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Invisible forces: How shame and guilt affect L2 achievement through regulating L2 anxiety and enjoyment

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Abstract

Emotions play a crucial role in second and foreign language learning as extensive research in second language acquisition (SLA) has documented the influence of both positive and negative emotions on second and foreign language (L2) learners' motivation, performance, and L2 attainment. Although language anxiety and enjoyment have garnered particular attention from scholars in the domain of L2 learning, their links with other emotions – more specifically, shame and guilt – remain underexplored. In other words, how L2 learners' proneness to shame and guilt act as key determiners of their L2 anxiety and enjoyment experiences remains largely unexplored. As such, two separate studies investigated how shame-proneness and guilt-proneness influence L2 achievement by regulating L2 anxiety and enjoyment. In Study 1, a sample of 327 English major university students, and in Study 2, a total of 256 undergraduates from English and non-English majors were recruited. The initial correlational analyses in both studies revealed a strong, positive relationship between shame-proneness and anxiety but a modest, negative correlation between shame-proneness and L2 enjoyment. Conversely, guilt-proneness had a modest, positive correlation with L2 enjoyment and no meaningful relationship with L2 anxiety. Path analyses exhibited that shame-proneness reduced L2 achievement of the students mainly by increasing their L2 anxiety and suppressing L2 joy, whereas guilt-proneness enhanced L2 achievement by boosting L2 enjoyment. The theoretical and pedagogical implications of the findings will be discussed in detail with respect to the contexts of the studies.

Keywords: shame-proneness; guilt-proneness; L2 anxiety; L2 joy; language achievement

1. Introduction

Emotions play a crucial role in second and foreign language (L2) learning, as extensive research in second language acquisition (SLA) has well documented the influence of both positive and negative emotions on L2 learners' motivation, performance, and L2 attainment (Botes et al., 2022a; Dewaele & Li, 2020; Kruk & Pawlak, 2022; Plonsky et al., 2022; Teimouri et al., 2019). However, a class of self-conscious emotions – shame, guilt, embarrassment, and pride – has not received proper attention from L2 scholars. In particular, despite the presence of growing evidence regarding how shame and guilt affect students' motivation, learning behaviors, and success outcomes in educational contexts (Pekrun et al., 2009; Turner & Schallert, 2001) as well L2 learning settings (e.g., Cook, 2006; Galmiche, 2017; Immonen, 2020; Teimouri, 2017, 2018, 2019; Xu, 2024), this line of research remains underdeveloped in SLA.

This paper aims to shed light on how L2 learners' tendencies to experience shame and guilt – shame-proneness and guilt-proneness – while learning an additional language influence their L2 achievement. In particular, it focuses on how these emotional traits indirectly affect achievement by regulating two high-activation, yet opposing-valence, emotions: L2 anxiety and L2 enjoyment. These emotions were chosen for both theoretical and empirical reasons. For instance, control-value theory (Pekrun, 2006) predicts that emotions combining high activation with differing valence are the most powerful proximal drivers of achievement-related behaviors and outcomes. Meta-analytic evidence in SLA (e.g., Botes et al., 2022a; Teimouri et al., 2019) corroborates that L2 anxiety and enjoyment consistently exhibit large effect sizes on L2 performance.

In addition, although L2 anxiety and enjoyment (e.g., Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Teimouri, 2017; Teimouri et al., 2019) have garnered considerable attention from L2 scholars, their links with shame-proneness and guilt-proneness of L2 learners have been overlooked. For instance, despite research findings in social psychology concerning the close associations between shame and anxiety (e.g., Fergus et al., 2010; Harder & Zalma, 1990; Swee et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2021), SLA research has rarely zoomed in on the pivotal role that shame-proneness may play as a primary determinant of L2 learners' anxiety. Likewise, no study has investigated how L2 learners' proneness to shame may also affect L2 learners' positive emotional experiences, like L2 enjoyment, harming their motivation, and ultimate achievement.

Finally, despite a handful of SLA studies investigating the role of shame in L2 learning, research on guilt-proneness and its effects on L2 learners' learning behaviors, self-regulation, and achievement is virtually non-existent. Such a gap is puzzling because research findings in social psychology have shown that guilt,

despite its unpleasantness, serves as an adaptive emotion fostering one's motivation (Tangney & Dearing, 2003). In sum, by threading together the feelings of shame, guilt, anxiety, and enjoyment, this study seeks to provide a cohesive account of how self-conscious emotions shape language achievement.

2. Literature review

2.1. Self-conscious emotions: Shame and guilt

Shame and guilt belong to the family of so-called self-conscious emotions – also called social or other-oriented emotions – for involving appraisals of others' thoughts, judgments, and feelings (Leary, 2007; Lewis, 1971; Tracy et al., 2007). During a shame experience, the focus of negative criticism is directed at the global self, leading individuals to deem themselves flawed or incompetent (Lewis, 1971; Tangney, 1990, 1995; Tangney & Dearing, 2003). A shamed individual would feel exposed, inferior, and hopeless, believing others negatively judge them (Tangney & Dearing, 2003; Tangney et al., 1996). As such, the individual would adopt avoidance or withdrawal responses as a defensive mechanism to escape painful feelings of shame. A shamed individual may also pin the blame onto others for their wrongdoings – a phenomenon called the *externalization of blame* (Tangney & Dearing, 2003; Tangney et al., 1996). In sharp contrast, during a guilt experience, the focus of negative criticism is directed at one's behavior rather than the entire self, making guilt less painful and damaging than a shame episode. Consequently, a guilty individual would admit responsibility for their misbehaviors and wrongdoings, seeking ways to take reparative actions (Lewis, 1971; Tangney, 1990, 1995; Tangney & Dearing, 2003). Figure 1 summarizes the distinct features of shame and guilt emotions.

