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Affective Factors and Their Influence on Second Language Acquisition: A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract

Affective factors such as motivation, anxiety, self-confidence, and attitudes play a crucial role in shaping Second Language Acquisition (SLA). This study draws on Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, which suggests that emotional conditions operate as a psychological filter that can either enable or hinder the processing of comprehensible linguistic input. This paper employs qualitative method by reviewing of relevant articles, books and journals from authentic sources. The result of the study demonstrates that affective factors can significantly increase or hinder the language learning process. Further, it is shown that the relationship between affective factors and instructional practices is highly reciprocal, highlighting the importance of supportive teaching methods and learner-centered pedagogies in lowering emotional barriers to language acquisition. Learners who demonstrate strong motivation, high self-confidence, and low levels of anxiety tend to have a reduced affective filter, allowing them greater access to linguistic input and willingness to learn the second language without any hesitation. In contrast, individuals who experience heightened anxiety, low motivation and low self-confidence toward language learning often participate less actively and show limited willingness to communicate. Lastly, it has been shown that implementation of appropriate pedagogy helps in making the students learn the second language to a great extent.

Keywords: Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, motivation, anxiety, second language acquisition.

1. Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is a complex process shaped by cognitive, social, and emotional influences. Earlier theoretical approaches largely focused on cognitive mechanisms, the quality of input, and instructional techniques. However, contemporary research increasingly

recognizes the importance of affective variables namely the emotional dispositions and attitudes that learners bring to the language learning process as key factors influencing success (Krashen, 1982). Although affective variables do not directly lead to language acquisition, they significantly influence the extent to which learners engage with input and maintain attention, practice, and perseverance throughout the learning process. It has been shown through studies that emotions such as anxiety, confidence, and motivational orientation affect learners' access to comprehensible input as well as their readiness to communicate in the target language.

This paper reviews major affective variables identified in second language acquisition research and examines empirical evidence regarding their influence on language learning outcomes. It also situates these findings within the theoretical framework of Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and discusses practical implications for language teachers seeking to enhance learning environments.

2.Theoretical Framework

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis proposes that emotional conditions do not directly alter the cognitive mechanisms responsible for acquiring language. Instead, they regulate the amount of comprehensible input that learners are able to internalize. In this model, affective variables function as a psychological filter. High levels of anxiety combined with low motivation and weak self-confidence raise the filter, thereby restricting the input that reaches the learner's internal language acquisition system. Conversely, when learners experience positive emotional conditions, the affective filter is lowered, allowing greater intake of linguistic information. (Krashen, 1982; Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

This perspective highlights the indirect, yet significant influence of emotional states on language learning. Learners who possess supportive attitudes and emotional stability are more inclined to seek learning opportunities, engage actively with learning materials, and take communicative risks which are behaviors that facilitate successful language acquisition.

3. Connection with Humanistic Psychology

The emphasis on affect in language learning is closely aligned with the foundational principles of humanistic psychology, which asserts that intellectual development cannot be separated from emotional well-being (Bao & Liu, 2021). This perspective underscores the idea that learners are not merely cognitive processors but whole individuals whose emotions, attitudes, and personal experiences significantly influence their capacity to acquire and use language effectively. It can either make or break the learning outcome. Humanistic approaches to language teaching, therefore, place strong emphasis on fostering empathy, nurturing self-esteem, and promoting learner autonomy as central components of meaningful and effective instruction. These approaches advocate for a supportive and non-threatening learning environment in which students feel valued, understood, and motivated to participate.

From this perspective, it is essential that emotional factors should not be treated as secondary or peripheral considerations within the language classroom. Instead, they must be considered and prioritized consciously and systematically integrated into the design of pedagogical practices, classroom interactions, and learning environments. By acknowledging and addressing the affective dimension of learning, teachers can create a more inclusive, engaging, and responsive class that enhance both learner motivation and overall language proficiency effectively.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive approach to offer a thorough analysis and deliver an in-depth insight on affective factors and their influence in second language acquisition. The study analyses secondary data to systematically evaluate previous research studies, books and

academic journals from authentic sources to comprehend the relationship of affective factors and the learning of a target language by students.

