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Acquiring Second/Foreign Listening Skill: The Affective Traits of Effective Learners

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Abstract:

To explore how affective variables may relate to listening proficiency, seventeen effective third-year students from the English department at Badji-Mokhtar University-Annaba were asked to respond to seven questions assessing their affective tendencies. The responses were then subjected to qualitative analysis to identify related attributes. Most students exhibited positive affective traits relevant to enhanced listening skills, including low anxiety levels, a willingness to make mistakes, seeking feedback, and an inclination toward introversion. The findings supported the study's hypotheses that positive affect contributes to successful listening, and those affective traits may predict better listening skills.

Keywords: affective variables; effective learners; listening.

Introduction

Developing effective listening skills poses complex challenges. While models of listening comprehension have highlighted various linguistic and cognitive processes involved, researchers have also recognized the significance of individual learner differences. Studies find learners exhibit diverse rates of progress in listening ability despite similar instruction. This suggests additional factors beyond language knowledge that may influence listening development.

Scholars have investigated a variety of individual factors that may impact listening performance. Some point to how the native language affects listening through cross-linguistic interference. Others emphasize the role of input quantity and quality. Age-related cognitive changes have also been proposed to influence listening comprehension over time. More recently, research has explored cognitive and affective variables specific to learners.

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Affective factors involve emotional states that can impact learning. While affection is likely to play a role, its relative contribution to developing strong listening skills remains inconclusive. This paper examines the affective factors influencing the listening comprehension of effective learners. Its goal is to determine whether listening should be primarily characterized as an affective endeavor based on the understanding of the learning process and attempts to test the following hypotheses:

1) Effective learners maintain positive attitudes while acquiring listening skills.

2) More positive affective variables may predict better L2 listening skills

1. Factors Affecting Acquiring Second/Foreign Listening

Language learning studies demonstrated that the mastery of second/foreign languages varies from one individual to another and from one group to another, no matter how achievement is measured, how proficiency is defined, and no matter how languages are taught (Wilkins, 1972, p.175). One hypothesis is that the native listening system may interfere with comprehending a new language. Similarities and differences between sound systems could determine relative ease or difficulty. According to Lado (1957, p.2):

> The student who comes into contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult.

Another explanation is the importance of comprehensible input. For Krashen (1982, p.31), the quantity and quality of linguistic input plays a decisive role in language learning. It was argued that young children are thought to be better learners. This ability may increase with age since adults are more able to abstract thinking and may thus benefit from comprehensible input.

The Critical Period Hypothesis also proposes that age impacts listening. Younger learners often achieve near-native level, unlike older ones. Limited plasticity after puberty may hinder the automaticity required for rapid listening. Observing immigrant families, Littlewood (1984), Ellis (1994), Brown (2000), Schumann (1975), and many others reported that the common explanation of differences between children and their parents is the existence of a period during which language acquisition and leaning are much easier.

More recently, research has examined cognitive and affective strategy development effects. Factors like working memory, attention span, and language anxiety could impact listening based on maturation. Bacon (1992b) investigated the relationship between listening strategy use and language proficiency. She concluded that success in listening appears to be related to the use of a variety of strategies. Ellis (1994) provided a comprehensive analysis of the research conducted on the affective characteristics of learners and their influence on listening. The results emphasized the significance of the various attributes that learners possess.

2. Affective Variables

The impact of learners' characteristics on the comprehension of listening materials has been extensively explored. Aspects such as self-assurance, motivation, anxiety, inclination towards introversion/extroversion, learners' previous experiences in language acquisition and various other qualities play a role in determining the proficiency with which learners engage in listening activities. Ellis (1994) examined the relationship between learners' traits and their language learning and acquisition processes. Most findings demonstrate a positive correlation and underscore the significance of the diverse attributes that learners bring to the educational setting. Among the affective attributes influencing learning and listening, we list:

2.1 Extraversion vs. Introversion

The common view of extroversion/introversion is often misleading. People tend to see an extrovert as a sociable, talkative, and outgoing person. Conversely, an introvert is a quiet, reserved one (Brown,2000, p.154). Related to this context, two hypotheses were investigated: The first one suggested that an extrovert learner is likely to be more successful in acquiring Basic International Communication Skills (BICS) because their gregarious and outgoing nature will allow them to take risks of seeking interaction with people, be in contact with more input and gather proficiency in communicating in the target language. The second hypothesis suggested that introverted learners tend to develop the Cognitive Academic Language Ability (CALA) because their reclusive nature makes them prefer reading, writing, and enjoying academic success rather than interacting with people (Ellis, 1994).

