

Representation and Cause Analysis of Learners' Emotional Issues in the Second Language Acquisition Process

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Abstract. In the field of second language acquisition, the influence of emotional factors on learning outcomes has become one of the core research directions. However, there is still room for a systematic analysis of its specific manifestations, causes, and solutions. This paper focuses on college students as the research subjects, combining Krashen's emotion filtering theory, to systematically analyze the core manifestations and deep causes of learners' emotional problems in second language acquisition. The study found that learners' emotional problems mainly manifest in two aspects: one is the personal psychological aspect, manifested as anxiety, timidity, and lack of motivation. The other is the attitude towards the language itself, manifested as a negative attitude, alienation, and frustration. The causes involve three aspects: personal character and language foundation, cultural differences and thinking interference, as well as deviations in teaching theory and practice. Based on this, this paper proposes the following suggestions: It is necessary to promote the collaborative efforts of learners and teachers, through emotional regulation to help learners adjust their psychological state, increase cultural contact to reduce thinking interference, optimize the classroom atmosphere to improve the learning environment, and ultimately reduce the intensity of emotion filtering and improve the effect of second language acquisition.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition; Emotional Issues; Learning Anxiety; Learning Motivation; Affective Filter Theory.

1. Introduction

In recent years, in the process of second language acquisition, the influence of emotional factors on the ultimate learning outcome has become increasingly crucial. During the learning process, anxiety, as the most common negative emotion, can cause learners to have difficulty concentrating. Research shows that on the one hand, most learners are troubled by emotional problems, which leads to a decline in learning efficiency and interruption of learning behavior. For example, in conversation scenarios, learners' attention shifts from "how to effectively organize language" to concerns such as "will this sentence be wrong and be ridiculed" or "is this sentence reasonable from the other person's perspective" due to the fear of pronunciation errors or expression stumbles, resulting in mental blocks and confusion in what was originally a fluent expression. In listening training, if anxiety arises from not understanding, this emotion can make the difficulty of information reception even greater, forming a vicious cycle of "the more anxious, the less clear one hears; the less clear one hears, the more anxious one becomes".

On the other hand, positive emotions such as interest and curiosity can be transformed into learning motivation. When learners identify with and become passionate about the culture behind the target language, such as developing an interest in English through American TV series or paying attention to Japanese due to anime or the practical scenarios of the language, they will spontaneously engage in learning. They will actively search for relevant learning materials, participate in language exchange communities, and even unconsciously accumulate language knowledge during rest time by watching TV shows or listening to songs. This internally-driven learning state not only enhances the efficiency of knowledge absorption but also helps resist setbacks in the learning process and maintain long-term learning continuity. Therefore, clarifying the specific manifestations and causes of emotional problems is a prerequisite for resolving the "emotional predicament" in second language acquisition.

2. Core Manifestations of Learners' Emotional Issues in Second Language Acquisition

The emotional issues of college students in the process of second language acquisition mainly manifest in two aspects: personal psychology and the language itself, with specific manifestations as follows:

2.1. Manifestations of Personal Psychological Issues

2.1.1 Anxiety in second language learning

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis holds that affective factors act as a "filter" that significantly influences the language acquisition process. The affective filter, as a mental barrier, determines the quantity of comprehensible input that learners can absorb. Lower anxiety and higher self-confidence directly reduce filter strength, thereby facilitating vocabulary retention and language output [1]. The intensity of this "filtering" mechanism varies, leading to distinct differences in the ultimate acquisition outcomes. When the affective filter is in a "low-intensity" state, its hindrance to external language input is weak, allowing more language information to smoothly enter the learner's cognitive system and enabling the learner to absorb and master a richer array of language knowledge. Conversely, if the intensity of the affective filter increases, its "interception" effect on language input becomes more pronounced, reducing the effective input volume and directly increasing the difficulty of language learning. Especially when this "filtering" effect becomes strong, it not only weakens the learner's active learning intention but may also induce obvious negative emotions such as anxiety and unease during the learning process. These negative emotions, in turn, adversely affect the learning process and ultimately have a detrimental impact on the actual language acquisition results [2]. In the 1970s, scholars in the field of language education began to focus on the connection between emotional factors and language acquisition, conducting in-depth research. During this process, it was clearly pointed out that anxiety, as a prominent emotional hindrance factor, would have a significant negative impact on the efficiency of second language acquisition [3]. Among the negative emotions experienced by college students in second language learning, anxiety is the most prominent. It can be classified into three types: classroom anxiety, test anxiety, and communication anxiety. Classroom anxiety is manifested as trembling and speaking in a weak voice when answering questions in class, or even being unable to express one's views completely. Test anxiety emerges before mid-term and final language exams, with some students experiencing insomnia, inattention, and memory decline. During the exams, they perform poorly due to excessive nervousness. Communication anxiety often occurs when communicating orally with native speakers or classmates. Fearing being judged for making mistakes in expression, they avoid initiating communication and even refuse to participate in group dialogue activities.

