

Negative Emotional Experiences in Second Language Learning: A Study of Autobiographical Narratives among Chinese ESL Learners

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Abstract

Research on second language learning has expanded enormously since its inception. Many studies related to second language learning have discussed how psychological factors particularly emotions affect a learner's motivation. But despite all that, little is known about the antecedents of these emotions in second language learning. The present study therefore explored the negative emotional experiences as the antecedents of various emotions and the effects on Chinese ESL Learners. This discursive study employed a qualitative design to gain an understanding of how negative emotions that were caused by negative emotional learning experiences affect a person's attitudes and motivation in English language learning. 14 Chinese adults with relatively limited English proficiency spoke, by way of Autobiographical Memory Interview (recall of events and facts from one's past), about their negative emotional experiences while learning and using the language during the past 20-25 years and how these experiences have impacted them psychologically and changed their attitudes and motivation in the English language learning process. The findings revealed that the learners' negative emotional learning experiences shape their negative emotions and learning attitudes, and predispose them to become demotivated in learning English.

Keywords — antecedents, negative emotional learning experiences, emotions, attitudes, motivation

I. INTRODUCTION

English is a compulsory subject in the primary and secondary education in Malaysia; even though it is not the national language, it is the main medium of communication in the society of Malaysia and the lingua franca in the business world here. In general, Chinese who live in Malaysia speak at least three languages, i.e. their mother tongue (Mandarin or other Chinese dialect), English and Malay. Despite the same big environment in which all Chinese grow up, some have mastered these three languages, some only two of the three, and some only one. It is commonly

believed in educational psychology that there are three aspects to the basic factors affecting one's learning efficiency, i.e. individual physiology, individual psychology and individual environment. Most people believe that a person's language ability is largely correlated with the environmental factor, which primarily consists of one's living environment and educational conditions. In Malaysia, most Chinese students with poor English ability come from non-English-speaking family where their non-English speaking habit was formed. If at school, this group of students chooses to befriend classmates of similar background, the opportunity for them to use English will be further reduced. On the contrary, if this group of students chooses to befriend English-speaking classmates, and is willing to overcome their learning barriers and improve their weaknesses, they will still be able to effectively improve their English ability. In other words, during second-language acquisition, apart from the environmental factor, psychological factors also dominate the learner's entire learning process, which will determine the kind of propensity to be developed during learning, and have an impact on their learning outcomes.

Psychological factors play an important role in a student's success in acquiring and using a second language. Studies on second language learning outcomes and psychological factors have focused on the sense of anxiety rather than other negative emotions. In the literature, anxiety is considered to be one of the most important affective factors, which affect the learner's language input and intake. Although anxiety represents important outcomes in its own right due to its impact on quality of learning and achievement in the classroom, not much is known about the antecedents of this emotion in second language learning. According to Sava (2002), teachers who use humiliation, rejection, excessive authority, sarcasm, and other disciplinary techniques based on fear and intimidation, can develop negative emotions such as withdrawal and anxiety in children. Thus, the present study explored the negative emotional experiences as the antecedents of various emotions and the effects on Chinese ESL Learners. This study

has probed in depth into other psychological factors apart from anxiety.

A. Emotions and Second Language Learning

Language learning is in essence a cognitive process, which comprises mainly of attention, perception, thoughts and memories. Attention is the beginning of one's cognitive process, while perception is the foundation formed by thoughts and memories. Psychologically speaking, cognitive activities go hand in hand with psychological factors, which exert an impact to be reckoned with on the said activities. They are inseparably interconnected throughout language learning process. During second language acquisition, it is impossible that a cognitive activity takes place independently from psychological factors. However, the scholarly literature about the process of second language learning has focused to a considerable extent on cognitive processes (Swain, 2011). Psychological factors have, in general, been neglected in the second language learning literature. Psychological factors particularly emotions, are at the core of human experience, so a greater understanding of their impact on language learners is important. Among studies in second language learning that focus on psychological factors, language anxiety has most frequently been studied (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1998; Matsuda and Gobel, 2004; Woodrow, 2006; Horwitz, 2010;). According to Sanaraj and Meenakshi (2016), in educational psychology, anxiety is an important variable that affects the indirectly by influencing the cognitive process in learning. Although it is generally believed that anxiety can result in negative outcomes for second language learners, other emotional factors may also affect the achievement of second language learning. For instance, Pavelescu and Petrić (2018) found that the emotion of love acted as the driving force in the foreign language learning process. Ross and Stracke (2016) revealed that pride is one particular positive emotion that has a meaningful connection with the second language learning experience. But despite all that, little is known about the antecedents of these emotions in second language learning. According to Bown and White (2010), the interaction of learners' previous language learning experiences, current learning events and goals played a significant role in their motivational behaviour. Hence, the present study investigates learners' previous language learning experiences that are most likely to cause negative emotions and affect learning motivation.

