

DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF SZEGED

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**RELATIONSHIPS AMONG L2 MOTIVATION, ANXIETY, WILLINGNESS TO
COMMUNICATE, AND PROFICIENCY AMONG ETHIOPIAN UNDERGRADUATE
STUDENTS**

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION SUMMARY

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1. Introduction

The process of acquiring a second or foreign language (L2) is inherently complex and multifaceted, extending far beyond the mere mastery of linguistic structures. It encompasses a diverse array of cognitive, metacognitive, and affective factors that profoundly influence learner performance. Key individual variables—specifically L2 motivation, willingness to communicate (WTC), and anxiety—have received considerable attention in the literature due to their critical roles in shaping language learning outcomes.

Research has unveiled varying interrelationships among these variables, underscoring their dynamic and context-dependent nature. Factors such as time, topic, and educational context can significantly influence how motivation, WTC, and anxiety manifest and interact. Given this complexity, there is an urgent need for further empirical investigation across diverse contexts and over different time frames.

This dissertation seeks to explore the intricate relationships among L2 motivation, WTC, anxiety, and proficiency, utilizing structural equation modelling to analyze these dynamics within multilingual and multicultural environments, with a particular focus on Ethiopia. The findings from this research will provide valuable theoretical, empirical, and practical insights aimed at enhancing English education, learning processes, and communication skills. Moreover, the implications of this study extend beyond the Ethiopian context, offering guidance for educators, policymakers, and language learners in similar English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings worldwide.

2. Research questions

This study aims to investigate the interplay between the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS), anxiety, willingness to communicate (L2WTC), and language proficiency among Ethiopian EFL learners. To address this objective, the research seeks to examine the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between L2MSS and L2 anxiety?
2. How does motivation impact anxiety and proficiency?
3. What is the effect of L2MSS on proficiency and L2WTC?
4. How does L2 anxiety affect proficiency and L2WTC in different settings?

3. Methodology

This dissertation presents a comprehensive analysis integrating four articles published in reputable Q1 and D1 journals, focusing on the relationship between L2MSS and L2 anxiety in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The research employs a cross-sectional quantitative design conducted in two phases: a pilot study and a main study.

In the initial stage of the small-scale pilot study, an expert and 65 students (aged 19 to 23; mean = 21.55, standard deviation = 1.28) evaluated the questionnaire's appropriateness, simplicity, and usefulness. Data collection and analysis for this phase commenced on November 5, 2021, and concluded on November 25, 2021. After completing the first pilot, a second and final pilot study involving 165 students was conducted in late November 2021. The primary aim of this second pilot was to gauge the validity and reliability of the adapted L2MSS and FL anxiety items within the EFL context.

The main study was conducted at Mizan-Aman Preparatory School, situated in the southwestern region of Ethiopia, during the initial semester of the 2022–2023 academic year. The school comprised a total of 652 students, with 314 females and 338 males in the 12th grade (ISCED 4) studying in English as the language of instruction and the subject of learning. The study employed a purposive sampling technique (Creswell, 2012) involving all students in the school to obtain comprehensive insights into the phenomena under investigation. This method facilitated the generation of generalisations about the target population, thereby reducing the likelihood of overlooking potential data points (Creswell, 2012; Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009). Out of the total population, 609 students (352 males and 257 females) willingly consented to participate in the investigation and completed the questionnaire within the allocated time. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 23 ($M = 20.6$, $SD = 0.72$). The provided data was utilised to implement three

empirical studies (study two, study three, and study four) as integral components of my dissertation.

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS 25 and AMOS 23, adhering to Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) protocols established by Tseng et al. (2006). Model fit was evaluated through indices such as RMSEA, GFI, TLI, and CFI, complemented by descriptive and correlational analyses. SEM assessed both measurement and structural models based on foundational works of Byrne (2013), Kline (2016), and Kunnan (1998).

Ethical considerations were strictly observed, with approval from the University of Szeged Institutional Review Board (IRB) and consent for data collection at Mizan-Aman Preparatory School. Participants were informed of the study's scope via verbal and written explanations, reinforcing assurances of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity.

4. Summary of key findings

In the dissertation, nine key findings were presented and critically discussed, leading to the proposal of a comprehensive model that significantly advances the understanding of the relationship between L2MSS, anxiety, L2WTC, and proficiency in the Ethiopian EFL context.

First, the initial pilot study and the subsequent empirical studies have offered robust theoretical backing for Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) L2MSS, thereby expanding its suitability to the Ethiopian context. This validation illustrates the universal applicability of the L2MSS framework, even within culturally and linguistically diverse settings such as Ethiopia.

Second, the findings revealed that students had a low ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience, while their ought-to L2 self was high. This pattern suggests a constrained positive self-concept, inadequate learning opportunities, and considerable external pressure to fulfil expectations associated with English language learning.

Third, there was a prevalent perception of inadequate English proficiency, with many expressing dissatisfactions and a lack of confidence in their practical language skills. This indicates a widespread belief among students that their current level of competence in English is insufficient.

Fourth, students demonstrated low perceived L2WTC in in-class, out-of-class, and digital settings. This finding indicates a hesitancy to engage voluntarily in structured activities with teachers and peers within the classroom, in social interactions outside the classroom, and with unfamiliar audiences or online platforms in the digital setting.

Fifth, students exhibited high levels of debilitating anxiety coupled with low levels of facilitative anxiety. This suggests that students experienced anxiety that hindered their ability to communicate and learn while lacking the type of anxiety that could have potentially motivated them or helped them focus. This imbalance indicates that anxiety may impede rather than drive their academic progress.

Sixth, the findings contributed to a comprehensive framework that illustrates the complex relationships between motivational and communication-related factors. The fundamental components of L2MSS—ideal L2 self, L2 learning experience, and ought-to L2 self—each substantially positively impacted proficiency and L2WTC in various contexts.

