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The effect of positive orientation and perceived social support on foreign language classroom anxiety

Yin Xing Jin, Jean-Marc Dewaele

Abstract

The present study reports on the effect of learners' positive orientation, perceived teacher and student emotional support on their foreign language classroom anxiety. One hundred and forty-four Chinese L1 second-year university-level participants filled out the Positivity Scale, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, and the Teacher/Student Emotional Support Scale. Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that positive orientation was a significant negative predictor of FL anxiety. The relationship between perceived student support and anxiety ceased to be significant as positive orientation entered the model. Perceived teacher support did not significantly predict FL classroom anxiety at each step of the analysis. The results are discussed in line with previous findings as well as their practical implications for foreign language teaching and learning in Chinese universities.

1. Introduction

While sitting in the same classroom, being taught by the same teachers, and using the same textbooks, learners may still greatly vary in terms of foreign language (FL) learning outcomes that they have achieved. Individual differences in language aptitude, learning motivation, attitudes towards target language community, and usable resources all contribute to the inter-learner variations in FL outcomes (Dornyei & Ryan, 2015). In addition, emotional experiences repeated over time in the FL classroom can also shape learners' FL learning process (Horwitz, 2017). In the last three decades, a good deal of work has focused on a negative emotion, FL anxiety, more specifically on its causes and consequences.

Research has shown that many factors underlie FL anxiety. Among the possible variables that influence FL anxiety is the perceived gap in social support (e.g., Huang, Eslami, & Hu, 2010). Explaining why students differ in perceived social relationships, Jin, de Bot, and Keijzer (2017) referred to the interpersonal differences in personality, temperament, mood, and/or language-learning growing experiences. Moreover, a positive outlook can also affect perceived social bonds. Students who habitually interpret themselves, other people, and life events in a positive manner have a more positive evaluation of social bonds (Alessandri, Caprara, & Tisak, 2012a). It is thus reasonable to assume that students with a positive orientation may suffer less from FL classroom anxiety, which was tested in this study. We also specified the roles of perceived teacher and student emotional support, that is, perceived cares and likes from teachers and peers (Johnson & Johnson, 1983; Johnson, Johnson, Buckman, & Richards, 1985), in FL classroom anxiety and compared the two perception variables and positive orientation in terms of the effect on classroom anxiety.

2. Literature review

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) heralded a period of intense interest in FL anxiety with the so-called “Specialised approach” which argued for a re-orientation of the conceptualization and measurement of FL anxiety (MacIntyre, 2017). Horwitz et al. (1986) defined FL anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 128). FL anxiety belongs to the category of situation-specific anxiety, which is distinct from, but related to trait anxiety (an index of innate emotional stability) and state anxiety (anxiety at a particular spatio-temporal point). Moreover, FL anxiety is an umbrella term for general FL anxiety and skill-specific anxieties like communicative, reading, and even pronunciation anxiety in a FL. Thus, the construct of FL anxiety incorporates “a suite of anxieties” (Horwitz, 2016, p. 72). Horwitz (2017) explained that FL learners can experience anxiety “because of distress at their inability to be themselves and to connect authentically with other people through the limitation of the new language” (p. 41).

The role of FL anxiety in FL learning has been a long-term research interest in SLA. The findings largely converge in pointing to the interference that FL anxiety can bring to FL learning and performance in a variety of domains. To be specific, FL anxiety may have negative academic, cognitive, and social effects on learners (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; MacIntyre, 2017). That is, anxiety hinders learners' proficiency development and weakens their self-confidence in the FL, which, in turn, strengthens anxiety, creating a vicious circle (e.g., Aida, 1994; Bosmans & Hurd, 2016). As anxiety increases, undivided cognitive activities associated with learning and performance are likely to be interrupted due to the increased task-irrelevant self-cognition (Eysenck, 1979). Anxious students may try to avoid communicating with others because they are afraid that their FL output would be judged to be accented, unauthentic, or poor (Horwitz et al., 1986). In addition, FL anxiety can also wreck the teacher's best intentions and render attractive materials inadequate (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

