Anxiety and L2 Self-Images: The ‘Anxious Self’

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Introduction

Anxiety is an elusive and complex phenomenon, known for inhibiting people in various activities and, in extreme cases, even potentially damaging their lives. Anxiety has also been recognised to affect foreign/second language (L2) learning and use, and the second language acquisition (SLA) literature typically distinguishes ‘language anxiety’ from other types of anxiety (e.g. Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Given the phenomenological saliency of anxiety, it may be surprising to many that there is no generally accepted definition of the construct, making it one of the most elusive concepts among individual difference characteristics (e.g. Eysenck, 1979; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 1995; Scovel, 1978; Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001; Young, 1991). One reason for the prevailing ambiguity is that anxiety can be conceptualised at various levels of abstraction, as is illustrated by the following four statements:

‘I am an anxious person’.
‘I am anxious when at the dentist’.
‘I feel anxious’.
‘I avoided the party because I was anxious about meeting people’. (Edelmann, 1992: 1)

The first example denotes a strong, personality-related characteristic of anxiety that one would define as a trait, but the second example demonstrates that anxiety can also emerge in specific situations. The third statement foregrounds the affective dimension of anxiety and the last example concerns anxiety as an antecedent of behaviour. Such variations have led scholars to view anxiety through several different lenses, from diverse perspectives. Some scholars regard it as part of personality (e.g. Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Simpson, 1980), others as a primary emotion (e.g. Dewaele, 2010; Gray, 1982; Spielberger, 1972), and it has also been mentioned as a key motivational component (e.g. Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).
The Need for New Ideas in Anxiety Research

Not only has language anxiety been a highly elusive concept, but a review of the literature reveals that anxiety research has been at a relative standstill for more than a decade. To illustrate this, a search in six leading journals in applied linguistics (Applied Linguistics, Language Learning, Language Teaching, Modern Language Journal, Studies in Second Language Acquisition and TESOL Quarterly; for a justification of these forums, see Boo et al., 2015) indicated that the total number of articles in these journals was fewer than 10 between the years 2005 and 2013, representing a decreasing trajectory in comparison with the previous two decades (see Figure 4.1). Interestingly, there has been a dramatic increase in this respect over the past two years, but it is fair to conclude that the recent surge presented little discussion of theoretical perspectives and developments in models of anxiety but focused primarily on practical aspects of combating anxiety. One valuable exception to this trend has been a recent paper by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), which highlighted the need to reflect on the functions of emotions rather than merely categorising them as positive or negative ones, thereby initiating a serious rethink about the conceptualisation of anxiety.

The Study

Phase 1

In order to obtain a broad understanding of the nature of anxiety, we decided to focus our research on learners whose experience of language anxiety was so strong that it resulted in a debilitating effect. First, we contacted two instructors of English and two assistant professors at four different universities in Turkey, who all had an awareness of language anxiety as a result of their academic studies, and asked them to refer us to students who exhibited some of the well-known symptoms of debilitating language anxiety, such as the inability to express themselves while performing language skills, freezing up during oral production, displaying physiological symptoms (e.g. blushing, shaking, sweating) when called on, avoiding eye contact with the teacher, excessively worrying about being left behind and over-studying with no gains. As a result of the teachers’ help as well as of subsequent snowball sampling, we conducted qualitative interviews with 20 participants on Skype, each lasting for approximately half an hour and involving questions to elaborate on how students perceived anxiety, what made them anxious and when/whether they became aware of anxiety. All these participants were Turkish learners of English at an intermediate level and they were all interviewed in their first language (L1), Turkish.

Phase 2

In order to further clarify and build on the obtained findings, we first administered an anxiety questionnaire – comprising the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986) and the general anxiety section (neuroticism) of the Big Five Inventory (John et al., 1991, 2008) – to 19 male and 55 female participants (mean age 19.8 years) who were studying English at Turkish universities. For interviewing, we selected 16 of them with the highest anxiety measures on one or both...
scales – the distribution of the data was such that these 16 participants formed a natural cluster with a considerable gap between them and the next group of learners in terms of their anxiety scores. All the selected participants were studying English language teaching, with their English proficiency being at an upper-intermediate level. The rationale for choosing students with such a relatively high level of proficiency was to exclude cases where anxiety was caused purely by the limited language code at lower proficiency levels. Each participant was interviewed face-to-face and the data were submitted to stepwise content analysis to distill salient themes.

