

The Impact of Emotional Factors on L2 Learners' Enjoyment and Anxiety in Foreign Languages

Qing Su^{1,a,*}

¹*School of Humanities and Law, Zhejiang A&F University, Hangzhou, 311300, China*
a. su.q7770517@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: In light of the expansion of globalization and the intensification of cross-cultural communication, there is an increasing necessity to learn a second language (L2). However, many L2 learners face emotional challenges throughout the learning process, which affect their learning experience and outcomes. This paper explores the emotional experiences of Chinese learners of English as a L2 and their impact on learning outcomes. Theoretical frameworks from positive psychology and educational psychology are then employed to investigate the roles of foreign language enjoyment and foreign language anxiety, as well as the moderating effects of classroom environment and social support. The results show that foreign language enjoyment has a positive effect on learning outcomes, whereas foreign language anxiety has a detrimental effect. In the case of semantic-prefix incongruence, high-level learners exhibited stronger interference effects, which indicates the complexity of affective information processing. Therefore, the paper not only deepens the comprehension of emotional factors in foreign language learning, but also provides valuable insights into foreign language teaching practices, which indicates that teachers should prioritize students' affective experiences, optimize classroom environments, and offer positive social support to promote their affective engagement and learning outcomes. Future research should further explore the differences in students' affective experiences in different cultural contexts to achieve more comprehensive and personalized foreign language teaching goals.

Keywords: Emotional Factors, Second Language Acquisition, Foreign Language Enjoyment and Anxiety, Positive Psychology, Educational Psychology.

1. Introduction

Traditional research on second language acquisition has mainly used cognitive studies, neglecting the important role of non-cognitive factors such as emotion, but learners' emotional experience and their subjective state should be the focus of observation. Prior to 2012, Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis was predominantly used in this field. After 2012, positive psychology was introduced into second language acquisition research, driving the emotional turn in this field, with a wide range of emotions such as anxiety, pleasantness, and boredom receiving extensive attention. Related empirical studies flourished, and the status of emotion-cognition balance was gradually recognized [1]. In China, foreign languages are compulsory from compulsory education to higher education. Learners' emotional states during second language acquisition are closely linked to their learning efficacy. Emotions directly impact learning outcomes, influencing attitudes towards the target

language. This is particularly evident in oral practice activities, which are crucial for English acquisition. As a result, this paper examines the factors affecting Chinese English learners' foreign language enjoyment and various emotions in the learning process within the framework of positive psychology, which aims to enhance the comprehension of foreign language education researchers and educators regarding foreign language learning enjoyment and learning engagement, and to enhance learners' foreign language learning outcomes through interventions on emotions and learning engagement [2].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Developmental Stages

Research on emotions in L2 learning can be roughly divided into three phases. The initial phase of research began in about 1985 and was heavily influenced by the Affective Filter Hypothesis (AFH), with a main focus on foreign language anxiety [3]. The hypothesis that negative emotional factors, such as anxiety and lack of confidence, had a detrimental effect on L2 acquisition breaks away from the traditional purely cognitive orientation but does not address positive emotions or elaborate on the mechanisms by which emotions are affected. Horwitz proposed the concept of foreign language anxiety (FLA) and developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), opening up the study of anxiety-centered emotions in second language learning [4]. The second phase began in 2012, when MacIntyre and Gregersen were influenced by positive psychology, thus indicating a shift in research on emotions in L2 learning towards positive emotions. As the frequency, variety, and importance of emotions are increasingly recognized, research has shifted its focus from anxiety to positive emotions, such as enjoyment [5]. Around 2018, the study entered the third phase, the final stage of multidisciplinary integration. And educational psychology theories, such as the control value theory, were incrementally incorporated into the field of L2 learning [6], enriching the study of emotional processes. Subsequently, the scope of research has been greatly expanded, and the range and diversity of research methods have been enhanced [7].

2.2. Classroom Environment

The physical, psychological and social environments that are part of the educational activities inside and outside the classroom play an important role in determining how learners feel about learning a foreign language. This is influenced by a variety of factors, including the learner-teacher relationship, the general classroom climate and other factors. The classroom environment is categorized into three main dimensions, namely teacher support, learner cohesion and task orientation [8]. Teacher support refers to the teacher's helpfulness, friendliness, and trust in learners; learner cohesion refers to the degree of mutual understanding, help, and support among learners; and task orientation refers to the learners' concern for completing the learning task, their perceived importance of the task's subject matter, and their perceived usefulness of the task [9]. Positive classroom environments have been demonstrated to enhance learners' positive emotions and motivation, which in turn has a beneficial impact on academic achievement [10]. However, the results of empirical studies on the relationship between classroom environment and L2 learning outcomes are inconsistent. Some studies show that a positive classroom environment has a significant direct predictive effect on L2 learning outcomes [11]. In general, a positive classroom environment is conducive to the enhancement of learners' L2 learning outcomes.

