The Research on the Affective Factors Which Influence Students’ Performance in College English Classes

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Abstract. College English classes call for students’ initiative in attending the classroom discussion and negotiation. Learners’ affective factors, especially attitudes and motivations, influence their performance in learning. This paper designed a questionnaire to detect how the learners feel in the actual college English classroom, especially as to the discussion session, and what their motivations are. After the survey, the software SPSS was used to analyze the statistics. Then the tables show the results and suggestions are given in the light of the analysis of the results. Statistics show that students’ participation in the classroom discussion is influenced by some affective factors, and intrinsic motivations have a strong correlation with their learning efficiency.

Introduction

In recent decades cognitive psychology has had a considerable influence on language teaching methodology. In contrast to behaviourism, which explains learning in term of operant conditioning and considers learning as the result of environments rather than genetic factors, cognitive psychology is concerned with the way in which the human mind thinks and learns. Cognitive psychologists are therefore interested in the mental processes that are involved in learning. This includes such aspects as how people build up and make use of their memories and the ways in which they become involved in the process of learning.

In a cognitive approach, learners are seen as active participants in the learning process, in which the learners make their own sense of the new knowledge and links it to what they have already known about the topic. Unless learners build representation of the new learning, “making it their own” by paraphrasing it into their own words and considering its meanings and implications, the learning will be retained only as relatively meaningless and inert rote memories.

One of the cognitive approaches is the constructivist movement. Constructivism embodies two major perspectives, cognitive constructivism and social constructivism. In addition to emphasizing that learning is a process of active construction of meaning, social constructivists emphasize that the process works best in social settings in which two or more individuals engage in sustained discourse about a topic. Participation in such discussions helps participants to advance their learning in several ways. Exposure to new input from others makes them aware of things that they did not know and leads to expansion of their cognitive structures. Exposure to ideas that contradict their own beliefs may cause them to examine those beliefs and perhaps restructure them. The need to communicate their ideas to others forces them to articulate those ideas more clearly, which sharpens their conceptions and often leads to recognition of new connections. As a result, cognitive structures become better developed.

In college English classrooms, students do not simply learn the linguistic structures and grammar rules, which was called language competence by Chomsky. They have to learn how to use the language properly, that is, to convert their language competence to communicative competence, which was first used by Dell Hymes in 1966. Therefore, teachers have to stimulate the students’
participation in the classroom discussion and negotiation. This situation is closely related with students’ affective state, which is one part of humanism.

Humanistic approaches emphasize the importance of the inner world of the learner and place the individual’s thoughts, feelings and emotions at the forefront of all human development [1]. These are aspects of the learning process that are often unjustly neglected, especially in language learning, as language itself is particularly humanistic and with social features.

Motivation

Affective Factors

An obvious fact about language learners is that they achieve quite different degrees of success. Why do some language learners learn better than others? Stevick answers in terms of internal processes: “Success depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analysis, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom” [2]. Stern comments, “the affective component contributes at least as much and often more to language learning than the cognitive skills” [3]. This claim is supported by a large body of recent cross-disciplinary research, showing that affective variables have significant influence on language achievement.

To understand affect in language learning is important for at least two reasons. First, attention to affective aspects can lead to more effective language learning. When dealing with the affective side of language learners, attention needs to be given both to how we can overcome problems created by negative emotions and to how we can create and use more positive, facilitative emotions.

A second reason for focusing attention on affect in the language classroom reaches beyond language teaching and even beyond what has traditionally been considered the academic realm. Daniel Goleman [4] has convincingly presented his case for an “expanded mandate” for all educational institutions. He points out that, especially since the eighteenth century, in Western civilization they have concentrated on understanding the rational, cognitive function of our mind, while misusing or denying whatever falls within the realm of the emotions or the non-rational. One of the consequences of this situation is their current “emotional illiteracy”. He believes what schools can do to educate the whole student is to bring together mind and heart in the classroom. His opinion is also fit for the conditions of China. In a college English classroom which focuses on meaningful interaction, there is certainly room for dealing with affect.

Stern [3] considers three major concepts of affect in second language learning: attitudes, motivation and personality. In this research focus is on students’ attitudes and motivation in college English classroom.