**Data analysis**

Although, as mentioned above, our study included a quantitative component, this was primarily used for the principled selection of interviewees for the subsequent, dominant qualitative phase. All the interviews were transcribed and analysed through latent content analysis to elicit general themes and patterns concerning both the symptoms of anxiety and the classroom situations that might trigger these characteristics. First, we highlighted relevant extracts in the transcripts and assigned codes for them. Then, we examined the codes and established broader themes among them based on the research aims and interview questions (e.g. anxiety-provoking situations, behaviours and thoughts while feeling anxious, describing anxiety, language anxiety vs general anxiety). Following this, in an adaption of Crabtree and Miller’s (1992) template approach, we developed an analysis guide that reflected McAdams’s New Big Five model and his three-level conceptual framework (see later in this chapter for details) and juxtaposed the categories of the coding themes and the template in order to identify the relevant qualitative data for our study. Each broad theme was then submitted to a more detailed analysis that enabled us to form more specific categories under each theme (e.g. stage fright, fear of negative evaluation, heightened expectations). This hierarchical pattern not only helped provide a general model but also allowed us to discover some fine links and distinctions within and between the initial broad themes and levels in the template. In addition to this, the questionnaire data were submitted to some basic statistical analyses of the two main variables (general and language anxiety) to examine their correlation with each other and their distribution across gender.

**The ‘Anxious Self’**

One of the main themes emerging from the first round of interviews was the fact that several learners talked about the way in which they were affected by anxiety in a somewhat detached manner, referring to an anxious persona that they were not fully in control of. The following two extracts from two different participants illustrate this point well:

I envy my classmates because they can express their ideas the way they want and I can’t. When I am anxious, I am aware of myself and my behaviours yet I cannot control my movements and I often ask myself: ‘What am I going to do now?’ ... I cannot reflect on my inner speech while performing. I keep telling myself that I should always smile but I have an anxious side and I cannot deny it. I believe that I can control the anxious side of me more and more, yet I do not know exactly how. (Female interviewee 1, hence Flint 1)

Normally I can do whatever I want but the person who presents (herself in the English class) cannot do what she wants. (Flint 6)

Thus, some learners found it conducive to describe their anxious manifestations in L2 performance as if those were the outworking of a fairly independent dimension of their overall self. This framing of the issue had obvious links to the recent emphasis in SLA on the significance of the learner’s self-concept (e.g. Csizer & Magid, 2014) and, within the domain of motivation research, the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2005, 2006a, 2006b). This prompted us to explore whether conceptualising the ‘anxious self’ might be a fruitful approach to shed new light on the subject. Our search for a potential conceptual framework that might accommodate this new conceptualisation led us to an influential recent theory of individual differences by Dan McAdams, the New Big Five model (e.g. McAdams, 2006a, 2006b; McAdams & Pals, 2006), which we then adopted as the guiding theoretical paradigm for our data analysis. Therefore, before presenting a more detailed examination of our qualitative data, let us provide a brief overview of this theoretical model.

**Situating Anxiety in McAdams’s Theory of Personality**

Personality factors have long been seen as key aspects of our understanding of variation in people’s performance, and personality traits have also been registered as some of the main contributors to anxiety (e.g. Beatty & McCroskey, 2000; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; MacIntyre, 1999; Young, 1991). The currently dominant personality construct, McCrae and Costa’s ‘Big Five’, includes five personality dimensions – extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness to experience – and within this construct anxiety is one of the primary facets of the ‘neuroticism’ dimension (Costa & McCrae, 1994; Goldberg, 1993; McCrae & Costa, 2003, 2008; McCrae & John, 1992). This anxiety component is normally equated with trait anxiety (Eysenck, 1997), and Goldberg (1993) suggests that people with a high level of trait anxiety often experience nervousness or general emotional impairment across a
range of situations. This, however, leaves the issue of state anxiety open, which is the point where McAdams’s approach becomes relevant. In his ‘New Big Five’ model (McAdams, 2006a, 2006b; McAdams & Pals, 2006), he proposes a three-tiered conceptual framework consisting of dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations and integrative life narratives. Thus, the new model views the overall personality of the individual as the interaction of three different levels, with each explaining psychological individuality using its own discourse (for a recent summary, see Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

Dispositional traits involve personality features such as extraversion, neuroticism, friendliness, dominance, dutifulness and depressiveness, that is, attributes that tend to be relatively stable across situations and over time; essentially we are talking about the main components of the Big Five model here. These traits act as the foundation for human individuality and provide a signature that an individual expresses in a variety of circumstances over a long stretch of time.

Characteristic adaptations refer to context-dependent constructs containing motives, goals, plans, strivings, strategies, values, virtues, schemas, self-images, mental representations of significant others, developmental tasks, and many other aspects of human individuality (McAdams & Pals, 2006: 208). This domain has been the primary focus of the classic individual difference paradigm. In comparison with traits, characteristic adaptations fit better into the social nature of everyday life as they are enacted in the light of, and are also moulded by, the ordinary demands of social situations. However, we should note that due to the fact that specific situations may collide with several different characteristic adaptations and thereby result in compositions of more general learner characteristics, ‘the distinction between dispositional trait and characteristic adaptation may not be perfectly clear in every case’ (McAdams & Pals, 2006: 208); for example, an individual’s anxiety tendencies can be manifested in specific forms of anxieties, a point that we will return to below.

What makes McAdams’s model genuinely integrative is the third level of the construct, integrative life narratives, which involves the ‘narrative identity’ that individuals create for themselves to help to define who they are, to connect with others and ultimately to make sense of their lives and regulate their behaviour. Narrative identity can be defined as ‘a person’s internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose’ (McAdams & McLean, 2013: 233). The significance of the concept lies in the assumption that individuals compose and comprehend their experiences to a large extent as narratives (e.g., excuses, explanations, myths or stories), and that these narratives then turn into the underpinnings of individuals’ self-concept. Indeed, self-narratives are not just stories about what happened in a specific time and spot; they also provide both an assessment of past occasions in relation to the self and a feeling of transient progression (Bruner, 1990; Habermas & Bluck, 2000).

An L2 narrative identity is described by Dörnyei and Ryan (2015: 202) as ‘the specific aspect of an individual’s ongoing internal narrative that relates to learning and using a second/foreign language’, which integrates past L2-related experiences and future goals. The unique practical importance of the third level of McAdams’s model lies in the fact that this is the component that humans can control the most, because its relationship with the overall framework is bidirectional: narrative identity not only unifies the personality system but also applies a developmental impact to it. Accordingly, shaping the life narrative can lead to shaping the whole mindset.

As will be illustrated below, language anxiety is reflected seamlessly in the three levels of McAdams’s model: first, it includes an initial element of inherent tendency that is biologically/genetically related; second, state anxiety can be understood as an example of characteristic adaptations; and third, our interviews confirm that people regularly produce narratives to create cohesion in their experiences and perceptions so that the unified narrative can become a kind of guide to be used to deal with the negative consequences of anxiety. Let us look at the three levels more closely in the light of our data.

Dispositional trait level

It is a well-known observation that anxious learners often experience one or more unpleasant symptoms. The most common ones are physiological, such as a high heart rate, stomach pain, feeling hot, trembling voice, blushing and shaking of hands or legs and so on. For example, our interviewees report,

I feel my heartbeats. (FInt 1)
I suddenly feel hot and my hands start shaking. I don’t know if my face really turns red but I certainly feel like that. (MInt 8)
My legs shake. Sometimes it is so extreme that I barely stand. (FInt 14)

Some of these symptoms were observed during the interviews themselves. Additionally, anxious students can sometimes have difficulty concentrating and can find themselves freezing up while performing, for example,

It feels like I am paralysed. When I am on the stage, something unidentifiable happens. Last year, even though I was well-prepared for a topic, I could not even talk about it. (FInt 12)
Anxiety may also manifest in some extreme symptoms such as unexplained pain, muscle stiffness or even fainting:

It was during an exam period. I woke up early in the morning. All I thought about was the exam that day. I felt dizzy and headed to the bathroom. Then, I fainted on the way there. (Flint 3)

The interview data elicited from our participants offers a clear indication that there is a tendency in some learners to experience symptoms of anxiety on a recurring basis, resulting in a rather resigned, settled disposition. The following three extracts are typical examples in this respect:

