

Theoretical and Empirical Research on Foreign Language Anxiety and Foreign Language Enjoyment in SLA

Xiang Li

University College London, United Kingdom

Abstract: This paper explores the theoretical and empirical research on Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The study delves into the evolution of FLA, a situation-specific anxiety type, and FLE, an emerging focus in Positive Psychology, examining their impact on foreign language learning. By analyzing the findings from four empirical studies, the paper investigates the influence of FLA and FLE on academic performance, their interrelationship, and their sources. The results demonstrate that high levels of FLA can significantly hinder language acquisition, while FLE can enhance it by increasing motivation and participation and changing attitude towards target languages and FL teachers. Additionally, the interplay between FLA and FLE varies across different learners and contexts, necessitating a balanced approach that mitigates anxiety while promoting enjoyment. This research offers pedagogical implications aimed at enhancing foreign language learning by fostering a supportive and enjoyable classroom atmosphere, promoting learner motivation, and building strong teacher-student relationships.

Keywords: Foreign Language Anxiety; Foreign Language Enjoyment; Second Language Acquisition; Language Performances.

1. Introduction

Since the 20th century, "anxiety" has been recognized as a pervasive human emotion, designating our era as the "age of stress" (Sarason, 1984). Psychologists have identified various categories of anxiety, with foreign language anxiety (FLA) being particularly relevant to language acquisition (Horwitz, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Recently, Positive Psychology (PP) has gained traction, focusing on positive emotions in language learners (Dewaele et al., 2018). Unlike traditional psychology, which emphasizes disorders, PP aims to create strategies to build resilience and alleviate suffering (Mercer & MacIntyre, 2014). This shift introduced the concept of foreign language enjoyment (FLE), highlighting the significance of positive emotions in learning (Oxford, 2018). Consequently, the focus on Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) has diminished (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012).

Previous literature reviews suggest a need for further investigation into how FLA and FLE influence SLA, both independently and interdependently. According to Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), metaphorically speaking, FLE and FLCA might be compared to the two faces of Janus.

Thus, the purpose of this essay critically examines recent studies on FLCA and FLE, exploring their theoretical backgrounds and measurement scales (FLCAS and FLES). It reviews four key studies (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Li & Wei, 2023; Dewaele, Botes & Greiff, 2023; Pan & Zhang, 2021), addressing three questions: (1) How do FLA and FLE impact language performance? (2) What are the correlational effects between FLA and FLE? (3) What are the sources of FLA and FLE? The final section synthesizes these findings and proposes pedagogical strategies to enhance language performance.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Foreign Language (Classroom) Anxiety

Krashen's affective filter hypothesis (1982) explains the correlations between affective factors (e.g., anxiety, motivation, self-confidence) and SLA. These factors indirectly influence learning outcomes by either facilitating or impeding the transformation of input into intake. High affective filters increase learners' anxiety and decrease self-confidence, hindering learning performance. FLA has been extensively examined as a prominent variable in second language learning (Kráľová, 2016).

Horwitz et al. (1986) defined FLCA as a complex construct of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning, arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process. FLCA is not inherent but develops in learners who tend to experience anxiety in foreign language classrooms (Horwitz, 2017). Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) identified three anxieties associated with FLA: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. These anxieties contribute to FLCA, though they do not exclusively define it. Factor analytic studies by Aida (1994) and Park (2012, 2014) further explored the components of language anxiety. Horwitz (2017) emphasized that understanding these components is not a prerequisite for helping anxious learners.

FLA undoubtedly impacts SLA through two types of anxiety: facilitating and debilitating anxiety (Kleinmann, 1977). Facilitating anxiety stimulates learning, while debilitating anxiety hinders it due to excessive pressure. Horwitz (2017) argued that using facilitating anxiety to motivate students is unethical as it may increase their anxiety; instead, emphasizing the enjoyable aspects of learning is more beneficial. Debilitating anxiety negatively affects long-term motivation for FL learners, impeding communication

and classroom performance (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). It is closely linked to willingness to communicate, with high anxiety correlating with reluctance to speak due to fear of negative evaluation (Liu & Jackson, 2008). Thus, FLA is frequently associated with performance evaluation, reducing enthusiasm for L2 study

2.2. Foreign Language Enjoyment

According to Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), learners often experience both anxiety and enjoyment. While anxiety has been extensively studied for decades (Daubney et al., 2017; Horwitz, 2010; Liu & Jackson, 2008; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Saito et al., 1999), other emotions have been largely overlooked since 2012. The introduction of positive psychology (PP) into SLA by MacIntyre & Gregersen (2012) brought more attention to a variety of emotions. PP, as noted by Dewaele and Li (2018), acknowledges negative emotions and aims to enhance positive emotions by fostering participation and a greater appreciation of life's significance (MacIntyre and Mercer, 2014). Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build theory (2001) within PP posits that positive emotions expand a learner's thoughts and actions, helping build psychological, physical, intellectual, and social resources essential for growth.

A key positive emotion in language learning is foreign language enjoyment (FLE). Enjoyment, a fundamental aspect of Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow theory, signifies a positive state where challenges and skills are well-matched. FLE is linked to learners' active efforts to tackle language challenges and improve their proficiency (MacIntyre, 2016). Botes et al. (2020) found that FLE arises when learners' psychological needs are met in the classroom. Pekrun et al. (2007) highlighted that enjoyment fosters determination, engagement, and enthusiasm in educational tasks. Enjoyment helps learners notice details and develop awareness of linguistic stimuli, thus enhancing language input. It also moderates negative arousal, which can otherwise diminish focus and limit language input.

As FLE research is still emerging, more studies are needed to fully understand it. Therefore, future research should explore the combined effects of emotions on language learning and the relationship between positive and negative emotions (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Empirical studies will help illustrate how FLA and FLE impact language performance, their interrelations, and their sources. Four key studies will be discussed in the third section

3. Empirical Research on FLA and FLE

This section presents empirical evidence supporting the essay's aim, specifically reviewing studies by Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018), Li and Wei (2023), