Self-Esteem and Cognitive-Affective Reading-Based Courses in an EFL Context

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Abstract
This study presents a preliminary step towards approaching a cognitive-affective course or, in Forgas' (2001) terms, an *affect into thought* infusion course, which focuses on reading open-ended stories. By relying on the course in which open-ended stories were used as materials to provide the basis for the broad objectives of the study, attempts were made to investigate the impact of a cognitive affective course on learners' self-esteem. The studies in the literature empirically support the positive relationship between self-esteem on the one hand, and academic success, second language performance and language learning strategy use, on the other. This study was based on a quasi-experimental design in which Pre-test post-test method was used. Eighty intermediate EFL students studying English at Iran Language Institute (ILI) with the age range of 13-15, participated in this study. The participants' self-esteem was measured by Coppersmith's self-esteem scale (1967) before and after a ten-week interval. Meanwhile, the participants in the experimental group were provided with open-ended stories where they were asked to empathize with characters, predict the ending of the story to reflect their own choice and feeling and also connect the themes of the stories to their own experiences. The results of covariance analyses (ANCOVA) indicated that using open-ended stories in the cognitive-affective reading-based course helped the participants improve their self-esteem. Also, this study provided the empirical evidence for the therapeutic role of the cognitive-affective reading-based course in which open-ended stories were used.

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Introduction

In the last decade there has been an accelerated flow of findings in multiple disciplines supporting a view of affect as complexly intertwined with cognition in guiding rational behavior, memory retrieval, decision-making and creativity. It is time to redress the imbalance by developing theories and technologies in which affect and cognition are appropriately integrated with one another (Picard et al., 2004). As early as 1917, William James spoke eloquently of the intimate connection between the emotional and cognitive, suggesting that "they are inextricably related and perhaps never entirely separate, distinctive, nor pure" (p.118).

Developments in the past decade have highlighted the gap in theoretical understanding between cognition and affection as two sides of mental functioning. While it has always been understood that too much emotion is bad for rational thinking, recent findings suggest that so too is too little emotion. These findings point to new advances in understanding the human brain not as a purely cognitive information processing system, but as a system in which affective functions and cognitive ones are integrated with one another.

Scientific findings over the past decade have started to lay the foundation for a better understanding of the role of affect in learning. Research has demonstrated, for example, that a slight positive mood does not just make you feel a little better but also induces a different kind of thinking, characterized by a tendency toward greater creativity and flexibility in problem solving, as well as more efficiency and thoroughness in decision making. These effects have been found among many groups of different ages and professions. The influences on cognition are not limited to positive mood — affective states such as fear, anger, sadness, and joy show up in the brain as different patterns of blood flow, providing one possible explanation for how affect influences brain activity (e.g. Lane et al. and Damasio et al.).

Learning research has long recognized the importance of facilitating different ways of thinking — with beliefs such as ‘you don’t understand something unless you understand it in many ways’. In his forthcoming book, *The Emotion Machine*,

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Marvin Minsky argues, '... when we change what we call our 'emotional states', we're switching between different ways to think'.

Among educators and educational researchers, there is a growing recognition that interest and active participation are important factors in the learning process (e.g. Bransford, 1999). But acceptance of these ideas is based largely on intuition and generalized references to constructivist theorists. There is need for new types of studies on the role of affect in learning.

Review of Literature

In the realm of language teaching profession, Brown (1981) has provided a useful classification of personality factors; "(1) egocentric factors, (2)transactional factors, how the self is transacted to other people, (3) motivational factors, and (4) a sketch of Community Language Learning as an instance of an affectively based teaching method" (p.102). He places self-esteem under the first category, i.e. egocentric factors. Self-esteem has been defined by Coopersmith (1967) as follows:

> By self-esteem, we refer to the evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself, it expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which an individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy. In short, self-esteem is a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes that the individual holds towards himself. It is a subjective experience which the individual conveys to others by verbal reports and other overt expressive behavior (p.103).

