent is more extroverted. The fourth part (Items 13-17) tests the inhibition state; the higher score indicates stronger inhibition of the respondent. The fifth part (Items 18-22) tests the state of teacher-student empathy; the higher score indicates a higher degree of empathy. The last part (Items 23-24) is additional questions.

3.4 Data Collection

In this survey, a total of 84 valid responses were collected from high school students, and 115 valid responses from college students. The collection of questionnaires is powered by Wenjuanxing (a Chinese online survey platform) and the data analysis software used in this paper is SPSS 25.0. All the data collected from Wenjuanxing was input into SPSS, and then the coefficient of correlation between each factor and English performance were calculated. Their English proficiency is measured by their English scores in item 2.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Attitude

Table 1 shows the correlation between the language learning attitude of high school and college students and their English performance, as well as their average attitude score.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High school students (N=84)</th>
<th>College students (N=115)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( r )</td>
<td>.398</td>
<td>.263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig (two-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average score</td>
<td>18.58</td>
<td>19.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 1, learning attitude is positively correlated with English performance of both high school and college students, which is consistent with previous findings (Li & Qin, 2011). The correlation between high school students’ attitudes and their English performance is stronger than that of college students. The influence of
attitudes on language learning is mainly reflected in three aspects: foreign language proficiency, learning engagement and classroom behavior (Hu, 2012). Second language learners who give up halfway always hold passive learning attitudes and regard foreign language learning as a burden, their academic performance is therefore worse than that of persistent learners who have positive attitudes. Besides, students whose attitudes are positive always try to be more active and attentive in class so as to learn more.

College students scored slightly higher than high school students in learning attitude. Compared with high school students, college students generally have a more positive learning attitude as they are more aware that learning a foreign language is of significance in many ways, such as reading foreign journals, finding a better job and studying abroad. College students’ strong integrative motivation to learn English promotes the generation of positive attitudes to a certain extent.

4.2 Character

Table 2 shows the correlation between the character of high school and college students and their English performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Correlation between Character and English Performance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High school students (N=84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r</td>
<td>.086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig (two-tailed)</td>
<td>.435</td>
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</table>

As seen in Table 2, no correlation is found between character and English performance for both groups. This is contrary to previous studies which have shown that generally extraverted personality can do better than the introverted one in second language acquisition (Sun, 2019). Extroverted learners tend to participate in learning activities actively and are less anxious than introverts, so they may perform better in listening and speaking. On the contrary, introverts are less likely to participate in language learning activities, thus have less comprehensible input. However, introversion is not always a disadvantage for second language acquisition. Introverted students may be better at reading since they generally have strong analytical ability and well-rounded thinking. Learners of different characters have different areas of expertise, but all of them can get good grades with their own efforts.

4.3 Inhibition

Table 3 shows the correlation between the inhibition state of high school and college students and their English performance, as well as their average inhibition score.

<table>
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<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Correlation between Inhibition and English Performance</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High school students (N=84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r</td>
<td>-.364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig (two-tailed)</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average score</td>
<td>13.82</td>
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</table>

As seen in Table 3, inhibition is negatively correlated with English performance for both groups, which concurs with the finding that inhibition is one of the negative affective factors in language learning (Zhu & Zhou, 2012). Moreover, inhibition has a greater impact on the English performance of high school students than that of college students. Second language learners inevitably make mistakes in the course of learning, which may lead to
embarrassment. Therefore, some learners with strong self-awareness seldom take part in learning activities in class for fear of making mistakes, which is the inhibitory behavior in language learning. As is known, taking part in class activities and reading aloud are crucial for language learning, so highly inhibited students may have poorer language performance. Furthermore, for high school students, the only place that they practice English frequently is class where they tend to show inhibitions. It may explain that inhibitions influence them more.

The average score shows that college students had slightly lower inhibition scores than high school students. This could be explained as the decline of inhibitions with the end of puberty. College students are generally just going through puberty and their affection of inhibition is weakened in comparison with that of high school students, so their ability to accept new knowledge is stronger and their courage to take part in learning activities is greater. In addition, the university provides students with more opportunities to exercise, such as frequent presentations in English classes, so that they can constantly reduce inhibitions and develop self-confidence and courage. As a result, the effects of college students’ second language acquisition may be much better than those of high school students.