The reasons why levels of anxiety vary among FL learners have also been investigated. It has been shown that the individual differences in anxiety levels are linked to demographic background, social/cultural backgrounds, proficiency levels as well as FL learning experience. For example, some people have been through FL immersion learning in target language countries, which has an immediate and positive long-term influence on FL anxiety levels. Allen and Herron (2003) documented a significant decrease of anxiety levels in French in 25 university students in a study abroad program in Paris. Okada (2015) reported a negative association of length of stay with students' anxiety levels in English, targeting Japanese overseas undergraduate and graduate students in the United States. Thompson and Lee (2014) investigated the link between South Korean students' experience abroad and their anxiety levels in domestic university-level English classes. A longer stay abroad was linked to a stronger reduction in anxiety levels in English. The lower anxiety levels after students returned home might be attributed to their improvement in language skills, for instance oral or auditory ability (Allen & Herron, 2003; Serrano, Llanes, & Tragant, 2016), pragmatic comprehension (Taguchi, 2011; Taguchi, Xiao, & Li, 2016), and intercultural adaptability and sensitivity (Williams, 2005). Overall, overseas experiences not only benefit the development of linguistic attributes and intercultural communication competence, but also enhance the students' psychological well-being.

The reasons why some people are more likely to suffer from FL anxiety than others

have also been investigated along the lines of broad personality traits and lower-order personality facets (Dewaele, 2017a). As for the broad traits, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) documented that extraversion was the only personality trait that showed a significant negative path to FL anxiety, among all the broad personality dimensions tapped by Goldberg's (1992) transparent bipolar inventory. A significant negative relationship between extraversion and FL anxiety also emerged in Dewaele's (2013) study that revealed that individuals who score high on Psychoticism and Emotional Stability experienced less anxiety in classroom-based FL learning contexts and during speaking a FL. In addition, the effect of global personality dimensions on FL anxiety was also examined in professional settings. Gargalianou, Muehlfeld, Urbig, and van Witteloostuijn (2016) developed a 10-item scale of communicative anxiety in FL applicable for school-independent formal contexts, through which the researchers investigated whether personality dimensions as assessed by Lee and Ashton's (2004) 60-item HEXACO Personality Inventory (an extension of the Big Five framework) mediated the relationship between gender and anxiety level. The results of a hierarchical regression analysis showed that females scored significantly higher than males on the communicative anxiety scale, even controlling for the effects of language-related socio-biographical variables that were age, perceived FL competence, FL reading frequencies, and age of onset of acquisition on anxiety levels. However, once the HEXACO personality dimensions entered the model, the significant difference between males and females in communicative anxiety disappeared. Among the six HEXACO personality dimensions, three were found to significantly predict communicative anxiety. They were emotionality (which includes facets such as fearfulness, anxiety, dependence and sentimentality), conscientiousness (which includes facets such as organization, diligence, perfectionism and prudence), and extraversion (which includes facets such as social self-esteem, social boldness, sociability and liveliness).

Among the lower-order personality facets, self-esteem has been frequently referred to in the literature (e.g., Baran-Łucarz, 2014; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1999; Young, 1991). A link between this personality facet and FL anxiety has also been empirically tested. In a structural equation modeling analysis, Liu and Zhang (2008) revealed that self-esteem significantly negatively predicted Chinese Year 1 undergraduate students' anxiety levels in English. The predictive power of general self-esteem on FL anxiety levels was furthermore attested by Jin, de Bot, and Keijzer (2015a) in two Chinese university students' FL learning contexts that were Japanese and English. The representation of general self-esteem in specific areas, i.e., domain-specific self-esteem, also showed a link to FL anxiety in several contexts. Fallah (2017) reported a significant negative influence of coping self-efficacy on FL anxiety levels. Coping self-efficacy refers to "beliefs about one's ability to perform coping behaviours" (Chesney, Neilands, Chambers, Taylor, & Folkman, 2006, p. 422). Individuals with stronger coping self-efficacy hold a more optimistic view of the controllability of stressors and of their ability to exercise coping strategies (Chesney et al., 2006), leading to more coping actions, and, by doing so, overcoming learning difficulties that give rise to anxious feelings. In addition, researchers have also investigated the effect of competitiveness on FL anxiety. However, it remains unclear whether it is a positive predictor, a negative predictor, or a non-significant predictor of FL anxiety levels (Jin et al., 2015a; Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999; Toth, 2007). Another lower-rank personality trait that has been related to FL anxiety is trait emotional intelligence (Trait EI), or trait emotional self-efficacy if its self-evaluative nature is stressed

