

Anxiety and Enjoyment in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

To balance the research that has been carried out on negative emotions, the researchers in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) have recently focused on the role of positive academic emotions and their role in the process of acquiring a foreign language (FL). The aim of the present article is to examine the relationships between foreign language enjoyment (FLE), foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) and students' academic achievement in English in order to prove that these two emotions do not constitute opposite dimensions but may converge and diverge from time to time during the learning process. This article calls for a more dynamic approach to studying emotions and investigating whether and to what extent these two emotions may mutually shape one another and thus affect learners' achievement in the foreign language classroom.

Keywords: foreign language enjoyment, foreign language anxiety, SLA, positive psychology

In 2010, Robert Murphy interviewed Zoltán Dörnyei, a respected and leading authority in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) studies and psycholinguistics, on the current tendencies in the field. Asked about the connection between emotions and second

language learning, Dörnyei claimed as follows: "I propose that we completely rethink the role of emotions in SLA, and in the discussion of learner characteristics (...) I treat the emotional system as equal to the cognitive and motivational systems" (22). Having this in mind, the research on emotions in the process of learning and acquiring a second language has been vibrant in the past few decades, and the researchers in the field share a firm belief that affect is at the heart of foreign language learning and of the teaching process; foreign language teachers are in charge of managing the emotional tenor of the foreign language classroom, and the foreign-language classroom is a place for a great deal of emotional turmoil (Dewaele et al., "Foreign Language Enjoyment and Anxiety" 677). Hence, the ongoing fascination with affective variables in SLA, which has been going on since the 1970s, appears to be both relevant and understandable (Gkonou et al. 1-2).

The idea that certain emotions may either accelerate or obstruct the progress in second language development is not new. According to a well-known theory, yet not having been scientifically proven, the Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by Stephen Krashen (1982), every language learner is equipped with the affective filter that may either decrease or increase the intake of comprehensible input (9). In other words, the Affective Filter determines whether, and to what extent, the learner's acquirer is open. Krashen suggested that certain negative emotional variables can hinder the comprehensible input from reaching the part of the brain responsible for acquiring language (9-10). When a student experiences negative emotions while being involved in the FL activity, his/ her affective filter is 'up,' and the comprehension of language input is prevented; as a consequence, it impedes language acquisition. High levels of stress and anxiety may create such a situation. On the other hand, positive affect is necessary, but not sufficient on its own, for second language acquisition to take place. When language students experience positive emotions, their affective filter is 'low,' and they are psychologically open to receive the language input they are exposed to.

The same situation can be described using a more modern metaphor, that is, negative affect operates like cold water preventing the proper linguistic development of a language learner, while positive affect functions as a fuel that drives the language-learning process. To date, it has been found that positive emotions may strengthen students' awareness of language input (Dewaele et al., "Foreign Language Enjoyment" 46), expand learner's experience and acquisition of adaptive knowledge (Frederickson, "The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions" 1369), encourage engagement, stimulate creativity, curiosity, and exploration (Fredrickson, "The Broaden-and-Build" 1372), and play a protective function against the lingering effects of negative emotions (Dewaele et al., "Foreign Language Enjoyment" 46; MacIntyre and Gregersen 197).

On the contrary, since language learning is a process that is particularly prone to anxiety-arousal, it goes without saying that negative emotions may exert a disruptive influence on learners' language performance. First of all, negative affect has a debilitating effect on learners' motivation. As Elaine Horwitz et al. noted almost three decades ago, in 1986, anxious learners may appear unmotivated by avoiding studying and/or skipping their language class entirely (125-132). Furthermore, negative affect may limit potential FL input (MacIntyre and Gregersen 197), which may severely hamper the progress in L2 (Krashen).

The present article aims to investigate two the most commonly experienced emotions in the foreign language classroom, that is, enjoyment and anxiety, and more precisely, to examine the intricate relationship between these two apparently opposite emotions. While Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) is the most commonly studied emotion in the field of SLA and has attracted the attention of both researchers and foreign language educators for roughly four decades (Gkonou et al. 1), Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) is a relatively new concept that was introduced in the field only a few years ago by Jean-Marc Dewaele and Peter MacIntyre in 2014. Since then, however, the concept of FLE has grown in popularity, and, at present, it

constitutes a new and promising research avenue which many researchers try to explore. Thus, the present article aims to prove that enjoyment and anxiety do not constitute the opposite ends of a single continuum and cannot be perceived as opposite emotions. Before discussing the relationship between FLE and FLCA, it is important to focus on their conceptualization and the role they play in the foreign language classroom.