4.4 Teacher-Student Empathy

Table 4 shows the correlation between the teacher-student empathy of high school and college students and their English performance, with the addition of their average teacher-student empathy score.

Table 4. The Correlation between Teacher-student Empathy and English Performance

<table>
<thead>
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<th>High school students (N=84)</th>
<th>College students (N=115)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$r$</td>
<td>.303</td>
<td>.290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig (two-tailed)</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average score</td>
<td>19.01</td>
<td>18.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 indicates that there is a positive correlation between teacher-student empathy and English performance of high school students and that of college students. As Ding (2014) indicates, teachers’ devotion to teaching, their care and love for students can greatly encourage students to learn, and arouse their interest in learning languages. Empathy is just like a bridge to communicate between teachers and students, which connects the intentions, opinions, and affections of teachers and students, and makes them form a unity when they meet in teaching situations, so as to create a harmonious classroom atmosphere. As we know, high school students learn English mainly through classroom learning, so they have more interactions with teachers and rely on teachers more, teacher-student empathy is therefore particularly important for their second language learning. However, most college students often learn English in various ways. In addition to taking college English courses, they often learn English through self-study or watching online classes, so they communicate less with teachers than high school students and teacher-student empathy has less influence on them than on high school students.

In the meantime, Table 4 indicates that the difference between high school and college students in teacher-student empathy is not significant. Besides, in the light of the choices of the question “When I encounter difficulties in English learning, I will take the initiative to seek help from my English teacher” in the questionnaire, we find that most of the students (56% of high school students and 59% of college students) choose to actively seek help from their English teachers. This shows that the teacher-student empathy is strong among both high school and college students.
The correlation analysis of the collected data reveals that except character, learning attitude, inhibition, and teacher-student empathy are closely related to second language acquisition. Among them, the influence of learning attitude and empathy on language acquisition is positive. The effect of inhibitions on second language acquisition is reversed, that is, when inhibitions are obvious, students’ English performance is not satisfactory.

In general, high school students are more susceptible to a variety of affective factors than college students since the latter are maturer. Therefore, high school English teachers should pay more attention to affective teaching. In addition, as far as the affective status of high school and college students in language learning is concerned, this study finds that college students’ attitudes towards English learning is slightly better than high school students, and their inhibition is slightly weaker than high school students, so the effect of second language acquisition may be better than high school students.

5 Conclusion

Through discussion and investigation, this paper examined four affective factors in English learning, and compared the differences and similarities in the influence of affective factors on second language acquisition in high school and college students. It is observed that affective factors exert a major impact on second language acquisition. Some potential implications for foreign language teaching can be drawn from the results of the study. Firstly, teachers should integrate ideological education into language teaching, and cultivate students’ positive learning attitudes. Moreover, attention should be paid to group learning, which tends to bring about changes in students’ cognition and attitudes. Secondly, it is important for teachers to consciously reduce students’ inhibitions in learning. Teachers can encourage students to take part in English communication activities and correct their misconception that mistakes made in class are threats to them. When students answer questions or give presentations, teachers should not overcorrect their pronunciation or intonation, but encourage them to express their views in language appropriate to their level. Thirdly, teachers must pay attention to the way they evaluate students, and learn to accept and appreciate them. In the process of English teaching, teachers should always listen to students’ opinions and pay attention to their emotions. Teachers’ understanding and respect for students play a definite role in eliminating students’ anxiety in class, stimulating students’ positive affective experience, and finally encouraging students to improve their abilities in a harmonious and relaxed environment. Lastly, teachers need to lay emphasis on students’ personality. Extroverted learners are good at communicating and brave in practice, but they always lack analytical ability while introverts can analyze the limited language input from different views. Moreover, extroverts want more external recognition to maintain their self-esteem and self-worth, whereas more care and encouragement should be given to introverts. Teachers ought to be aware that some activities can greatly motivate extroverted students but dampen the enthusiasm of introverted students. Therefore, classroom activities should be diversified, so that students of different characters can exert their strengths and make progress in these activities.

With the further development of curriculum reform, it is believed that more attention will be paid to the application of affective factors in foreign language teaching.

References