5. Major Affective Variables in SLA

5.1 Motivation

Motivation is widely regarded as one of the most influential predictors of success in language learning, shaping not only how much effort learners invest but also how consistently and efficiently they engage with the learning process over time. Its importance cannot be undermined. Highly motivated learners are more likely to demonstrate persistence in the face of challenges, actively participate in classroom interactions, and take initiative in seeking opportunities to practice and refine their communicative skills. Their sustained engagement often leads to deeper understanding of language, ultimately contributing to higher levels of proficiency and communicative competence. They are less likely to restrain from classroom participation and involves actively in the learning process.

In the field of second language acquisition, motivation is commonly categorized into two primary types: integrative and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation refers to a learner's desire to connect with and become part of the target language community, often driven by genuine interest in the culture, people, and social practices associated with the language. Instrumental motivation, on the other hand, is more pragmatic in nature, involving goals such as achieving academic success, securing employment, or advancing one's professional career. While these categories provide a useful framework for understanding learner intentions, contemporary perspectives recognize that motivation is complex, fluid, and often shaped by a combination of personal, social, and contextual factors.

A study by Fan, et. al. (2025) examined the dynamic relationship between motivation and emotional variables and highlighted that motivation does not operate in isolation but interacts closely with other affective factors such as anxiety, self-confidence, and enjoyment. For instance, a motivated learner with low anxiety and high confidence is more likely to take risks in communication and engage more fully in language learning tasks. Conversely, high levels of anxiety may hinder participation and thereby results in restraints, even in otherwise motivated individuals. This interplay suggests that motivation both influences and is influenced by learners' emotional states, creating a reciprocal relationship that significantly impacts language processing and acquisition.

Furthermore, learners with strong intrinsic motivation that is those who engage in learning for personal satisfaction and interest, tend to experience greater enjoyment and deeper engagement in language-related activities. This heightened engagement increases their exposure to meaningful and comprehensible input, facilitates more frequent practice, and ultimately accelerates language development. As a result, fostering and sustaining motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, becomes a crucial objective for teachers aiming to create effective and enriching language learning environments.

5.2 Anxiety

According to Papi and Khajavy (2023), second language anxiety refers to the feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness, or self-doubt that learners may experience during the process of acquiring or using a second language. Within the area of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, anxiety has emerged as one of the most extensively examined affective variables, largely due to its consistently observed impact on learner performance and overall language development. Unlike general anxiety, second language anxiety is often situation-specific, arising directly from the unique cognitive, social, and communicative demands associated with language learning. It causes low achievement, fear of negative evaluation and avoidance of interaction. It is a major affective factor which can lead to difficulties in speaking, writing and listening skills.

This form of anxiety can manifest in various learning contexts, including classroom interactions, oral communication tasks, and high-stakes assessment situations. For instance, learners may feel particularly anxious when asked to speak spontaneously in front of peers, participate in group discussions, or perform in evaluative settings where their linguistic competence is judged. A recent study conducted by Jiang, et.al. (2024) on the dictation component of the test for English majors, band 4 (TEM-4) found out the detrimental effects of anxiety, revealing that students with lower levels of anxiety achieved significantly better results than their more anxious counterparts. Such findings clearly illustrate the negative relationship between anxiety and language performance, particularly in tasks that require focused attention and accurate processing of input.

From a cognitive perspective, anxiety can immensely interfere with the language learning process by diverting mental resources away from meaningful language processing, towards the regulation of emotional distress. When learners are preoccupied with feelings of fear or self-doubt, their working memory capacity is reduced, limiting their ability to comprehend, retain, and produce linguistic information effectively. This disruption can hinder the internalization of new vocabulary, grammatical structures, and pronunciation patterns. Consequently, high levels of anxiety not only affect immediate performance but may also slow long-term language acquisition. Therefore, it is essential to recognize and address second language anxiety to create supportive learning environments that enable learners to engage more confidently and effectively with the target language.

