Rethinking the language learner: What can the psychology of language learning offer?

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Outline

1. Psychology of language learning
2. Emotion and anxiety
3. Emotion regulation as a key skill

7th Bremen Symposium on Language Learning and Teaching at Universities, 1 March 2019
Two language learners

Alessandra
Not motivated to learn English (compulsory subject)
Extroverted
Enjoys group work
Sociable, talkative and quite lax

Yuki
Highly motivated (study abroad opportunities)
Introverted
Anxious to succeed
Self-conscious about own pronunciation
Question

Which learner (Alessandra? Yuki?) will succeed in English language learning? Why?
Answer

• Rather difficult to predict.
• We cannot safely/confidently say that one will succeed and the other will fail.
• Language learning is not linear.
• Individual learners in all their complexity.
• Holistic view of the psychology of the language learner.
What is language learning psychology?
Language learning psychology is...

“[...] concerned with the mental experiences, processes, thoughts, feelings, motives, and behaviours of individuals involved in language learning” (Mercer et al., 2012: 2).
“Among the psychological constructs implicated in L2 learning, none has perhaps generated as much literature as motivation”

(Ushioda, 2012: 58)

...but is it just about motivation?
## Psychological constructs (Mercer et al., 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological constructs</th>
<th>I know this term</th>
<th>I have come across this term, but I am not sure what it means</th>
<th>I don’t know this term</th>
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<td>Self-concept</td>
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<td>Motivation</td>
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<td>Attributions</td>
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<td>Foreign language anxiety</td>
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<td>Emotions</td>
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<td>Learner autonomy</td>
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<td>Self-regulation</td>
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Emotion

“our minds have thoughts as well as emotions and the study of either without the other will never be fully satisfying”

(LeDoux, 1998: 39)
Emotion

“Decisions based on emotion aren’t decisions, at all. They’re instincts. Which can be of value. The rational and the irrational complement each other. Individually they’re far less powerful.”

(Raymond Tusk, S1E12)
Emotion and cognition

• The stronger the emotional connections and the more meaningful the information and linkages, the stronger the memory trace will be.

• Great anxiety for many people is the loss of memory and information!
Emotions

• Subtle
• Subjective
• Omnipresent
• Intangible
• Fragile
• Ever changing ("the motion of emotion"; Gregersen, MacIntyre, & Meza, 2014)
• Mixed

...
MEET THE LITTLE VOICES INSIDE YOUR HEAD.
Current view on emotion

Poststructuralist-discursive:

• Emotions are contextual, relational, and the effects of contact among people, ideas and objects.
• The same object/idea/situation might engender different emotions among people.
What is language anxiety?
Some facts about anxiety

• Common condition.
• General anxiety disorders estimated to affect up to 5% of the UK population.
• Slightly more women are affected than men.
• Condition more common in people aged 35-39.

(Source: NHS)
Have you ever heard these comments?
1. “I sweat every time I have to speak English with a native speaker.”

2. “I hate speaking English in front of the class.”

3. “My heart starts beating faster every time my teacher asks me a question.”

4. “I am ashamed of speaking English because of my accent.”

5. “I always feel that other students are more at ease to speak than me.”

(Adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale; Horwitz et al., 1986)
“...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.”

(Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014: 3)

Relatively common, but largely unwelcome emotion, because it can impact negatively on the language learning experience.
Language anxiety

Conceptually similar to three performance-related anxieties:

- Communication apprehension
- Fear of negative evaluation
- Test anxiety

However, communication apprehension + fear of negative evaluation + test anxiety ≠ language anxiety (Horwitz, 2017)
Anxiety is primarily negative and hinders learning; debilitative anxiety

(Gkonou, Daubney, & Dewaele, 2017)

Some anxiety can ‘push’ people to work = incentive, drive, tension, alertness; facilitative anxiety

(Williams, Mercer, & Ryan, 2015)
Yerkes-Dodson Law
trait vs. (?)
state anxiety

- Trait anxiety: personality-related and task-independent
- State anxiety: environment-triggered and task-dependent
- Susceptible to environmental threats? Or own dispositional vulnerability? Or both?
Research has shown that…

• Personality traits (e.g. neuroticism, introversion) as significant predictors of language anxiety (Dewaele 2002, 2013; Dewaele & Al-Saraj, 2015).

