

A Critical, Synthesis-oriented Literature Review Related to L2 Learner Emotions in the Area of Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: In the past decade, L2 learner emotions have been thoroughly examined in the field of second language acquisition with emerging theories and research methods introduced from neighboring disciplines, including positive psychology and educational psychology. Numerous emotions such as foreign language anxiety, enjoyment and boredom have received widespread attention, breaking the traditional research path oriented by pure cognition. The purpose of this paper is to give corresponding suggestions for future research by summarizing and evaluating relevant theories and research methods. The major findings show that although booming field flourishes with an increasing number of explorations into theories and more rigorous and diversified methodology, there are some theoretical and methodological issues of the current researches, such as the lack of emotion theory from the perspective of linguistics, the lack of theories accommodating technology-enhanced L2 learning, the lack of experimental research in quantitative research and the relative lack of qualitative research method. Therefore various future attempts could still be made in theoretical and methodological aspects. In view of the above, emotion research in second language acquisition has shown a trend of development from singularity to diversification in terms of research contents, methods, and paradigms, and there is an urgent need to address the existing deficiencies in research theories and methodologies.

Keywords: L2 learner emotions; second language acquisition; emotion research in second language acquisition; positive psychology

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1 Introduction

Emotions are a hot topic in the field of second language acquisition research at present. The research heat continues to climb, breaking the traditional research path of pure cognition orientation and presenting noteworthy cutting-edge trends. Firstly, the scope of research has progressively broadened to encompass emotions beyond those associated with academic achievement, such as shyness, guilt, envy, gratitude, pride, love and empathy. Secondly, research perspectives have characteristics of contextualization and ecologization, examining emotional experiences across diverse second language contexts (such as EAP, ESP, TBLT, skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing, and traditional versus computer-assisted instruction). It also emphasizes the influence of micro and macro environments (such as tasks, classroom, campus, family, and policy environment) on individual emotions. Additionally, research methods are becoming increasingly diverse, with cross-sectional quantitative researches currently dominating the field, while the number of mixed method research and qualitative research is gradually rising. In addition, practice-oriented approaches are becoming increasingly prominent, with topics (e.g., emotional interaction, emotion regulation and intervention) gaining more attention for their practical guidance significance. The purpose of this review is to systematically synthesize and critically evaluate the existing literatures on emotion in second language acquisition. By integrating studies from both domestic scholars and international researchers, this review seeks to provide insights into the state of research on emotion theories in second language acquisition and current mainstream research methods, identify research gaps in the current field, lay a theoretical foundation for subsequent empirical studies, and provide pedagogical implications for L2 teaching and learning.

2 Overview researches on L2 learner emotions in second language acquisition

2.1 Emotion researches in second language acquisition

2.1.1 The connotation of L2 learner emotions

The focus of emotion research in the field of second language acquisition is emotion. However, under different theoretical frameworks, the connotations of "emotion" are different. Firstly, according to Scovel (1978), under the framework of traditional psychology, emotion is defined as inherent attribute of individuals and decontextualized psychological concept. Sarason (1984) opposed emotion and cognition, believing that emotion hinders the language learning process. Secondly, Fredrickson (2001) claimed that positive psychology not only distinguishes emotion from psychological and physiological perspectives, but also affirm positive effect of positive emotion. Thirdly, according to Prior (2019), both sociocultural theory and post-structuralism emphasize that emotion is not merely an individual mental phenomenon, but also a social construction developed from social relationships. Swain (2013) believed that sociocultural theory and post-structuralism view L2 learner emotions from the sociocultural perspective.

In short, L2 learner emotions refer to the subjective experiences of L2 learners in the learning context. Izard (2010) pointed out L2 learner emotions encompass both internal psychological processes and external physical manifestations. Pavlenko (2012) argued that L2 learner emotions reflect not only individual subjectivity but also the relationships of society, culture, and politics. According to Ng (2021), L2 learner emotions deeply permeate the entire process of second language learning and is strongly linked to learners' cognitive abilities and academic performance.

