

## University of Groningen

### Foreign language classroom anxiety

Jin, Yinxing

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## **Chapter 6**

### **General Discussion and Conclusion**

This PhD project has focused on three crucial issues in the field of foreign language (FL) anxiety, i.e., the relationship between FL anxiety and FL learning, the sources of FL anxiety, and the stability of FL anxiety. One hundred and forty-six (146) Chinese undergraduates of Japanese in the first year of their studies, who were simultaneously learning English, were tested twice over a 2-month interval. The following questionnaires were completed by these students at both time points: the Demographic Information Questionnaire (excluded at Time 2), the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986), the Trait Anxiety Scale (Spielberger, 1983), the Teacher Support/Affiliation/Involvement Scale (Trickett & Moos, 2002), the Competitiveness Index (Houston, Harris, McIntire, & Francis, 2002), the Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), and the English/Japanese Proficiency Scale. All measures were piloted before administering them to the 146 students of the main study. The effectiveness of the English/Japanese Proficiency Scale in assessing language proficiency was validated by correlating students' self-reports with teachers' ratings. In what follows, the findings as presented in Chapters 2 through 5 are discussed, followed by the contributions of this project to the field of FL anxiety, the limitations of the project as well as directions for future research.

### **6.1. General Discussion of the Findings**

This project comprised four studies, with the first (see Chapter 2) investigating and comparing the effects of FL proficiency, the family's social status, and a learner's competitiveness and self-esteem on FL anxiety. The results showed that FL proficiency was the best predictor of FL anxiety, followed by self-esteem, then competitiveness (all were negative predictors). Social status was not found to relate to FL anxiety, either directly or indirectly.

Chapter 3 reports a study investigating the relationship between FL anxiety and FL proficiency, as well as the diachronic stability of anxiety in English and Japanese and the

synchronic stability of anxiety across the two languages. Anxiety changes were found to be negatively associated with the development of overall proficiency and the proficiency of subskills. Anxiety in Japanese significantly decreased over time, but no significant change was found for English. Furthermore, no significant difference was found between anxiety in Japanese and English.

The study reported in Chapter 4 compared the impact of two classroom environment dimensions (teacher support and student involvement) and two personality traits (trait anxiety and competitiveness) on FL anxiety. It also aimed to tentatively answer the question whether FL anxiety is more sensitive to classroom environment dimensions or learners' personality traits. The results showed that all the classroom and personality dimensions significantly predicted FL anxiety, with teacher support being a better predictor than student involvement and trait anxiety being a better predictor than competitiveness. In addition, the personality traits of trait anxiety and competitiveness predicted FL anxiety better than the two classroom dimensions of teacher support and student involvement, suggesting that FL anxiety is influenced more by personality traits than classroom variables.

The last study (reported in Chapter 5) investigated the effects of teacher support and student cohesiveness on FL learning outcomes and compared their effect with that of FL anxiety. It was revealed that student cohesiveness was a positive predictor of FL proficiency. Teacher support did not show a direct relationship with FL proficiency, but was positively related to student cohesiveness and negatively to FL anxiety. FL anxiety as a negative variable for FL proficiency showed a better predictive power than student cohesiveness and teacher support.

The findings further attest the complexity of factors determining the degree of FL anxiety, and the improvements and setbacks of FL learning. In addition to FL proficiency, FL anxiety is subject to the impact of psychological and situational variables. FL proficiency

levels are determined by learners' affective characteristics and classroom climate dimensions. It should be noted that these FL anxiety/proficiency-related variables play different roles: some variables negatively predict FL anxiety/proficiency, but some others exert a positive predictive power (e.g., self-esteem was a negative predictor of FL anxiety and student cohesiveness positively predicted FL proficiency). What is more, the internal and external factors weigh differently in FL anxiety and FL learning, with some factors playing a more prominent role. For example, the two psychological variables of trait anxiety and competitiveness predicted FL anxiety better than the two situational variables of teacher support and student involvement. In other words, different variables are linked in a hierarchical structure regarding the influences they exert over FL anxiety and FL learning.

In addition, the findings also highlight a potential interaction among FL anxiety/proficiency-related variables, as suggested by the correlation analysis results. That is, changes in one variable may lead to changes in others. It also means that one factor can directly affect anxiety levels and FL learning (e.g., a direct effect of trait anxiety on FL anxiety), or indirectly through other factors (e.g., an indirect effect of teacher support on FL proficiency via student cohesiveness). Due to complex interactions between anxiety/proficiency-related variables, it is impossible to sufficiently explain the changes of FL anxiety and proficiency only in terms of a few (even prominent) variables.

Furthermore, this project also investigated the stability of anxiety in English/Japanese over time and the difference between anxiety in the two FLs. Anxiety in English did not show a significant change, suggestive of the stabilization of anxiety in a FL which has been learnt for quite a long time. Thus, in an attempt to reduce anxieties in FLs to which learners have a long learning trajectory, teachers need to log considerable energy and time. Besides, no significant difference was found between anxiety English and Japanese, indicating that teachers do not attend less to learners' anxiety levels in FLs, which are relatively familiar to

learners and furthermore underscoring the difficult task that is FL learning.

## **6.2. Contributions and Limitations**

This project has touched upon questions seldom addressed in previous studies of FL anxiety. Previous studies in this area have typically adopted a cross-sectional design, not tapping the relationship between FL anxiety and FL learning over time. In Study 1 as reported in Chapter 3, the differences between Time 1 and Time 2 tests were calculated for both FL anxiety and FL proficiency, followed by a correlational analysis of both anxiety and proficiency. Correlation is not causation, and a negative relation between the changes of anxiety and proficiency sheds light on the potential reciprocal effects between FL anxiety and FL proficiency, but does not indicate a direct causal relationship. Although correlational analysis is not new at all in FL anxiety studies, the perspective to look at the relationship between FL anxiety and FL proficiency and the way to collect data for the analysis (Time 2 scores subtracting Time 1 ones) is innovative and may be taken up by future studies.

In addition, this project has directly investigated the effects of two essential classroom variables (teacher support and student cohesiveness) on FL learning and compared their effect with that of FL anxiety (c.f. Chapter 5). The findings endorsed the importance of a positive classroom environment for learners' academic outcomes and furthermore the necessity to control learners' anxiety levels, as FL anxiety predicted FL proficiency better than the two social support variables in the classroom.

Researchers have long been aiming to uncover the sources of FL anxiety. Despite the large number of studies that now exist, societal, psychological, and situational variables remain that have been only sparingly related to FL anxiety. The two studies described in Chapters 2 and 4 serve to enrich the literature pertaining to the sources of FL anxiety by relating some of the less addressed societal, psychological, and situational variables to FL

anxiety, for instance a family's social status and competitiveness as a personality trait. In addition, as noted in Chapter 2, the number of anxiety-provoking factors is vast. Therefore, teachers are faced with great difficulties in handling all these factors. It is better to focus on those which are strongly associated with FL anxiety. These prominent ones can be identified through studies comparing the weighted contributions of different factors. Therefore, the comparisons as carried out in the Chapters 2 and 4 studies are pedagogically meaningful and furthermore extend our understanding of the relatively important factors associated with FL anxiety.

The contributions of this project to the stability studies of FL anxiety are both conceptual and empirical. In the study reported in Chapter 3, two concepts, i.e., diachronic stability and synchronic stability, were proposed and defined. The rationale for the definitions was given as well. Empirically, the study compared the diachronic change of anxiety levels in English and Japanese in 146 Chinese university students. Though researchers have targeted Chinese populations in the past, they have never compared anxiety in multiple FLs as a function of time. Regarding the synchronic stability of FL anxiety, a majority of available studies have situated the focus on European learning contexts, and have left FL learning on other continents largely unexplored, for instance in Asia, which necessitates a study as the one in Chapter 3. The findings enhance our understanding of FL anxiety as a construct: FL anxiety can be stabilized over time and be independent of target languages.

This project has methodologically contributed to FL anxiety studies. It has collected data from multiple FL learning contexts at two different time points. By using multiple data points, a biased conclusion regarding the research questions can be avoided as much as possible. For instance, in the study as reported in Chapter 2, competitiveness did not predict anxiety in English at Time 2. Interpreting this finding in isolation, it would have been concluded that competitiveness does not directly contribute to learners' anxiety levels.

However, this personality variable did predict anxiety in English at Time 1 and anxiety in Japanese at both times, making it feasible to claim that competitiveness does play a role in shaping FL anxiety. Hence, this project encourages researchers to base their conclusions on multiple data points in a single study.

