

The Correlation among L2MSS, Foreign Language Enjoyment and Boredom in Online Classes: An Exploratory Study of Chinese English Majors

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Abstract

According to the statistical results of questionnaires issued, this research, standing up for positive psychology (PP), analyzed the relationship between second language motivational self system (L2MSS), foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and foreign language learning boredom (FLLB) of Chinese English language students in the post- pandemic era in an e-learning environment. The results show that: (1) Chinese English majors maintain a medium to high level of L2MSS and FLE in their online classes, and a medium level of foreign language learning boredom; (2) FLE has a negative correlation with FLLB; (3) FLE produces a positive predictive trend for ideal L2MSS and learning experience. However, FLLB does not produce a significant predictive trend for either of these categories. The study integrates multiple theories in second language acquisition (SLA), which not only corroborates the applicability of the undoing hypothesis in the online classroom, but also provides a scientific basis for improving language learning outcomes for English majors in China at a theoretical level.

Keywords: L2MSS, foreign language enjoyment, foreign language learning boredom, broaden-and-build theory, online learning

1. Introduction

The research related to second language motivation has become one of the issues that cannot be avoided in the exploration of this area of second language acquisition (SLA). Due to the growing concern for individual differences, psycho-emotional and cognitive aspects of learners in their learning process have become a central issue (Wen, 2010). At the same time, among the various fields and sub-disciplines, positive psychology (PP) has a deep connection to second language acquisition, both in terms of its scope and depth of research (Li, 2021). Also, Seligman (2002) clearly pointed out that PP should shift from repairing deficits to constructing positive elements, and since then, research on positive emotions and negative emotions has begun to flourish and has entered a boom stage so far.

With the COVID-19 triggering lockdown in Chinese universities, online or blended teaching models have gradually drawn attention from scholars studying SLA (Han & Gao, 2020; Li & Han, 2022), and delivery models such as flipped classroom, which use information technology for knowledge transfer, have begun to enter English classes in Chinese universities. Also, as the foreign language education model in China gradually focuses on a mix of online and offline student learning models (Hu, 2021), the research environment of motivational and emotional research in SLA is also undergoing a shift. What's more, the prominence to note is that the emotional engagement created the possibility of sustainable change in terms of education. It is interesting to point out that the change is sustainable if it lasts for a period of time before the pedagogical transformation is fully implemented (Hubers, 2020). Simply put, students' learning outcomes are thus influenced to varying degrees by their emotional engagement in online learning.

In order to promote the development of the foreign language teaching model with Chinese characteristics and to enhance sustainable learning for English majors in China, this study aims to discuss the association among L2 motivational self system (L2MSS), foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and foreign language learning boredom

(FLLB), as well as the effect of FLE and FLLB levels on L2MSS among English majors in the online classroom in China.

2. Literature Review

2.1 L2 Motivational Self System

Studies concerning second language motivation has long been a major concern in the field of SLA. In the 1950s, Gardner, a Canadian psychologist, proposed a socio-educational model and summarized two types of motivational orientations, “integrative” and “instrumental” orientations (Gardner, 1985). In this century, with the development of globalization, Dörnyei proposed a self-centered theory of L2MSS based on the original motivation theory (Dörnyei, 2009). On the basis of mainstream psychology, the L2MSS consists of three parts, including ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self and L2 learning experience (Dörnyei & Csizer, 2002). The ideal self-produced by the learner during the L2 process is called the ideal L2 self. Different from the real learner, it can help L2 learners to develop a strong motivation to learn, provided that they want to master a certain L2 to make up for their current deficiency. People are expected to have certain characteristics to avoid certain negative influences or to meet certain expectations, imposed by their environment and culture, and this is the ought-to L2 self. The motivation generated by The L2 learning experience is related to the learner’s experience in the specific context. It is influenced to varying degrees by the instructor, the content of the lesson, the learning partner and related experiences. Dörnyei further states that in this theoretical framework, people often expect or believe that they should be able to master and become proficient in a kind of language, which leads to incentive to master the target language, and this incentive is often strong. By generating this motivation, people can bridge the gap between reality and the ideal (Dörnyei, 2009).

