

## KEY CONCEPTS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS/CONCEPTOS CLAVE DE LA LINGÜÍSTICA APLICADA

### THREE ENTANGLED FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNER EMOTIONS: ANXIETY, ENJOYMENT AND BOREDOM

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#### 1. The difficult birth of emotion research in applied linguistics

It would have been impossible to foresee, back in the early 2000s, that Dewaele's (2005) call for more attention in foreign language learner emotions would be answered so massively. What started as a red distress signal in the night sky has since evolved into rich, diverse and colorful fireworks expanding in different epistemological and methodological directions. It would be presumptuous of course to claim that Dewaele (2005), or a further call in Dewaele (2011), were the triggers, as interest in emotions was spreading across different fields. Both papers pointed out that the dominance of cognitive approaches in applied linguistics, with a small space for socio-psychological approaches, had led to an emotional blind spot both in foreign language curricula and in the research agenda. John Schumann (personal

communication 2020) argues that the preference for cognitive approaches stemmed from SLA researchers wanting to be seen as serious scientists. Counting morphemes, calculating learners' accuracy rates and vocabulary richness, measuring learners' short-term memory and aptitude constituted respectable, safely "serious", replicable, etc research. Emotions, in contrast, belonged to the realm of the irrational in the eyes of many applied linguists (Dewaele 2019, 2021; Prior 2019). This is rather surprising considering that psychologists have been analysing emotions in rigorous ways for many decades. Moreover, several major psychology journals focus specifically on emotions. *Cognition and Emotion*, for example, was created in 1987, and became one the leading journals in the field. The increased popularity of qualitative research around the new millennium opened the door to a new type of emic research, with an explicit wish to hear participants' voices. The uniqueness of the experience of individual learners as well as inquiries into their emotions, investment, duty, love and desire became legitimate objects of research (Kramsch 2003; Norton 2001; Pavlenko 2007).

## **2. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety**

It would be wrong to claim that nobody has shown interest in learner emotions before the turn of the millennium. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) heralded a new era in research on Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) by providing the field with a psychometrically solid scale to measure FLCA, which allowed replications, comparisons and adaptations with different learner populations (MacIntyre, 2017). FLCA was defined as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128). Horwitz (2017) explained that FLCA shares characteristics of both traits and states: a

learner is not born with FLCA but it can slowly grow among those who experience anxiety in the FL class, coalescing into state-like FLCA that flares up when the FL has to be used. FLCA is caused by the difficulty in projecting an accurate image of oneself, which is not an issue in a first language: “presenting yourself to the world through an imperfectly controlled new language is inherently anxiety-provoking for some people” (p. 44). Anxious learners may sweat, experience accelerated heart rates, and suffer from a dry mouth when having to speak up. FLCA can be paralysing, forcing learners into ignominious silence. It can limit their focus and hinder the absorption of new linguistic input (MacIntyre & Gregersen 2012).

Anxiety was also included as an independent dimension in Gardner’s (1985) Socio-educational model. The problem was that the total focus on FLCA caused an imbalance in the field that most researchers interested in learner emotions were unaware of.

It was only when MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) introduced Positive Psychology to the field of applied linguistics that there was a collective realisation that by focusing only on the deleterious effects of FLCA on FL performance and progress, we had overlooked the potential positive effects of other emotions. Here again, some nuance is needed. Gardner (2004) had included “positive” items in his Attitude/Motivation Test Battery: “Learning English is really great”; “I look forward to going to class because my English teacher is so good”; “I really enjoy learning English”. The items were part of the dimension “Attitudes towards the learning situation”. These specific items would have fitted perfectly in an “Enjoyment” dimension that would have offered a counterweight to anxiety in the model.

A meta-analysis by Botes et al. (2020) of 67 studies (with a total of 99 effect sizes) showed a moderate negative relationship between FLCA and general FL academic achievement. A more detailed analysis revealed that FLCA is negatively linked to speaking, listening, reading, and writing achievement.

Botes, van der Westhuizen et al. (2022) used the data gathered by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) to do a proper psychometric validation of their 8-item Short-Form FLCAS. The latter had only reported Cronbach alpha values to demonstrate the internal consistency of their scale. Botes, van der Westhuizen et al. (2022) found that the S-FLCAS has a unidimensional structure with all eight items loading on a single latent variable: FLCA. The S-FLCAS showed good internal consistency as well as solid convergent and discriminate validity. The measure showed itself to be fully invariant across L1 groups, age, gender, and educational levels.