It (anxiety) is somehow inside me. I can't get rid of it. I am an introvert person and I think that is all because of it. (Flint 4)

I get nervous easily. I am concerned about the reactions I may be receiving upon my decisions or participations. It is not extreme but it prevents me from making decisions freely. (Flint 15)

I think it is my general personality. I do not like talking to people because I do not feel comfortable. (Flint 9)

One of the most recognisable features of dispositional traits is that they are relatively consistent across different circumstances, and indeed, the qualitative data suggest that most of the participants experienced detrimental effects of anxiety in different walks of their lives. For example, one interviewee (Flint 15) stated, ‘No matter what I do or which subject I study, I will become anxious as it is one of my main characteristics’. Moreover, as the following extract illustrates, some of our data also point to the inheritable nature of dispositional traits (even though further research would be needed to determine exactly what and to what extent is inherited): ‘My mother has always had anxiety. She often tells me that we are similar to each other in terms of anxiety’ (Flint 11).

Additional quantitative analysis
As mentioned earlier, we have conducted some basic statistical analysis of the questionnaire data, which confirmed the existence of a dispositional level of anxiety. Although the literature suggests contradictory results about the relations of general anxiety and language anxiety (Dewaele, 2002, 2013; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1959), our questionnaire showed that there was a strong positive association between the neuroticism and language anxiety variables ($r=0.60$, $p<0.001$). This indicates that the stronger someone’s general anxiety tendency, the more likely he/she is to realise it in the language classroom setting; in other words, emotionally stable individuals are likely to suffer less from language anxiety. This generalisable trend, however, is modified by gender differences, which is another area where opinions do not fully converge (e.g. Dewaele, 2013; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Woodrow, 2006). Our data set revealed that female learners scored higher on both language anxiety and neuroticism scales (mean $=[1]=2.7$, standard deviation $[SD]=0.51$; $M=3$, $SD=0.62$) in comparison with male learners ($M=2.4$, $SD=0.48$; $M=2.6$, $SD=0.65$; $t\{[1]\}=2.02$, $p<0.05$; $t\{[1]\}=-2.42$, $p<0.02$). That females were found to be more anxious than males might be explained by sociocultural aspects of anxiety (MacIntyre, 1995; Yan & Horwitz, 2008), because in male-dominant societies, females have been reported to be more anxious than males and more reluctant to interact with others in learning a foreign language (Park & French, 2013). Therefore, one possible reason why past research has shown different results could be the diverse sociocultural contexts in which the studies were carried out, which forms a link between dispositional trait level and the characteristic adaptation level of MacAdam’s model.

Characteristic adaptation level
Some people experience a debilitating fear-like emotion in certain situations, which not only reduces the productivity and the efficiency of their performance but also causes a great deal of unease in them. However, unlike dispositional traits, these emotions are characteristic of only specific aspects of particular people’s social life, with some well-known adaptations of this kind including stage fright and test anxiety. Stage fright is a widely known and experienced anxiety manifestation in a distinct type of communication situation; it can be understood as a ‘dynamic event that revolves around fluctuations in individuals’ perceptions of their own competency in public speaking settings’ (MacIntyre & MacDonald, 1998: 360). Giving a speech, singing or acting before an audience are some of the most common situations in which people experience stage fright, and we also find several examples of it in our own data set; for example, ‘I can easily become anxious in front of a group of people. I also feel anxious if there is an authority – you know, the feeling of being evaluated’ (Flint 4). This extract also highlights the role of the presence of an authority as another factor contributing to anxiety arousal.

Test anxiety is one of the clearest demonstrations of how a specific instructional task can mediate anxiety. With the growing impact of examinations in modern society, test anxiety has become a pervasive issue (Huang & Hung, 2013; Sarason, 1986; Zeldner, 1998), as individuals increasingly come across test situations not only in classroom settings but also in other aspects of life such as job interviews or applying for educational programmes. One of our participants (Flint 5), for example, reported: ‘I am anxious not only in classes in English but also in others, especially during exams. Sometimes I cannot even focus on the questions’.
Besides the above examples of adaptation to communication situations and task types, our data also highlight several other archetypal adaptation forms. A frequent anxiety type concerns the fear of negative evaluation – for example, 'Others might think that I am not capable enough. I might fail and others might laugh at me' (Flint 6) – which may be particularly salient within a competitive classroom goal structure: '... when I see my friends studying or participating more than I do, I feel anxious' (Flint 1). It is no coincidence that the adaptations that we have mentioned so far as emerging from our data correspond with the three well-known components – communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety – that Horwitz et al. (1986) identified in their seminal paper as shaping FLA.