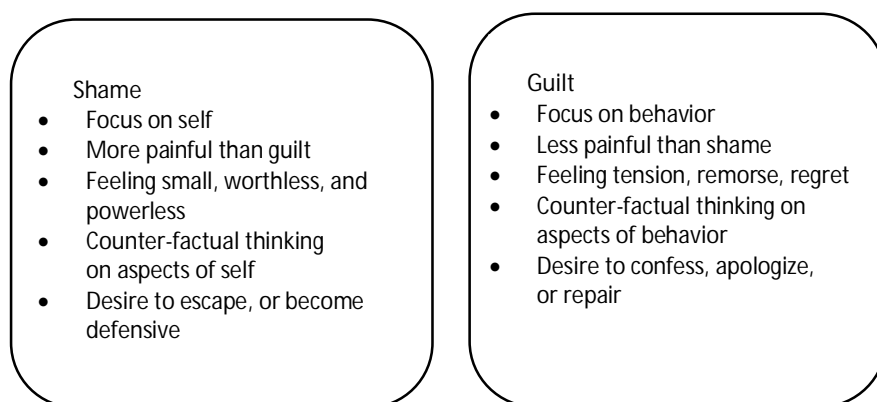


Figure 1 Differential features of shame and guilt (adopted from Teimouri, 2018, p. 635)

Shame and guilt reactions do not occur solely as a function of one's actual behaviors in real social events. In other words, an individual can also anticipate their likely shame and guilt reactions by imagining their (mis)behaviors along with their potential consequences in future events. These forms of forecasted emotional reactions, known as anticipatory shame and guilt, are different from consequential experiences of shame and guilt, which occur during or after an event (Tangney & Dearing, 2003; Tangney et al., 1996). A functional relationship also exists between consequential and anticipatory shame and guilt: One's past feelings of shame and guilt act as sources of critical feedback for assessing similar affective feelings in events that are expected to occur in the future (Tangney, 1995; Tangney et al., 1996).

Shame and guilt have so far been examined as emotional reactions occurring during actual or imagined events. However, these emotions can also be understood as dispositional traits (e.g., Spielberger, 1983). Emotional dispositions refer to a person's tendency or likelihood to experience particular emotions across relevant contexts (Tangney et al., 1996). Accordingly, individuals with higher shame-proneness or guilt-proneness are more vulnerable to experiencing shame and guilt, whether in anticipation of or following an event. Thus, proneness to shame and guilt as personality traits will exert their influence by triggering other cognitive, emotional, and behavioral regulations.

2.2. Shame, guilt, and L2 learning

In line with research in social and educational contexts, research on the impact of shame and guilt on one's motivation, behaviors, and achievement has also extended into the domain of L2 learning (e.g., Cook, 2006; Dong, 2022; Galmiche, 2017, 2018; Karimi & Fallah, 2021; Teimouri, 2017, 2018, 2019; Wang, 2016; Xu, 2024). Cook (2006), for instance, explored the shame experiences of 30 English as a second language (ESL) college students in the US and found that the students reported numerous cases of shame episodes while learning English. Furthermore, shame-prone students were found to avoid interactions using the target language. Likewise, Wang (2016) identified frequent experiences of shame among 143 Chinese college students learning English in China. The in-depth interviews revealed several causes of shame, such as meeting others' expectations, social comparison, personality traits, and L2 competence. Similarly, Galmiche (2017, 2018) investigated the shame experienced by L2 learners from different language and educational backgrounds in France. In interviews with L2 learners, shame emerged as the most recurring emotion, surpassing other negative emotions like frustration and anxiety. Shame also damaged the students' linguistic confidence, identity, and self-esteem. Moreover, shame-prone L2 learners

felt more anxious about L2 failures and were more inclined to avoid class interactions. Teimouri (2018) also found that shame (and guilt) were common emotional reactions among English learners in Iran. Similarly, Immonen (2020) examined Finnish university students' experiences of shame when using English, and the results of the students' autobiographical narratives instanced many episodes of shame reactions. Feelings of inferiority, discomfort with English pronunciation, and fear of negative evaluation were uncovered as common triggers of shame reactions. Shamed individuals also reported avoiding English-speaking situations as a means of shielding themselves from the painful pangs of shame.

Several studies have explored how shame influences L2 learners' motivation, emotional experiences, and language achievement. For example, Teimouri (2017) investigated L2 learners' experiences of shame within the framework of Dörnyei's (2009) L2 motivational self system. Findings from multiple regression analyses indicated that all learners, regardless of whether they were driven by an ideal L2 self or an ought-to L2 self, exhibited vulnerability to shame. Nevertheless, learners with stronger perceived social and personal obligations to learn English (i.e., ought-to L2 self/others and ought-to L2 self/own) demonstrated greater susceptibility to shame experiences. Karimi and Fallah (2021) also found that shame was positively correlated with exhaustion, cynicism, and academic inefficacy and negatively associated with teacher affective support (TAS). Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Dong (2022) identified that shame was strongly and positively correlated with boredom, hopelessness, and anger among 640 Chinese students in online FL classes. Shame was also strongly related to fixed mindsets and negatively related to growth mindsets. Barabadi et al. (2023) also detected a negative path between the shame-proneness of 483 Iranian students and their self-reported English proficiency, teacher evaluation, and course grades.

While studies reviewed above have primarily focused on shame and its link to internal and external factors, only two studies have examined the influence of guilt in conjunction with shame on L2 learning. Using *Second Language Test of Shame and Guilt Affect* (L2-TOSGA) to measure shame-proneness and guilt-proneness of 174 English-major students in Iran, Teimouri (2018) found that while shame-proneness reduced the students' attention, intended effort, and willingness to communicate in L2 (L2 WTC), guilt-proneness enhanced them. In addition, shame-proneness negatively affected L2 achievement, whereas guilt-proneness improved it. In another study using the L2-TOSGA questionnaire, Xu (2024) found that students' cognitive appraisal was negatively related to shame-proneness and positively associated with guilt-proneness. Moreover, emotion suppression was positively related to shame-proneness and negatively related to guilt-proneness.

2.3. L2 anxiety, enjoyment,¹ and L2 learning

L2 anxiety, often described as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry” (Spielberger, 1983, p. 1), is a well-established construct in SLA research. In its extensive research trajectory, L2 anxiety has been conceptualized either as a state, trait, or situation-specific emotion (Horwitz, 2010; MacIntyre, 2017; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Past research has consistently attributed a negative role to L2 anxiety in L2 learning, such as lowering achievement (e.g., Aida, 1994; Alrabai, 2022; Bielak, 2022; Li & Wei, 2023; Wang & MacIntyre, 2021), impairing cognitive processing (e.g., MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), reducing motivation (e.g., Papi & Teimouri, 2014; Teimouri, 2017), and decreasing willingness to communicate in the target language (e.g., Khajavy et al., 2018; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). In his review of L2 anxiety research, MacIntyre (2017) concluded that anxiety was best understood as a negative predictor of language achievement, a conclusion further supported by Teimouri et al.’s (2019) meta-analysis of L2 anxiety studies (see also Botes et al., 2020; Zhang, 2019).

