Second Language Acquisition: Summary Of Article 'The Relationship Between Learners' Affective Variables And Second Language Achievement

A. Bibliography

Alrabai,F., & Movkosky,C. (2016). The Relationship between Learners' Affective Variables and Second Language Achievement. Arab World English Journal (AWEJ), Volume.7, Number.2, (p. 77-103).

B. Introduction:

Alrabai and Movkosky recognize the definitive connection between learners' L1 and self-identity, as well as, how the interaction of a combination of factors and elements (including biological, cognitive and environmental) can affect the process of learning L2, especially for adults. The learning process can challenge the learners' self-identity and conjure up a multitude of intense emotions (including frustration, embarrassment, fear, loss of self-confidence, etc.), which in turn can inhibit learners' ability to achieve competency. Aware of this, Alrabai and Movkosky recognized the importance of further examination into the impact psychological effects have, both individually and in concert on the learning of L2. The focus of this particular research study is on the five affective variables (attitudes, motivation, anxiety, autonomy, and self-esteem) and their influence on successful L2 acquisition (L2 achievement). The overriding thought is that all of the affective variables have a strong interdependence and interrelationship.

The five effective variables studied by Alrabai and Movkosky have been examined by other researchers, but have either received little attention in terms of their relevance to L2 learning or their effect on L2 learning has not been explored individually or in concert. Furthermore, many of them have used final grades as the measure, which resulted in the variability of results.

All five affective variables have a strong connection, are in constant interplay with one another and are important components in determining how we interact and engage with the world we live in. All play a decisive role in an individual's perception of self-identity, which studies have revealed is often challenged in the process of acquiring L2.

Target language (TL) acquisition involves complex mental operations that can challenge these precepts and by doing so provoke strong emotional reactions that inhibit learning competence. The role of affect has been found to have a greater psychological impact on learners' capacity to perform and to have deeper implications in L2 acquisition than in other cognitive domains. The term "affective variables" has been used in this research study to describe five factors that are closely related to learner's self-identity. It should be stated that they are not necessarily conceptualized as such by other researchers and are not all affective in the same way. While this study explores the effect these variables have on L2 achievement both separately and in conjunction with one another, the principle aim was to determine which of the five variables (attitudes, motivation, anxiety, autonomy, and self-esteem) contributes the most.

B.1. Attitudes: Attitude is defined as “an individual’s disposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to an object, person, institution, or event, or any other discriminable aspect of the individual’s world” (Ajzen, 1989, p. 241). The focus of this study was on learners’ attitudes specific to their learning situation; the curriculum, the teacher, the methods of teaching, and the classroom dynamics, as well as the learner’s attitudes towards the target language (TL), its culture, values and the community in which it is spoken (Gardner, 2001). Previous research examining the part attitudes play in language acquisition has consistently shown a strong connection between attitudes and motivation.

B.2. Anxiety: One of the definitions was stated as “(a)nxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (Spielberger, 1938, P. 1). While the term has a broader definition, the specific type relevant to this study is “Foreign Language Anxiety”, which is defined as “a distinct complex construct of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128). They coined the term “situation-specific anxiety” to distinguish it from a general personality trait. Studies of L2 anxiety have consistently shown it to have a negative effect on language acquisition, although one study showed that success in L2 acquisition can lower anxiety levels.

B.3. Self-esteem: Most studies examining self-esteem have been done outside the field of linguistics and were done in the mid-20th century. Self-esteem is broadly considered to be a fairly fixed personality trait, which has a strong influence on behavior (Fitts, 1965; Miskimins, 1973; Rogers, 1951). Self-esteem can be classified into three levels, global, specific and task. Global self-esteem is an individual’s general sense of personal value and is not based on any specific abilities or traits. Specific self-esteem is a sense of personal value based on general abilities and attributes (learning L2). Task self-esteem is a sense of personal value based on specific learning tasks (doing a grammar exercise, engaging in a communicative task, a language test, etc.) Previous studies of self-esteem have shown that high global self-esteem is typically linked to high achievement and low anxiety, but specific and task self-esteem are much better indicators of learners’ actual performance.