In 2007, Reinhard Pekrun et al. created a *Three-Dimensional Taxonomy of Achievement Emotions* (16). In line with this taxonomy, enjoyment can be classified as an example of positive, activating and activity-focused emotion (Pekrun et al., "The Control-Value Theory of Achievement" 16). Enjoyment related to achievement activities may take various forms. On the one hand, task-related enjoyment includes the feeling of excitement at novel and challenging tasks. On the other hand, enjoyment might be instigated once the learner is confronted with an activity perceived as being controllable and valued positively, with the task appropriately challenging, yet achievable, carefully adjusted to the learners' linguistic capacity.

Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) has been defined as "a complex emotion, capturing interacting dimensions of challenge and perceived ability that reflect human drive for success in the face of difficult tasks" (Dewaele and MacIntyre, "Foreign Language Enjoyment" 16). Therefore, in order to experience FLE, students need to be engaged in a new and puzzling task which arouses curiosity, generates interest and gives a learner the pleasure and satisfaction from what has been achieved (Ainley and Hidi 205-208).

FLE can be also described as a complex and multidimensional emotion. The way it operates in the FL environment resembles a specific, self-perpetuating process. In order to experience a high level of enjoyment, a foreign language learner needs to be faced with an optimal challenge. The question naturally arises as to what lies behind this concept, and, more importantly, how to sustain this experience in the language classroom. The research behind the *broaden-and-built* theory of

positive emotions (Fredrickson, "The Role of Positive Emotions" 218-226) as well as *flow*, introduced into the field by Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, may help to understand this process.

First, everything starts with the task that the student is faced with. It should be neither too easy, nor too difficult, but demanding and arousing curiosity. Once a learner approaches such a FL task, a deep interest is generated, and he/she becomes fully engaged and immersed in a foreign language learning activity. In this sense, enjoyment may widen the attention span and awareness of a learner (Fredrickson, "Positive Emotions Broaden and Build" 39). This may further translate into an increased activity in the prefrontal lobe our highest forms brain, the seat of intelligence, which in very general terms is involved in attention, cognition and the decision-making process, and also functions as storage for the short-term memory and the working memory (Baddeley 289). Additionally, in terms of broadening, enjoyment may encourage the development of connections across concepts and promote more global information processing (Fredrickson, "Positive Emotions Broaden and Build" 39). Taken together, if all these processes speed up in the brain, we learn more efficiently. Furthermore, once a learner overcomes the difficulties connected with a given activity, he/she experiences a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. It is believed that if a learner is searching for information about the object that has aroused his/her curiosity, the anticipated information is rewarding for his brain (Kang et al. 963). As a result, the student feels pleasure and satisfaction and is rewarded with both physical and psychological Subsequently, the learner experiences a sense of self-development, and he/she is motivated for further work, for taking up future challenges connected with FL learning. Thus, as indicated above, this process is self-perpetuating.

The aforementioned chain of favorable events that are likely to occur in the foreign language classroom clearly depicts the private dimension of FLE coalescing around cognition, selfdevelopment and challenge, proving that achievement is the surest route to self-esteem and enjoyment (Dewaele and MacIntyre, "The Two Faces" 264). Nonetheless, there is one more dimension that can be distinguished, that is, the social one. The social dimension of FLE subdivides into variables connected with the FL teacher (e.g. support, recognition, feedback, sense of humor, etc.) and with the atmosphere in the classroom. It is believed that enjoyment plays a mediating role in building relationships with other pupils and in creating a supportive atmosphere among students in the FL classroom (Dewaele and Alfawzan 27). As such, it is fair to believe that the foreign language classroom environment can facilitate enjoyment (Dewaele and MacIntyre, "The Two Faces" 264).

