

[Research Notes]

About emotional intelligence instruction for low-achieving L2 learners

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Abstract

Emotional intelligence (EI) has recently been a visible research focus in the fields of education and language learning. Furthermore, relationships between EI and achievement/motivation in L2 (English as a second/foreign language) learning have also drawn researchers' attention. Importantly, the researchers have recommended EI instruction/practice in L2 classrooms for students' success. However, EI seems not to be a set of simple skills to acquire, in particular for low-achieving L2 learners. This paper discusses some issues of using EI instruction and/or training for low achievers, notably in L2 classrooms.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, cooperative learning, low achievers, EFL/ESL students, language learning

Emotional intelligenceの向上と英語学習：

苦手意識の強い学習者に関する一考察

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Introduction

Emotional intelligence (EI) has recently been a visible research focus in the fields of education and language learning (e. g., Balasubramanian and Al-Mahrooqi, 2016). Furthermore, relationships between EI and achievements/motivation in L2 (English as a second/foreign language) learning have also drawn researchers' attention (e.g., Oxford, 2015). Importantly, the researchers have recommended EI instruction in L2 classrooms for students' success.

However, EI may involve abilities/skills that are not easy to acquire, in particular for low-achieving L2 learners. Such learners do not seem to have the critical abilities of EI or ESI¹ (emotional-social intelligence), such as the abilities to create 'positive affect and be self-motivated' and to 'manage change, adapt and solve problems of a personal and interpersonal nature' (Bar-On, 2006, p. 14). If students have these abilities or skills, they may be able to adapt to their L2 classroom environments and motivate themselves; and such skills should lead them to success. In my long years of teaching experience, low achievers are more likely to give up/stop learning or listening to their teachers' instructions in a short time and do something else or nothing in classrooms (see Tatsumoto, 2011 for more details). Besides, they often or easily forget to bring necessities (e.g., textbooks, dictionaries) to their classrooms. In other words, compared with high achievers, such students tend to be lazy and seem to have no or very few experiences of reaching specific goals that need long-term perseverance or effort. This tendency means that low achievers may require, at least, intensive instruction and practice to develop EI.

The requirements of EI seem to generate another problem on the side of teachers. Intensive EI training may involve time-consuming labour/tasks such as preparation, student care and special practice in addition to regular teaching. Low-achievers usually need more care and attention to make them work than high-achievers. For example, low-achievers are more likely to forget assignments and be reluctant to work in their classrooms than high-achievers.

Considering the teachers' risk of being overwhelmed and time limitations, some concerns might occur to us: Are EI instruction and practice truly usable and practical for low-achieving L2 students in real-life classrooms? As you can see, it is impossible to answer this question in one study. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine some aspects of the question.

In the first section, the definition of EI is discussed. The second section examines possible difficulties of acquiring EI skills in the field of education/learning. The third section considers research about links between EI and L2 learning. The final section includes possible remedies for the difficulties involved in adopting EI instruction and practice (successfully) in L2 classrooms for low

1 To avoid any confusion, in this paper, EI and ESI are treated as the same concept (a more detailed description of the terms will be presented in a later section).

achievers and future considerations for research.

1. Emotional intelligence

This section discusses the definition of emotional intelligence (EI)² in this paper. Considering the aim of the present paper, the more broadly used and reliable model and concept should be utilized. In this sense, the Bar-On model of emotional-social intelligence (ESI; Bar-On, 2006) and its inventory appear to be appropriate because they have been widely used in many fields, including L2 learning. Therefore, the present paper uses that model as the concept of EI.

It should be noted here, to avoid unnecessary confusion, this paper regards the terms EI and ESI as the same concept, and refers to the notion as EI. The descriptions of the two terms, as well as the Bar-On model, are as follows.

The terms EI and ESI are different, but they are treated as the same notion in many studies. Bar-On (2006) sees the concepts of EI and ESI as closely related and overlapping constructs. He also perceived that emotional and social components are supposed to be incorporated and that the term *emotional social-intelligence* expresses the construct more precisely than *emotional intelligence* or *social intelligence*.