Our interviews with anxious learners suggested two more common characteristic adaptations. One of these is related to the content of the communication, particularly unfamiliar content. The best example of this type in our data set involved an account where a participant who normally displayed heightened language anxiety talked about a situation when this did not happen:

The lesson started with what we already knew, for example with Facebook, we were familiar with the topic and able to understand it. We started talking about this... I was very relaxed. I could answer everything. (Flint 16)

Finally, a theme that would resonate with many anxious learners concerns the perception of heightened expectations:

I have to express my ideas freely and I have to answer when people ask questions. I am a second year university student. People have expectations. This is what an educated person should do. When I cannot answer I feel like an idiot. (Flint 11)

We have argued earlier that characteristic adaptations are mediators that bring to the fore general anxiety tendencies in the individuals' actual lives, and therefore we asked our interviewees when they first came to realise their anxiety dispositions. Many students reported that they first experienced their anxiety in adolescence, as they tried to find their position among their peers. For example, one of the students stated that she became aware of her anxiety during social interactions in her high school years when she noticed that she actually cared about the other students' opinions:

I think I started to be anxious in high school when social relationships became more serious. I am generally comfortable in the school but when I feel that the outcome of my task performance may be negative, then I start feeling anxious. I can’t help thinking about what others might think about it. (Flint 7)

However, with some other interviewees (Flint 4), the first memories of experiencing anxiety go back to a younger age ('I have always had this problem. When I was 10 years old there were classroom representative elections. I gave a speech and I started crying'), while some others first encountered it only when they attended university:

It (my anxiety) started at university because the classroom activities demanded extra effort... I remember my first presentation in English. I looked at my friends' faces and I saw that they were all looking at me... (Flint 1)

**Narrative identity level**

The narrative level of anxiety concerns learners' attempts to make sense of their anxious reactions, to understand why and how those occur as well as to organise and process them through explanations and rationalisations. Interviewing, as a research method, taps into this narrative mode by definition, and the analysis of our corpus foregrounded three typical approaches the participants' narratives took, representing three reaction styles: fighter, quitter and safe player.

**Fighter**

Some students explicitly expressed that they would like to get rid of their anxiety, adding that they had already started developing a disposition of adopting such combative behaviour. It was promising to see that, through such a conscious stance, these students – who, we should recall, had often experienced a debilitating degree of anxiety – started to deal with their anxiety in a constructive manner, as illustrated by the following two examples:

Now I am more aware of myself. I am not as anxious as I was before. Only in a few circumstances – I am going to be a teacher of English. English language will be my job. So I cannot be an anxious teacher, right? (Flint 10)

Actually, I often criticise the anxious me and find it unnecessary to be anxious. The positive side is that I have become a person who does detailed research to be well prepared before attending to a lecture. going somewhere or doing something. I have also started reading about anxiety. What I am saying is I do not give up. I am trying to improve myself. It is getting better and I feel happier. (Flint 1)
Quitter

In contrast to the fighters, some other students perceived their anxiety in an unconstructive and non-forward-pointing manner, even though the actual symptoms they experienced were no more severe than those felt by the fighters. They became resigned to failure in trying to overcome their anxiety, as is expressed clearly by the following statement: ‘I do not think I can change. It is typical me. I have always been anxious and I will always be, I know’ (FInt 9). As a result, the typical coping mechanisms such students adopted were characterised by flight rather than fight; for example, in the following example one of the interviewees reported the intention of taking another course at university instead of the L2-related subject he was studying:

I want to talk in the classroom but I cannot take the first step. It does not matter whom or where I speak... As long as I speak in English, I am always nervous. To tell you the truth, I do not struggle. I have not attended the presentation sessions this semester and I will fail for that. I consider changing my course and study educational sciences instead of English language... (MInt 8)