Jacoby (1991) also writes, "In German the word *Selbswertgefuls* makes clear: it is a feeling (*Gefuh*) of worth (*wert*) that we have of ourselves (*selbst*)" (p.24). She also adds, The word 'esteem', derived from the Latin word *aestimare*, denotes an estimation that I make of my own value (p.24).

There are a few research findings which confirm the positive relationship between this factor and SL proficiency. For example, Lambert and Gardner (1972), and Brodkey and Shore (1976) included measures of self-esteem in their studies of success in language learning (quoted in Brown, 1987, p.102). Fuher (1974) also states, "consistent, successful risk-takers in her study were cautious and had

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middle-level self-esteem" (quoted in Beebe, 1983, p.42). Adelaide Heyde (1979) found that a high level of self-esteem was associated with SL proficiency (quoted in Littlewood, 1984, p.64).She studied the effects of three levels of self-esteem on the oral production of American college students learning French as a foreign language. In this regard, Brown cites," she found all three levels of self-esteem correlated positively with performance on the oral production measure… "(P. 102)

The findings reported in the literature on self-esteem are all indicative of the inherent complexity of the trait. Some other studies carried out in this respect are reviewed below.

Cheng and Page (1989) conducted a study to determine the relationship between anxiety and self-esteem. They found a negative correlation between students' anxiety level and their self-esteem. No significant relationship between anxiety and gender was found. However, the males in this study were found to have higher self-esteem than the females.

Newbegin and Owens (1996) examined the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement. A significant relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement was found in this study. In other words, those students with higher self-esteem were more successful in their academic performances.

Byrne (2000) examined the relationship between fear, self-esteem and coping strategies. The findings of the study showed that the levels of self-esteem for girls were consistently lower. It was also found that boys were more successful in reducing their fear. An inverse relationship between self-esteem and fear was also found.

El-Anzi (2005) conducted a study to investigate the relationship between academic achievement and the variables including self-esteem, optimism and pessimism. Significant positive correlation was found between academic achievements and both self-esteem and optimism. However, the relationship between academic achievements and pessimism was found to be negative.

In a study by Benetti and Kambourpoulos (2006) the effect of trait resilience and trait anxiety on self-esteem was examined. They also took the role of positive and negative affect into consideration. To measure self-esteem, the researchers

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used the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale. What they proposed was that trait resilience and trait anxiety may indirectly influence self-esteem through positive and negative affect respectively. The final sample consisted of 240 participants. It was found that trait anxiety and trait resilience have significant indirect effects on self-esteem via negative and positive affect. The conclusion was that this impact might be due to the effects of trait anxiety and trait resilience on "regulating affective experiences which in turn may be more proximal predictors of individual feelings of self-worth" (p.341).

The review of literature supports the connection between affective factors and literature. For instance, Ghosn (2001) states that literature, including short stories, plays, novels and poems, has the potential to foster emotional well-being by providing vicarious emotional experience. Also, Miall (2005) states that the feeling obtained in literary texts appears to enable a reader to frame a particular meaning, to register it for the time being as a possible component of the story and draw, if necessary, on the prior knowledge when a feeling matches an occurrence from the reader's memory.

Bringing the role of literary texts to the foreground, Krakovsky (2006) states, works of fictions, do not simply mimic real world life, but "they intensify it" and "let us play with fire of emotions from a safe remove"(Krakovsky,2006, p.52). In the same line, Miall (2005) claims that the pleasure of literary reading may implicate the re-experiencing of negative feelings from ordinary settings, but within contexts in which they can be contextualized, managed and brought into relation with other feelings. Therefore, in De Sousa's (2005) terms, "if we could understand how the movement of literature through paths of accessibility from one possible world to the way our own real world emotions can actually be transformed, we can create conditions under which our subjects are changed by the powers of literature"(De Sousa, 2005, p.355). This is the point that the present study seeks to touch. Given the emotional and psychological nature of language learning, the broad objective of this study is to investigate the impact of a cognitive-affective course which focuses on reading open-ended stories on learners' self-esteem.

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Research Questions

In the present study, the researcher has tried to answer the following questions:

Research Question #1: Does a cognitive-affective reading-based course with its focus on reading open-ended short stories affect the EFL learners' self-esteem?

