

Exploring the Influence of Motivation and Anxiety on L2 Students' Learning Outcomes

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Abstract. In second language studies, motivation and anxiety have always been the focus of scholars at home and abroad. This study conducted a questionnaire survey on over 120 Chinese IELTS candidates and selected 5 participants for case interviews. Relevant analysis was conducted on the results of the questionnaire survey, and the interview data was also summarized, aiming at exploring the relationship between motivation, anxiety, and academic performance in second language acquisition represented by the IELTS exam. The research has shown that there is a significant positive correlation between IELTS scores and the L2 Motivational Self System, with the internal ideal L2 self demonstrating a higher level of impact on scores than the ought-to self. The necessary external motivations have also been proven to be advantageous; There is an overall negative correlation between anxiety and academic performance. The study fills the gap in second language studies for IELTS learning by investigating the current situation of Chinese IELTS candidates. It is suggested that learners should fully utilize the incentive function of L2 motivational self during exam preparation and consciously regulate their anxiety to stabilize their emotional states.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition; L2 Learning Motivation (L2M); L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS); Anxiety; IELTS Learning.

1. Introduction

With the prosperity of globalization and the transition into the knowledge economy, there is an emerging correspondence among countries worldwide. The second language, as an indispensable communication tool, has been explored widely.

Second language acquisition, which differs from mother tongue learning, is influenced by complicated factors, including subjective and objective ones. Individual factors of the learners have been closely associated with second language acquisition (SLA). As a result, the relationship between the key elements like motivation and anxiety also attracts considerable attention and is well-established.

Gardner and Lambert pioneered research on motivation for second language learning from the perspective of social psychology, creatively categorizing foreign language learning motivation into “convergence motivation” and “instrumental motivation” [1]. As the popularity of English grows globally, researchers began to take into account internal and dynamic factors like attitude, which may weigh more in affecting the motivation of L2 learners compared with interest in native-speaking groups [2]. In 2005, Dörnyei introduced a creative “self” perspective into L2 motivation research, putting forward the L2 motivational self-system (L2MSS). Combining self-theory in psychology and Dörnyei’s own empirical findings, the L2MSS includes 3 aspects: ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self and L2 learning experience [3].

Learning anxiety refers to the learners’ negative response to the outcome that may threaten their sense of worth or self-esteem, such as annoyance, nervousness, or fear caused by learning [4]. Many domestic studies have concluded that anxiety is a key factor affecting learning behaviors [5,6]. In earlier times, SLA studies on learning anxiety mainly focused on the causes, tools for measuring foreign language learning anxiety, its manifestation and the relation between academic performance and learning anxiety. In 1996, Horwitz et al. proposed that the definition of foreign language anxiety

should be combined with contextualization and described FLA as “a distinct complex construct of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of language learning process” [7,8]. Based on the concepts mentioned before, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was designed by Horwitz et al. and provided a valid tool for further quantitative analysis of foreign language learning anxiety [8]. Horwitz divides anxiety into three categories, communication anxiety, class anxiety and test anxiety [7].

However, as China is getting more and more involved in the international world, the number of International English Language Testing System (IELTS) learners has demonstrated a booming trend. The previous study may lack accuracy in describing the influence of motivation and anxiety on L2 students’ learning outcomes, especially on IELTS scores. For the sake of that, this study is aimed at filling this gap and will conduct a survey based on Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) and Horwitz’s Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale with IELTS learners as a research subject, in order to explore the relevance between motivation, anxiety and the IELTS score. It is also expected to provide empirical evidence for understanding Chinese students’ emotional state and further enhance the learning effects of second language acquisition. For this purpose, a sample of over 100 IELTS learners were surveyed and collected materials including their scores and status of learning motivation and anxiety.

2. Method

This study combines both quantitative and qualitative research methods as complementary to each other.

2.1. Research Question

Based on the research purposes and the literature review in the dissertation, this paper takes IELTS learners as respondents and mainly investigates the following issues through quantitative questionnaires and qualitative interviews:

- i) What are the general profiles of motivation and anxiety?
- ii) What’s the relationship between academic performance on IELTS and the learners’ motivation and anxiety?
- iii) What are the causes of motivation and anxiety individually?

2.2. Questionnaire

As a response to research questions, the questionnaire has two main purposes. One is to investigate the possible learning motivation of different IELTS learners. The other is to investigate whether IELTS learners have different types of learning anxiety.

