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THE IMPACT OF AFFECTIVE FACTORS ON CHINESE EFL LEARNERS' SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND COPING STRATEGIES: A CASE STUDY-BASED APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Affective factors are widely recognized as crucial determinants of second language acquisition (SLA), yet research on Chinese EFL learners often examines these variables in isolation or offers pedagogical implications that remain abstract. Anchored in the Affective Filter Hypothesis, Gardner's socio-educational model, and Dörnyei's motivation framework, this article conducts a case-based synthesis of published studies to examine how motivation, attitude, anxiety, and self-confidence jointly shape Chinese learners' engagement, learning behaviors, and language outcomes. By analyzing representative cases reported in prior empirical research, the study identifies recurring mechanism pathways linking contextual pressures to affective states and learning performance. Based on the synthesis, the article proposes coping strategies from both teacher and learner perspectives. The findings contribute a context-sensitive understanding of affective influences in Chinese EFL settings and offer practical implications for classroom instruction.

KEYWORDS: Affective Factors; Second Language Acquisition; Chinese Learners of English; Learning Strategies.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

English functions as a global lingua franca and occupies a central position across all stages of formal education in China. Despite long-term instructional exposure and substantial learner investment, English learning outcomes among Chinese EFL learners vary considerably. Previous research has shown that such variability cannot be fully explained by differences in instructional input, learning time, or cognitive ability alone, prompting scholars to increasingly focus on learner-

internal variables in second language acquisition (SLA) (Klein, 1986; McDonough, 2011). Among these variables, affective factors have been consistently identified as critical determinants of learning engagement and achievement.

Affective factors such as motivation, attitude, anxiety, and self-confidence are particularly salient in the Chinese EFL context. Under an exam-oriented education system, English learning is closely tied to high-stakes testing, which tends to strengthen instrumental motivation while simultaneously intensifying anxiety and fear of negative evaluation (Qin, 2004; Jing, 2005). Empirical studies in China indicate that frequent assessment pressure and performance-oriented classroom practices may inhibit learner' willingness to communicate and reduce their tolerance for ambiguity in language use (Wang & Wan, 2001; Jiang, 2023). As a result, learners with similar proficiency and exposure may develop markedly different emotional responses to English learning, leading to divergent learning behaviors and long-term outcomes.

The importance of affective factors has long been emphasized in SLA theory. The Affective Filter Hypothesis proposes that learners' emotional states regulate the extent to which linguistic input is internalized, suggesting that motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety function as psychological gateways to acquisition (Krashen, as discussed in Schütz, 2007). From a socio-educational perspective, Gardner and Lambert (1959) argue that motivation is socially embedded and closely related to learners' attitudes toward the target language and its speakers. Subsequent research confirms that motivational orientations and attitudes are robust predictors of second language achievement (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). Building on these traditions, Dörnyei (1998) conceptualizes motivation as a dynamic construct that fluctuates across contexts and learning experiences, highlighting the need to examine affective factors as evolving rather than static.

Although extensive research has confirmed the importance of affective factors, existing studies often examine single variables in isolation or rely primarily on large-scale survey data, offering limited insight into how affective factors interact in real educational contexts (Bao & Liu, 2021; Dong & Cheng, 2024). Moreover, pedagogical implications are frequently discussed in general terms without sufficient grounding in learners' lived experiences. To address these limitations, the present study adopts a case-based synthesis of published empirical research to explore how motivation, attitude, anxiety, and self-confidence jointly influence SLA among Chinese EFL learners and to propose coping strategies that bridge theory and classroom practice.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Affective Factors in Second Language Acquisition

Affective factors have long been regarded as core determinants of individual differences in SLA. Early SLA research gradually recognized that language acquisition is not solely a cognitive process but is deeply influenced by learners' emotional and psychological states (Klein, 1986; Selma, 2017). Affective factors generally refer to learners' emotions, attitudes, and self-perceptions that shape their engagement with language input, interaction, and persistence in learning. Research consistently shows that favorable affective conditions promote active participation and sustained effort, whereas negative affect may result in avoidance behaviors and reduced learning opportunities (Bao & Liu, 2021; Tallungan et al., 2022).

In the Chinese EFL context, affective factors are closely intertwined with instructional practices and sociocultural expectations. Studies have reported that exam pressure, teacher-centered instruction, and accuracy-oriented evaluation often heighten learners' anxiety while narrowing their learning strategies (Qin, 2004; Wang & Wan, 2001). Consequently, affective factors influence SLA not only as internal emotional states but also as mediating mechanisms between learning environments and learner behavior.