The first hypothesis got more support than the second. Strong (1983) reported that six out of eight studies based on natural communicative language which therefore provide an example of BICS, showed that extroversion is a facilitator factor in learning. Other studies conducted to investigate that issue (Naiman et al., 1978) yield very inconsistent results and, thus, fail to demonstrate the conclusive positive correlation between extroversion and success in language learning. Brown (2000, p.156) related those results to the different cultural views of valued traits; in some cultures, introverted persons are given more attention than extroverted ones.

2.2 Motivation

Motivation is one of the most important affective variables. It is the requirement for any desire of fulfillment of activities. Littlewood (1984, p. 53) qualified it as the "crucial force which determines whether a learner embarks on a task at all, how energy he devoted to it and how long he perseveres." Brown (2000, p.160) pushed the bar higher by saying, "motivation is probably the most frequently used catch-all term for explaining the success or failure of virtually any complex task."

Gardner and Lambert (1972) specified two motivation orientations: Integrative and instrumental. Integrative motivation is fostered by the learner's positive attitude toward the community and the native speakers of the language they are learning. In contrast, the need for fulfillment using the

learned language as a means lies behind the development of instrumental motivation.

In language learning, motivation has the important role of facilitating learning and maximizing the degree of achievement. Wilkins (1972,p.181) stated that if individuals know that their learning of a foreign language would satisfy their needs, influence the actions and thoughts of others, and pursue their occupation and recreation, surely they would learn that language more rapidly and effectively.

2.3 Language Attitude

Attitude can influence language learning. It was noticed that children who experienced low encouragement from their parents, teachers, or peers because those latter hold negative attitudes toward the culture of the native speakers of that language are likely to acquire this negative attitude and display poor levels of achievement (Larson-freeman & Long, 1991, pp.178-179). Schumann (1975, p.230) suggested that the age of ten or so is the best period to develop tolerance for cultural differences after that age and even before children associate the concept with bad.

Research conducted to investigate the role of attitude in language learning showed that integrative motivation is believed to have a decisive say in language learning because the desire to know people, to come into physical contact with the native speakers and their culture, and the positive attitude towards the other community is what pushes people to learn that language (Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p.165).

2.4 Anxiety

Anxiety in language learning is the feeling of discomfort, fear, and doubt in one's ability that everybody experiences when they have to try their newly learned language in front of an audience. How people regard their self-image and how they feel about interacting with others can yield significant insights into how anxiety grows inside the learner.

Researchers like Gardener and MacIntyre (1993) suggested two levels of anxiety: trait and situational/state. Trait anxiety, according to Scovel (1978), is related to the personal "permanent predispositions to be anxious," whereas state anxiety occurs as a response to a particular situation, event, act, etc

State anxiety has much interest from researchers since it is assumed to be more relevant to language learning. It is hypothesized that anxiety has a bad effect on language learning. In her diary, Bailey (1983) described the effect of anxiety on her own learning. She qualified this anxiety as being 'debilitating', especially when associated with competitiveness. Other researchers pointed out other cases where anxiety can positively influence learning since feeling some degree of it would push the learner to invest more in the task of learning and show more interest and concern.

2.5 Inhibition vs. Risk-Taking

Guiora et al. (1972) explained the inhibition phenomenon by introducing what they called "language ego." The ego is formed and evolves by interacting with others. Since those interactions are mostly carried out through the first language medium, people tend to develop the

language ego, which attaches that identity to their mother tongue. The process of language ego formation happens during childhood and is completed by puberty. During this period, the ego is flexible, which explains children's ability to accommodate new languages.

Conversely, adults' egos are fixed, and learning new languages is regarded as a threat to their first identity. Besides, learning an additional language involves the experience of trying that language with all the risks of embarrassment and humiliation resulting from the possible failure. Learners with "thick ego", i.e., those who separate themselves from the outside, resolve to inhibition, whereas those with 'thin ego" tend to tolerate the ambiguity of the new system and show better this position to learn new languages.

To trespass the barrier of inhibition, learners are encouraged to take risks. Risk-taking is the willingness to try new experiences regardless of the possible dangers. If inhibition is a defense of those reluctant to appear foolish while trying the new language and making mistakes, some students in the eagerness to learn an additional language second or foreign and achieve success take the risk of making mistakes. Thus, risk-taking is a positive factor in enhancing learning. Ely (1986) studied the risk-taking behavior of students learning Spanish and reported a positive correlation between risk-taking and achievement.

3. Research Methodology

This study is conducted with 17 effective third-year students from the English department at Badji-Mokhtar University-Annaba. The effective learners were identified by considering their average and academic achievement in general and their scores in the oral expression module. In addition, the input of their teachers was sought, and their assessment of the students' work ethic, progress, and communication skills played a crucial role in the selection process for this study.

