The effect of positive orientation and perceived social support on foreign language classroom anxiety

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A B S T R A C T

The present study reports on the effect of learners' positive orientation, perceived teacher and student emotional support on their foreign language classroom anxiety. One hundred and forty-four Chinese L1 second-year university-level participants filled out the Positivity Scale, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, and the Teacher/Student Emotional Support Scale. Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that positive orientation was a significant negative predictor of FL anxiety. The relationship between perceived student support and anxiety ceased to be significant as positive orientation entered the model. Perceived teacher support did not significantly predict FL classroom anxiety at each step of the analysis. The results are discussed in line with previous findings as well as their practical implications for foreign language teaching and learning in Chinese universities.

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1. Introduction

While sitting in the same classroom, being taught by the same teachers, and using the same textbooks, learners may still greatly vary in terms of foreign language (FL) learning outcomes that they have achieved. Individual differences in language aptitude, learning motivation, attitudes towards target language community, and usable resources all contribute to the inter-learner variations in FL outcomes (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). In addition, emotional experiences repeated over time in the FL classroom can also shape learners' FL learning process (Horwitz, 2017). In the last three decades, a good deal of work has focused on a negative emotion, FL anxiety, more specifically on its causes and consequences.

Research has shown that many factors underlie FL anxiety. Among the possible variables that influence FL anxiety is the perceived gap in social support (e.g., Huang, Eslami, & Hu, 2010). Explaining why students differ in perceived social re-lationships, Jin, de Bot, and Keijzer (2017) referred to the interpersonal differences in personality, temperament, mood, and/or language-learning growing experiences. Moreover, a positive outlook can also affect perceived social bonds. Students who habitually interpret themselves, other people, and life events in a positive manner have a more positive evaluation of social bonds (Alessandri, Caprara, & Tisak, 2012a). It is thus reasonable to assume that students with a positive orientation may suffer less from FL classroom anxiety, which was tested in this study. We also specified the roles of perceived teacher and student emotional support, that is, perceived cares and likes from teachers and peers (Johnson & Johnson, 1983; Johnson, Johnson, Buckman, & Richards, 1985), in FL classroom anxiety and compared the two perception variables and positive orientation in terms of the effect on classroom anxiety.

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2. Literature review

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) heralded a period of intense interest in FL anxiety with the so-called "Specialised approach" which argued for a re-orientation of the conceptualization and measurement of FL anxiety (MacIntyre, 2017). Horwitz et al. (1986) defined FL anxiety as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128). FL anxiety belongs to the category of situation-specific anxiety, which is distinct from, but related to trait anxiety (an index of innate emotional stability) and state anxiety (anxiety at a particular spatio-temporal point). Moreover, FL anxiety is an umbrella term for general FL anxiety and skill-specific anxieties like communicative, reading, and even pronunciation anxiety in a FL. Thus, the construct of FL anxiety incorporates "a suite of anxieties" (Horwitz, 2016, p. 72). Horwitz (2017) explained that FL learners can experience anxiety "because of distress at their inability to be themselves and to connect authentically with other people through the limitation of the new language" (p. 41).

The role of FL anxiety in FL learning has been a long-term research interest in SLA. The findings largely converge in pointing to the interference that FL anxiety can bring to FL learning and performance in a variety of domains. To be specific, FL anxiety may have negative academic, cognitive, and social effects on learners (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; MacIntyre, 2017). That is, anxiety hinders learners' proficiency development and weakens their self-confidence in the FL, which, in turn, strengthens anxiety, creating a vicious circle (e.g., Aida, 1994; Bosmans & Hurd, 2016). As anxiety increases, undivided cognitive activities associated with learning and performance are likely to be interrupted due to the increased task-irrelevant self-cognition (Eysenck, 1979). Anxious students may try to avoid communicating with others because they are afraid that their FL output would be judged to be accented, unauthentic, or poor (Horwitz et al., 1986). In addition, FL anxiety can also wreck the teacher's best intentions and render attractive materials inadequate (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