2.3. Second Language Learning Emotions

Research on enjoyment has increased in tandem with the growth of positive psychology [5]. Enjoyment is a positive, high-arousal process emotion that enhances cognitive and action resources, which in turn improves academic achievement [12]. However, anxiety is thought to be a process emotion that hinders learning a foreign language [13]. The focus of emotion research has shifted in recent years from the two primary emotions of enjoyment and worry to boredom, an emotion that negatively affects learners' motivation, cognitive resources, and engagement in learning [14]. It typically shows itself as a learner's incapacity to appropriately assess the importance of a task or as a loss of control, which causes distraction and mood swings and impairs academic performance.

3. Theoretical Foundations

Emotions are crucial for personal growth and learning. Positive emotions broaden attention and aid resource accumulation, while negative emotions restrict behavior and resource acquisition. Well-being theory emphasizes happiness through positive emotions, engagement, relationships, and fulfillment. And control-value theory examines emotions' influence on learning goals, promoting diverse emotional research across disciplines.

3.1. Positive Psychology

3.1.1. Broaden-and-Build Theory

Fredrickson introduced the broaden-and-build theory, which has three main tenets [15]. Individuals experience a range of emotions, with positive and negative emotions coexisting and balancing each other. Positive emotions can broaden attention and thinking. When accumulated, these effects promote physical, psychological, and social resources beneficial for personal development, leading to more positive emotions. Conversely, negative emotions narrow attention and limit behavior, preventing the building of supportive resources and increasing unpleasant experiences. Positive emotions can mitigate the effects of negative emotions and help build resilience and well-being. MacIntyre introduced this theory into L2 research, highlighting a universal emotional schema for L2 learners where positive and negative emotions coexist. They noted that positive emotions increase motivation to learn a second language and facilitate language acquisition. Building on this, Dewaele and MacIntyre proposed the concept of "foreign language enjoyment," suggesting that happiness helps individuals overcome obstacles and progress in language learning. Enjoyment fosters curiosity, creativity, and a love for learning, broadening the behavioral repertoire of language learners. Through play and exploration, social interactions and linguistic abilities are also developed on an individual basis. Furthermore, Dewaele and MacIntyre's creation of the Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (FLES) opened a new avenue in the research on positive emotions [5].

3.1.2. Well-Being Theory

Seligman's well-being theory posits that happiness is what one should strive for above all else, and the PERMA model is one way to achieve this goal [16], where P stands for positive emotions, E for engagement in activities that highlight one's strengths, R for good social relationships established, M for meaning sought beyond oneself, and A for achievements in a particular area. Although rarely used as a tool in the study of learner emotions, the theory breaks with the tradition of linguistic goal-oriented research on L2 acquisition by highlighting the non-linguistic goal of L2e teaching, i.e., learners' well-being is as important as their L2 proficiency or achievement. Therefore, there is a need

to specialize in psychological factors related to an individual's mental health and well-being, such as emotions, in order to broaden the scope of research on L2 acquisition.

3.2. Educational Psychology

Control-value theory, proposed by educational psychologist Pekrun, is another theoretical impetus of the surge in research on emotions in L2 learning [17]. Firstly, he posited a three-dimensional structure of emotion, indicating that emotions should be understood holistically in terms of three dimensions: valence (positive and negative), activation (low activation vs. high activation), and goal orientation (process-oriented and outcome-oriented). This provides a basis for defining the concept of emotions. Secondly, he addressed domain specificity, noting that emotional experiences and interaction networks vary among disciplines because each has different goals and learners have diverse self-concepts. Therefore, emotional research should be tailored to each profession. Thirdly, he discussed the network of affective relationships, which includes the dynamic, bidirectional, direct, and indirect connections between emotions and their distal antecedents (internal and external factors), proximal antecedents (control and value appraisals), and consequences (cognition, motivation, engagement, self-regulation, and learning strategies).

