

EFL teachers' factors and students' affect

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Abstract: Individual learners' affective factors are very important for foreign language learning. In China foreign language learning mainly happens in classroom. Foreign language teachers are the organizers and carriers of language classes, and thus they inevitably influence the students' affection. This study explores how EFL teachers influence students' affect, what the teachers should do to develop and make good use of students' positive affect, and what the teachers should do to avoid the negative affect and facilitate its possible transformation into the positive.

Key words: affect; humanism; affective filter

1. Introduction

How to successfully acquire a foreign language? Many linguists and psychologists have been trying their best to answer such problems. During the recent years more and more researchers have begun to study the affective factors. In China, English as a foreign language is learnt mainly in classroom and the teacher is the direct organizer and carrier of a language class. Isolation of Chinese EFL students from native speakers and from the culture of the target language is a serious obstacle to these students' advanced acquisition of that language (James,1990). Therefore, EFL teachers in China affect EFL students more than teachers of English as a second language (ESL) do. For a long time, Chinese EFL teaching has been under the model of "teacher-centered". This teaching model emphasizes the cognitive aspect, but ignores the emotional communication between students. So, nowadays emotional illiteracy is a common phenomenon. This is very harmful to language learning and students' all-round development.

The present study explores the students' attitudes towards the foreign language teachers' influence on their affection and how the teachers affect students, and seeks ways to lower students' affective filter. Only through this way, can foreign language learners in China acquire higher language proficiency.

2. Relevant Literature Review

2.1 Humanistic perspectives

Humanistic approach, one of the mainstreams of contemporary educational theories and practices, emphasizes the importance of the inner world of the learner and places the individual's thought, feelings and emotions at the forefront of all human development. The second language pedagogy over the past two decades has been much impacted by Humanism.

Humanistic approach to second language teaching is characterized by learner-centeredness in that a student is first of all regarded as a person—a whole being, with his individual characters both in cognition and in affect. It

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assumes that students learn a second language best when they are treated as individuals with their own characters and specific needs. Learner-centered teaching does not mean to play down the role of the teacher; rather, it highly values the role of teacher in that the classroom teacher can encourage the students through negotiations, which allow the students to be aware of the direction their learning is taking, and therefore take more interest and become more involved in what they are doing. The role of the teacher consequently shifts from that of instructor towards that of facilitator, thus playing an even more important role in developing student positive affective state. Humanistic approach stresses the importance of a learning environment, which minimizes anxiety and enhances personal security. The humanistic teacher, on the one hand, gives the dominating role to the learners; on the other hand, the teacher creates a supportive psychological atmosphere for the learners so they can study independently, non-defensively and therefore, effectively. Humanistic education stresses the need to unite the cognitive and affective domains in order to educate the whole person. In light of this, developing language learners' positive affect is conceived as both means and end of a language instructional program. So According to the thought of humanistic education, the target of education is developing the human beings' ability from every aspect. A whole man should not only have intelligence, but also have good personality. Then education involves both cognitive activities and affective activities. Teachers and students together share the affective interaction.

2.2 Second language acquisition perspectives

In addition to the quest for affective teaching methods, research on what is going on inside the learner has gained much notice. The discoveries of Gardner and Lambert are noteworthy: one's attitudes and feelings in learning a foreign language play an important role and negative feelings lead to poor performance.

Dulay and Burt proposed the theory of "the Affective Filter Hypothesis" to explain how affective variables affect the foreign language learning process. American linguist Stephen Krashen (1982) later further developed the theory. The Affective Filter Hypothesis deals with how affective factors relate to second language acquisition. The filter controls how much input the learner comes into contact with, and how much input is converted into intake. It is "affective" because the factors, which determine its strength, have to do with the learner's motivation, self-confidence, or anxiety state. Learners with high motivation and self-confidence and with low anxiety have low filters and so obtain and let in plenty of input. Learners with low motivation, little self-confidence, and high anxiety have high filters and so receive little input and allow even less in.