Motivation

Most researchers and educators would agree that motivation “is a very important, if not the most important factor in language learning” [5], without which even “gifted” individuals cannot accomplish long-term goals, whatever the curricula and whoever the teacher. Thus the concept of language learning motivation has become central to a number of theories of L2 acquisition, and motivation has been widely accepted by teachers and researchers as one of the key factors influencing the rate and success of L2 learning, often compensating for deficiencies in language aptitude and learning. It could be said that all other factors involved in L2 acquisition presuppose motivation to some extent.

Sometimes we do something because the act of doing it is enjoyable in itself. At other times we engage in an activity not because we are particularly interested in the activity itself, but because performing it will help us to obtain something else that we want. Cognitive psychologists, therefore, came to draw a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura [6] provide a clear definition of these concepts. Very simply, when the only reason for performing an act is to gain something outside the activity itself, such as passing an exam, or earning a reward or avoiding a punishment, the motivation is likely to be extrinsic. When the experience of doing something generates interest and enjoyment, and the reason for performing the
activity lies within the activity itself, then the motivation is likely to be intrinsic. A general
guideline would be to ask: Would I do this even if no reward or punishment followed?

Dickinson [7] claims that success enhances motivation only in children who are focused on
learning goals, that is, who are intrinsically motivated. According to Koestner & McClelland [8],
research on intrinsic motivation has led to the conclusion that intrinsic motivation will be greatest
under conditions that foster feelings of challenge, competence, and self-determination. They also
claim that if external events enhance feelings of competence, as when someone is told he or she has
done a task very well, intrinsic motivation is likely to increase. By contrast, events that lead to
feelings of incompetence are likely to undermine intrinsic motivation.

Much of the work in this area suggests that it is important to present tasks which tap into the
learners’ intrinsic motivation both at the stage of initiating and sustaining motivation. This would
include a consideration of interest, curiosity, challenge, and the development of independent
mastery and judgement.

The Research

The author conducted a survey aiming to find out a) How the learners feel in the actual college
English classroom, especially as to the discussion session? b) What are their motivations?
The survey is to find out which factors influence the learners’ activity in English learning and
English class, and what motivate them to learn English well.

The author designs the questionnaire according to the literature review, aiming to find out what
influence English learners’ attitudes and their attendance in the discussion in college English class.
The questionnaire is divided into 2 dimensions. Each statement in the dimensions ranges from
strongly disagree, disagree, agree, to strongly agree, which are scored 1, 2, 3 and 4 separately.

As the titles suggest, dimensions a) and b) are to find out the learners’ reasons for and feelings
about college English class and class discussion sessions.

Following is the questionnaire.

A. My attitudes toward my participation in the discussion in English classes:
1. I have no interest in the discussion and I think it is insignificant in improving my English.
2. I am afraid of making mistakes, so I am not active.
3. I am afraid of being thought of as a bad English learner by the teacher.
4. Sometimes the topic for discussion is too boring and uninteresting.
5. Some of my classmates are good at spoken English and I have a sense of inferiority.
6. I dislike English classes at all.
7. The proficiency of the English teacher is not high, so I don’t want to say anything.
8. The teacher often acts as an initiator and elicitor.
9. I would like to make the best of the opportunities to practise my English language.
10. I always take part in the discussion actively.
11. I become nervous when the teacher asks us to discuss.
12. I like discussion best in English classes.
13. When the teacher asks questions, I often like to call out whatever I think.
14. I seldom open my mouth unless I am called on.
15. The teacher always corrects our mistakes.
16. I feel happy when I discuss with my classmates.
17. I can’t find a suitable partner for discussion.
18. The interaction and cooperation between the teacher and students are nice.

B. What motivate me to learn English well?
19. I want to satisfy myself with a sense of achievement.
20. I want to establish my capability.
21. I want to pass the CET4 and CET 6, or pass the national entrance exam for postgraduate
students.
22. I want to go abroad.
23. I want to understand the culture and history of English-speaking countries.
24. I want to enjoy the movies, TV programs, songs and literature works in their original English editions.
25. I want to find a better job after graduation.
26. I want to communicate with foreigners.
27. I want to improve my professional study.
28. I want to pass the exams and graduate.
29. I want to challenge myself.

One hundred and twenty questionnaires were collected from the students in Grade One of the University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (UESTC). After the questionnaire, the subjects’ latest final exam scores were collected and their scores in national College English Test Grade 4 (CET 4) were also collected later. The statistics is dealt with by the software SPSS.