With the deepening of motivation research in educational psychology and the development of motivational inquiry in SLA, a more systematic understanding of the academic community has developed in the essence of second language motivation, which tends towards the existence of temporality and contextuality of motivation for SLA encompasses a variety of dynamic mechanisms (Dörnyei, 2009). For the past few years, L2MSS has been mostly used to explore learners’ L2 learning behaviors, and several empirical studies have shown that the ideal L2 self and positive L2 learning experiences tend to have a predictive function on learners, while the exploration of the intrinsic link between the ought-to L2 self and the learner may differ from person to person (Papi, 2010; Wei, 2013). Moreover, Liu (2015) examined the validity of the L2MSS in different groups of Chinese EFL students and the results were within acceptable limits, suggesting that the model is applicable to the Chinese EFL students. Wei explored the relationship between the L2MSS and ambiguity tolerance and communicative intention, illustrating that learning motivation and ambiguity tolerance should be increased to improve students’ communicative willingness (Wei, 2020). However, with the rise of the online teaching model, we should devote more attention to the changes in second language motivation in the online classroom environment.

2.2 The Broaden-and-Build Theory

As the foundation of PP, the broaden-and-build theory was developed by Fredrickson in 2001. Fredrickson (2001) argued that positive emotions can expand the space for an individual’s momentary thinking and behavior, thereby building the ongoing capacity of the individual, which provides long-term adaptive benefits, whereas negative emotions narrow individual resources and are detrimental to long-term development. At the same time, considering that individuals are influenced by the surrounding environment and other factors, the broaden-and-build theory also proposes the undoing hypothesis, which intends to discuss the dynamic relationship between positive and negative emotions, i.e., positive emotions have some ameliorating effect on the negative effects of negative emotions.

In recent decades, as research in humanistic psychology has become popular, many researchers and educational scholars in the field of SLA are turning to positive emotions, thus exploring the intersection between positive and negative emotions and their predictive effects on academic achievement based on the broaden-and-build theory. Li’s empirical study with Chinese high school students confirms this finding (Li, 2020). In general, the predictive function of negative emotions can be illustrated through the broaden-and-build theory.

2.3 The Control-Value Theory

In contrast to the broaden-and-build theory, the control-value theory is more likely to describe the relationship among emotions, activity processes, and achievement outcomes (Pekrun, 2006). It proposes a three-dimensional categorization of emotions to help research the concept, production, and interrelationship of academic emotions in a specific educational context, and advocates defining academic emotions in terms of three dimensions:

validity (positive emotions versus negative emotions), activeness (activity process), and goal directness (activity itself or activity achievement). For example, enjoyment is a positive, high-arousal process emotion, whereas anxiety is a negative, high-arousal outcome emotion (Han & Xu, 2020). Emotions are important elements generated in the learner's learning environment and can act on the learner's internal cognition to motivate learning (Dewaele & Li, 2022). Moreover, control-value theory varies across domains, and then the composition of learning emotions can vary across instructional models, subjects or sub-domains of subjects (Goetz et al., 2008).

Up to now, the empirical studies using the control-value theory in the framework of SLA have been mainly used to investigate the interrelationship of emotions in specific contexts and the forecasting role of emotions on second language behavior (Li & Dewaele, 2020). Unlike the broaden-and-build theory, the control-value theory tends to explore the relationship between emotions generated in different educational settings of learners, observing the generation, role, regulation, and outcome of emotions generated in learning activities.

2.4 FLE and FLLB

With the development of PP, in the 21st century, academics began to emphasize the concept of whole-person education, and foreign language education gradually shifted from focusing on learners' deficits to a humanistic education in which negative and positive emotions are given equal importance (Dong, 2021). Many scholars have thus begun to focus more on the positive qualities that enable students to be successful, fulfilled, and self-actualized (Jiang & Li, 2017). An avalanche of scholars began to comprehensively explore the role of multiple emotions on L2 learners, among which enjoyment has received greater attention (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2017). Over the past few decades, FLLB has also come to the forefront of researchers in negative emotion research (Kruk, 2019; Li & Dewaele, 2020).

