

CROATIAN EFL LEARNERS' AFFECTIVE PROFILE, ASPIRATIONS AND ATTITUDES TO ENGLISH CLASSES

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***Summary** - The author focuses on affective learner characteristics as individual differences among Croatian learners of EFL. In the introduction to the paper she contextualizes affective aspects of FL learning by identifying those factors that are relevant for this paper and through referring to relevant second language acquisition and FL theory research studies. In the main part of the paper the author describes her own research carried out on a convenience sample of Croatian primary and secondary school learners of EFL. She considers the findings concerning their affective profile, aspirations and attitudes to EFL classes in interaction with a host of other variables shown important in FL learning, such as out-of-class learning of EFL, gender, school location, use of the Internet etc. She concludes that, besides their importance at the theoretical level, the obtained results have important practical implications, particularly for FL teacher education.*

***Key words:** affective learner factors, affective learner profile, aspirations, motivation, attitudes*

Research in the fields of second language acquisition (SLA) and foreign language teaching (FLT) has indicated an important role of affective learner factors. They are usually contrasted with cognitive factors and both have recently come to be investigated in a specific sub-field known as *individual differences*. Both sets of factors influence the language learning process via interaction with the learning context. Research into affective aspects of language learning were initiated by the belief that cognitive factors are not the only ones that exert influence on learning. Stern (1983) says that we can claim that affective factors, at least, contribute to learning as much as cognitive factors. Schumann (1986) even claims that affective factors enable cognitive factors to become active.

Literature shows that in spite of a large number of studies in the affective domain some aspects have been completely neglected.

In Croatia considerable attention has recently been paid to learner attitudes to learning and teaching. A possible reason for this is awareness of the importance of learner attitudes, of how little we know about the nature of these attitudes, about differences in attitudes in specific learner groups or about how learner attitudes to learning influence choice of learning strategies. From practical experience we know that learners face difficulty when teaching activities do not match their attitudes to learning and teaching or expectations. This opposition can result in motivation decrease (Mihaljević, 1991; Mihaljević Djigunović, 1998).

Horwitz (1987) claims that learner attitudes to teaching can, to a large degree, influence learners' final achievement, even when learners' dissatisfaction is not openly demonstrated during classes.

While Lambert and Gardner (1972) consider attitudes to second language native speakers the main component of language learning motivation, some authors (e.g., Dörnyei, 2005) believe that these attitudes do not essentially influence motivation in FL learning¹.

In foreign language learning contexts attitudes concerning the educational and learner levels seem to be more important.

In psychology, motivation is often connected with levels of aspiration, which is defined as the standard that individuals set themselves in target-directed activities. It is generally assumed that previous success in some activity raises the level of aspiration, while previous failure lowers it. Level of aspiration is influenced by many other factors such as difficulty and nature of task, perceived value of task, expectations of success and failure etc. Performance results in an activity depend also on how others (e.g., teachers) expect us to perform.

Learners' assessment of task value and probability of success presents an important motivational component. Even in early research (e.g., Atkinson, 1957) need for achievement was investigated as a result of two tendencies: motivation directed towards success and motivation directed towards avoidance of failure. Research findings in this area suggest that, for example, learners with the first type of motivation obtain high achievement in homogeneous groups and find Skinnerian type of programmed learning highly unchallenging.

Aim

In this study we investigated the role of individual differences in affective learner factors among Croatian English language learners. The following affective learner factors were looked into: attitudes to the English language, attitudes to learning and teaching of English, language learning motivation, language anxiety, self-perception and aspirations. We were interested in the relationship between

¹ A second language has the status of an official language in the country where it is learned; a foreign language is learned in a context where it does not have the status of an official language, but is most often learned as a school subject.

participants' affective characteristics, their communicative competence in English, and importance of affective aspects in predicting achievement in English.

Sample

Overall sample included 2,137 participants², and it consisted of two sub-samples. The sub-sample of primary school learners consisted of 1,481 eighth graders, while the sub-sample of secondary school learners consisted of 656 secondary school seniors. The number of responses included in the analyses varies, since some of the participants did not fill in all parts of the questionnaires used in the study.