2.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Affective Factors

One of the most influential theoretical accounts of affective factors in SLA is Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, affective variables such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety regulate the intake of comprehensible input, with high anxiety or low motivation raising the affective filter and constraining acquisition (Krashen, as discussed in Schütz, 2007). Although the hypothesis has been critiqued for its lack of precise operationalization, it has provided a foundational framework for understanding affective mediation in SLA.

From a socio-educational perspective, Gardner and Lambert (1959) propose that motivation is shaped by learners' attitudes toward the target language and its community, distinguishing between integrative and instrumental orientations. Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that motivation and attitudes are strongly associated with second language achievement across learning contexts (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). Dörnyei (1998) further expands motivational theory by emphasizing its dynamic nature, arguing that motivation fluctuates in response to learning experiences, success and failure, and contextual change. This dynamic view is particularly relevant in exam-oriented EFL contexts, where learners' motivational intensity may shift across learning stages.

2.3 Motivation and Attitude in SLA

Motivation is widely recognized as a driving force behind sustained engagement in SLA. Learners with strong motivation are more likely to invest effort, participate actively in classroom interaction, and seek additional learning opportunities outside class (Li, 2020; Dong & Cheng, 2024). In China, however, motivation is often dominated by instrumental goals related to examinations and academic advancement, which may effectively promote short-term achievement but fail to sustain long-term engagement or intrinsic interest (Liu, 2019).

Attitude toward English learning is closely related to motivation and plays a mediating role in SLA. Learners who perceive English as meaningful and useful tend to approach learning tasks positively and persist in the face of difficulty, whereas negative attitudes may result in resistance to participation and reduced learning investment (Soler, 1994; Zhu & Zhou, 2012). Empirical studies indicate that attitudes influence SLA primarily through their impact on learning engagement and classroom behavior, shaping how learners interact with instructional input and communicative opportunities (Wang, 2024).

2.4 Anxiety and Its Effects on Language Learning

Foreign language anxiety is one of the most extensively studied affective factors in SLA. Research has identified communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety as major dimensions of foreign language anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). High levels of anxiety have

been shown to impair concentration, disrupt memory retrieval, and reduce learners' willingness to communicate, particularly in speaking and assessment contexts (Wang & Wan, 2001; Zhang, 2020). In Chinese EFL classrooms, anxiety is often intensified by performance-oriented evaluation and sociocultural concerns related to face-saving, which may amplify learners' fear of making mistakes in public (Qin, 2004; Jiang, 2023). As a result, anxious learners tend to adopt avoidance strategies, limit participation, and rely on rote learning rather than communicative practice, which ultimately constrains SLA (Day, 2023).

2.5 Self-Confidence and Self-Efficacy in SLA

Self-confidence, often conceptualized as self-efficacy, refers to learners' beliefs about their ability to successfully perform language tasks. Grounded in social cognitive theory, Bandura (1986) argues that self-efficacy influences individuals' choice of activities, effort, persistence, and resilience. In SLA, learners with higher self-confidence are more willing to take communicative risks and engage in challenging tasks, whereas learners with low confidence tend to withdraw and restrict their learning behaviors (Tallungan et al., 2022).

Empirical research demonstrates a positive relationship between self-confidence and language proficiency across skills such as speaking, writing, and reading (Zhu & Zhou, 2012; Xudong et al., 2023). Importantly, self-confidence interacts with other affective factors: repeated success can strengthen confidence and reduce anxiety, while repeated failure may undermine confidence and exacerbate negative emotions, forming a self-reinforcing cycle.

2.6 Research Gaps and Rationale for the Present Study

Despite extensive research on affective factors in SLA, several gaps remain. First, many studies focus on single affective variables without sufficiently examining their interaction as a system (Bao & Liu, 2021). Second, a large proportion of research relies on questionnaire-based methods, which identify correlations but provide limited insight into learners' lived experiences and behavioral mechanisms (Dong & Cheng, 2024). Third, although Chinese scholars have increasingly explored affective factors in local contexts, pedagogical strategies are often presented in broad terms and lack concrete guidance grounded in case-based evidence (Jing, 2005; Wang, 2024).