II. METHODS

A. Participants

14 Chinese adults voluntary (age in between 28-32; 7 females and 7 males) participated in this study, their background information is shown in the table below:

TABLE I
The background information of the respondents

Respondent	Gender	Age	English subject score in SPM (The Malaysian Certificate of Education)	Mother tongue
R1	F	28	7D	Chinese Mandarin
R2	M	28	7D	Cantonese
R3	M	30	8E	Cantonese
R4	F	27	9G	Chinese Mandarin
R5	F	27	8E	Chinese Mandarin
R6	M	27	6C	Chinese Mandarin
R7	M	32	8E	Hokkien
R8	F	30	7D	Chinese Mandarin
R9	M	28	8E	Chinese Mandarin
R10	F	30	7D	Chinese Mandarin
R11	M	27	7D	Chinese Mandarin
R12	M	31	7D	Cantonese
R13	F	31	6C	Hakka
R14	M	31	8E	Cantonese

Note. The Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), or the Malaysian Certificate of Education, is a national examination taken by all fifth-year secondary school students in Malaysia. SPM is equivalent to the O-Level.

B. Procedure

This discursive study employed a qualitative design to gain an understanding of how negative emotions that caused by negative emotional learning experiences affect a person's attitudes and motivation in English language learning. 14 Chinese adults with relatively limited English proficiency spoke, by way of Autobiographical Memory Interview (recall of events and facts from one's past), about their negative emotional experiences while learning and using the language during the past 20-25 years and how these experiences have impacted them psychologically and changed their motivation in the English language learning process. The 14 respondents were divided into four groups. The interview was first started with a chat between the researcher and the respondent on English learning achievement in school. When the topic was talked about, researcher began to induce respondent to share one of their most negative

emotional experiences in learning English language narratively. From there the researcher began evoking the respondent’s emotional memories related to English learning and using by asking them to recall the events that deemed have triggered a negative emotional impact on them. During the interview, the respondent was also asked to talk about their learning attitudes and motivation after the events.

Prior to the interview, each respondent had to fill up a form that was designed to elicit their personal background information. The interview was conducted in Chinese Mandarin by one of the researcher and transcribed verbatim by a research assistant.

III. RESULTS

A. Findings

The findings showed that only 11 respondents managed to complete the AMI, the other three respondents (R6, R7 and R10) said that apart from the unsatisfactory examination results, they can’t really recall any negative emotional experiences in English learning. The table below is the summary of the negative emotional English learning experiences, the feelings towards those experiences and the effects on attitudes and motivation of the 11 respondents through AMI:

TABLE III
The findings of the AMI

At age 7-12	Negative emotional learning experiences and the effects
R1(female)	-Was slapped by the English teacher for not giving an accurate answer when asked Feelings: ashamed, frightened, sad. Change on learning attitude: Anxious, afraid of difficulty, more focused in class
R2(male)	-was whipped by his mother for failing the English exam Feelings: felt wronged, sad Change on learning attitude: Afraid of difficulty, making extra effort
R5(female)	-was made to stand for not handing in English homework on time Feelings: Afraid of difficulty, sad Change on learning attitude:

	Anxious, afraid of difficulty
R12(male)	-was assigned to a “lousy” group for his poor English learning ability, sitting with other classmates with poor English skills Feelings: unhappy Change on learning attitude: no
At age 13-18	Negative emotional learning experiences and the effects
R3(male)	- was named and criticized in front of the class for his poor grades in an English exam Feelings: ashamed, sad Change on learning attitude: afraid of difficulty, unmotivated
R8(female)	-was laughed at by classmates for mispronouncing English words during English reading class Feelings: ashamed, sense of inferiority Change on learning attitude: afraid of difficulty, slack/unmotivated
R9(male)	-was scolded by mom for failing an English exam and was not given a month’s pocket money as a punishment Feelings: sad Change on learning attitude: afraid of difficulty, slack/unmotivated