Instrument and procedure

The questionnaire for measuring participants' affective characteristics consisted of three parts. The first part („affective profile“) contained 13 statements. They referred to attitudes to the English language, to learning English and to English language classes, to English language learner self-perception, to language learning motivation and language anxiety. The level of agreement to each statement was specified by a five-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree; 5= strongly agree). The second part („aspirations“) contained three questions asking participants to assess the probability of success on an imaginary English language test and the level of parents' and their own satisfaction with the result. The third part („attitudes to English classes“) contained two open questions about what participants liked the most and the least in their English language classes.

The questionnaire was written in Croatian, and it was administered during regular English language classes.

Results and discussion

AFFECTIVE PROFILE

Reliability α of this part of the questionnaire was .834 for the primary school sample, and .787 for the secondary school one.

The descriptive statistics of participants' general affective profile are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' affective profile

| | Valid N | M | SD | Minimum | Maximum |
|------------------|---------|-------|------|---------|---------|
| Primary school | 1316 | 48,59 | 9,19 | 17 | 65 |
| Secondary school | 531 | 49,51 | 7,59 | 24 | 65 |

² For details on the sample see J. Mihaljević Djigunović and V. Bagarić this issue)

Mean values presented in Table 1 show a relatively high positive affective profile of our participants. Comparison of the results in the sub-samples points to a more positive profile and lower spread of values among the secondary school learners. Our assumption is that emotional and biological changes at the time of puberty play an important role in the affective profile of primary school learners. As we were interested in the differences in affective profile in relation to gender, t-test was used to measure the significance of differences in the results of both sub-samples (Table 2).

Table 2: Comparison of male and female participants' affective profile

| | gender | N | M | SD | t | p |
|------------------|--------|-----|-------|------|-------|------|
| Primary school | male | 600 | 47,34 | 9,08 | -4,56 | <.05 |
| | female | 713 | 49,64 | 9,15 | | |
| Secondary school | male | 220 | 48,63 | 7,37 | -2,28 | <.05 |
| | female | 308 | 50,14 | 7,72 | | |

Among both primary and secondary school learners t-test has shown significant differences in the affective profile between male and female learners. In both cases female learners had a more positive profile. T-values indicate a more significant difference in the primary school sub-sample. We also checked the significance of differences in participants' affective profile in relation to location of primary schools (urban or rural) and the type of secondary school.

The secondary schools were grouped in the following way: the first group comprised learners from catering, economics and medical secondary schools, while the second comprised learners from electrical engineering, building construction, mechanical engineering, vocational and vocational-art secondary schools; the third group consisted of learners from grammar schools. The results are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3: Affective profile of primary school learners broken down by location (rural/urban)

| | N | M | SD | t | p |
|-------|-----|-------|------|------|------|
| urban | 729 | 49,14 | 8,88 | 2,44 | <.05 |
| rural | 587 | 47,90 | 9,51 | | |

The results show significant differences: learners in city schools had a significantly more positive affective profile than learners from rural schools.

Table 4: Affective profile of primary school learners broken down by location (rural/urban)

| Type of school | N | Presentation of ar. mean among homogeneous subtests- Scheffe (Alpha =,05) | F | p |
|----------------|-----|---|------|------|
| cat/eco/med | 173 | 48,44 | 4,11 | <,05 |
| el/vocat/build | 74 | 48,93 | | |
| grammar | 270 | 50,47 | | |

Significant differences were found. Even though the results did not match the grouping, it is apparent that learners from grammar schools had the most positive affective profile, while the least positive profile was found among learners from catering, economics and medical secondary schools.

A possible explanation is that learners from urban areas were more exposed to English in everyday life and, therefore, had higher motivation for learning than learners from rural areas. Secondary school results are difficult to interpret and in future research it would be interesting to study the affective profile of students from different types of secondary schools.

Interesting significant differences in affective profile were found among learners who had learned another foreign language. A great majority among the primary school learners had not learned any other language except English, while among secondary school learners only a minority had learned English only (Table 5).