To address these limitations, the present study adopts a case-based synthesis approach, integrating representative cases from existing research to examine how motivation, attitude, anxiety, and self-confidence jointly influence SLA among Chinese EFL learners. By situating these cases within established theoretical frameworks, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive and context-sensitive understanding of affective influences and to derive actionable coping strategies for both teachers and learners.

3.0. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case-based synthesis approach to investigate the influence of affective factors on second language acquisition (SLA) among Chinese EFL learners. Case-based synthesis is particularly suitable for research questions that aim to uncover mechanisms and patterns across existing empirical studies rather than to generate statistical generalizations. Previous

SLA research has pointed out that affective factor such as motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence are highly context-sensitive and dynamically shaped by learning environments, which makes in-depth case analysis an effective method for capturing their complexity (Klein, 1986; McDonough, 2011).

Rather than collecting new primary data, this study systematically synthesizes representative cases reported in published empirical research. This methodological choice is consistent with previous reviews and theoretical discussions in SLA, which emphasize the value of integrating qualitative evidence to explain how affective factors operate in real learning contexts (Bao & Liu, 2021; Selma, 2017). By reanalyzing existing cases through a unified analytical framework, the present study aims to identify recurring patterns and interaction mechanisms among affective factors in the Chinese EFL context.

3.2 Case Selection Criteria

The cases included in this study were selected based on three criteria. First, the cases had to focus explicitly on one or more affective factors—namely motivation, attitude, anxiety, or self-confidence—in the process of English learning. Second, the participants in the selected studies had to be Chinese EFL learners, ensuring contextual consistency and relevance to the research focus. Third, the studies needed to provide sufficient descriptive detail regarding learning context, learner behavior, and learning outcomes to allow for mechanism-based analysis rather than surface-level comparison.

Based on these criteria, four representative cases were selected from prior empirical studies conducted in Chinese educational settings. These cases respectively highlight the role of motivation and motivational orientation (Li, 2020; Liu, 2019), learning attitudes toward English and classroom participation (Soler, 1994; Zhu & Zhou, 2012), foreign language anxiety in speaking and testing contexts (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Wang & Wan, 2001; Zhang, 2020), and self-confidence or self-efficacy in relation to learning strategies and performance (Bandura, 1986; Tallungan et al., 2022). Together, these cases provide a balanced representation of the major affective dimensions discussed in the literature.

3.3 Analytical Framework and Procedure

To ensure analytical consistency across cases, this study employs a common analytical framework that examines each case along four dimensions: (1) contextual conditions, (2) affective manifestations, (3) learning behaviors and strategy use, and (4) language learning outcomes. This framework is informed by the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which highlights the mediating role of affective factors between input and acquisition (Schütz, 2007), as well as by socio-educational and motivational theories that emphasize the interaction between learner attitudes, motivation, and learning environment (Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Dörnyei, 1998).

Each case was first examined individually to identify how specific affective factors manifested in the learning process and how they influenced learners' engagement and performance. Subsequently, cross-case comparison was conducted to identify convergent patterns and recurring mechanisms. Particular attention was paid to the interaction among affective factors, such as how anxiety may

undermine self-confidence or how positive attitudes and motivation may jointly facilitate sustained engagement. This procedure aligns with previous research that calls for integrated analysis of affective variables rather than isolated examination (Bao & Liu, 2021; Dong & Cheng, 2024).

3.4 Reliability and Validity Considerations

Although this study does not involve primary data collection, methodological rigor was ensured through careful case selection, transparent analytical procedures, and theoretical triangulation. By grounding the analysis in well-established SLA theories and drawing on multiple empirical sources, the study enhances the credibility of its interpretations (Klein, 1986; McDonough, 2011). In addition, the use of multiple cases reduces the risk of idiosyncratic interpretation based on a single study and allows for the identification of stable patterns across different learning contexts.

Nevertheless, as with other synthesis-based studies, the findings are intended for analytic rather than statistical generalization. The conclusions should therefore be interpreted as theoretically informed explanations of how affective factors influence SLA in the Chinese EFL context, rather than as universally generalizable claims.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The case-based synthesis reveals that affective factors exert a systematic and interactive influence on Chinese EFL learners' second language acquisition. Rather than operating independently, motivation, attitude, anxiety, and self-confidence form an interrelated affective system that shapes learners' engagement patterns, learning strategies, and language outcomes. Across the selected cases, differences in learners' emotional experiences were consistently associated with differences in classroom participation, out-of-class practice, and performance, confirming earlier claims that affective factors function as mediating mechanisms between learning environments and acquisition processes (Klein, 1986; Bao & Liu, 2021).