Among the numerous positive emotions produced by foreign language learners (FLL) in their learning process, enjoyment has received the most extensive attention, meaning the positive emotion experienced by learners after coping with learning challenges, carrying out academic activities, and achieving psychological requirements during foreign language learning process (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Motivated by the broaden-and-build theory, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) conducted research in a foreign language learning environment to examine FLE as a positive emotion and foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) as a negative emotion, and the study confirmed the simultaneous presence of both emotions in a multilingual sample with a moderate negative correlation. Subsequent studies in the field of SLA based on the broaden-and-build theory have mostly been about FLE and FLCA (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Elahi Shirvan & Taherian, 2018). Meanwhile, some studies have also discussed the predictive path of FLE on foreign language achievement through structural equation construction, which showed that in addition to its own predictive role, FLE also indirectly and significantly positively predicted foreign language achievement through "expectancy motivation" (Dong, 2021).

In recent years, with the academia focusing on the concept of whole-person education, FLLB, including pleasure, shame, burnout, and other emotions developed by FLL, has gradually come to the forefront of researchers' minds (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Teimouri, 2018; Li, 2020). Li & Dewaele (2020) explored the prediction of FLLB by emotional intelligence and perceived learning gains of Chinese tertiary students (non-English majors) in the English online classroom environment, both of which together acted as a negative predictor of FLLB in the online education context. Li & Han (2022) discussed the results of the prediction of FLE and FLLB on learning performance in the e-learning environment, and the results showed that FLE and FLLB jointly predicted students' self-assessment performance in online classes. At this stage, research on FLLB is still in its infancy, and its effect paths and interrelationships with other foreign language emotions remain to be explored.

3. The Study

3.1 Questions

Compared to the traditional classroom, there are relatively few studies on the relationship between L2MSS and FLL's emotion in the online classroom environment, especially for Chinese English majors. Meanwhile, as an emerging trending topic, the relationship between FLLB and L2 learning motivation is still unclear.

In view of this, the study examined the levels of L2MSS, FLE, and FLLB among Chinese English majors in the online classroom environment, then explored the relationships among the L2MSS, FLE, and FLLB, and finally discussed the influence of the FLE and FLLB on the L2MSS. These research questions are set out below.

- (1) What are the levels of L2MSS, FLE and FLLB among Chinese English majors in the online classroom environment?
- (2) What are the relationships among L2MSS, FLE and FLLB?

(3) What are the forecasting roles of the two foreign language emotions on the L2MSS?

3.2 Participants and Context

The study, using a web-based questionnaire, investigated 150 English majors from Chinese universities, and eventually obtained 137 valid questionnaires with an effective rate of 91.33%. The average age of the 150 participants (16.97% of male, 83.21% female) was 19.99. Affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, all participants took the e-learning courses during the period when this questionnaire was conducted.

At both Chinese and international levels, most of the research objects in the field of SLA are non-English majors, and so far, only very few studies have taken English majors as the research objects. Therefore, it is valuable to explore the localization of the research on second language motivation and foreign language emotions in connection with Chinese English majors in the post-pandemic era.

4. Instruments

4.1 L2 Motivational Self System Subscale

The scale in this study was adapted from the questionnaire designed by Taguchi et al. (2009) for Chinese EFL learners when they investigated the L2MSS of EFL learners from 3 countries including China. The scale consists of three aspects: ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience, with a total of 15 items, and is a 5-point Likert scale (from 1= totally disagree to 5= totally agree) with positive scoring. The total scale reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .843) and subscale reliability (Cronbach's alpha of .757, .741, and .882 respectively) of the scale were satisfactory, indicating that the scale reliability met the test requirements and had good internal consistency.

4.2 Foreign Language Enjoyment Subscale

This study was based on the Foreign Language Enjoyment Subscale (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014) with reference to a scale adapted from Li et al. (2021) limiting the usage scenario to the online classroom. The scale embraces 11 items and is a five-point Likert scale (from 1= totally disagree to 5= totally agree) with positive scoring. SPSS reliability analysis showed that the scale had superior reliability, with high Cronbach's alpha values (.911).

