

Same Learners, Different Anxieties: Comparing L2 Korean and L3 English Learning Anxiety among Immigrant Children

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how anxiety is distributed across the two target languages of immigrant children attending a public elementary school in South Korea, who acquire Korean as a second language (L2), the language of schooling, and study English as a third language (L3) taught as a school subject. Fifty-six children in grades 5 and 6 completed a child-adapted anxiety scale based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale once for each language, and their responses were analyzed with paired comparisons and item-level mixed-effects models. Contrary to the acquisition-order pattern reported for adult multilinguals, the children were more anxious in Korean than in English, and the difference was concentrated in test anxiety and classroom anxiety rather than in communicative domains. Anxiety correlated moderately across languages, yet children varied widely in which language provoked more anxiety. Background variables showed no reliable moderation. For the children in the present sample, anxiety appeared to attach to the language of academic consequence rather than to the language learned last, an interpretation that awaits testing with direct measures of perceived stakes.

Keywords: immigrant children, L2 Korean, L3 English, foreign language anxiety, mixed-effects modeling

1. Introduction

The number of students from immigrant backgrounds in South Korean public schools has risen every year since national statistics began tracking them in 2012, and the fastest-growing subgroup consists of children of foreign-born families who have immigrated to Korea (Kang, 2022). For these children, the linguistic configuration of schooling is unlike that of their Korean-born classmates. They speak a heritage language

* Acknowledgment: An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2023 Joint International ELT Conference.

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at home as their first language (L1), acquire Korean, the language of the classroom and the wider community, as their second language (L2), and study English as a third language (L3) through the regular national curriculum. Research on these learners has begun to map their acquisition of Korean and English as linguistic systems (e.g., Kim et al., 2024), and their motivational profiles across the two target languages have been examined (Jo, 2023). Yet the affective variable that has arguably received more attention than any other in the field of second language acquisition — anxiety — has not, to my knowledge, been investigated in this population.

The omission matters for two reasons. The first is practical. Anxiety is among the most robust negative correlates of language achievement: a meta-analysis of 97 studies involving nearly 20,000 learners estimated the anxiety–achievement correlation at $r = -.36$ (Teimouri et al., 2019). If immigrant children experience substantial anxiety in the language through which all of their schooling is delivered, the consequences extend well beyond the language classroom. The second reason is theoretical. Research on anxiety in multilingual speakers has repeatedly found that anxiety is higher in languages learned later in life (Dewaele, 2007, 2010), and studies of instructed bilinguals comparing a community L2 with L3 English have likewise found anxiety to be highest in the L3 (Santos et al., 2017b). Immigrant children in Korea invert the sociolinguistic premises of this work: their earlier-acquired L2 is not a curricular foreign language but the majority language on which their academic survival and social integration depend, whereas their later-acquired L3 is a school subject in which they and their Korean-born classmates are institutional beginners together. Whether the well-documented ordering of anxiety across a multilingual’s languages survives this reversal of stakes is an open question, and one this population is uniquely positioned to answer.

The present study therefore compares anxiety in L2 Korean and L3 English within a single cohort of 56 immigrant children in grades 5 and 6, using a child-appropriate anxiety scale based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986) that measures communication apprehension, classroom anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety (Kang & Kim, 2017). Beyond mean-level comparison, the study exploits the fully within-subject design by fitting item-level mixed-effects models, which allow the language effect to vary across children and thereby quantify not only whether the average child is more anxious in one language, but how uniformly that pattern holds. Three research questions guide the study:

1. How do immigrant children’s levels of anxiety in L2 Korean and L3 English compare, overall and across the four anxiety domains?
2. To what extent are children’s anxieties in the two languages related, and how much

- do individual children vary in the direction and magnitude of the L2–L3 difference?
3. Do learner background variables (gender, grade, L1, and length of residence) moderate the L2–L3 anxiety difference?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Foreign language anxiety and its measurement

Horwitz et al. (1986) defined foreign language anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 128). Their account drew on three related performance anxieties (i.e., communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation) while insisting that language anxiety is not simply their sum transferred to the language classroom. Its distinctive source is the threat that limited target-language competence poses to the learner’s self-concept: the mature self one knows cannot be presented through the restricted self the new language permits. The situation-specificity of the construct was subsequently confirmed empirically. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) factor-analyzed 23 anxiety scales and recovered language anxiety as a factor orthogonal to general trait and state anxiety; moreover, language anxiety predicted short-term memory and vocabulary production deficits in the L2 but not the L1, indicating that its effects operate on cognitive processing in the target language specifically. Three decades of subsequent research, reviewed by Horwitz (2010), have consolidated the construct while shifting attention toward the sources of anxiety, its variation across instructional and socio-cultural conditions, and its manifestation in particular learner populations.

The FLCAS remains the field’s dominant instrument, and its psychometric behavior in Korean samples is well documented. Park (2012) tested competing measurement models with 918 Korean university learners of English and found that a four-construct representation (i.e., communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and classroom anxiety) fit better than one-, two-, or three-construct alternatives, although absolute fit remained modest; a later exploratory–confirmatory sequence suggested that a two-factor solution may suffice (Park, 2014). Gender differences favoring higher anxiety among female learners have been reported, with evidence that the scale functions largely equivalently across genders (Park & French, 2013). For school-aged learners, Kang and Kim (2017) developed a 32-item adaptation

organized around Park's (2012) four subconstructs, with item wording adjusted for young learners, and documented adequate reliability with 462 elementary, middle, and high school students; notably, they found English learning anxiety to increase across school levels. Because the factor structure of the FLCAS is not fully settled even in adult samples, the present study treats subscale scores descriptively and bases its central inferences on item-level modeling.