Investigations into the relationships between FLCA, FLE and FLB, and their joint effect on FL performance have revealed that very anxious students are typically also more bored. Dewaele, Botes and Greiff (2022) used structural equation modeling with data collected from an international sample of 332 FL learners and found that FLCA was the strongest negative predictor of performance. A similar pattern emerged in Dewaele, Botes and Meftah (to appear) where latent dominance analysis established that FLCA had the greatest relative importance on the FL performance of a group of 502 Moroccan EFL learners.

### **3. Foreign Language Enjoyment**

The concept of Foreign Language Enjoyment was developed and operationalised in Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014). It was a convergent

parallel mixed methods study inspired by Positive Psychology. As MacIntyre, Gregersen et al. (2019) explained later, Positive Psychology can be seen as a useful meta-theory rather than a unified theory. Crucially, it moves away from a deficit perspective: “balance between positive and negative processes is essential to move the field beyond simplistic notions of good and bad, motivated and demotivated, successful and unsuccessful learners” (p. 8). As such, Positive Psychology offers applied linguists a useful theoretical, epistemological, and methodological toolbox.

Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) created a 21-item FLE scale that covered both the personal and social aspects of learner enjoyment in the FL classroom. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2016) later defined FLE as “a complex emotion, capturing interacting dimensions of challenge and perceived ability that reflect the human drive for success in the face of difficult tasks (...) enjoyment occurs when people not only meet their needs, but exceed them to accomplish something new or even unexpected” (pp. 216-217). An online questionnaire allowed Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) to reach out to a large and diverse population ( $N = 1746$ ), though a majority were Westerners. One of the main research questions was the relationship between FLCA and FLE. A moderate negative correlation was found between both emotions, suggesting that they are not like the two faces of Janus, standing at opposite sides of a single dimension, but rather independent dimensions. It meant that learners could in fact experience both intense FLE and FLCA simultaneously, or experience neither if they felt totally disengaged from classroom activities. The moderate negative relationship between FLE and FLCA was confirmed in a recent meta-analysis of 56 studies (and 96 effect sizes) (Botes, Dewaele et al. 2022).

Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) found that high levels of FLE were positively related with degree of multilingualism, perceived FL proficiency, relative standing in the FL class, higher level of education, higher age, and (female) gender. FLCA showed a reverse pattern with each of the independent variables, except for gender. Further research into the sources of FLE and FLCA revealed that the former is mainly linked to learner-external variables such as teacher and peers (for overviews, see Dewaele, Chen et al. 2019; Dewaele 2022), while the latter is shaped mainly by learner-internal variables and, more specifically, personality traits such as general anxiety, neuroticism and perfectionism (for an overview, see Dewaele 2017).

Responding to the need for shorter, psychometrically tested instruments, Botes et al. (2021) used the database on which Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) was based to investigate the factor structure of FLE in more detail. They identified a 3-factor hierarchical model with a higher-order FLE factor. The first factor referred to FL learners' appreciation of their FL teacher, the second factor reflected their purely personal enjoyment related to being in the FL class, and the third factor reflected the good relationships with peers and was labelled social enjoyment. The new 9-item Short Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (S-FLES) was found to have excellent fit statistics for the factor structure, as well as internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

Both Dewaele, Botes and Greiff (2022), and Li and Wei (2022) reported significant negative correlations between learners' FLE and FLB. FLE had no effect on FL performance in Dewaele, Botes and Greiff (2022) but FLE had a significant positive effect on the performance of 954 Chinese EFL learners (Li & Wei 2022) and a relatively weaker positive effect on the performance of the Moroccan EFL learners in Dewaele, Botes and Meftah (to appear).

#### **4. Foreign language learning boredom**

The third learner emotion that started attracting the attention from researchers more recently is FL learning boredom (FLB), which refers to an unpleasant psychological and emotional state that combines feelings of “dissatisfaction, disappointment, annoyance, inattention, lack of motivation to pursue previously set goals and impaired vitality” (Kruk & Zawodniak 2018: 177).

