

## *Original Paper*

# Affective Factors and Pedagogical Implications in Young Learners' English Learning

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### **Abstract**

*The process of second language learning involves both objective and affective factors. Based on Krashen's theory on affective filter, the present paper sets Chinese young English learners as a specific object and argues how to use affective factors in second language teaching to improve young learners' engagement. By analyzing this topic, some useful results and implications have been found and can be used for future teaching by specific groups of teachers.*

### **Keywords**

*affective factors, second language acquisition, second language teaching, methodology, implication*

## **1. Introduction**

Affective factors have attracted increasing attention in the field of second language (L2) learning over recent years. The affective factor refers to an individual's mood and attitude towards himself or herself and the surrounding environment (Du, 2009). Krashen (1988, cited in Du, 2009) has divided L2 learners' affective factors into motivation, attitude, anxiety, and self-confidence. Some researchers (e.g., Schumann, 1975) suggest that affective factors play a crucial role in L2 learning, with others (e.g., Mihaljević Djigunović, 2012) even claiming that the affective factor is decisive to the success of language learning. In English teaching for young learners, this aspect seems to be particularly worthy of attention. As Edelenbos et al. (2007) suggest, the main aim of English teaching to early age learners is to help them to develop a positive attitude and motivation towards English learning (EL). This could have a far-reaching impact on their future learning (Nikolov, 2001, cited in Mihaljević Djigunović, 2012). Similarly, helping young learners to eliminate certain negative affective factors such as anxiety and lack of confidence could enable them to make better progress in EL. Affective factors vary among individual young learners, and also differ from those of mature learners. One of the most salient

features is instability. A number of researchers have shown that children generally have a positive attitude towards language learning when they begin to learn a language, but their enthusiasm or motivation usually declines over time (Chambers, 2000). Mihaljević Djigunović and Medved Krajnović (2015) also suggests that young learners' attitudes towards EL are very likely to be influenced by the environment or people around them, such as their parents, relatives, and teachers. Among these, the teachers, and their language teaching approach, typically have the greatest impact (Vilke, 1993, cited in Mihaljević Djigunović, 2012). The instability of young learner affective factors also implies that they are more open to being changed and adjusted. Indeed, Krashen (1982) has put forward the concept of the affective filter, which holds that it is possible for teachers to apply appropriate teaching methods to 'turn down' affective filters so as to promote learners' L2 acquisition. In recent years, various teaching approaches and techniques have been proposed to help teachers motivate students and improve their engagement with EL. However, the usefulness and effectiveness of these may vary in different populations of learners. In this paper, the group of learners that will be discussed comprises 30 Chinese sixth grade primary school students aged between 11 and 13. The school is located in one of the developing cities of China, and the teachers are also Chinese. All of the children have three years of EL experience, but in practice, they display mixed levels of English proficiency. They all need to take the middle school entrance English test (MSEET) at the end of the current school year, which is the main EL target at this learning stage. Additionally, these learners are also expected to be competent in practical English communication. The classrooms are well equipped with teaching tools and materials, and students and teachers have access to computers and the Internet. In line with the characteristics of these students and their learning goals, this paper will present and discuss three teaching methods which it is believed are suitable to be used to enhance their engagement: game-based classroom learning, collaborative learning, and scaffolding.

## **2. Three Teaching Techniques**

### *2.1 Game-Based Learning*

The first concept being proposed to enhance young learners' engagement in the English classroom is game-based learning. When it comes to games, many people will associate their purpose with entertainment. However, it has long been proposed that games could be integrated into the EL classroom in order to improve learners' participation and motivation (Gee, 2003, cited in Bado & Franklin, 2014). This is based partially on the simple fact that children like to play. According to Rieber (1996), for children, play performs a key role in both their cognitive and affective domains. Moreover, some elements of games, such as fantasy, enjoyment, and challenge, could easily provoke young learners' intrinsic motivation (Chen & Law, 2016). The idea of embedding games into classroom activities could be called game-based learning, and usually requires students to utilise language knowledge and background knowledge to achieve a specific goal or task (ibid). Pivec et al. (2003) suggest that learners are often motivated by game-based activities due to their desire to solve a problem

or complete a task. Furthermore, game-based activities also enable students to exercise control and make meaningful choices, which could lead to them feeling a sense of autonomy that in turn may increase their learning motivation (Anyaegbu, 2012). Aside from improving students' motivation, Young (1991) points out that game-based activities could also be applied in EL classrooms to relieve learners' negative affective factors. According to one study of Chinese EL learners (Liu & Jackson, 2008), because of the fear of making mistakes and others' negative evaluations, students often feel anxious when asked to use the target language and as a result frequently remain silent or are reluctant to participate fully. In scenarios created in game-based activities, the instructional purpose is often less prominent, which can create a safe environment for learners to try to practice the language (Saunders and Crookall, n.d., cited in Young, 1991). Consequently, students tend to attach less importance to mistakes and judgment, since they are given the excuse that their unsuccessful performances could be attributed to unfamiliarity with the rules of the game or being novice players (*ibid*).