2.2.1. Participants

The questionnaire is designed for IELTS learners. 126 participants are surveyed in total, including 76 females and 50 males. Among these participants, 61.16% of them are undergraduates and 8.26% are high school students, taking up the least share. The average IELTS score of the people involved is around 6.5.

2.2.2. Questionnaire design

Based on Horwitz’s anxiety classification and scale in 1986, Dörnyei’s “motivation self-system” theory and Chinese English learners learning motivation proposed by Liu Fengge, a new targeted questionnaire is formed with some innovative adaptations [7,9,10]. A 5-point Likert scale was taken to collect data for subsequent quantitative research. This questionnaire consists of 35 items in total and is rated on a 5-level scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

There are 3 dimensions in the provided questionnaires.

Firstly, the questionnaire will provide a brief understanding of the basic information from the participants engaged, including gender, age and most importantly, IELTS score.

Secondly, several questions about motivation are presented based on the elaboration and classification of motivation from Dörnyei [9]. Questions A1 to A5 are about the Ideal L2 Self. Questions A6 to A10 are about Ought-to L2 Self and questions A11 to A15 correspond to L2 Learning Experience. This part helps deepen the inquiry of the participants' motivation in SLA.

The final part is aimed at learning about the participants' learning anxiety. People engaged are asked to explain their own anxiety through several questions on emotional state. According to the classic FLCAS by Horwitz, the following questions are matched with learning anxiety, communication anxiety and test anxiety individually [7].

The reliability coefficient of the whole questionnaire is computed by Cronbach's alpha and turns out to be 0.848, which indicates good internal consistency.

2.2.3. Questionnaire collection

The questionnaires are distributed through network channels and invite IELTS learners who have taken IELTS at least once to fill in. According to the research topic of this study, the selected samples and data can be regarded as a relatively representative sample to reflect the relationship between grades, motivation, and anxiety. 121 valid questionnaires were collected in total, with 5 invalid questionnaires removed so the efficient rate is 96.03%.

2.2.4. Data analysis

After collecting the valid questionnaire data, SPSS 26.0 is used to analyse as follows: (i) report on the different types of motivation of second language learners in IELTS learning in a descriptive statistical form. (ii) report on the different types of anxiety of second language learners in IELTS learning in a descriptive statistical form. (iii) analyze the correlation coefficients between IELTS scores and three variables of second language motivational self-system, as well as different types of anxiety.

2.3. Qualitative Study

To further explore the reasons behind the motivation and anxiety of IELTS learners, qualitative interviews were conducted to obtain more authentic and effective material.

2.3.1. Participants

Five participants are interviewed in the study, one of whom is male and the other four are female. All of them are junior students who have experience in the IELTS exam.

2.3.2. Interview syllabus

The interviews are in the form of Q&A, primarily based on the research purposes and research questions of this paper. Interviewees were invited to participate in online conferences during which conversation materials were kept through recording and other forms.

The whole interview is divided into 2 parts. Before the formal interview process, the interviewees are asked for their personal basic information including their age, IELTS scores and preparing duration for the test if necessary. Then more detailed questions about learning motivation and anxiety are set forth to get a better handle on their learning states. For example, why do they sign up for IELTS and which subject worries them most if having test anxiety?

3. Results

3.1. The Relationship between L2 Learning Motivation and IELTS Performance

After necessary correlation analysis (see Table 1), it is shown that three dimensions of the L2 motivational self-system were all in positive correlation with IELTS performance [9].

Table 1. Correlation analysis between Second Language Self and IELTS Scores

	L2MSS	IELTS Score
1	Ideal L2 self	0.576**
2	Ought-to L2 self	0.360**
3	L2 learning experience	0.490**

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed), with a Pearson correlation coefficient.

The results of correlation analysis reveal the relationship between three variables of second language motivation self-system and the outcome of second language acquisition, which is reflected by IELTS scores.

Compared with the other two types of motivation, the ideal L2 self is proven to have a greater impact on IELTS outcomes, presenting a correlation coefficient of 0.576. As Dornyei's findings suggested, integrative motivation, also known as the ideal self in the motivational self-system, can best explain why people choose a certain activity, how long they are willing to persist, and how much effort they are ready to put in [6,11]. It can be indicated that the ideal L2 self triggers more intrinsic motivation, which may help promote the learners to achieve effective incentives to continue their IELTS learning. When the learners avoid treating learning IELTS as a responsibility or obligation which means catering to others' expectations, they are allowed to be driven internally. Positive learning strategies will also be taken if the learners themselves aspire to achieve higher scores in final tests. The ideal L2 self helps to facilitate the motivation for IELTS learning in the study, and the more learners are driven by their ideal self, the better their test scores may be. This result is consistent with the research findings of Zhong Linjing [12].

