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AFFECTIVE FACTORS IN SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of affective factors in self-directed learning. Affective factors include emotions, feelings, moods, beliefs and attitudes; the authors give a brief overview of these phenomena and how they affect cognition. The paper then describes ways in which affective factors are attended to in a self-access setting at a university in Japan, where language learners are engaged in a process of self-directed study. Drawing on findings from some preliminary research, the authors consider ways in which learners might be able to sustain motivation during periods of self-directed study.

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of affective factors in learning and investigate how learners might be supported during a period of self-directed study. The researchers begin by defining affect and then exploring the relationship between affect and cognition. They then look at ways in which educators can promote affective factors in self-directed learning, drawing upon examples from initial research. The aim of the paper is to answer four questions:

- What is affect?
- Why is it important in self-directed learning?
- How do we as educators currently attend to affective factors?
- How can we do this better?

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Context

The context for the present research is a small, private university near Tokyo in Japan, specializing in languages and culture. The institution features a large self-access learning centre ('the SALC') and the main aims of the SALC are to promote language learner autonomy and target language use by providing resources and support services to students. The SALC offers a series of optional self-directed language learning modules, which around 500 students each year choose to take. The modules are designed to help learners develop the autonomous learning skills needed to successfully plan and implement a course of independent study. Learners working on a module are assigned personal learning advisors (LAs) to help them evaluate their needs, choose appropriate materials and methods, monitor their learning, maintain motivation and evaluate their linguistic gains. Several research studies have been conducted in recent years examining the interaction between the learners and LAs and the way this advising dialogue (both face to face and written) promotes reflection and awareness of learning processes (cf. Mynard & Navarro, 2010; Mynard, 2010; 2012; Mynard & Thornton, 2012; Thornton & Mynard, 2012; Yamaguchi et al., 2012).

2.2 Advising in Language Learning (ALL)

Advising in Language Learning (ALL) is the process of helping a learner become more aware and autonomous through engagement with dialogue and drawing upon tools that facilitate reflection (Carson & Mynard, 2012). In the context described above, LAs meet learners in the SALC either for face-to-face booked advising sessions, at a Learning Help Desk on a 'drop in' basis, or in conjunction with one of the optional modules. The modules are tools that facilitate

thinking and learning, and this is further enhanced through the advising process. Typically, learners attend a group orientation session before starting a module; they then meet their LAs in person for one-to-one advising sessions around three times during an eight-week period. Each week, the learner submits written descriptions and reflections on self-directed work, and the LA responds to these reflections, also in written form. The LAs respond to the learners in a personalized way and may focus on cognitive, metacognitive, sociocultural-interactive, or affective factors (Mynard, 2012; Mynard & Thornton, 2012; Thornton & Mynard, 2012). Although all of these factors are important in the learning and advising process (Hurd & Fernández-Toro, 2009), *affect* is the focus of this paper.

3. AFFECT

3.1 *What is Meant by “Affect”?*

The term *affect* is a broad one, covering a diverse range of mental phenomena. When we talk of affective states, we are commonly referring to *emotions* or *moods*. Moods lack intensity, are diffuse and often endure for extended periods. Emotions, on the other hand, are relatively intense, distinct, but short-lived. Moods have little cognitive content and usually no salient antecedent cause. In other words, people usually do not know why they are in a certain mood. Emotions tend to have a salient antecedent cause, and the individual is normally aware of what that cause is. They also have clear cognitive content (disgust, fear, anger) so that, unlike moods, emotions have a referent towards which they are directed (Forgas, 2000; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). Moods can be classed as being positive or negative, but emotions can be much more complex. One need simply consider emotions like sadness, fear, guilt, or regret to see that they are more than simply ‘good’ or ‘bad’ (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). A summary of the differences

between emotions and moods is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Emotions and Moods

Emotion	Moods
Relatively intense	Lack intensity
Concentrated	Diffuse
Short-lived	Endure for longer
Salient antecedent cause	No salient antecedent cause
Clear cognitive content	Little cognitive content
Have a referent	No referent
Complex	'Good' or 'bad'

The affective domain also covers *preferences* and *evaluations* (Fiske & Taylor, 2013), which can be categorized as generally positive or negative, in the same way as moods. *Beliefs* and *attitudes* come under the notion of affect (Hurd, 2008; Oxford, 2011). Affect also refers to *feelings* (Hurd, 2008), though it is important to distinguish between feelings and emotions, two terms that are used almost interchangeably in daily discourse. In biological terms, an emotion is a bodily response to a stimulus; a feeling is a representation of that emotional state in the brain. Many organisms will therefore have emotions and even feelings, because mental representations do not require consciousness. A feeling in the human sense is the conscious awareness of a non-conscious mental representation of a non-conscious, bodily emotion (Damasio, 2000).