It should be noted that although instructional content is often less visible in game-based activities, this does not mean that the acquisition of language knowledge and skills is ignored. Instead, students might better acquire knowledge through their experiences of performing complex tasks than through individual learning or practice activities (Pivec et al., 2003). In addition, game-based activities are also effective in helping learners to consolidate their prior knowledge by providing a rich and meaningful context (Young, 1991). This type of educational game is not limited to competitive games in the traditional sense, as the teacher could integrate target language into a task that requires students to solve a problem or achieve a goal while adding elements that young people are interested in, such as fantasy, movement, and imagination (Nunan, 2010). Moreover, if the Internet and computers are accessible (as in the context mentioned above), teachers would be provided with more choice and convenience in implementing game-based activities. For example, Anyaegbu et al. (2012) conducted a study in an EL classroom in a Chinese primary school which examined the effectiveness of an online interactive EL program called Mingoville. This program provides a variety of mini-games and tasks related to EL on its website, so a teacher can introduce it into her classroom and encourage students to participate in the activities. The results of the study show that this program can indeed arouse the interest of students and enhance their engagement.

Nevertheless, some potential problems need to be considered when introducing games into the English classroom, as game-based learning might not always be as effective as is claimed. For instance, it has been suggested that students will be motivated by activities that are interesting for them (Pivec et al., 2003). However, in a class of 30 children, it would appear difficult to design an activity that caters to everyone's interests. Moreover, Chen and Law (2016) argue that students are less likely to be motivated by an activity that is too easy or too difficult. On the one hand, a game needs to have a certain degree of challenge to encourage students to overcome it, while on the other hand students will likely become demotivated if they believe that they are incapable of completing the task (*ibid*). Thus, how to set the difficulty of a game's task is a difficult problem for the teacher, especially in a large classroom with

mixed levels of language proficiency among students. Moreover, if a game is highly competitive, it could even become a source of classroom anxiety (Young, 1991). From the analysis above, it can be seen that introducing games into English classrooms is useful in enhancing students' engagement. Through creating a positive and relaxed classroom atmosphere, young learners are encouraged to learn and practice the language in a fun and engaging way. However, a limitation of this method lies in whether teachers can design suitable game tasks that consider the interests and language proficiency of all students.

## 2.2 Cooperative Learning

The second technique that will be introduced is cooperative learning, which is very common in English teaching. It refers to dividing students into small groups in order to achieve a common learning goal through cooperation. According to Julkunen and Borzava (1996, cited in Dornyei, 1997), cooperative learning is more likely to motivate learners compared with competitive or individualistic approaches. A number of arguments have been put forward in support of this position. Firstly, Ushioda (1996, cited in Dornyei, 1997) argues that this mode of learning could provide learners with an appropriate psychological condition that enables them to be intrinsically motivated. Furthermore, in cooperative learning, students will be endowed with a sense of ownership of their learning through interaction with their peers (*ibid*). Such a sense of ownership leads to learning autonomy and thus motivates students (Lin, 2010, cited in Baleghizadeh & Farhesh, 2014). This is particularly relevant in the context of this paper because the English classroom in China is generally teacher-centered with students being viewed as passive receivers (Rao, 2013). In such a situation, students are less likely to have learning autonomy which may explain their relatively low levels of classroom engagement. Another reason why a cooperative classroom could motivate students is that it generates positive interdependence among students. According to Johnson et al. (1993), during group activities, students often have a sense that they must put in their own efforts and coordinate them with those of others in order to achieve a common goal. Moreover, they tend to become more active in group work because of a sense of responsibility for their peers' learning (Lee, 1999, cited in Sato, 2003).

In addition to enhancing student motivation, a cooperative classroom could solve some other problems related to affective factors that may arise in the traditional classroom. As Baleghizadeh and Farhesh (2014) suggest, cooperative learning could control students' affective filters and relieve their anxiety. Research shows that more than half of English learners feel anxious when asked to speak in front of the class (Young, 1991). The reason for this is the fear of making mistakes or looking "dumb" in front of other students (*ibid*). Such an audience effect could be overcome in cooperative learning (Long & Porter, 1985). This is because it will help to create a relaxed classroom atmosphere for students, rather like an intimate community. Consequently, students will be more willing to take risks in using the target language. Another explanation for cooperative learning reducing students' fear or anxiety is that, during group work, students are less likely to feel that they will be singled out and blamed or laughed at for making a mistake (Sato, 2003). This seems to be particularly relevant in the context of young

learners in China. In fact, according to one survey of young learners of English, participants reported that cooperative learning increased their motivation, and made them feel less constrained and freer to practice and make mistakes (Littlejohn, 1983, cited in Long & Porter, 1985). Furthermore, based on the interaction hypothesis proposed by Long (1980, cited in Baleghizadeh & Farhesh, 2014), learners could better acquire language through interaction and negotiation for meaning. This shows that cooperative learning is likely to be effective in helping the target students to realise their learning goals.