As to the effects of FLE on academic performance, a number of tendencies can be displayed. First of all, FLE is linked to more positive attitudes towards the foreign language (Dewaele and Dewaele 14); it is positively correlated with students' academic achievement (Ranelucci et al. 101) and their self-reported test results (Dewaele and Alfawzan 39), and higher levels of FLE are also linked to higher English proficiency scores (Dewaele and Alfawzan 39). This might be partially explained by the fact that a good command of a foreign language is linked to a greater control perception, particularly when FL learners attribute value to the FL they study (Piechurska-Kuciel, "L2 or L3?" 97). Another tendency is that female learners score higher levels of FLE than their male peers (Dewaele and MacIntyre, "The Two Faces" 237; Dewaele et al., "Foreign Language Enjoyment" 55; Dewaele and Alfawzan 27). Finally, Gholam Hassan Khajavy et al. (605) found that FLE constitutes a crucial factor in predicting learners' increased willingness to communicate (WTC). Taking into account the profound effects of enjoyment on learners' performance and achievement in the FL, it is fair to suggest that FL teachers should be less concerned about deleterious effects of negative emotions, and instead, they should make a greater effort to fuel learners' enthusiasm and boost their FLE (Dewaele et al., "Foreign Language Enjoyment and Anxiety" 694).

Having discussed foreign language enjoyment in greater detail, it is now time to focus on foreign language classroom

anxiety, which has been conceptualized 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" (Horwitz et al. 128). In a similar vein, in 2014, Tammy Gregersen and Peter MacIntyre in their book on Capitalizing on Language Learners' Individuality described foreign language anxiety as an emotion reflecting "the worry and negative emotional reaction when learning and using a second language and is especially relevant in a classroom where self-expression takes place" (3).

As mentioned before, language anxiety has attracted the attention of second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and foreign language educators for roughly four decades (Gkonou et al. 1). Since that time, language anxiety has been mainly dichotomized into several categories: trait/ situation-specific anxiety, facilitating/ debilitating anxiety, and internal/socially constructed anxiety. Other researchers investigated whether anxiety is a cause or an effect of performance. language Nonetheless. such binary conceptualizations, as suggested by Christina Gkonou et al. (5) may impose a severe constraint on our view of language learner characteristics. More often than not, language learners may experience both stable anxiety and specific to one domain; what is more, they might be both experienced at the same time. Furthermore, anxiety might be regarded both as a consequence and a cause of language performance, as well as an internal and social dimension (MacIntyre 27).

In 2017, Gkonou et al. published a substantial volume or more precisely an anthology on language anxiety, *New Insights into Language Anxiety*. In one of the opening chapters of the aforementioned anthology, entitled "An Overview of Language Anxiety," MacIntyre presents an in-depth overview of research on language anxiety and its gradual development in SLA. Referring to earlier research, MacIntyre presents the academic, cognitive and social effects of language anxiety on academic performance (17).

In terms of academic effects, it is believed that anxiety is linked to impaired performance on tests, lower grades and poor

academic achievement (MacIntyre and Gardner 103; Horwitz et al. 131; MacIntyre 14). Furthermore, learners' anxious reactions negatively affect oral performance (Young 439; Tóth 170) and a high level of anxiety negatively affects flow experience, as well as intrinsic motivation (Oxford 186). Regarding its cognitive effects, anxiety is found to interfere with cognitive performance at all stages of learning, that is, input, processing, and output. Thus, learners who experience language anxiety tend to be less fluent than those who do not. Moreover, they need more time to complete a task, achieve the same academic results, memorize new vocabulary, retrieve vocabulary from long term memory in comparison to their peers who do not experience language anxiety (MacIntyre 17). Eventually, in terms of social effects, anxiety may reduce linguistic self-confidence in learners (anxious learners tend to underestimate their language skills) and diminish learners' willingness to communicate in a FL (MacIntyre 17).

In a similar vein, the causes of anxiety might be divided into academic (e.g. errors in pronunciation, methods of testing, improper instruction of the FL teacher), cognitive (e.g. low self-esteem, shyness, fear of losing one's identity), and social (e.g. fear of being laughed at, competitiveness) (MacIntyre 21).

With respect to the effects of enjoyment and anxiety on learning behaviors and academic performance, research based on the aforementioned *Three-Dimensional Taxonomy of Achievement Emotions* (Pekrun et al., "The Control-Value Theory of Achievement" 16) has consistently found higher enjoyment to predict greater achievement and higher anxiety to predict poorer academic achievement. Thus, it would be reasonable to assume that foreign language enjoyment and foreign language classroom anxiety are nothing but contrary emotions, representing the opposite ends of a single continuum. Nevertheless, it would be a deceptively simple assumption, as negative affect is not simply the opposite of positive affect in either of its behavioral or cognitive effects.