4.3 Foreign Language Online Classroom Boredom Subscale

Boredom in Practical English Language Classes Questionnaire (BPELC) created by Kruk & Zawodniak (2017) was the first ever instrument to assess boredom in foreign language acquisition and has contributed significantly to the study of emotions in SLA. However, its low sample size, low transparency and theoretical basis as well as its fuzzy classification pose certain limitations to its use. Therefore, a more scientific and applicable scale for the online classroom environment was used in this study. The scale developed by Li et al. (2021) in their study of participants' tendency to be bored in English online classes was selected for the study, which contains 8 items and is a five-point Likert scale (from 1= totally disagree to 5= totally agree) with positive scoring. Adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Boredom Subscale, the Foreign Language Online Classroom Boredom Subscale limits the context to the online classroom to measure subjects' tendency to be bored or experience recurrent boredom in English online classes. The test results showed that the reliability of the scale was tested to be .937 in this study, and the applicability was high.

4.4 Data Analysis

At the end of the web-based questionnaire, SPSS 26.0 was applied to measure the reliability of each scale. After the measurements were completed, descriptive statistics, Pearson's test and stepwise regression test were performed on the data using SPSS 26.0 to further test the relationship between L2MSS, FLE and FLLB, respectively, in response to the questions posed in this study.

5. Results

5.1 Levels of L2MSS, FLE and FLLB

Descriptive statistics and normal distribution were selected for this empirical analysis to describe the overall situation of L2MSS, FLE, and FLLB among English majors in China. The self-evaluation of motivation, enjoyment, and boredom in the online classroom environment is shown in Table 1. The overall levels of L2MSS and FLE are moderately high, and the level of FLLB is moderate.

Table 1. Descriptive results

Variable	Interval	Mean (Total)	Std	Min	Max	Skewness (SE)	Kurtosis (SE)
ideal L2 self	5-25	20.058	3.129	12	25	-0.25 (0.207)	-0.48 (0.411)
ought-to L2 self	6-30	21.241	4.081	11	30	-0.04 (0.207)	-0.07 (0.411)
L2 learning experience	4-20	15.547	2.839	8	20	-0.66 (0.207)	0.62 (0.411)
L2MSS	15-75	56.847	7.802	36	75	-0.07 (0.207)	0.29 (0.411)
FLE	12-60	47.628	6.628	29	60	-0.42 (0.207)	0.28 (0.411)
FLLB	9-45	23.161	6.458	11	39	0.33 (0.207)	-0.54 (0.411)

Note. Std= Standard deviation; SE= Standard error

5.2 The Correlations of L2MSS, FLE and FLLB

The correlation analysis is generally used to determine the correlation between variables, and in the process of this analysis, the indicators taken were all continuous variables and did not meet the requirements of the rank correlation test, so Pearson correlation analysis was used. The obtained correlation analysis table is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. The correlations of L2MSS, FLE and FLLB

	Ideal L2 Self	Ought-to L2 Self	L2 Learning Experience	L2MSS	FLE	FLLB
Ideal L2 Self	——	0.489**	0.413**	0.807**	0.372**	-0.265**
Ought-to L2 Self	0.489**	——	0.282**	0.822**	0.293**	-0.123
L2 Learning Experience	0.413**	0.282**	——	0.677**	0.700**	-0.449**
L2MSS	0.807**	0.822**	0.677**	——	0.557**	-0.334**
FLE	0.372**	0.293**	0.700**	0.557**	——	-0.539**
FLLB	-0.265**	-0.123	-0.449**	-0.334**	-0.539**	——

According to the results in Table 2, it can be obtained that there are significant correlations observed in all dimensions with the variables apart from ought-to L2 self and FLLB, and among the combinations of significant correlations, only FLLB and all other dimensions produce significant negative correlations with the variables.

5.3 The Predictive Effects of FLE and FLLB on L2MSS

In this section of the regression analysis, FLE as well as FLLB were selected as independent variables and L2MSS as dependent variables to construct the regression model, and the final regression analysis table was obtained as follows.

