Anxiety and Enjoyment in the Foreign Language Classroom: A Dynamic Perspective

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The present study examined the relationship between anxiety and enjoyment in the foreign language classroom from a dynamic perspective. The Motometers were used to capture the dynamic emotions of four English majors in a class session. The results showed that the correlational patterns of anxiety and enjoyment varied from individual to individual, caused by various private and social factors in the context of foreign language learning.

Keywords: anxiety, enjoyment, dynamic, foreign language learning

Introduction

The influence of effect on second language acquisition (SLA) has long been acknowledged. Affect refers to non-linguistic variables such as motivation, attitude, anxiety, and self-confidence. Krashen’s affective filter hypothesis accounts for the role of affect in facilitating or blocking comprehensible input’s reaching the language acquisition device in the learner’s mind. Arnold (2011) affirmed that affect could be considered as a prerequisite for the optimal cognitive work of learning to take place. Therefore, how to integrate affect and cognition should be a major concern for the enhancement of learning.

As a kind of negative affect, anxiety has received most attention among SLA researchers because anxiety has been described as one of the strongest predictors for success or failure for foreign language learners. Anxiety is defined as “the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language” (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 27), while foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) is “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, p. 128). To reduce the negative outcomes associated with anxiety, foreign language teachers are encouraged to facilitate a positive learning environment and provide learners with a better learning experience.

SLA researchers have recently turned their attention to positive emotions in foreign language learners, following the arrival of Positive Psychology. One positive emotion that is of particular interest is enjoyment. As a result, how enjoyment operates in L2 contexts is little known, and how enjoyment interacts with anxiety in the foreign language classroom is even less known.

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Deweale, MacIntyre, Boudreau, and Dewaele (2016) believe that both positive and negative emotions serve adaptive functions, which collaborate in facilitating foreign language learning, and stronger overall emotional experiences underpin the motivation for foreign language learning. Emotions are dynamic and their causes also change over time. However, dynamics of emotions can be obscured when data are averaged among multiple persons (Boudreau, MacIntyre, & Dewaele, 2018) in the conventional quantitative approach. A dynamic systems approach allows a closer look at the dynamic changes in a variable across a group of people or within an individual over time.

Adopting a dynamic perspective, the present study aimed to explore the dynamic relationship between anxiety and enjoyment and the varying patterns of correlation between the two variables in the foreign language classroom. The research questions are: (1) Is there variability to be found in students’ anxiety and enjoyment in the foreign language classroom? (2) What is the relationship between anxiety and enjoyment on the individual level over one class session? (3) How are the fluctuations in emotions accounted for by the classroom context?

Method

Four first-year English majors enrolled in a Chinese university were invited to participate in the study. They were selected from a class of 30 students in an English course focusing on integrated language skills. The number of students was considered reasonable for close observations in the foreign language classroom and a micro-level individual analysis on foreign language learning emotions. The participants’ FLCA and foreign language enjoyment (FLE) were measured through the foreign language classroom anxiety scale (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986) and the FLE scale (Li, Jiang, & Dewaele, 2018). Student 1, Fiona, had a high rating of FLE and low FLCA, and had a high self-perceived English proficiency. Student 2, Bryant, had a medium FLE and a medium FLCA, and reported low self-perceived proficiency. Student 3, Emily, had a medium FLE and low-to-medium FLCA, and reported medium self-perceived proficiency. Student 4, Gary, had a high FLE and low-to-medium FLCA, and also reported medium self-perceived proficiency.

The main instrument for data collection was called “Motometer”, based on the original version used by Gardner and colleagues (2004). The Motometer was a thermometer-shaped figure with a “0” at the lowest and a “100” at the highest point. There were 20 Motometers on an A4 size sheet to take real-time measurements of students’ enjoyment and anxiety during a classroom session of 45 minutes. At the beginning of the session, the participants were indicated to draw horizontal lines on the first two Motometers to rate their levels of enjoyment and anxiety. After that, they were prompted by a soft bell sound to draw the lines every five minutes. In this way, 20 ratings were given by each participant, and altogether 80 ratings comprised the numeric data of this study. On the bottom of the sheet, a comments section allowed the participants to elaborate on their reported levels of emotions, which provided qualitative data for the study. The session was video-taped to provide contextual information, such as classroom activities and episodic instances.

The Motometer data were converted to a 1-100 numeric scale, resulting in graphs showing individual and group variability. Video-taped classroom activities and episodic instances involving the participants as well as students’ comments were analyzed to account for the variability in the Motometer data.

Results and Discussion

Figures 1-4 show the ratings of four participants’ anxiety and enjoyment in one session of the English class. It can be seen that enjoyment levels were mostly higher than anxiety levels, which coincided with the
findings in Dewaele and MacIntyre’s large-scale survey (2014). The survey concluded that anxiety and enjoyment were two distinct emotions, and enjoyment was not the lack of anxiety. On the individual level, great variability was observed in both anxiety and enjoyment. The relationship between anxiety and enjoyment was dynamic and variable, ranging from moderately negative correlation (Bryant), almost no correlation (Emily) to moderately positive correlation (Fiona and Gary). The results of this study echoed those of Boudreau, MacIntyre, and Dewaele (2018) which adopted an idiodynamic approach in examining the relationship between the two variables in communication tasks.

Figure 1. Fiona’s ratings.

Figure 2. Bryant’s ratings.
Figures 3 and 6 present group data on anxiety and enjoyment respectively. In either of the figures, group average graph did not resemble any of the individual graphs, indicating group average’s limitation in explaining learner differences. However, group average could inform teaching by showing what was likely to trigger anxiety or enjoyment in the foreign language classroom context. For example, a spike of anxiety was observed when students took turns to judge transmitting ways of HIV virus in an activity related to background information, accompanied by a similar increase of enjoyment during the first and second five minutes (between Points 1 and 3 in Figures 5 and 6). Two of the participants wrote in the comments sections that they found the activity challenging but interesting. For another example, a sharp increase of anxiety was observed when the students were asked to summarize the story in the text without much time to prepare, while enjoyment just leveled off during the 6th five minutes (between Points 6 and 7). During the 7th five minutes (between Points 7 and 8), enjoyment increased and anxiety decreased when a theme-related video clip was shown for class discussion. The factors that could account for the fluctuations in emotions were private or social. The link between context and system behavior is inextricable, and the immediate context should be perceived as part of the overall dynamic system (Waning, Dörnyei, & De Bot, 2014).
Conclusion

With a dynamic perspective, the present study was able to answer the research questions. There are intrapersonal and interpersonal variabilities observed in students’ anxiety and enjoyment in the foreign language classroom. The relationship between anxiety and enjoyment was dynamic, and the correlation patterns ranged from moderately negative, near zero to moderately positive. The variability in students’ emotions in the language class could be attributed to individual differences, teacher factors, peer factors, class activities, incidents, materials, and topics, etc.

However, only one class session was studied and one time-scale of five minutes was used to collect data, which could only provide limited information on the emotional dynamics. Emotions at more diverse timescales should be studied. In particular, longitudinal studies are needed for dynamic approaches to SLA research.

References


