

Second/ Foreign Language Learning Emotions: Review and Prospect

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Abstract

The past decade witnessed a mounting research interest in the pivotal role of emotions in language acquisition and education. Under such a circumstance, this review article aims to highlight this emerging field and to review the development of emotion research in Second/Foreign Language Learning in detail. The concept of emotions and emotion-related theories in SLA will be presented first, followed by the reviews of the development of emotion research in SLA. Finally, corresponding suggestions and implications will be offered for future research.

Keywords

Positive Psychology; Academic Emotions; Second/Foreign Language Learning; SLA.

1. Introduction

Educational settings are imbued with emotional experiences that guide teacher-student interactions and affect learning and teaching (Pekrun et al., 2002). However, in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), emotion-related variables are traditionally overlooked as irrational factors, and the word “emotion” itself was generally absent in the SLA literature for a long time. It was not until the introduction of humanistic language teaching values in the 1970s and 1980s that scholars began to take a holistic view of language learners, emphasizing their cognition and emotion equally (Arnold, 1998, 1999; MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014; Jiang & Li, 2017). The humanistic language teaching values, such as Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), highlight the fundamental role of emotion in language learning and remind researchers that the affective dimension plays a role in SLA (Dewaele, 2005). Nevertheless, the “affective turn” is marked by the introduction of Positive Psychology (PP) in SLA in 2012. After then, SLA researchers started to focus on a great variety of emotions experienced by language learners rather than exclusively focusing on learners’ anxiety (Dewaele & Li 2018; Miyahara, 2019). Emotions have emerged as one of the most salient topics in current SLA research. Studies of emotions in SLA could be easily found in refereed journals, books, and conference proceedings, indicating that the field is reaching maturity. Therefore, it is crucial for us to discuss concepts, theories, topics, and methods of emotion study in SLA and formulate suggestions for future research on the connections between emotions and L2 learning and teaching.

2. Concept and Theories of Emotion in SLA

Despite a large number of emotion studies in the field of SLA, little attention has been paid to elucidating the conceptualization of emotions in L2 learning as well as the underlying theories.

2.1. Conceptualization of Emotion

Emotion has proven remarkably difficult to define (MacIntyre, 2017). Different fields’ definitions vary greatly because researchers tend to define emotions from a unique vantage point (Shao, 2019). For a long time, L2 researchers tend to refrain from giving a direct definition

of emotion. Therefore, it is necessary to review the conceptualization of emotions. Aligning with the tradition in psychology, in terms of the underlying theories to conceptualize emotions in L2 learning, there are two main approaches to categorizing emotions: the basic approach and the dimensional approach (Dewaele & Li, 2020). According to the basic emotion theory, there are a few basic discrete emotions that are universal; individuals experience basic emotions as distinct from each other (Ekman, 1992). Traditionally, happiness, surprise, fear, disgust, anger, and sadness have been labeled as the six basic emotions, and these emotions are linked with specific behaviors and action tendencies. In contrast, according to the dimensional theory, emotions are individual constructions of three independent, bipolar dimensions: pleasure/valence, arousal/activation, and dominance (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Emotions involve coordinated psychological processes, including affective, cognitive, physiological, motivational, and expressive components (Kleinginna & Kleinginna, 1981; Scherer, 2000). Therefore, a consensus can be reached that emotions are multifaceted phenomena (Pekrun & Stephens, 2010). Many scholars tend to understand emotions as multi-dimensional, such as in Barrett & Russell' circumplex models of affect (1980) and Reeve's (2015) definition of emotion. Pekrun as the first one used the term academic emotions to denote emotions linked to academic learning, classroom instruction, and achievement (Putwain et al., 2018), whose emotion theory considers multiple dimensions of emotions, which is consistent with the circumplex models of affect. According to Pekrun, academic emotions are conceptualized as varying along two dimensions, i.e., valence and activation. Thus, affective states are grouped according to the relative degree of positive versus negative valence and activation versus deactivation. Later, in addition to valence and activation, he adds another aspect of object focus (Pekrun, 2006) to further distinguish academic emotions as achievement, epistemic, topic, and social emotions. In addition to Pekrun, a few SLA researchers also agreed that emotions in L2 learning could also be conceptualized as achievement emotions with three dimensions: (1) the object focus, the activity itself or the outcome; (2) value, positive vs. negative quality; (3) control, degree of controllability and forms of control (attributions to external and internal causes) (Li, 2018; Piniel & Albert, 2018). Till now, many emotion studies in SLA have taken Pekrun's theory as the theoretical basis and have justified its validation (Han & Hyland, 2019; Shao et al., 2019; Dewaele & Li, 2021).

