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Research on Emotional Regulation Strategies in Second Language Learning Contexts Under the Background of Further Education and Employment of English Majors

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Abstract

Second Language learner emotions has been a hot research topic recently. In the realm of emotion regulation, both theoretical frameworks and empirical studies have yielded substantial findings. This study explores emotion regulation among English majors within the contexts of further education and employment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven English majors, and their responses were transcribed and analyzed using Nvivo. The findings indicate that: (1) emotion regulation strategies differ between English majors in further education versus employment contexts; (2) their choice of emotion regulation strategies is influenced by internal factors such as beliefs and personality, as well as external factors like interpersonal relationships and environmental conditions. These results contribute to the understanding of emotion regulation in the contexts of further education and employment, offering practical guidance for English majors in managing their emotions.

1. Introduction

Under the influence of Positive Psychology's Constructivist and Happiness Theories, second language acquisition has sparked a wave of emotional research. Initially focusing on the overall emotional landscape of second language learning, research has gradually shifted to explore emotions unique to various temporal windows, task environments, skill backgrounds, and learning modes (Li et al., 2024). These aspects primarily concern the relationship between emotions and cognition. Swain (2013) and Pessoa (2008) underscore the inseparable link between emotions and cognition, jointly facilitating second language acquisition. Effectively employing strategies to regulate emotions in second language learning is crucial for learner self-regulation and the learning process itself (Oxford, 2017).

Currently, ER research in second language acquisition has predominantly focused on language learning (Han & Xu, 2024; 2020; Xu, 2021), with insufficient attention given to practical issues faced by contemporary Chinese English majors, such as employment and further education. In light of this, this study aims to explore ER strategy regulation among English major students in the contexts of further education and employment, seeking to address the following research questions:

What ER strategies do Chinese English major students adopt in the contexts of further education and employment?

Are there differences between these contexts? If so, what factors influence the selection of ER strategies?

2. Literature Review

With the introduction and widespread application of positive psychology, second language acquisition research has witnessed an "affective turn" (Pavlenko, 2013). In terms of theoretical models, Gross (2015) proposed the Emotion Regulation Process Model, categorizing emotion regulation strategies into five types: situation selection, situation modification, attention deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation. Building upon this model, Oxford (2017) formulated emotional strategies for self-regulation in second language learning, emphasizing effective management of various emotions as crucial for learners' language acquisition. Within the academic achievement context, Pekrun's (2006) Control-Value Theory distinguishes between modifying emotions at a distal or proximal level and altering emotional responses. Harley (2019) further expanded on these frameworks with the ERAS model, enriching the theoretical foundations laid by Gross (2015) and Pekrun (2006).

Empirical studies by Han and Xu (2024; 2020) have investigated emotional regulation during second language writing processes and emotional management in the publication of graduate

theses. Xu (2021), through large-scale analysis, explored the overall situation of emotional regulation in English language learning among Chinese university students, addressing gender and disciplinary differences. Despite these efforts, empirical research on emotional regulation in second language acquisition in China remains relatively scarce, particularly in addressing significant developmental milestones faced by English majors. Thus, this study focuses on exploring emotional regulation strategies in second language learning among English majors within the contexts of further education and employment, drawing primarily on Harley's ERAS model.

3. Methodology

This study employs a predominantly qualitative mixed-methods approach, collecting qualitative data through semi-structured interviews. Utilizing the ERAS model's five major emotion regulation (ER) strategies, the interview data on academic pursuits for further education and employment/entrepreneurship are coded and analyzed using NVivo software.

3.1 Research Subjects

Seven undergraduate and graduate English majors from three Chinese universities (two engineering-oriented and one foreign language-focused) participated in semi-structured interviews. Among the participants, there were 2 male and 5 female students; 1 master's student and 6 undergraduate students. Specifically, 4 participants expressed clear intentions to pursue further education, while 2 participants indicated clear intentions for employment/entrepreneurship. One participant expressed readiness for both further education and employment/entrepreneurship, and their data was included in both analyses accordingly.

3.2 Data Collection

This study, conducted in March 2024, employed random sampling to select 2-3 English majors from each of three universities for semi-structured interviews. The interviews were divided into two parts: the first part collected demographic information such as gender, grade level, and institution; the second part focused on emotion regulation strategies under the pressure of pursuing further education or employment. The specific questions for the second part of the interview were as follows: “1. What are your future plans? 2. Have you experienced anxiety when considering your future development? What were the reasons? 3. Have you actively regulated your emotions? 4. What specific measures did you take to regulate your emotions? 5. Has your school implemented any measures to alleviate your anxiety, such as psychological counseling, extracurricular activities, workshops (for employment/postgraduate studies/studying abroad), academic and career guidance, or company recruitment presentations? Have these measures been effective for you? Have they motivated your learning and improved your academic performance? 6. Please describe something you have done for your future development. What happened at that time? What emotions did you experience?” Participants provided verbal responses to these

questions without time or word limits, conducted in Chinese and recorded, then transcribed into text.