It is through feelings, which are inwardly directed and private, that emotions, which are outwardly directed and public, begin their impact on the mind; but the full and lasting impact of feelings requires consciousness, because only along with the advent of a sense of self do feelings become known to the individual having them.

(Damasio, 2000, p. 36)

However, in common parlance, the term *emotion* is often used to describe both the complete set of bodily responses to a stimulus *together with* a conscious awareness of those responses; that is the way the term is used in this paper.

According to Oxford (2011), affect in second language learning has been a relatively under-researched area, with attention being paid to certain topics. *Language anxiety* has been a fertile field of study. L2 learning anxiety arises when the learner is afraid of L2 social performance, mainly speaking. It has many adverse consequences: reduced willingness to communicate; general avoidance behaviours; low scores on standardized tests; reduced self-confidence; and a reduced sense of control. There is a range of physical symptoms: trembling; dryness of the throat; palpitations; stammering; and blushing (Oxford, 2011).

3.2 Affect and Cognition

The question of the relationship between affect and cognition – feeling and thinking – is an age-old one. In some views, affect has been seen as having a negative and dangerous impact on thinking and behaviour; in others, it is seen as an essential companion to rational thought (Forgas, 2000). Many thinkers in the Western theological and philosophical traditions have tackled this question, and one key conception of mental life that has survived till this day is the idea that it has three components: affect (relating to feeling); cognition (relating to thinking); and conation (relation to willing). These have traditionally been seen as “distinct and complementary

faculties” (Forgas, 2000, p. 3). This tripartite organization of the mind has remained influential, to the extent that many psychologists in the last century still saw each faculty as fundamentally separate. As Forgas (2000) points out, this may explain why each of the two main paradigms of twentieth-century psychology focused on one faculty as an independent entity. Behaviorism focused solely on conation (goal-oriented behaviour). Cognitivism, until a couple of decades ago, was concerned with “thinking” in terms of cognition, with no attention paid to affect. Much current research looks at the interaction between affect and cognition and views the two mental faculties as an integrated system.

Researchers today, therefore, see the influence between affect and cognition as bidirectional (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). Forgas (2000) cites evidence for the influence of affect on attention, memory, thinking, associations, and judgments, as well as for influence in the other direction, as when “people’s appraisal and analysis of situational information activate appropriate emotional responses” (Forgas, 2000, p. 6).

Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece (2008) provide an overview of the ways in which affect has an influence on cognition, learning, and performance. There are four primary routes by which such influences operate. Firstly, affect has an impact through memory processes. One example is the process known as *affect-congruent retrieval* (Forgas, 2000), whereby one’s affective state facilitates the retrieval of memories that are affectively congruent with it. In other words, people who are depressed or anxious or in a bad mood display a bias towards recalling negative memories, while people who are in a positive mood are more likely to recall good memories. Negative affective states also appear to have a detrimental effect on working memory, while positive affective states seem to have no bearing upon it (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008).

There is also evidence that affective states can influence one’s choice and use of

information processing strategies, which has consequences for learning and performance. It used to be the consensus that negative affect leads to more analytic, systemic, and detailed information processing than positive states, which were thought to generate rapid but superficial processing (Forgas, 2000). It now appears that the reality is more complex. Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2000) report that students displaying negative affective states are *less* likely to choose more complex cognitive strategies that require deeper information processing. This makes sense as such strategies demand greater engagement with the task in hand, something that is unlikely to occur with aversive negative affective states (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008).