2.1.2 Shyness in second language learning

Timidity is closely related to anxiety, but it focuses more on "behavioral avoidance". Many college students have developed psychological shadows due to experiences such as pronunciation mistakes being corrected and incoherent expressions being ridiculed in their past second language learning. As a result, they are reluctant to take the initiative to try in subsequent learning. For instance, in oral practice, even if they know the answer, they are reluctant to raise their hands to speak, in language practice activities (such as foreign language corners), they only passively listen and do not actively initiate conversations, fearing to "make mistakes" or "not express well". Over time, this leads to difficulty in improving their language output ability.

2.1.3 Demotivation in second language learning

As a crucial emotional element in the process of second language learning, motivation not only plays a vital role in maintaining learners' enthusiasm for continuous learning but also serves as the core driving force that inspires them to actively engage in language learning and overcome learning difficulties. Among the various factors that determine whether second language acquisition can

achieve its goals smoothly, motivation always holds an indispensable key position [4]. However, the lack of motivation among college students in second language learning is mainly manifested as "passive learning". Some students learn a second language merely to fulfill credit requirements or pass exams, and that is Integrative motivation (driven by the desire to engage with the target language culture) tends to promote sustained language learning efforts, whereas instrumental motivation (driven by external goals like exams) often fades once the goal is achieved [5]. Students lacking intrinsic interest and long-term goals: they do not actively participate in class interactions, do not review or expand their knowledge independently after class, and only cram before exams. They easily give up on the difficulties in language learning (such as grammar rules and vocabulary memorization), and find it hard to maintain a sustained enthusiasm for learning, ultimately leading to poor learning outcomes and forming a vicious cycle of "insufficient motivation - poor grades - even less motivation".

2.2. Manifestations of Emotional Issues towards the Language Itself

2.2.1 Negative attitude towards the target language

The analysis of data from scholars' research shows that factors such as students' lack of confidence, negative self-evaluation of their oral English skills, negative feedback from classmates and teachers, and limited vocabulary that hinders communication are the main causes of oral English anxiety. It can be inferred that students who hold a negative attitude towards their oral English skills lack confidence and interest in oral activities in English classes, and are reluctant to answer questions in class. When required to participate in oral English activities in class, they worry about making mistakes and facing negative evaluations from teachers and ridicule from classmates [6]. Some learners develop a resistance towards the target language due to "no practical need" or "subjective prejudice". For instance, non-English major students think "English won't be needed in future work", and thus they just go through the motions in class. Students learning minor languages (such as Russian or Arabic) may have a negative mindset from the very beginning, thinking "it doesn't matter if I don't learn well", and are unwilling to spend time understanding the cultural background behind the language, making the learning process dull and uninteresting.

2.2.2 Frustration in language learning

The sense of alienation manifests as "feeling that the target language has nothing to do with oneself", and a lack of cultural belonging. For instance, students learning Japanese merely memorize words and grammar mechanically, without understanding Japanese social etiquette (such as the usage scenarios of "polite language"), resulting in frequent mistakes in simulated communication; students learning Spanish have never been exposed to Spanish festival culture (such as "tomato fight"), considering the language as "strange symbols", making it difficult to establish an emotional connection, and subsequently reducing their enthusiasm for learning.

3. Analysis of the Causes of Learners' Emotional Issues in Second Language Acquisition

3.1. Personal Level Causes

3.1.1 Influence of personality traits

There are significant differences in emotional expressions between extroverted and introverted learners in second language learning [7]. Extroverted learners are more willing to actively attempt language output; even if they make mistakes, they can quickly adjust and are less likely to experience anxiety, while introverted learners pay more attention to others' evaluations and worry about "making mistakes and losing face"; they tend to be nervous in public settings and thus avoid language practice. For example, when faced with an oral presentation task, extroverted students can actively prepare and actively share, while introverted students, due to "fear of being noticed", are overly anxious and thus affect their performance.