Given the dominant negative role of L2 anxiety in L2 learning, research has consistently examined its predictors. From a motivational perspective, for instance, L2 learners’ wishes and aspirations for learning an L2 (i.e., ideal L2 self) have been shown to be negatively related to L2 anxiety, whereas their duties and obligations for L2 learning (i.e., ought-to L2 selves) have been positively associated with it (e.g., Jiang & Papi, 2022; Papi & Teimouri, 2014). Higher self-confidence has similarly been linked to decreased L2 anxiety (e.g., Alrabai, 2022; Dewaele & Li, 2022). Moreover, students’ self-perceived competence and actual L2 proficiency have been associated with lower levels of anxiety (e.g., Alamer & Lee, 2021; Lee et al., 2023), demonstrating a bidirectional relationship between anxiety and language achievement. Personality traits, such as openness to experience and L2 grit, have also emerged as negative predictors of L2 anxiety (e.g., Piechurska-Kuciel, 2018, 2020; Teimouri et al., 2022).

Although past emotion research had predominantly focused on negative emotions, particularly L2 anxiety (Teimouri et al., 2019), a notable shift in SLA research has occurred toward examining positive emotions, particularly L2 enjoyment (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Enjoyment in language learning reflects a positive emotional state associated with goal attainment, concentration, and the development of interpersonal relationships (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). L2 enjoyment has been conceptualized as a multidimensional notion closely related to internal and external factors, such as class dynamics, teacher support, peer

¹ The terms *enjoyment* and *joy* are used interchangeably in psychology and SLA literature to describe similar positive emotions. Thus no theoretical distinction between the two is made in this paper while reviewing the relevant literature in SLA.

collaboration, and personal learning experiences (Botes et al., 2020; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). The dynamic nature of L2 enjoyment and its fluctuation in the L2 classroom have also been highlighted (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2017; Elahi Shirvan & Taherian, 2020). The results of past research have also indicated a positive role on L2 enjoyment, such as improving L2 achievement (Jin & Zhang, 2021), increasing willingness to communicate (Khajavy et al., 2018), and boosting L2 self-perceived competence (Dewaele & Proietti Ergün, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020).

SLA research has also examined the connections between L2 enjoyment and various factors. Age and educational level, for instance, have been found to be positively correlated with L2 enjoyment; that is, older and university-level students have reported higher levels of enjoyment compared to younger and high school students (Dewaele et al., 2018; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). L2 learners' enjoyment has also been examined in relation to their motivational orientations; for instance, their ideal L2 selves have exhibited a strong relationship with L2 enjoyment during learning (Papi & Teimouri, 2014; Teimouri, 2017). In addition, research has shown that the personality traits of openness to experience and emotional intelligence have been positively associated with L2 enjoyment (Li & Xu, 2019; Resnik & Dewaele, 2020). Classroom context, including the teacher's behavior and the learning environment, has further been shown to influence L2 enjoyment, with supportive teacher practices and interactive activities fostering greater positive emotions (Elahi Shirvan & Taherian, 2020).

2.4. How do shame-proneness and guilt-proneness regulate L2 learners' anxiety and joy during L2 learning?

Despite substantial research focusing on the correlates of L2 anxiety and L2 enjoyment, the mechanisms by which other emotional traits regulate these two key emotions in L2 learning remain largely unexplored. Of particular interest, research on how L2 learners' proneness to shame and guilt may manifest themselves through L2 anxiety and L2 enjoyment is sparse. Such a research gap gains even more significance considering that research in social and clinical psychology has accumulated solid evidence regarding the substantial link between experiences of shame, social anxiety (SA), and social anxiety disorder (SAD) (e.g., Swee et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2021). For instance, Swee et al.'s (2021) meta-analysis revealed strong, positive correlations between shame and SA and SAD. According to Swee et al. (2021), "the conceptual overlap between SA and shame is substantial, and it seems highly unlikely, perhaps even impossible, to experience significant SA, and certainly diagnosable SAD, without experiencing some level of shame" (p. 2). In the context of L2 learning – intriguingly – even though

a handful of studies have also reported strong positive correlations between shame and L2 anxiety in their correlational tables ($r_s = .59-.70$) (e.g., Barabadi et al., 2023; Dong, 2022; Shen et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021), the theoretical connection between these two emotions has mainly been overlooked.

In contrast to shame-proneness, the relationship between guilt-proneness and anxiety has been found to be unstable in a few studies conducted in the domain of psychology. For instance, Lutwak and Ferrari (1997) found that while shame-proneness was positively related to social avoidance, distress, and interaction anxiety, guilt-proneness did not show any significant association with those anxiety symptoms. In another study, Fergus et al. (2010) identified non-significant relationships between guilt-proneness and different types of anxiety disorders after controlling for shame-proneness. Likewise, Căndea and Szentagotai-Tătar's (2018) meta-analysis on the connections between shame-proneness, guilt-proneness, and anxiety symptoms revealed that, in most instances, only shame showed a significant positive relationship with anxiety symptoms once the shared variance between shame and guilt was accounted for. In the L2 learning context, however, research examining how the guilt-proneness of L2 learners is related to L2 anxiety is non-existent.

2.5. Aims and research questions

Despite growing research in social psychology examining how people's proneness to shame and guilt are associated with various forms of anxiety, studies on how these emotional traits influence positive emotions like enjoyment are scarce. In the domain of L2 learning, this lack of research is even more pronounced, where no studies currently exist. As highlighted earlier, given the prominence of L2 anxiety and enjoyment as key affective factors in L2 learning, examining how L2 learners' shame-proneness and guilt-proneness regulate these emotions gains significant theoretical and educational relevance. As such, two independent studies in different contexts probed the links between English students' proneness to shame and guilt, L2 anxiety, L2 enjoyment, and L2 achievement. The results of these two separate studies in different contexts will strengthen the generalizability of findings beyond a single setting. Both studies explored the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do shame-proneness and guilt-proneness predict L2 anxiety and L2 joy?
- RQ2: How do L2 anxiety and L2 joy predict L2 achievement?
- RQ3: How do shame-proneness and guilt-proneness predict L2 achievement – directly and indirectly?