Table 5: Comparison of affective profile broken down by foreign languages learnt

| | Learned another foreign language | N | M | SD | t | p |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|------|-------|------|-------|------|
| Elementary school | no | 1033 | 47,80 | 9,30 | -6,45 | <,05 |
| | yes | 283 | 51,45 | 8,15 | | |
| Secondary school | no | 194 | 47,40 | 7,49 | -4,47 | <,05 |
| | yes | 293 | 50,47 | 7,40 | | |

In both sub-samples statistically significant differences were found between students who had learned only English and those who had, besides English, learned one or more foreign languages. The latter had a significantly more positive affective profile. We can assume that by learning more languages learners enhance language awareness, develop learning strategies and decrease language anxiety, which contributes to more positive attitudes to learning English and to a better perception of oneself as a foreign language learner.

Studying the exposure to formal out-of-class English language teaching (e.g., language courses or private lessons) we found that out-of-class learning was

statistically correlated with a more positive affective profile of students in both sub-samples (Table 6).

The reason probably lies in higher self-confidence of learners who, by studying English both in class and out of class, acquire more competence than their classmates. At this point the role of economic and social status of such students should be taken into consideration: their parents obviously had enough financial resources for additional education of their children and thought that it was very important to acquire a good knowledge of English. Of course, it is possible to interpret these results in the opposite way: students who learned English out of class did it precisely because they were motivated, turning that form of learning into a consequence of a positive affective profile and not its cause. Only experimental research could show for sure which interpretation is correct.

Table 6: Comparison of affective profile broken down by out-of-class learning

| | Out-of-class Eng. lang. learning | N | M | SD | t | p |
|------------------|----------------------------------|------|-------|------|-------|------|
| Primary school | no | 1196 | 48,19 | 9,16 | -5,10 | <,05 |
| | yes | 109 | 52,84 | 8,68 | | |
| Secondary school | no | 493 | 49,27 | 7,55 | -2,89 | <,05 |
| | da | 24 | 53,83 | 7,25 | | |

The use of the Internet was also related to learners' positive affective profile. A significant difference between all three categories of frequency of use (*I do not use, I rarely use and I often use*) was found at the primary school level, while the secondary school learners could be grouped in two categories where the ones who often used the Internet had a significantly more positive profile than the rest of the learners. The results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Comparison of affective profile broken down by use of the Internet

| | Use of Internet | N | Presentation of ar. mean among homogeneous subtests- Scheffe (Alpha =.05) | F | p |
|------------------|-----------------|-----|---|-------|------|
| Primary school | no | 428 | 45,17 | 72,39 | <,05 |
| | rarely | 390 | 48,20 | | |
| | often | 477 | 52,12 | | |
| Secondary school | no | 75 | 46,77 | 13,73 | <,05 |
| | rarely | 180 | 48,39 | | |
| | often | 263 | 51,14 | | |

We assume that secondary school learners were more interested in using the Internet, and that the interest further motivated the students to learn English, decreased language anxiety and raised learners' self-confidence.

One of the key questions in this part of the study concerns the relationship between students' affective profile and their success on communication tests. We computed correlations with overall test results³, and with individual tests measuring competence in each of the four language skills (Table 8).

Table 8: Correlations between affective profile and test achievement

| | | writing | speaking | reading | listening | Overall result (without speaking) |
|------------------|-----------|---------|----------|---------|-----------|-----------------------------------|
| Primary school | Pearson r | ,58* | ,57* | ,46* | ,34* | ,57* |
| | N | 1188 | 175 | 1130 | 1274 | 1019 |
| Secondary school | Pearson r | ,39* | ,50* | ,28* | ,25* | ,38* |
| | N | 365 | 71 | 531 | 531 | 365 |

Even though all coefficients are statistically significant in both sub-samples, it is interesting that they vary from skill to skill, and some skills have higher correlation within a sub-sample. As can be seen from the table, the correlation between overall results and learners' affective profile is consistently higher among primary school learners. A high correlation among secondary school learners is evident only with the results on the speaking test. Correlations of results on the receptive skills (listening, reading) level are lower than on the productive skill (speaking, writing) level in both sub-samples. How can this phenomenon be accounted for? A possible explanation could be the following. At a lower level of learning and at a younger age, learners are not capable of perceiving their competence in terms of separate language skills, and their motivation for learning English, if there is any, is global. At a higher level of learning and at an older age, e.g., in the final year of secondary school, their aim seems to be oriented towards oral language production, where they still face some difficulties and feel insecure. It is in this segment of language learning that they strive for success since it enables concrete oral use of English in everyday life. When it comes to the remaining three skills, learners probably resort to failure avoidance strategies, while in concrete situations of language use they manage in different ways (e.g., use a dictionary while reading, use simplified language in writing e-mail messages, etc.).