3.3 Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were imported into NVivo 11 Plus for qualitative content analysis. Initially, the data underwent open coding aligned with the research questions. Subsequently, through comparison with relevant literature, the codes were refined into five major categories of emotion regulation (ER). Within the contexts of pursuing further education and entering the job market, there were 31 codes respectively. Two coders independently analyzed 20% of the data, achieving an inter-coder reliability of 80.3% through initial coding consistency checks. Any discrepancies in coding were resolved through detailed discussions between the two coders until consensus was reached.

4. Discoveries and Discussion

4.1 The Usage of Emotion Regulation

In the ERAS model, all five major categories of emotion regulation (ER) strategies were utilized by participants, albeit with varying frequencies. Within the context of pursuing further education (Table 1), the most commonly employed ER strategy was response modulation (33.33%), followed by situation modification (30.77%). The least utilized ER categories were attention deployment and cognitive change. Among the specific ER subcategories, problem-solving was predominantly used, with seeking help from others constituting 71% of this subclass.

In the employment context (Table 2), the most prevalent ER strategies were response modulation and situation modification, each accounting for 30% of responses. Within response modulation,

Table 1: Categories and subcategories of ER strategies (further education context):	Nodes count	Percentage
Situation Selection	6	15.38%
Avoidance	1	2.56%
Engagement	5	12.82%
Situation Modification	12	30.77%
Modifying External Situations	8	20.51%
Changing Environment	1	2.56%
Problem Solving	7	17.95%
Seeking Help from Others	5	12.82%
Solving Independently	2	5.13%
Modifying Internal Situations	4	10.26%
Enhancing Knowledge and Skills	3	7.69%
Adjusting Task Implementation	1	2.56%
Attentional Deployment	4	10.26%
Shifting Attention	1	2.56%
Enhancing Attention	3	7.69%
Cognitive Change	4	10.26%
Changing Control Assessment	3	7.69%
Increasing Control Assessment	1	2.56%
Decreasing Control Assessment	2	5.13%
Changing Value Assessment	1	2.56%
Increasing Value Assessment	1	2.56%
Decreasing Value Assessment	0	0.00%
Response Modulation	13	33.33%
Resting	2	5.13%
Sharing and Venting	5	12.82%
Physical Exercise	0	0.00%
Listening to Music	0	0.00%
Other Recreational Activities	3	7.69%
Dietary Intake	2	5.13%
Deep Breathing	0	0.00%
Emotional Expression (e.g., crying)	1	2.56%
Total	39	100%

Table 2: Categories and subcategories of ER strategies (further employment context):	Nodes count	Percentage
Situation Selection	5	16.67%
Avoidance	0	0.00%
Engagement	5	16.67%
Situation Modification	9	30.00%
Modifying External Situations	4	13.33%
Changing Environment	0	0.00%
Problem Solving	4	13.33%
Seeking Help from Others	2	6.67%
Solving Independently	2	6.67%
Modifying Internal Situations	5	16.67%
Enhancing Knowledge and Skills	2	6.67%
Adjusting Task Implementation	3	10.00%
Attentional Deployment	4	13.33%
Shifting Attention	0	0.00%
Enhancing Attention	4	13.33%
Cognitive Change	3	10.00%
Changing Control Assessment	1	3.33%
Increasing Control Assessment	1	3.33%
Decreasing Control Assessment	0	0.00%
Changing Value Assessment	2	6.67%
Increasing Value Assessment	2	6.67%
Decreasing Value Assessment	0	0.00%
Response Modulation	9	30.00%
Resting	1	3.33%
Sharing and Venting	3	10.00%
Physical Exercise	1	3.33%
Listening to Music	0	0.00%
Other Recreational Activities	3	10.00%
Dietary Intake	1	3.33%
Deep Breathing	0	0.00%
Emotional Expression (e.g., crying)	0	0.00%
Total	30	100%

expressive suppression remained a frequently employed strategy. Unlike the educational context, within the situation modification category, adjusting internal situations was more common than problem-solving, with percentages of choosing to enhance knowledge skills and adjust task implementation nodes reaching 16.67%. Cognitive change was the least utilized ER category. The most frequently used ER subcategory was adjusting internal situations (16.67%).

