

A Case Study of Learner-Internal Factors in Second Language Learning

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ABSTRACT: *Although it is believed and even proved that students' anxiety in foreign language learning is usually negatively associated with their performance in this field, this paper presents that higher level of such anxiety correlates with higher level of motivation, which is linked to better achievement in classroom settings for second language (L2) learning. This study explores how a combination of learner-internal factors (anxiety and motivation) may have positive impact on the performance of a group of Chinese graduate students, based on a repeated two-way ANOVA of the data collected before and after a mock business negotiation in English. The results suggest that negative psychological factors may work positively in a result-oriented project, which may in turn alleviate negative emotions and facilitate L2 learning in the long run.*

KEY WORDS: anxiety, motivation, second language learning

INTRODUCTION

It is widely agreed that with more input and practice in the target language, second language learners will be more proficient in speaking. However, the outcome in foreign-language classroom settings may not be always as expected, due to all sorts of variables. Researchers made attempts to examine various dimensions in individual differences, regarding learner-internal factors, such as motivation and emotion, particularly anxiety.

However, it is yet to be assessed that to what degree anxiety may be transformed into a positive force in L2 learning if the learners' motivation is engaged in the process. This study records the change in speaking proficiency of a group of first-year Chinese post-graduates before and after a mock business negotiation in English, to investigate the dynamic relation of motivation and anxiety intertwined in the mechanisms of effective foreign language learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have been working on the role of anxiety in the process of second language learning. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) put forward the concept of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), which is a unique variable independent from general anxiety. It is a situation-specific anxiety in the context of L2 learning. It is argued that, in the classroom for second language learning, it is natural and understandable that learners may feel anxious when they find themselves inadequate in this setting, due to peer pressure, unsatisfactory test results, or just harsh feedback from teachers. Three decades of research on the topic of FLA has offered a thorough elaboration on the effect of anxiety in the L2 classroom. Namely, it is believed that

anxiety is in the category of negative emotions, which has counter-productive impact on second language learning and achievement. (Phillips, 1992; Dörnyei, 2005; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Papi & Teimouri, 2014; Teimouri, 2016; MacIntyre, 2017; Dewaele, 2019; Teimouri et al., 2019).

On the other hand, motivation, among other variables, has been securitized extensively by scholars of second language acquisition to elaborate on different behaviours in language learning in various contexts. By analysing the motivational dispositions of L2 learners through the theoretical framework of Motivational Self System, they found that L2 learners' efforts and performance in L2 learning is substantially associated with where they see themselves in the future. (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Higgins, 1987; Dörnyei, 2005; Boo et al., 2015)

In these previous studies, data were collected only at one point via general proficiency tests, final grade, or self-ratings to measure L2 learners' proficiency. Such cross-sectional designs allow researchers to explore the relationship between L2 learners' motivation/emotion and achievement. However, it is advisable to examine how such learner-internal factors impact L2 learners' development over time. Besides, it is noteworthy to explore the dynamic interaction between anxiety and motivation in terms of their integrated effect on L2 learning. Hence, the hypothesis in this study is the level of anxiety may correlate with the level of motivation, which may positively influence the outcome of L2 learning through a result-oriented program in classroom setting.

METHODOLOGY

The participants are 138 first-year MBA candidates at Shenzhen University, China, who were recruited to take part in a mock business negotiation in English. They reported their levels of anxiety and motivation in a questionnaire. As for their English proficiency, they were first interviewed before the mock negotiation by two speaking examiners for Cambridge Business English Certificate (BEC) exams, then their performance in the mock negotiation were assessed by the same examiners, on a scale of 1 to 10.

The questionnaire, designed to survey the participants' motivation and anxiety, requires the participants to mark one of the 6 responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree on a 6-point scale.