Motivation emerged as a primary driving force behind sustained engagement in SLA. Learners with strong motivation—particularly when it extended beyond exam-oriented goals—demonstrated higher levels of initiative, more frequent interaction, and greater persistence in language practice. This finding aligns with prior research indicating that motivated learners invest more effort and employ a wider range of learning strategies (Li, 2020; Dong & Cheng, 2024). In contrast, learners whose motivation was narrowly instrumental often limited their learning activities to completing assignments and preparing for tests, which resulted in slower development of communicative competence. This pattern supports Gardner and Lambert's (1959) claim that motivation grounded in broader attitudes toward language use tends to sustain engagement more effectively, and it resonates with Dörnyei's (1998) argument that motivation fluctuates in response to learners' experiences and perceived value of learning tasks.

Attitude toward English learning played a complementary role by shaping learners' willingness to engage with learning opportunities. The synthesized cases suggest that learners who perceived English as meaningful or useful approached classroom activities more positively and were more inclined to participate in interaction, whereas negative attitudes often manifested in passivity and resistance. These findings are consistent with earlier empirical evidence demonstrating that attitudes

influence SLA indirectly by affecting learning engagement rather than linguistic aptitude itself (Soler, 1994; Zhu & Zhou, 2012). In the Chinese EFL context, where instructional practices may emphasize accuracy and examination performance, negative attitudes can further amplify disengagement, reinforcing patterns of minimal participation and surface-level learning (Qin, 2004; Jing, 2005).

Anxiety was found to exert a predominantly inhibiting effect on SLA, particularly in speaking and evaluative contexts. High levels of foreign language anxiety were associated with cognitive disruption, avoidance behaviors, and reduced willingness to communicate, which in turn constrained learners' exposure to meaningful input and output. This finding echoes extensive research demonstrating the negative relationship between anxiety and language performance (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Wang & Wan, 2001). From a cognitive perspective, anxiety consumes attentional resources and interferes with working memory, making it difficult for learners to retrieve and organize linguistic knowledge during real-time communication. In exam-oriented Chinese classrooms, anxiety is often intensified by fear of negative evaluation and face-saving concerns, leading learners to avoid speaking opportunities and rely on rote learning strategies (Jiang, 2023; Zhang, 2020). Such avoidance further limits communicative practice and reinforces a cycle of underperformance and heightened anxiety (Day, 2023).

Self-confidence, often conceptualized as self-efficacy, functioned as a protective and facilitative factor in the SLA process. Learners with higher self-confidence were more willing to take risks, participate in interaction, and experiment with language use, which contributed to greater learning gains over time. This pattern is consistent with Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, which emphasizes that self-efficacy beliefs influence individuals' effort, persistence, and resilience. Empirical studies in SLA similarly indicate that confident learners are more likely to adopt active learning strategies and engage in autonomous practice, whereas learners with low self-confidence tend to restrict themselves to passive routines (Tallungan et al., 2022; Xudong et al., 2023). Importantly, self-confidence was closely linked to learners' emotional histories: repeated success strengthened confidence and reduced anxiety, while repeated failure undermined confidence and intensified negative affect.

A key finding of this synthesis is that affective factors interact dynamically rather than exerting isolated effects. Motivation and positive attitudes can partially offset the negative impact of anxiety by encouraging continued engagement, while strong self-confidence can buffer learners against fear of making mistakes. Conversely, low motivation and negative attitudes may exacerbate anxiety and erode confidence, producing a downward spiral of avoidance and stagnation. This interactional pattern supports previous arguments that SLA is a complex, multi-factorial process shaped by the interplay of emotional, cognitive, and contextual variables (Bao & Liu, 2021; Selma, 2017). It also provides empirical support for the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which conceptualizes affective factors as collective conditions regulating access to acquisition rather than as independent predictors (Schütz, 2007).

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings underscore the importance of addressing affective factors holistically in Chinese EFL classrooms. Instructional practices that focus exclusively on

linguistic accuracy and test performance may unintentionally heighten anxiety and suppress motivation, whereas supportive learning environments that encourage participation and tolerate error can lower affective barriers and promote engagement. The findings also highlight the need for instructional strategies that foster learners' self-confidence and positive attitudes, thereby creating conditions conducive to sustained SLA. These implications are consistent with prior research advocating the integration of affective considerations into foreign language teaching practice (Bao & Liu, 2021; Wang, 2024).

