

Introduction to the special issue on foreign language anxiety: Theoretical and methodological developments

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Abstract

This introduction outlines the theoretical and methodological developments that have shaped research on foreign language anxiety since Scovel's (1978) foundational review. Building on MacIntyre's (2017) synthesis of the confounding, specialized, and dynamic phases, we argue that the field has entered a new contextual phase characterized by increasingly narrow, context-specific research questions and more sophisticated analytic approaches. We summarize eight contributions included in this special issue, which collectively span person-centered, cross-cultural, physiological, dynamic, and task-specific

examinations of language anxiety. These studies expand the nomological network of language anxiety by incorporating constructs such as shame, guilt, and imposter phenomenon; revisit debates surrounding the directionality of the anxiety-proficiency relationship; and employ innovative methodologies including latent profile analysis, Bayesian modelling, heart-rate variability, and experience sampling. Together, they demonstrate how language anxiety is best understood as a contextually grounded and dynamic construct.

Keywords: language anxiety; foreign language anxiety; second language anxiety

1. Introduction

Anxiety is undoubtedly the most prominent emotion studied in second and foreign language (L2) research. The emotion has been scrutinized in the literature ever since the first review of the topic was published by Scovel (1978). Since this initial review, anxiety in language learning has become a cornerstone of individual differences research in applied linguistics. As synthesized by MacIntyre (2017), language anxiety has undergone three major phases in the last fifty years, namely, the *confounding phase*, the *specialized phase*, and the *dynamic phase*, with each phase marked by its own theoretical and method-based debates. In this special issue, we have collated eight studies that each reflect different elements of the development of language anxiety research, demonstrating the theoretical and methodological strides made in the field. Furthermore, we argue that research on language anxiety have moved beyond the synthesis of MacIntyre (2017) to an increasingly narrow context-specific settings, using sophisticated methodologies. We therefore also introduce the *contextual phase* of language anxiety research.

2. The confounding phase

The first phase identified by MacIntyre (2017) is the *confounding phase*, wherein Scovel (1978) identified in his review of the literature that not all measures of anxiety were necessarily created equal. That is, the measures utilized to capture anxiety specific to language learning ought to have the necessary content validity to do so. Measures capturing clinical anxiety or general worry are not suitable to measure the nuances of language learning anxiety. Rather, anxiety research in applied linguistics ought to be targeted to the actual experience of anxiety during the course of language learning. In this special issue, we include seven empirical studies, of which each uses a different, yet valid, measure of language anxiety. Furthermore, each measure of language anxiety utilized specifically aims to capture

anxiety within the context of language learning, reflecting the acceptance of the issues raised in Scovel's (1978) review and the adaptation of the field towards embracing psychometric rigor.

Further arising from this research phase was the debate regarding facilitating and debilitating anxiety (see Kleinmann, 1977). This distinction pertains to whether all types of language anxiety should necessarily be viewed as negative and whether anxiety cannot to some extent be seen as a motivating force. Although the majority of modern measures and conceptualizations of language anxiety are based on anxiety as a debilitating force, with some researchers actively arguing against investigating facilitative anxiety (Horwitz, 2017), a few scholars have started to re-examine the possibility of facilitative effects of anxiety in language learning (see Mikami, 2023). However, Albert and Csizér's (20205) contribution to this special issue demonstrates that anxiety is not simply a cause or consequence of learning, but an emergent property of how multiple individual differences profiles combine in learners. In a large-scale questionnaire study of 1,152 Hungarian secondary school students learning English, they measured motivation variables, autonomy variables, positive emotions, and anxiety. Cluster analysis yielded different motivational, autonomy, and positive emotion profiles, which were then entered as factors in a general linear model predicting anxiety. Beyond modest main effects, the key finding was that two-way and three-way interactions explain more variance in anxiety than any single construct. Certain configurations, such as high overall motivation combined with negative classroom experiences, or strong ought-to-selves and high perceived importance of contact in the absence of positive emotions, are associated with particularly elevated anxiety, suggesting that motivational "pressure" can be anxiety-provoking when not buffered by positive affect. By contrast, internally driven motivation, positive learning experiences and higher autonomy tended to coincide with lower anxiety, even among learners with weaker positive emotion profiles, pointing to a protective role of autonomy. The study conducted by Albert and Csizér (2025) therefore problematizes the classic facilitating versus debilitating anxiety distinction by showing that anxiety is strongly related to a complex interrelated nomological network of variables that can both elevate or buffer against the effects of the negative emotion.

