

# THE EFFECT OF MOTIVATION AND ANXIETY ON ENGLISH LEARNING ON A VIETNAMESE EFL LEARNER: A CASE STUDY

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**ABSTRACT:** This article summarises my case study which investigates two important psychological factors in foreign language learning, including motivation and anxiety, and their influences on learners. Regarding the participant, the study involves one Vietnamese learner who has a great deal of experience in her English learning journey both in Vietnam and Australia. For the research aims to be achieved, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were carried out to collect data related to the participant's feelings, thoughts, and experiences. The study's result indicates that strong integrative motivation as well as beneficial and inhibitory anxiety associates with the learner's English learning and performance. Following are some implications to promote learners' motivational aspects and mitigate anxiety-related issues, which were proposed by the researcher.

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## MỘT NGHIÊN CỨU ĐIỂN HÌNH VỀ ẢNH HƯỞNG CỦA ĐỘNG LỰC VÀ SỰ LO ÂU LÊN VIỆC HỌC TIẾNG ANH CỦA HỌC SINH VIỆT NAM

**TÓM TẮT:** Bài báo này tóm tắt nghiên cứu của tôi về 2 yếu tố tâm lý trong việc học ngoại ngữ, bao gồm động lực và lo âu, và sự ảnh hưởng lên người học. Nghiên cứu bao gồm 1 học sinh Việt Nam, người đã có nhiều kinh nghiệm trong quá trình học tiếng Anh ở cả Việt Nam và Úc. Để đạt được mục đích của nghiên cứu, tôi đã thực hiện các cuộc phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc và sử dụng các bộ câu hỏi để thu thập dữ liệu liên quan tới cảm xúc, suy nghĩ và kinh nghiệm của người tham gia. Kết quả của nghiên cứu cho thấy động lực học thực dụng cùng với lo âu tích cực và tiêu cực có liên quan tới việc học tiếng Anh và khả năng của người học. Theo sau đó là một vài gợi ý của nhà giáo dục để thúc đẩy động lực của người học và giảm các vấn đề liên quan tới sự lo âu.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

For this case study, I chose an 18-year-old Vietnamese learner, whose level of English proficiency is intermediate. Annie was born in Vietnam and spent several years experiencing Vietnamese educational system before moving to Australia 5 months ago. She started to learn English as a compulsory subject at school when she was 11. However, not until she turned 13 did she take the subject seriously and study it purposefully. During her living and studying in Australia, Annie has been

considerably exposed to second language input and required to use English frequently for communicative and academic purposes in her daily life.

My aim when conducting this case study is to investigate two characteristics of Annie as a second language learner, namely motivation and anxiety, and to carry out an in-depth analysis of these features. With greater insights into motivational and psychological aspects of second language learning, I will discuss some implications for teachers and learners themselves to

generate and strengthen the motivation during this process as well as cope with the impact of anxiety upon L2 learning.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Motivation

Motivation has been considered as one of the most important factors in affecting L2 acquisition and contributing to learner's success in L2 learning (Dörnyei, 1998; Williams & Burden, 1997). With that in mind, the researcher wishes to analyse the collected data to find out the kinds of motivation the participant possesses and the impact of different factors on her motivation.

According to the theory proposed by Gardner and Lambert (1972), foreign language students' motivation can be affected by two kinds of motivation, including instrumental and integrative motivation. While the former demonstrates *"a sincere and personal interest in the people and culture represented by the other group"*, the latter reflects *"the practical value and advantages of learning a new language."* Moreover, as Saville defined, a learner who has integrativeness toward the foreign language also desires to become a member of that community or culture. Meanwhile, if that learner is driven by the practical values of learning the foreign language, for example increasing job prospects or gaining education opportunities, he or she is associated with the instrumental motivation.

In order to better grasp how Annie's motivation is formulated, the researcher also scrutinizes another model created by Deci and Ryan (Noels, 2001). Although these models were developed a long time ago, they represent the first and important

notions about motivation. The latter model includes intrinsic, extrinsic motivation and amotivation.

