How do L2 learners’ shame-proneness and guilt-proneness affect their language learning motivation and achievement?

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Emotion research in second language acquisition (SLA) research is currently undergoing rapid changes with an increasing number of studies exploring its role in second language (L2) learning (Dewaele, 2019; Prior, 2019; Teimouri, 2018). In line with this rising wave of studies, my research aims (1) to introduce the constructs of shame-proneness and guilt-proneness from social psychology research into SLA studies, (2) to validate the psychometric measurement of these two constructs within SLA, and (3) to examine the influence of shame-proneness and guilt-proneness on L2 learners’ motivational behaviors and language achievements.

These research objectives were explored as follows: First, the prevalence of shame and guilt reactions in L2 settings was explored. Next, Second Language Test of Shame and Guilt Affect (L2-TOSGA) was developed to measure L2 learners’ individual differences in terms of their proneness to shame and proneness to guilt during L2 learning. Then, various psychometric properties of the L2-TOSGA were examined. Finally, the links between L2 learners’ shame-proneness and guilt-proneness, and their motivational behaviors and language achievements were probed. A total of 769 English learners, across four studies, from five private language institutes and two private universities in Iran participated in this research.

The results of both qualitative and quantitative analyses evidenced the pervasiveness of shame and guilt in an L2 context and attested to the reliability, stability, and validity of the newly developed questionnaire, the L2-TOSGA. The findings also revealed that not all the negative emotions of L2 learners have detrimental effects on students’ learning of a second language. More specifically, while shame-proneness can hamper L2 learners’ motivation by impairing their sense of global self, guilt-proneness can increase L2 learners’ motivation by encouraging corrective actions to undo their misbehaviors. In short, this research sheds light on the multi-faceted nature of social emotions and highlighted their subtle influence on L2 learners during language learning and use.