3. The specialized phase

The second phase identified by MacIntyre (2017), is the *specialized phase*, wherein language anxiety was researched as a domain-specific construct. The specialized approach was introduced by the seminal work of Elaine Horwitz, who developed the *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986). The FLCAS provided researchers with a reliable measure of situation-specific language

anxiety and, consequently, led to a rapid flourishing of research examining language anxiety and its nomological network. This new wave of emotion research specifically led to expanding the repertoire of emotions to include positive emotions such as enjoyment, hope, pride and curiosity (as also demonstrated in Albert & Csizér, 2025), as well as negative emotions such as anger, shame, and guilt, and the underlying mechanisms that drive feelings of anxiety in language learning contexts. Three contributions in our special issue are dedicated to expanding this nomological network of language anxiety, namely, the work of Teimouri (2025), Resnik et al. (2025), and Khajavy and Lou (2025).

Teimouri's (2025) contribution extended the nomological network of emotions surrounding anxiety to include self-conscious emotions, namely, shame and guilt. Across two studies (Iran, $N = 327$; Turkey, $N = 256$), the paper examined how learners' dispositional shame- and guilt-proneness indirectly shape L2 achievement through their influence on anxiety and enjoyment. Using path analysis, Teimouri found that shame-proneness strongly increased L2 anxiety and suppressed enjoyment, which in turn reduced achievement, whereas guilt-proneness enhanced enjoyment and modestly supported achievement without heightening anxiety. Intriguingly, a small positive direct effect of shame on achievement emerged in one context, suggesting that under strong performance norms shame may operate as a short-term motivational driver, though its total effect remained negative. These findings demonstrate that anxiety is embedded within a broader emotional system, revealing that its antecedents are not limited to situational stressors but also rooted in deeper self-evaluative processes. By differentiating the maladaptive self-focus of shame from the reparative orientation of guilt, the study advances a more granular, theory-integrated view of language emotions.

In turn, Resnik et al.'s (2025) contribution broadens the nomological network of language anxiety by introducing the imposter phenomenon (IP) as a psychological antecedent of both language anxiety and enjoyment. Drawing on data from 397 Austrian tertiary-level English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, the study examined how demographic and self-perception variables predict IP and how IP, in turn, shapes language anxiety, enjoyment, and engagement. Using structural equation modeling, the authors found that younger female learners and those perceiving themselves as below average in their cohort reported higher IP. IP was strongly positively associated with language learning anxiety and negatively with enjoyment and performance engagement, though not with other engagement dimensions. The novelty of the study lies in situating IP (a well-documented construct in psychology) within the nomological network of language learning, positioning it as a higher-order self-evaluative belief that helps explain why some learners experience persistent anxiety despite adequate proficiency or motivation.

Furthermore, the contribution of Khajavy and Lou (2025) applies latent profile analysis (LPA) to identify distinct subgroups of learners based on their language anxiety, thereby expanding the nomological network by showing that anxiety is not a uniform construct but one that clusters into meaningfully different experiential patterns (as was also demonstrated by Albert & Csizér, 2025). Using data from 384 Iranian tertiary-level EFL learners, the authors modelled language anxiety item responses and uncovered five profiles: low anxiety, medium anxiety, high anxiety, high physiological response, and high anxiety around the teacher. These profiles were meaningfully associated with willingness to communicate and achievement goals, demonstrating that the type of anxiety, not just its intensity, shapes motivational and behavioral outcomes. The identification of nuanced subgroups highlights how specific manifestations of anxiety have distinct correlates and potential intervention pathways.

Furthermore, during the specialized phase of research into language anxiety, the causality and directionality between anxiety and proficiency in the target language were under special scrutiny. Researchers such as Sparks and Ganschow (1995) strongly argued that language anxiety is merely the result of a lower aptitude and as such was of lesser import, whereas MacIntyre (1995) and Horwitz (2000) maintained that language anxiety was debilitating to foreign language learners' success and that "understand[ing] the many sources and the real observable consequences" of language anxiety was necessary in order to assist learners (MacIntyre, 2017, p. 9). The question of directionality regarding target language proficiency and language anxiety has not been settled in the literature, with some researchers arguing for spiral effects (see Botes et al., 2020a) and others arguing for a singular direction with language anxiety as a predictor (see Dewaele et al., 2023a, 2023b) or outcome (see Sparks & Alamer, 2022). Null results are also a distinct possibility, as demonstrated in the contribution of Abdi Tabari et al. (2025). Using a sample of 140 US university students (70 first language [L1] English writers, 70 advanced L2 English writers), the authors combined Cheng's (2004) multidimensional *Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory* with four rhetorical writing tasks of increasing cognitive complexity (narrative, expository, expo-argumentative, and argumentative). Writing output was evaluated through detailed complexity, accuracy, lexical sophistication and fluency (CALF) indices using Bayesian linear mixed-effects modelling. Results showed that while L2 learners reported significantly higher somatic, cognitive, and avoidance anxiety than L1 peers, anxiety had no direct or interactive effect on any performance measure. These null results are theoretically significant because they suggest that the well-documented negative association between anxiety and proficiency may be partly spurious, reflecting proficiency-driven variance rather than a causal effect of anxiety. By applying a rigorous Bayesian framework