Multiple dimensions of motivation are covered, including integrativeness, instrumentality, and attitudes to L2 community and culture, in light of the L2 Motivational Self System theory (Dörnyei et al., 2006). The scores were put into four categories: somewhat motivated, fairly motivated, quite motivated, and highly motivated. The items on the survey are as follows:

1	I am prepared to expend a lot of effort in learning English.
2	Whenever I think of my future career, I imagine myself using English.
3	Studying English is important to me because other people will respect me more if I have a knowledge of English.
4	Studying English is important to me because English proficiency is necessary for promotion in the future.
5	Studying English is important to me because I would like to spend a longer period living abroad (e.g., studying and working).
6	Learning English is important to me because I would like to travel internationally.
7	Studying English is important to me because it offers a new challenge in my life.
8	The things I want to do in the future require me to use English.

Eight questions involving the physical symptoms of anxiety, such as nervousness and lack of confidence related to foreign language learning, were adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986). The scores were also put into four categories: somewhat anxious, fairly anxious, quite anxious, and highly anxious. The items are listed in the following table.

1	I feel confident when I speak in my foreign language class.
2	I can feel my heart pounding when I'm being called on in my foreign language class.
3	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in my foreign language class.
4	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my foreign language class
5	Even if I am well prepared for my foreign language class, I feel anxious.
6	I am embarrassed to volunteer answers in my foreign language class.
7	I always feel that the other students in my class speak the foreign language better than I do.
8	I don't worry about making mistakes in my foreign language class.

A two-way ANOVA is used twice to investigate the possible interaction effect between the level of anxiety and the level of motivation as independent variables, and the level of proficiency as a dependent variable.

RESULTS

The descriptive statistics of the participants' speaking performance before the mock negotiation are summarized in Table 1 and Table 2. It looks like there is no interaction effect between the two factors of motivation and anxiety since the P-value is far above 0.05 as shown in the ANOVA analysis.

Table 1

Proficiency Before the Negotiation				
	somewhat anxious	fairly anxious	quite anxious	highly anxious
somewhat motivated	5	5	5	5
	4	5	5	6
	5	5	5	6
fairly motivated	5	5	5	6
	5	6	6	7
	6	6	7	8
quite motivated	5	5	6	7
	6	6	7	8
	6	6	6	9
highly motivated	6	6	6	9
	6	7	7	8
	6	7	8	8

Table 2

ANOVA: Two-Factor with Replication

SUMMARY	somewhat anxious	fairly anxious	quite anxious	highly anxious	Total
<i>somewhat motivated</i>					
Count	3	3	3	3	12
Sum	14	15	15	17	61
Average	4.66666667	5	5	5.66666667	5.08333333
Variance	0.33333333	0	0	0.33333333	0.26515152
<i>fairly motivated</i>					
Count	3	3	3	3	12
Sum	16	17	18	21	72
Average	5.33333333	5.66666667	6	7	6
Variance	0.33333333	0.33333333	1	1	0.90909091

<i>quite motivated</i>							
Count	3	3	3	3	12		
Sum	17	17	19	24	77		
Average	5.66666667	5.66666667	6.33333333	8	6.41666667		
Variance	0.33333333	0.33333333	0.33333333	1	1.35606061		
<i>highly motivated</i>							
Count	3	3	3	3	12		
Sum	18	20	21	25	84		
Average	6	6.66666667	7	8.33333333	7		
Variance	0	0.33333333	1	0.33333333	1.09090909		
<i>Total</i>							
Count	12	12	12	12			
Sum	65	69	73	87			
Average	5.41666667	5.75	6.08333333	7.25			
Variance	0.4469697	0.56818182	0.99242424	1.65909091			
ANOVA							
<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>F crit</i>	
Sample	23.4166667	3	7.80555556	17.8412698	5.485E-07	2.90111958	
Columns	22.9166667	3	7.63888889	17.4603175	6.7772E-07	2.90111958	
Interaction	2.91666667	9	0.32407407	0.74074074	0.66930727	2.18876577	
Within	14	32	0.4375				
Total	63.25	47					

The descriptive statistics of the participants' speaking performance after the mock negotiation are summarized in Table 3 and Table 4. The P-value is well below 0.05, which indicates that there might be interaction effect between the two factors of motivation and anxiety through the whole process of the mock negotiation.