Since the cause-and-effect relationship between the included variables cannot be established based on correlations alone, we can only make assumptions about a possible interpretation of the obtained results.

³ For details on the tests used see in other articles this issue.

Our final analysis of results refers to the role of affective profile in predicting overall success in learning English as measured by school grades. Due to a much smaller number of participants tested orally, besides the affective profile, our analysis included only results on listening, reading and writing tests. The results of the two regressive analyses, for primary and secondary school learners respectively, are presented in Tables 9a and 9b.

Table 9a: Multiple regression analysis of English achievement as measured by school grade in English (primary school learners)

| N=1015 | | | | Correlation between grade and tests | Standard. regressive coefficients |
|-------------------|-----|-----|---------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| | R | R2 | F | r | Beta |
| | ,76 | ,57 | 334,54* | | |
| Writing test | | | | ,68* | ,36* |
| Reading test | | | | ,57* | ,17* |
| Listening test | | | | ,36* | ,00* |
| Affective profile | | | | ,64* | ,35* |

As can be seen from the table above, the results on the three tests and the affective profile can account for 57% of the English language grades within the primary school sub-sample. The best predictor is the writing test, followed by the affective profile. The reading test is a much weaker predictor, while the English language grade cannot be predicted from the reading test at all.

Table 9b: Multiple regression analysis of English achievement as measured by school grade in English (secondary school learners)

| N=379 | | | | Correlation between grade and tests | Standard. regressive coefficients |
|-------------------|-----|-----|--------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| | R | R2 | F | r | Beta |
| | ,64 | ,41 | 59,52* | | |
| Writing test | | | | ,48* | ,28* |
| Reading test | | | | ,29* | ,06* |
| Listening test | | | | ,38* | ,16* |
| Affective profile | | | | ,54* | ,39* |

The four variables included can account for 41 % of the English language grades. Among the secondary school learners the affective profile is the best predictor of the grade. Based on the obtained results we can conclude that the learners' affective profile is a very important predictor of Croatian learners' success in

learning the English language. This finding is valuable both for practitioners and for FL teaching theory.

ASPIRATIONS

In the second part of the questionnaire the participants estimated probability of success on an imaginary English language test, and own and parents' satisfaction with the result. We computed correlations between results in these variables and results on communication tests. Coefficients are presented in Tablea 10a and 10b.

Table 10a: Correlations between estimated success, own satisfaction, parents' satisfaction and results on tests (primary school learners)

| | | writing | speaking | reading | listening |
|--|-----------|---------|----------|---------|-----------|
| Estimated success on a test | Pearson r | ,55* | ,50* | ,45* | ,35* |
| | N | 1194 | 178 | 1139 | 1282 |
| Estimated self-satisfactory score | Pearson r | ,44* | ,38* | ,35* | ,24* |
| | N | 1215 | 179 | 1155 | 1304 |
| Estimated satisfactory score for parents | Pearson r | ,20* | ,23* | ,19* | ,14* |
| | N | 1140 | 166 | 1083 | 1228 |

Learners' estimations of results on the imaginary test correlated significantly with overall test results, and the correlations were higher on productive than on receptive skills tests. The highest correlation was found with the writing test results. Very similar findings, yet with a lower coefficient, were obtained in relation to parents' and participants' own satisfaction with the scores on the imaginary test. Correlations with parents' satisfaction were significant, yet very low.