5.3 Self-Confidence and Self-Efficacy

Self-confidence and self-efficacy are the beliefs in one's capability to successfully perform specific tasks and it plays a central and multifaceted role in shaping learners' participation, engagement, and persistence in the process of language learning. These constructs influence not only how learners perceive their own abilities but also how they approach challenges, respond to feedback, and regulate their learning behaviors over time. In the context of second language acquisition, self-efficacy is particularly substantial because language learning often involves uncertainty, frequent errors, and the need for continuous practice in classrooms and other socially interactive settings.

Learners who possess strong self-efficacy are generally more willing to take risks, such as initiating conversations, expressing ideas despite limited vocabulary, or attempting complex linguistic structures. Rather than avoiding difficult tasks, they tend to view challenges as opportunities for growth and development. This proactive mindset encourages greater classroom participation, sustained effort, and resilience in the face of setbacks which is very important especially in learning a language. In contrast, learners with low self-efficacy may hesitate to engage, fear and shame in making mistakes, and withdraw from communicative situations, thereby limiting their exposure to meaningful language use and practice.

According to Shi Lihong (2016) learners with high self-efficacy have significant role in second or foreign language learning. Learners with stronger self-belief tend to experience more positive academic emotions, such as enjoyment, satisfaction, and a sense of achievement. These learners are also more likely to adopt effective learning strategies, set realistic goals, and monitor their own progress. As a result, they often achieve higher levels of language proficiency compared to their less confident peers. The relationship between self-efficacy and achievement is, therefore, both direct and indirect, as confidence not only enhances emotional well-being but also supports behaviors that lead to improve learning outcomes.

Taking everything into account, it is evident that self-confidence and self-efficacy are not merely supportive traits but fundamental components of successful language learning. By fostering a sense of competence and encouraging positive self-perceptions, teachers can help learners build the confidence needed to engage more fully with the target language, ultimately contributing to both their emotional development and measurable language acquisition success.

5.4 Attitudes and Emotional Climate

Learners' attitudes toward the target language, the teacher, and the overall learning environment play a crucial role in shaping their emotional experiences throughout the language learning process. These attitudes are formed through a combination of personal beliefs, prior learning experiences, cultural perceptions, and classroom interactions. They significantly influence how learners' approach and respond to language-related tasks. When learners develop positive attitudes toward the language they are studying, they are more likely to show curiosity, openness, and a genuine willingness to engage with both the linguistic and cultural aspects of the target language readily.

However, the role of the teacher and the classroom environment are also key factors in promoting these attitudes which cannot be undermined. Supportive, encouraging, and inclusive learning environments can help reduce learners' fear of negative evaluation, allowing them to participate more freely and confidently in communicative activities. In such environments, collaboration is often encouraged, peer interactions become more meaningful, and learners feel safe to experiment with language without the constant pressure of not making errors. On the other hand, negative attitudes, whether directed toward the language, the teacher, or the classroom setting, can create psychological barriers that limit participation, increase anxiety, and hinder effective language processing. Learners who feel uncomfortable or undervalued are less likely to take initiative or fully engage in learning opportunities and they often end up as mute spectators in the classroom.

Research on affective filters, particularly in oral communication contexts, further highlights the importance of these emotional and attitudinal factors. A study conducted by Paladin, et.al. (2023) on the affective filters' extent of influence on oral communication revealed that students' oral communication is most influenced by their motivation to learn the target language which in turn makes the language learning process fun. Learners with higher motivation and stronger self-confidence tend to exhibit lower affective filters, enabling them to process input more efficiently and perform better in speaking activities. Conversely, those with negative attitudes or low confidence may experience heightened affective barriers, which can obstruct both comprehension and production. These findings underscore the need for teachers to cultivate positive attitudes and emotionally supportive environments, as they are essential for facilitating active participation, enhancing communicative competence, and promoting overall development in the target language.

