

Recognizing, Understanding and Mitigating L2 Learner Frustration

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【Abstract】

Despite ample studies focusing on motivation and anxiety, an often overlooked emotion in second language acquisition (SLA) research has been frustration (Hashemi, 2011; Jibeen 2013; McCuaig, Pearlstein, & Judd, 2010). The effects of this emotion can be damaging to the learner in both the long and short term, further impeding the complex task of a consistent learning progression. In turn, a brief cross-disciplinary exploration into this crucial emotion is a necessary step towards raising awareness for L2 teachers and helping them unfetter their L2 learners. Along with a general overview of frustration, this paper examines possible originations, categorical differences, and finally a course of action for language teachers to keep in mind for future use.

【Keywords】

L2 learners, affect, emotions, frustration, motivation

1. Introduction

Emotions have always been an influential part of the learning process and as such, they can help or hinder learner receptiveness and motivation (Pavlenko, 2005). Indeed, it has been essential for teachers to consider the effects of emotions on the dynamic of every classroom and each individual student (Dewaele, 2005; Swain, 2013). Currently, there is agreement that certain emotive states can be mitigated in order to discourage obstructive cycles and patterns (Oxford, 2015). For the second language learner, this often includes dealing with recurring negative feelings such as anxiety, fear, and self-doubt (Dörnyei, 2001, 2007; Hashemi, 2011). Additionally, Krashen's (1982) "affective filter" reminds us that minimalizing these negative feelings and emotions can result in increased student responsiveness and engagement. While much research has examined how to unburden the L2 learner of anxiety, and consequently promote increased confidence, scant L2 research has been done solely on the emotive state of frustration, particularly with regard to its recognition and subsequent steps toward alleviation.

As Dörnyei points out (2007, p. 731), "...to understand the psychological tapestry of the classroom...we need to adopt an interdisciplinary approach." In turn, some of the most relevant research with regard to learner frustration has been found in psychological studies, particularly with regard to students with learning disabilities, behavioral issues, or other cognitive disorders (Nelson, 1997; Myles & Simpson, 1998; Raggi & Chronis, 2006). These particular students, justifiably, exhibit consistently high levels of frustration compared to their peers and thus have had more robust research on the trials and errors of strategic interventions (Mennuti, 2006; Young & Bramham, 2007). Fortunately, successful strategies can also be applied to most students in general, including the L2 learner. As a result, there exist opportunities to adapt and apply these techniques in a manner that would aid L2 students and teachers alike when dealing with frustration.

To further complement this research, it would be useful to also take into account effective L2 motivational strategies (Shutenko, 2015). In his teacher guide entitled *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom* (2001), Dörnyei argues for "emotion control strategies" as one of several ways to positively augment the learner's motivational drive. Clearly, there exist significant correlations with regard to addressing learner emotions while enhancing motivation, as also pointed out by Oxford (1990, 2015).

This paper aims to explore and distil those strategies, both in current L2 research and beyond it, with a focus on frustration's discerning features, causes, and ultimately its mitigation for L2 learners.

2. What Causes Frustrated L2 Learners?

According to Merriam-Webster's online dictionary (2016), "frustration" is defined as the following:

- 1) "a feeling of anger or annoyance caused by being unable to do something"; and
- 2) "a deep chronic sense or state of insecurity and dissatisfaction arising from unresolved problems or unfulfilled needs."

In other words, frustration stems from an unattainable goal for the learner. Furthermore, it is provoked by both external and internal factors, with limitations on the controllability of each (Jibeen 2013; Shorkey & Crocker, 1981). These internal emotional factors, psychological in nature, typically overlap with other feelings such as

inadequacy, powerlessness, anxiousness and low self-confidence (Amsel, 2002). Contrastively, according to Myles & Simpson (1998, p.3), external factors may stem from teaching professionals in such cases as:

- * “disorganization”
- * “inconsistency”
- * “a lack of positive reinforcement”
- * “irrelevant curricula”
- * “an overexposure to punishment”

3. How Do We Recognize Frustration in Our Learners?

As with many emotions, it is possible to identify frustration by being observant of its physical attributes and other manifestations. For example, recent strides in computer science have coalesced with the need to interpret facial changes as a means to better understand users. Thus, facial recognition has helped define noticeable differences to indicate varying degrees of emotional states (McDaniel, et al., 2007). Interestingly, frustration has been shown to be a lesser problem than boredom (Baker, D’Mello, Rodrigo, & Graesser, 2010).

With regard to e-learning, it has been important for software to discern scalable frustration in order to readjust the difficulty level accordingly. In this way, an e-learning program tailors itself in accordance with the individual learner’s pace. For instance, if a camera or sensor detected pupil dilation – an indicator of higher frustration – the program would moderate and ease the learning burden for the user (Rosch & Vogel-Walcutt, 2012). Additionally, algorithms can now associate a combination of factors including speed of response, hesitation, and for touch-sensitive hardware and screens – any increase in the amount of force applied (Baker et al., 2010). Still, while these have aided the computer-human dynamic, there are many other telling factors that can be seen in person. As teachers, how should we proceed to understand and respond to these observable features?

In short, students in real classroom environments tend to exhibit a much more complex array of frustration due to their added social dynamics (Skehan, 1989). Outward symptoms, while varied, often include one or more of the following:

- * boredom
- * apathy
- * anger
- * depression
- * low self-esteem
- * irritability
- * low motivation

4. Noting the Categorical Differences

Obviously, frustration is not always easily discernable from other feelings, but a key point is that it often acts as a common precursor. Fortunately, there are salient categorical differences within this emotion that can serve as a guide in its recognition, and hopefully, as effective interventions.