Research on language anxiety in elementary learners remains comparatively sparse, but there is direct evidence that children of the age studied here differentiate languages affectively. Udry and Berthele (2025) showed that Swiss fifth and sixth graders hold distinct academic self-concepts for their L2 and L3, with internal affective variables, including anxiety, more strongly connected to those self-concepts than external evaluations such as teacher encouragement or peer comparison. Within-child comparison of anxiety across two target languages at this age is thus both feasible and meaningful.

2.2. Anxiety across the languages of multilingual learners

A learner who knows several languages does not carry a single quantum of language anxiety into all of them. The largest body of evidence on how anxiety distributes across a multilingual repertoire comes from Dewaele and colleagues. Among 106 adult multilinguals, foreign language anxiety rose systematically with order of acquisition, being higher in the L2 than in the L1, in the L3 than in the L2, and in the L4 than in the L3, across situations ranging from conversations with friends to public speech (Dewaele, 2007). In a database of 953 users of French as L1 through L4, communicative anxiety was likewise lower the earlier the language had been acquired, with knowledge of typologically related languages providing “affordances” that damp anxiety at intermediate proficiency levels (Dewaele, 2010). Knowing more languages is itself associated with lower anxiety in any one of them: multilingual learners have repeatedly shown lower foreign language anxiety than comparable bilinguals or monolinguals in Korea (Thompson & Lee, 2013), Turkey (Thompson & Khawaja, 2016), Tunisia (Bensalem, 2017), and Saudi Arabia (Bensalem & Thompson, 2022), although degree of multilingualism does not always emerge as a predictor once proficiency and frequency of use are controlled (Dewaele & Al-Saraj, 2015).

At the same time, anxiety levels in a multilingual's different languages are far from independent. Rank orders of anxiety across the L1–L4 were significantly concordant in Dewaele (2007), and strong cross-language correlations among FLCAS scores in the L2, L3, and L4 led Dewaele (2013) to conclude that anxiety levels are relatively stable across

the foreign languages a person knows, plausibly reflecting lower-order personality dispositions such as neuroticism or trait emotional intelligence. Language anxiety, on this view, has both a person-level and a language-level component. This duality has been made explicit in complex-dynamic treatments of anxiety (Gregersen, 2020), and the random-effects decomposition employed in the present study is designed to quantify it.

Direct within-learner comparisons of a community L2 and school L3 have been conducted with adult bilinguals in the Basque Country. Santos et al. (2017a) examined how proficiency, language certification, and bilingualism relate to communicative anxiety in L3 English among 352 Basque–Spanish bilinguals, comprising university students and young professionals. In a separate study conducted within the same research programme, this time comparing anxiety across languages in 532 adults, anxiety was substantially higher in L3 English than in the L2, whether that L2 was Basque or Spanish, a difference both groups attributed to their limited exposure to English (Santos et al., 2017b). Two boundary conditions on this L3-dominant pattern deserve emphasis. First, when the two target languages carry comparable stakes, the difference can vanish: Chinese university students learning English and Japanese simultaneously reported statistically indistinguishable anxiety in the two, at two measurement points (Jin et al., 2015). Second, and more strikingly, the ordering can reverse. Among 100 Flemish adolescents, Dewaele (2002) found communicative anxiety significantly higher in L2 French, the earlier and more intensively instructed language, than in L3 English, an “unexpected result” that the author traced to the societal position of French in Flanders as a former prestige language and social marker, with anxiety in French (but not English) patterned by social class. Anxiety in a given language, Dewaele concluded, is determined not by acquisition order as such but by the societal and individual meaning of that language for the learner. What has not yet been examined is the case in which the L2’s societal weight is not a matter of prestige but of necessity, where the L2 is the majority language on which a child’s schooling itself is conducted. Related evidence that appraised consequences shape language-learning emotion comes from appraisal-theoretic comparisons of L2 and L3 learning experiences (Gabrys-Barker, 2011) and from findings that perceived crosslinguistic similarity lowers L3 anxiety (Lin, 2022).

2.3. When the target language is the majority language: anxiety in migration contexts

For immigrant learners, the language of the host society is not a foreign language, and the anxiety it occasions has begun to be studied under the heading of majority language anxiety. Jee (2022) surveyed three generations of Korean immigrants in

Australia and found that anxiety tracked language dominance within the migration trajectory: first-generation immigrants reported considerable anxiety in the majority language, English, and almost none in Korean, whereas 1.5- and second-generation members showed the mirror image of heritage language anxiety alongside near-zero English anxiety (see also Sevinç & Dewaele, 2018, on Turkish immigrants in the Netherlands). Anxiety in migration contexts, this work suggests, concentrates in whichever language the speaker both needs and has not yet made dominant. This formulation carries a sharp prediction for the children studied here. Having resided in Korea for one to four and a half years, they remain non-dominant in Korean while depending on it for every subject lesson, every assessment, and every peer interaction of the school day. English, by contrast, is a subject in which the institutional expectation is beginner-level performance for all students alike. If anxiety follows need-under-non-dominance rather than order of acquisition, these children should be more anxious in their L2 than in their L3, which is the opposite of the pattern canonical in the multilingualism literature.

2.4. The present study

Set against this background, the immigrant-child configuration in Korea constitutes something close to a natural experiment on the sources of language anxiety: acquisition order and communicative exposure favor lower anxiety in Korean, while stakes and the learner's dominance relation to the language favor lower anxiety in English. Existing L2/L3 comparisons cannot arbitrate, because in those designs the later language was also the higher-stakes or less-practiced one. Moreover, virtually all of the evidence reviewed above comes from adults or adolescents; whether these dynamics obtain in middle childhood, in a population of growing educational significance in Korea, is unknown. The study addresses the three research questions stated in Section 1 with a cohort of immigrant children in grades 5 and 6, an age band and population for which anxiety data have not previously been reported.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Fifty-six immigrant children (28 girls, 28 boys) attending a public elementary school in region A of Gyeonggi Province, South Korea, participated in the study. Region A