6. Mechanisms Connecting Affect and Language Acquisition

Affective variables play a major role in second language acquisition through an interrelated psychological and cognitive mechanisms. It is through these mechanisms that learners process linguistic input, engage in communicative practices, and sustain their language learning over time. Studies done in this area has consistently demonstrated that affective factors such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence play a profound and pivotal role in language learning outcome.

6.1 Allocation of Cognitive Resources

Emotional states play a crucial role in determining how cognitive resources are distributed during language learning. Negative affective conditions, particularly anxiety, can impose a substantial cognitive pressure, thereby diverting attention away from language processing tasks. According to attentional control theory, anxiety interferes with the efficient allocation of attention, reducing learners' ability to focus on task-relevant stimuli (Eysenck et al., 2007). In the context of second language acquisition, this diminished attention can hinder the understanding and retention of new linguistic inputs, thereby hampering the learning process.

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis further explains this phenomenon by suggesting that heightened anxiety acts as a psychological barrier that prevents comprehensible input from being effectively processed (Krashen, 1982). Empirical studies on second language anxiety have shown that

anxious learners often experience difficulties in comprehension and production due to the competition between emotional regulation and cognitive processing. As a result, both immediate performance and long-term acquisition may be adversely affected.

6.2 Willingness to Communicate

Learners' motivation and self-confidence are closely linked to their willingness to communicate (WTC), a key determinant of active language use. MacIntyre et al. (1998) conceptualize WTC as a situational construct influenced by both affective and contextual variables, with anxiety and perceived competence playing central roles. Research consistently indicates that higher levels of anxiety are associated with reduced willingness to initiate communication, while greater self-confidence enhances participation.

Conversely, motivated learners with strong self-belief are more likely to engage in communicative activities, thus increasing their exposure to meaningful input and interactional feedback conditions widely recognized as essential for language development (Dornyei, 2005). Such engagement not only promotes linguistic competence but also reinforces positive affective states, creating a reciprocal relationship between communication and emotional readiness.

6.3 Emotional Regulation and Learning Strategies

The ability to regulate emotional responses is a critical factor in sustaining effective language learning. Learners who employ affective strategies such as positive self-talk, anxiety reduction techniques, and emotional self-regulation are better equipped to maintain engagement with learning tasks. Oxford (1990) identifies affective strategies as a key category of language learning strategies that help learners manage emotions, motivation, and attitudes.

Furthermore, research within positive psychology in second language acquisition highlights the importance of promoting positive emotional experiences to broaden learners' cognitive resources and build resilience (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). By lowering anxiety and enhancing motivation, these strategies contribute to sustained effort, increased participation, and improved learning outcomes. In this sense, emotional regulation serves not only as a supportive mechanism but as a fundamental component in optimizing the conditions for successful language acquisition.

7. Pedagogical Implications

Learning a second language like English in a country where English is learnt as a second language is primarily done at school. So, it is of paramount importance to weave an effective pedagogical approach to help the students mitigate the problems and setbacks caused by affective factors. It has been found out through literature review of previous studies on the influence of affective factors like motivation, anxiety and self-confidence on second language acquisition (SLA) suggest that effective language teaching extends beyond cognitive and linguistic considerations to include learners' emotional conditions and experiences. Classroom practices that address anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence can significantly enhance learning outcomes by creating conditions that facilitate meaningful engagement with the target language. Appropriate teacher guidance and advice increase stronger effort to participate and greater effort to learn on the part of the learner. Further, positive teacher feedback and guidance play a significant role in the students' emotional states especially their motivation, anxiety and self-confidence.

