

University of Groningen

## Foreign language classroom anxiety

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**Summary in English**

Language learning is a process that requires learners' cognitive and behavioral involvement. It is also a process that sees mixed pleasant and unpleasant affective reactions. One of the negative affects is anxiety, which may be especially prevalent in the context of foreign language (FL) learning (Dewaele, 2007b). Here learners may be faced with great difficulties as they attempt to master twisty pronunciation, lengthy vocabularies, and complex grammatical rules. Since affects are an indispensable part of FL learning, research into their effects on FL learning is necessary. The main aim underlying this PhD project was to further enhance our understanding of the impact of affects on FL learning through the lens of FL anxiety. It also touched upon issues including the underlying factors of FL anxiety and the stability of FL anxiety over time and across target languages.

This was done within the context of the first-year university students' FL learning in China. Chinese students mainly acquire their FL skills through formal instructions at schools and have rare chances to use a FL outside the classroom. To be specific, data were collected from 146 Japanese majors at three different universities, who were learning English. These students had learned English for quite a long time but had just started learning Japanese. They were tested in two FL learning contexts (English and Japanese) and at two time points over a 2-month interval by repeatedly filling out a battery of questionnaires pertinent to personality, English/Japanese proficiency, classroom environment in English/Japanese classes, etc. (One of the measures, the Demographic Information Index in which the Social Status Scale is included, was excluded at Time 2). Multiple data points are conducive to drawing more accurate conclusions regarding research questions, reducing the influences of change results.

The findings showed that FL proficiency levels, two personality traits of self-esteem and competitiveness, and two classroom environment factors of teacher support and student involvement negatively predicted FL anxiety levels, whereas trait anxiety was a positive predictor. The family's social status was not related to FL anxiety levels. In addition, data

analyses also revealed the interrelatedness of FL anxiety-related variables (e.g., FL proficiency, self-esteem, and competitiveness), indicative of the interactions among FL anxiety stimuli. In short, many factors account for learners' anxiety levels that are also linked to the inter-variables interplay. Owing to the complexity of anxiety triggers, FL anxiety "cannot simply be flushed out of the FL learner" (Dewaele & Al-Saraj, 2015, p. 206), though it can be alleviated to an extent (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Similarly, many factors underlie the development of FL proficiency. Nevertheless, the influencing power of these FL proficiency-related factors is different, with some factors being particularly important. For one, FL anxiety showed a larger influence on FL proficiency development than teacher support. Such a hierarchical pattern also holds true for FL anxiety, as indicated by the finding that two personality traits of trait anxiety and competitiveness predicted FL anxiety better than two classroom environment dimensions of teacher support and student involvement.

As far as the stability of anxiety over time is concerned, results showed that the participants' anxiety in English did not show a significant change across the two tests, whereas anxiety in Japanese significantly decreased for the full sample and individual universities, suggestive of the stabilization of anxiety in a FL to which learners have a long learning trajectory. At both time points, no significant differences were found between anxiety in English and Japanese, indicating that FL anxiety can be independent of target languages.

To sum up, therefore, the findings further endorse the proposition that FL anxiety interferes with FL learning. In addition, FL anxiety is not only attributed to low FL proficiency. Other FL anxiety-provoking factors include learners' personality traits, classroom climate, etc. Hence, a complexity perspective should be taken when attempting to understand the sources of FL anxiety, as Gaddis (2002) has argued that, "[We'd] think it irresponsible to seek to isolate -or 'tease out'- single causes for complex events" (p. 65).

Furthermore, this project also attested the stabilization of FL anxiety over time and across target languages. That is, learners may be equally anxious no matter which FLs they are learning and their anxiety levels may constantly remain high no matter how friendly learning environment is.