L2 buoyancy: Exploring learners’ everyday resilience in the language classroom

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Recent work in language learner psychology has shown the potential contributions of positive psychology for the field of second language acquisition. This study was designed to explore the rationale for buoyancy (Martin & Marsh, 2008, 2009)—the capacity to overcome the setbacks, challenges, and pressures that are part of the ordinary course of school life within the ranks of L2 learners. We begin by providing a conceptual overview of the buoyancy construct, and propose that while motivation may be critical to L2 learning success, because challenges and setbacks are an everyday reality of language learning in instructed settings (e.g., poor grades, competing deadlines, exam pressure, performance failures) the learning gains that students make can also be lost if they are not resilient to adversity and are unable to overcome the pressures that are part of the ordinary course of language learning. We then report on a study designed to investigate the buoyancy profiles of college-level L2 learners (N = 879) in South Korea. Through questionnaire data we assessed their academic buoyancy and a set of six hypothesized predictors (i.e., L2 self-efficacy, L2 self-regulation, ideal L2 self, L2 learning persistence, L2 learning anxiety, and teacher-student relationship). Using a two-step cluster analysis of this data, we identified five prominent L2 learner archetypes across the spectrum of buoyancy, ranging from the “ideally buoyant” L2 learner to the “academically fragile” L2 learner. We consider the implications of this novel construct for instructed L2 learning and propose that, from this perspective, buoyancy provides learners with the capacity to negotiate the ups and downs of language learning, and to overcome everyday adversities on the path to L2 learning success. We discuss these findings as a springboard for future research on the language learner using insights from positive psychology.

Keywords: instructed L2 learning, L2 learning buoyancy, positive psychology.