

# **The Influence of Teachers' Affective Reaction on the English Learning of Disadvantaged Students in Middle Schools: A Case Study of Experimental School Affiliated to Zhejiang University of Technology**

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## **Abstract**

This study mainly discusses the influence of teachers' affective reaction on the English learning of disadvantaged students. Questionnaire survey and classroom observation were used as the main research instruments and 81 middle school students were chosen as the research subjects. The results show that teachers' affective reaction helps disadvantaged students increase their participation in learning activities, helps them enhance their self-confidence, and guides them to explore and further improve their comprehensive English learning ability.

Keywords: Teachers' affective reaction; Disadvantaged students; English learning; Middle schools

## **1. Introduction**

In the process of teaching English in secondary schools, some students may lose confidence because of the increasing difficulty in learning English, and gradually become the students with learning difficulties. A student with learning difficulties is "a student whose intelligence is normal, but who is unable to adapt to life in a normal school, leading to 'academic depression' or 'academic malpractice'. Such 'depression' or 'malpractice' is reversible or basically reversible, that is, through the patient guidance of teachers, the active cooperation of parents and their own hard work, students can eventually reach a good academic standard"(Zhong Qiquan, 2003:21). The teacher, as the guide and organizer of the teaching classroom, while teaching knowledge, "should be careful not to neglect the emotional needs of students" (Yu Hui, 2008:22). Emotion and knowledge interact and influence each other, and are the indispensable link between students and teachers in language, thought and behavior.

In addition, the emotional behavior of teachers is enough to create an expectation effect on students, which further affects the English learning of disadvantaged students. This expectation effect, also called the Rosenthal effect, refers to an educational principle put forward by American psychologist Rosenthal et al through experiments. When the expectations of teachers or parents are successfully transmitted to students, students will be influenced to believe that they are loved by their teachers and parents and continuously improve themselves to meet their expectations, so as to make greater progress in learning.

Middle school is the golden period to cultivate students' enthusiasm and interest in English learning. If teachers lack sufficient emotional attention to students with learning difficulties, they will lose their interest in

English learning. This paper takes the emotional behavior of junior middle school English teachers as a starting point to explore the influence of teachers' emotional behavior on junior middle school English learners, to provide new perspectives for teachers' teaching improvement, and to provide relevant data for teachers' use of emotional behavior through practice surveys, so as to promote teachers' teaching success and improve learners' physical and mental development. Related Theory and Research of Emotion Teaching

## 2. The Theories and Research Related to Emotional Education

Language teaching expert Krashen (1985) proposed the "affective filtering hypothesis". He argued that affective filtering was an intrinsic processing system that subconsciously prevented learners from absorbing language based on what psychologists called "emotions", which were a psychological barrier that prevented the learner from fully digesting the integrated input he received in his learning. This points out the relationship between emotions and English learning. Language acquisition is not only based on the input of the corresponding language, but the process of bilingual acquisition is also governed by emotional factors. When learners have more negative emotions, such as boredom and low self-esteem, the language input will not be sufficient, which will eventually lead to the inability to learn the language successfully. Emotional filtering is negatively correlated with language input. The stronger the emotional filtering is, the less language content will be fed to the brain. On the contrary, weak emotional filtering will help the brain to successfully receive more language input. In particular, affective filtering is related to the emotional factors in the process of bilingual acquisition such as learning confidence and motivation. Only by reducing affective filtering in the process of English language teaching can learners have positive affective states and receive effective input, which will ultimately lead to the effectiveness of English language teaching.

Western humanistic education, represented by Carl Rogers and Maslow, puts forward the idea of "student-centered", which aims at the unified development of emotion and cognition, emphasizes students' emotional responses, focuses on students' individual emotions and needs and the exploration of their potential, and strives to create a good learning environment for language learners (Li Yincang, 2005). Maslow (1943) divided human needs into seven levels: physiological needs, security needs, belonging and love needs, respect needs, intellectual needs, aesthetic needs, and self-actualization needs. Only when the underlying needs are met, will human needs continue to move upward. The higher they go, the closer the relationship is with the emotions.

Teachers, as promoters in the process of students' learning, need to pay close attention to students' emotions and needs, stimulate their curiosity and cultivate their self-confidence. According to Rogers (1983:344), "one of the tragedies of modern education is the belief that only cognitive learning is important". He strongly believed that human cognition and emotion were inseparable. Only by fully engaging students' emotions could they be fully motivated to learn intrinsically. "Meaningful learning combines logic and intuition, reason and emotion, concepts and experiences, ideas and meanings. If we learn in this way, we become perfect human beings" (Center, 2014:127). These provide useful insights into effective language teaching and, in the context of these studies, scholars have further investigated the impact of affective factors on language learning.