2.1.2 Three developmental stages of emotion researches in second language acquisition

Emotion research in second language acquisition can be divided into three stages. According to Li et al. (2024), the first stage focused on foreign language anxiety which was mainly influenced by the affective filter hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1985). The affective filter hypothesis has to some extent broken through the cognitive-oriented tradition. It illustrates that negative emotions such as anxiety hinder second language acquisition. However this hypothesis does not take positive emotions into consideration. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) discussed foreign language enjoyment of international L2 learners, providing insights into empirical researches of positive emotions in the field of second language acquisition. The diversity of emotion was gradually gained recognition. Then, a number of empirical researches began to focus on positive emotions. The third stage, emotion research in second language acquisition adopted a multidisciplinary approach. Under the framework of positive psychology, related theories in the field of educational psychology such as control-value theory proposed by Pekrun (2006) was introduced by Li Chengchen in 2018. An increasing number of emotions such as boredom, shame and guilt received attention from the field of second language studies (Pawlak et al., 2020; Teimouri, 2018).

2.2 Review key emotion theories and research methods

2.2.1 Review control-value theory

The control-value theory is the theoretical basis of emotion research in second language acquisition. Put forward by Pekrun in 2006, the control-value theory was later introduced into the field of second language acquisition by Li Chengchen in 2020, which mainly includes the following contents. Firstly, in terms of the three-dimensional structure of academic emotion, Pekrun (2006) advocated to define academic emotion from three dimensions, that is, valence (positive or negative), arousal (degree of activation) and object focus (activity-related or outcome-related). This classical theory was widely used by some scholars at home. Wang et al. (2021) explore the antecedents of L2 emotion on the basis of control-value theory and found that EFL learners' self-efficacy can significantly predict academic emotion. As for domain specificity, the control-value theory emphasizes that different academic disciplines have distinct goal orientations, and that learners' academic self also vary, thereby giving rise to differences in the experience of emotion. Therefore, it is necessary to differentiate emotion research for different disciplines. Besides, the dynamic relationships between the antecedents of emotion and consequences provides a wide range of research topics for emotion research in second language acquisition.

2.2.2 Review broaden-and-build theory

The broaden-and-build theory, firstly proposed by Fredrickson (2001), is the theoretical basis of emotion research in second language acquisition. According to Fredrickson (2001), positive emotion is conducive to constructing physiological, mental, and social resources which can promote individual development, while negative emotion hinder the construction of resources of individual development. The broaden-and-build theory was introduced into emotion research in SLA by MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012). MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) pointed out that the coexistence of positive emotion and negative emotion is the daily emotion schema of L2 learners. Positive emotion helps to broaden the thinking and horizons of L2 learners and enhance their ability to pay attention to new things which is conducive to the construction language resources of L2 learners, while negative emotion such as anxiety limits the thinking-action resources of L2 learners. The development of positive psychology has prompted scholars to start paying attention to the diverse dimensions of emotion, especially the role of positive emotion.

2.2.3 Review the research methods

In terms of quantitative research method used in emotion research in second language acquisition, context-based retrospective questionnaire is usually used to minimize memory bias. For example, Li and Dewaele (2024) used task-based questionnaire and to conceptualize and measure task-specific enjoyment of participants. Physiological measure (e.g. EEG, GSR, eye-tracking) is another quantitative research method employed in emotion research in second language acquisition. For instance, Dewey et al. (2018) used hair cortisol as physiological manifestation of anxiety of L2 learners to understand how study abroad anxiety levels differ from at-home levels.

As for qualitative research method used in emotion research in second language acquisition, some context-dependent retrospective methods are widely used. For example, Elahi Shirvan and Talebzadeh (2018) adopted an idiodynamic method to study patterns and causes of high and low FLE arousals. In addition, less threatening qualitative methods such as vignette methodology and focus group interview are used in emotion research in second language acquisition. For instance, Goetze (2023) pointed out that vignette methodology can offer promising opportunities for the investigation of situation-specific dynamic variables (e.g., emotion and cognition) in language learning and teaching. Nakamura et al. (2021) conducted focus group interviews five times to gain in-depth views about boredom and its antecedents in the L2 learning context in general, as well as the learners' boredom experiences in the class.