(Dewaele, Petrides, & Furnham, 2008). Using 464 adult participants who had learned and used multiple languages, Dewaele et al. (2008) revealed a significant negative impact of trait EI on communicative anxiety in L2, L3, and L4 when speaking with friends, colleagues, strangers, on the phone, and in public. Shao, Yu, and Ji (2013) documented a significant negative relationship between trait EI and anxiety levels in the English classroom among 510 Chinese university students. Trait EI incorporates components like emotion regulation, stress management, and assertiveness (Dewaele et al., 2008). It can be assumed that higher trait EI individuals are better able to control their own emotions and to gauge the emotional reactions of other people allowing smoother interpersonal relationships, resulting in lower anxiety levels (Dewaele, 2017a; Dewaele et al., 2008). In addition, both qualitative and quantitative research has also uncovered that those who are perfectionism-oriented tended to experience more FL anxiety (Dewaele, 2017b; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). The findings for perfectionism and FL anxiety suggest that a positive link might exist between FL anxiety and conscientiousness, a global personality trait reflecting an inclination to strive for accuracy and perfection (Gargalianou et al., 2016).

As shown, both global and specific personal characteristics have been found to be related to FL anxiety, although more research has focused on the narrow personality facets. Global personality dimensions are rather multi-faceted. For instance, neuroticism encompasses an absence of optimism, self-doubt, emotional lability, and worry (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). A single measure may not capture all the facets constituting a global personality dimension equally well. Thus, the non-significance between a global personality measure and FL anxiety in its various forms may arise from the limited scope of the measure. In other words, global personality measures may skirt or weakly address those facets that underpin FL anxiety (Scheier et al., 1994). Moreover, because multiple facets cluster under a general personality dimension, an established relationship between a global measure and FL anxiety scores becomes less interpretable (van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2000). The relative rarity of global personality studies with regard to FL anxiety may reflect researchers' concerns about these weaknesses of global personality measures.

Furthermore, FL learners' high classroom anxiety may partly result from their cognitive and emotional evaluations of classroom environment. Thus, "anxiety has both internal and social dimensions" (MacIntyre, 2017, p. 28). Palacios (1998), who administered Trickett and Moos's (1973) Classroom Environment Scale and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS, Horwitz et al., 1986) to 227 Spanish I and 218 Spanish IV university students, found that perceived student engagement and teacher support were negatively associated with the FLCAS scores, but a positive relationship emerged between perceived task orientation and anxiety in Spanish across the two levels. The subsequent regression analyses confirmed that perceived classroom aspects were significant predictors of the learners' anxiety levels within both sample groups, but these classroom aspects were not specified by the researcher. Using the same measures, Jin, de Bot, and Keijzer (2015b) found that perceived teacher support significantly negatively predicted Chinese L1 university students' anxiety levels in English and that perceived student engagement negatively predicted anxiety in Japanese. The predictive power of perceived teacher support for anxiety levels was also established in Piechurska-Kuciel (2011). It should be noted that the studies that targeted tertiary students reported a significant, but relatively weak relationship between perceived teacher and student

support, and FL anxiety. The reason for this phenomenon might be that these studies adopted measures with items for both emotional and academic support. Future studies may consider specifying the roles of perceived teacher and student emotional or academic support in FL anxiety.