Research Question #2: Does sex play any significant role in the impact of a cognitive-affective reading-based course with its focus on reading open-ended stories on the EFL learners' self-esteem?

To this end, the following null hypotheses were addressed:

Research Hypothesis #1**:** The cognitive-affective reading-based course with its focus on reading open-ended stories does not have a significant effect on the EFL learners' self-esteem.

Research Hypothesis #2: Sex plays no significant role in the impact of a cognitive-affective reading-based course with its focus on reading open-ended stories on the EFL learners' self-esteem.

Method

Participants

Eighty intermediate EFL students (forty male and forty female) studying English at Iran Language Institute (ILI) with the age range of 13-15, participated in this study. The reason for selecting these participants was mainly related to their age, since EFL students with this age range seem to be a better choice for investigating the cognitive-affective effect of reading stories. It is assumed that learners at this age range are more likely to be influenced by reading open-ended stories and empathizing with the story characters. The participants, who had enrolled in ILI English classes in the winter semester of 2009, attended the class on Mondays and Thursdays. They took the ILI placement test, which is a reliable and valid test, to become homogeneous as intermediate learners of English language. These participants included four intact classes from ILI, each consisting of 20 homogeneous male or female learners. Two classes were randomly assigned as experimental groups and the other two as control groups.

Instruments

In order to ensure the participants' understanding of the following questionnaire, the translated version of this scale into Persian was used. The translated version of this questionnaire demonstrated adequate internal consistency reliability, which is over .80, and is validated through concurrent correlation procedures.

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This scale includes 58 items. Eight items of this test are lie items (6, 13, 20, 24, 27, 34, 41, and 55) and 50 items are devised based on various levels of self-esteem such as general or global, task and social self-esteem. If a participant scores more than four (4) on the eight false items, he or she tries to pretend self-esteem and this will decrease the reliability of this scale for that person. Internal consistency reliability of the Persian version of Coopersmith's self-esteem scale by alpha coefficient, as measured by Biyabangard (2003) was found to be .86 .The test contains five subscales: (a) doing academic tasks, (b) social relationship, (c) family, (d) self, and (e) future. Items number (2 ,4 ,5 ,11 ,14 ,18 ,19 ,21 ,23 ,24 ,28 ,29 ,32 ,36 ,45 , and 57) receive one mark if they are answered by "yes", and no mark if they are answered by "no". The rest of the items are marked in a reverse order. A participant's score ranges from 0 to 50. The desirable score on this test ranges from 25 to 50. Items in the scale are written for young learners, but interested researchers can change the wordings to fit adult students too.

Procedures

This study was based on an experimental research strategy with a pre-test post-test control group design. Two intact classes of intermediate EFL students who had taken the ILI placement test, from the Iran Language Institute (ILI) were randomly chosen. The pretest scores were obtained by administering the Persian version of Coppersmith's self-esteem scale (1967) to both groups. The questionnaires were distributed by the researcher among the students at their class hours during the winter term of 2009. They were required to mark a choice, which best fitted their characteristics in their view. In order to ensure the participants' understanding of the questionnaires, the Persian version of the questionnaire was used. Moreover, if the students had any questions concerning the items in the questionnaires, the researcher was ready to answer them and help them understand the items.

Then the participants in the experimental groups were provided with open-ended stories where they were asked to empathize with characters, events and setting, predict the ending of the story to reflect their own choice and feeling and also connect the themes of the stories to their own experiences. Meanwhile the researcher (teacher) acted as a facilitator who facilitated the discussion and helped the participants fill in the gap properly. This kind of literary reading provided the basis not only for learning materials, but also for classroom activities such as peer-led discussion and group work in which they could express their feelings. In

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contrast, the participants in the control group were assigned non-literary readings which were the basis for learning vocabulary, forms or sentence comprehension.