In terms of mixed method used in emotion research in second language acquisition, Q method and social network analysis are used to examine L2 learner emotions. Kruk et al. (2022) employed a Q method to explore 37 Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of potential sources of boredom in the classroom. Zhang et al. (2023) explored the effects of learners' emotions and peer interaction patterns on their affective engagement in English collaborative learning through social network analysis. These mixed method are conducive to conducting quantitative inference and reflecting the dynamic changes of emotion.

3 In-depth analytic review

3.1 Discussion of the strength and weakness of the sources

In terms of the strengths of the sources, firstly, theories of L2 learner emotions research show the trend of diversified development. These

emotion researches in SLA are conducted not only from the perspective of traditional psychology and positive psychology, but also from the disciplinary theoretical perspective. Scholars in the field of SLA have conducted relatively extensive empirical researches on the basis of pluralistic emotion theories. Secondly, the paradigm of empirical research on emotion has developed from single dimension to multi-dimension, including researches on specific learners' emotional variables at the micro level and researches on learners' emotion with a holistic view. Thirdly, as for the expansion of the scope of SLA research, scholars in these sources conduct researches on psychical elements which is related to individuals' mental health and well-being, highlighting the non-linguistic goal of L2 teaching.

The weakness of the sources are as follows. Firstly, these researches on L2 learner emotions were conducted from the perspective of positive psychology and the sociocultural theory. While little attention was paid to the emotional investment theory, leaving a large room for exploration in the future. Specifically, researches on specific learners' emotional variables at the micro level account for a relatively large proportion. However, these researches lack in-depth exploration of the emotional development process of learners and have deficiency in paying attention to the complexity, diversity, and integrity of emotion. Secondly, at the conceptual level, these researches failed to distinguish trait emotion and state emotion. Currently, academic community mainly focuses on trait emotion (e.g., anxiety, enjoyment and boredom). In contrast, the academic community pays little attention to dynamic and context-dependent state emotion such as task emotion. Thirdly, as for research direction, these researches focused on examining the relationship between emotion and L2 academic achievement, and neglected the influence of emotion on second language acquisition itself. Fourthly, these researches have some deficiency in emotion regulation and intervention. They mainly concentrated on L2 learners ways to deal with negative emotions particularly anxiety, as well as the overall distribution of emotion regulation strategies among L2 learners. However, they ignored positive emotion cultivation strategies, the underlying mechanisms affecting the selection and use of emotion regulation strategies and the practical impacts of emotion regulation. In the aspect of emotion intervention, these emotion researches in SLA were conducted in the theoretical framework of positive psychology instead of multidisciplinary perspective. Besides, in terms of research methods, the exploration of more scientific research paradigms is relatively insufficient. Reviewing these sources, I found that most studies have adopted quantitative or qualitative method, while few studies have used method that combine qualitative and quantitative characteristics to comprehensively capture the features of emotion and explore the causes of emotion.

3.2 The significance of findings in relation to the literature as a whole

In terms of the theoretical contribution, firstly, the findings in relation to the literature as a whole consummated the theoretical framework. By validating, expanding control-value theory and the broaden-and-build theory, these research findings enhance the explanatory power and generalization of the theories. Secondly, these findings established new theoretical perspective. Apart from academic emotion, the findings put forward the importance of other types of emotion (e.g., self-conscious emotion and social emotion generated in teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction), which provide a novel analytical framework for emotion research in SLA, thereby enriching the theoretical system in this field. Thirdly, the findings in relation to the literature as a whole facilitate the cross-integration of second language acquisition with theories from multiple disciplines such as psychology and sociology. This contributes to a more comprehensive perspective for understanding emotional phenomena in second language learning.

In terms of practical guidance, firstly, these findings are conducive to facilitating the optimisation of L2 teaching strategies. They emphasize the importance of designing teaching activities and adjusting pedagogical approaches according to the characteristics of L2 learners's emotion, thereby improving teaching by harnessing the role of learners' positive emotion in second language learning, understanding the sources of their negative emotion and exploring the positive aspects of negative emotion. Secondly, these findings can help teachers better understand emotional needs of L2 learners, enabling them to provide targeted emotion support and intervention so as to boost L2 learners' learning impetus. Thirdly, the findings in relation to the literature as a whole can shed light on instructional practice about how to explore learners' diversified emotions and construct a supportive L2 learning atmosphere that is conducive to activating positive emotion through classroom interactions and task design so as to enhance L2 learners' learning engagement and sense of achievement. Lastly, in the perspective of sociocultural theory, teachers can regard dialogue narrative as a teaching method and a lens to observe learners' emotional experience, exploring students' emotional states in educational environments and their impact on cognitive development and behavior.