In sum, the phenomenon of FL anxiety has fascinated researchers for decades and there is a growing interest in this area, including more diverse epistemological and methodological approaches (Dewaele, 2017a; Jeong et al., 2016; Sevinç, 2017). New self-report instruments have been developed to tap into the constituents of FL anxiety that have been under-researched (e.g., a communicative anxiety scale for non-school professional situations in Gargalianou et al., 2016; a phonetics learning anxiety measure in Baran-Łucarz, 2013). In addition, this field is also benefiting from taking in those concepts from positive psychology that, as a research field and a movement, steers away from a negative symptoms-oriented research tradition in psychology and focuses on the qualities that can lead to an individual or a community's flourishing (MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2016; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

One such concept that deserves more attention is positive orientation or positivity, that is, "a basic disposition predisposing people to appraise life and experiences with a positive outlook" (Caprara et al., 2012, p. 702). It is located at the core of three constructs, namely self-esteem, life satisfaction, and optimism (Alessandri et al., 2012b; Caprara, Alessandri, & Barbaranelli, 2010b; Caprara, Steca, Alessandri, Abela, & Mcwhinnie, 2010a). Thus, people with stronger positive orientation possess more self-confidence beliefs, hold a brighter view of future, and appreciate life better. Students with a higher degree of positive orientation tend to evaluate teachers/peers and class events positively and have more positive feelings towards them (Alessandri et al., 2012a). Empirical studies have shown that positive orientation predicts physical and mental health outcomes better than each of the three constructs of self-esteem, life satisfaction, and optimism (Alessandri et al., 2012a). Therefore, it can be speculated that students' degree of positive orientation may not only determine their FL anxiety levels, but also may impose a greater influence on FL anxiety than perceived social support. This study aims to see to what extent positive orientation and perceived teacher/student emotional support predict FL classroom anxiety.

The research question is as follows:

To what extent do positive orientation, perceived teacher emotional support and perceived student emotional support predict FL classroom anxiety levels?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants were 144 Year 2 English major students at a public university in South China's Hai Nan Province (136 females, 8 males). Average age was 20.07 (SD $\frac{1}{4}$ 0.89). An absolute majority of students started learning English since primary school with few students beginning from junior high school. Generally, they had studied English for close to 11 years (Mean $\frac{1}{4}$ 10.74, SD $\frac{1}{4}$ 2.24) by the time of data collection and were considered at an intermediate level in terms of English proficiency. In addition, these students took several English courses each semester, taught by different teachers. They

were also learning Japanese, German, Spanish, or Korean as the second FL.

Convenience sampling was used. The first author who teaches in the institution addressed a call for participation to his EFL students who were under no obligation to participate. We will be careful in the interpretation of the findings as we realize that our sample is not necessarily representative of the larger population of Chinese EFL students in China (Evans & Rooney, 2013). In addition, we also conducted power analysis to determine the number of students to be surveyed. We expected a medium effect size at a maximum for perceived teacher/student emotional support and positive orientation on FL classroom anxiety, based on the previous findings for the effect of perceived social support and personality traits on FL classroom anxiety. According to Field (2009), a minimum of 80 samples are needed for a medium effect size, a .80 level of power, and three predictors. In this study, 144 participants were recruited, warranting sufficient power to detect the effect of predictor variables on FL classroom anxiety.

3.2. Materials

3.2.1. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

The FLCAS was developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). It contains 33 positively or negatively worded items that were rated on five points labeled strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree. These anchors from strongly disagree to strongly agree were assigned 1e5 for positively worded items when scoring and 5e1 for negatively worded items. The scores on this measure range from 33 to 165 with higher scores indicating a higher level of general anxiety in the FL classroom. Two exemplar items are: I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class and It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes.

The FLCAS was translated into Chinese in this study using the following procedures in order to facilitate the participants' understanding of the scale items: One Chinese-English bilingual translated the FLCAS into Chinese and the translations were cross-checked by two Chinese-English bilinguals. The three translators discussed to resolve the minor discrepancies that occurred among them. Further, English learning context was specified for the anxiety scale in Chinese. The translated FLCAS was validated by correlating 27 Year 2 university-level English major students' scores on this scale and their self-reports of anxiety levels in English on the basis of an interval of 0e100. This validation process produced a very significant Spearman's correlation coefficient of .69.