2.3 Psychology perspective

Modern psychology has tested that affect has nine important functions: motivation function; consolidating function; adjusting function; signal function; infecting function; transfer function; leading function and harmonizing function. It is very important for teachers to try best to develop learners' active affect and make good use of the affective functions. American psychologist Bruno proposed the theory of "motivation principle". He holds that motivation is the best impetus to study well. According to educational psychology, one of the most important factors, which influence the learning result, is learners' affective control (SHU Ding-fang, 1993).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The analysis consisted of a pilot study, a written questionnaire, and interviews. In order to develop an appropriate survey instrument for this study, in May 2006 a pilot survey was administered to 50 English major students of a Normal University in the south of Shandong Province, China. The final questionnaire included nine

variables, which may influence students' affection.

In September 2006, the questionnaire was administered to 225 English majors studying at the same university. All the 225 questionnaires distributed were handed back. Following the survey, in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 of the participants to further explore students' affective needs.

In formulating interview questions, efforts were made to ensure that the questions were clear, precise, and motivating. All the interviews, which lasted 1-2 hours each, were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim as soon as possible afterwards. The earlier interviews were used to generate new interview questions and provide direction for subsequent ones. Transcripts of the interviews were later given to the participants for verification.

3.2 Subjects

The subjects chosen for the formal questionnaires survey are 225 English majors of 8 regular classes in a Normal University in the south of Shandong Province. 60 participants came from two first grade classes, 55 from two second-year classes, 58 from two junior classes, and 52 from two senior ones. Of the 225 participants, 98 were male and 127 were female, ranging from 18 to 24 years in age; the average age was 21.6. Their experience in learning English varied from 11 to 16 years, with an average of 13 years.

14 of the 225 survey participants were chosen for interviews. In selecting interview informants, Patton's "maximum variation sampling" was followed. Thus a maximum variation was allowed for in participants' age, sex, learning experience, and grade. First of all, students of all grades must be represented in the group of interview informants and each grade students should be equally represented. Second, an equal number of male and female students should be included. Then the other two parameters—informants' age and years of learning English, were added, which were intended to be as varied as possible. The background of the interview was tabulated (see Table 1).

The 14 informants involved in this study were identified by their pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. The following table shows the participants' background characteristics out of the questionnaires regarding their pseudonyms, gender, years of learning English, grade, and age.

Table 1 Background characteristics of the 14 cases

Pseudonym	Gender	Years of learning English	Grade	Age
Tom	M	11	First	18
Mike	M	12	Second	19
Lily	F	15	Senior	22
Toni	F	14	Senior	23
Echo	F	11	First	19
John	M	14	Senior	22
Andy	F	13	Junior	21
Kim	M	11	Second	19
Mary	F	11	Senior	21
Bums	M	12	First	18
Kate	F	12	Second	18
Wood	M	13	Junior	20
Bake	M	12	Second	20
Cathy	F	14	Junior	21

3.3 Instruments

Two types of instruments were employed: a questionnaire for the survey study, and interviews for the case study.

4. Results

This part will present the results of the data collection and analyses. Based on the data from questionnaires and interviews, classification was made. In general, the students can feel the affective influences by their English teachers from the following nine aspects: teachers' personality, teachers' vocational affect and moral, teachers' knowledge, the way of treating the teaching material, the management of the teaching environment, the way of making teaching evaluation, teachers' affective characteristics, teaching style, and the way of organizing classroom instruction.

Table 2 The influence rate of teachers' personality

	No influence	Influence	Great influence
Participant number	0	29	196
Percentage (%)	0	12.9	87.1

Table 2 shows that 100% of the participants were aware of the influence of the teachers' personality on their learning. For instance, Mary wrote in her response: *I like the teacher who has his own personality. He is not only a teacher but also a person as well and it comes through the lesson.*

Table 3 The influence rate of teachers' vocational affect and moral

	No influence	Influence	Great influence
Participant number	0	17	208
Percentage (%)	0	7.6	92.4

Table 3 reports that 100% of the participant agreed that teachers' vocational affect and moral is decisive for their learning emotion. Loving the profession as a foreign language teacher is the basic premise of teaching well. Tom responded: *If a teacher really enjoys her job, that would make the lessons more interesting.*

Table 4 The influence rate of teachers' knowledge

	No influence	Influence	Great influence
Participant number	0	32	193
Percentage (%)	0	14.2	85.8

The data shows 100% of the participants stressed the importance of teachers' knowledge. We all know that even *a clever housewife cannot cook a meal without rice*. Teachers' knowledge is the *rice*. Mike is a male student, extroverted. He has learned English for about 12 years. He is active in class. He views teachers' knowledge as quite important: *I like a teacher who has lots of knowledge, not only of his subject.*

English language learning involves many other subjects. A good language teacher with extensive knowledge could have comprehensive understanding of materials being discussed, and with effective teaching methodology he would attract students' attention and sustain their interests, thereby helping them digest what they are fed in class on the spot.