3. Study 1

3.1. Participants

327 fresh undergraduate students (234 females and 93 males) majoring in English in Iran participated in this study by completing a questionnaire. The students came from different age groups, from 18 to 66 years old ($M = 31.22$, $SD = 9.05$), who also reported various language learning experiences, ranging from 1 to 20 years ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 2.91$). Their self-reported English language proficiency level – on average – reached lower-intermediate ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.05$) on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (beginner) to 5 (upper intermediate and over) (see supplementary file for a copy of the scale).

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Shame and guilt

To measure the students' proneness to shame and guilt during L2 learning, the L2-TOSGA (Teimouri, 2018) was adopted. The L2-TOSGA is a scenario-based questionnaire developed and validated to measure L2 learners' tendencies toward experiencing shame and guilt in language learning. The questionnaire consists of 13 distinct but common L2 scenarios with the potential to induce shame and guilt reactions in L2 learners. Each L2 scenario is followed by items measuring shame-proneness, guilt-proneness, externalization, and detachment (46 items) (see supplementary file for a copy of the questionnaire). The addition of externalization and detachment items to the questionnaire was mainly due to the avoidance of compelling participants to select only shame and guilt responses (Teimouri, 2018, 2019). Previous studies have demonstrated the high reliability and validity of the L2-TOSGA in L2 learning contexts (e.g., Barabadi et al., 2023; Teimouri, 2018; Xu, 2024).

- *Shame-proneness scale* (13 items): The items reflect negative self-evaluation, where mistakes and failures are deemed as a function of a flawed global self, consequently leading to avoidance-type behaviors (e.g., "I would feel my English proficiency is worse than the other students").
- *Guilt-proneness scale* (13 items): The items reflect negative behavior evaluation, where mistakes and failures are deemed as a function of one's own wrongdoing, leading to corrective attempts to compensate for previous misbehaviors (e.g., "I would try harder next time to state what I mean more clearly").

- *Externalization* (11 items): The items measure tendencies to attribute failures to external factors to reduce one's own responsibility (e.g., "Students should have tried harder to understand what I meant").
- *Detachment* (11 items): The items measure a lack of concern or indifference toward the unfolding L2 event (e.g., "I wouldn't care; it happens sometimes").

3.2.2. L2 anxiety and L2 enjoyment

Four items from Taguchi et al. (2009) were used to assess learners' anxiety levels during L2 learning and use in English classes (e.g., "How worried would you feel if your teacher asked you a question in English?"). Four items from Teimouri (2017) were used to measure learners' positive feelings of joy (enjoyment) related to L2 learning (e.g., "Do you enjoy learning English?"). While alternative scales exist for measuring L2 anxiety (Botes et al., 2022b; Cheng, 2017) and enjoyment (e.g., Botes et al., 2021), the selected scales in this study have also been frequently employed in L2 research and have demonstrated strong reliability and validity in previous studies. The emotions of L2 anxiety and L2 joy were measured using a six-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 6 ("very much").

3.2.3. L2 achievement

Language achievement was assessed via students' final grades in three core language courses: grammar, speaking, and listening. Course grades, measured on a scale from 0 to 20, were calculated by averaging the scores from both midterm and final examinations in each respective course. Since all three course grades were strongly correlated ($r = .71-.82$), the grades were averaged to generate one overall achievement score for the statistical analyses.

3.3. Procedure and data analysis

The data collection began at the beginning of the academic semester at two private universities. Before the questionnaires were administered to the students in each class, they were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. The questionnaires were administered in the students' native language to ensure complete comprehension. All the items were randomized in

the questionnaires, and the questionnaires were administered to the students in two different class sessions, with the order of distribution varying between the sessions. Both written and oral instructions were provided to the students to ensure they understood how to complete the questionnaire. On average, it took the participants 15-20 minutes to fill out the questionnaires. The collected data were entered in SPSS 21 for data analysis, and the missing values, inconsistencies, and outliers were initially checked (see supplementary file). First, descriptive and reliability analyses were conducted for all the measured scales, followed by correlational analyses to examine their interrelationships. Lastly, path analyses were run to examine the direct, indirect, and total effects of the variables on the criterion variables. All the main assumptions underlying correlational analyses and path analyses were also examined (see supplementary file). Supplementary files are available from the OSF project page (<https://osf.io/zdf3k/>).

4. Results

As seen in Table 1, descriptive analyses revealed that the students had lower levels of shame-proneness ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.08$) and higher levels of guilt-proneness ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 0.74$). The students also reported a moderate level of L2 anxiety ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.22$) and a high level of L2 joy ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 0.67$). Finally, the students' final grades indicated high achievement levels ($M = 17.89$, $SD = 1.43$). In short, the results revealed that students tend to be guilt-prone and enjoy more positive emotional experiences while learning English. The results of reliability analyses – Cronbach's alpha (α) and McDonald's Omega (ω) – attested to the excellent internal consistency across measures, with L2 anxiety reaching an acceptable level (Cronbach's $\alpha = .68$, 95 % CI [0.65, 0.71]) due to its limited number of items (Field, 2018).

Table 1 Descriptive and reliability analysis of all the variables

Variable	Min	Max	Median	M	SD	α	ω	95% CI of the mean	
								Lower	Upper
Shame-proneness	1.0	6.0	2.15	2.40	1.08	.86	.86	2.29	2.52
Guilt-proneness	2.0	6.0	4.77	4.73	0.74	.87	.87	4.65	4.81
L2 anxiety	1.0	6.0	3.25	3.44	1.22	.68	.68	3.31	3.57
L2 joy	2.0	6.0	5.75	5.45	0.67	.82	.82	5.37	5.52
L2 achievement	12.83	20.0	18.17	17.89	1.43	.89	.89	17.74	18.05

Note. Six-point Likert-type scales were used to measure all emotion constructs. L2 achievement scores ranged from 0 to 20.