4 Synthesis

4.1 Research Gaps

In terms of theoretical gap, firstly, emotion research in second language acquisition lacks emotion theory from the perspective of linguistics. Current theories such as the broaden-and-build theory and the control-value theory are primarily derived from fields of positive psychology and educational psychology, thus failing to focus on the process of second language acquisition and language itself. The second is the lack of theories accommodating technology-enhanced L2 learning. Current theories mainly focus on offline second language learning and fail to reflect the characteristics of the digital information age. Although some of these empirical studies focus on online learning contexts, most of them adopt traditional offline emotion theories.

In terms of empirical gap, some core questions lack empirical validation. Few researches have comprehensively examined the interaction between emotion and cognition and their impact on L2 learning and the way emotion affect language proficiency, the characteristics of the language itself and language acquisition process.

When it comes to methodological gap, non-experimental designs such as questionnaires account for a significant proportion in quantitative research, while experimental research is relatively scarce. Although the use of self-report scales are conducive to conducting large-scale surveys and are convenient for statistical processing and analysis of results, the results may exist subjective bias because of

memory bias and social desirability bias. Many scales fail to highlight the contextual characteristics of emotion, resulting in low ecological validity. Qualitative research is relatively scarce and mainly uses retrospective methods such as interview, open-ended questionnaire, focused writing, and diaries to collect data. Despite many scholars at home and abroad have long emphasized that language learning is a dynamic and developmental process, qualitative longitudinal studies still remain insufficient in current research.

4.2 Specific future research questions

Future researches should focus on the following questions.

RQ1: What is the relationship between emotion and L2 proficiency? What is the relationship between emotion and the characteristics of language itself such as complexity, fluency, and accuracy? How does emotion affect the micro-processes of second language acquisition?

RQ2: Compared with traditional classroom, what are the levels of learners' foreign language enjoyment, anxiety, and boredom in the context of college English online courses in the perspective of cognitive load theory? What kind of relationship among foreign language enjoyment, anxiety, and boredom? What is the predictive effect of foreign language enjoyment, anxiety, and boredom on foreign language performance and self-evaluation of effect of online learning?

RQ3: Under different task environments, skill backgrounds and learning modes, how does the interaction between emotions and cognition affect the mechanism of second language acquisition?

5 Conclusion

This literature review synthesizes developmental stages, research topics, theoretical bases, research methods of emotion researches in second language acquisition over the past decade. Key findings are as follows. Firstly, the research topics are rich and diverse. Some researches focus on the dual role of emotion: positive emotion (e.g., foreign language enjoyment) and negative emotion (e.g., anxiety, boredom) significantly predict L2 learning outcomes including academic achievement, oral performance, and writing proficiency. In the field of SLA, apart from academic emotion, academic community also concerns multidimensional emotion topics such as shyness, guilt, envy, gratitude, pride, love and empathy. Secondly, theoretical explorations in this domain have witnessed continuous in-depth development, covering both empirical explorations of relevant theories and the expansion and innovation of theories. The characteristics of emotion theories vary, and generally show a trend of shifting from a psychological perspective to a sociocultural perspective. Thirdly, empirical research methods are influenced by theoretical perspectives. The psychological perspective generally relies on quantitative research methods to classify and analyze emotion, while the sociocultural perspective tends to apply qualitative research methods to record and describe emotion.

Emotion research is a hot topic in the field of second language acquisition. However, this field is still in the early stage of development and relevant theories, research contents, and research methods need to be consummated. Future researches should be based in the field of second language acquisition and strengthen theoretical thinking and empirical validation on core questions. In the practice of foreign language teaching, educators should attach importance to integrating positive education with language teaching. This helps construct positive language education that is student-oriented, with the goal of boosting foreign language academic achievement and well-being.

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