B.4. Autonomy: Dickinson (1993, p. 330) defined the term autonomy as “an attitude towards learning in which the learner is prepared to take, or does take, responsibility for his own learning”. As with self-esteem, much of the research done has been outside of the linguistic field. Autonomy is thought to enhance intrinsic motivation and promote higher learner achievement levels because the learner will set goals on their own, reflect on their progress and further their practice outside the classroom.

B.5. Motivation: In Gardner’s Socio-Educational Model, motivation is seen to have three components: motivational intensity, a desire to learn the TL, and attitudes toward learning the TL. In addition, Gardner noted a fourth attitudinal component which he identified as a precursor to motivation; attitudes to the learning situation (Gardner, 1985). The 1990s saw a shift towards more psychology-based approaches in examining motivation; linking L2 motivation to the learners’ sense of self, through cognitive-situated, process-oriented studies. They explored self-esteem and attitudes and how they both change and affect motivation. It is universally agreed that motivation is a critical component in the acquisition and achievement of L2.

C. Methodology

C.1. Design:

Two sets of data were collected: 1) through a questionnaire relating to the five affective variables mentioned above, and 2) L2 proficiency data via an L2 achievement test. In figure 1, the relationship between individual affective variables and L2 achievement can be seen.

Data was collected in two waves with a period of 3 months in between. Both were administered in the participants' L1, Arabic. 274 participants took part in the 1st collection wave (Time 1 - T1) at the beginning of the semester. Due to absenteeism and invalid answers, the number dropped to 252 for the 2nd collection wave (Time 2 - T2) at the end of the semester. The 2-wave design of the data collection made it possible to examine the relative stability of the correlations for the individual variables over time.

C.2. Participants:

Those participating in the study were male Saudi undergraduates at three different universities in Saudi Arabia; King Khalid University, King Abdulaziz University, and King Saud University. All of the participants were taking EFL to satisfy a requirement for their degree. Although they were all Saudi citizens whose first language was Arabic, they came from various social and regional backgrounds. One-third came from the capital city, one third from the southern region and one-third from the western region of Saudi Arabia. They ranged in age from 15 to over 25 years old, with the greatest majority in the 19-22-year-old range (84+%). Those falling between the ages of 23-25 represented (9+%) and the combined total of those aged 15- 22 and those over 25 were negligible (3+%). While the period of their EFL learning experiences ranged from 5 to over 15 years, 93% fell into the 5-15 year bracket, and from that group, almost 65% had English experience over a period of 5-10 years.

C.3. Instruments:

The two instruments used were a questionnaire, which contained 58 questions relating to the five affective variables and a language achievement test. The collected data were subjected to preliminary statistical analyses and found to have a reliability index of .91 at (1st) and .88 at (2nd).

The questionnaire was multiple-choice using a five-point Likert scale, with responses to the questions ranging from Very Untrue to Very True. Participants completed the questionnaire in one sitting during class time in an atmosphere of anonymity. The participants' L2 proficiency levels were tested using standardized EFL achievement tests, which were carefully moderated and tested for reliability. Multiple regression analyses were performed to establish the capacity of the affective variables under consideration to predict learner achievement and to identify which of these variables had the greatest impact on learners' achievement. Although the institutions administered different tests they were all very similar in content and practically identical in structure. The multiple-choice portion of the tests targeted the same types of language skills: listening, reading and grammar. The writing was tested separately using a single, holistically evaluated writing task. The tests were 2-hour mid-term syllabus-based progress tests with a maximum score of 25.