The results of the correlational analyses (see Table 2) revealed that shame-proneness was strongly and positively correlated with L2 anxiety ($r = .58$,

$p < .001$) and moderately and negatively correlated with L2 joy ($r = -.30, p < .01$). Guilt-proneness was moderately positively correlated with L2 joy ($r = .33, p < .001$) but was not significantly related to L2 anxiety ($r = .03, p > .05$). L2 anxiety and L2 joy were also moderately and negatively correlated ($r = -.25, p < .001$). Finally, L2 achievement was moderately negatively correlated with shame-proneness ($r = -.31, p < .01$) and L2 anxiety ($r = -.39, p < .01$), but was weakly positively correlated with guilt-proneness ($r = .14, p < .01$) and moderately positively correlated with L2 joy ($r = .30, p < .001$). Thus, consistent with Cohen's (1988) benchmarks, the strongest association was observed between shame-proneness and L2 anxiety, while moderate associations emerged between guilt-proneness and L2 joy. However, following Plonsky and Oswald's (2014) field-specific benchmarks for L2 research, the association between shame-proneness and L2 anxiety ($r = .58$) can be interpreted as a large effect, while the link between guilt-proneness and L2 joy ($r = .33$) represents a moderate effect.

Table 2 Correlational analyses of all the variables with confidence intervals

Variable	Shame-proneness	Guilt-proneness	L2 anxiety	L2 joy
Guilt-proneness	.07 [-.04, .18]			
L2 anxiety	.58** [.50, .65]	.03 [-.08, .14]		
L2 joy	-.30** [-.40, -.20]	.33** [.24, .42]	-.25** [-.34, -.15]	
L2 achievement	-.31** [-.40, -.21]	.14* [.03, .25]	-.39** [-.47, -.30]	.30** [.20, .40]

Finally, path analyses were run to examine the interrelationships between all the variables. In particular, the study aimed to examine how shame-proneness and guilt-proneness affect L2 achievement both directly and indirectly through L2 anxiety and L2 joy. Figure 1 shows the results of path analyses. First, the model's fit was examined based on several important fit indices, such as the chi-square test (χ^2) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), evaluating how well the model reproduces the observed data, with RMSEA values ≤ 0.06 indicating a close fit and values between .08 and .1 showing acceptable fit (Byrne, 2016; Kline, 2016; MacCallum et al., 1996). Moreover, incremental fit indices, such as the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), the normed fit index (NFI), and the relative fit index (RFI) were used (with acceptable thresholds of ≥ 0.90 and excellent fit at ≥ 0.95) to ensure that the proposed model adequately explains the observed data (Byrne, 2016). The chi-square statistic of 3.626 ($df = 1, p = .057$), the CMIN/DF value of 3.626, and the RMSEA value of .09 all suggested an acceptable fit. Other indices, such as CFI (.991), IFI (.991), TLI (.907), NFI (.988), and RFI (.876), also fell within acceptable limits.

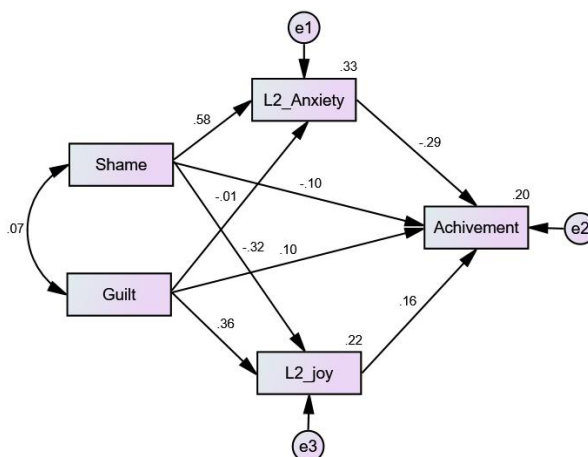


Figure 1 Path analyses (standardized coefficients) regarding the interrelations between shame-proneness, guilt-proneness, L2 anxiety, enjoyment, and achievement among Iranian students

L2 anxiety negatively ($\beta = -.29, p < .001$) and L2 joy positively ($\beta = .16, p < .001$) predicted L2 achievement. Shame-proneness had a strong positive effect on L2 anxiety ($\beta = .58, p < .001$) and a negative effect on L2 joy ($\beta = -.32, p < .001$). In contrast, guilt-proneness had no effects on L2 anxiety but positive effects on L2 joy. Neither shame-proneness ($\beta = -.10, p = .11$) nor guilt-proneness ($\beta = .10, p = .06$) exhibited statistically significant direct effects on L2 achievement, though the effects of guilt-proneness were close to reaching statistical significance. Furthermore, shame-proneness had a negative, indirect effect on achievement ($\beta = -.22, p < .001$) through both L2 anxiety and L2 joy, whereas guilt-proneness had a positive, indirect effect on achievement ($\beta = .06, p = .06$). Overall, shame-proneness had a total negative effect on achievement ($\beta = -.33, p < .01$), mainly through L2 anxiety and L2 joy. Conversely, guilt-proneness had a positive total effect on achievement ($\beta = .16$), primarily due to its positive indirect effects via L2 joy.

5. Study 2

5.1. Participants

A total of 256 undergraduate students from an elite public university in Turkey participated in the study. The sample included 173 females, 68 males, and five non-binary individuals; 10 students chose not to disclose their gender. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 32 years ($M = 21.13, SD = 1.76$). They came from various academic majors and years, including 91 students from Foreign Language Education and 162 from other fields. Regarding English proficiency, 75% identified

themselves as upper intermediate, 20% as intermediate, and 3% as lower intermediate. Most students (96%) had no experience living abroad, and almost 70% reported having a native English teacher.

5.2. Measures

The same scales used in Study 1 were also adopted in Study 2 to measure the students' shame-proneness, guilt-proneness, L2 anxiety, and L2 joy. However, the students' language proficiency was assessed by using the IELTS Academic Reading Test. This test consists of three reading passages that progressively increase in difficulty, assessing various reading skills, such as understanding main ideas and key details, scanning, analyzing logical arguments, and identifying the author's perspective, attitude, and purpose. The students' responses were graded by two research assistants independently, with any discrepancies discussed and resolved to reach complete agreement. The test scores ranged from 0 to 40.