Bar-On's model of ESI involves the following five essential elements (p. 14): (a) the ability to recognize, understand and express emotions and feelings; (b) the ability to understand how others feel and relate with them; (c) the ability to manage and control emotions; (d) the ability to manage change, adapt and solve problems of a personal and interpersonal nature; and (e) the ability to generate positive affect and be self-motivated.

His model of ESI and its inventory (Emotional Quotient Inventory: EQ-i; 2006) was divided into five scales, and each scale included several skills. The five scales and all 15 skills were as follows (p. 23):

Intrapersonal (Self-awareness and self-expression):

- Self-regard (to accurately perceive, understand and accept oneself)
- Emotional self-awareness (to be aware of and understand one's emotions)
- Assertiveness (to effectively and constructively express one's emotions and oneself)
- Independence (to be self-reliant and free of emotional dependency on others)
- Self-actualization (to strive to achieve personal goals and actualize one's potential)

2 For a theoretical and empirical overview or history of EI, please see other papers (e.g., Fernández-Berrocal and Extremera, 2006).

Interpersonal (Social awareness and interpersonal relationship):

- Empathy (to be aware of and understand how others feel)
- Social responsibility (to identify with one's social group and cooperate with others)
- Interpersonal relationship (to establish mutually satisfying relationships and relate well with others)

Stress management (Emotional management and regulation):

- Stress tolerance (to effectively and constructively manage emotions)
- Impulse control (to effectively and constructively control emotions)

Adaptability (Change management):

- Reality-testing (to objectively validate one's feelings and thinking with external reality)
- Flexibility (to adapt and adjust one's feelings and thinking to new situations)
- Problem-solving (to effectively solve problems of a personal and interpersonal nature)

General mood (Self-motivation):

- Optimism (to be positive and look at the brighter side of life)
- Happiness (to feel content with oneself, others and life in general)

Bar-On also defines ESI as follows (p. 14):

... emotional-social intelligence is a cross-section of interrelated emotional and social competencies, skills and facilitators that determine how effectively we understand and express ourselves, understand others and relate with them, and cope with daily demands.

2. Difficulties in acquiring EI skills

Before discussing the links between EI and L2 learning, looking at possible difficulties in gaining EI competence in other fields might be beneficial, in particular in the field of education. L2 learning is part of education, and theoretical bases are overlapped in many ways.

As stated in the introduction, recent attention towards connections between EI and learning/academic achievement has been upfront. However, not all research shows successful results and it should not be ignored in order to find possible causes and their remedies. Complicated outcomes can be seen in some research, even when adopting long-term EI training. For example, Dolev and Leshem (2016) focused on the influence of a two-year teacher-centred EI training in Israel by using EQ-i (Bar-On, 2006) and semi-structured interviews to collect data. This investigation involved 12 group workshops and 10 personal training sessions for 21 secondary-school experienced teachers. Many of the teachers were in leadership positions, such as school principal, mid-management staff, educational counsellors. All these informants completed EQ-i at the beginning and end of the training, and 20 of them were interviewed. The results showed significant gains in only two

(*assertiveness* and *stress tolerance*) of the 15 skills in the Bar-On model (see the previous section). In total EI score, moreover, six informants indicated no gain or decrease; all individual scores for 15 competencies had complex patterns.

The interview data of Dolev and Leshem (2016) showed more considerable perceived benefits in EI training than the results of EQ-i indicated above; most of the informants believed that their overall levels of EI had increased. However, some of them perceived little/no EI improvement. In addition, all the informants reported that acquiring EI skills was an on-going process and they needed further improvement.

Both types of data (EQ-i and interview) of the study above, in a nutshell, were complicated. In other words, even two years of EI training did not generate clear and profound change. Considering that the informants were veteran teachers, obtaining EI competence could be quite tricky.

Another study also suggested the difficulty of acquiring EI skills. Larin and others (2014) focused on changes in EI competence in health science courses at university and graduate school levels in the US and Canada. The health care professional courses aimed to teach students specific attitudes and behaviours. Among the attitudinal skills, Larin and others (2014) targeted EI, caring, leadership, ethical behaviour and decision-making. The courses included: McMaster University Bachelor of Health Science (BHSc), Nursing and Physical Therapy programs; Ithaca College Physical Therapy programs. The lengths of these programs were four-year undergraduate, two-year master's; and a three-year study leading to a master's entry-level course after a two-year pre-professional program. 132 students participated in the study, and several kinds of questionnaires, including the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory Short (EQ-i: S; Bar-On, 2006), were conducted; targeted abilities of the other questionnaires were leadership, caring and moral judgement. The questionnaires were administered on the participants' entry and in the final months of their courses; the duration of each course was approximately two to four years.