Table 5 The influence rate of teaching material treatment

	No influence	Influence	Great influence
Participant number	0	168	57
Percentage (%)	0	74.7	25.3

All the survey and interview participants considered that a good English teacher should meet his/her students' needs and make the material of teaching interesting and active. The following comments were typical:

To tell you the truth, I didn't like English very much before I entered the university. When I was in the middle school I was the most silent one in my class, and takes no active participation in class. Yes, I was passive in English studying at that time; I did not have confidence of studying English well. It is my Intensive Reading teacher-Miss Zhang who makes me realize that English studying is very interesting! I never forget the first class she has given us! I knew we should learn a new text: Good Manners in England. It seemed dull! Instead of reading the new text and learning the new words, Miss Zhang asked us "what are good manners in China?" We are Chinese, and we know it very well! All the class became active, and we gave many examples of good manners in China. That is very easy! Then Miss Zhang asked "As far as you're concerned, what are good manners in England? Let's have a discussion".

Table 6 The influence rate of teaching environment management

	No influence	Influence	Great influence
Participant number	46	135	44
Percentage (%)	20.4	60	19.6

Teaching environment here refers to the interpersonal relation between the English teachers and the students. 79.6% participants favored appropriate and harmonious relationship between teachers and students that was very important for studying well.

Table 7 The influence rate of teaching evaluation way

	No influence	Influence	Great influence
Participant number	0	23	202
Percentage (%)	0	10.2	89.8

100% of the participants agreed seemly evaluation by the teacher is decisive for their learning emotion. Evaluations the students needed most from their teachers were positive, hortative and pertinent ones. Evaluations should be rejected that are too sharp, passive, and even harmful to students' physical and psychological health. Kim is a female student. He is active and outgoing. He learns English with enthusiasm and motivation. His response was: *I prefer praise rather than criticism; otherwise my self-esteem may be hurt. Teachers' evaluation is fairly important concerning language learning.*

Table 8 The influence rate of teachers' affective characteristics

	No influence	Influence	Great influence
Participant number	29	129	67
Percentage (%)	12.9	57.3	29.8

Teachers' affective characteristics refer to teachers' own mood and the expression on their faces when having class. 87.1% of the participants held the idea that teachers' happy mood and dramatic, rich, and kind expression on their faces could make them excited and even stimulate their interests in studying English. Unhappy mood and strict, stiff, indifferent facial expression were not welcome. Kate, the extrovert girl with 12 years' experience of

learning English responded: *A happy teacher makes me happy and relaxed.*

Table 9 The influence rate of teaching style

	No influence	Influence	Great influence
Participant number	0	159	66
Percentage (%)	0	70.1	29.9

100% of the participants considered the teaching style was an important factor influencing their English learning interest. Toni is a female student. She is field-independent. She responded: *No matter what kind of style a teacher has, he should make us relaxed.*

Table 10 The influence rate of teaching organization

	No influence	Influence	Great influence
Participant number	0	25	200
Percentage (%)	0	11.1	88.9

100% of the participants attach importance to teachers' class organization. They all hoped that teachers should create an active teaching and learning atmosphere. They were eager to be surprised by the teacher through class activities, not always a single model. They hoped intercommunion with the teacher.

5. Implications, Contribution and Limitation

The results of the study clearly show that EFL teachers influence students' affection. All of the students in the survey hold that their EFL teachers do really influence their English language learning, including their interests in the language, motivation, and attitude towards the language, etc. Certain characteristics of teachers can be strong predictors of students' affect. As EFL professionals, instructors have an obligation not only to respond to learners' linguistic needs, but also to their affective needs to produce more successful language learners. Teachers' positive influence on students' affects may enhance students' language proficiency. Teachers' sensitivity and skills in making full use of the above nine variables could be the key to success.

