Interaction-based research has been central to understanding how a second language (L2) develops over time through interaction (Mackey, Abbuhl & Gass, 2012). To date, SLA research has mainly focused on the role that language input and output, negotiation of meaning, and feedback have on L2 learning, neglecting the affective dimension of interaction-driven L2 learning. Further, affective factors in SLA have been investigated mostly as traits, and research on their state-dimension has been scant.

The current mixed-methods study focuses on how foreign language anxiety (FLA) develops during four task-based interactions and its possible impact on interaction-driven learning. A total of 21 native-speaking-English learners of Italian were video-recorded as they carried out a spot-the-difference and a picture-story task, with both a native and a nonnative speaker of Italian. They subsequently watched the videos and rated how their level of anxiety fluctuated during the interactions (idiodynamic rating, MacIntyre, 2012). Stimulated interviews based on the videos and the graphs of the dynamic rating provided insights into the reasons behind the fluctuations. Participants’ learning outcomes were measured through accuracy and fluency gain scores based on oral pre-posttests.

Findings show that L2 learning is a situated process, in which learner-internal and contextual factors interact in a complex and non-linear relationship. Participants’ significant improvement and increase in the number of attempts to use the target structures indicate that practicing and receiving feedback contributed to learning, and that state anxiety was not a significantly disruptive factor. These findings unveil possible mechanisms in place in L2 interactions, and how state anxiety triggered by task complexity, interlocutors’ proficiency, learners’ cognitive processing, and interactional factors may affect participants’ learning. I discuss findings in light of possible strategies for L2 learners and teachers to manage anxiety in interaction-based L2 learning, so that it is channeled to foster L2 development.

Keywords: Anxiety, idiodynamic method, task-based interaction.