3.1.2 Weak language foundation

A weak foundation in language is a significant cause of anxiety and frustration. For instance, college students with poor English skills in high school, after entering university, cannot understand the listening materials or read the English texts, and cannot keep up with the teacher's pace in class, gradually developing a psychological gap of "I am worse than my classmates". Students learning French, if they do not master the "pronunciation rules", will frequently mispronounce words during subsequent learning, and despite multiple corrections, there will still be no progress, thereby generating frustration and even giving up practicing.

3.2. Cultural Level Causes

There are some differences between the Native and Target Language Cultures. In the process of learning English, the inherent differences between the Chinese and English grammatical systems are the main cause of learners' grammatical errors. For instance, Chinese lacks the systematic tense, voice, and inflectional changes found in English, which leads to frequent mistakes when students use English tenses. At the same time, Chinese has much less strict requirements for subject-predicate agreement and the forms of nouns (singular and plural) compared to English, and these differences directly result in common mistakes made by learners in English writing and oral expression [8]. The conflict between the native culture and the target culture can cause learners to experience anxiety in communication. For example, Chinese expressions emphasize "mildness and subtlety" (such as saying "maybe it's not convenient" when refusing someone), while English places more emphasis on "directness and clarity" (using "No" when refusing). If a learner responds to an English teacher's invitation in Chinese by saying "Maybe later", they might be misunderstood as "agreeing", and after repeatedly encountering similar problems, they may avoid communication due to "worrying about cultural differences leading to misunderstandings". Cultural discrepancies in communication norms (e.g., direct vs. indirect expression) often lead to misinterpretations, which in turn increase learners' anxiety and avoidance behaviors in second language interactions [9].

Preconceived notions about the target language culture can lead to negative attitudes prematurely. For instance, some learners believe that "Arabic is difficult to learn" (due to its unique letter shapes and complex pronunciation), and thus develop a sense of fear before even starting the learning process.

3.3. Theoretical and Practical Level Causes

The deviations in the teaching process will directly exacerbate the emotional issues, mainly manifested in two aspects: theoretical orientation and practical operation.

3.3.1 Deviation in teaching theory orientation

Traditional second language teaching often focuses on "knowledge imparting" as its core, neglecting the regulation of emotional factors. For instance, in the classroom, teachers mainly explain grammatical rules and vocabulary usage, without paying attention to the emotions of the learners. Even when they notice students' anxiety, they mostly resort to the excuse of "more practice will do" and fail to provide specific emotional guidance methods. Some teachers attribute "poor grades" to "students' lack of effort", ignoring the impact of emotional issues on learning, and further undermining the learners' confidence.

3.3.2 Insufficiency in teaching practice

The flaws in teaching operations can exacerbate emotional issues, mainly manifested as "single evaluation" and "insufficient activities" [2].

Defects in teaching operations can lead to a single form of evaluation. Most courses rely mainly on "final exam scores" as the evaluation criterion, ignoring the processual performances such as classroom participation and oral improvement. For instance, students with poor basic skills, even if they actively participate in class and complete their homework conscientiously, may still be judged as "having poor learning" due to their low exam scores, and may gradually lose confidence.

The flaws in teaching operations can also lead to insufficient activities. There are few language practice opportunities, leading to learners "being afraid to speak and not knowing how to speak". At present, there are obvious limitations in the oral language training of foreign language teaching: Firstly, the proportion of oral practice time in English courses is insufficient, and it is mostly conducted in a collective manner, such as "whole-class reading", lacking individual interaction design. Secondly, small language courses are restricted by large class sizes, making it difficult for teachers to provide one-on-one guidance to students, resulting in students' oral language problems not being corrected for a long time, and thus easily leading to a timid mentality.

4. Suggestions for Addressing Learners' Emotional Issues in Second Language Acquisition

4.1. Learner Level

4.1.1 Mastering self-emotional regulation skills

Learners should actively learn methods for managing emotions and alleviating negative feelings [10]. For instance, when facing classroom anxiety, one can adopt the "deep breathing technique": take three deep breaths before speaking to calm down the nervousness. When dealing with test anxiety, one can replace negative thoughts with "positive mental suggestions" (such as "I have reviewed the key points and can perform normally"), keeping a "feeling diary" to sort out one's daily learning emotions (such as "I wasn't nervous during the oral practice today and made progress"), and strengthen positive experiences.