In recent years, the Chinese scholars, influenced by Western linguists, have been actively exploring and researching the emotional factors in the process of language teaching and learning. In 2017, the English Curriculum Standards included the goal of emotion in its basic philosophy: "It should be oriented to all students and focus on quality education. The curriculum places special emphasis on stimulating students' interest in learning English, paying attention to each student's emotions, helping them build a sense of achievement and self-confidence, enabling them to develop comprehensive language proficiency, improving humanistic literacy,

enhancing practical skills and cultivating the spirit of innovation". It emphasizes that the emotional attitudes that will have an impact on the learning process and the effectiveness of learning include interest, motivation, self-confidence, will and so on.

In short, scholars at home and abroad have studied the influence of teachers' affective factors on students' language learning from different perspectives, but there is still a lack of research on the influence of teachers' specific affective reactions on the language learning of ELL students.

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1 Research questions

- (1) How do teachers' affective reactions promote English learning activities for students with learning difficulties?
- (2) How do teachers' affective reactions improve the confidence of disadvantaged students in English classrooms?
- (3) How do teachers' affective reactions positively affect the comprehensive English learning ability of students with learning difficulties?

#### 3.2 Subjects of study

A total of 81 students in the third and fourth classes of the seventh grade at the Experimental School affiliated to Zhejiang University of Technology were the subjects of this study. Among them, five students were selected as the focus of observation, all of them were in the bottom twenty percent of their class in the eleven English subject tests. Detailed information can be found in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1 Information specific to the five students**

names	classes	Average score of 11 tests (120 total)	highest score	lowest score
Xiao Gao	3	38.18	62	19
Xiao Lu	3	22.64	29	15
Xiao Duan	4	45.54	65	30
Xiao Chen	4	35.18	48	19
Xiao Tan	4	30.00	40	22

#### 3.3 Research methods

##### 3.3.1 Questionnaires

The questionnaire in this study was designed to investigate the extent to which students subjectively perceived that their teachers were paying attention to them and whether, for them, their teachers' affective reactions had some impact on their English language learning and how these impacts changed them.

##### 3.3.2 Classroom observations

Classroom observation of the five disadvantaged students was divided into three phases: early (2 weeks), middle (2 months) and late (2 weeks).

At the beginning of the observation, the authors recorded two English classes of Ms. Chen. In the middle of the observation, the author told Mr. Chen the purpose of this study, asked Mr. Chen to consciously give more emotional reactions and attention to these five students in the classroom, and recorded four of Mr. Chen's English classes. In addition, the author would also pay close attention to these students and give them homework instructions, test paper analysis, and attention and encouragement after class. At the end of the observation, two of Ms. Chen's classes were also recorded, and interviews conducted with these students.

#### 3.4 Data collection and analysis

Data collection for this study began between the mid-September and early December 2019. The eight lessons recorded and the notes on the situation related to the disadvantaged students were used as material for later analysis, and the 81 valid answers collected from the questionnaire were counted and analyzed.

## 4. Results and Discussion of the Questionnaire and Classroom Observations

### 4.1 Questionnaire analysis

#### 4.1.1 Teachers' expectations of students

Table 4.1 shows that high scoring students enjoyed their English class and their English teacher more and felt that their teacher had higher expectations of them. Students who scored below fifty lacked interest in English class and enjoyed their teachers less, and also rarely felt that their teachers had high expectations of them.

**Results for questions 3-5 in Table 4.1 Segment score;**

scores (120 points)	I like English class.	I like English teachers.	High Expectations
100-120	85.71%	92.86%	100%.
72-100	71.43%	80.95 %	76.19%
50-71	47.37%	78.95 %	52.63%
Less than 50	29.17%	25.93%	22.22%

#### 4.1.2 Impact of in-class call-outs by teachers on students

Table 4.2 shows that the percentage of students who agreed with question 10 (Does encouragement from the teacher increase your motivation to raise your hand in class?) The percentage of students who agreed with the question was low, and most of them felt that they were more likely to remain silent in class even with the encouragement of the teacher. Question 9 (Does the teacher guide you to the correct answer in class?) shows that many students receive encouragement and help from their teachers in answering questions.