2.2. The Broaden-and-Build Theory

The Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) is considered the foremost theory discussing emotions in language learning. However, the introduction of PP to SLA has brought new theoretical resources to empirical studies on emotions. In PP, there are two major emotional-related theories: the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) and the control-value theory (Pekrun, 2006). The two theories are "twin sisters" in PP, they two supplement each other and can be integrated as a holistic theoretical framework for emotion studies to establish theoretical triangulation (Li, 2018).

The Broaden-and-Build theory (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001) is one of the foundation theories of Positive Psychology. It differentiates the function of positive emotions as broadening and building and negative emotions as narrowing. According to this theory, positive emotions "can broaden the field of attention and build resources for the future" and help learners "to build relationships, personal strength, and tolerance for the moments when things become difficult" (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). It not only elucidates the distinctive functions of positive and negative emotions but also points out the interaction between positive and negative emotions, which hypothesis that positive emotions may "correct, mitigate, dismantle or undo" the after-effects of negative emotion. Thus, the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions focuses on a wide range of classroom emotions, including both positive and negative emotions, and motivates researchers to include positive emotions into consideration and explore the possible

interactions between positive and negative emotions (Dewaele & Li, 2018; MacIntyre et al., 2019; Prior, 2019).

2.3. The Control-Value Theory

The Control-Value Theory is essential in contemporary educational psychology, which is focused on the nomological network of emotions in academic settings (Putwain et al., 2018). According to Pekrun (2006), the perceptions of control and subjective value for achievement activities and outcomes shape achievement emotions. Based on this view, emotions emerge surrounding achievement-related activities (e.g., enjoyment) as well as retrospective (e.g., shame) and prospective (e.g., hope) achievement outcomes. The actual emotion that occurs depends on one's feelings of control and value. Experiencing both control (competence) and positive subjective value (perceived importance of the task) increases enjoyment and decreases boredom and anger during achievement activities. Based on the control-value theory in educational psychology (Pekrun, 2006), emotions in L2 learning could also be conceptualized as achievement emotions with three dimensions: (1) the object focus, the activity itself or the outcome; (2) value, positive vs. negative quality; (3) control, degree of controllability and forms of control (attributions to external and internal causes) (Li, 2018; Piniel & Albert, 2018). This theory provides more comprehensive and robust support for the empirical study of emotion, involving the conceptual structure, production, influence, change, complex relationship network, and emotion regulation strategies. Dewaele & Li (2020) pointed out that, compared to the broaden-and-build theory, the control-value theory has a broader applicability in SLA research in that it addresses not only the significant effects of emotions but also the causes and antecedents of emotions in educational settings. This theory systematically describes the complex, two-way and dynamic relationship between academic emotion and its "antecedents and effects" (Li, 2021).

3. Previous Studies on Emotions

The past decade witnessed a mounting interest in emotions (Dewaele, 2019; Prior, 2019), and the advent of PP in SLA (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Mercer & MacIntyre, 2014) has caused a "positive renaissance" and "affective turn" (Li & Xu, 2019). Emotions have emerged as one of the most salient topics in the field of SLA. However, it is not to say that before the introduction of PP in the field of SLA, there was no emotion study in L2 learning. Much initiative work had prepared the ground for the "positive renaissance" (Arnold, 1999; Broner & Tarone, 2001; Cook, 2000; Gotz et al., 2008; Imai, 2010). Therefore, the review of previous studies will take the introduction of PP in SLA as the dividing point and compare the emotion studies between the two periods. Then we can find out why it is called the "affective turn".

3.1. Emotion Studies Before the "Affective Turn"

Previous studies on emotions before the advent of PP can be divided into two types. One is about the formation of measurement tools for emotions. There are Achievement Emotions Questionnaire (AEQ) (Pekrun et al., 2006) for measuring multiple emotions. The AEQ is the most widely used questionnaire examining diverse emotions. Several studies have proved its validation in the L2 context (Alamer & Lee, 2019; Davari et al., 2020; Shao et al., 2020). In terms of the measurement of specific emotions, there are Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz & Cope, 1986) and the French Class Anxiety Scale (Gardner & Smythe, 1975). Previous measuring tools (e.g., Spielberger, 1983; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994) mainly focus on negative emotions, especially anxiety, while positive emotions in SLA have not received much research attention. Moreover, the measurement generally relies on scaled self-report questionnaires. Previous research also attends attention to affective phenomena in language learning (Rintell, 1984, 1990; Clachar, 1999). Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, Schumann's

Acculturation Model (1978), and neurobiological approach to affect (1997) provide a theoretical basis for emotion explorations. For example, Imai (2010) examined how learners' emotions manifested in verbal communication and concluded that emotions not only facilitate, filter, or hinder an individual's inner cognitive functioning but also mediate development. Other noteworthy examples of attention to affective phenomena include Rintell's (1984, 1990) work on the pragmatic effects of emotive expression in a narrative and Clachars (1999) study of emotion in L2 writing. It can be said that affective phenomena in language learning have long been under investigation.