To test the hypotheses, a questionnaire containing seven questions was administered, and a qualitative analysis was used to explore students' opinions and views. The selected questions are connected to the hypotheses by targeting specific affective variables influencing effective listening and language learning outcomes. In order to test the hypotheses, the questions asked investigated the positivity of cultural attitudes, the possible presence of debilitating anxiety, the comfort level that supports risk-taking, willingness to take risks, and whether feedback elicits positive emotions.

4. Results and Discussion

***What are your attitudes towards the target language culture?**

Positive attitudes towards culture can potentially enhance motivation and engagement in language learning. A comprehensive understanding of culture offers valuable context for comprehending language usage and the origins of linguistic elements. Maintaining a sense of curiosity and receptiveness toward diverse cultural perspectives facilitates language comprehension. Most participants' responses were receptive and appreciative of the target culture. Twelve students conveyed positive attitudes toward the target culture, including admiration, respect, interest,

and enjoyment. One student articulated that their attitude towards the target culture depended on the degree to which the culture in question respected their own cultural background. Most of the responses centered on affective dimensions, encompassing aspects such as appreciation, motivation, and open-mindedness, which were closely associated with emotions and values.

The findings exposed the learners' predispositions and emotional investment in the target culture. This emphasized the influence of affective factors on developing proficiency in the second language, as posited in the literature review. From students' feedback, culture was considered a means of enriching personal connections to the language. The responses emphasized affective qualities rather than solely objective language proficiencies.

***How does feedback on your language skills make you feel?**

Student responses to the impact of feedback on their language skills revealed positive emotions. Ten students expressed that feedback generates feelings of motivation, contentment, and satisfaction. Two students value feedback to identify areas in need of improvement. One student indicated a lack of concern for feedback as long as progress is made, and only one student does not appreciate unsolicited feedback but recognizes the value of its constructiveness.

According to the results, feedback identifies weaknesses and guides further learning since external validation and acknowledgment of progress enhance emotional well-being. The responses also suggest that feedback fosters adaptive emotional engagement with language learning among these students. This supports the role of emotions in influencing how students approach and persevere in language development over time, as hypothesized.

***Do you feel anxious when listening in the target language?**

Most students indicated low levels of anxiety when it comes to listening, which has implications for affective variables such as confidence that impact listening performance. The differences in anxiety dispositions among individuals appear to be influenced more by affective traits than solely by language proficiency. Lower anxiety levels may promote many learners' resilience and persistence in listening tasks.

The responses provided valuable insights into the affective mindsets of learners and how such trait may influence their approaches and outcomes in listening comprehension. Eleven students explicitly stated that they do not experience anxiety while listening. Four students mentioned that they occasionally or rarely feel anxious. One student admitted feeling anxious when listening to native speakers. Another student stated that their level of anxiety depends on the stage of the language in which they are.

From the results, the majority reported that they do not experience anxiety when listening. Many attributed this lack of anxiety to their enjoyment of listening or their confidence. Those who sometimes feel anxious linked it to their difficulty understanding certain words or the advanced oral skills of native speakers. They also reported that beginners may initially experience higher levels of anxiety, but it decreases with practice. Some reported that understanding concepts rather than individual words can help reduce anxiety.

***How willing are you to take risks in your language learning?**

Most students in this initial sample reported a disposition toward risk-taking. Fourteen students clearly expressed their willingness to take risks, using phrases such as "always ready," "willing 100%," and "ready to take risks." Two students indicated some hesitation but mentioned being open to taking risks depending on the type (financial versus emotional). One student stated they were cautious but willing to take more risks. Another student stated that they do not believe they will take any risks.

From the results, risk-taking is seen as important for developing and improving oral skills. Ambition and determination are associated with risk-taking. However, physical risks are less appealing than financial or online risks, emphasizing that students are reluctant to be in embarrassing situations even for learning.

***How comfortable are you making mistakes when speaking?**

The responses provided insights into the affective mindsets of learners regarding errors. Traits such as confidence and resilience are linked to tolerance for mistakes, affecting the willingness to communicate and develop language. Most students indicated that they had developed a sense of affective comfort over time.

Ten students expressed being comfortable or very comfortable when making mistakes. On the other hand, four students mentioned that they were somewhat comfortable or okay with making mistakes. Conversely, two students stated that they were not comfortable with making mistakes. Additionally, one student stated that their comfort level depends on the number of mistakes and the setting in which they occur, while another student differentiated their comfort level based on whether they were alone or in front of others.