4.1.2 Correcting misconceptions about learning

Learners need to break away from the "perfectionism" mindset and accept that "making mistakes is part of the learning process" [10]. For example, during oral practice, tell yourself "Even if you make a mistake, it's an opportunity to gain experience", and actively try complex expressions; when encountering difficulties, don't rush to deny yourself, but instead transform "not being able to learn" into "learning step by step" (such as breaking down "French small tongue sounds" into "first practice rinsing, then combine with words"), gradually overcome them, and accumulate a sense of achievement.

4.1.3 Actively engaging with target language culture

By establishing emotional connections with the target language through various means, interest can be enhanced [4]. For instance, students learning English can watch original TV series like "Friends" to experience daily conversation scenarios. Students learning Japanese can participate in the campus "Japanese Culture Festival" to experience kimono-wearing and sushi-making; students learning German can read the German abridged version of "The Little Prince" to accumulate vocabulary while immersing themselves in the story, transforming language learning from "rote memorization" to "cultural experience".

4.2. Teacher Level

4.2.1 Creating a positive and inclusive classroom atmosphere

Positive emotional factors can optimize the teaching content [11]. Teachers need to reduce learners' anxiety through "encouraging feedback" and "equal interaction". For example, when a student gives an incorrect answer, instead of directly denying it, they should say, "This idea is quite good. It can adjust the expression further", design "group mutual assistance" activities, such as "English partner practice", allowing students with better foundations to help those with weaker foundations, thereby reducing the pressure of being singled out; during the class, share "the teacher's own learning experiences", such as "I also often made mistakes when I was learning", making learners feel that "making mistakes is normal". Therefore, teachers need to continuously monitor the students' after-class activity dynamics and deeply understand the specific reasons why they fail to review

Chinese or practice Chinese in class after school. After identifying the problems, not only should the deficiencies in students' learning be clearly pointed out, but also support and assistance should be actively provided to help them overcome these obstacles that hinder the progress of learning [10].

4.2.2 Implementing diversified teaching evaluations

A combined approach of "process evaluation + outcome evaluation" is adopted, with a focus on learners' progress [2]. This approach allows students with weak foundations to achieve good grades through "active participation" and "careful completion of homework", and regular feedback on "progress points" is also provided to strengthen their learning confidence.

Meanwhile, additional courses taught by foreign teachers can be added. When learners have the opportunity to converse with native speakers, their ability to comprehend input content improves; furthermore, when in a "communicative" environment, learners gain more opportunities to engage with the target language [11]. Such native-speaker interactions deliver authentic linguistic input that textbooks rarely capture--including colloquial expressions, cultural nuances embedded in speech, and natural intonation patterns--which are critical for developing holistic language competence beyond basic grammar and vocabulary. The real-time feedback from foreign teachers also helps correct subtle pronunciation errors or pragmatic misunderstandings promptly, preventing the solidification of incorrect language habits.

Notably, the synergy between the "process + outcome" evaluation system and native-speaker-led communicative practice aligns with core insights in second language acquisition research. As Lightbown and Spada emphasized, "Language learning thrives when formative feedback on progress is paired with meaningful opportunities for authentic use. Assessment without practice remains abstract, while practice without feedback risks stagnation" [12]. In practice, the evaluation framework ensures learners receive targeted guidance to address individual gaps—for instance, identifying through process tracking that a student struggles with tense consistency and providing focused drills—while foreign teacher courses transform this structured guidance into practical application. This cycle not only accelerates skill mastery but also reinforces the confidence built through progress feedback: when learners see their assessed improvements translate to smoother conversations with native speakers, their intrinsic motivation to engage with the target language deepens further. Such integration is particularly impactful for learners with weak foundations, as it bridges the gap between "knowing" language rules and "using" them effectively in real contexts.

5. Conclusion

This article analyzes the emotional issues in second language acquisition among college students and discovers that these emotional problems mainly manifest in personal psychology and attitudes towards the language itself. Their causes involve personal character and foundation, cultural differences, and interference in thinking, as well as deviations in teaching theory and practice. To solve these problems, learners need to actively regulate their emotions, correct their learning beliefs, and come into contact with the target culture. At the same time, teachers need to create an inclusive classroom and implement diverse evaluations.

Emotional factors are the "invisible regulators" of second language acquisition. Only by reducing the intensity of emotional filtering can learners absorb language input more efficiently and achieve a virtuous cycle of "continuous learning" and "ability improvement".

Future research can combine specific language learning scenarios, further explore personalized solutions to emotional problems, and provide more accurate references for second language teaching.

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