The independent and combined effects of cognitive and affective variables on grammatical gender agreement in L2 French

Stephanie Cote
University of Toronto, Canada

In an attempt to explain the variability often observed between second language (L2) learners of similar proficiencies, individual differences, including cognitive variables, (e.g., working memory [WM]), and affective variables, (e.g., foreign language anxiety [FLA]), are often cited. While previous studies have considered the effects of each of these factors individually, they have not considered the combined effects of both FLA and WM. Given that FLA may block attentional resources and diminish WM capacity (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), the specific relationship between these two variables is of particular interest.

The current study will examine the effects of FLA and WM capacity on grammatical gender agreement accuracy in the oral production of intermediate L2 French speakers. More anxious learners are predicted to demonstrate reduced agreement accuracy based on previous findings that FLA negatively affects oral competence more generally (e.g., Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012). We also predict that learners with lower WM capacity will be less accurate, and that this difference will be especially evident when adjective agreement occurs across clause boundaries (e.g., [une femme]NP [qui est nerveuse]CP ‘a woman who is nervous’). More anxious learners are predicted to be less accurate than their peers with similar WM capacity, since anxiety may block WM. Twenty Anglophone intermediate French learners will complete a picture narration task. FLA and WM will be measured via the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986) and a reading span test (e.g., Waters & Caplan, 1996), respectively. Two main contributions will be made. First, while many previous studies have considered the effects of FLA on general L2 competence (most often measured via language course grades), our study will expand individual differences research by examining a specific structure (grammatical gender agreement). Second, it will investigate the relationship between FLA and WM, which has not yet been addressed.

Keywords: second language acquisition, working memory, foreign language anxiety.