Many students viewed mistakes as learning opportunities and a natural part of the learning process. It was found that confidence, self-awareness, and a positive attitude toward mistakes were associated with a greater sense of comfort. Conversely, some students reported feeling less comfortable due to performance pressure and a fear of judgment. Beginners may experience more worry about mistakes, but their comfort level tends to increase with experience and practice.

***How motivated are you to learn the Target Language?**

All 17 students responded that they are very motivated to learn English, which has some positive implications in the context of this study since high motivation is associated with persistence, effort, and achievement. Being very motivated suggests these students have an engaged, adaptive affect toward English learning. The unanimous report of high motivation hints at a powerful socio-cultural boost influencing learners' identities, values, and investment in English. It provides further evidence supporting the hypothesis that more positive affective variables, like high motivation, may predict better L2 outcomes, in this case, English language learning.

***Are you more introverted or extroverted?**

Seven students self-identified as introverts. Four students acknowledged possessing both introverted and extroverted tendencies. Three students identified as extroverts. One student indicated that their

disposition depends on the environment, and one student described themselves as an ambivert, exhibiting a balance of introverted and extroverted traits.

While a plurality of students identified as introverts, the responses indicated that some individuals possess a combination of traits or adaptive styles, which vary based on factors such as the environment and task.

The traits of introversion/extroversion were linked to preferences and styles in language learning. Social contexts and interactions influenced the outward expression of these traits. The balance of these traits allows for flexibility in different learning situations.

Based on the analyses of the students' answers to the seven questions, the two hypotheses are confirmed:

For the first hypothesis, the students demonstrated largely positive affective dispositions related to language learning, such as low anxiety about listening, comfort with making mistakes, appreciation of feedback, willingness to take risks, positive cultural attitudes, and an inclination toward introversion. These positive mindsets would support effective listening skill acquisition according to the hypothesis. Only a small minority reported negative affective states.

For the second hypothesis, the analyses identified links between students' affective traits and their language learning approaches, preferences, and development. For example, confidence is associated with tolerance for mistakes, motivation from feedback and cultural engagement, flexibility from balanced personality traits, and resilience are shown through risk-taking.

Students' responses tended to demonstrate affective attributes hypothesized to predict and facilitate listening success. The qualitative insight into affective mindsets provides tentative confirmation of the hypotheses based on this initial sample of effective language learners. Nevertheless, larger samples would be needed to validate the proposed relationships.

5. Possible Suggestions

Acknowledging emotion holds practical implications for learners; this is why language instructors should aim to foster adaptive affective mindsets in learners through activities that promote cultural appreciation, risk-taking, and openness to feedback and mistakes. This could facilitate more engaged listening development over time. Besides, assessment of listening skills could incorporate evaluation of affective dispositions to gain a more holistic understanding of students' strengths and challenges. This could have implications on many sides related to teaching:

*Language programs and policies should emphasize socio-cultural integration and identity exploration to sustain motivation for listening practice, especially for introverted learners.

*Teacher training should raise awareness of affective factors so individual differences can be better supported in classroom listening instruction.

*Listening curriculum/materials could incorporate meta-cognitive strategies to help regulate listener anxiety and build their confidence.

6. Potential Limitations of the Study

With only 17 students involved, the findings can only be generalized to a subset of language learners. A larger, more diverse sample is needed. The study relied on students' self-evaluations of their affective traits and tendencies, which may need a more objective, bias-free approach. Moreover, only "effective" learners were selected, excluding less confident students who may provide different perspectives. As a preliminary study, more work is needed to validate the findingd. Hence, replication with stronger research designs is required to overcome these limitations and draw firmer conclusions.

7. Conclusion

Developing listening is an arduous endeavor, a fact that is widely acknowledged. In light of the strenuous efforts it demands, researchers endeavor to explore the various factors involved in this process, which may serve as either facilitators or hindrances. This qualitative study provided insight into the role of affective factors in second/foreign language listening acquisition. By analyzing students' responses regarding their mindsets, personalities, and emotional dispositions, several main conclusions can be drawn:

The analyses confirmed the hypotheses that positive affective traits relate to effective listening skill development over time. The students predominantly displayed low anxiety, cultural appreciation, openness to feedback and mistakes, intrinsic motivation, and introversion tendencies that support engagement and persistence with listening tasks.

While exploratory, this study provides foundational insight into how mindsets may interact with and predict listening outcomes over the long term. Affective skills and dispositions warrant consideration to understand the complex, dynamic nature of listening development. Larger-scale, quantitative, or longitudinal research is still needed to validate students' trait-performance. Nevertheless, these results suggest that affect holds meaningful explanatory power and merits greater attention from an integrated perspective.

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