The results of the study showed small improvements in total score (significant) in EQ-i: S; this shift appeared to be smaller than expected. Since all of the participants were supposed to be future health-care professionals and were motivated to enhance their skills, more substantial improvements were anticipated. Adding to this, in the light of the course length (two to four years), such a small shift seemed to suggest some difficulties in gaining EI skills.

3. Possible obstacles to acquiring EI skills in L2 learning classrooms

The previous section discussed difficulties in gaining EI competence in the field of education. This section also examines possible obstacles to acquiring EI competence but focuses on a narrower field, those in L2 learning classrooms and, in particular low-achieving L2 learners.

In the field of L2 learning, recent attention to EI has been noticeable, and researchers have talked

about the importance of applying EI in the classrooms (e.g., Oxford, 2015; Ghosn, 1999). However, there seem to be obstacles for L2 students to acquire EI skills; such obstacles should not be underestimated, in particular for low achievers.

There is a thought-provoking study focusing on the effects of EI instruction on L2 motivation³ in an Iranian university. Barzegar and Sadr (2013) utilized EI instruction to enhance L2 motivation because EI skills and L2 motivational strategies were equivalent to each other in many ways. According to the researchers, L2 motivation is emotion-related. From their own experiences they selected the three most emotion-based L2 motivational strategies/components as targets of their investigation. The three strategies were: 1) *interpersonal relationships* between students and teachers (how students feel about their teachers); 2) *stress tolerance* (how students control their inhibitive stresses/emotions; and 3) *positive attributions* (how students perceive their successes and failures).

The theoretical and practical backgrounds of the three strategies/components above were mainly from Dörnyei's (2001) L2 motivational strategies and attribution theory (e.g., Weiner, 1992). Barzegar and Sadr (2013) contended that the three L2 motivational strategies were comparable to some EI skills. A summary of the researcher's views is as follows. Regarding *interpersonal relationships*, constructing personal relationships with students in L2 classrooms equalled EI skills of empathy and interpersonal relationships (e.g., listening to others/students carefully). Secondly, in L2 classrooms, anxiety to learn a language (language anxiety) was inhibitive stress. Adopting cooperative learning⁴ (CL) in the classrooms could help to decrease language anxiety. In other words, facilitating cooperation instead of competition with other students in classrooms could reduce anxiety/stress because competition could require struggles and create debilitating stress or anxiety. Barzegar and Sadr (2013) also claimed that CL and EI skills overlapped in terms of social responsibility, interpersonal relationships and stress tolerance, which were all among EI skills (see section one above for EI scales).

Concerning the third strategy of L2 motivation (positive attributions), Barzegar and Sadr (2013) held that encouraging L2 students to believe their failures resulted from lack of effort, instead of lack of abilities, was associated with self-regard and optimism in EI skills. This way of belief/strategy was based on attribution theory, which is one of "the most influential perspectives in achievement motivation research" (Elliott, Hufton, Anderman and Illushin, 2000, p. 125). Roughly speaking, the main idea of the third strategy was: when students believed that their failures/successes resulted from their abilities, their motivation could decrease; but when the students attributed their failures/successes to effort, their motivation could increase. Namely, if the causes of their results were

3 L2 motivation means, in this paper, learners' motivation to study L2.

4 For more details of CL, see e.g., Dörnyei (2001); Slavin (1995); Jacob (1999).

controllable factors like effort, they could regard the results as changeable in the future. However, if not controllable, they could think of the results as unchangeable or hopeless. As in attribution theory, optimism and self-regard in EI skills provide the same basis for protecting self-image or self-esteem by believing that unpleasant events/things are temporary, controllable and/or external (Barzegar and Sadr, 2013; see also e.g., Tatsumoto, 2011).