3.3. Semantic-Rhythmic Stroop Effect

Emotional vocabulary refers to a collection of words associated with specific emotional tendencies, such as "appreciation" and "disgust," which involve integrating multiple sensory inputs including linguistic and paralinguistic information. Linguistic information primarily concerns semantic valence, the literal meaning of words serving as the main vehicle for emotional expression. For instance, "appreciation" conveys admiration and approval. Paralinguistic information includes emotional prosody, facial expressions, and body language, enhancing emotional expression through physical characteristics. Emotional prosody encompasses a range of vocal characteristics, including increased volume, shortened duration, and higher pitch, which are utilized to convey emotional nuances. Inconsistencies between verbal and paralinguistic cues can impede accurate emotion comprehension, resulting in less accurate behavioral responses and longer reaction times. This phenomenon is referred to as the "Semantic-Rhythmic Stroop Effect" [18], whereby the automatic activation of semantics impedes the processing of prosody.

4. Embodied Emotion in Second Language Learning

In recent years, there has been increasing focus on the role of emotions in foreign language learning, with Pekrun's theory emphasizing their impact on motivation, cognitive strategies, and outcomes.

4.1. Foreign Language Enjoyment

Foreign language enjoyment refers to the positive emotions and psychological states learners experience during foreign language learning, encompassing an interest in and love for the language, as well as the pleasure and satisfaction derived from the learning process. In recent years, this concept has become a significant area of L2 learning research. Studies by Dewaele and MacIntyre revealed that enjoyment in learning a foreign language can enhance learners' intrinsic motivation, facilitate more efficient learning processes, and ultimately improve language proficiency. The factors affecting foreign language enjoyment include teachers' teaching methods, attitudes, and emotional support, which greatly influence learners' interest in foreign language learning. Encouraging feedback and interactive teaching can increase learners' enthusiasm. Additionally, a favorable learning environment, such as well-equipped language labs and multimedia resources, can boost interest and

participation in learning. Personal factors, including learners' interest, motivation, and confidence, also play a crucial role; learners with high self-efficacy typically find more enjoyment in learning. In educational practice, enhancing learners' enjoyment of foreign language learning can be achieved through diversified teaching methods, positive emotional support, favorable learning environments, and encouraging participation in language practice activities like language clubs and international exchanges.

4.2. Foreign Language Anxiety

Foreign language anxiety refers to learners' feelings of tension, fear, and unease during the learning and use of a foreign language. Horwitz et al. first introduced foreign language classroom anxiety as a specific emotional state that hinders language learning [4]. Related studies show that foreign language anxiety significantly harms learners' language performance. High anxiety can make learners reluctant to speak in class, afraid of making mistakes, and ultimately hinder their language development in several ways. The classroom setting, high standards, harsh environments, and evaluative techniques set by teachers can increase students' anxiety. Individual differences such as introversion, low self-esteem, and lack of interest in learning a foreign language can also heighten anxiety in some learners. Additionally, learners with lower language proficiency often experience higher anxiety due to fear of failure and judgment. Teachers can support anxious students by creating a calm environment, encouraging participation, tolerating mistakes, and minimizing negative feedback. Tailoring instruction to each student's interests and language level can help build confidence. Providing psychological support to students can also aid in overcoming anxiety [19].

5. Applications in the Teaching of Spoken English

In foreign language teaching, it is vital to emphasize learners' emotional experience, which can be achieved by integrating emotional education into language teaching. Methods such as role-playing and scenario-based teaching can stimulate learners' emotional experiences. It is also important to provide emotional support by building trusting relationships between teachers and learners and giving emotional encouragement. In addition, enriching teaching and learning through diverse materials and formats can also enhance learners' emotional resonance. Through in-depth research and understanding of these factors, educators can optimize foreign language teaching and enhance learners' experience and effectiveness. Taking speaking in foreign language learning as an example, emotions can have different effects on sentence processing [20]. In L2 emotion lexical processing, low-level learners tended to rely on onomatopoeic channels, whereas high-level learners did not show a clear channel preference. In addition, low-level learners showed a preference for positive semantics and sad emotions, whereas high-level learners did not show a specific preference for semantic valence or emotional prosody. The strength of the semantic-antecedent Stroop effect was positively correlated with L2 proficiency. The higher the proficiency level, the more pronounced the Stroop effect. Under conditions of semantic-precession incongruence, high-level learners are more disturbed when judging emotional information in speech. It can be posited that elevated levels do not inherently enhance the capacity to process conflicting information; rather, they may potentially precipitate an inverse outcome. High-level learners who demonstrate considerable response delays in the presence of semantic-prosodic incongruence may have undergone the following cognitive processes: after initially completing affective lexical processing by directly acquiring concepts from the L2, they were perplexed and skeptical about the conflict between semantic valence and affective prosody. In the absence of complete assurance in their L2 proficiency, they suppressed the semantic affective data they had acquired from the L2. This