D. Results:

The results of the EFL achievement tests showed a remarkable consistency of achievement levels across the two collection waves. Interestingly, nearly 70% of learners fell within the low-to-moderate range and none of the participants fell in the very high achievement range. Inferential statistical analyses from both collection waves showed significant correlations among all of the affective variables. While anxiety was found to be negatively correlated with the other affective variables, its correlation values were noticeably lower than any of the others and scored the weakest correlation with autonomy at T1 and the attitudes at T2. The strongest correlation was between motivation and self-esteem. The study showed that the only truly stable and durable factor among the five variables was motivation. The other four seemed to be more transient in nature.

Both collection waves showed significant correlations between each of the five affective variables and L2 achievement, with motivation by far the strongest and anxiety the weakest. Anxiety was again found to have a negative correlation with achievement, but the effects of anxiety and self-esteem both lessened below statistical significance over time. Using multiple mediation regression analyses, on data collected from both collection waves the affective variables' capacity to predict achievement was not only significant, but its magnitude was also remarkable. In the 1st collection wave, the five affective variables together explained 91% of the variance in learner achievement, and in the 2nd nearly 85%. The other remarkable result was the highly superior predictive power of motivation relative to that of the other four variables. Motivation alone explained 67% (1st) and 60% (2nd) of the variance in learner achievement. The relative contribution of attitudes, anxiety, autonomy, and self-esteem to achievement, although statistically significant, was quite small. However, it should be noted that anxiety was again found to be negatively correlated with achievement.

E. Conclusions:

These analyses showed a very close interrelationship among the five affective variables, their unique contribution to L2 achievement and their tremendous importance in L2 acquisition. Together they account for between 85% (1st) and 91% (2nd) of the variance in our participants' L2 achievement, but it should be noted that their share is not equal. The principle aim of this study was to determine which of the five variables contributes the most. The results showed compelling evidence that relative to the other four variables motivation had by far the most significant effect on L2 acquisition, accounting for between 60% and 67% of the variance in achievement levels and was the only truly stable and durable factor. By comparison, the individual effects of the other four affective variables can be described as marginal. As stated previously, anxiety had the lowest correlations with L2 achievement and had the weakest predictive capacity. Over time the link between anxiety and achievement disappeared altogether.

According to the authors, it should be kept in mind when considering the results and implications of these analyses, that the true impact of effect on L2 acquisition can only be definitely established relative to the impact of other, non-affective, variables, including a range of social, cognitive, environmental and biological factors. Those factors were not included in this study. Also, this study has been about the effects of the affective variables on achievement, not the other way around. Affective variables and achievement are almost never uni-directional. For

example, motivation contributes to achievement and the level of achievement can, in turn, affect motivation. Just as high achievement will lead to higher self-esteem and lower anxiety.

F. Educational Implications:

The findings revealed the impact the affective variables have in the acquisition of L2 and the critical importance the teachers' role plays in managing their impact, by reducing anxiety and encouraging autonomy, positive attitudes and establishing a classroom atmosphere that nurtures motivation. Above and beyond the social, psychological, environmental and pedagogical factors is how the teacher conducts the class. To a greater or lesser degree what a teacher does or doesn't do has a profound effect on the learners' successes and failures in L2 acquisition.

The findings strongly indicate that of all the affective variables, the strongest link to achievement is motivation. If teachers can engage and motivate learners, it is almost certain to promote learners' autonomy and self-esteem, reduce anxiety, and promote positive attitudes, resulting in improved learning outcomes. Teachers should strive to understand relevant motivational strategies and incorporate those in the classroom.

Incorporating Motivation into the Classroom:

To promote motivation, exercises should engage students and be presented in a variety of contexts. Activities should be varied and relevant to the learners' lives and provide them with the ability to use what they have learned in real-life communication. This also helps students be engaged in class.

One great way to get students engaged is through competitive exercises. Games are a great tool for doing this. One competitive exercise is to divide them into groups and have each group come up with as many vocabulary words as they can from a previously introduced vocabulary bank (things you wear). Give them a limited amount of time to do this. The group that comes up with the most words wins. The lesson can then be expanded in relevant ways to further grammatical, functional, listening, communicative and writing practice.

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