and directly comparing L1 and L2 writers across matched tasks, Abdi Tabari et al. (2025) refine the causality debate at the heart of language-anxiety research, showing that anxiety may not independently impede proficiency once linguistic competence and task complexity are taken into account.

In addition, the introduction of the FLCAS in the specialized approach phase had additional consequences on language anxiety research that are still present. Firstly, the FLCAS provided researchers with an easily accessible and administrable tool that could be used to measure foreign language anxiety (see Botes et al., 2022; Horwitz, 1986). The ease of use of the FLCAS undoubtedly contributed to the current abundance of self-report anxiety research found in the literature, with the majority of anxiety research utilizing self-report scales (Botes et al., 2020b). This abundance of self-report measures is also reflected in the contributions to this special issue, with the work of Albert and Csizér (2025), Teimouri (2025), and Resnik et al. (2025) all relying on self-report measures. In contrast, methods such as physiological measures (e.g. Dewey et al., 2018), moment-to-moment measures (e.g. MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2022), and qualitative measures (e.g. Von Worde, 2003) are in part neglected in the literature. The reliance on self-report scales also has additional knock-on effects – an over-abundance of cross-sectional studies relying on linear methods, with some at times inferring causality.

In this special issue, we therefore also include a study utilizing physiological measures of anxiety, namely the contribution of Belnap et al. (2025). They offer a rare physiological perspective on language anxiety by examining how heart rate variability (HRV), a marker of stress regulation and autonomic flexibility, relates to emotional well-being and Arabic proficiency gains during a 13-week intensive study abroad program. Drawing on mixed methods with 21 US learners of Arabic, the study combined HRV recordings, personality traits, proficiency scores, and qualitative interviews. The findings revealed robust associations between neuroticism and elevated heart rate, and between conscientiousness and lower heart rate, linking physiological stress responses with stable dispositional tendencies associated with anxiety. Notably, higher HRV was associated with higher pre- and post-program oral proficiency, as well as with greater proficiency gains, suggesting that learners with better physiological regulation may either learn more effectively under immersion stress or experience reduced anxiety that enables deeper engagement. Interview data supported this interpretation, showing initial anxiety and cultural stressors giving way to adaptation and emotional resilience over time. The study further supports the use of HRV as a direct, continuous physiological indicator of anxiety-related arousal, offering insights not accessible through self-report alone.

4. The dynamic phase

The third and final research phase identified by MacIntyre (2017) is the *dynamic phase*, characterized by the measurement of language anxiety as a state-level construct measured at a moment-to-moment basis. This phase was ushered in by the introduction of the idiodynamic method, an experience sampling method (ESM) that allowed researchers to measure state-level anxiety experienced by language learners during language tasks, with learners rating their own emotions retrospectively (see Gregersen et al., 2014). The use of ESM, especially the idiodynamic method, has proved increasingly popular in applied linguistics literature to examine foreign language anxiety (see Arndt et al., 2023; Khajavy et al., 2021). However questions still remain concerning, for example, the distinction between state and trait emotions and the extent to which aggregate state emotions can be assumed to be pseudo-trait measures (see Rauthmann et al., 2019). Furthermore, the idiodynamic method involves the use of retrospective, moment-to-moment rating of emotions, whereas traditional ESM, favored in educational psychology research, measures emotion within the moment via smart apps (see Arndt et al., 2023).

In this special issue, Arndt and Krstic's (2025) methodological paper positions ESM as a crucial tool for advancing the dynamic approach to language anxiety research. ESM captures state-level emotions in real time, repeatedly and in situ, allowing researchers to track fluctuations in anxiety across the intermediate timescale (hours and days) that sits between idiodynamic, second-by-second data and longer-term questionnaire-based change. This timescale is largely absent from current second language acquisition research despite being theoretically central to understanding how anxiety ebbs and flows during everyday language use. The paper argues that ESM offers major advantages by providing ecologically valid, context-rich data about what learners are doing, where they are, and whom they are interacting with at the precise moment anxiety occurs. Furthermore, repeated measurements involved in ESM support both within-person analysis of emotional dynamics and between-person comparisons using multilevel modelling. Arndt and Krstic (2025) also highlight practical and conceptual issues, such as designing ultra-brief state-anxiety items, balancing random versus fixed sampling schedules, and addressing compliance and missingness, which require careful planning in applied linguistics studies.