3.2.2. The Positivity Scale (POS)

The POS that was developed by Caprara et al. (2012) in English constitutes eight items with one item negatively worded. It reflects "individuals' regard for themselves, confidence in the future/others, and satisfaction with their lives" (Caprara et al., 2012, p. 703). One sample item from the POS is: I look forward to the future with hope and enthusiasm.

The eight items are rated on a 5-point Likert format: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neither agree nor disagree (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5). Scores were reversed for the negatively worded item. The obtainable scores on the POS fall into the range of 8e40 with higher scores indicating a higher level of positivity. In addition, the POS was translated from English to Chinese through a procedure of back translation such that the participants could clearly understand all the items.

Table 1
Means with standard deviations and ranges of the FLCAS, POS, TPSS, and SPSS data.

Measurements	Range	M(SD)	Cronbach's alpha
Positive Orientation	15e38	27.17 (4.11)	.77
Perceived Teacher Support	6e19	12.79 (2.23)	.74
Perceived Student Support	9e25	16.93 (2.83)	.84
Anxiety in English	44e154	96.00 (18.55)	.94
PO	PTES	PSES	AE
PO PTES PSES AE	1.00 .34*** .34*** -.43***	1.00 .52*** -.18*	1.00

3.2.3. The Teacher/Student Personal Support Scale (T/SPSS)

The TPSS and the SPSS that were developed by Johnson and Johnson (1983) consist of four and five positively worded items, respectively. In this study, the TPSS and the SPSS items were anchored in a 5-point Likert format as for the POS. Thus, the obtainable scores for the TPSS are in an interval of 4e20 and 5e25 for the SPSS. Those who reported higher scores on the T/SPSS perceived more emotional support from their teachers or peer classmates. The two scales were also translated into Chinese from the English original via back translation. Two exemplar items from the TPSS and the SPSS are: My teachers are interested in me as a person and Most of the students in my class(es) are kind and helpful.

3.3. Procedures

Before distributing the questionnaires, participants were encouraged to give honest answers to the questions included in the questionnaires. The participants were also informed that their answers would not be disclosed to anyone else and that the data were only used for a research purpose and had nothing to do with their English grades. Following the collection of the questionnaires, the answers given by the participants were registered and analyzed.

3.4. Data analysis

A descriptive analysis was conducted by using SPSS 22.0 to obtain information about the profiles of the 144 participants' levels of FL anxiety, positive orientation, and perceived teacher/student emotional support (see Table 1), following the aggregation of the individual participants' scores on the items that are respectively included in the FLCAS, the POS, the T/SPSS. Then a simple correlation analysis was performed to gain a first insight into the relationships between positive orientation, perceived teacher and student support, and FL anxiety.

In order to investigate the effect of positive orientation and teacher/student emotional support on FL anxiety levels, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted, which took place in two steps: The variables of perceived teacher and student support were first entered into the model, followed by positive orientation. The order in which the predictor variables entered the model was based on a fact that empirical evidence has suggested that perceived teacher emotional support and perceived student emotional support may influence FL anxiety levels, but the relationship between positive orientation and FL anxiety has not been explicitly examined.

4. Results

4.1. Simple correlation analysis

Table 2 reports the results of Spearman's correlation analysis that was conducted

between positive orientation, perceived emotional support from teachers and students, and anxiety in English.

Table 2

Correlations between positive orientation, perceived emotional support and anxiety in English.

Note. PO ¼ Positive Orientation; PTES ¼ Perceived Teacher Emotional Support; PSES ¼ Perceived Student Emotional Support; AE ¼ Anxiety in English; *** p < .001; * p < .05.

As shown in Table 2, positive orientation showed a positive relationship with perceived teacher and student support, suggesting that students with a higher degree of positivity tend to feel more emotional support from teachers and peer classmates, and vice versa. Perceived teacher and student support were moderately correlated. Moreover, anxiety in English showed the strongest link with positive orientation, followed by perceived student support, then perceived teacher support.