has the highest proportion of foreign residents among Korean municipalities, and the participating school serves a concentrated population of children from foreign-born families. All participants were in the fifth ($N=28$) or sixth grade ($N=28$) at the time of data collection. The children were born outside South Korea to foreign-born parents and had immigrated with their families; they use their heritage language at home as their first language (L1), learn Korean, the language of schooling and the wider community, as their second language (L2), and study English as a third language (L3) through the regular national curriculum. Fourteen children (25.0%) spoke Chinese as their L1 and 42 (75.0%) spoke Russian. Their length of residence in South Korea ranged from 12 to 52 months ($M=38.2$, $SD=13.0$). The survey was not conducted as a separately recruited research project. It was carried out as part of the participating school's language education program development, with the approval of the school, which holds responsibility for educational activities involving its students. The children were informed of the purpose of the survey and of their freedom to decline or to stop answering at any point, and all of them agreed to take part. Because each child completed the questionnaire on two occasions approximately one month apart, the two response sets were linked within child by means of a temporary numeric code assigned by the researcher; children's names did not appear on the questionnaires, and no other sensitive personal information was collected at either administration.

Table 1. Participant characteristics ($N=56$)

Characteristic	Category	<i>n</i> / <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Gender	Girls / Boys	28 / 28
Grade	5th / 6th	28 / 28
First language	Chinese / Russian	14 / 42
Length of residence (months)	Range 12–52	38.2 (13.0)

Two features of this population merit emphasis. First, unlike the adult multilinguals studied in most previous research on anxiety across languages (e.g., Dewaele, 2007; Santos et al., 2017b), these children encounter their L2 not as a foreign language but as the majority language of schooling: all school subjects are taught in Korean, and all school-based assessment is conducted in Korean. Second, their L3 English is a school subject in which they and their Korean-born classmates are, institutionally, beginners together; the national curriculum introduces English in grade 3 with generally three hours per week in grades 5–6.

3.2. Instrument

Learning anxiety in each target language was measured with the 32-item anxiety scale developed by Kang and Kim (2017) for Korean school-aged learners. The scale is based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986), with subconstructs classified following Park's (2012) four-factor investigation of the FLCAS. The instrument comprises four subscales: communication apprehension (14 items), classroom anxiety (9 items), fear of negative evaluation (6 items), and test anxiety (3 items), each rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). Kang and Kim (2017) reported subscale reliabilities of .70 or higher with 462 Korean elementary, middle, and high school students. The full set of items is given in the Appendix.

Each child completed the scale twice: once with reference to Korean language arts instruction (L2 version) and once with reference to English instruction (L3 version). The two versions were identical except for the target-language referent: items referring to English and to the English class or teacher in the original scale were rendered with Korean and the Korean class or teacher in the L2 version, with no other change in wording. All items were prepared in two language versions, that is, the children's L1 (Chinese or Russian) and Korean, and each child chose which version to answer; all 56 children opted for the L1 version, minimizing the risk that limited Korean reading proficiency would compromise response validity. The L1 versions were translated by the two bilingual instructors who provide Korean–Chinese and Korean–Russian interpreting and translation support at the participating school, each fully proficient in the spoken and written forms of both languages. The two translators independently produced a draft and then reviewed each other's version together with the researcher, resolving discrepancies by discussion until both agreed that the wording conveyed the meaning of the Korean source items at a reading level appropriate for fifth and sixth graders. Negatively worded items were reverse-scored prior to analysis. In the present sample, internal consistency for the full 32-item scale was high for both versions (Cronbach's α = .93 for L2 Korean, .92 for L3 English). Subscale reliabilities were adequate for communication apprehension (.91/.89), classroom anxiety (.69/.67), and fear of negative evaluation (.73/.85), but low for the 3-item test anxiety subscale (.34/.37). The low value for test anxiety is attributable to the small number of items and their weak intercorrelation (mean inter-item r = .14 in L2 Korean and .16 in L3 English); the three items nevertheless correlated with the full-scale score (corrected item-total r = .29–.54 in L2 Korean and .20–.33 in L3 English), and removing them left total-scale reliability essentially unchanged. Subscale-level results for test anxiety are therefore

interpreted with caution throughout. The item-level mixed-effects analyses described below, which do not require aggregating items into subscale scores, serve as the primary evidence concerning domain-specific effects, and a set of sensitivity analyses reported in Section 4.5 examines how far the test-anxiety finding depends on any individual item.

3.3. Procedure

The questionnaires were administered in paper-and-pencil format to intact classes during the children's regular lessons: the L2 Korean version during a Korean class period, and the L3 English version during an English class period approximately one month later. Administering each version within the corresponding target-language lesson anchored the children's responses in the relevant classroom context, and separating the two administrations reduced the likelihood that children would mechanically reproduce their earlier responses or directly compare the two languages while answering; the design nevertheless confounds the language contrast with time of measurement and with classroom context, because the order was fixed rather than counterbalanced and the two administrations took place in lessons that may differ in teacher, task climate, and evaluative pressure; this limitation is taken up in Section 6. Data were screened for completeness; no missing responses were present. All subscale and total scores reported below were computed directly from the raw item responses rather than from pre-existing derived fields.

3.4. Data analysis

Analyses proceeded in three steps. First, descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients were computed, and L2–L3 differences were tested with a 2 (language) $\times$ 4 (subscale) repeated-measures ANOVA followed by paired-samples *t* tests with Holm-corrected *p* values (correction applied within the four-subscale family; the total score was tested separately). Cohen's d_z is reported as the effect size for paired contrasts. Shapiro–Wilk tests on the paired difference scores indicated departures from normality for classroom anxiety ($p=.029$) and test anxiety ($p=.022$) only; because the *t* test is robust to mild non-normality at this sample size, *t* tests are reported throughout, and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests computed as a check for the two affected subscales yielded the same decisions in both cases (classroom anxiety $p=.011$; test anxiety $p<.001$).