A third route by which emotions or mood might influence cognition, learning, and performance is their demand on attentional resources. Space in working memory is limited, and affective states take up space, thereby increasing *cognitive load*. Emotions such as fear or anxiety, for example, can interfere with the cognitive processing required to complete a task by consuming working memory resources (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). Intriguingly, both positive and negative states can take up scarce processing capacity, yet there is an asymmetry in the consequences of the two types of effect for cognitive processing and performance (Forgas, 2000).

Affect may also have motivational consequences (Forgas, 2000). Positive affect, such as enjoyment of a task, may generate intrinsic motivation; negative affective states might be expected to lessen intrinsic motivation, though fear might result in extrinsic motivation (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). However, as Forgas (2000) notes, positive affect may lead to strategies aimed at maintaining positive mood, by avoiding cognitive effort for example; negative states may lead to processing that is more attentive and careful.

4. AFFECTIVE FACTORS IN PRACTICE

4.1. Examples of How Affective Factors are Addressed

There are three ways in which affective factors are addressed through the SALC at the institution described in this paper (also see Valdivia, McLoughlin, & Mynard, 2011). The first is through a module called the *First Steps Module* which is a module designed to introduce learners to some of the key concepts associated with becoming a language learner. Once a learner is aware of these factors and equipped with some tools, he or she finds it easier to design and implement a course of self-directed learning. One of the units of the First Steps Module is “Affective Strategies” and consists of activities to explicitly introduce learners to internal and external motivational factors, confidence-building techniques, and also to strategies for reducing anxiety.

The second way is to ensure that affective factors are an integral part of the process of designing and implementing a course of independent study. LAs help learners to construct plans that help them to not only focus on their language learning goals, but also to manage their motivation and affective states. A model called SURE+E (Study Use Review Evaluate + Enjoy) is introduced to the learners to help them to organise and balance their learning in order to make noticeable progress and notice and measure their achievements which in turn aim to build confidence, maintain motivation and promote a sense of self-efficacy.

Finally, the weekly comments that LAs write to learners each week also have a significant role to play and these comments are one of the main focus areas of this paper; namely ways in which LAs focus on affective factors through written comments and also on students’ reactions to LA comments and whether these comments have any impact on affective factors.

4.2 Previous Research

Previous research in this context has not focussed specifically on affective factors, yet findings helped to shape the direction in which current and future research and practice will take. Two separate studies conducted at the same institution indicated that LAs pay particular attention to not only cognitive and metacognitive factors, but also to affective factors when facilitating self-directed learning, particularly through written comments. The written format allows more thinking time than in face-to-face situations, so LAs can attend to different aspects of a learner's experience. In one of the studies (Thornton & Mynard, 2012) the researchers analysed the written comments by nine LAs as part of the First Steps Module to see whether the comments targeted mainly cognitive, metacognitive or affective factors. The researchers found that approximately half of all advisor comments primarily had an affective function.

In addition, a typical advisor comment focused on a combination of cognitive, metacognitive and affective factors, like in this example:

I know you are super busy with all your work. Finding time for independent study (module work) can be difficult. Also a big part of university life is socializing and having fun with friends - don't feel too bad. What the SUR (Study, Use, Review) model can do is help you add balance to your language learning. Activities that help you study, use and review for both your goals are particularly useful.

What are some activities that you can do to help you study –vocab & speaking and use vocab & speaking?

An interpretation of this comment is: "...the advisor first attends to the learner's affective side, by trying to reassure her about balancing work and social life commitments, which in itself requires the metacognitive skill of time management. The metacognitive aspect of learning is then further focused on when the advisor reinforces the usefulness of a model for organizing learning activities which has been introduced in this unit. Finally a cognitive aspect is also added

by the advisor, who prompts reflection and encourages action, through questioning, on specific learning activities which might be suitable for this learner” (Thornton & Mynard, 2013, p. 149).

The research shows that LAs focus on affective factors to a large degree, but do the learners read, understand and benefit from these kinds of comments? Mynard (2012) conducted research to try to establish to what extent the comments from LAs were valued by learners and whether the comments influenced students’ learning. In order to investigate this, six module takers and their learning advisors were interviewed (separately) and the module materials were examined (further details of the research can be found in Mynard, 2012). The results indicated that all six learners valued and were influenced by the comments from LAs. The types of comments that the learners felt were most useful depended on their particular needs, but all of the participants mentioned affective or motivational matters. In fact, almost half of the episodes that students highlighted during the interviews appeared to have had an impact on the learner’s affective domain or influenced their motivation (19 out of 42 episodes).