Table 3. The effects of FLE and FLLB on L2MSS

LR model		Fitness Index			Estimate		95%CI of B	Collinearity Diagnosis	
IV	DV	R	R ²	F	β	t		tolerance	VIF
FLE	L2MSS	.559	.312	30.416***	.532	6.248***	[.428,.824]	.709	1.410
FLLB					-.048	-.562	[-.261,-.145]		

Note. IV=Independent variable; DV=Dependent variable; R= Correlation coefficient; R²= Coefficient of determination; T=Stat; CI=Confidence interval; B= Bias regression coefficient

From the table above, we can reach the relationship and results as follows. Firstly, the R² of the regression model is 0.312, which indicates that this model can generalize 31.2% of the linear trend in the original data, which reveals

a better effect in the questionnaire data; and secondly, the test result of the F-test shows the value of the test statistic is 30.416, with significance $p < 0.05$, which can be considered that the presence of the selected independent variables in the at least one variable has a significant effect on the dependent variable. Also, according to the results of the above table, it is known that only the FLE dimension significantly affects the L2MSS at the 95% confidence level.

6. Discussion

6.1 Levels of L2MSS, FLE and FLLB

Table 1 reflects the overall situation of the motivation as well as the two emotions generated by Chinese English majors when they learn English in the online classroom context. First, the current status of L2MSS for Chinese English majors in the e-learning classroom environment is analyzed through three categories: ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience. The ideal L2 self of the respondents of this survey is at a high level, while the ought-to L2 self and L2 learning experience are at a medium to high level. Overall, the L2MSS of Chinese English majors is at a moderately high level, indicating that the overall L2MSS of the participants in the online class condition is moderately high. However, the three dimensions that make up the L2MSS vary, with the ideal L2 self at the highest level, the L2 learning experience at the second highest level, and the ought-to L2 self at the lowest level.

In terms of the overall means, English majors are more excited about the offline to online model of instruction, and their satisfaction values remain above a high level, but they still retain the boredom emotion for the online classroom. The broaden-and-build theory conceptualizes the relationship between positive and negative emotions as two different dimensions and states that they are not in opposition to each other (Fredrickson, 2001, 2003). The coexistence patterns of emotions produced by L2 learners in the online classroom environment can be explored in depth later. To be specific, according to the results of the descriptive statistics (with normal distribution) of this study, there were differences in the emotions generated by different L2 learners while participating in English online classes, and individuals differed in their emotions when faced with environmental changes, which supported Li & Han's (2022) view. The reason for the higher level of FLE and FLLB among English majors than non-English majors in the online classroom environment may be that English majors are more motivated by integration rather than instrumental learning, i.e., the need for test-taking is less than that of non-English majors.

6.2 The Correlations of L2MSS, FLE and FLLB

From Table 2, we can see that FLE is positively correlated with L2MSS, while FLLB is negatively correlated with L2MSS. Also, there is a corresponding Negative interplay of relationship between FLE and FLLB, a relationship that corroborates the conclusions of Li et al. (2021). The tendency of emotions generated by students, including enjoyment and boredom, in foreign language online classes to ebb and flow broadens the applicability of the undoing hypothesis of the broaden-and-build theory, namely, the hypothesis is equally applicable to Chinese English majors in the online classroom environment.

Furthermore, ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience are significantly and favorably correlated with FLE, i.e., the more enjoyable emotions students receive in English online classes, the stronger their ideal L2 self and the more positive their L2 learning experience are. On the contrary, ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience are negatively correlated with FLLB, and it is not difficult to understand that negative emotions reduce individuals' ability to absorb and construct language resources in the short and long term (Fredrickson, 2001, 2003), and learners diminish their subjective willingness to reduce or narrow the gap in the ideal and real L2 selves, to the detriment of L2 learning. Table 2 also explains that the ought-to L2 self is correlated with FLE in a positive direction, while the correlation with FLLB is not significant. The reason for this may be that emotions are internal motivators that stimulate learners to engage in learning, but the ought-to L2 self-created by L2 learners is an image of what should be in order to circumvent passive consequences or to achieve the aspirations of other individuals or groups and is more related to extrinsic, instrumental motivation (Higgins, 1987; Wei, 2020). It has also been shown that the ought-to L2 self-image lacks actual motivation to motivate learners to learn and does not really promote second language proficiency (Hong, 2015).