Second, to make full use of the item-level data and to avoid treating anxiety scores as error-free aggregates, linear mixed-effects models were fitted to the 3,584 individual

item responses (56 participants $\times$ 32 items $\times$ 2 languages), with crossed random intercepts for participants and items (Baayen et al., 2008; Linck & Cunnings, 2015). All predictors were entered with explicit coding. Language was dummy-coded with L3 English as the reference category (L3 English=0, L2 Korean=1). Gender was coded with boys as the reference (boys=0, girls=1), grade with fifth graders as the reference (grade 5=0, grade 6=1), and L1 group with Chinese as the reference (Chinese=0, Russian=1). Length of residence was grand-mean centered ($M=38.2$ months) and scaled in years, so that a coefficient of 1 corresponds to a difference of 12 months. Model building proceeded incrementally: a null model (M0), addition of the language fixed effect (M1), addition of a by-participant random slope for language (M2), and addition of person-level covariates, namely gender, grade, L1 group, and length of residence, together with their interactions with language (M3). Models were estimated with maximum likelihood and compared with likelihood-ratio tests; marginal and conditional R^2 (Nakagawa & Schielzeth, 2013) are reported for the retained model. A further model crossed language with subscale membership at the item level. Within this model, the language $\times$ test anxiety contrast was specified in advance, because test anxiety is the domain in which the account motivating the study predicts the largest difference; it is the only contrast interpreted as a test of that prediction, and the remaining contrasts are reported descriptively. Given the ordinal nature of Likert responses, cumulative-logit models with participant-cluster bootstrap confidence intervals (200 resamples) were fitted as robustness checks (Liddell & Kruschke, 2018). Analyses were conducted in Python 3.10 (statsmodels 0.14; pingouin 0.6); the analysis script and de-identified data are available as supplementary materials.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, and reliabilities by language and subscale. Mean anxiety was moderate in both languages but consistently higher for L2 Korean ($M=2.82$, $SD=0.73$) than for L3 English ($M=2.62$, $SD=0.63$). Test anxiety was the highest-scoring domain in both languages (L2: $M=3.26$; L3: $M=2.86$), and classroom anxiety the lowest (L2: $M=2.60$; L3: $M=2.36$).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and internal consistency by language and subscale

Scale (<i>item N</i>)	L2 (<i>M</i>)	L2 (<i>SD</i>)	L2 (α)	L3 (<i>M</i>)	L3 (<i>SD</i>)	L3 (α)
CA (14)	2.90	0.89	.906	2.75	0.78	.893
CLA (9)	2.60	0.65	.690	2.36	0.59	.673
FNE (6)	2.77	0.86	.728	2.61	0.94	.852
TA (3)	3.26	0.81	.341	2.86	0.67	.368
Total (32)	2.82	0.73	.933	2.62	0.63	.920

Note. CA=communication apprehension; CLA=classroom anxiety; FNE=fear of negative evaluation; TA=test anxiety. α =Cronbach's alpha.

4.2. Comparing anxiety in L2 Korean and L3 English

The 2×4 repeated-measures ANOVA yielded a significant main effect of language, $F(1, 55)=7.45, p=.01, \eta^2=.023$, with higher anxiety in L2 Korean; a significant main effect of subscale, $F(3, 165)=17.43, p<.001, \eta^2=.07$; and a language $\times$ subscale interaction, $F(3, 165)=2.87, p=.04$ (Greenhouse–Geisser corrected $p=.05, \epsilon=.81$), indicating that the size of the language difference varied across anxiety domains.

Paired comparisons (Table 3) located the language difference in two domains (Figure 1). Test anxiety was substantially higher in L2 Korean than in L3 English, $t(55)=3.92, p<.001$ (Holm-corrected $p<.001$), $d_z=.52$, and classroom anxiety was moderately higher, $t(55)=2.49, p=.02$ (Holm-corrected $p=.047$), $d_z=.33$. Communication apprehension ($d_z=.19$) and fear of negative evaluation ($d_z=.18$) did not differ significantly between languages. The total-scale difference was significant, $t(55)=2.21, p=.03, d_z=.30$. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests produced the same pattern of decisions throughout.

Table 3. Paired comparisons of anxiety in L2 Korean and L3 English ($N=56$)

Scale	L2 <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	L3 <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>p</i> (Holm)	<i>d_z</i>	Wilcoxon <i>p</i>
Total	2.82 (0.73)	2.62 (0.63)	2.21	.031	-	0.30	.024
CA	2.90 (0.89)	2.75 (0.78)	1.43	.159	.317	0.19	.084
CLA	2.60 (0.65)	2.36 (0.59)	2.49	.016	.047	0.33	.011
FNE	2.77 (0.86)	2.61 (0.94)	1.34	.187	.317	0.18	.173
TA	3.26 (0.81)	2.86 (0.67)	3.92	<.001	<.001	0.52	<.001

Note. CA=communication apprehension; CLA=classroom anxiety; FNE=fear of negative evaluation; TA=test anxiety. Holm correction applied within the four-subscale family.