4.3 Comments that Help Learners to Manage Affect and Motivation

Although, this certainly needs further analysis and additional supporting data, the following six areas emerged from the interviews conducted by Mynard (2012) as ways in which students indicated that LA comments had helped them to manage affective and motivational states.

1. Being able to talk to an LA about other things, not just learning

This aspect was mentioned by three of the participants and here is one extract from an interview with a learner:

“(my LA) cheer me not only study, but club and other things. I think it’s great.....for me

to contact with learning advisor it is nice chance to talk about other things for example in the class or some other problem so it's nice.”

2. The use of pictures, emoticons and stickers

In a face-to-face advising scenario, LAs use body language, humour and tone of voice to establish trust and rapport. During the module period, most of the interaction is in written form and given the limited face-to-face contact, LAs make efforts to establish trust and rapport with learners in other ways. For example, all LAs use emoticons - usually smiley faces for this purpose. Some LAs use stickers or drawings and all of the learners interviewed mentioned them and indicated that they appreciate them.

3. LAs giving emotional responses

LAs often express their own feelings in their comments for example, one LA wrote “I'm really pleased that you're happy with your progress this week.” Two learners said during interviews that they appreciated these kinds of comments as they motivated them like in this example: “I am happy! I was happy, so my motivation....was up... that sentence, could good words for me, so I did harder work this unit. I pleased when I read this comment.”

4. Using encouraging words

LAs wrote encouraging comments throughout the module, and one student talked about how these kinds of comments helped her motivation: “my motivation gradually up... I always thought (my LA's) comments fill me happy so I continue work. To tell the truth, other class homework is very hard for me, it is difficult for me to continue this work, but (my LA's) comments cheer up so I could continue.”

5. The nature of written interaction

One participant explained how the nature of the hand-written interaction motivated her: “I like read here because look like secret diary with (my LA). I like.” Later she added “(the

written comments were..) very helpful and reading is fun - my LA's message.”

6. LAs intuiting

LAs tend to intuit how they believe a student is feeling based on the evidence as a way of connecting and empathising with the learner and this was appreciated. One student explained that she felt her LA understood her which was also motivating: “I thought [my LA] was understood me ...I became happy.”

5. CONCLUSIONS

According to Dornyei and Ushioda (2011), L2 motivation needs positive conditions to thrive. Initial and sustained motivation require a positive self-evaluation on the part of the learner. Particularly, in independent learning settings, as important as the need for a focus on cognitive and metacognitive strategies is “the need to focus on positive emotions and attitudes and build in strategies in the materials that can help students to maintain a positive outlook” (Hurd 2008, p. 232). One way to introduce such a focus is to explicitly teach affective strategies.

Oxford (2011) presents affective strategies as a component of language learning to be used in tandem with cognitive and sociocultural-interactive strategies. Affective strategies “help learners directly optimize their emotions, beliefs, attitudes, and motivation for the purpose of L2 learning” (Oxford, 2011, p. 64). They enable the learner to generate positive emotions and attitudes and stay motivated. Oxford identifies two main types:

- Activating supportive emotions, beliefs and attitudes (e.g. expressing feelings, relaxing, creating positive emotions through thoughts or statements, using positive self-talk, using self-handicapping)
- Generating and maintaining motivation (e.g. considering the instrumental use of the L2 or

future rewards, using positive self-talk to motivate or negative self-talk as a push to improve, using self-handicapping as a positive challenge, increasing intrinsic motivation by personalizing tasks)

Furthermore, as we can talk of metacognitive strategies, Oxford argues that we can also identify meta-affective strategies, which are concerned with learners' control of their affective strategy use and allow learners to be aware of and control their affect, whether emotions, motivation, beliefs, or attitudes.

Although students are explicitly introduced to affective strategies through the modules, much of the motivation for learners in this context is likely to be due to the comments that they regularly receive from their LAs. Although this is beneficial, LAs should also consider extending the training that learners receive in affective strategy use so that learners are able to manage their own affective states and sustain their own self-directed study even without the regular comments from LAs.

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