At age 19-24	Negative emotional learning experiences and the effects
R4(female)	-when expressing her own opinions on a certain topic in class, said “putted” instead of “put” and was made fun of by her classmates Feelings: Ashamed, sense of inferiority Change on learning attitude:lack of confidence

R11(male)	-unable to communicate with westerners Feelings: sense of inferiority, lack of confidence Change on learning attitude: slack/unmotivated, self-comforting
R14(male)	-was not employed due to poor English ability during the job interview Feelings: lack of confidence Change on learning attitude: self-comforting
At age 24 and above	Negative emotional learning experiences and the effects
R13(female)	-made a fool of herself for not being able to understand the instructions given at work Feelings: ashamed Change on learning attitude: sense of inferiority, lack of confidence, depressed, afraid of difficulty, escapism

IV. OVERALL DISCUSSION

This study reveals that negative emotional language learning experiences are possible to cause different negative emotional effects on a learner, and most of these negative emotional memories involve people around the respondents, such as the respondent’s teachers, classmates and family members. The following paragraph discusses how the negative emotions, besides anxiety, that are caused by negative emotional learning experiences affect a person’s attitudes and motivation in English language learning.

A. Sense of inferiority and lack of confidence

According to Alfred Adler, an Austrian psychologist, the sense of inferiority stems from the feelings of incompetency and pain at an early age due to an inability. Now it refers to the mental state of self-contempt due to a weakness, believing that he/she is inferior to others in a certain or a few aspects. Inferiority complex causes one to withdraw and isolate from others, prevents self-confidence and deprives honour. Many Chinese students did not build a solid English language foundation at Chinese primary

school; as they encountered increasingly complex English grammar at secondary school, they realized that they were not able to catch up with other classmates and began feeling down with learning English, not daring to read vocabulary or text nor ask any question, beset by the fear of making mistakes and inflicting ridicule on themselves. Any further negative emotional learning experiences then will be a heavy blow to their self-confidence. For instance, R8 was jeered at by her classmates for not being well-acquainted with English pronunciation. As a result, she developed a sense of inferiority which in turn led to the formation of fear of difficulty and slackness. Likewise, R4 felt humiliated when giving a speech in English in the university, she made a mistake of saying “putted” instead of “put”. Her confidence level further deteriorated and she became more apprehensive giving a speech in English. As for R14, after failing a job interview due to his lousy English, he admitted that since then he dared not look for other English-speaking jobs, as he had lost his confidence in trying.

Students who have been punished or laughed at for underperforming at school generally lack confidence and suffer from inferiority complex. The AM of the three respondents shows that they are convinced they will never be able to learn English well. Thanks to the constant reproaches from teachers and parents whenever they blundered or underperformed, they have over time lost total confidence in learning English as well as the enthusiasm in engaging in any learning activity.

B. Slackness

Slackness is a lack of motivation or pressure to learn, and a lack of enthusiasm for learning; he or she who is slack is indifferent toward learning, avoids learning and is unconcerned of whether his or her results are good or bad. Slackness was developed in two of the three respondents during the process of learning and using English. As can be seen from the interview with R8, R9 and R11, slackness is developed after primary education. In other words, negative emotional experiences in learning before one turns 13 years old won’t give rise to slackness. R9 said that he was not slack at primary school as he had a certain level of passion for English. However, with his not-so-solid English foundation, he entered into secondary school where the English subject became slightly harder and required a better grasp of grammatical rules, which as a result limited his progress. He would always get a lot of stick from his mother for scoring poorly in his English exam; this was when slackness gradually built up, and eventually turned into weariness, which persisted throughout his university years. Since English was remotely relevant to his major, he started to slacken his efforts in learning English once his studies began. Likewise, R11 mentioned that when he was studying abroad, every now and then he encountered some exchange

students from the West but was unable to communicate with them; this made him feel inferior. In the same time however, he kept telling himself that English had nothing to do with his major in Chinese language. He admitted that since he found no motivation to learn English well, there was no need to force himself to take it any further.