4.2. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis

Hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to see to what extent positive orientation, perceived teacher emotional support and perceived student emotional support predicted unique variance in FL anxiety levels. Following the completion of the analysis, the range of standardized residuals was examined for outliers. It showed that the standardized residual for one case was above 3. However, this case was kept in the data set, as Cook's distance was in a range of .00e.14 for the analysis, suggesting that no case would give a bias to the model (Field, 2009). In addition, an inspection of the partial plots indicated that

no

Table 1
Means with standard deviations and ranges of the FLCAS, POS, TPSS, and SPSS data.

Measurements	Range	M(SD)	Cronbach's alpha
Positive Orientation	15-20	27.17 (4.11)	.77

case would have an undue influence on the regression coefficient for each predictor. Furthermore, the assumptions of normality, homoscedasticity, and independence of residuals were not found to be violated. Multicollinearity was not a concern for the current analysis (average VIF was 1.3). The results of this regression analysis process are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting anxiety in English from positive orientation and perceived teacher/student support.

Note. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .005$. * $p < .05$.

As shown in Table 3, perceived teacher and student emotional support that entered the

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PO	PTES	PSES	AE

model at Step 1 explained 8% of the variance in anxiety in English. As for the individual predictor variables, perceived student support was shown to significantly negatively predict FL anxiety levels, but perceived teacher support was not a significant predictor. After entry of positive orientation at Step 2, the total variance explained by the model as a whole was 21%, $F(3, 140) = 12.20$, $p < .001$. Positive orientation explained an additional 13% of the variance in anxiety in English, F change $(1, 140) = 22.33$, $p < .001$. In the final model, only positive orientation significantly predicted anxiety in English.

5. Discussion

The present study investigated the roles of perceived teacher and student emotional support in FL classroom anxiety with a sample of Chinese L1 EFL learners. It also examined the effect of positive orientation on FL classroom anxiety. To these ends, a hierarchical regression analysis in two steps was performed. Perceived teacher and student support entered the model at Step 1, followed by positive orientation at Step 2.

The results showed that perceived teacher emotional support did not significantly predict FL classroom anxiety, which confirms the previous findings in Palacios (1998) and Jin et al. (2015b) that teacher-centred independent variables had relatively little effect on older students' FL anxiety levels. The phenomenon could be linked to the fact that as age grows, students tend to seek independence mentally and behaviorally. Thus, adult learners at the stage of tertiary education are more autonomous and tend to seek independence from their teachers who are thus relieved of their "baby sitter-like" role with younger students. At this educational level, teachers usually provide a limited time of classroom instruction weekly and may not meet students often. Due to the increased distance between teachers and students, teachers' emotional care-giving thus becomes less influential for students.

Perceived student emotional support was a significant negative predictor of FL anxiety at Step 1 of the regression analysis, but the significance disappeared at Step 2 with positive orientation entering the model. Peer classmates are those with whom a learner interacts most frequently in regular school life. The peers' views can greatly shape fellow learners' behaviors and thoughts. How close students feel with their classmates matters in terms of psychological comfort as indexed by lower FL anxiety. Nevertheless, the peer effect on learners' anxiety levels may be subject to the mediation of other variables, for example learners' own personality traits, as implied by the cessation of significance of the relationship between perceived student support and FL anxiety as long as positive orientation entered the analysis.

A significant negative predictive power of positive orientation was established for FL anxiety levels in this study. In addition, positive orientation was shown to be a better predictor of FL classroom anxiety in contrast to perceived teacher and student emotional support. Previous studies have unveiled that positive orientation is a good predictor of individuals' predisposed affectivity and perceived intimacy with others (Alessandri et al., 2012a). With the current finding, the predictive model of positive orientation is expanded into the FL learning domain. This finding also reflects existing findings on the effect of personality traits on FL anxiety. FL anxiety was found to be positively linked to personality traits that reflect "negativity", for example Emotionality (Gargalianou et al., 2016) and Neuroticism (Dewaele, 2013). More positive, extraverted FL learners have also been found to suffer less from FL anxiety (Dewaele, 2013; Gargalianou et al., 2016). The pattern that FL learners who score high on Trait Emotional Intelligence report lower levels of FL anxiety is equally consistent with the present findings. Indeed, key facets of Trait Emotional Intelligence are optimism, happiness, emotional control, and assertiveness (Dewaele et al., 2008; Shao et al., 2013).