General Frustration. This type of frustration is exhibited when there is no particular controlling or determining factor in its cause. While larger issues may loom, this could

be a physiological response (e.g., lack of sleep) or another outside factor (e.g., poor time management).

Focused/Directed Frustration. In this case, there is a main incendiary of the frustration, whether that is a person, concept, or a learning impediment (e.g., task, lesson, or environment). When this happens, the provocateur becomes the direct recipient of associated responses stemming from the frustration. Examples of subsequent reactions can include avoidance, aloofness, sarcasm/insults, or even physical altercations (Mennuti, 2006; Nelson, 1997; Shorkey & Crocker, 1981).

Misdirected Frustration. In misdirected frustration, the emotion itself is released either inward, towards the self, or outward and away from the cause, thus creating a type of collateral damage elsewhere (Honeycutt & Milliken, 2012). An inward example of this would be when a student becomes frustrated with a lesson that has a high burden of difficulty, then begins to sob after many failed attempts. Alternatively, in an external misdirection, the student may raise his or her voice at another student as an aggressive-reactive response. In both cases, there is a clear misdirection of frustrated emotion towards a faultless other.

Episodic Frustration. A much more manageable type of frustration is one that is momentary and unrelated to a history of prior events. This may occur when students are placed in a pair with an imbalance of partner participation or ability in the given task, hence leading to an acute frustration. This can be more easily rectified with proper teacher interventions such as changing partners or readjusting the task itself.

Cumulative Frustration. One of the most debilitating and potentially explosive aspects of frustration is cumulative frustration, which has the ability to compound over time if the root causes are not reconciled as early as possible (Honeycutt & Milliken, 2012). What can seemingly start as a benign or minor annoyance can slowly develop into a highly stressful event or situation with unpredictable results. An example of a cumulative frustration may be with a teaching style that is new or different than what the student had experienced previously. In this case, it may be a change from a passive classroom environment to an active one where participation and discussion are expected as in communicative L2 classrooms. Over time, the inability to cope with this drastic change may grate on the teacher-student relationship until it manifests itself into more negative reactions. An example may lead to a student avoiding a particular class entirely and consequently failing.

5. Mitigation of the Frustrated L2 Learner?

Once frustration is determined, what is the best course of action? As mentioned earlier, students with cognitive, behavioral, or emotional disorders are more prone to this emotion and therefore previous research exists with a multitude of strategic interventions developed, albeit outside of SLA (Iurea 2015; Mennuti, 2006; Nelson, 1997; Ragi & Chronis, 2006). However, these strategies may also be applied to the frustrated L2 learner within the appropriate context and situation.

Below is a list of adapted strategies for the L2 learner based on previous L2 affective strategy research in tandem with studies in social psychology and education:

Strategy 1: Readjusting the Scaffold. As Krashen (1982, 2003) has extolled, the L2 learner needs comprehensible input. Realistically, materials may not always suit the exact level of the classroom or learner, therefore, proper scaffolding is necessary to

allow students to gain traction on the learning goals or objectives. While this remains a tenet of L2 teaching as a general rule, there is little mention of additional scaffolding for the frustrated individual.

This targeted approach may suit the need of a particular student that may not be able to cope with the cognitive or language burden. By lowering the difficulty, and acknowledging the frustration, the student will often respond more constructively to the task, lesson, or teacher (Becktold, 2001; Qu, Wang, & Johnson, 2004).

Strategy 2: Positive, Consistent Teacher Modelling. An aspect often forgotten amid learner emotions is that of teacher emotions. If the teacher continues to display a positive or neutral attitude under challenging circumstances, learners tend to respond in kind when faced with similar adversity (Becktold, 2001). This reaction can be immediate or gradual, yet its overall effect is long-lasting provided the teacher remains within an acceptable range of emotional stability.

Furthering this strategy is the need for teachers to avoid abusing their hierarchy of power. Teachers can sometimes exhibit examples of these kinds of destructive behaviors through the use of some of the following common examples:

- * shaming
- * condescension
- * a raised voice
- * comparing attributes of “good” students to “poor” students

(Honeycutt & Milliken, 2012; Mennuti, 2006; Monroe, 2008)

Ironically, teachers participate in these negative loops unintentionally due to their own frustrations with students.

Strategy 3: Diagnosing Through Communication. For nearly every category of frustration, keeping a proactive “willingness to communicate” can help diagnose, and resolve, both major and minor issues (Iurea, 2015; MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998). Cumulative frustration, for instance, needs to be troubleshooted at a deeper level, with a greater understanding of the history before a beneficial solution can take place, whereas episodic frustration may be handled at that moment in time.

Both communicative and cultural misunderstandings should be acknowledged within this dialogue as well. By doing this, minor frustrations will avoid compiling and becoming insurmountable.

Strategy 4: Reflecting and Reevaluating. Not all frustrations can be placated within the classroom, and so it is our responsibility as educators to post-diagnose. A frustrated student will appreciate a latent understanding compared to an absence of acknowledgment. We must take the time to reflect on our own teachings, the classroom dynamic, and the individual students when issues arise (Saylag, 2012).

4. Conclusion

For any learner, there will always be moments of frustration. As instructors, it is important to not only notice these accompanying causes and effects, but also have strategies on how best to deal with them. While each student may respond to frustration

in a unique manner, the invoking factors are important to address, whether those are superficial or involve a longer sequence of past events.

Further research may help provide a better approach towards diagnosing and alleviating frustration among L2 levels and across different cultural backgrounds and tolerances (Chipea, Negruți, & Chip, 2012).

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