Based on the aforementioned data analysis, interpersonal communication emerged as the primary mode of emotion regulation for English majors in both contexts. The key difference between the two contexts lies in the preference for problem-solving and adjusting internal situations: participants in the educational context often sought help from others to solve problems, whereas those in the employment context tended to autonomously enhance their knowledge skills and adjust task implementation.

4.2 Factors Affecting Emotion Regulation

Based on the analysis of the data from the tables, the first research question has been addressed satisfactorily. Additionally, preliminary insights into the second research question have been provided, indicating differences in emotion regulation (ER) strategies between educational and employment contexts. Further analysis of the interview content revealed that the ER strategies adopted by participants in these two contexts are influenced by internal factors such as beliefs and personality traits, as well as external factors including interpersonal relationships and environmental conditions.

4.2.1 Internal Factors

Internal factors include beliefs and personality traits. Beliefs have a direct influence on the choice of emotion regulation (ER) strategies. For instance, in the educational context, one participant mentioned, "Consulting with senior students who have successfully navigated the process will give me a clearer idea of what to do next, reducing my anxiety." Similarly, another participant stated, "I like to read experience posts on Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book) to learn from experts' exam preparation strategies, which is very insightful for me." In contrast, in the employment context, students tend to autonomously enhance their knowledge and skills. For example, one participant remarked, "The job market is competitive now. Instead of focusing too much on others, I prefer to concentrate on improving my own abilities, obtaining more certificates, and winning more competitions."

In both scenarios, students' beliefs about problem-solving directly influence their choice of ER strategies. Apart from beliefs, personality traits also play a significant role in ER strategy selection. Unlike beliefs, personality traits' impact on ER strategies is not constrained by the educational or employment context. This means that regardless of whether in an educational or employment scenario, students' personality characteristics affect their willingness to actively seek external assistance. Some introverted participants mentioned, "I often feel hesitant to ask senior students questions because we're not very familiar; it feels a bit presumptuous." In contrast, extroverted participants are less concerned about this issue, stating, "Senior students are generally friendly, and I think they would be willing to share their experiences with us."

These findings underscore the differential influence of beliefs and personality traits on ER strategy selection across educational and employment contexts.

4.2.2 External Factors

Several external factors influence the differential selection of emotion regulation (ER) strategies in two distinct contexts. Firstly, in terms of interpersonal relationships, students aiming for further education have better relationships with senior students compared to those focusing on employment. This is likely due to the longer duration seniors spend in academic settings relative to their counterparts targeting job placements. Additionally, their closer ties with faculty members

facilitate introductions between seniors and juniors. Conversely, seniors concentrating on employment allocate more time to enhancing job-related skills and internships, resulting in weaker connections with younger peers on campus.

These dynamics also affect environmental factors. For instance, within the English major, there is a noticeable disparity in the frequency and quality of organized events between educational and employment-oriented experiences. Events such as seminars on further education are more prevalent and typically better executed than those focusing on career placements. Employment-oriented events often concentrate on specific industries such as education and training, with minimal coverage on professions like accounting, which predominantly feature promotional activities for paid courses. Consequently, students often express discontent towards such events: "I usually refrain from attending employment experience sharing sessions. Most are in industries I'm not interested in, and many sessions end up soliciting contact information for sales pitches, which is quite frustrating."

Thus, external factors significantly influence ER strategy selection in these two contexts, revealing substantial shortcomings in employment-related support for English majors.

5. Conclusion

This study employs the ERAS model to investigate the selection of emotion regulation (ER) strategies among English majors in academic and employment contexts, examining similarities and differences while analyzing underlying reasons. Adopting a qualitative research approach, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with participants and meticulously analyzed the gathered data. The findings validate the diversity and uneven distribution of ER regulation, akin to Professor Han Ye's research on emotion regulation strategies among graduate students in academic writing and publication contexts, where response modulation and situational adjustment strategies are frequently employed. Moreover, the study identifies significant roles played by internal factors such as beliefs and personality, as well as external factors including interpersonal relationships and environmental influences, in shaping ER strategy selection across both contexts. This elucidates the mechanisms of ER strategy selection and highlights existing issues in fostering employment opportunities within the English major.

The study acknowledges limitations such as a small sample size and a lack of quantitative analysis. Future research could expand sample size, develop data models, and explore the effectiveness of ER strategies in academic and employment settings. Overall, rooted in positive psychology, this study broadens the scope of ER research and enriches the discourse on emotional aspects of second language acquisition studies.

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