Safe player

Our findings show that anxious students sometimes employ ‘safety-seeking behaviours’, which are measures that an individual takes to circumvent a potentially negative event. In the language classroom, these students avoid or minimise the chance of being asked to perform in the L2 by not initiating speech, avoiding eye contact, sitting at the back of the class or giving monosyllabic answers (for a detailed description of this disposition, see King, 2014; Oxford, 1999). As the following example illustrates, such behaviours can turn into a cohesive avoidance type that would also affect other aspects of the individual’s everyday life:

If I noticed an item I bought from a store was damaged I would never go there to ask for a new one. It is the same in the classroom. I never take responsibility and answer a question. Most of the time I sit at the back of the classroom. (FInt 11)

Finally, we also found examples of students who simply had not produced a clarifying narrative for themselves and thus had not constructed any cohesive meaning of their experiences. This was revealed when they indicated to us that taking part in the interview – which, by definition, pushed them into a narrative mode – played a conducive role in helping them to make sense of their experiences. For example, at the end of an interview, one participant (FInt 6) said, ‘Thank you! Really... I have found that the problem is within myself because I limit myself’.

One of the most remarkable findings of our interview data has been the observation that when students managed to structure painful memories into constructive narratives, this had a ‘redemptive’ impact on their negative thoughts or feelings. Some individuals, for example, were ready to share their personal narratives with others, and interestingly, they seemed to coincide with the ones showing a fighting disposition. On the other hand, it seems that a reluctance to share stories with others may leave students alone with their anxious thoughts, which might in turn make it more difficult to let students process their experiences. For example, one of the interviewees has defined anxiety as a difficult concept to explain and told us how she became resigned to it, even though she attended classes:

I can’t really explain it (my anxiety). I sometimes cry after my presentations then people see how sad I feel and they try to cheer me up. This is how I am and I accepted it. (FInt 4)

When we examined our data to understand how people explained such an avoidance, it appeared that a key contributing factor involved the fact that the people concerned feared other’s negative opinions about themselves and chose therefore not to talk about their experiences because they thought others might perceive them as a weakness; for example, ‘I do not want them to think bad about me or have pity on me’ (FInt 13).

The ‘Anxious Self’ Revisited

In the interview extracts cited in the previous section, several participants described themselves as cohesive personas – or as one participant called it, ‘the anxious me’ – when they operated in an anxious state, and in several cases they talked about this ‘anxious self’ as a side of themselves that was fairly distinct from other aspects of their existence, having a life of its own. From this perspective, the three reaction styles emerging from the narratives can be viewed as manifestations of three typical anxious self types that are given shape by the narrative level of the students’ self-system. Yet, we need to stress that the anxious self concerns anxiety facets at all three levels of McAdams’s three-tiered model, and the following two narratives offer illustrations of how the various dimensions contribute their unique impact to the mix.

I attended an English Language Teaching department two years ago and I had to take an exam for preparatory year exemption. When I first arrived at the university I knew no one. I did not even know where the exam would take place. I was so anxious that I could hardly breathe. As a result, I decided not to take the exam and I went back
home. That would cost me one extra year at the university and I was depressed for a while questioning my action. After one or two months, as I started to take the preparatory class, I came to realize that I actually needed it. I was going to become an English teacher but I did not feel proficient. In a way, that year was an opportunity for me to learn English well. I also met some really nice friends. We are still in the same classroom. If I had taken that exemption test probably I would not have been in a different position. I would not be self-confident. Now I am more aware of myself. I am not as anxious as I was before. Only in a few circumstances – I am going to be a teacher of English. English language will be my job. So I cannot be an anxious teacher, right? (Fnt 10)

I am generally an anxious person. Homework, not being well prepared for tasks, attempting to do something – these things often make me anxious. Sometimes I can feel my heartbeat and I feel like talking to someone to tell what has happened. ... I do not think I am worse than my classmates (in terms of English language skills) but, especially in the classroom setting, when I see my friends studying or participating more than I do, I feel anxious. I start questioning my style. I can say that I feel insecure in English. ... Actually, I often criticise the anxious me and find it unnecessary to be anxious. The positive side is that I have become a person who does detailed research to be well prepared before attending to a lecture, going somewhere or doing something. I have also started reading about anxiety. What I am saying is I do not give up. I am trying to improve myself. It is getting better and I feel happier. (Fnt 1)

These extracts make it evident that both students had anxiety tendencies and suffered from these by experiencing some of the well-known symptoms. Yet, they showed marked differences at the characteristic adaptations level: the first student's anxiety mostly manifested itself in test situations, whereas the second student was more affected by the competitive perspective. The narrative level, however, shows a common feature in the two students: both of them were able to develop a cohesive narrative with a positive trajectory regarding their anxiety experiences, which resulted in the idea of changing profession.