The Results of the Research and Analysis

The statistic results are reported accordingly:

A. My attitudes toward my participation in the discussion in English classes

Statements 1-18 (S1-18) are about the students’ attitudes toward the discussion sessions in the English classroom. The mean of the total score of each statement is 2.5 ((1+2+3+4)/4=2.5), so the statements with means over 2.5 are chosen as ones that are largely agreed on. S2, S4, S8, S9, S14, S15 and S18. Put the percentages of agree and strongly agree together and we get the percentage of agreement. According to the percentages of agreement, the statements are listed as follows: S8(70.6%), S14(70%), S9 (61.5%), S15 (58.8%) , S4(53.2%) , S2 (49.7%) and S18 (49%). In discussion and conversation, even though most students (70.6%) think their teachers are good at encouraging them to speak in the class, most of the learners (70%) are not active and would not like to open their mouth unless called on by the teacher. That is truly one of the problems in the English classroom. At least two reasons can be found in this table, “Sometimes the topic for discussion is too boring and uninteresting” (53.2% agreement); “I am afraid of making mistakes, so I am not active” (49.7% agreement). But generally, the students really want to improve their English learning, for 61.5% of the students “would like to make the best of the opportunities to practice my English language”. So the teacher should try to prepare more interesting topics and tasks, and try to relax the atmosphere of discussion and free the students from worrying about making mistakes as well. Teachers can’t “always corrects our mistakes”, which will make the students feel that making a mistake is really a big problem. In college English classroom, the successful communication of meanings is more important than the accuracy of language. Through asking for a clearer and more detailed response in a kind and soft voice, or breaking down the question, the teacher can help the students well express themselves without making them feel embarrassment. Anyhow, the data indicates that the teachers have tried their best. They have been acting as an initiator and elicitor in the discussion. And the interaction and cooperation between the teacher and students are not very bad. The next step for teachers is just to improve the ways and be more effective.

B. What motivate me to learn English well?

Table 1. Correlations Among CET4 Score, Final Score and Intrmtv (intrinsic motivation).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CET4</th>
<th>Final</th>
<th>INTRMTV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CET4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.733**</td>
<td>.354**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRMTV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.354**</td>
<td>.189</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.054</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>140</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Table 1 illustrates that learners’ CET4 scores are highly correlated with their intrinsic motivations: the correlation coefficient \( r \) is 0.354 and the significant level is 0.004, less than 0.01. To test whether the learners who have stronger intrinsic motivations are significantly different in their performance in CET4 and the final exam from those who have less intrinsic motivations, a t-test is made based on their scores in intrinsic motivation. The mean of the scores in intrinsic motivation is 1.35. Because there is no decimal in the scores, so 2 is chosen as the cut point. In other words, the test is to be made between the learners whose scores equal or over 2 in intrinsic motivation and those whose scores are less than 2.

Table 2. T-test on Two Types of Learners with Strong or Weak Intrinsic Motivations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>Std. Error Difference</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Final</td>
<td>2.134</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>.035</td>
<td>3.807</td>
<td>1.784</td>
<td>.269 - 7.344</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Std. Error Mean stands for standard error mean. t stands for the value of t-test. df stands for degrees of freedom. Std. Error Difference stands for standard error difference.

Table 2 shows T-test on Two Types of Learners: with Strong or Weak Intrinsic Motivations. It indicates that the significant levels of the t-test are 0.001 and 0.035, both less than 0.05, which means these two types of learners are significantly different in the performance in the exams. There is a strong correlation between the intrinsic motivations and the learning efficiency.

Therefore, the stronger the intrinsic motivations are, the better the learning efficiency is. To foster students’ intrinsic motivations, teachers may have various ways. They may introduce excellent English movies and poems and lead the students to a warm discussion about them. They may also design some challenging but operable tasks and stimulate their ambition to win and to show. Teachers should especially pay attention to communicate friendly with students after class, so that they can influence students’ attitudes toward English learning positively. Affirmation and appreciation of the students should be the best way to encourage students. Even small progresses of students should be recognized and pointed out by teachers because once students realize that these progresses have been noticed by the teacher and some others, they will be more confident and positive in English learning. That will give them a sense of achievement and increase their intrinsic motivation greatly.

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References