3.2. Emotion Studies after the "Affective Turn"

An increasing number of researchers have been focused on academic emotions, and the related research can be mainly divided into three types:

One concerns the conceptual structure of different academic emotions and corresponding measurement tools. The development of positive psychology in SLA encourages researchers to give equal attention to positive and negative emotions. Thus, scholars began to focus on various emotions L2 learners may experience during learning. As a result, the conceptual constructs of different academic emotions are presented, and corresponding measuring tools are formed, such as enjoyment (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014), burnout (Li et al., 2021), shame and guilt (Teimouri, 2018), boredom (Li et al., 2020). What needs to be noticed is that new forms of measurement, such as scenario-based questionnaires, are developed to measure specific emotions in L2 settings (Oxford, 2017; Teimouri, 2018). These valid measuring tools provide feasible tools and references for future emotional research.

The second type of research focuses on exploring the antecedents and effects of emotion in L2 learning. The CVT posits a model whereby achievement emotions, its antecedents, and outcomes in learning are linked by reciprocal relationships over time (Pekrun et al., 2007). Fueled by the theory, scholars have tentatively researched the antecedents and outcomes of emotions (Li, 2018; Piniel & Albert, 2018; Han & Hyland, 2019; Shao et al., 2019). For the factors that influence emotions, it was found that personal factors like gender, age, L2 level, class rank, emotional intelligence, and external variables such as classroom environment, teachers' predictability, strictness, and teacher-student relationship can affect emotions (Li et al., 2018; Li, 2020; Jiang & Dewaele, 2019; Li et al., 2021). Xia and Xu revealed that factors such as teacher expectations, students' autonomy, student competition, and teacher-student relationship influence negative academic emotions with different paths and varied levels of intensity. As to the effect of emotions, it is found that emotions can influence learners' confidence, interest, motivation, engagement, cognition, and, finally, their overall English achievement (Pekrun & Stephens, 2012; Li, 2020; Li et al., 2020). Among the effects of emotions, the most salient topic is its effects on academic achievement. The control-value theory (Pekrun et al., 2007; Pekrun, 2006) points out that academic emotions are the other factors affecting academic achievement in addition to IQ. Li et al. (2019) found that enjoyment can positively predict academic achievement, while anxiety negatively predicts academic achievement. Saito et al. (2018) revealed that foreign language enjoyment and anxiety could positively and negatively predict learners' speaking English, respectively. Putwain et al. (2018) revealed that more enjoyment and less boredom could predict more outstanding learning achievement, and higher enjoyment and lower anxiety could predict greater subsequent achievement. In turn, more extraordinary achievement could predict higher enjoyment and lower anxiety.

The third type of research goes with emotion intervention and training studies. Adopting the control-value theory, researchers began exploring ways to enhance learners' emotional experience to improve learning achievement (Brackett & Rivers, 2014; Li & Xu, 2019; Han & Xu, 2020). Han and Xu (2020) explored the self-regulation strategies of negative emotions in the second language writing of four Chinese college students. It revealed that students used

emotion-oriented, appraisal-oriented, and situation-oriented strategies to self-regulate emotions throughout their revision processes. Additionally, emotional intelligence as an essential personal trait started to receive increasing popularity in the field of PP. Scholars began to use effective PP-based interventions on learners' emotional intelligence and emotions in L2 learning (Oxford, 2016; MacIntyre et al., 2019). Mercer & Gkonou (2017) suggested incorporating emotional intelligence training programs to support effective teaching. Gregersen et al. (2014) innovatively implemented EI interventions for an English learner and a pre-service TESOL teacher. They found that the EI-oriented intervention practice can increase the positive-broadening power of positive emotion. Mercer and Gkonou (2017) also suggested incorporating training programs to develop EI to support effective teaching. Li & Xu (2019) conducted multi-dimensional emotional intelligence training on Chinese EFL learners and found that it significantly indirectly affects foreign language happiness and anxiety.

