English language learners' use of self-regulatory strategies for foreign language anxiety in China

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This article reports on an exploratory study of Chinese EFL learners' use of self-regulatory strategies for foreign language anxiety (FLA). A 31-item questionnaire was developed based on focus group interviews and theoretical input drawn from areas of research including learning strategy, self-regulated learning, and cognitive therapy. A total of 753 non-English major undergraduate EFL learners from seven universities in central China participated in the study. Both an Exploratory Factor Analysis and a Confirmatory Factor Analysis were conducted to identify the specific categories of strategy while General Linear Model univariate procedures were performed to detect any difference in strategy use among the students of different FLA levels. Findings revealed that six categories of strategy were identified, with Cognitive Strategy, Metacognitive (Appraisal) Strategy, and Affective Strategy being favored by the students. FLA levels exerted a significant impact on the students' strategy use. The low-anxiety group demonstrated significantly higher frequency in the use of all the six categories of strategy except Avoidance Strategy and Affective Strategy. The high- and mild-anxiety groups, in contrast, respectively used Avoidance Strategy and Affective Strategy most frequently. Based on these findings, practical implications for alleviating learners' FLA in foreign language teaching are provided.

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1. Introduction

Foreign language anxiety (FLA), "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, p. 128), is recognized as an important affective variable impacting on second language acquisition (Arnold, 2005; Horwitz, 2001). In the field of second language acquisition (SLA) research over the past few decades, the effect of FLA on students' language acquisition and performance has been extensively studied, with mostly negative effects being reported (e.g., Gregersen, 2003; Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012; Horwitz, 2001; Yan & Horwitz, 2008). Given its negative impact reported in most cases, a multitude of studies have focused on its possible causes and how to devise teaching interventions that can help learners manage and reduce it, thereby making language learning and teaching more effective. While it is important to note the effect and influence of teachers and other agents as social support in alleviating students' FLA, relatively little attention has been given to students' exercise of agency and self-regulation of FLA. Considering the critical importance of affect in SLA

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(Dewaele, 2015; Garrett & Young, 2009; Oxford, 2015) and of learners' self-regulatory processes in response to affective challenges (Bown & White, 2010), this study investigates how Chinese EFL learners employ self-regulatory strategies to cope with the widely-recognized challenge of FLA.

2. Literature review

For many decades teachers and researchers have been exploring, describing, analyzing, and measuring learners' anxiety with regard to second/foreign language learning. The most prevailing tool used for the measurement of FLA is the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). Numerous studies conducted utilizing the FLCAS yielded significant negative correlation between FLA and FL performance or achievement, a variable measured through course grades, scores on standardized tests, and other assessments (e.g. Aida, 1994; Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012; Liu & Jackson, 2008). Thus, by and large, FLA has been regarded in extant literature as a relatively stable, debilitating emotional reaction experienced by second language learners in a variety of contexts (Horwitz, 2010; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Xu & Kou, 2015).

To cope with the adverse impact of FLA on learners, extensive research has been devoted to identifying the causes of FLA and proposing relevant instructional strategies to prevent or mitigate its arousal (e.g. Chen & Chang, 2004; Ewald, 2007; Foss & Reitzel, 1988; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Oxford, 2017). A number of studies went even further and reported on practical anxiety-relieving interventions conducted in natural classroom environments. For example, Kralova, Skorvagova, Tirpakova, and Markechova (2017) applied psycho-social training to reduce student teachers' foreign language pronunciation anxiety and verified its positive effect. Other experiments included computerized pronunciation practice (Shams, 2005), cooperative learning techniques (Naagahashi, 2007), the length approach (Guo, 2011), and a package of anxiety-reducing strategies targeting possible sources of FLA (Alrabai, 2015).

However, all these studies on FLA-reducing strategies have centered upon what teachers can do to alleviate students' FLA. From learners' perspective, their use of affective strategy to "regulate emotions, motivations, and attitudes" has always been an important part of their language learning process and has long been documented (Oxford, 1990, p. 135). For example, Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL; Oxford, 1990) measures students' strategy use for FLA alleviation under the taxonomy of affective strategy. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that, like SILL, the instruments employed in previous research are usually comprehensive in scope, and thus each category of strategy represented in them may not be exhaustive. For instance, in terms of affective strategy, SILL only incorporates five items to examine either learners' general feelings in language learning or a couple of different types of affect, such as anxiety and fear. It might be inadequate and inappropriate if we aim to closely examine how learners cope with a specific affective challenge in L2/FL learning, such as FLA.

In response to this situation, some studies have utilized such qualitative methods as interviews and open-ended questionnaires to elicit learners' actual use of FLA-reducing strategies and found that not only affective strategies but other types of strategy have been employed by learners themselves to cope with FLA. For example, Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004) reported that Japanese EFL learners' "anxiety coping behaviors in the language classroom are characterized by the use of cognitive, affective, and behavioral strategies as well as resignation" (p. 264). More specifically, they categorized five strategy types under this four-branch typology, i.e. Preparation (Behavioral), Relaxation (Affective), Positive Thinking (Cognitive), Peer Seeking (Cognitive), and Resignation (i.e. avoidance behaviors). Focusing on learners' foreign language listening anxiety, Bekleyen (2009) revealed that their common coping strategies included practicing, asking for help, and thinking positively. Dealing with distance language learners, Hurd (2007) found that students enrolled in a distance French course in the UK predominantly used two strategies to cope with anxiety: (1) actively encouraging oneself to take risks in language learning, and (2) positive self-talk. Hurd and Xiao (2010) situated their investigation on Chinese distance learners and summarized a variety of anxiety-reducing strategies that they employed, such as positive self-talk, self-encouragement to take risks in language learning, and paying more attention to weak points in routine study.

All these studies indicated that, rather than merely affective strategies, students may utilize various categories of strategies, including cognitive, affective, and behavioral strategies, to cope with affective challenges like FLA. This has been further verified by a number of studies that investigated links between FLA and language learning strategies. For example, Golchi (2012) found that low-anxiety learners used more metacognitive strategies than their high-anxiety peers. Chow, Chiu, and Wong (2017) revealed that learners' use of metacognitive and social strategies may help increase their level of learning motivation and in turn help reduce the intensity of reading and listening anxiety. It can be hypothesized that learners may coordinate their learning process by arranging, planning, and evaluating (metacogitive) to regulate anxious feelings and they may also improve their understanding of the affective dimension in L2/FL learning process through interaction or cooperation with others (social).

Studies on self-regulated learning have also shown that when learners proactively self-regulate their affect or emotion, multiple categories of strategies will be tapped into. For example, in the self-instructed context, Bown (2006) found that successful learners used affective strategies such as self-encouragement and self-motivation to help cope with negative emotions like frustration and anxiety in an ongoing manner. Bown (2009) revealed that students' self-regulation of learning included managing their emotional responses by means of avoidance and positive self-talk. Bown and White (2010) highlighted the various cognitive and metacognitive strategies that students employed to identify, process, and manage their emotions, evidencing that "thoughtful control of affect and cognition" (Winne, 1995, p. 175) is a salient feature of self-regulated learning.