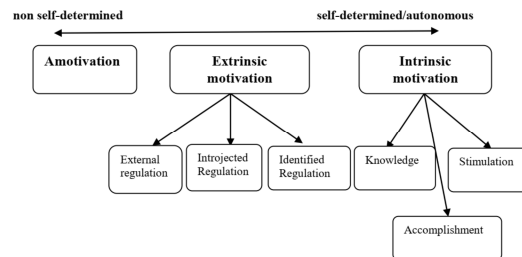


Figure 1. Self-determination theory: A theoretical framework by Deci & Ryan

As conceptualized on a continuum, the framework begins with amotivation on the far left, which refers to no motivation. In other words, an amotivated individual tends to act passively or unwillingly when doing an activity. Located on the other end of the continuum, intrinsic motivation is the most self-determined type (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which encourages students to pursue an activity without the presence of a reward. When an individual is intrinsically motivated, he or she voluntarily participates in a task, which makes him or her feel enjoyable and delighted. In the middle is extrinsic motivation, which are external forces, such as tangible rewards, praises or punishment, rather than the interest in the language itself (Dörnyei, 1998; Williams & Burden, 1997).

As foreign language motivation can also be affected the surrounding environment and people, thus, it is important not to overlook this factor, specifically, learning context and significant others.

### 2.2. Anxiety

Anxiety is an affective variable that creates 'the subjective feeling of

tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry' (Horwitz et al., 1986); therefore, it can affect learners' L2 performance (Dörnyei, 2005).

Communication apprehension is defined as learners' level of fear arousing during their communication with people (Horwitz et al., 1986). Learners who are communicatively apprehensive often avoid conversations or social interactions. It is also stated that the lower English competency, especially in speaking and listening, is correlated with higher level of communication apprehension, which explains why some students tend to keep quiet in language classes.

Regarding test anxiety, it is derived from students' fear of failure to perform successfully in tests or assignments (Sarason, 1978). Nervousness during test can be caused by deficits in students' skills or negative experience in previous exams (Horwitz et al., 1986).

With regard to fear of negative evaluation, it is identified as the expectation of being negatively evaluated, the avoidance of being evaluated or the apprehension about others' evaluations (Watson & Friend, 1969). As a result of the sensitiveness to evaluative situation, such students can attend classes passively, isolate themselves from in-class activities or otherwise make effort to improve their skills (Horwitz et al., 1986).

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

Due to the fact the case study involves only one participant, it is carried out without a pilot study. In addition, this is a qualitative research which analyses the participant's speech, thus, the collected data is nonnumerical and cannot be

demonstrated in diagrams. The specific research instruments will be mentioned and justified below.

Regarding motivation, the chosen participant was invited to participate in a short interview and complete a questionnaire. A semi-structured interview was chosen because the interviewer can offer the participant guidance with the prepared questions and prompts. This method helped Annie elucidate specific issues which were raised up in the follow-up questions. Furthermore, a questionnaire was used with the hope to obtain more data about Annie's motivation in case it was not fully retrieved from the interview. Also, questionnaires allow interviewers to inquire into hidden attitudinal aspects of interviewees and make sure that the result is consistent and reliable.

After that, in order to acquire data about Annie's level of anxiety in the English classroom, the researcher used the *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)* developed by Horwitz (1986) and the *Test Anxiety Scale* by Sarason (1980), which was then followed by a semi-structured interview, allowing the learner to elucidate her choices in the questionnaires.

However, it would be unreasonable to assume that Annie's anxiety and motivation represent the learning characteristics of all Vietnamese learners because the analysis is made based on her data only.

## **4. FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS**

### **4.1. Motivation**

It seems that my learner has both integrative and instrumental motivation.

Annie first mentioned that ‘I really want to study and live in other English speaking country’ and ‘I prefer to stay in other English speaking country more than in Vietnam’ . She then expressed strong agreement to statements like ‘learning English is important to me because I would like to travel internationally’ . All of this evidence firstly represents her desire to be more involved in the community of the target language and secondly shows that she has been driven to learn the language to communicate with English-speaking community. In other words, they constitute her integrative motivation. In addition, Annie indicated her great interest in English films, culture, people and so on, which partially contributes to her integrativeness toward the targeted society. From the data, it is also found that studying English is also necessary for the participant’s future major, professions and for her avoiding the poor test results, demonstrating that she is instrumentally oriented by the ‘utilitarian benefits’ of English. This instrumental motivation is rather common and important to learners in the context of EFL, like Vietnam. However, it seems that Annie’s integrative motivation is more prevalent and consistent, which agrees with the statement that integrative motivation supersedes its counterpart because of the involved attitudinal factors and goal orientated behaviors (Gardner, 1985).