From the review above, it is clear that there are some differences between the two periods in terms of the research topic. Firstly, the emotional spectrum has been extended mainly from foreign language anxiety to include other emotions, for instance, foreign language enjoyment (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2017; Li et al., 2018), guilt and shame (Teimouri, 2018), pride (Abo-Zaied & Tannenbaum, 2019), love (Pavelescu & Petrić, 2018), anger, excitement, hope, joy, frustration (MacIntyre et al., 2019; MacIntyre & Vincze, 2017), and boredom (Li et al., 2021; Pawlak et al., 2020). Secondly, emotion measurements are no longer solely reliant on self-report. New measurement forms, such as scenario-based questionnaires, are developed to measure specific emotions in L2 settings (Oxford, 2017; Teimouri, 2018). Thirdly, the introduction of PP and the application of the CVT theory encourages researchers to investigate the links between achievement emotions and their antecedents or outcomes. These empirical studies (Li, 2018; Piniel & Albert, 2018; Han & Hyland, 2019; Shao et al., 2019) have highlighted the causes, effects and correlates of emotions experienced in L2 learning, which paved the way for the exploration of enhancing language learning well-being.

4. Implications for Future Research

The advent of PP offers emotion researchers rich research topics, tools, and approaches in the field of SLA (Dewaele & Li, 2020). At the same time, the broaden-and-build theory and the control-value theory provided SLA researchers with excellent theoretical bases for exploring the causes and effects of emotions, the interplay between emotions and their correlates, and the interaction between language learner and teacher emotions. Although some L2 researchers acknowledged the critical role of emotion in language learning (e.g., Dewaele, 2005; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Swain, 2013), research on emotion and SLA is lagging behind the rapidly progressing field of emotion and learning in psychology and education (Frenzel et al., 2009; Goetz et al., 2010; Pekrun et al., 2017, 2019). After reviewing previous research, some implications for future research could be drawn.

Firstly, for measuring academic emotions, more reliable, valid instruments are needed for measuring multiple discrete emotions that play crucial roles in SLA. The tools used in emotion studies now are mainly self-report questionnaires. "Improving measurement is critical to better studying faculty emotions, particularly moving beyond single item measures accounting for social-environmental predictors" (Stupnisky et al., 2019). Therefore, future measurements of emotions could combine verbal, visual, and video-based reviews. Mixed-methods designs would better avoid the subjectivity of self-reports and allow drawing a multifaceted picture of the students' and teachers' emotions in L2 learning and teaching. Future studies may choose research tools according to the subjects' background or level. For example, scenario-based questionnaires and video analysis are recommended for children's emotions rather than solely relying on self-reports.

Secondly, more research on the regulation of emotions is needed. Given the increasing interest in emotion in educational contexts, we must understand how emotions themselves are shaped or regulated by teachers and students. Students are surrounded by opportunities to feel positive or negative emotions, but how students regulate their emotions in educational settings needs to be clarified. For now, emotion studies mainly focus on the antecedents and outcomes of emotions, and little attention has been given to regulating emotions. Certainly, the understanding of the triggers of emotion plays an important role in the development and use of emotion regulation strategies. However, finding an effective way to regulate emotions is more important. Therefore, combining the research of emotion functions, origins, and research on emotion regulation is of great value. For example, teachers can change their behavior and classroom environments to increase interest on the part of the students by effectively regulating their emotions. Students, on the other hand, can guide their own attention to topics that excite them and change the way they think about classes to enhance the value of what they once found uninteresting. Above all, emotion regulation studies may shed important new light on the educational process and improve language learning.

Thirdly, future research could focus on teachers' emotions (Martínez Agudo, 2018; Miller & Gkonou, 2018) and emotion transmission in L2 classrooms. As the participant, organizer, and controller in class, teacher emotions seem to be inextricably linked to classroom processes. Educational psychologists have demonstrated that emotions are perceived and transmitted between teachers and students, guiding and shaping their interaction, thus affecting teaching/learning effectiveness (Pekrun, 2006). However, research on the reciprocal and bidirectional nature of emotion transmission in L2 teacher-student interactions is still in its infancy, with tentative efforts made concerning the construct of "emotion contagion" (Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2021). Efforts should be made to close these research gaps in the near future. For example, the longitudinal study can explore how teachers' emotions affect students' emotions and how teachers' emotions vary across an academic year. It will be of great pedagogical value to consider the effects of teachers' emotions on students' emotions (Benesch, 2013) and vice versa and explore the emotional interaction patterns between teachers and students.

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