

# Case Study on Learning Anxiety

*Aijia Men*

Quzhou College of Technology Quzhou City, Zhejiang Province 324000

## Introduction

Second or foreign language motivation and anxiety is thought to be among the most important individual difference variables in language learning. This case study aims to summarize and present related theories and apply relevant research methodology in the qualitative interview of a Japanese student learning English as a foreign language in London. The interview is semi-structured with open research questions. And the interviewee is recruited voluntarily from a language learning institution in London. The following up analysis of the interview could reveal the influence of anxiety and motivation along her way of learning English, which may help deepen the comprehension of individual learner differences on top of the theoretical frameworks.

## Literature review

Anxiety and motivation in L2 acquisition context have been discussed by many researchers from different perspectives including those that are contrary to each other. This section aims to discuss the theoretical background to the two individual learner differences (ILDs) referring to some key research studies.

## Anxiety

One of the earliest researches done by McCroskey in 1970 has pointed out the relationship of language learning anxiety with communication apprehension. The primary goal of language learning is to communicate with other people, and the failure in communication could be the setback for language learners. Therefore, the rising level of anxiety during any of the five forms of communication could accumulate and reflect in the progress of foreign language learning. Since it is a qualitative interview study, there are obvious disadvantages such as limited time, miscommunication, lack of trust from the interviewee, memory loss of the beginning of language learning, shortage of writing samples, etc (Tóth, 2011).

In this case study, the author would apply questions of available questionnaires from established studies and try to find out the sources of foreign language anxiety and the relationships between anxiety and study time, context, receptive and productive skills, and teacher's feedback. Since it is a qualitative interview study, there are obvious disadvantages such as limited time, miscommunication, lack of trust from the interviewee, memory loss of the beginning of language learning, shortage of writing samples, etc (Tóth, 2011). The solution lies in close observation of the interviewee in classroom and collecting data from peer practicing teachers to reflect general performance of the student. In this way it prevents the author from making up missing information, and also provides a different opinion on evaluating data.

## Motivation

L2 motivation, as a complex research topic, has been developing since the 1950s as a social-psychological concept to a cognitive-situated period in 1990s. To now, the contemporary mainstream of L2 motivation research is process-oriented. The L2 motivation discussed in this study could be defined as "the dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritized, operationalised and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out" (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998). The definition suits this research due to the diversified language learning background of the interviewee and the dynamics of motivation from different learning phases.

The theoretical framework is based on the process model of L2 motivation that Dörnyei and Ottó brought up in 1998. There are mainly two dimensions of the model: the action sequence, and the motivational influences. The action sequence could be further divided into three stages: pre-actional, actional, and post-actional, with respective motivation themes: choice, executive, and retrospective. The second dimension of the process model explains motivational forces that come along with action sequence (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998). This case study would also discuss the cause of motivation and factors of demotivation based on the interview.

In order to understand the interviewee's L2 motivation referring to her L2 learning experience since university, the present study intends to inquire about the three motivational stages by established interview questions. The author would also code and analyse the emerging factors that could influence motivation in the interviewee's case.

## Methodology

After the first week of teaching practice with upper intermediate level class at International House London, the author noticed a student from Japan was always on time and taking careful notes of all the classes. Finally, she consented to be my interviewee and we set the interview date at the last day of teaching practice which was also a good chance to get some feedback about my own teaching.

The classical approach of interviewing is not suitable for this case study because it does not allow variables and takes the interview as a resource for 'facts' that the interviewer believes (Seale, 1998). The interview is semi-structured with a set of indirect questions. As Seale (1998) points out, utilizing a semi-structured interview could achieve an equal and honesty relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, which is of great significance in this case study for that it requires the interviews to voluntarily engage in the topic of English learning and reveal her genuine anxiety and motivation.

## Findings and discussion

This section aims to give a full report on the interviewee's IDLs on the basis of the interview, answering questions as below: 1. sources of learner's foreign language anxiety, 2. the relationships between anxiety and study time, context, receptive and productive skills, and teacher's feedback, 3. different motivation formation in different phases of English learning 4. factors that could influence motivation positively or negatively.

After the interview, the author transcribed the dialogue and mainly coded the second section for further analysing, as Dörnyei (2007) has pointed out that "the first step in data analysis is to transfer the recording into a textual form". In general, the author applied two colours separately to highlight anxiety and motivation related content, which gave the focus of themes in long paragraphs, and different shades of similar colours were used for subthemes. For further detail such as continuous elements that leads to pressure and prompt, the author used numbers for coding. On top of the systematic coding and transcribing, the author has selected the most interesting and relevant sections for further analysis.

### About anxiety

Based on the learner's self-awareness as inadequate in English learning, the time of study does not affect FLA in a noticeable way. However, as the learning process grows, the learner admits that "hard-working is always the right answer for developing my English skills". It is noticeable that the learner has established a positive awareness of direct feedbacks such as good scores, the success of job application, but these are not enough to change her judgement about her achievement in English proficiency. Although she reacts modestly towards compliment, it is noticeable that teacher's feedback pattern has an influence on her FLA as well. The classic Asian classroom, not restricted to English as a subject, does not include much teacher-student interaction.

### About motivation

According to Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) process model of L2 motivation, certain factors could demotivate learners rather than give a positive support, for instance, reduced self-confidence, coursebook, interference of another foreign language being studied, the teacher, etc. These four demotivating factors were also spotted in the present interview: "I do not always feel confident when speaking to someone with accents, and I tend to keep quiet because I am afraid to have to repeat the conversation most of the time...the coursebook I first used in London was quite old and childish for an intermediate student, and I did not like to be categorized as middle-school level or not good enough for adult books...My husband is French and I speak French at home mostly, but French is also a foreign language to me, I sometimes find it confusing when memorise new vocabulary...native (Japanese)". These demotivating factors could easily be noticed and changed voluntarily by the interviewee, and she made the decision to go abroad, seeking for an immersion of English speaking and learning environment.

## Conclusion

This study investigated L2 learner anxiety and motivation as two individual learner differences. In this specific case study, foreigner language anxiety was not correlated with study time or learner's L2 proficiency, but more based on the interviewee's self-image. And the anxiety could be turned into motivation just with a reduction of poor self-evaluation on language performance especially in speaking. It was also found in the analysis that the interviewee had a strong goal setting and commitment in the dimension of pre-actional motivation. Besides, she also revealed strong learner autonomy and self-reflection awareness in a motivating sense. The demotivating factors could not stop the learner from making positive changes and developing better English learning skills.

It has to be noted that the present case study is really limited to the time and only one interviewee. The lack of preparation and interaction time with the interviewee could reduce the credibility of the finding, which was mostly based on the interview and fragmented

oral expressions. Secondly, the theoretical framework of L2 anxiety is not as solid as that of L2 motivation, with many more existing researches. Thirdly, it is hard to apply the findings to future IDLs research due to the limited sample size and lack of empirical evidence. Besides, there might be missing themes in the interview due to limited time, and a preliminary interview in the beginning of the teaching practice would have been worth doing.

As for the author's future teaching practice, however, this case study deepens my understanding of related theories and encourages me to comprehend student behaviour inside and outside of the classroom. There is always a reason for a certain behaviour: when a student does not perform well in class, it is better to observe and communicate rather than assume anything in advance.

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