In addition to the contributions of the project, its limitations should also be mentioned. First, the participants' English and Japanese proficiency was elicited using two self-report instruments, not through direct measurements. MacIntyre, Noels, and Clément (1997) mention that self-ratings of FL proficiency are influenced by FL anxiety, though they are still positively related to actual testing scores. Second, the participants were at different stages in their English and Japanese learning (beginning and intermediate level for Japanese and English, respectively). Marcos-Llinás and Garau's (2009) study showed that anxiety level could be related to stage of learning. Thus, a significant difference might be found between anxiety levels in English and Japanese, with participants at the same level of their learning process for the two FLs. Third, though it adds a time dimension in the study design, an interval of two months between two tests is a relatively short time span. Some findings may be attributed to this short time span, for example the non-significant result for the between-tests comparison of anxiety in English, more elaborately discussed in Chapter 3. Fourth, the findings are based on 146 university-level students. Despite constituting a large sample, it is still insufficient for using the statistical technique of factor analysis, because "[as] a general rule of thumb, it is comforting to have at least 300 cases for factor analysis" (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996, p. 640). Thus, the underlying structure of the employed measures was not explored, which made it impossible to build more sophisticated models accounting for the interactions among inter-and intra-construct components.

### 6.3. Recommendations for Further Studies

While in earlier decades the focus of research was on the language that had to be learned, in recent years, the focus has shifted to the learner and to learner-related factors that may have an impact on language learning and teaching. In addition to the traditional trio attitude/motivation/aptitude, other personality-related factors have been added. Personality traits have been added to the list that includes factors like impulsiveness and control. One of the most significant additions is the role of FL anxiety. Stimulated by the seminal work by Elaine Horwitz and colleagues like Peter MacIntyre, Jean-Marc Dewaele, and Tammy Gregersen, this has developed into a whole research field with many empirical studies that have enriched the field. The present dissertation has attempted to add to this tradition building on the work by these pioneers. Still, FL anxiety as a research territory has much work to do in the future.

Though FL anxiety has been established as a negative learner variable, the mechanisms through which it affects FL learning have so far not been fully understood, and warrant further explorations. To this end, studies exploring the differences between anxious and non-anxious students in subtle FL learning aspects are very much needed. For instance, specifically in relation to L2 writing, researchers may find out whether highly anxious students tend to compose shorter passages (sentences), use less complex sentence structure, and make more errors than the more relaxed ones in writing tasks. It is also interesting to compare the reading process between high and low-reading anxiety students, in order to provide more insight into how reading anxiety interferes with reading performance.

In addition, studies should look more closely at the roles that the family's social status and competitiveness play in FL anxiety, as the current project rendered contradictory results regarding the relationships between these two variables and FL anxiety with those found in previous studies: competitiveness negatively predicted FL anxiety in this study, in contrast to

Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, and Daley's (1999) non-significant finding between competitiveness and FL anxiety and the establishment of competitiveness as a positive predictor of FL anxiety in Tóth (2007); no relationship between social status and FL anxiety was found in this study, whereas Dewaele (2002) attested that the family's social status negatively predicted communicative anxiety in French. It further needs to be pointed out that research should extend to societal, psychological, and situational variables other than those included in this project, and comparative studies should continue in order to reveal which factors tie in more closely with FL anxiety. Thus, the nature of FL anxiety can be better understood.

Moreover, the subjects were tested twice over a 2-month interval in this project. In the future, a study with a longer interim period between tests should be designed. More than two testing sessions can be administered, if possible, with a view to obtaining more insight regarding the variability in anxiety over time and across FLs. It is worth noting that an inspection of anxiety with many data points in time may be problematic, because repeating test for anxiety may be discouraging and bothersome for learners, and in fact may lead to enhanced anxiety. Therefore, researchers should carefully design procedures and strategies to be used to collect data.

Finally, it is necessary to continue developing effective FL anxiety interventions (e.g., Kurt & Atay, 2007). Lessening anxiety can lead to happier learners and better learning outcomes. Researchers may also consider looking at the other side of FL learning, i.e., the enjoyment of learners, in line with the "positive psychology" trend in SLA. The related research is in its infancy, because "SLA researchers have mostly focused on the negative face of emotion, with anxiety being the most studied topic" (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014, p. 238). Potential research topics include a further investigation of the relationship between FL anxiety and FL enjoyment, and the factors underlying this positive affect.