illustrates the detrimental effect of negative emotions on the construction of spoken sentences, thereby indicating that emotions influence sentence processing.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, the emotional experiences of Chinese English learners in L2 learning and their impact on learning outcomes are explored under the positive psychology and educational psychology. The results show that positive emotions significantly enhance learning motivation and outcomes, while negative emotions may have adverse effects. Classroom environment and social support also play key roles in regulating learners' emotional experiences and learning outcomes. In addition, learners at different levels of emotional lexical processing experience different semantic-prosodic Stroop effects, and learners at higher levels experience more pronounced disturbances in the presence of semantic-prosodic inconsistencies. In conclusion, this study advances the understanding of affective factors in language learning and offers insights for foreign language teaching practices. Teachers are encouraged to prioritize learners' emotional experiences, optimize classroom environments, and provide positive social support to enhance emotional engagement and improve learning outcomes. Tailored teaching strategies should be implemented to accommodate learners at different proficiency levels. Future research should explore cross-cultural differences in affective experiences and effectively integrate affective education into educational practices to achieve comprehensive and personalized foreign language teaching goals.

References

- [1] Li, C., et al. (2024) *Emotions in Second Language Learning: Retrospect and Prospect*. *Modern Foreign Language*, 47(01): 63-75.
- [2] Yu, H., et al. (2024) *A Longitudinal Study on the Development of Foreign Language Enjoyment and Engagement*. *Modern Foreign Language*, 47(01): 101-113.
- [3] Hermas, A. (2010) *Language Acquisition as Computational Resetting: Verb Movement in L3 Initial State*. *Int. J. Multiling.*, 2010, 7(4): 343-362.
- [4] Horwitz, E.K., et al. (1986) *Foreign language classroom anxiety*. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2):125-132.
- [5] Dewaele, J.M., et al. (2014) *The two faces of Janus? Anxiety and enjoyment in the foreign language classroom*. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 4(2): 237-274.
- [6] Li, C. (2018) *A Positive Psychology Perspective on Chinese Students' Emotional Intelligence, Classroom Emotions, and EFL Learning Achievement*. Xiamen University, China.
- [7] Li, C., et al. (2023) *Foreign language learning boredom: Conceptualization and measurement*. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 14(2): 223-249.
- [8] Clément, R., et al. (1994) *Motivation, Self-confidence, and Group Cohesion in the Foreign Language Classroom*. *Language Learning*, 44(3):417-448.
- [9] Peng, J., et al. (2010) *Willingness to communicate in English: A model in Chinese EFL classroom context*. *Language Learning*, 60(4): 834-876.
- [10] Reyes, M.R., et al. (2012) *Classroom emotional climate, student engagement, and academic achievement*. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 104(3): 700-712.
- [11] Wei, H., et al. (2019) *Understanding the Relationship Between Grit and Foreign Language Performance Among Middle School Students: The Roles of Foreign Language Enjoyment and Classroom Environment*. *Front. Psychol.*, 10: 1-8.
- [12] Wang, X., et al. (2022) *The Predictive Effects of Foreign Language Enjoyment, Anxiety, and Boredom on Learning Outcomes in Online English Classrooms*. *Front. Psychol.*, 13: 1050226.
- [13] Teimouri, Y., et al. (2019) *Second language anxiety and achievement: A metaanalysis*. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 41: 363-387.
- [14] Macklem, G. (2015) *Boredom in the Classroom: Addressing Student Motivation, Self-Regulation, and Engagement in Learning*. Manchester: Springer.
- [15] Fredrickson, B. (2001) *The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotion*. *American Psychologist*, 56(3): 218-226.
- [16] Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. Free Press.

- [17] Pekrun, R. (2006). *The control-value theory of achievement emotions: Assumptions, corollaries, and implications for educational research and practice*. *Educational Psychology Review*, 18(4): 315-341.
- [18] Lin, Y., et al. (2020). *Prosody dominates over semantics in emotion word processing: Evidence from cross-channel and cross-modal Stroop effects*. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 63(3): 896-912.
- [19] Luan, L., et al. (2023). *Exploring the Role of Online EFL Learners' Perceived Social Support in Their Learning Engagement: A Structural Equation Model*. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 31(3): 1703-1714.
- [20] Zhao, C., et al. (2024). *Incrementality in English as second language oral sentence production*. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 56(03): 405-416+480.