I think it is my general personality. I do not like talking to people because I do not feel comfortable. I prefer being alone. I have always been like this and I have not questioned why. I suffer from anxiety in almost all the other classes. Of course it is worse in English because presentations and in-class speeches put extra pressure on me. I do not like these and I often feel like not doing these. During presentations, I do not know how to react. I just imitate others and I do not like it. Actually even the presence of different faces looking at me when I talk is enough to make me anxious. As I said, I normally keep with a distance from other people but when I am anxious I am even more unbearable for them. I am not that kind of a person to talk to a group of people. That makes me think about my future career and I think I should be into a less formal profession (than becoming a teacher), such as running a small coffee shop. It seems risky but I think I will take the risk. Just I need to find the strength. ... I do not think I can change. It is typical me. I have always been anxious and I will always be, I know. (Fnt 15)

Interestingly, as this student tried to make sense of her anxious reactions, she observed features of the communicative context that heightened her anxiety and blamed the people around her. As a result, she decided that escaping anxiety meant escaping from crowds, implying that she had better choose a job that would require less exposure to formal group talk and to interaction in general.

**Conclusion**

This chapter described the process of investigation whereby the concept of the 'anxious self' emerged from our data and found an accommodating theoretical paradigm in McAdams's novel, three-tiered model of personality. Our guiding assumption has been that conceiving anxiety in terms of a dynamic combination of three relatively distinct facets offers a more nuanced understanding of how anxiety affects the learners' performance across various communication situations, language tasks, content areas and contextual conditions other than the traditional dichotomy of trait and state anxiety. The novel aspect of McAdams's model is the elevation of learner narratives to an identity-dimension status, that is, viewing the way learners form cohesive verbal accounts of their relevant experiences as an integral part of the overall holistic anxiety construct. We believe that recognising the importance of learner narratives has a broad significance that goes beyond the domain of anxiety research. Similar to how narrative approaches have helped to recontextualise personality psychology (McAdams, 2006b), they can be useful to develop a more dynamic portrayal of learner characteristics in general – indeed, Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) have recently proposed a reconceptualisation of individual difference factors along these lines.
The adaptation of McAdams’s framework suggests that anxiety is not uniform. There are certain tendencies that are sometimes reflected in a pure form and sometimes in combination with some other factors, with further dynamism added by the fact that people often construct cohesive life narratives that accommodate but, at the same time adjust these manifestations. In this way, individuals can integrate and organise feelings in a coherent way in order to achieve a sense of consistency and control over their lives, which allows them to constructively process anxiety-provoking experiences.

Adding a narrative component to our understanding of language anxiety also has practical implications. Learner stories can be re-narrated, which in turn can affect the whole tenor of the anxious self, and appropriate ‘redemptive’ strategies might be able to turn any negative trajectories into more positive ones. In other words, we believe that helping learners to produce constructive narratives about their overall anxious selves might offer a way to reprocess their anxiety-related experiences positively, thereby combating some of the harmful effects of debilitating anxiety.

Finally, reframing anxiety as the anxious self might offer a way to link anxiety research to other areas of SLA where the importance of the self-concept has been recognised. An obvious link in this respect would be relating the anxious self to future motivational self-guides such as the ideal self, and it may also be possible to employ imagery-based strategies in shaping the anxious self in a similar manner to how the role of vision has been ideal in promoting the ideal self (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). This paper admittedly took only the first steps in these directions, leaving several questions unanswered: further research could explore, for example, the key components of narrative identity that are responsible for determining a learner’s overall developmental trajectory, and future investigations could also examine how these factors are related to the anxiety facets of the two other levels (dispositional traits and characteristic adaptations). It is also likely that learner narratives vary considerably across different cultures, which raises the question as to whether there are any universally effective processing strategies for learners to rely on when trying to cope with their anxious self-images.

References