Positive orientation represents one's general inclination to respond to life and experience with a positive attitude (Caprara et al., 2012). Students who have a higher degree of positive orientation tend to be open to pleasant moments, to be more sensitive to signals of reward from teachers or peers, and to view setbacks in learning as less threatening. They can also rebound from frustrations more quickly (Caprara et al., 2010b). All this helps to foster loyalty to classroom learning and/or more affinity with teachers/peers among higher-positive orientation students, which in turn contributes to these students' subjective well-being as indexed by lower anxiety, and by extension, optimal functioning in the FL classroom. On the contrary, learners who less think positively are more ready to notice the negative aspects of events or people and are more likely to interpret something positive or neutral as unfavorable. These students are more likely to feel that their teachers or classmates are less supportive, which does not dent their FL anxiety.

The effect of positive orientation on FL anxiety may also be explained from the perspective of FL enjoyment. That is, it is highly probable that the current participants with a positive orientation experienced more FL enjoyment during their English classes. This FL enjoyment consists of a private and a social dimension (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016). The social aspect of FL enjoyment explained a larger amount of variance in the principal components analysis and included items reflecting peer and teacher support in the FL classroom. The moderate negative correlation between FL Enjoyment and FL anxiety reported in Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) did suggest that positive emotions can -to a certain extent-neutralise negative ones, especially among more advanced learners.

The present study has some limitations. First, the participants were recruited from only one university in China so the findings cannot automatically be generalized to other types of schools in China or abroad. Future studies might investigate to what extent the current findings replicate across groups and instructional contexts. Second, the participants are relatively homogeneous in terms of some demographic features such as age, the L1, and cultural background. Third, the TPSS was used to generalize the participants' holistic perceptions of their English teachers' support, instead of targeting one particular teacher and the course taught by the teacher, which might lead to the non-significant relationship between perceived teacher support and FL classroom anxiety. Fourth, the TPSS achieved a respectable, but still lower Cronbach's alpha in this research context than in

previous studies (eg., .85 in Johnson & Johnson, 1983; .80 in Johnson et al., 1985), suggesting a less compact aggregation among the translated items in measuring the same construct, which led to the imprecision in measuring perceived teacher support. Moreover, the researcher who collected the data was one of the participants' English teachers. Hence, some participants' responses to the TPSS items might have been slightly biased, increasing the chances of measurement errors for the teacher support variable.

Despite the limitations, the findings still have important implications for organizing FL teaching and learning in Chinese universities. First, this study reveals the relative importance of perceived student emotional support for learners' lower anxiety levels in the FL classroom. Thus, teachers should create a positive classroom environment characterized by solidarity, friendship, and mutual tolerance among classmates, so that learners can safely explore and experiment with the FL. In order to forge the inter-peer relationship, cooperative learning in its various forms can be organized, which enhances inter-peer intimacy through fostering interactions and collaboratively solving problems. Second, this study also suggests that it is crucial to nurture learners' positivity orientation, as learners with a higher level of positivity evaluate oneself and social relationship more positively, leading to lower anxiety in FL learning situations. It should be noted that positive orientation is a personality trait and is relatively stable over time. Thus, the specific strategies for improving learners' positivity levels should be frequently and continuously exercised, which include reflecting one's own strengths, expressing gratitude towards others, and reminiscing and anticipating one's achievements in FL learning.

6. Conclusion

The present study suggests that perceived teacher emotional support barely affects learners' FL classroom anxiety. Perceived student emotional support is more important than perceived teacher emotional support when it comes to reducing FL anxiety in adult learners, which further shows the necessity of fostering inter-peer cohesion in the FL classroom. In addition, this study also established that a learner's positive orientation is linked to significantly lower FL classroom anxiety and that it mediates the relationship between perceived student support and FL classroom anxiety. Thus, FL anxiety is related not only to the extent to which learners hold a positive self-concept, but also to the extent to which they have a positive view about other people.

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