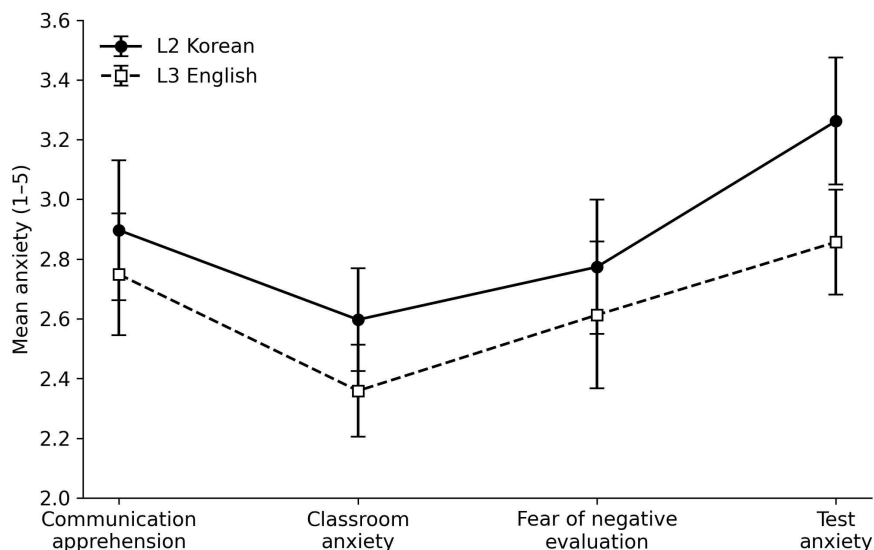


Figure 1. Mean anxiety by subscale and target language (error bars: 95% CIs).

4.3. Item-level mixed-effects models

Table 4 summarizes the model sequence. Adding the language fixed effect improved on the null model, $\chi^2(1)=32.7$, $p<.001$. Allowing the language effect to vary across participants improved fit dramatically, $\chi^2(2)=716.2$, $p<.001$, and this random-slope model (M2) was retained. In M2, responses to L2 Korean items were on average 0.20 scale points higher than responses to L3 English items, $b=0.20$, $SE=0.090$, $z=2.23$, $p=.026$, 95% CI [0.024, 0.375], confirming the language effect after accounting for participant- and item-level dependencies (participant ICC=.26; item ICC=.20; $R^2_{\text{marginal}}=.01$, $R^2_{\text{conditional}}=.46$).

Two features of the variance structure are noteworthy. First, the by-participant random slope variance was large (0.39, against a random-intercept variance of 0.35): children differed markedly not only in overall anxiety but in the direction and magnitude of their L2–L3 gap. Expressed as a standard deviation, the language effect of 0.62 around the mean of 0.20 implies that a substantial minority of children were in fact more anxious in English than in Korean, even though the average child showed the reverse pattern: 18 of the 56 children (32.1%) showed a negative difference at the total-score level (Figure 2), with individual differences ranging from -1.44 to +2.34. Second, person-level

anxiety was far from language-specific: total scores in the two languages correlated at $r=.52$, $p<.001$ (subscale range .34–.58), indicating a moderately stable individual disposition alongside the language-specific component captured by the random slopes.

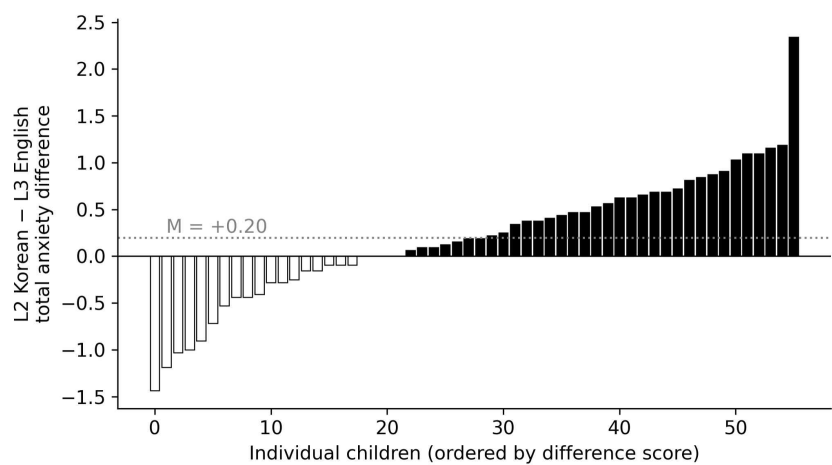


Figure 2. Individual L2 - L3 total anxiety difference scores (white bars: children more anxious in L3 English).

Adding gender, grade, L1 group, and length of residence, with their language interactions (M3), did not reliably improve fit, $\chi^2(8)=7.80$, $p=.45$; no covariate reached significance. The full set of fixed effects from M3, with standard errors and 95% confidence intervals, is reported in Table 5 so that the evidence bearing on RQ3 can be inspected directly. The language $\times$ length-of-residence coefficient was positive but marginal, $b=0.15$, $SE=0.08$, $p=.07$, tentatively suggesting that the Korean-over-English anxiety gap may widen rather than narrow with longer residence.

Table 4. Item-level mixed-effects models (3,584 observations)

Model	Specification	Log-likelihood	AIC	LRT (<i>df</i>), <i>p</i>
M0	Random intercepts (participant, item)	−5,881.8	11,769.6	–
M1	M0 + language	−5,865.5	11,738.9	$\chi^2(1)=32.7$, $p<.001$
M2	M1 + by-participant language slope	−5,507.4	11,028.7	$\chi^2(2)=716.2$, $p<.001$
M3	M2 + covariates $\times$ language	−5,503.5	11,036.9	$\chi^2(8)=7.80$, $p=.45$

Note. Retained model M2. Language fixed effect (L2 Korean=1): $b=0.20$, $SE=0.09$, $z=2.23$, $p=.026$. Variance components: participant intercept 0.35, by-participant language slope 0.39, item 0.34, residual 0.89.

Table 5. Fixed effects of the covariate model (M3)

Fixed effect	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
Intercept	2.53	0.230	[2.08, 2.98]	10.99	<.001
Language (L2 Korean=1)	0.07	0.244	[-0.41, 0.55]	0.29	.775
Girls	0.25	0.164	[-0.08, 0.57]	1.50	.134
Grade 6	0.07	0.171	[-0.27, 0.40]	0.40	.690
L1 Russian	-0.09	0.197	[-0.47, 0.30]	-0.44	.661
LOR (per year)	0.00	0.078	[-0.15, 0.15]	0.00	.999
Language × Girls	0.06	0.174	[-0.28, 0.40]	0.35	.728
Language × Grade 6	-0.02	0.181	[-0.38, 0.34]	-0.11	.911
Language × L1 Russian	0.15	0.209	[-0.26, 0.56]	0.70	.483
Language × LOR	0.15	0.082	[-0.01, 0.31]	1.81	.070

Note. Fixed effects from M3 (3,584 item responses; crossed random effects for participants and items, with a by-participant random slope for language). Reference categories: L3 English, boys, grade 5, L1 Chinese. LOR=length of residence, grand-mean centered ($M=38.2$ months) and scaled in years, so that a coefficient of 1 corresponds to a difference of 12 months.