Meanwhile some stories were assigned to the experimental groups, which were all selected from the book *Discovering Fiction 1, A Reader of American Short Stories* (Judith Kay and Rosemary Gelshenen, 1990) (See the list of the stories in the Appendix). On the other hand, some of the non-literary readings, assigned to the control group, include: *Buy Me! , Memory, Greenland, The Olympic Games, Jeans, No Smoking, English-The International Language*, and *Chocolate*, which were all selected from the book *Concepts and Comments* (Patricia Ackert, 1999). In order to design the open-ended stories which were appropriate to the participants' age and English proficiency level, the endings of all the stories which were assigned to the experimental group were left out purposely by the researcher.

All the readings assigned to both groups were at the same level of difficulty and not more than a few pages long. After a ten-week interval, posttest scores were obtained by administering the same questionnaires to both control and experimental groups. Finally, a one-way univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) and a two-way univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were used.

Results

This study was conducted to find an appropriate answer to the above-mentioned questions. To this end several statistical procedures were utilized and the results are presented as following:

To address the first research question, a univariate analysis of variance (ANCOVA) was conducted. The posttest scores were considered as dependent variables, the treatment on pretests as independent variables and the pretest scores as covariate variables. The error was originally set at .05 when comparing groups on SE (self-esteem) variables. Covariance analysis was carried out to see whether the treatment had a significant effect on self-esteem posttest scores when the pretreatment effects were covaried out. The results of global post SE analysis are reported in Tables 1, 2 and 3.

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Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of global post SE

Treat	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Control Group	.5033	.07198	40
Experimental Group	.5158	.07262	40
Total	.5095	.07212	80

Table 2
Tests of Between-Subjects Effects in global post SE

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	.095[a]	2	.047	11.526	.000
Intercept	.099	1	.099	24.214	.000
PreSE	.092	1	.092	22.299	.000
Treat	.033	1	.033	7.996	.006
Error	.316	77	.004		
Total	21.181	80			
Corrected Total	.411	79			

a. R Squared = .230 (Adjusted R Squared = .210)

Table 3
Parameter Estimates of global post SE

					95% Confidence Interval	
Parameter	B	Std. Error	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Intercept	.284	.050	5.653	.000	.184	.384
PreSE	.521	.110	4.722	.000	.301	.740
[treat=1]	-.045	.016	-2.828	.006	-.077	-.013
[treat=2]	0[a]	.	.	.	.	.

a. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.

As reported in Table 2, the treatment effect of the study on the participants' global self-esteem was found to be significant, ***F* = 7.996, *p < .05.** Thus, a significant difference in the treatment effect was indicated. This difference could

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account for the Coopersmith's self-esteem questionnaire mean score increase from pretest to posttest in the experimental group.

To address the second research question, a two-way univariate analysis of variance (ANCOVA) was conducted. The posttest scores were considered as dependent variables, the treatment and sex as independent variables and the pretest scores as covariate variables. Covariance analysis was carried out to see whether there are significant interaction effects of sex and the treatment on SE posttest scores when the pretreatment effects were covaried out.

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics of Post SE

Treat	sex	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Control Group	Male	.4891	.07647	20
	Female	.5176	.06604	20
	Total	.5033	.07198	40
Experimental Group	Male	.5043	.06659	20
	Female	.5272	.07821	20
	Total	.5158	.07262	40
Total	Male	.4967	.07120	40
	Female	.5224	.07161	40
	Total	.5095	.07212	80

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Table 5
Tests of Between-Subjects Effects in post SE

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	.100[a]	4	.025	5.992	.000
Intercept	.086	1	.086	20.625	.000
PreSE	.083	1	.083	20.008	**.000**
Treat	.033	1	.033	7.873	**.006**
Sex	.001	1	.001	.126	**.724**
treat * sex	.004	1	.004	.999	**.321**
Error	.311	75	.004		
Total	21.181	80			
Corrected Total	.411	79			

a. R Squared = .242 (Adjusted R Squared = .202)

Table 6
Parameter Estimates of post SE

Parameter	B	Std. Error	t	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Intercept	.276	.058	4.753	.000	.160	.391
PreSE	.528	.118	4.473	.000	.293	.763
[treat=1]	-.031	.021	-1.471	.146	-.072	.011
[treat=2]	0[a]	.	.	.	.	.
[sex=1]	.009	.022	.430	.668	-.034	.052
[sex=2]	0[a]	.	.	.	.	.
[treat=1] * [sex=1]	-.029	.029	-1.000	.321	-.088	.029
[treat=1] * [sex=2]	0[a]	.	.	.	.	.
[treat=2] * [sex=1]	0[a]	.	.	.	.	.
[treat=2] * [sex=2]	0[a]	.	.	.	.	.

a. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.