Table 3

Proficiency After the Negotiation				
	somewhat anxious	fairly anxious	quite anxious	highly anxious
somewhat motivated	5	5	6	6
	5	5	6	6
	5	6	5	6
fairly motivated	5	5	6	7
	5	6	6	7
	6	6	7	8
quite motivated	5	6	6	7
	6	6	7	8
	6	6	7	9
highly motivated	6	6	7	9
	6	7	8	10
	6	7	8	10

Table 4

ANOVA: Two-Factor with Replication

SUMMARY	somewhat anxious	fairly anxious	quite anxious	highly anxious	Total
<i>somewhat motivated</i>					
Count	3	3	3	3	12
Sum	15	16	17	18	66
Average	5	5.33333333	5.66666667	6	5.5
Variance	0	0.33333333	0.33333333	0	0.27272727
<i>fairly motivated</i>					
Count	3	3	3	3	12
Sum	16	17	19	22	74
Average	5.33333333	5.66666667	6.33333333	7.33333333	6.16666667
Variance	0.33333333	0.33333333	0.33333333	0.33333333	0.87878788
<i>quite motivated</i>					
Count	3	3	3	3	12

Sum	17	18	20	24	79
Average	5.66666667	6	6.66666667	8	6.58333333
Variance	0.33333333	0	0.33333333	1	1.17424242
<i>highly motivated</i>					
Count	3	3	3	3	12
Sum	18	20	23	29	90
Average	6	6.66666667	7.66666667	9.66666667	7.5
Variance	0	0.33333333	0.33333333	0.33333333	2.27272727
<i>Total</i>					
Count	12	12	12	12	
Sum	66	71	79	93	
Average	5.5	5.91666667	6.58333333	7.75	
Variance	0.27272727	0.4469697	0.81060606	2.20454545	

ANOVA

<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>F crit</i>
Sample	25.2291667	3	8.40972222	28.8333333	3.1893E-09	2.90111958
Columns	34.7291667	3	11.5763889	39.6904762	6.787E-11	2.90111958
Interaction	6.52083333	9	0.72453704	2.48412698	0.02805813	2.18876577
Within	9.33333333	32	0.29166667			
Total	75.8125	47				

The results show that most of the participants improved their speaking proficiency at the end of the project via a mock negotiation. More specifically, it seems when participants experienced stronger positive motivation and higher level of anxiety, they are more likely to achieve more improvement in their oral proficiency even within a relatively short period of time in a two-week project.

Researchers (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014) have been working on the issue of how cross-sectional emotions, both positive and negative, may affect L2 learners. Among other things, anxiety is believed to be one of those negative factors, which may build up in their learning experience and become a counterproductive agent.

However, it is probably noteworthy that anxiety may not always be a bad thing. When L2 learners are faced with a specific project, they may be driven by the force of motivation and reinforced with certain amount of anxiety, which may somehow turn out to be a facilitating element. This can be seen in the ANOVA analysis. It seems that motivated participants appear to make unique contributions to the process of the mock negotiation. As shown in the present study, those L2 learners with clearer vision of ideal future are more likely to experience

stronger anxiety due to higher expectations on themselves. The results here suggest that anxiety, which is usually regarded as negative emotion, may interact with motivation, hence significantly boost their ultimate achievement in EFL classrooms.

Implications and Limitations

This study demonstrates the possibilities that in result-oriented L2 learning process, certain degree of anxiety may become an impetus for motivated learners to enhance their speaking proficiency, particularly those with clear visions about their future. Thus, teachers may design activities through a variety of projects, to tap on L2 learners' motivation and exert certain pressure, the combination of which could turn out to be an impelling force in the learning experience. By working on a specific project, participants could be strongly stimulated in a classroom setting with intensified practice in using the target language. Although they might be anxious to varying degrees, such anxiety should not become a huge concern for teachers. Instead, along with their motivation and encouragement from teachers, it might be transformed into a boosting factor in the learning process.

However, this study was only a tentative attempt to explore the possible relationship between motivation, anxiety and L2 speaking proficiency. The results are yet to be supported with more qualitative and quantitative evidence. Therefore, more studies are expected to investigate the dynamic and interactive changes of the above factors in L2 learning classrooms.

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