Using the model created by Deci and Ryan, it is found that Annie’s extrinsic motivation and amotivation are expressed more explicitly than the intrinsic one. Her statements ‘When I first learned English, I feel that it really hard and I quite hate it’ and ‘I don’t want to study English

at all’ indicate that Annie encountered amotivation because she did not seem to value the language or expect that it would lead her to future success. However, Annie then said ‘when I realized that, like the need of English and I realized that I have to study English for ...for the sake... of my.... my future, I feel motivated and I study English for myself’. In other words, she started to learn English actively after acknowledging its importance and necessity to her life, proving that her extrinsic motivation does exist. Annie took the language seriously not because of the particular interest or enjoyment that she found in English itself, but because of its usefulness that she realized that it would help her obtain something else.

Regarding the learning context, Annie had spent several years learning English in Vietnam where EFL classes are mainly grammar-translation oriented (‘Learning English In The Vietnamese Context’, 2018). With this approach, Annie mainly studied English ‘through a book’, ‘follow all the instructions in the book to study’ and ‘do a lot of exercises’. Besides, she mentioned her teacher’s method in ‘she just give me the textbook and teach me other basic formula, English verb tense’. Therefore, Annie felt that ‘it’s really bored’ and did not ‘feel any motivated in learning English’. Nevertheless, after a few months studying in Australia, Annie revealed that her motivation to study English increased. As Williams and Burden (1997) stated that if classes are creativity-oriented, students will be interested in the subject. Accordingly, the fact that Annie’s school not only has ‘a variety of activity’, but also gives students ‘a lot of freedom’ in choosing

their favourite topics has impacted her motivation positively. Furthermore, she is largely exposed to authentic sources of language input and frequently has opportunities to communicate with members of English community like teachers, peers and native speakers. Therefore, she is likely to develop more interest in the language.

Regarding the involvement of significant others, teachers can significantly influence an individual's motivation in language learning (Noels, 2001; Williams & Burden, 1997). While discussing how Annie overcomes difficulties in English learning, her teacher was mentioned 'I always talk to her so that she could, she could give me the advice and help me to study it'. Another major source of influence on learners' motivation is family members, specifically parents (Noels, 2001). It can be seen that Annie's parents always encourage her to study English, to become 'an ideal person for her sister' and promote the belief that she 'will have a better life in another country'. Their parental support, as Noels (2001) stated, is not associated directly to success in the target language, but it helps the learner to sustain motivation and persist at learning English.

#### **4.2. Anxiety**

It is argued that students' perception of the ease in the foreign language classroom is the foremost identifier of problems that may arise during the learning process (Ganschow & Sparks, 1991). Accordingly, looking at how Annie perceives the learning environment in her current English class, for example 'I feel quite fun and like it's less stress'; it seems that

the learner generally has not experienced much anxiety.

Firstly, communication apprehension is evident in Annie's explanation in the interview that '...when we don't understand what teacher is saying, so we don't know what to do....If the teacher asks us some questions about the thing that they just talk about, we won't know what to answer them....that will be embarrassed in front of other student'. This is also a good illustration of how anxiety impacts different stages of the learning process, in which it not only makes the learner unreceptive to language input but also impairs their output (1994). Also, the erroneous belief 'English is not our first language' that the participant holds, resulting in the negative perception that she can have trouble understanding others as well as making herself comprehensible. Therefore, it seems understandable why she agrees with statement the 'I freeze up on things like intelligence tests and final exams'. This mentions the disconcerting feeling, which makes L2 knowledge deteriorate, makes students freeze up (Young, 1991), and become forgetful when being called to perform (Dörnyei, 2005). This point can be seen in Annie's statement 'we don't know what to say, we don't know how to talk about it and sometimes we could forget the word... we just stuck in the words and you're just standing there...'. Even though when the teacher's call on the student is acknowledged, Annie said 'we still nervous because we know that "Oh no it's gonna be me. What should we say?"'. The anxiety provoked in this situation can impair the learner's language production if the teacher's question is too complicated



and then continues to develop since what she encounters is a bad learning experience (Ellis, 2015), which is evident in ‘...if the questions that the teacher asks is easy and I can answer it.... but like, when the answer is, like, I don’t know what to say...we’ll be nervous... and we like, we become more and more nervous....’. As MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) suggested, it is likely that if these experiences are perpetuated in a second language context, the negative attitudes generated by students will be unchanged.