In the model crossing language with subscale, the omnibus interaction did not reach significance, $\chi^2(3)=5.88$, $p=.12$, whereas the planned language × test anxiety contrast was significant, $b=0.26$, $SE=0.11$, $p=.02$. Because this single contrast was specified in advance, no multiplicity adjustment was applied to it; had the four language × subscale contrasts been treated as a family and Holm-corrected, the test-anxiety contrast would have remained the largest but would no longer have reached the conventional threshold. The item-level models are thus more conservative than the repeated-measures ANOVA, in which the language × subscale interaction was significant, and the two analyses agree on the ordering of the domains while disagreeing on whether the domain-specific variation is reliable.

4.4. Ordinal robustness checks

Cumulative-logit models with participant-cluster bootstrap confidence intervals corroborated the domain-specific findings: the odds of endorsing a higher anxiety category in L2 Korean relative to L3 English were significant for test anxiety items, $OR=1.82$, 95% CI [1.28, 2.51], and classroom anxiety items, $OR=1.37$, 95% CI [1.02, 1.79]. For the full item set, the estimate was directionally consistent, but its interval

included unity, $OR=1.30$, 95% CI [0.96, 1.60]. The overall L2>L3 difference should accordingly be characterized as modest, with test anxiety and, secondarily, classroom anxiety as the domains in which it is most consistently observed.

4.5. Sensitivity analyses for the test-anxiety subscale

Because the test-anxiety subscale comprises only three items and showed low internal consistency, three sensitivity analyses examined how far the L2–L3 difference in this domain depends on any single item. First, the three items were compared separately across languages. Two of them showed significantly higher anxiety in L2 Korean: worrying about a low score, $t(55)=2.53$, $p=.014$, $d_z=0.34$, and becoming more confused the more one prepares, $t(55)=3.28$, $p=.002$, $d_z=0.44$. The reverse-scored item on feeling at ease during tests did not differ, $t(55)=0.88$, $p=.385$, $d_z=0.12$; this item also showed the weakest association with the full scale and was the main source of the subscale’s low reliability, which is consistent with the difficulty children of this age are known to have with reverse-worded items.

Second, the subscale was recomputed three times, each time omitting one item. The L2–L3 difference remained significant in every case, with effect sizes between $d_z=0.32$ and $d_z=0.53$ (Table 6). Third, a mixed-effects model fitted to the 336 responses to the three test-anxiety items alone, with the same random-effects structure as M2, yielded a language effect of $b=0.41$, $SE=0.11$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.62], $p<.001$. These analyses indicate that the higher test anxiety observed in L2 Korean is not produced by any one item and is recovered by models that do not require the subscale to be internally consistent. They do not, however, remedy the limited content coverage of a three-item measure, and the finding accordingly requires replication with a fuller and more reliable test-anxiety item set.

Table 6. Leave-one-out sensitivity analysis for the test-anxiety subscale

Items included	L2 (<i>M</i>)	L3 (<i>M</i>)	<i>t</i> (55)	<i>p</i>	<i>d_z</i>
All three items	3.26	2.86	3.92	<.001	0.52
Omitting “I usually feel at ease during tests” (R)	3.22	2.70	3.99	<.001	0.53
Omitting “I worry about getting a low score”	3.16	2.79	3.08	.003	0.41
Omitting “The more I prepare, the more confused I get”	3.40	3.09	2.42	.019	0.32

Note. $N=56$. (R)=reverse-scored item. Each row reports the paired comparison for the subscale mean computed from the items retained.

5. Discussion

5.1. Higher anxiety in the community L2 than in the school L3 (RQ1)

The central finding of this study is that the immigrant children in the present sample reported significantly higher anxiety in their L2 Korean than in their L3 English. The difference was modest at the level of the full scale ($d_z=0.30$) and larger in the domain of test anxiety ($d_z=0.52$), with classroom anxiety showing a smaller reliable difference and communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation showing none. This pattern inverts the ordering most commonly reported for multilingual speakers, in whom anxiety rises with order of acquisition (Dewaele, 2007, 2010), and it inverts the specific result obtained in the design closest to that of the present study, where adult bilinguals in the Basque Country were markedly more anxious in L3 English than in their community L2 (Santos et al., 2017b).

Two qualifications frame this finding. First, the aggregate and item-level analyses do not fully converge: the repeated-measures ANOVA returned a significant language $\times$ subscale interaction, whereas the corresponding omnibus interaction in the item-level models did not reach significance, and only the planned test-anxiety contrast did. The ordering of the domains is the same in both analyses, but the item-level models, which do not treat subscale means as error-free, provide the more conservative estimate; claims about domain-specific differences are therefore made here with that conservatism in mind. Second, the test-anxiety subscale contains only three items and was internally inconsistent. The sensitivity analyses reported in Section 4.5 show that the difference in this domain survives the removal of any one item and is recovered in a model that does not require the items to cohere, so the result is unlikely to be an artefact of a single item; it nonetheless rests on a narrow measure and calls for replication with a fuller and more reliable test-anxiety item set.