The present study has aimed to prove that despite being a negative emotion, it is worth looking at foreign language classroom

anxiety through the lens of positive psychology. Once assumed that lowering the level of negative emotions does not simply guarantee the presence of positive emotions, hence, leading to excellent academic performance, it is reasonable to believe that an individual may possess a large amount of both anxiety and enjoyment, or a large amount of one but not of the other, or of neither. Thus, following the research that has already been carried out in the field, it is fair to say that, although being prime examples of positive and negative emotions and sharing a moderate negative correlation, enjoyment and anxiety are not opposite emotions. Instead, they are partially inter-related but essentially separate dimensions (Dewaele and MacIntyre, "The Two Faces" 261; Dewaele and Dewaele 19).

It is therefore recommended to look at enjoyment and anxiety simultaneously and to investigate how these two emotions interact. Having assumed that anxiety and enjoyment constitute two distinct emotions working along separate pathways whose trends can converge or diverge from time to time (Dewaele and MacIntyre, "The Two Faces" 265), the question that remains unanswered is what these specific circumstances in the foreign language classroom are that may evoke enjoyment and provoke anxiety at the same time. What might immediately come to one's mind is the concept of optimal challenge, described in the initial part of this article, which lies at the very heart of enjoyment. In order to be perceived as challenging, the activity the learner is faced with should be slightly more difficult than the previous one the learner was engaged in; it needs to be demanding, requiring concentration and heightened attention. As such, it may arouse some level of anxiety in a learner; for instance, a threat to one's self-esteem/selfconcept caused by lack of confidence, fear of failure, fear of taking the risk, fear of being laughed at, etc. Nonetheless, if this risk is taken, the student is rewarded with a spontaneous joy derived from dealing with the activity per se and the sense of satisfaction once a task is completed. In this sense, anxiety could be perceived as 'facilitative,' enabling the learner to take the risk and overcome FL difficulties. Still, in her study "On the Misreading of Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986)," Horwitz questions the existence of this

type of language anxiety and strongly advocates that under no circumstances should a foreign language teacher exacerbate negative emotions in the foreign language classroom (40). What the teachers should do, instead, is to increase their learners' motivation and encourage the presence of positive emotions in the classroom. This could be done by offering support and contrastive feedback, by praising learners, and by focusing on their strengths rather than pinpointing their mistakes, thereby creating a positive and emotionally safe atmosphere in the foreign language classroom. These points reflect current trends in the field of SLA drawing on positive psychology developments.

To conclude, the shift of focus in the field of SLA from dealing primarily with negative emotions to positive psychology, understood as the scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals to thrive, is definitely a promising research avenue. The departure from the prime objectives of psychology aimed at decreasing fear, combating boredom, controlling anger and reducing anxiety is undeniably needed and long-awaited, yet it might not be enough. Despite the fact that the experience of enjoyment might be described as the emotional key that both children and adults may use to unlock their full foreign language learning potential, it might not be enough to ensure the understanding of the processes that take place in the language classroom and in the learners themselves. While the deleterious effects of foreign language classroom anxiety on the learners' progress, motivation, and performance in a FL seems to be wellestablished (Horwitz et al. 125-132; Young 439-445; Pekrun et al., "Achievement Goals and Achievement" 115-135; Piechurska-Kuciel, "Gender-Dependent" 227-248; MacIntyre and Gardner 251; MacIntyre 11; De Smet et al. 47), only a few researches thus far have compared its effect with that of foreign language enjoyment (Dewaele and MacIntyre, "The Two Faces"; Dewaele et al., "Do Girls Have All the Fun?"; Dewaele and Alfawzan 21; Dewaele et al., "Foreign Language Enjoyment and Anxiety" 676).

Thus, there is a call for a dynamic approach in studying emotions in SLA, that is, foreign language anxiety should be

studied in connection with positive emotional language experiences, such as foreign language enjoyment. It needs to be done in order to understand the fundamental nature of both positive and negative emotions and to investigate whether and to what extent these two emotions mutually shape one another. Only such an approach will allow us to investigate the long and demanding process of second language acquisition from a new perspective, and, eventually, it will help us to better understand why some students are successful and derive joy from foreign language learning, while for others this process is only associated with a tedious and nerve-racking experience.

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