**Table 4.2 Results for questions 6-10**

type of question	serial number	100-120	72-100	50-71	Less than 50
in-class call-outs	6	100%.	95.23%	78.95 %	74.07%
	7	100%.	85.71%	68.42%	74.07%
	8	85.71%	85.71%	78.94%	81.48%
	9	75.57 %	71.43%	73.68%	62.96%
	10	71.43%	47.62%	47.37%	48.14%

#### 4.1.3 The impact of teachers' in-class attention on students

Table 4.3 shows the results from question 12 (Does the teacher urge you to actively participate in the group?). and Question 13 (Do you think that the teacher's attention to the group activity helped you to participate in the activity?) It was found that the students believed that teacher supervision and guidance helped them to participate more actively in learning activities, which indicates that teachers' affective behavior towards students does facilitate their learning activities, whether they are advantaged or disadvantaged students.

**Table 4.3 Results for questions 11-14**

Type of question	serial number	100-120	72-100	50-71	Less than 50
In-class concerns	11	92.86%	71.43%	73.68%	37.03%
	12	100%.	100%.	100%.	100%.
	13	100%.	100%.	100%.	92.59%

	14	85.71%	71.43%	68.42%	74.07%
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#### 4.1.4 The impact of teacher encouragement and interaction on students after class

Question 15 in Table 4.4 (Are you willing to communicate with the teacher after the lesson?) shows that almost all the students avoid contact with their teachers. However, almost all of the students had an optimistic view that the teacher's encouragement and interaction did have a positive impact on their English learning, as shown by question 18 (Does the teacher's affirmation of you make you more motivated to learn English?) and question 19 (Do you think a close teacher-student relationship promotes better English learning?)

**Table 4.4 Results of questions 15-20**

type of question	serial number	100-120	72-100	50-71	Less than 50
After-school encouragement and interaction	15	78.57%	57.14%	52.63%	18.52%
	16	100%	100%	100%	100%
	17	71.43%	52.63%	52.63%	18.52%
	18	100%	100%	100%	92.59%
	19	100%	100%	94.74%	92.59%
	20	42.56%	33.33%	26.31%	7.14%

#### 4.1.5 The Impact of teachers' after-school attention on students

Question 22 in Table 4.5 (When you don't do well in an exam, does your teacher ask you why?) shows that some students felt that their teachers could not notice them in a timely manner when their test scores fell below expectations. However, almost all the students agreed that the teacher's supervision and monitoring of the after-school learning tasks were extremely important, as shown in question 23 (Do you need the teacher's supervision and attention for English learning tasks?).

**Table 4.5 Results of questions 21-24**

type of question	serial number	100-120	72-100	50-71	Less than 50
After-school attention	21	92.86%	66.66%	63.16%	74.07%
	22	78.57%	71.42%	57.89%	55.55%
	23	92.86%	90.47%	78.95%	85.19%
	24	100%	100%	100%	100%

## 4.2 The analysis of classroom observations

### 4.2.1 Changes in classroom performance

At the beginning of the observation, these students were trying to reduce their presence and attention in the classroom.

In the middle of the observation, Ms. Chen paid more attention to these students and gave them more opportunities to show their presence in class.

In the later part of the observation, the five students with learning difficulties began to try to actively present themselves when they encountered simple learning tasks, although they still made some mistakes. Among them, Student Xiao Gao and Student Xiao Lu were more active in speaking in class, more focused in their thoughts, and able to initiate group discussions with their classmates.

*Episode 2: (Carry out group activities.)*

*T: Four people as a group. Talk about each other's New Year's resolutions, and one member reports the other members' resolutions to the class. The reporting student can choose a competitor, and the whole class will judge whose report is more brilliant.*

*(10 minutes later)*

*T: Anyone volunteer?*

*Student Gao: Me. And I want Lu. (Raise his hands.)*

*T: OK, nice. You want to compete with Lu. Now, you should first report the resolution of your group.*

From this example, we can clearly see that Student Xiao Gao was able to actively participate in classroom activities and had a higher level of classroom participation compared to the earlier period.

#### 4.2.2 Changes in the quality of assignments

These five students with learning difficulties had poor-quality assignments and often made excuses for not completing their assignments on time. For example, Student Xiao Duan was poor at analyzing problems when completing assignments. So the authors chose to meet with him face-to-face to review and explain the assignments. Because face-to-face review of homework can emphasize the thinking process and guide the student's thinking face to face, the student can have an emotional experience of "I can do it too" and is willing to succeed through his own efforts (Liu Shuying, 2010). Later, he is able to complete assignments within his ability in a calm manner.

#### 4.2.3 Changes in test results

By paying close attention to them in the classroom and helping them build their self-confidence, the students made some progress in their test scores. The changes in their scores on the 11 tests are shown in Table 4.6. Students Xiao Guo and Xiao Duan's scores improved significantly, while students Xiao Chen, Xiao Lu, and Xiao Tan's scores fluctuated slightly. The authors also interviewed them.