6.3 The Predictive Effects of FLE and FLLB on L2MSS

According to the results in Table 2, FLE has a significant positive predictive function on the L2MSS, indicating that the L2 motivation of Chinese English majors is easily influenced by positive emotions in the online classroom, and teachers can pay more attention to students' positive emotions in future teaching to improve students' L2 motivation level and thus improve English majors' academic performance through regulating positive emotions.

Table 3 shows that after keying L2MSS, FLE, and FLLB into the same regression model, only FLE significantly influenced L2MSS, while FLLB did not have a significant predictive effect on L2MSS. Overall, the positive predictive effect of FLE on second language motivation was more significant than the negative predictive effect of FLLB on second language motivation for Chinese English majors in the online classroom environment. Combined with definition of boredom proposed by Li et al. (2021) based on the control-value theory three-dimensional framework of emotions (Pekrun, 2006), FLLB is a negative, low arousal academic emotion, and FLE with high arousal is more motivating to L2 learners for L2MSS, which focuses on autonomous behavior.

7. Conclusions

This paper explored the overall levels of L2MSS, FLE, and FLLB, as well as the relationships among them in the online classroom environment among Chinese college students majoring in English, and discussed the forecasting role of the two foreign language emotions on L2MSS. The study found that Chinese English majors maintained high levels of FLE and L2MSS in online classes, and moderately high levels of FLLB. Students' learning motivation was mostly self-generated and may be related to their major being English, but the exact reasons for this need to be further investigated. The FLE and FLLB were negatively correlated, with FLE positively predicting L2MSS and FLLB negatively predicting L2MSS, but when entered into the same regression model, only FLE had a significant predictive effect on L2MSS.

Research shows that positive and negative emotions tend to co-exist to some extent, but this does not mean that emotions cannot co-exist, and the co-existence patterns of emotions in language learning can be further explored in the future. In the future, teachers should emphasize the importance of PP in a blended foreign language teaching model, focus on emotion regulation to cultivate students' ideal L2 self-vision, create a pleasant learning experience, and reduce boredom in the process of online learning, so as to improve individuals' motivation to learn second language, improve their English knowledge acquiring performance, and create conditions for sustainable learning through information-based foreign language teaching.

There are limitations in the design of this study; therefore, the findings should be treated with more prudence. First, this study attempted to investigate the L2MSS, FLE, and FLLB levels of Chinese English majors in the context of online classes, but the survey form of this study was a distributed online questionnaire, which was influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, and sample size eligible for the survey was limited during the conduct of the study, which caused the coverage of the research subjects to be less than extensive and the representativeness of the research sample had room for improvement. Future relevant studies should improve the sample size and sample representativeness to make the research results more informative. Second, in terms of control-value theory, which focuses on the relationship between emotions and learning outcomes, the authors did not include learning outcomes in this study. The main reason for doing so is a wide variety of training programs used by different universities for English majors, and the study could not select uniform and representative English majors' grades, which could be used as the measured variables in the future by referring to the Test for English Majors-Band 4 (TEM-4) and so on. Third, the L2MSS was not refined to the next dimension when the same regression model was keyed in, and the study could be made more detailed in the future.

Despite the implausibility of the study in some aspects, the findings still have many merits. The paper explores the levels of L2MSS, FLE, FLLB and their interrelationships among Chinese English majors in the online classroom environment for the first time. By understanding students' motivation and academic emotions, teachers can make timely adjustments to the current teaching model, enhance classroom emotions, grasp students' motivation, and accelerate the learning efficiency of online classes. In addition, some studies have shown that dreaded L2 self is an independent self, and as far as the current L2MSS research is concerned, there is little mention of dreaded L2 self, and this variable can be used as a research element in the future to explore its association with emotion and its predictive effect on students' learning outcomes. Finally, individual differences in students' emotions call for educators to attach importance to individual emotional changes and to further discussing the coexistence mechanisms of emotions so that they can respond to changes in the e-learning context in a timely manner and safeguard students' learning outcomes.

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