C. Fear of difficulty

The fear of difficulty is a mentality closely associated with failures and arises from the negative emotional feedback caused by each failure. Fear grows stronger out of each repeated failure and very soon one finds oneself in this vicious cycle of fear where fear of difficulty accumulates over time and turns into a regular tendency. A student trapped in such a cycle dreads difficulty at the sight of it and is sapped of every ounce of courage to overcome anything that seems difficult, even when in reality it is not-so-great a difficulty. Most of the respondents admitted having had such mentality. R1 described that being slapped by her English teacher when she was in Standard 6 caused fear of difficulty in her toward learning English. She dreaded reading new English words because she was not able to articulate many words. On the other hand, R3 admitted resisting writing English compositions in his secondary school because he didn't know how to use verbs in past tense. R3 recounted how knowing full well that a poorly written composition would bring down his overall grade and that he would get an unsatisfactory result for his exam and eventually incur criticism from his teacher, he dreaded composition at the sight of it. R2 had the same problem. As English became increasingly difficult for him, he began to worry about not getting a good grade and eventually getting a lot of stick from both teachers and parents; but the more he worried, the more he dreaded learning and sitting for the exams.

D. Feeling wronged

Among the 11 respondents, only R2 felt wronged at some time while suffering negative emotional learning experiences. R2 recounted that he was whipped by his mother for failing her English exam when he was in Standard 4. Due to his carelessness, he did not answer the last page of the exam paper, and got zero for that section, which as a result caused him to fail the exam. He felt wronged because if he had answered the last page he would not have failed the exam. However, feeling wronged did not affect his attitude toward learning English, it was the traumatizing fear of being whipped by his mother that gave rise to anxiety and fear of difficulty in the face of every English exam he sat for since then.

E. Feeling sad and depressed

The mentality of self-comforting convinces oneself to think of the bright sides of things in a bad situation. Two of the three respondents, R11 and R14

It is inevitable that we feel sad and depressed when we encounter learning setbacks. Through the AMI of the 11 respondents we see that all of them had felt sad and depressed at different stages due to negative emotional learning experiences. This is because these negative emotional incidences were a blow to them. R1 indicated that she was extremely sad for being slapped by her English teacher at primary school and the sadness stemmed from feeling resentful for being treated so rudely and embarrassed in front of everyone in the class. As for R3, after being criticized by name in front of everyone for his poor grade in an English exam, he felt ashamed and went home to cry. R9 was scolded by his mother for failing his English exam and was not given a month's pocket money as a punishment. He was sad at that time because he did not agree with the punishment imposed on him, and he believes the sadness had been caused by feeling resentful and disappointed.

F. Humiliation

Humiliation refers to the negative emotions aroused when one's self-esteem is wounded to absolute embarrassment. Among the 11 respondents, R4, R5, R8, R11 and R13 admitted having had such psychology. Humiliation is not supposed to happen in any learning process; however, the memories of these people show that they felt humiliated after being physically punished, publicly criticized or jeered at. In the same time, they agree that feeling humiliated was the root cause of many other negative mindsets toward learning, e.g. sense of inferiority, anxiety, fear of difficulty, etc.

G. Inhibition

Inhibition is a mentality that keeps the learner from wanting to continue learning. This mentality arises due mainly to too high an error rate in the learning process, and also because the learner is deprived of approvals from the people around him/her. As a result, the mentality of feeling inhibited arouses, which leads to restlessness and gives rise to pessimism and negativity. Among the 11 respondents, R13 admitted having suffered this mentality. She confessed that when she was working in a company where English was the medium of communication, she had to deal with many English documents and come in contact with English-speaking customers on a daily basis. She made errors almost everyday and felt that her colleagues around her were looking down on her; negativity and inhibition therefore emerged. This negative emotional experience was what prompted her to eventually to leave the company and change to work for a Chinese newspaper. She admitted that was a form of escapism.