When asked about the reasons for their unsatisfactory performance, Student Xiao Lu indicated that he could not keep up with the other students because his English learning ability was too weak; Student Xiao Tan expressed that he did not have sufficient time to further consolidate his knowledge; and Student Xiao Chen directly stated that he did not like English, which showed that his subjective abandonment was the root cause of his weakness in English learning.

In addition, Student Xiao Gao wrote a weekly reflection on his own progress, stating that his teacher's care and help had gradually given him confidence and enthusiasm for learning English, which motivated him to dare to express himself in class.

**Table 4.6 Results for eleven tests**

Test Date	Xiao Gao	Xiao Lu	Xiao Duan	Xiao Chen	Xiao Tan
9/6	34	23	45	45	27
9/12	39	28	30	28	28
9/20	37	15	39	29	41
10/10	19	21	46	34	22
10/14	38	23	39	48	35
10/18	40	16	44	45	31
10/28	35	19	54	38	40
11/11	27	29	47	19	23
11/22	33	27	43	39	27
11/29	62	20	51	33	27
12/8	56	28	65	29	29

### 4.3 Positive impact of teachers' affective reactions on the students with learning difficulties

Teachers' affective reactions toward disadvantaged students can increase their participation in learning activities. Disadvantaged students often avoid using English, preferring to remain silent in class; however, the teacher conducts one or two learning activities in each class. This format allows students to communicate effectively in language and to listen to other members' ideas to enrich their own thinking. According to Slavin,

disadvantaged students can benefit greatly through collaboration, including facilitating interaction, providing comprehensive input and output, increasing self-confidence and self-esteem, and increasing motivation (Zhong Qiquan, 2003). In turn, teachers' affective reactions can increase student engagement. First, teachers' attention can identify disadvantaged students who remain silent during learning activities and take timely action. During the group debriefing process, the teachers' affirmation of the disadvantaged students' debriefing performance can make them face up to and acknowledge themselves, and thus be motivated to participate in the next learning activity and take advantage of the opportunity to present themselves.

Teachers' affective reactions toward disadvantaged students help them develop the belief that "I can do it too" and increase their self-confidence. English learning is a "systematic and coherent process" (Ellis, 1985:27), and the students who are weak at the previous stage will gradually lose enthusiasm and motivation and develop low self-esteem. However, the analysis of the study shows that attention to disadvantaged students inside and outside the classroom can shorten the distance between teachers and students. Teachers' affective reactions such as encouragement in the classroom can make students feel the pleasure of the English classroom and change from passive acceptance to initiative. As stated in the Affective Filter Hypothesis, the weaker the affective filter is, the more language input the brain can successfully receive (Krashen, 1985).

Teachers' affective reactions toward disadvantaged students can make them aware of the importance of their learning skills in the process of learning new knowledge and lead them to explore and further improve their English language learning skills. Learning English in secondary schools has more written assignments and constant memorization of knowledge points (Li Bing, 2007). This feature is a great challenge for disadvantaged students. For example, comprehension and analysis skills are required when reading texts, and self-management and memorization skills are required when consolidating knowledge points. Teachers' affective reactions toward disadvantaged students can develop and improve their learning abilities in different ways. For example, by giving opportunities to demonstrate in class, teachers can help them focus and gradually develop the habit of paying attention in class.

## 5. Conclusion

Disadvantaged students at the secondary school level are adolescents who are developing rapidly physically and mentally, and teachers' positive affective reactions will help them to discover their potential abilities. Therefore, teachers should usually pay attention to affective input and transmit affective messages such as encouragement to students through their own behavior, so that students can receive English teaching in a harmonious and pleasant atmosphere.

Based on the above study, the following three specific insights are drawn:

First, teachers should pay more attention to the weaker students in the classroom. When dealing with students who are lagging behind in learning, teachers should correct their attitudes, care about students' participation in learning activities, pay attention to students' physical and mental needs and developmental characteristics, and further improve students' self-confidence and overall English learning ability through emotional reactions such as caring.

Second, teachers should give appropriate guidance to disadvantaged students to help them adjust their English learning methods correctly and develop good study habits. To a large extent, the choice of students' learning methods and the formation of their habits affect their learning efficiency and academic performance.

Third, teachers should pay attention to the subtle influence that affective behavior has on students in the teaching process. Each student is an individual with certain differences, which requires teachers to encourage students to engage and discuss more with the teacher so that the teacher can give proper guidance and

immediate affective attention.

There are also some limitations in this study. First, it is easy to bring personal subjective feelings into the observation process, thus affecting the final conclusion of the experiment. Second, because the influence of teachers' affective reactions on disadvantaged students' English learning is a long-term process, and the limited time available for this study restricts the detailed and in-depth analysis of the problem.

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