5.1 Implications for EFL Teaching

5.1.1 Renewing teaching idea

For a long period of time foreign language teaching has adopted the traditional grammar-translation method, and students have the idea that to learn well the grammar is to learn a foreign language well. The traditional grammar-translation method pays less attention to the actual use of language in the real society. Nowadays more and more people have realized that the aim of acquiring a language is to communicate. So teachers should renew their teaching idea. The aim of EFL teaching is to cultivate students' communicative competence, including grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence and discourse competence.

5.1.2 Improving EFL teachers' personality

Personality is an individual's inherent idiosyncrasy. EFL teachers' personality concretely embodies in their speeches and behaviors. An excellent teacher should be warm-hearted, humorous, fair, diligent, and conscientious, etc. Teachers with excellent personality have invisible force to impel students to make progress. If the students recognize teachers' excellent personality, this recognition would make students like and respect their teachers which in turn would inspire the students to be greatly interested in learning, and help them form good personality.

5.1.3 Having positive vocational affect and moral

Committedness to the profession of being a foreign language teacher is the basic premise of teaching well. Famous Confucius says, "teaching tirelessly" is the ideal condition of being a good teacher. Teachers feel happy because they have cultivated many persons with ability. But in our society there are still many foreign language teachers who often walk through their teaching. They usually pay little attention to the development of the teaching quality, seldom communicate with students, and teaching result is of course not good. Such kind of teaching attitude not only reduces teachers' prestige, but also hurts students' enthusiasm in learning.

5.1.4 Cultivation of beneficial classroom atmosphere

It is generally accepted that good classroom atmosphere should be harmonious, pleasant, less anxious, active and motivating, so that students may feel relaxed, secure and greatly motivated and may achieve greater success. The teacher plays an important role in cultivating a beneficial classroom atmosphere.

5.1.5 Positive teacher's attitude and expectation

The teacher's attitude to each student contributes to a good and healthy atmosphere. A good teacher should be sympathetic and treat every individual equally, for the teacher's expectation and confidence in his students may encourage them to work harder and achieve greater success; while the ignorance the teacher shows consciously or unconsciously may do harm to students' self-image. So the teacher should not pay over attention to students of good grades only and show preference for them. Instead, he should take notice of the potential of students of poor grades and encourage and help them in their studies. In fact, it is students with poor self-image who are most sensitive and need help eagerly. Words of encouragement or even a smile can help them overcome their poor self-image. Teacher's Expectation shows vividly teachers' attitudes towards the students. Active teachers' expectation can make students feel teachers' trust and respect towards them. It helps form harmonious relationship between teachers and students.

5.1.6 Adoption of elastic methods

One decisive factor to prevent teaching quality from improving is the backwards teaching methods. Every teaching method has its own feature; we cannot say one method is better than the other method. Teachers should adopt teaching methods according to the specific needs of students and teaching activities. Only by this, can efficient teaching occur according to the certain student and certain material. Above all, through the whole teaching process, humanism should be a major concern of the teacher that combines cognitive and affective process.

5.1.7 Respecting student's individual characteristics

With the deepening of foreign language teaching reform, the "learner-centered" theory is gaining more and more attention. Foreign language teaching should focus on the learners. The instructors need to acknowledge that each student is an individual who learns in a unique way. Every student has his own characteristics and learning style, and students' motivations to learn and their psychological states are different too. Teachers should respect student's individual characteristics to suit their different needs. Teachers should be aware that students from different family backgrounds and academic settings might have different learning motivations. Even the same student may have different learning motivations at different times. Understanding the students is the precondition of educating students. Teachers' different understandings of the students lead to different attitudes and behaviors towards the students. Understanding the students is crucial for teaching and studying, and is also the important representation of teachers' psychological quality. English teachers should be first unclouded and open, adjusting to the diversity of the students' personality.

5.2 Contribution

This study describes Chinese English major students' perception towards English teachers' factors for that influence their own affection in studying English, especially for their learning interest. The valuable contribution of this study is to allow EFL instructors of Chinese students a window into classrooms through the student's eyes.

5.3 Limitation

The limitation of this study was the small size of subjects, with only 225 English major participants. The findings from the 225 subjects, especially the 14 cases out of only one university might not be generalized to the large populations (e.g. all EM students at foreign language university, or college students in general).

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