• Recent idiodynamic view of language anxiety and emotions: tendency to fluctuate over time (Gregersen, MacIntyre, & Meza 2014; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012).

• Language anxiety encompasses both aspects of the trait (i.e. stable) and state (i.e. dynamic) dichotomy in classrooms ⇒ complexity of the construct.
Causes

Self-degrading thoughts: excessive self-evaluation, fear of failure, concern over others’ opinions.

Social comparisons/peer pressure, desire for teachers’ approval.

Error correction, underestimate one’s abilities.

Language testing: abilities taxed because of demands of test (on top of...).

Specific tasks.

Specific skills.

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Consequences

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioural/physical</th>
<th>Linguistic/cognitive</th>
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<td>• Increased heartbeat, tension, trembling</td>
<td>• Proficiency and achievement</td>
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<td>• Fidgeting, less eye contact</td>
<td>• Forgetting what has been learned</td>
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<th>Interactional/social</th>
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<td>• Insecurity, panic, worry, embarrassment</td>
<td>• Less participation, silence</td>
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<td>• Procrastination, perfectionism</td>
<td>• Limit social exchanges</td>
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Consequences

- Abandoning studies;
- Negative attitudes towards the target language;
- Low willingness to communicate;
- Tensions among learners;
- Self-doubts;
- Stifling learners’ enthusiasm and motivation.

(Gkonou, Daubney, & Dewaele, 2017)
So how can we mitigate anxiety?

(Gkonou, 2018; Oxford, 2017)
Emotional self-regulation

- Self-awareness of one’s emotions, understanding of how these emotions are experienced and expressed, and strategies for managing these emotions (Gross, 2015).

- When emotions are felt to be ‘undesirable’ (Niedenthal et al., 2006).
Emotional self-regulation

Two main types of strategies:

• antecedent-focused strategies: outset of the generation of an emotion and before it has been fully elicited

• response-focused strategies: later stage of the emotion generation process
Cures: The learner

Situation selection (situation that will cause desirable emotions)

• Meeting regularly with a fluent speaker of the L2 to practise.

• Going to the study sessions before the exam to give myself the best chance of performing well.

• Working together with the person sitting next to me.
Cures: The learner

Situation modification

• Going to the library to study. I can feel like a good student.

• Seizing opportunities to practise the language.

• Using resources that offer exposure to the target language (e.g. films, music, literature etc.).
Cures: The learner

Attention deployment

• Using a distraction to reduce language anxiety.

• Thinking of something else and not my anxiety.

• Doing something that makes me happy/that I enjoy.
Cures: The learner

Cognitive reappraisal

• Thinking of times when I’ve studied hard.
• Telling myself that there’s still time to practise.
• Encouraging myself by saying that every hour I study will put me closer to my goals.
Cures: The learner

Relaxation

- Relaxing with music.
- Taking a deep breath.
- Taking a short break while I am getting ready to do a talk in the language.
Cures: The teacher

- Correcting errors with sensitivity to students’ feelings.
- Constructive feedback: what students did well and what needs improving.
- Finding out about students.
- Helping with goal setting (SMART goals).
- Breaking down challenging tasks into smaller, more manageable sets.
- Student groupings and teacher roles.
Conclusion

• Language learning involves complex processes.
• Psychological constructs are interconnected.
• Language learner anxiety is multidimensional.
• Primarily negative but there is hope!
• Strategies coming from learners, but teachers can also help.
• Language learning as an enjoyable and lifelong experience!
Please feel free to get in touch via email:

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