The reasons why levels of anxiety vary among FL learners have also been investigated. It has been shown that the individual differences in anxiety levels are linked to demographic background, social/cultural backgrounds, proficiency levels as well as FL learning experience. For example, some people have been through FL immersion learning in target language countries, which has an immediate and positive long-term influence on FL anxiety levels. Allen and Herron (2003) documented a significant decrease of anxiety levels in French in 25 university students in a study abroad program in Paris. Okada (2015) reported a negative association of length of stay with students' anxiety levels in English, targeting Japanese overseas undergraduate and graduate students in the United States. Thompson and Lee (2014) investigated the link between South Korean students' experience abroad and their anxiety levels in domestic university-level English classes. A longer stay abroad was linked to a stronger reduction in anxiety levels in English. The lower anxiety levels after students returned home might be attributed to their improvement in language skills, for instance oral or auditory ability (Allen & Herron, 2003; Serrano, Llanes, & Tragant, 2016), pragmatic comprehension (Taguchi, 2011; Taguchi, Xiao, & Li, 2016), and intercultural adaptability and sensitivity (Williams, 2005). Overall, overseas experiences not only benefit the development of linguistic attributes and intercultural communication competence, but also enhance the students' psychological well-being.

The reasons why some people are more likely to suffer from FL anxiety than others have also been investigated along the lines of broad personality traits and lower-order personality facets (Dewaele, 2017a). As for the broad traits, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) documented that extraversion was the only personality trait that showed a significant negative path to FL anxiety, among all the broad personality dimensions tapped by Goldberg's (1992) transparent bipolar inventory. A significant negative relationship between extraversion and FL anxiety also emerged in Dewaele's (2013) study that revealed that individuals who score high on Psychoticism and Emotional Stability experienced less anxiety in classroom-based FL learning contexts and during speaking a FL. In addition, the effect of global personality dimensions on FL anxiety was also examined in professional settings. Gargalianou, Muehlfeld, Urbig, and van Witteloostuijn (2016) developed a 10-item scale of communicative anxiety in FL applicable for school-independent formal contexts, through which the researchers investigated whether personality dimensions as assessed by Lee and Ashton's (2004) 60-item HEXACO Personality Inventory (an extension of the Big Five framework) mediated the relationship between gender and anxiety level. The results of a hierarchical regression analysis showed that females scored significantly higher than males on the communicative anxiety scale, even controlling for the effects of language-related socio-biographical variables that were age, perceived FL competence, FL reading frequencies, and age of onset of acquisition on anxiety levels. However, once the HEXACO personality dimensions entered the model, the significant difference between males and females in communicative anxiety disappeared. Among the six HEXACO personality dimensions, three were found to significantly predict communicative anxiety. They were emotionality (which includes facets such as fearfulness, anxiety, dependence and sentimentality), conscientiousness (which includes facets such as organization, diligence, perfectionism and prudence), and extraversion (which includes facets such as social self-esteem, social boldness, sociability and liveliness).

Among the lower-order personality facets, self-esteem has been frequently referred to in the literature (e.g., Baran-Łucarz, 2014; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1999; Young, 1991). A link between this personality facet and FL anxiety has also been empirically tested. In a structural equation modeling analysis, Liu and Zhang (2008) revealed that self-esteem significantly negatively predicted Chinese Year 1 undergraduate students' anxiety levels in English. The predictive power of general self-esteem on FL anxiety levels was furthermore attested by Jin, de Bot, and Keijzer (2015a) in two Chinese university students' FL learning contexts that were Japanese and English. The representation of general self-esteem in specific areas, i.e., domain-specific self-esteem, also showed a link to FL anxiety in several contexts. Fallah (2017) reported a significant negative influence of coping self-efficacy on FL anxiety levels. Coping self-efficacy refers to "beliefs about one's ability to perform coping