Approaching FLB from a Control Value perspective developed in Educational Psychology, Li et al. (2021) defined FLB as “a negative emotion with an extremely low degree of activation/arousal that arises from ongoing activities (...) (that) are typically over-challenging or under-challenging” (p. 12). Using data from 2223 Chinese EFL learners, Li et al. (2021) developed a 7-factor Foreign language learning boredom scale with 32 items. They validated the scale using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses complemented by additional validity and reliability analyses. The first factor reflects Foreign Language Classroom Boredom and was included in several research designs.

Using a database of 2002 Chinese EFL learners, Li (2021) found that FLB is predicted by different control–value appraisals which interacted simultaneously. EFL learners who felt proficient (high control) and who valued their EFL classes (high engagement) suffered less from FLB. Analysis of the qualitative data gathered through interviews revealed a curvilinear relationship between FLB and control appraisal: “extremely high and low control were both antecedents of boredom. In other words, students got bored when they felt overwhelmingly challenged or underchallenged in English learning” (p. 329). Li (2021) exhorted teachers to design tasks that are appropriately difficult in order to boost learners’ sense of confidence, competence and

control in the FL. A positive emotional classroom atmosphere allows more FLE, less FLB and FLCA. The central role of the teacher in creating an optimal emotional atmosphere was highlighted in Dewaele and Li (2021) where teacher enthusiasm was shown to shape the learning engagement of 2002 Chinese EFL learners. Teacher enthusiasm boosted FLE, lowered FLB directly and indirectly. Both emotions mediated the effect of teacher enthusiasm on learner engagement (negative for FLB, positive for FLE).

Li and Wei (2022) reported that the negative effect of FLB on performance during the first data collection had faded by the third data collection. Dewaele, Botes and Meftah (to appear) found that FLB had a significant negative effect on performance although it was slightly weaker than FLCA.

## **5. The relationship between learner emotions and motivation**

An exciting new question in this area of research is to what extent FL learner emotions and motivation are connected. MacIntyre, Ross and Clément (2019) defend the position that both are strongly connected as emotions are at the heart of motivation and that positive emotions like FLE are intrinsically motivating because they will push learners into investing more in the FL learning. Negative emotions, on the other hand, risk weakening motivation, which could undermine the FL learning process. Dörnyei (2020) adopted a more nuanced position. While acknowledging that FL learner emotions play an important role in their learning, he rejected the idea that emotions are linked to goal-specific action, arguing instead that emotions have more diffuse “action tendencies” (p. 121) but that they are not intrinsically motivating. He put positive emotions in the backseat, encouraging the FL motivational processes that are directly steering the FL learning process.



A longitudinal study by Dewaele, Saito et al. (2022a) of 360 FL learners of English, German, French and Spanish in a Kuwaiti university found evidence for MacIntyre, Ross et al.'s (2019) position that FLE is intrinsically motivating. FLE and FLCA were found to remain stable over the course of one semester while levels of Attitudes/Motivation decreased significantly. A closer look at the four Attitudes/Motivation dimensions revealed a strong drop for the dimensions "Motivation" and "Attitudes toward the Learning Situation". Mixed effects modeling analyses revealed that FLE and FLCA had medium-strong effects on the Attitudes/Motivation dimensions. The authors argue that high FLE can act as a buoy for sagging motivation which could be caused by disappointing test results or the realization that FL learning requires unrelenting effort over a long period of time. The more trait-like FLE becomes intrinsically motivating and may stop learners from giving up. A follow-up study on the same database showed that teachers' frequency of using the FL in class, teacher predictability and teacher frequency of joking were positively linked to both FLE and Attitudes/Motivation but not to FLCA (Dewaele, Saito et al. 2022b). Infrequent teacher joking was linked to a significant gradual decrease of FLE over time.

## **6. Conclusion**

It is fair to conclude that research on FL learner emotions is following a steep upward trajectory. The metaphor of emotion research having developed like multi-coloured fireworks in the introduction might not adequately reflect the nature of this line of research. It goes well beyond flashes, bangs and puffs of smoke. A more appropriate metaphor would be that of a mossy park with entangled gnarly trees, flowerbeds, bushes, climbing frames and lakes (Dewaele, Chen et al. 2019). It would be open to researchers and FL teachers who could be encouraged to create a similar green peaceful place in the FL classroom where learners are

encouraged to experiment with the FL and take risks without fear of ridicule or disapproval. This will make FL classes more effective, exciting and enjoyable. Anxiety, enjoyment and boredom have been shown to be entangled directly and indirectly with each other and with motivation, and they are further shaped by a large number of learner-internal and contextual variables.

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