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Impact of affective variables on Korean as a foreign language learners' oral achievement



Danielle Ooyoung Pyun ^{a,*}, Jung Sup Kim ^{b,1}, Hyun Yong Cho ^{c,2},
Jung Hee Lee ^{c,3}

^a Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA

^b Department of Korean Language and Literature, Kyung Hee University, Seoul, South Korea

^c Institute of International Education, Kyung Hee University, Seoul, South Korea

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ABSTRACT

While research on affective variables abounds in the foreign and second language acquisition literature, few studies have examined the role that learner affect plays in learning a less commonly taught language (LCTL) such as Korean. This study examines potential relationships between affective variables (i.e., motivation, anxiety, linguistic self-confidence, and risk-taking) and oral achievement in a KFL (Korean as a Foreign Language) North American college classroom setting. The results showed that learners' achievement was positively correlated with linguistic self-confidence and risk-taking while negatively associated with anxiety. A positive correlation was also found between motivation and linguistic self-confidence. Anxiety was negatively correlated with linguistic self-confidence and risk-taking. Among the four affective variables investigated, only risk-taking was identified as a significant predictor of student achievement in oral skills. Findings suggest that (1) learners' affective states play a significant role in learning an L2 that is non-cognate with and distant from their L1 and (2) effortful and frequent attempts of risk-taking should be particularly emphasized to enhance learners' achievement in L2 oral proficiency.

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1. Introduction

Individual learner differences have long been recognized as playing a viable role in learners' achievement or performance in the foreign and second language classroom. Modern language pedagogy, which emphasizes learner-centered communicative approaches, calls for more attention to the whole learner in both intellect and emotional dimensions and to the diverse contexts of learning. Amongst individual learner variables, those classified as involving an affective dimension, such as attitudes, foreign language anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence, have been the object of much research including the

* Corresponding author. Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures, The Ohio State University, 398 Hagerty Hall, 1775 College Road, Columbus, OH 43210, USA. Tel.: +1 614 292 3876.

E-mail addresses: pyun.7@osu.edu, dopyun@gmail.com (D.O. Pyun), jskim@khu.ac.kr (J.S. Kim), iiejhy@khu.ac.kr (H.Y. Cho), iiekor@khu.ac.kr (J.H. Lee).

¹ Department of Korean Language and Literature, Kyung Hee University, 26, Kyunghedae-ro, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul 130-701, South Korea. Tel.: +82 2 961 0080.

² Institute of International Education, Kyung Hee University, 26, Kyunghedae-ro, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul 130-701, South Korea. Tel.: +82 2 961 0097.

³ Institute of International Education, Kyung Hee University, 26, Kyunghedae-ro, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul 130-701, South Korea. Tel.: +82 2 961 0084.

multiple studies by Gardner and his associates (Gardner, 1985; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997) and Dörnyei (1994, 2001, 2005).

Many of previous studies of L2 affect discussed learners' emotions in relation to their learning behaviors (e.g., Dörnyei, 2005; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre & Noels, 1996) and learning outcomes (e.g., Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994; Kondo-Brown, 2006; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004). Some of the recent studies of L2 affect paid attention to the dynamic and fluid nature of learner emotions such as developmental aspects of affect (Garrett & Young, 2009) and social aspects of emotions which are intersubjectively negotiated through social interaction (Imai, 2010). Overall, research on affective variables to date has focused on learners of English as a second/foreign language (e.g., Cheng, 2002; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Imai, 2010; Kim, 2009; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004) or learners of European languages (e.g., Frantzen & Magnan, 2005; Garrett & Young, 2009; Marcos-Llinás & Garau, 2009; Phillips, 1992), and relatively little investigation has explored LCTLs (less commonly taught languages) such as Korean. The few studies examining learner affect within the LCTL context targeted learners of Japanese (Kitano, 2001; Saito & Samimy, 1996; Samimy & Tabuse, 1992), Chinese (Xie, 2014; Zhao, Guo, & Dynia, 2013) and Arabic (Elkhafaifi, 2005); little has been written about learners of Korean as a foreign language.