H. Self-comforting

pointed out that they resorted to comforting themselves thanks to the negative emotional experiences in learning and using English; they told

themselves that English was after all not so important in their everyday life, and that they could choose to excel in other areas in order to conceal their lack of English skills. For instance, after realizing that he was having difficulty communicating with Westerners, despite feeling slightly ashamed, R11 convinced himself that limited English proficiency would not affect what he wanted to achieve later on in his life, since his major was Chinese language, which had nothing to do with English language, and also she would choose to become a Chinese teacher in the future. R14 had such mentality as well when he first started working, which was what led him to start his own business, for which he communicates in mainly Mandarin and Chinese dialects with his customers.

Besides, this study has revealed some interesting phenomena:

1) People with poor English language skills have suffered some negative emotional experiences in their English-learning process. We did not set out in this study to prove whether these experiences were the cause of them not doing well in their English subject eventually, however what is certain is that these negative emotional learning experiences had given rise to negative learning mindsets.

2) Negative emotional learning experiences are not forgotten after many years, because the negative emotions inflicted were profound. This finding is not consistent with the general belief found in Autobiographical Memory study that people can hardly remember their childhood. The fact that majority of the respondents were able to clearly relate negative emotional learning experiences in their childhood (primary school) proves that memories that had left a certain degree of psychological impact are easily called to mind. This is consistent with the findings of Bluck and Li (2001) that anger and sadness were correlated with vividness.

3) Other than the sense of anxiety, there are many other psychological factors that can affect a person's learning mindset. All the respondents that were punished physically for not doing well in their English learning admitted suffering from fear of difficulty in their subsequent English learning.

4) Self-comforting is one psychological factor that leads up to giving up learning. Judging from the experiences of R11 and R14, after having had the mentality of self-comforting, both of them decided not to ever try to raise their own English level, and as a result chose a working environment that could conceal their inadequacy.

Although this research has reached its aims, there were some unavoidable limitations. 14 adults were involved in this study, but three of them failed to complete the AMI, this has affected the reliability of the survey's results because the sample size has become smaller. Moreover, this is a qualitative interview that relies on respondents' ability to accurately and honestly recall whatever details about their negative emotional experiences in English learning, unfortunately, some respondents did not manage to complete the AMI. When the respondents said they couldn't remember if there was any negative emotional experience in their memory, we were unable to judge that whether these people were unwilling to share their past with us, they really have not experienced any negative emotional experience in English learning, or their memories of these experiences have faded. Therefore, we were unable to prove that most people with poor English proficiency

V. CONCLUSION

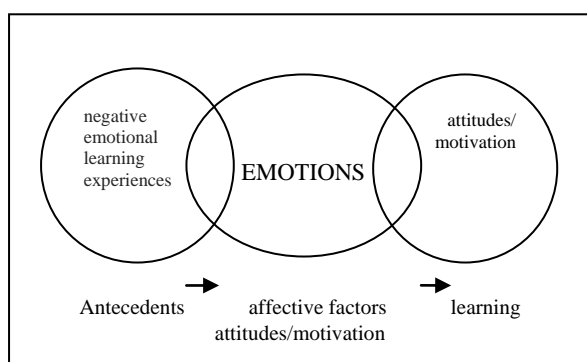


Figure 1: The causal effect of negative emotional learning experiences, attitudes and motivation on second language learning

This study clarified the causal relationships of learners' negative emotional learning experiences, attitudes and motivation on second language learning (see Figure 1). As evidence shows, learners' negative emotional learning experiences shape their negative emotions and learning attitudes, and predispose them to become demotivated in learning English. The findings also revealed that negative emotions have a particularly strong influence on attitudes, especially modulating the selectivity of attitudes as well as motivating action and behaviour. The findings of this paper are consistent with the statement made by Gravoso, R.S., A.E. Pasa & T. Mori (2002) that students' prior learning experiences, conceptions of learning, and study approaches underpin the quality of their learning outcomes. According Krashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition, low motivation, low self-esteem, and debilitating anxiety can combine to 'raise' the affective filter and form a 'mental block' that prevents comprehensible input from being used for learning a language. This is what the present research has proved to us. However, the findings of this research are in conflict with what Mariza & Argelia (2013) found that negative emotions lead to positive learning outcome in foreign language learning.

have had some negative emotional experiences in their English learning process. Hence, for future research, carrying out the same study in a bigger group might provide more reliable results.

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