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An Investigation into Strategies for Enhancing Foreign Language Emotional Experience and Improving Communication Willingness

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Abstract

The "English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High Schools" (2017 Edition) emphasizes the importance of fostering students' positive attitudes, self-confidence, interest, initiative, and collaborative awareness during the compulsory education phase. In the elective compulsory phase, it highlights the need to help students self-regulate negative emotions such as anxiety, encourage risk-taking and error correction, and cultivate a strong interest in English. Furthermore, it encourages students to actively seek opportunities for practicing and using the language. Second language communication willingness is a critical factor in promoting the development of learners' communicative competence and serves as a key indicator of second language acquisition outcomes. As such, it remains a central objective in second language teaching. However, a common issue among foreign language learners is insufficient communication willingness due to emotional challenges. Therefore, this paper aims to explore strategies for optimizing foreign language emotional experiences and enhancing communication willingness.

Keywords

Foreign Language Anxiety; Foreign Language Enjoyment; Willingness to Communicate

1. Literature Review

1.1. Willingness to Communicate

The concept of communication willingness was first introduced by McCroskey and Baer (1985), with a focus on single-language communication. Building on this, MacIntyre et al. (1998) further developed the concept of second language communication willingness, defining it as the "readiness of second language learners to engage in conversation with specific individuals in a particular context using the second language." This psychological state represents the final step before

actual foreign language communication and determines whether learners can participate in real-life interactions (Lee, 2020). Based on the integration of various factors, MacIntyre et al. (1998) proposed a pyramid model of second language communication willingness, which arranges variables such as individual emotions and social environment in a top-down manner. At the bottom of the pyramid are more stable individual traits such as personality, while higher levels include more variable factors that are sensitive to environmental influences, including pleasure and anxiety. This model has been validated in numerous studies (Khajavy et al., 2017). As the role of mental health and personality traits in second language learning outcomes becomes increasingly recognized, there is a growing call in the academic community to adopt a holistic perspective in examining second language learners (Li & Han, 2022).

1.2. Foreign Language Emotion

The Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2003) and the Control-Value Theory (Pekrun, 2006) are fundamental frameworks in the study of emotions in foreign language learning. The Broaden-and-Build Theory posits that positive emotions such as enjoyment expand an individual's cognitive and behavioral repertoire, thereby enhancing psychological resilience and building personal resources. In contrast, negative emotions like anxiety narrow an individual's resources (Fredrickson, 2001).

Foreign language enjoyment and anxiety are key topics in the field of foreign language emotions. While foreign language anxiety has been extensively studied, there has been insufficient focus on positive emotions beyond anxiety. Drawing on positive psychology, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) explored both foreign language enjoyment and anxiety together, discovering that these emotions, as independent constructs, can co-occur in second language learning and have distinct predictive effects on learning outcomes (Dong& Liu, 2022). Li Chengchen and Han Ye (2022) explicitly stated that foreign language enjoyment and anxiety are not in a purely oppositional relationship and can coexist without excluding or counteracting each other. Therefore, this study will examine both foreign language enjoyment and anxiety simultaneously.

1.3. The Relationship between Willingness to Communicate and Foreign Language Emotion

Firstly, foreign language anxiety is significantly related to communication willingness. In the process of language learning, learners' concerns about communication activities and their fear of negative evaluations may reduce their willingness to engage in communication, thereby limiting their opportunities to use the second language. Learners with low communication willingness often lack self-confidence, have fewer opportunities for language output, and experience slow

progress in language skills, which further exacerbates their foreign language anxiety (Hu, 2016).

Secondly, empirical research shows that foreign language enjoyment enhances students' sense of achievement and can directly predict their foreign language learning performance (Li & Cheng, 2020; Dong & Liu, 2022) as well as their willingness to communicate in the second language (Wei & Chen, 2022). On the other hand, foreign language anxiety negatively affects second language learning and communication (Li & Cheng, 2020), and it is a significant negative predictor of academic performance in the second language, thus decreasing communication willingness. These studies suggest that learners who experience higher levels of foreign language enjoyment or lower levels of anxiety tend to have higher communication willingness in the second language (Khajavy et al., 2018; Wei & Chen, 2022).

In conclusion, foreign language emotions have a significant impact on communication willingness, and communication willingness, in turn, influences emotional experiences, forming a cyclical effect. Therefore, this paper focuses on strategies to optimize foreign language emotional experiences and enhance communication willingness.

2. Factors Influencing Foreign Language Emotional Experiences and Communication Willingness

2.1. Personal Internal Factors

MacIntyre and Gardner highlight that low language proficiency often triggers foreign language anxiety. Learners, due to their insufficient knowledge base, struggle to express themselves accurately. For instance, in cross-cultural business negotiations, limited vocabulary and frequent grammatical errors can hinder effective communication, leading to information breakdown. Repeated experiences of communication failure erode learners' self-confidence and induce anxiety, causing them to avoid subsequent interactions and resulting in a sharp decline in communication willingness. In contrast, higher language proficiency fosters learner confidence.