Unlike Indo-European languages, East Asian languages are considered “truly foreign languages” to L1 (first language) English speakers (Jordan & Walton, 1987, p.111), for the linguistic and cultural codes of East Asian languages are unrelated to and quite distant from the English language. According to the language difficulty rankings compiled by the Foreign Service Institute of the U.S. Department of State, Korean belongs to Category III, the group of languages with the highest learning difficulty for native English speakers, requiring approximately four times more learning hours than Category I languages, such as Spanish and French. Yet, Korean is one of the 13 critical need foreign languages designated by the U.S. Department of State, and more proficient and qualified American speakers are significantly in demand. Past research suggests that for an L2 that is non-cognate with and distant from the L1, affective factors can exert a strong influence on learners' linguistic performance in class and can predict learners' success in L2 learning, particularly at the beginning level (Samimy & Tabuse, 1992). This view, however, cannot yet be asserted without further verification of other L2 settings particularly the cases of LCTLs. The present study aims to investigate KFL (Korean as a Foreign Language) learners' affective states and the relationship between learners' affective factors and their achievement in L2 Korean oral skills.

Drawing on past research on affective factors and the present study's authors' anecdotal experience in teaching KFL, four variables were hypothesized as having effects on KFL students' oral achievement: motivation, L2 speaking anxiety, perceived linguistic self-confidence, and class risk-taking. These are the variables frequently considered or conceptualized as affective. However, it should be noted that they may not be solely affective but also involve cognitive or personality elements. Motivation, for example, can be construed as a variable dependent on both affect and cognition (Dörnyei, 2010; Schumann, 2004). The four variables under investigation in this study, therefore, can be understood as factors involving an affective dimension.

2. Literature review

2.1. L2 motivation

Motivation is said to be the driving force that initiates L2 learning and sustains the effort to self-regulate one's learning and achieve one's goals (Dörnyei, 2005; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2008). The socio-educational model of second language acquisition proposed by Gardner (1985, 2001, 2010) posits that motivation is highly correlated with measures of achievement and is a strong determinant of L2 attainment.

Past studies of motivation have made significant contributions to identifying the underlying constructs of motivation. According to Gardner (1985, 2001), the motivation factor is made up of three components: motivational intensity, desire to learn the language, and attitudes toward learning the language. In other words, a motivated L2 learner tends to exert great effort to learn the language, hold a strong desire to succeed, and find learning enjoyable and fulfilling. These three elements of motivation are closely related to the goals the learner intends to accomplish using the L2, which is better known as the learner's motivational orientation. Learners' motivational orientation can be broadly classified into two types: integrative motivation (i.e., learning the L2 out of a genuine interest in the target language, culture, and people) and instrumental motivation (i.e., learning the L2 to gain pragmatic benefits). Studies based on the integrative/instrumental paradigm found that integrative motivation generally accompanied higher achievement in a second language (Dörnyei, 2001; Hernández, 2006; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003).

Since the 1990s, greater effort has been made to extend the parameters of motivation theory by identifying and integrating other potential kinds of motivators. Oxford and Shearin (1994), for example, called for discussion of a broader model of motivation that incorporates theories and principles from various areas of psychology (e.g., general, educational, industrial, and cognitive developmental psychology). In a similar attempt, Dörnyei (1994) outlined a more comprehensive as well as more classroom-relevant model of L2 motivation comprising three different levels: (1) the Language Level (integrative and instrumental motivations); (2) the Learner Level (need for achievement, self-confidence); and (3) the Learning Situation Level (course specific, teacher-specific, and group-specific motivational components). In his later publications in 2005 and 2009, Dörnyei proposed an alternative framework of motivation labeled the *L2 motivational self-system*, which consists of three major elements: the *ideal L2 self*, the *ought-to L2 self*, and the *L2 learning experience*. Dörnyei explained that a learner's motivational behaviors are mediated and regulated by a personal concept of possible selves, such as the ideal self that the learner aspires to approximate and the ought-to self that the learner feels obligated to possess in order to avoid negative

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