Table 10b: Correlations between estimated success, own satisfaction, parents' satisfaction and results on tests (primary school learners) (secondary school learners)

| | | writing | speaking | reading | listening |
|--|-----------|---------|----------|---------|-----------|
| Estimated success on a test | Pearson r | ,29* | ,53* | ,28* | ,27* |
| | N | 360 | 70 | 527 | 527 |
| Estimated self-satisfactory score | Pearson r | ,28* | ,39* | ,28* | ,19* |
| | N | 367 | 71 | 537 | 537 |
| Estimated satisfactory score for parents | Pearson r | ,01* | ,10* | ,03* | ,05* |
| | N | 340 | 65 | 491 | 491 |

For the secondary school sub-sample we identified generally lower coefficient values, and the highest correlation was found with the speaking test. The coefficients of the four tests with the estimated scores on the imaginary test were, as well as among primary school learners, higher than the estimated participants' test score. None of the coefficients with parents' satisfaction was statistically significant.

ATTITUDES TO ENGLISH CLASSES

In this part of the questionnaire the participants were asked to describe what they felt was good about their English language classes, i.e., what they liked most, what they felt was bad, i.e., what they disliked. Since these were open questions, in the interpretation of this part of the questionnaire we took a qualitative approach to the analysis of the data.

An interesting general conclusion was that the answers to both questions referred very similar aspects of English classes.

Depending on the perception of classes they were exposed to, our participants indicated the following as their positive aspects: communicative approach to teaching, opportunity to express their attitudes and opinions, exposure to authentic language situations in the classroom (e.g., watching films in English without subtitles), and the use of activities which ask for active involvement (e.g., group work, project work). As negative aspects of their English language classes they mentioned a too traditional approach to teaching, too few communicative activities, too many tests, especially grammar tests. It is interesting that the learners from electrical engineering, building construction, mechanical engineering, vocational and vocational-art secondary schools especially criticised teaching approach that can be characterised as the grammar-translation approach: reading and translating long specialised texts.

When it comes to the syllabus, the participants indicated cultural aspects as interesting segments, and in the negative context they mentioned uninteresting texts full of "unnecessary" details and boring grammar drills.

It is interesting that the participants had no objections to the teaching materials. The primary school learners mentioned textbooks only in a positive sense and among the secondary school learners the objections were generally directed to the level of interest the texts provoked. Participants in both sub-samples praised the use of additional teaching materials.

The English language teacher was often mentioned as a cause of either satisfaction or dissatisfaction with classes. While the source of satisfaction among younger learners were teachers' personal characteristics and teaching expertise, the secondary school learners found the teacher's language and teaching competence more important.

These findings are of great importance for teaching practice. They point out that the things that theoretical education insists on in training future English language teachers really matters. In situations where those ideas and approaches are applied, learners are satisfied with classes, while in situations where teachers teach in the same manner they themselves were taught, their approach becomes counter-effective. All of the above speaks in favour of the need for life-long education which would enable teachers access to latest findings of systematic research on various populations of learners.

Conclusion

Based on the study and the interpreted results we came to the following conclusions about affective learning factors of Croatian EFL learners and their relationship with achievement.

Secondary school learners have a more positive affective profile than the primary school learners, and the same goes for female learners as opposed to male learners. However, the differences in favour of female learners are greater among primary school participants. A significantly more positive affective profile is found among urban primary school learners as opposed to rural ones, and among grammar school learners as opposed to learners from other types of secondary schools. Learning other languages except English seems to have a beneficial effect on learners' general affective profile, and the same goes for learning English simultaneously in and out of class. The importance of exposure to English in informal situations has also been proved important since, for example, the use of the Internet is also connected to the positive affective profile: among the primary school learners even a rare use of the Internet is connected to a more positive profile.

Our study also indicated that the relationship between learners' affective factors and their success in learning is also very important. Generally, we have found a more significant correlation with productive as opposed to receptive skills, especially among the primary school learners. Among the secondary school learners the affective profile is at the same time the best predictor of general success in learning the English language, while among the primary school learners it is the second best predictor following the writing test results. The results of self-estimated potential success on an imaginary test show that the Croatian learners are mostly realistic in assessing their abilities, especially at the productive skills level: this is apparent from the perception of success in writing among the primary school learners, and from the perception of success in speaking among the secondary school learners. Estimated parents' satisfaction with the potential success shows very little (primary school) or insignificant (high school) correlation with the success on real tests.

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