7.1 Developing Low-Anxiety Learning Environments

Anxiety is one of the most prominent and prevalent affective barriers in second language acquisition. According to Arnold (2000, P.59) language anxiety "ranks high among factors influencing language learning, regardless of whether the setting is informal (learning language on the streets) or formal (in the classroom)". So, one of the primary responsibilities of language teachers is to minimize

affective barriers by fostering a supportive and psychologically safe classroom atmosphere. According to Horwitz et.al., (1986) learners often experience apprehension related to fear of negative evaluation, peer comparison, and error correction. Such anxiety can inhibit participation and reduce the intake of linguistic input to a large extent.

To overcome these effects, the teacher can use various coping mechanisms by adopting different engaging techniques which are learner-centered like creating a safe classroom environment, using the mother-tongue of the student whenever needed and by normalizing errors as an essential part of the learning process and encouraging collaborative rather than competitive learning structures have shown positive results. Cooperative activities, such as pair and group work, have been shown to reduce anxiety and increase learners' willingness to communicate (Young, 1991). According to Elkhayma (2020), integrating relaxation exercises, peer support systems and formative feedbacks can create a more conducive atmosphere for language learners, allowing to manage their anxiety more effectively.

7.2 Enhancing Learner Motivation

Motivation is widely recognized as a driving force in second language acquisition, influencing both the intensity and persistence of learners' efforts. According to Dornyei (2005), motivation is not a static trait but a dynamic construct shaped by classroom experiences, teacher behavior, and task design. Hence, the role of the teacher, the pedagogy used and a safe non-threatening and cooperative learning environment becomes imperative towards increasing motivation of the students.

According to self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan (1985), to promote intrinsic motivation the concepts of autonomy, competence, and relatedness cannot be undermined. In practical terms, this implies that teachers should provide learners with meaningful choices, opportunities for self-directed learning, and tasks that are appropriately challenging. Furthermore, integrating culturally relevant materials and authentic communicative tasks can strengthen learners' integrative and instrumental motivation, thereby promoting sustained involvement in language learning (Gardner, 2010). The onus is on the teacher to choose appropriate and targeted motivational strategy that aligns with the needs of the learners thereby creating a more conducive environment for the language learning process.

7.3 Building Learner Confidence

Self-confidence is often conceptualized as self-efficacy and plays a crucial role in shaping language performance and participation. Bandura (1977) argues that individuals' beliefs in their capabilities influence their willingness to attempt tasks, persist through difficulties, and recover from setbacks. In the context of second language acquisition, higher self-confidence has been linked to greater willingness to communicate and initiate a conversation in a second language thereby increasing the learning process. (Macintyre et al., 1998).

Teachers can instill confidence by structuring learning experiences in a way that ensures gradual progression from simpler to more complex tasks, from known to unknown. This scaffolding approach allows learners to experience success at each stage and thus reinforcing their sense of competence. Constructive and personal feedback, rather than overly critical correction, has also been shown to support confidence and reduce anxiety. The kind of feedback and the way it is given have differential impacts on the learners (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Recognizing and celebrating incremental progress is another effective strategy as it shows to the students that their efforts are noticed by the teacher. Even small achievements, when acknowledged, can reshape learners' self-perceptions and encourage continued effort. Over time, such practices help learners develop resilience against setbacks and a more positive self-concept as language users, which in turn facilitates greater engagement and risk-taking in communication.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be safely stated that affective factors like motivation, anxiety and self-confidence occupy a central position in second language acquisition as they directly influence learners' emotional readiness to process input, engage in interaction, and sustain effort over time. The studies and articles reviewed and critically analyzed have provided an exhaustive empirical data and literature in support. Given these findings, it is essential for language teachers to adopt a holistic approach that integrates emotional as well as cognitive dimensions of learning simultaneously. Further, the onus is on the teacher to implement an appropriate pedagogy which is tailored to produce an optimum learning experience and second language acquisition of the students because every student has different requirements and learning capacity. Furthermore, attention to classroom environment, learner autonomy, and psychological support can significantly enhance both learners' well-being and their linguistic development altogether. Ultimately, addressing affective factors is not a secondary aspect of teaching but a fundamental component of effective language pedagogy, contributing to more inclusive, engaging, and successful learning experiences of the students.

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