Seventh, the findings demonstrated that both the ideal L2 self and L2 learning experiences were associated with decreased levels of debilitating anxiety, indicating that students who had well-defined objectives and were exposed to supportive learning environments tended to experience lower levels of debilitating anxiety. Conversely, the ought-to L2 self was found to be correlated with increased levels of debilitating anxiety, suggesting that external pressures may have contributed to the exacerbation of anxiety among language learners.

Eighth, the study's results indicated a significant negative correlation between debilitating anxiety and English proficiency as well as L2WTC across different contexts. This implies that higher levels of debilitating anxiety may hinder both English proficiency and L2WTC. Conversely, the findings demonstrated a positive correlation between facilitative anxiety, proficiency in English, and L2WTC, suggesting that constructive stress can enhance confidence and willingness to communicate.

Ninth, the positive influence of students' L2WTC within the classroom extends beyond academic boundaries to real-life and digital contexts. This suggests that when students are open to communicating in English during class, it can substantially boost their ability and confidence to engage in real-life interactions and online communication. Thus, the skills and self-assurance acquired through classroom interactions have the potential to transfer to real-world conversations and digital communication platforms.

5. Implications

The findings of this dissertation yield significant implications across multiple dimensions of language learning and teaching within the Ethiopian context. A primary implication is the enhancement of Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System, specifically tailored to reflect the sociocultural and emotional realities faced by Ethiopian students. By recognizing the duality between the ideal L2 self, representing intrinsic motivation, and the ought-to L2 self, which embodies external pressures, the research highlights the necessity for context-specific adaptations of established theoretical models. This understanding promotes a balanced way to motivate individuals, supporting their personal goals while also considering external expectations.

Moreover, the study advocates for the modernization of English proficiency assessment methods to better align with the evolving educational landscape in Ethiopia. By integrating both objective and subjective evaluation techniques, particularly through the development of CEFR-based self-assessment tools, students gain a structured yet adaptable means to evaluate their competencies. This approach not only promotes independent learning and self-regulation but also enhances academic mobility, thereby providing greater access to international educational and career opportunities. A holistic understanding of language proficiency can be attained by complementing self-assessments with standardized measures, benefiting students, educators, researchers, and policymakers alike.

The findings also reveal that anxiety in language acquisition is multifaceted and context-dependent, challenging the traditional binary view of anxiety as merely present or absent. This research underscores the notion that anxiety can function as both a facilitative and debilitating force in language learning. To address this complexity, it is crucial to implement personalized strategies aimed at mitigating the negative impacts of anxiety while harnessing its motivational potential. Educational interventions should cultivate a supportive and non-judgmental classroom atmosphere, encouraging positive peer interactions and incorporating self-reflection techniques that enable students to effectively regulate their anxiety.

Additionally, the research emphasizes the importance of expanding instructional practices beyond conventional face-to-face methods to include essential digital communication skills. Challenges such as limited digital literacy, inadequate infrastructure, and minimal exposure to online communication platforms hinder Ethiopian students' confidence in utilizing language skills in virtual contexts. Addressing these challenges necessitates prioritizing digital literacy training and providing opportunities for engagement in online discussions, virtual collaborations,

and multimedia-based language tasks. By bridging this gap, students will be better prepared for effective communication in an increasingly globalized environment.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that students' motivation to learn English is largely influenced by external pressures, overshadowing intrinsic aspirations. This imbalance highlights the critical need for strategies that foster intrinsic motivation and personal growth. Classroom practices should include future-oriented tasks, role models, and clear articulations of the personal benefits of English learning, such as career opportunities and cultural enrichment. Creating a supportive and engaging classroom atmosphere is essential for enhancing student willingness to communicate and learn. Effective pedagogical approaches must prioritize student-centered, interactive, and diverse methodologies that foster collaborative and positive peer interactions, thereby alleviating anxiety and promoting active participation.

Finally, the research contributed to the development and validation of a new model that explores the intricate relationships among motivation, emotions, and communication behaviours in Ethiopian EFL learners. This model transcends the examination of individual variables in isolation by focusing on their dynamic interactions. Insights derived from this model offer a comprehensive understanding of how to enhance L2 learning experiences through targeted interventions, reinforcing the interconnectedness of motivation, anxiety, communication confidence and proficiency.

In summary, the implications of these findings advocate for a multifaceted approach to language education in Ethiopia, emphasizing the importance of contextualization, modernization, and a supportive learning environment to optimize L2 learning outcomes.

6. Limitations and future research directions

This study acknowledges several limitations that warrant consideration for future research. Firstly, the cross-sectional design, which gathers data at a single point in time, restricts the understanding of changes in learner variables over time; thus, future studies should adopt a longitudinal approach to track trends and causal relationships more effectively.

Secondly, while a quantitative design provides valuable statistical insights, it may lack the depth required to fully capture individual experiences and contextual factors. Therefore, employing explanatory sequential mixed-method research could enhance data richness by integrating quantitative findings with qualitative insights for a more comprehensive analysis.

Additionally, the limited scope of the current study, which focuses solely on one school, may restrict the broader applicability of the findings; hence, future research should involve a more diverse sample across multiple schools and demographics to improve generalizability. Furthermore, the Language Learner Motivation and Self-Self Model (L2MSS) does not fully account for the role of learners' actions and efforts in achieving success; future investigations could extend this framework to examine how specific actions and behaviours affect learning outcomes.

Lastly, addressing the interrelationship between motivation and engagement is crucial, as this study currently lacks a focus on integrating "why" (motivation) and "how" (engagement) in language learning; future research should strive to develop holistic approaches that simultaneously address both aspects for more effective language education.

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