Regarding test anxiety, the learner’s score of the Test Anxiety Scale indicates that Annie is in the medium range, but there are unavoidably some specific evaluation situations in which the participant is prone to anxiety. For the student’s tension during presentations, it can be explained by her worry about having bad grades in these assignments ‘... when I get a bad grade, I will feel like “Oh why I’ve done this, I wish I should have like study more”’ due to the fact she sets high demands for herself and also receives high expectations formed by her parents. Moreover, regarding presentation situations, the learner explains that ‘Even if i am well-prepared, like I have my, my cue card in front of me. But like, I still nervous....’. Because in testing situations like presentations, students have to remember and coordinate different knowledge simultaneously, sometimes they possibly forget a particular language point learned previously (Horwitz et al., 1986), as described in ‘...I have to talk fast and like sometimes I will be like “oh, what’s next? What’s next?” and I don’t know what to say’. Nevertheless, the learner’s level of test anxiety is in the middle, so

some strategies, like prompt cards, can be developed to handle the nervousness. She attributes the result to the amount of effort put in the process instead of the uneasy suspense during the presentations. With surprise tests, including the test tasks and formats that may be unfamiliar to students, the current anxiety level is argued to be higher (Young, 1991). For this kind of assessment, the participant confesses that test ‘I will feel like really nervous and like my heart would be pounding’; however, that she can convince herself of the appropriate level of the test, which is one of the developed strategies, really eases her worry instantly.

With regard to fear of negative evaluation, the feeling of apprehension is evoked when the learner has trouble articulating her ideas during group work, such as ‘if people have like think negative thought about you, you will feel really stressed and depressed, upset like you’re not good enough’. This results in Annie to ‘less want to participate in like whenever people are speaking’, or in other words, her withdrawal from classroom activities, which is one characteristic of students with fear of negative evaluation. The evidence above is what Dörnyei (2005) defined as debilitating anxiety, which hinders students’ successful performances. Nonetheless, it is feasible for an individual to have combined anxiety, and the other type, facilitating anxiety, is also found in Annie’s case. Despite the fact that being evaluated negatively is fearful, Annie thinks ‘if enough negative thought will make have like motivation to be better... study more and try to enhancing our knowledge, our English skill’. Similarly,

the participant states ‘...but maybe that’s also the motivation for me to study more and like learning more words....’ when being asked to think of friends’ negative comments due to miscommunication during group work and negative feedback from teachers. These thoughts emphasize anxiety’s facilitative impact, as a counterpart of motivation, which drives students to intensify the effort (Ellis, 2015).

## **5. IMPLICATIONS**

To finalize the paper, the researcher will discuss some implications for teaching and learning, on the basis of the analysis of two aspects above. It is affirmed that motivation and anxiety, two essential variables in SLA, are not only significantly correlated to students’ performance, but also each other; therefore, boosting students’ motivation to learn English and alleviating anxiety levels are essential for improving students’ English performance (Liu & Huang, 2011). Generally, teachers can boost students’ motivation by encouraging the awareness of how important English is, promoting positive attitudes towards the language, developing self-efficacy, or praising (Dörnyei, 1994). Specifically, in Annie’s case, she has had integrative motivation; however, it seems that her intrinsic motivation, a positive predictor of English performance, is not developed strongly enough. Therefore, it is suggested that she has more exposure to English literary works or entertainment productions and makes more connection international friends, with the hope to not only stimulate the interest in the language itself but also to foster integrative motivation. Thus, the learner will likely be more willing and active in performing

English in different situations, and at the same time, the level of anxiety may be lowered.

As regards anxiety, overall, teachers’ acknowledgement of the existence of anxiety in classrooms is prioritised before any therapeutic solutions, based on which the appropriate technique can be implemented, such as giving advice. Making adaptations in error correction is also one possible way that may reduce anxiety or defensive reactions because learners seem to be vulnerable to non-supportive corrective manner and practices (Horwitz et al., 1986). In terms of the participant, it is advisable that she should change the erroneous belief about the disadvantage of not having English as the mother tongue, which can help her to interpret anxiety-provoking situations in a more positive way. Additionally, joining in a language club or practicing self-talk is also recommended to reduce anxiety in personal and interpersonal communication or evaluative situations, and improve the ability to deliver an impromptu speech (Young, 1991).

## **6. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, Annie is found to have the strong integrative motivation, and her motivation has been affected by several factors, namely the learning context and significant others. Meanwhile, Annie’s anxiety includes both beneficial and inhibitory anxiety, which affects her performance sometimes, but also can become the motivation to improve herself. To address issues arising from the analysis, some specific implications are pondered and stated, which may increase the participant’s motivation and lower her

level of anxiety.

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