Empirically, the contribution of Elahi Shirvan et al. (2025) further demonstrates the benefits of repeated measure designs and dynamic data by tracing the daily, person-specific trajectory of language anxiety over an entire year. Working with a single intermediate EFL learner ("Sara"), the authors collected 264 daily language anxiety ratings and applied dynamic P-technique factor analysis, a time-series structural equation modelling method that models both within-person

factor structure and lagged dependencies across days. The analysis revealed a four-factor structure of the participants' anxiety, namely, a lack of self-confidence, fear of negative evaluation, performance anxiety, and negative attitudes. Notably, positive feedback loops were found between these factors of anxiety. This study demonstrates why dynamic methods offer valuable insight into language anxiety, as they capture individualized patterns that are invisible in cross-sectional or group-level research. By showing how anxiety evolves across days within a single learner, the study highlights the fundamentally person-specific and temporally structured nature of language anxiety.

5. The contextual phase

Beyond the synthesis of the language anxiety literature provided by MacIntyre (2017), further developments in the field have arisen, leading to what we would term *the contextual phase*. In this current phase of language anxiety research, researchers are examining anxiety in increasingly narrow, context-specific research questions. Language anxiety is examined, for example, in the context of the teacher, the classroom setting, and the specific task, as opposed to broader context-general language anxiety studies. Literature has increasingly examined emotion from the perspective of language teachers, with anxiety in teachers being of particular concern (Ali, 2015; Aydin & Ustuk, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent rise of online language learning has also led to a slew of research examining foreign language anxiety in online settings (Resnik et al., 2023). Furthermore, the role of task-specificity in foreign language anxiety has been a topic of debate (Bielak, 2025), with some authors examining task anxiety as an additional debilitating emotion separate from the common conceptualization of foreign language anxiety (Donate, 2022). This specificity is seen throughout the contributions to our special issue, where language anxiety is consistently shown to be deeply context-bound. Albert and Csizér's (2025) learner profiles highlight how anxiety emerges from specific combinations of motivational, emotional, and autonomy-related classroom experiences, while Teimouri's (2025) work demonstrates how culturally situated self-conscious emotions shape anxiety differently across contexts. Resnik et al. (2025) reveal the social-comparative and identity-based classroom conditions that give rise to imposter-driven anxiety. In addition, Khajavy and Lou's (2025) latent profiles expose distinct forms of anxiety tied to different instructional and interactional environments. Abdi Tabari et al. (2025) situate anxiety within the narrow frame of task-specific writing demands, showing that its effects depend on cognitive task context rather than global proficiency. Belnap et al. (2025) capture anxiety physiologically within the

immersive and socially challenging conditions of study abroad. Methodologically, both Arndt and Krstic's (2025) ESM framework and Elahi Shirvan et al.'s (2025) person-specific dynamic modelling underline that anxiety is subject to moment-to-moment contextual changes. Together, these contributions demonstrate that language anxiety is shaped by the immediate social, emotional, instructional, and task contexts in which learners operate.

Furthermore, we argue that the contextual phase of research is driven by increasingly sophisticated methodologies, with applied linguistics researchers adopting complex analytic tools to model ever increasing complexity in language emotion research. In our special issue, the use of advanced methodologies is abundant, with the use of person-centered, dynamic, physiological, and multi-level approaches. Researchers draw on methods such as cluster and profile analyses to capture heterogeneous learner subgroups, longitudinal and dynamic modelling to trace emotional fluctuations over time, Bayesian and multilevel frameworks to account for context-embedded variation, and physiological measures to index stress responses in real-world environments. Experience sampling and intensive longitudinal designs further illustrate the move toward capturing emotions in situ and examining within-person variability rather than assuming homogeneity across learners. Collectively, these innovations reflect a vibrant field that is re-inventing and retooling itself to study anxiety as a context-sensitive, temporally unfolding, and individually patterned.

6. Conclusion

The contributions in this special issue illustrate both the historical continuity and the forward momentum of language anxiety research. While each study reflects elements of the confounding, specialized, and dynamic phases outlined by MacIntyre (2017), they collectively point toward a new contextual phase. By integrating context-sensitive theoretical frameworks with increasingly sophisticated methodological approaches, these studies demonstrate how the field is evolving toward a more precise and ecologically grounded understanding of anxiety. We hope this special issue encourages continued refinement of theory, method, and context in future research.

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