5.3. Procedure and data analysis

Data collection took place in a lab setting with the help of two trained research assistants. The students first completed the paper-based IELTS Academic Reading Test, with 60 minutes to answer all questions. Afterwards, they filled out a paper-based questionnaire, which took approximately 15 minutes. Before beginning the data collection, the participants signed a consent form that outlined their rights, the purpose of the study, and the procedures. After data collection, each student was compensated \$15 as a token of appreciation. Two research assistants independently entered the collected data into SPSS 21 and then cross-checked for inconsistencies, resolving any discrepancies. Before proceeding with the main analyses, the dataset was screened for missing values, incomplete responses, and other potential issues. For data analysis, the same methods as those used in Study 1 were applied: descriptive and reliability analyses, correlational analyses, and path analyses. Likewise, all the main assumptions underlying correlational analyses and path analyses were examined (see supplementary file). Supplementary files are available from the OSF project page (<https://osf.io/zdf3k/>).

6. Results

As shown in Table 3, descriptive analyses revealed that the students exhibited a moderate level of shame-proneness ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.03$) and a higher level of

guilt-proneness ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.65$). Moreover, they reported lower anxiety levels ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.35$) but higher levels of L2 joy ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 0.89$). Finally, the students' IELTS reading scores ($M = 30.56$, $SD = 7.07$) indicated an upper-intermediate level of proficiency, equivalent to a band score of 7. In sum, the results showed that students tend to be more guilt-prone and experience more positive emotions than negative ones during L2 learning. Reliability analyses (Cronbach's α and McDonald's ω) also evidenced excellent internal consistency for all the measures (Field, 2018).

Table 3 Descriptive and reliability analysis of all the variables

Variable	Min	Max	Median	M	SD	α	ω	95% CI of the mean	
								Lower	Upper
Shame-proneness	1.31	6.0	3.31	3.41	1.03	.89	.89	3.29	3.54
Guilt-proneness	2.23	6.0	4.77	4.71	0.65	.86	.86	4.63	4.79
L2 anxiety	1.0	6.0	2.67	2.78	1.35	.84	.84	2.62	2.95
L2 joy	1.0	6.0	5.25	5.06	0.89	.87	.87	4.95	5.17
IELTS reading scores	7.0	40.0	32.00	30.56	7.07	-	-	29.69	31.43

The correlational analyses (see Table 4) also showed that shame-proneness was strongly and positively correlated with L2 anxiety ($r = .55$, $p < .01$) and weakly and negatively correlated with L2 joy ($r = -.20$, $p < .01$). Guilt-proneness was strongly and positively associated with L2 joy ($r = .50$, $p < .01$) and was not significantly related to L2 anxiety ($r = -.10$, $p > .05$). Shame-proneness and guilt-proneness were also found to be unrelated ($r = .01$, $p > .05$). L2 anxiety and L2 joy were weakly and negatively correlated ($r = -.22$, $p < .01$). Finally, students' IELTS reading scores were weakly and negatively correlated with L2 anxiety ($r = -.23$, $p < .01$) and weakly and positively correlated with L2 joy ($r = .17$, $p < .01$). Thus, consistent with Cohen's (1988) benchmarks, the strongest associations emerged between shame-proneness and L2 anxiety, and between guilt-proneness and L2 joy, while the other correlations were generally small in magnitude. However, following Plonsky and Oswald's (2014) L2 benchmarks, these associations would be interpreted as moderately strong, approaching the threshold for large effects ($r \approx .60$).

Table 4 Correlational analyses of all the variables with confidence intervals

Variable	Shame-proneness	Guilt-proneness	L2 anxiety	L2 joy
Guilt-proneness	.01 (-.10, .12)			
L2 anxiety	.55** (.47, .62)	-.10 (-.21, .01)		
L2 joy	-.20** (-.30, -.09)	.50** (.41, .59)	-.22** (-.31, -.13)	
IELTS reading scores	.02 (-.09, .13)	.12 (.02, .22)	-.23** (-.32, -.14)	.17** (.07, .27)

Finally, path analyses were conducted to assess the interrelations between shame-proneness, guilt-proneness, L2 anxiety, L2 joy, and IELTS reading scores.

Figure 2 shows the results of path analysis. Considering the model fit, the CMIN/DF value of 1.651 along with the values of RMSEA (.051), CFI (.997), IFI (.997), TLI (.951), NFI (.992), and RFI (.884) all indicated a strong model fit collectively (Byrne, 2016). L2 anxiety negatively predicted the IELTS reading scores ($\beta = -.32, p < .001$), whereas L2 joy positively predicted them ($\beta = .14, p = .04$). Moreover, shame-proneness strongly and positively predicted L2 anxiety ($\beta = .55, p < .001$) and had negative effects on L2 joy ($\beta = -.20, p < .001$). In contrast, guilt-proneness had a small but significant negative effect on L2 anxiety ($\beta = -.10, p = .05$) but strong positive effects on L2 joy ($\beta = .50, p < .001$). Finally, shame-proneness significantly positively predicted IELTS reading ($\beta = .23, p < .001$). Shame-proneness also had indirect, negative effects on IELTS reading through L2 anxiety ($\beta = -.21, p < .01$), whereas guilt-proneness had a small positive indirect effect on IELTS reading through L2 joy ($\beta = .10, p < .05$). Overall, guilt-proneness demonstrated a positive total effect on reading scores ($\beta = 0.12, p < .05$). While shame-proneness had a positive direct effect, it was offset by a negative indirect effect via L2 anxiety, ultimately leading to an insignificant total impact of .01.