One interpretation of the reversal, which the present data are consistent with but cannot establish, concerns what may be called the differential stakes of the two languages. It should be stated at the outset that perceived importance, academic burden, and proficiency in each language were not measured in this study, so the account below is offered as a plausible reading of the pattern rather than as a demonstrated mechanism. For these children, Korean is not one classroom subject among others: it is the medium of every lesson, every test, and every peer relationship, and their standing as students is continuously adjudicated in it. English, by contrast, is a curricular foreign language in which they and their Korean-born classmates are institutional beginners together, and

a subject in which prior exposure or L1 resources may leave some immigrant children at no disadvantage at all. On this account, the anxiety these children carry in Korean is not primarily the communicative apprehension of the classic foreign-language learner but the evaluative apprehension of a student being assessed, in real time, in a language not yet their own. The domain profile of the difference supports this reading directly: the L2–L3 gap was concentrated precisely in the evaluative domains, test anxiety above all, while the two communicative domains, communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, did not differ. Had the difference been driven by communicative unfamiliarity or limited exposure, the opposite profile would be expected, as it was in the qualitative accounts of Santos et al.'s (2017b) participants, who attributed their L3 anxiety to lack of contact with English.

This stakes account is consistent with three strands of prior evidence. First, Dewaele (2002) reported the only clear precedent for an L2>L3 reversal: Flemish adolescents more anxious in L2 French than in L3 English, a result traced not to proficiency or exposure but to the societal weight of French as a prestige language and social marker. The present findings generalize that insight from prestige to necessity, from a language that marks one's social standing to a language on which one's schooling depends, and locate its affective signature in test anxiety, as the necessity account predicts. Second, when two target languages carry comparable stakes, within-learner anxiety differences shrink to nothing: Chinese university students learning English and Japanese simultaneously, both as curricular foreign languages, showed no reliable difference between the two (Jin et al., 2015). It is the asymmetry of consequence, not the fact of learning two languages, that generates the gap. Third, evidence from migration contexts shows anxiety concentrating in whichever language the speaker needs but has not yet made dominant: first-generation Korean immigrants in Australia experienced anxiety chiefly in the majority language, English, while later generations shifted toward heritage-language anxiety as their dominance relations reversed (Jee, 2022; see also Sevinç & Dewaele, 2018). The present participants, recent arrivals who are non-dominant in Korean and wholly schooled in it, occupy exactly the position for which that literature predicts majority language anxiety, and their reports bear the prediction out at an age the literature has not previously reached.

It is worth noting what this interpretation does not claim. It does not claim that English is affectively negligible for these children: mean L3 anxiety (2.62) was only moderately below L2 anxiety (2.82), and test anxiety was the highest domain in both languages, plausibly reflecting evaluative pressures of Korean schooling culture that attach to any tested subject (cf. Park & French, 2013). Nor does it claim that the reversal

will hold for immigrant children in general, or at all stages of settlement; the present sample was drawn from a single school in one region and was unbalanced across L1 groups, so the pattern reported here should be treated as specific to this cohort until it is replicated. The dominance-tracking evidence reviewed above further implies that the pattern should attenuate, and eventually invert, as Korean becomes dominant across years of residence, a point to which the length-of-residence finding below is relevant.

5.2. One disposition, two languages (RQ2)

Anxiety in the two languages was moderately correlated across children ($r=.52$ for total scores), yet the mixed-effects analysis showed that the by-participant variability in the L2–L3 difference was large, larger indeed than the average difference itself: roughly one third of the children (18 of 56; Figure 2) reported more anxiety in English than in Korean. Both halves of this result are informative, and each disciplines the interpretation of the other.

The cross-language correlation replicates, in children, the stability that Dewaele (2007, 2013) documented across adult multilinguals' L2, L3, and L4, and is consistent with the view that a lower-order disposition such as trait anxiety or neuroticism contributes a person-level component to language anxiety wherever it is measured. At the same time, the sheer magnitude of the random-slope variance vindicates Dewaele's (2002) complementary conclusion that language anxiety is not a stable personality trait expressed uniformly across languages: which language provokes more anxiety, and by how much, is an individual matter, presumably reflecting each child's particular history of classroom experiences, achievements, and social relationships in each language (Gregersen, 2020). Methodologically, this argues for analytic approaches that model the language effect as varying across learners rather than estimating only a population average; had only the mean contrast been reported, both the minority pattern and its size would have been invisible.

5.3. Background variables (RQ3)

No background variable (i.e., gender, grade, L1 group, or length of residence) reliably moderated the L2–L3 anxiety difference, and the covariate block as a whole did not improve model fit. Given the sample size, these null results should be read as absence of evidence rather than evidence of absence; several are nonetheless worth situating. The absence of a gender effect contrasts with the higher anxiety of female learners in Korean

adult samples (Park & French, 2013) but aligns with null gender findings elsewhere (Bensalem, 2017; Dewaele & Al-Saraj, 2015); descriptively, girls' means were higher in both languages, in the direction of the adult literature. The absence of an L1-group difference is noteworthy because typological proximity might have been expected to ease Russian-speaking children's path into English relative to Chinese-speaking children's, or vice versa for Korean (cf. Dewaele, 2010; Lin, 2022); either the present groups are too unequal in size for such effects to surface, or proximity effects are simply overshadowed, at this stage, by the stakes differential that both groups share.

The single suggestive signal was the positive language $\times$ length-of-residence coefficient ($p=.070$): children with longer residence tended toward a larger, not smaller, Korean-over-English anxiety gap. Any interpretation must be tentative. But the direction is intelligible: over the 12–52-month window observed here, growing proficiency in Korean is accompanied by rising academic stakes, including more complex curricular language and weightier assessment in the upper elementary grades, so that the evaluative pressure of Korean may outpace the comfort that proficiency brings. The generational evidence from settled immigrant communities (Jee, 2022) suggests this trajectory eventually bends the other way; identifying when, and for whom, requires longitudinal data.