3.2. The Relationship between L2 Learning Anxiety and IELTS Performance

It is demonstrated that three types of anxiety in second language acquisition according to Horwitz have significant negative correlations with IELTS scores [7].

Table 2. Correlation analysis between Anxiety and IELTS Scores

	Anxiety	IELTS Score
1	Communication anxiety	-0.496**
2	Class anxiety	-0.490**
3	Test anxiety	-0.451**

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed), with a Pearson correlation coefficient.

The results of the correlation analysis reveal the correlation between three types of anxiety in SLA and the IELTS scores (see Table 2). It has been discovered that a higher level of anxiety may produce worse IELTS grades. This result is consistent with the related research of Wu Xiaoyan [13].

In the survey, 59.51% of participants reported feeling panicked when talking with native English speakers, indicating that almost half of second language learners suffer from such communication anxiety.

3.3. Conclusion of Interview Results

Through online and face-to-face interviews, the major findings are as follows:

i) Most learners entered IELTS for the purpose of studying abroad or applying for international study programs. They also believe that it is an authoritative test worldwide and helps achieve qualifications of English language ability.

ii) External motivation, such as striving for an overseas offer, may have a significant function of motivation in IELTS learning. Meanwhile, if one has a certain intrinsic motivation like enjoying English spontaneously, the final grade also tends to be higher accordingly.

iii) Basically every interviewee, regardless of the level of grades, holds a common view that the anxiety level in IELTS learning is related to one's English proficiency. Compared with the other two types of anxiety, participants reported varying degrees of prominent test anxiety, which prevented them from performing their best in IELTS more or less.

4. Discussion

By adopting both quantitative and qualitative methods, this research conducted correlation and regression analysis on the data collected by questionnaire survey and sorted out interview materials. In order to explore the influence of motivation and anxiety on L2 students' learning outcomes, IELTS learners are chosen as the research object and their scores are applied to be the reflection of second language learning results. This is what the study found: (i) The three aspects of the L2 motivational self-system all have a direct bearing on IELTS scores. Ideal L2 Self and Ought to L2 Self are positively associated with IELTS scores. Both ideal L2 self and ought to L2 self can affect the learners' emotional state, effort investment and so on in the learning process. By contrast, the inherent ideal self yields a more marked influence on learning outcomes. (ii) There is a significant negative correlation between anxiety and IELTS scores. The higher the level of anxiety is, the more stressful the students will feel, and gradually influences the learning achievement adversely. (iii) Due to conditioning from domestic society, Chinese students commonly have test anxiety, which may trigger uncertain factors like forgetfulness.

The research suggests that by taking IELTS learning as a representation, learners can initially anticipate their ideal self-standards to stimulate their intrinsic motivation in the following study. If there are proper external factors to urge one's preparation progress, unexpected good effects may be triggered. In addition, learners should pay attention to alleviating their exam anxiety during the preparation process and final examination, properly handling existing problems like oral English shame. Finally, getting fully prepared for the exam proves to help relieve inner anxiety to a certain extent and thus avoid making unnecessary mistakes from nervousness.

5. Conclusion

This study focuses on the roles of motivation and anxiety in second language acquisition. It combines qualitative and quantitative methods and uses IELTS scores as a reflection of the effectiveness of second language acquisition, in order to explore more effective learning strategies. The research was conducted on the current learning situations of second language learners and took two authoritative theories as its theory basis, also reflecting on previous research findings to ensure the scientific validity of the questionnaire issued. This thesis has provided a deeper insight into the correlations between motivation, anxiety and L2 outcomes. Meanwhile, innovation points are established by exploring the research gap of IELTS learning in second-language areas at home. Ultimately, the

conclusion is drawn that appropriate types of motivation contribute to improving IELTS grades and excessive anxiety may harm grades.

The shortcomings exist in the meantime. First, the sample capacity is slightly small and has an uneven sex ratio. Second, it has to be admitted that some other possible factors which may influence SLA have not been considered comprehensively so the conclusions may not be representative enough. Therefore, the further work is hoped to expand samples and make improvements.

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