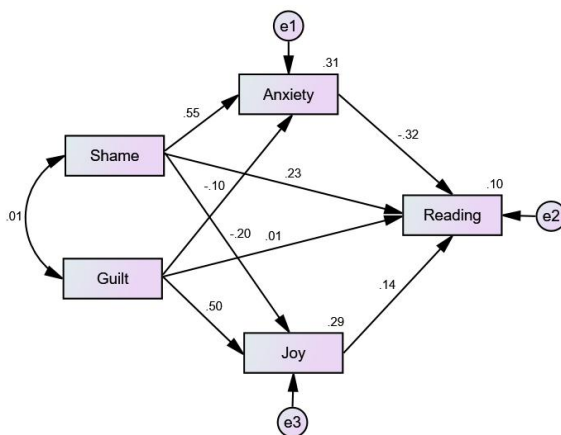


Figure 2 Path analyses (standard coefficients) regarding the interrelations between shame-proneness, guilt-proneness, L2 anxiety, enjoyment, and achievement among Turkish students

7. Discussion

Two independent empirical studies – Study 1 in Iran and Study 2 in Turkey – explored the relationships between undergraduate students' proneness to shame and guilt, L2 anxiety, L2 joy, and L2 achievement. A key focus of the study was

to examine how the shame-proneness and guilt-proneness of the students influenced their L2 achievement by regulating L2 anxiety and enjoyment. To address the first research question – how shame-proneness and guilt-proneness predict L2 anxiety and L2 enjoyment – the results revealed distinct patterns: while shame-proneness was strongly and positively related to L2 anxiety and negatively to L2 joy, guilt-proneness showed no significant connection with L2 anxiety and was positively associated with L2 joy.

The positive, strong path between shame-proneness and L2 anxiety in both studies is consistent with the results of past research in social psychology, wherein shame is strongly associated with social anxiety and other anxiety symptoms (e.g., Fergus et al., 2010; Harder & Zalma, 1990; Swee et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2021). In the L2 learning context, too, L2 learners' shame reactions are strongly associated with their language anxiety in a few studies (e.g., Dong, 2022; Shao et al., 2020; Shen et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021). As noted, a shame episode involves a negative evaluation of one's global self, where individuals perceive themselves as incompetent and flawed (Tangney & Dearing, 2003); consequently, shame-prone individuals are in a constant state of fear and worry regarding how others would judge their internal flaws and mistakes. As such, a shame-prone language learner would feel anxious about making language-related mistakes because they would consider those mistakes and errors to expose their incompetence and inadequacies to others (Galmiche, 2018; Teimouri, 2018, 2019). Moreover, shame-prone L2 learners might get involved in a state of negative ruminations (Tangney & Dearing, 2003) concerning their self-perceived (L2) incompetence and become overly vigilant about their actions, leading to increased nervousness and tension in social situations, wherein they are forced to use the target language. In addition, L2 learners' past shame experiences (i.e., consequential shame) might also trigger their L2 anxiety about future language use and recurrences of those painful emotional feelings (i.e., anticipatory shame) (Teimouri, 2018). On the other hand, guilt-proneness was found to be unrelated to language anxiety, which has also been found in previous research in social psychology (e.g., Fergus et al., 2010). As noted, guilt-prone individuals focus more on their behaviors than their global selves. Thus, they are less likely to be preoccupied with others' judgments and feel anxious about negative evaluations (Tangney et al., 1996). In other words, guilt-prone L2 learners would feel less anxiety because of their commitment to compensating for their shortcomings and advancing toward their L2 goals as past research has documented positive effects of guilt on L2 learners' motivation (e.g., Teimouri, 2018, 2019).

Considering the strong path between shame and anxiety, it is not surprising to see that shame-proneness has been negatively related to L2 joy. A pervasive self-criticism that fosters feelings of inferiority and worthlessness will drastically

reduce one's experiences of positive emotions like joy. In other words, the preoccupation with self-critical thoughts leaves little room for the emergence of positive emotions like joy (Fredrickson, 2001). In addition, because shame-prone L2 learners tend to avoid situations that might expose their L2 perceived inadequacies (Teimouri, 2018), they are less likely to engage in positive L2 learning experiences (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Guilt-proneness, on the other hand, is positively associated with L2 joy. Unlike shame, guilt arises from negative evaluations of one's specific actions (vs. global self) and motivates individuals toward reparative actions (Tangney & Dearing, 2003). Guilt-prone individuals are more likely to acknowledge their mistakes and take responsibility for their shortcomings. Guilt thus fosters a proactive approach to learning, an approach that will help L2 learners have a sense of accomplishment and progress, which, in turn, will boost their L2 enjoyment (Fredrickson, 2001). Moreover, guilt-proneness is associated with higher emotional intelligence and better emotional regulation strategies (Xu, 2024), enabling learners to manage negative emotions more effectively and maintain a positive outlook on their language learning journey.

The second research question focused on how L2 anxiety and L2 joy predict L2 achievement. In both studies, L2 anxiety negatively and L2 joy positively predicted L2 achievement. The negative impact of L2 anxiety on language achievement is well-documented in its extensive literature. Several meta-analyses have consistently detected a significant negative relationship between L2 anxiety and language achievement and performance (Botes et al., 2020; Teimouri et al., 2019; Zhang, 2019). The positive impact of L2 enjoyment on language achievement has also been well-established in SLA research. For instance, Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018) found that students who reported higher levels of enjoyment in language classes also achieved better academic results. According to Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions like joy expand individuals' thought-action repertoires, encouraging exploration and creativity. Therefore, joyful learners are more likely to participate actively in class, take risks using the language, and persist in facing challenges (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Teimouri et al., 2022). In their meta-analysis of research concerning foreign language enjoyment (FLE), Botes et al. (2022a) found that FLE was positively related to L2 learners' L2 WTC, self-perceived achievement, and academic achievement, and negatively associated with L2 anxiety.

The third research question investigated how shame-proneness and guilt-proneness predict L2 achievement directly and indirectly. In both studies, guilt-proneness had no direct effects on L2 achievement, whereas shame-proneness had positive direct effects on L2 achievement only in Study 2. The absence of significant direct effects of shame-proneness and guilt-proneness on L2 achievement in Study 1 suggests that these emotional traits influence learning outcomes mainly

indirectly through orchestrating emotions like anxiety and joy. Intriguingly, shame-proneness emerged as a positive predictor of L2 proficiency in Study 2. The contextual nuances in the elite Turkish university may have transformed the students' shame-proneness features into a motivational drive, leading to extra efforts and practices to meet high contextual, social, and familial expectations. Also, the nature of the achievement test itself could partly explain this discrepancy; for instance, the shame-achievement dynamics might have been different in a speaking test. Nonetheless, the results of Study 2 further demonstrated that the positive direct effects of shame-proneness on L2 achievement were offset by its adverse effects on L2 anxiety and L2 joy. In other words, the total impact of shame-proneness on L2 achievement reached almost zero because its positive and negative effects canceled each other out. In short, although shame may temporarily enhance one's achievement, it will damage one's overall motivation and success in the long run. For instance, a shame-prone L2 learner may study hard to avoid the embarrassment of receiving a low score on an exam; however, the constant anxiety generated by dreading failure can erode their genuine interest in learning English, leading to a decline in their L2 motivation and performance over time.