5.4. Implications for practice

If the interpretation advanced above is broadly correct, three tentative implications follow. First, for Korean-as-a-second-language provision: because the children's anxiety concentrates in evaluation rather than communication, low-stakes formative assessment formats, such as portfolio-based, untimed, or performance-embedded assessment, are likely to do more for their affective welfare than additional conversational practice, valuable as that is. Second, for mainstream classroom teachers: an immigrant child who converses fluently in Korean may nonetheless carry substantial test anxiety in it; conversational ease is a poor proxy for evaluative comfort, and accommodations (extended time, orally clarified instructions) target the actual locus of distress. Third, for English teaching: the English classroom appears to function, comparatively, as the affectively lighter space in these children's school day, a "level field" where immigrant students are not behind by definition. Teachers might deliberately exploit this: opportunities for immigrant children to succeed visibly in English can build a generalizable sense of academic competence at low affective cost (cf. Udry & Berthele, 2025, on the centrality of internal affective variables to young learners' academic self-concepts).

6. Conclusion

This study compared anxiety in L2 Korean and L3 English within a single cohort of 56 immigrant children attending one public elementary school in South Korea, using a child-adapted FLCAS-based scale and item-level mixed-effects modeling. Three findings stand out for this cohort: the children were, on average, more anxious in their earlier-acquired community L2 than in their later-acquired school L3, reversing the canonical acquisition-order pattern; the reversal was most pronounced in test anxiety, a pattern more readily explained by the evaluative stakes of the majority language than by communicative unfamiliarity, though the study did not measure those stakes directly; and a moderate cross-language correlation coexisted with large individual differences in the direction and size of the gap, indicating that language anxiety in this population is neither a fixed trait nor wholly language-specific.

The limitations are those of a small, single-site study of an understudied population. The sample of 56, drawn from one school in one region and unbalanced across L1 groups, limits power, particularly for the moderator analyses, and restricts generalization to immigrant children in Korea more broadly; confirmatory factor analysis and measurement-invariance testing across the two language versions were not feasible at this sample size. The low reliability of the three-item test anxiety subscale was mitigated, but not eliminated, by item-level modelling and by the sensitivity analyses in Section 4.5, and the test-anxiety finding warrants replication with a fuller and more reliable item set. The two questionnaires were administered in a fixed order approximately one month apart, each within the corresponding target-language lesson; the language contrast is therefore confounded with time of measurement and with classroom context, including possible differences between the Korean and English lessons in teacher, task climate, and evaluative pressure, and future studies should counterbalance the order or measure both languages at the same time and under comparable conditions. All data are self-reports, and perceived importance, academic burden, and proficiency in each language were not measured, so the stakes interpretation could not be tested directly. Finally, the cross-sectional design cannot establish how the L2–L3 anxiety configuration evolves with residence; the marginal length-of-residence interaction, in particular, requires longitudinal confirmation.

These limitations notwithstanding, the study offers the first evidence, in middle childhood and in the Korean immigrant context, that the language a multilingual learner is most anxious in need not be the one learned last, and it suggests that the consequences attached to a language deserve attention alongside the order in which it was acquired.

For research, this invites L2/L3 anxiety comparisons to consider the stakes attached to each language, and not acquisition order alone, and to measure those stakes directly. For schools, it directs attention to where these children's anxiety was most evident: not in the English classroom, but in the everyday evaluative demands of schooling in Korean.

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Received: July 13, 2026

Revised version received: August 20, 2026

Accepted: August 20, 2026

Appendix. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Questionnaire

Adapted from Kang and Kim (2017; based on Horwitz et al., 1986; Park, 2012). Administered in participants' L1 (Chinese/Russian) on a 5-point Likert scale (1=*strongly disagree* to 5=*strongly agree*). Language referents were tailored to L3 English or L2 Korean without altering other wording. (R) Items were reverse-scored so that higher scores indicate higher anxiety.

No.	Item	Subscale
1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking the target language in class.	CA
2	I do not worry about making mistakes in class. (R)	FNE
3	I tremble when I know that I am going to be called on in class.	CA
4	It frightens me when I do not understand what the teacher is saying in the target language.	CA
5	Taking this class would not bother me at all. (R)	CLA
6	During class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the lesson.	CLA
7	I think that the other students are better at the target language than I am.	FNE
8	I usually feel at ease during tests in this class. (R)	TA
9	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in class.	CA
10	I worry about getting a low score on tests in the target language.	TA
11	I do not understand why some people get so upset over this class. (R)	CLA
12	In class, I can get so nervous that I forget things I know.	CLA
13	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in class.	CA
14	I would not be nervous speaking the target language with native speakers. (R)	CA
15	I get upset when I do not understand what the teacher is correcting.	CA
16	Even if I am well prepared for class, I feel anxious about it.	CLA
17	I often feel like not going to this class.	CLA
18	I feel confident when I speak in class. (R)	CA
19	I am afraid that the teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	FNE
20	I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on in class.	CA
21	The more I study for a test in the target language, the more confused I get.	TA
22	I do not feel pressure to prepare very well for this class. (R)	CLA
23	I always feel that the other students speak the target language better than I do.	FNE
24	I feel very self-conscious about speaking the target language in front of other students.	CA
25	The class moves so quickly that I worry about getting left behind.	FNE

No.	Item	Subscale
26	I feel more tense and nervous in this class than in my other classes.	CLA
27	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in class.	CA
28	I feel relaxed and confident on my way to this class. (R)	CLA
29	I get nervous when I do not understand every word the teacher says.	CA
30	I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak the target language.	CA
31	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the target language.	FNE
32	I get nervous when the teacher asks questions I have not prepared in advance.	CA

Note. CA=communication apprehension (items 1, 3, 4, 9, 13, 14, 15, 18, 20, 24, 27, 29, 30, 32); CLA=classroom anxiety (items 5, 6, 11, 12, 16, 17, 22, 26, 28); FNE=fear of negative evaluation (items 2, 7, 19, 23, 25, 31); TA=test anxiety (items 8, 10, 21). (R)=reverse-scored.