However, there exist some potential problems which cannot be ignored. First of all, students sometimes refuse to cooperate with classmates who they do not want to talk to (Sato, 2003). In addition, some students will resist the views of fellow group members and insistently stick to their own judgment (ibid). Moreover, it has been mentioned above that positive interdependence could contribute to students' motivation, but this relies on the premise that every group member will do their fair share of group work (Johnson et al., 1995, cited in Dornyei, 1997). In reality, some students may play a dominant role while others may not perform any meaningful role at all. In such cases, students may even become demotivated due to the poor cooperative learning experience. These issues should be considered particularly carefully when teaching English to young learners, due to their specific characteristics (Nunan, 2010). Finally, social skills are a precondition of cooperative learning (Johnson et al., 1995, cited in Dornyei, 1997), but young learners may lack competence in these due to their often limited knowledge of the world (Nunan, 2010). Consequently, the assistance of teachers could be required to help students to develop such skills. Despite these issues, the use of cooperative learning is still recommended because it offers a pathway to creating a classroom that supports the enhancement of student motivation.

### *2.3 Scaffolding*

The final measure that will be examined is scaffolding. Scaffolding was first proposed by Vygotsky (1978) when he put forward the concept of the 'zone of proximal development', which refers to the gap between what a person can do on his own and what he can accomplish with the support of others (Lantolf, 2000, cited in Samana, 2013). To put it simply, scaffolding refers to providing learners with necessary and appropriate help so that they can better achieve learning results. However, in addition to promoting learning results, scaffolding can also be used to enhance student engagement in EL. It has been found that students' classroom anxiety and unwillingness to use the target language may be due to a lack of confidence in using English (Liu & Jackson, 2008). This is particularly relevant to the target context because the English teachers are non-native speakers so they are less likely to have had many opportunities for authentic interactions in English. Similarly, they will typically have had few chances to be exposed to English in their daily lives (ibid). This may in turn cause their students to have more doubts and lack self-confidence in their English proficiency. Scaffolding, therefore, could help teachers to increase students' self-perceived English proficiency (ibid). In this way, students will be encouraged to participate in classroom activities. Furthermore, Ahangrai et al. (2014) suggest that scaffolding of language could increase the possibility of students being successful in an activity or task related to that

language. If students are aware of their progress or experience success, they will become more confident and motivated in using the target language (Young, 1991). Another advantage of scaffolding is that it can help to build a good relationship between teachers and students. When students are in trouble or need assistance, teachers will be able to help them to solve their problems, leading to the formation of a supportive and positive image of the teacher in the minds of students. According to Horwitz et al. (1986, cited in Simimy, 1994), building a good rapport between teachers and learners is extremely useful in reducing classroom anxiety.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that scaffolding may be counterproductive if used improperly. For example, Arfaei Zarandi and Rahbar (2016) suggest that teachers may provide students with too much instruction due to the demands of keeping up with the curriculum, resulting in students being made to exert too much effort and gradually losing motivation. This is particularly likely to happen in the target context because teachers are faced with the pressure of preparing students for the MSEET. Therefore, excessive scaffolding has the possibility of demotivating students. Additionally, there is the issue of large class sizes. In a classroom of 30 students, it may be difficult for teachers to take care of every student individually and provide them with the help that they need. If some students are ignored, they may feel frustrated and demotivated. However, according to Samana (2013), it is not only teachers who should provide scaffolding as students can also support each other. In this respect, the cooperative learning outlined above could be integrated with scaffolding to provide an effective solution.

### **3. Conclusion**

It is clear that affective factors are worthy of special attention when considering teaching English to young learners. Fostering a positive attitude and motivation towards learning English can not only help children to achieve greater progress in their current learning but also benefit the future development of their language skills. In addition, it is necessary for teachers to pay attention to certain negative emotional factors faced by students, and make efforts to eliminate these in order to improve their learning efficiency. With reference to older primary age children in a school in China, this paper has offered three suggestions to enhance students' engagement with EL. The first idea is to combine classroom activities with some elements of games, which could engage young learners by stimulating their interest, providing them with learning autonomy, and reducing their fear of making mistakes. The second suggestion is to employ cooperative learning more in the classroom because this could help to create a safe and motivating environment for learning and exploring language. Finally, scaffolding is useful in increasing students' self-confidence in using English and establishing a good relationship between teachers and students, and will also contribute to enhancing students' engagement with language learning. Although it has been noted that these methods are not without certain limitations and weaknesses, it is possible for teachers to make productive use of them by keeping some important points in mind. Firstly, teaching approaches or techniques used in the classroom should be flexible and dynamic, and be adjusted according to situational changes, such as students' progress or affective

variables. Secondly, integration of the different techniques can be used to reduce the impact of their shortcomings and achieve better results, such as by enabling students to provide scaffolding for each other as mentioned above. Finally, for any method to be truly effective, it must take into account the characteristics and needs of students, such as their interests and language levels. Only when teachers have a clear understanding of their students can they devise targeted methods and activities that will help them to make measurable progress in their language learning.

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