In summary, the results showed that shame-proneness and guilt-proneness shaped L2 achievement mainly via operating L2 anxiety and L2 joy. Specifically, shame-proneness reduced L2 achievement by amplifying anxiety and suppressing L2 joy, whereas guilt-proneness increased achievement by boosting L2 joy. Shame-prone students would feel more L2 anxiety due to the negative self-evaluation of their global L2 self, which would impair cognitive processing (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), L2 willingness to communicate (Khajavy et al., 2018; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996), motivation (Teimouri, 2017), and ultimately, L2 achievement (Teimouri et al., 2019). Similarly, shame-prone students would feel less enjoyment because of heightened anxiety and avoidance of L2 learning events, further undermining their L2 motivation and achievement. Guilt-prone students, on the other hand, would feel more L2 enjoyment because their compensatory efforts would result in improvements, progress, and a sense of accomplishment. Consequently, enhanced feelings of joy would strengthen their L2 motivation, engagement, and achievement (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Teimouri, 2017).

8. Limitations, future research, and pedagogical implications

Before discussing the theoretical and pedagogical implications of the study, several of its unique limitations need to be acknowledged. First, the samples recruited in both studies were not fully representative, with Study 1 involving only English major students from private universities and Study 2 involving students from

diverse majors from a leading university. Second, the cross-sectional design of the study did not allow for drawing causal inferences on how shame-proneness and guilt-proneness affect L2 achievement over an extended period of time, both directly and indirectly. Third, although the same tools were used to measure students' emotional traits, different measures were employed to assess L2 achievement (i.e., course grades and L2 proficiency tests). In addition, course grades were used as measures of language achievement in Study 1; however, as noted by Brown et al. (2018), course grades may not fully capture L2 proficiency because factors beyond language ability, such as grading policies and instructor expectations, may influence them. Finally, the overrepresentation of female students in both samples poses a challenge in generalizing the findings across genders.

This study was the first attempt to empirically test how shame-proneness and guilt-proneness, as two emotional traits, predict students' L2 anxiety and joy as well as their L2 learning outcomes, and the results are in line with the findings of research in social and educational psychology. However, more research is needed to better understand how shame and guilt regulate L2 learners' emotions (e.g., boredom) and learning behaviors (e.g., L2 use). In addition, longitudinal research can help pinpoint how the effects of shame-proneness and guilt-proneness on L2 learning outcomes evolve. For instance, in Study 2, shame-proneness was found to affect L2 proficiency directly. Therefore, longitudinal research has the potential to clarify whether these positive effects of shame may diminish over time. Another avenue for further research is examining how social and cultural values may induce shame and guilt among L2 learners. For instance, shame may function differently in collectivist cultures than in individualistic ones (Bedford & Hwang, 2003; Wong & Tsai, 2007). Also, future studies should investigate how other internal (e.g., gender, age) and external (e.g., teacher feedback, group dynamics) variables may moderate – or mediate – the interrelationships between shame-proneness, guilt-proneness, and L2 achievement. Finally, examining various dimensions of shame and guilt, such as state vs. trait or adaptive vs. maladaptive, would enhance our understanding of their subtle influence on L2 learners' motivation, behaviors, and L2 learning outcomes (Tangney & Dearing, 2003; Tangney et al., 1996).

The findings of this study highlighted the critical roles of L2 learners' emotions, in particular shame-proneness and guilt-proneness, play in determining L2 learning outcomes. Therefore, L2 teachers should aim to decrease the shame and anxiety reactions of L2 learners while increasing their positive emotions, such as joy, through various strategies. Teacher feedback plays a significant part in shaping learners' emotional responses during L2 learning. Thus, teachers should direct their feedback at students' behaviors rather than their attributes (Teimouri, 2018). By doing so, if students make mistakes, for instance, they will be more likely to

experience guilt reactions rather than shame and, consequently, will be more willing to extend their efforts to compensate for their shortcomings and more likely to enjoy the process of L2 learning. Teachers can also cultivate students' growth mindsets (Dweck, 2013) through various motivational strategies; teachers can highlight the fact that one's personal traits, such as intelligence and personality, are malleable and can be improved via hard work, reinforcing the idea that mistakes are opportunities for learning rather than reflections of one's inherent shortcomings. Teachers can also reduce their students' shame and anxiety by creating a positive learning environment. For instance, Karimi and Fallah (2021) revealed that teacher support reduced burnout in EFL learners. Specifically, students who perceived their English teachers as encouraging, respectful, and emotionally supportive reported lower levels of emotional exhaustion and cynicism. Moreover, teachers can take advantage of collaborative learning strategies, such as structured group projects and peer-assistance tasks, to strengthen supportive interpersonal relationships among the students, alleviating the negative effects of shame on the students' motivation and learning behaviors (Wilson, 2016).

9. Conclusion

Two independent studies examined how shame-proneness and guilt-proneness predicted L2 anxiety, joy, and achievement among undergraduate students. The findings revealed that shame-proneness strongly predicted higher levels of L2 anxiety and lower levels of L2 joy. Guilt-proneness, on the other hand, positively predicted L2 joy and had no significant relationship with L2 anxiety. In essence, shame casts a shadow on positive emotions, dimming the light of joy, while guilt serves as an energy source, fueling L2 joy. Consequently, the results underscored the harmful effects of shame-proneness on L2 learning outcomes. That is, shame-prone L2 learners experience more anxiety and less joy, damaging their cognitive and behavioral engagement in L2 learning. Shame hinders L2 learning, although it may occasionally catalyze short-term gains in specific contexts. Guilt-prone L2 learners, on the other hand, manifest more joy and less anxiety, fostering their cognitive and behavioral engagement in L2 learning. As this study has demonstrated, not all unpleasant emotions are inherently harmful to language learning – guilt transforms discomfort and regret into L2 learning success.

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