5.0 CONCLUSION

5.1 Major conclusion

This study has explored the influence of affective factors on second language acquisition (SLA) among Chinese EFL learners through a case-based synthesis of published empirical research. By integrating representative cases within established SLA frameworks, the study demonstrates that motivation, attitude, anxiety, and self-confidence exert substantial and interconnected effects on learners' engagement, learning behaviors, and language outcomes. Rather than functioning as isolated variables, these affective factors operate as an interactive system that mediates the relationship between learning environments and acquisition processes, providing further support for theoretical claims that emphasize the affective dimension of SLA (Schütz, 2007; Bao & Liu, 2021). One major finding of the study is that motivation plays a central role in sustaining learners' engagement in English learning. Learners with stronger motivation—particularly when it extends beyond narrow exam-oriented goals—are more likely to invest effort, participate actively, and seek opportunities for meaningful language use. This finding is consistent with previous research highlighting the importance of motivational intensity and orientation in SLA (Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Dörnyei, 1998; Li, 2020). At the same time, the study shows that attitudes toward English learning shape how motivation is enacted in practice, as positive attitudes facilitate persistence and engagement, whereas negative attitudes may lead to resistance and disengagement (Soler, 1994; Zhu & Zhou, 2012).

The findings also confirm the pervasive inhibiting role of anxiety in SLA. High levels of foreign language anxiety constrain learners' cognitive resources, reduce willingness to communicate, and encourage avoidance behaviors, particularly in speaking and assessment contexts. In the Chinese EFL setting, anxiety is often intensified by exam pressure and fear of negative evaluation, which may further limit learners' exposure to communicative practice (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Wang & Wan, 2001; Zhang, 2020). These results reinforce prior arguments that reducing anxiety is a prerequisite for effective language learning and that affective barriers can undermine acquisition even when instructional input is adequate (Day, 2023).

Self-confidence, conceptualized as self-efficacy, emerged as a key protective factor that supports learners' persistence and resilience. Learners with higher self-confidence are more willing to take risks, engage in interaction, and adopt active learning strategies, which contributes to sustained progress in SLA. This finding aligns with social cognitive theory and empirical research demonstrating the role of self-efficacy in shaping learning behavior and achievement (Bandura, 1986; Tallungan et al., 2022; Xudong et al., 2023). Importantly, the study highlights the reciprocal relationship between self-confidence and other affective factors, as successful learning experiences

strengthen confidence and reduce anxiety, while repeated failure undermines confidence and exacerbates negative emotions.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to SLA research by illustrating how affective factors interact dynamically within a specific educational and cultural context. By adopting a case-based synthesis approach, the study moves beyond variable-centered analyses and offers a mechanism-oriented account of affective influences in Chinese EFL learning. The findings lend empirical support to the Affective Filter Hypothesis and complement motivational theories by demonstrating how affective conditions jointly regulate learners' access to acquisition opportunities (Schütz, 2007; Dörnyei, 1998). In doing so, the study underscores the value of integrating affective perspectives into mainstream SLA research.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that English instruction in China should place greater emphasis on affective regulation alongside linguistic training. Teaching practices that foster internalized motivation, encourage positive attitudes, reduce anxiety, and build learners' self-confidence are likely to create more favorable conditions for SLA. This conclusion echoes previous calls for the integration of affective considerations into foreign language teaching and supports the development of learner-centered, supportive classroom environments (Bao & Liu, 2021; Wang, 2024).

5.2 Limitation and future implications

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, as a case-based synthesis relying on secondary data, the findings are constrained by the scope and quality of the original studies reviewed. The absence of primary empirical data limits the ability to generalize the conclusions to all Chinese EFL learners. Second, although the study integrates multiple affective factors, it does not quantitatively model their relative contributions or causal relationships. Future research could address these limitations by employing mixed-methods designs that combine large-scale surveys, experimental studies, and in-depth qualitative analysis.

Future studies may also extend this line of research by examining affective factors across different educational stages and cultural contexts, thereby exploring the universality and context-specificity of affective influences in SLA. In addition, further research could investigate the interaction between affective factors and other individual difference variables, such as learning strategies, cognitive styles, and learner autonomy, to provide a more comprehensive account of the complex mechanisms underlying second language acquisition (Dong & Cheng, 2024; Selma, 2017).

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