Regarding the instrument to measure L2 motivation, Barzegar and Sadr (2013) adopted the same L2 motivational questionnaire⁵ used by Taguchi, Magid and Pepi (2009), and this Likert-type questionnaire included 14 variables (76 items) divided into two primary parts: learners' attitudes and motivation about learning English (e.g., whether or not having their personal goals such as getting better jobs and passing examinations, cultural interests, family influence, and so on) and their background information.

Barzegar and Sadr (2013) administered EI instruction covering 15 skills overall in order to see changes in L2 motivation among the participants. The participants were 136 students, with non-language related majors, studying English for general purposes (EGP) or specific purposes (ESP) and they were divided into two groups: EI instruction-received (experimental) and non-treatment (control) groups. The EI instruction was primarily *input* without practice and continued for seven weeks. The motivation questionnaire was carried out by pre-post design.

The results of the study above revealed that the students' overall L2 motivation did not significantly increase. Although only one variable *instrumentality-prevention* of 14 elements showed significantly higher scores, this variable aimed at "the regulation of duties and obligations such as studying English in order to pass an examination" (Taguchi, Magid and Pepi, 2009, p. 75). To put it another way, all of the participants were supposed to need to pass the English classes they took, and the enhanced variable appeared to indicate only the temporary and natural motivation they should have.

Considering the undesirable results above and the similarities between EI skills and L2 motivational strategies, EI skills seemed to be challenging to acquire in L2 classrooms as presented in the previous section. As Barzegar and Sadr (2013) claimed, gaining EI skills needed training/practice instead of instruction only; they could be obtained chiefly through real-life experiences. These aspects of EI skills suggested that EI competence required, at least, intensive training along with learning English. However, such intensive training needs an extended time frame and duration, which appears to be hard for teachers. Teachers usually have many things to do inside/outside of their classrooms. In addition, when it comes to teaching low-achieving L2 students, compared with

5 Barzegar and Sadr (2013) used the Iranian version (14 variables and 76 items). Although the Japanese and Chinese versions had 10 variables and 67 items, Taguchi, Magid and Pepi (2009) did not specify the differences.

high-achievers, teachers may need much more time for such training because low-achievers are less likely to have life experiences to acquire EI skills. Many studies and data showed that EI competence was a strong predictor of school performance (see e.g., Labby, Lunenburg and Slate, 2012; Jaeger, 2002), which meant that successful students were more socially and emotionally intelligent than unsuccessful ones.

4. Conclusion

As discussed in the previous sections, acquiring EI skills may not be an easy task, in particular for low-achieving L2 students. Considering obstacles such as the need for long-term intensive EI training and teachers' time limitation and labour, solutions seem to be very difficult to find. However, we could think of some remedies for the problems.

As a long-term remedy, we could adopt EI training beginning in early childhood education. If we could use a long time-range from preschool to university or starting the training as early as possible, we might be able to increase students' levels of EI skills to a more satisfying extent. This remedy may be challenging to realise but is worth consideration.

Another possible remedy could be CL. As Barzegar and Sadr (2013) discussed (see the previous section), CL methods, in general, require and involve interpersonal, social responsibility and stress management skills, which are also essential for EI competence. Besides, although the researchers only claimed that self-regard and optimism were associated with attribution theory, these two EI skills might also be related to CL. In CL classrooms students do not have to compete with each other because cooperation is the key for their success (interdependence; see Slavin, 1995 for more details of CL). In such an environment students may be able to understand and accept themselves (self-regard) due to fewer chances to feel shame or disappointment on account of their abilities, compared with competitive or individualistic classroom contexts.

Moreover, CL usually generates a positive classroom atmosphere in which students can be optimistic since they have much better chances to be successful, in particular, low achievers (Olsen and Kagan, 1992). Furthermore, CL should promote interpersonal relationships among students, not only advancing relationships between teachers and students. On top of all these benefits by CL, it can save time for training/instruction of EI skills because CL should enable teachers to provide both the EI and L2 education at the same time.

With respect to research about relations between EI and CL, only a limited number of studies exist. Regarding the relations in L2 learning, even fewer studies can be found. Therefore, more future research about the relations is needed.

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