Besides, The impact of personality traits on emotions and communication willingness in foreign language interactions has also garnered significant attention. Eysenck (1997) suggested that extraverts are energized by the external world and are enthusiastic about social interactions. In the context of foreign language learning and communication, extraverted learners eagerly engage in language practice and view foreign language interaction as an exciting and stimulating adventure. As a result, their communication willingness remains consistently high. In contrast, introverted individuals may worry about being judged for making mistakes, which heightens their anxiety and suppresses their emotions. This often leads to hesitation before speaking, and they are more likely to engage only in familiar, low-pressure

environments, resulting in significantly lower communication willingness (Phillips, 2001).

2.2. External Factors

Firstly, the classroom atmosphere significantly affects students' emotions and willingness to communicate in foreign language learning. Under Krashen's "Affective Filter Hypothesis", an environment with low affective filters, that is, a relaxed and positive classroom atmosphere, allows students to receive more language input. In contrast, research on traditional classrooms has found that an overly teacher-centered and rigid classroom structure raises students' affective filters, causing them to become silent out of fear of making mistakes and thus fostering negative emotions. This severely suppresses their willingness to communicate.

Secondly, social support has substantial empirical evidence in shaping foreign language emotional experiences. Studies have shown that positive peer feedback and mutual encouragement create a "synergistic effect," where individuals share knowledge and skills, fostering a harmonious atmosphere. Students who receive praise experience a boost in confidence, with initial feelings of tension and shyness dissipating. This encouragement inspires a desire to explore new topics and engage in more challenging conversations, significantly increasing their willingness to communicate.

3. Strategies for Optimizing Foreign Language Emotional Experiences and Enhancing Willingness to Communicate

3.1. Differentiated Instruction and Personalized Feedback

Differentiated instruction has long been regarded as a practical approach to implementing "teaching according to students' needs". In the classroom, teachers should design differentiated tasks based on students' varying proficiency levels, ensuring that each student can successfully complete the assigned tasks. Additionally, personalized feedback is essential. For students who tend to experience anxiety, teachers should provide targeted, encouraging feedback and pay close attention to their progress. This approach helps reduce anxiety, enhances students' enjoyment of foreign language learning, and ultimately increases their willingness to communicate.

3.2. Different Emotional Experiences

Activities like emotion-sharing sessions, role-playing, and situational teaching methods provide valuable opportunities for students to practice using English in different emotional contexts, which in turn helps improve their willingness to communicate in various emotional states.

For example, by designing a variety of life scenarios, such as ordering food at a restaurant, consulting a doctor at a hospital, or asking for directions at an airport,

students can take on different roles that reflect different emotional states. More specifically, in the airport scenario, some students could play passengers who are anxious and frustrated after losing their luggage, while others might portray staff members trying to assist despite being overwhelmed by numerous tasks. Through these activities, students use English to interact with others while deeply engaging with the emotions of their roles.

Another effective method is playing original foreign-language movie or TV clips that feature emotionally charged scenes, such as the joy of a family reunion or the frustration of a career setback. After watching the clip, students can discuss the emotional reactions of the characters, imitate their dialogues, and recreate the atmosphere of the scene. This helps students connect more deeply with the emotions being conveyed and fosters more authentic emotional experiences in language learning.

By incorporating these activities, students not only practice English but also enhance their emotional intelligence, improving their ability to navigate complex emotional situations when communicating in a foreign language.

3.3. Teacher Role Transformation

In helping students optimize their emotional experiences in foreign language learning and enhance their willingness to engage in communication, teachers play several crucial roles.

First and foremost, teachers act as guides, encouraging students to explore various emotions through carefully crafted questions. For example, when using materials such as textbooks or film clips, teachers can ask questions that stimulate emotional awareness. After watching a farewell scene, asking students, "How would you feel if you were in her shoes?" encourages them to engage in perspective-taking, delve deeper into the emotional layers, and then articulate their feelings in the target language. Additionally, teachers help students by providing emotional expression frameworks, which reduce the difficulty of organizing language and increase students' willingness to participate. For instance, when expressing the emotion of disappointment, teachers can offer the sentence structure, "I felt disappointed because..." and encourage students to add personal experiences, gradually guiding them to naturally connect their emotions with the foreign language.

Moreover, as emotional role models, teachers should effectively utilize facial expressions and body movements to convey emotions during foreign language instruction. For instance, when teaching vocabulary related to happiness, such as "delighted," teachers can display a broad smile, bright eyes, and accompany the word with lively hand clapping. When narrating stories or explaining texts, teachers can use variations in tone, speed, and emphasis to embody emotions. For example, when reading a suspenseful story, slowing down the pace and lowering the voice can create a tense, mysterious atmosphere; sharing a funny anecdote with a

quicker pace and higher pitch can elicit excitement and curiosity, drawing students into the emotional experience. This helps immerse students in the foreign language context, ultimately enhancing their willingness to engage in communication.

Finally, as feedback providers and encouragers, teachers should first offer emotional validation before giving language guidance when responding to students' expressions. After a student shares an embarrassing experience, the teacher might begin with, "I can totally relate to that feeling", acknowledging the student's emotions. Then, gently correcting any grammar mistakes helps the student feel supported rather than criticized, maintaining their enthusiasm for communication. This approach fosters a positive, open learning environment where students feel comfortable making mistakes and continue to engage with the language without fear of judgment.

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