The results of post global SE analysis are reported in Tables 4, 5 and 6. As reported in Table 5, the interaction effects of sex and the treatment on SE posttest scores was not significant, ***F* = .999, *p*=.321> .05.** Thus, no significant difference

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of the interaction effects of sex and the treatment on global SE was indicated in the experimental group. Furthermore, the significant level of sex effect (.**724)** on global SE posttest scores which was not statistically significant revealed that there was no meaningful difference of sex effect on the participants' global self-esteem in the experimental group. Therefore, based on the second research hypothesis, it can be reported that sex plays no significant role in the impact of a cognitive-affective reading-based course with its focus on reading open-ended stories on the EFL learners' self-esteem.

Discussion and Implications

The results reported above indicate the significant increase in the self-esteem scores of the experimental groups. One reason for this result might be that the cognitive-affective reading-based course in which literary readings were used might have changed the participants' negative expectations which could lead to their lower self-esteem and negative affect. Besides, this cognitive-affective reading-based course with its emotionally colored literary readings must have offered the participants the opportunity to voice their emotions, avoid discomfort and promote helpful function of emotion and thought. Compared with the participants in the control group in which non-literary readings were used, the participants in the experimental groups where literary readings were used also interacted more with their peers. Through interaction and experiencing characters' emotions, the participants practiced understanding of others in their inwardness and individuality.

The implication is that EFL learners can enjoy communicative facility and experience high levels of self-esteem if teachers rely on emotion-generating and emotion-managing techniques in courses which use emotionally colored literary excerpts in an attempt to improve self-esteem. In addition, through cognitive-affective courses, both teachers and learners can appropriately tackle some of the affective and communication problems besetting in the classrooms and evaluate language performance in an optimistic light, leading to better L2 learning performance.

If we develop self-esteem through cognitive-affective courses in which literary readings are used as the basis of second language learning, learners can also gain cultural understanding, which is the fifth skill besides speaking, listening, reading and writing. If EFL/ESL students have training to imaginatively put themselves in

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place of characters from the target culture in reading open-ended stories, it becomes easier to reconstruct their viewpoints. Through literature-based reading courses, instructors and teachers of English, therefore, should help learners with personalization to express emotions and internalize the other in the self.

Conclusion

As Gardner (1993) states, to fully understand the complexity of language learning process, we should pay attention to internal mechanisms and social interpersonal interaction involved in this process. This study presents a preliminary step towards approaching a cognitive-affective course or, in Forgas' (2001) terms, an *affect into thought* infusion course. Attempts were also made to draw on reading open-ended stories which could provide the diverse examples of emotional life. The results of the study indicated that reading open-ended stories used in the cognitive-affective reading-based course helped the participants improve their self-esteem.

Also, this study provided the empirical evidence for the therapeutic impact of the cognitive-affective reading-based course in which the open-ended stories were used. Given the role of self-esteem in foreign language learning, teachers should make use of *affect into thought* infusion courses through reading open-ended stories to help learners think rationally within an emotionally colored context.

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Appendix

The stories which were assigned to the experimental groups included:

You Go Way, I'll Go Mine (William Saroyan, 1943)
The Mirror (Judith Kay, 1996)
Home (Gwendolyn Brooks, 1991)
Eleven (Sandra Cisneros, 1991)
The Blanket (Floyd Dell, 1926)
The Bracelet (Yoshiko Uchida, 1976)
Johanna (Jane Yolen, 1983)
The Fun They Had (Isaac Asimov, 1957)

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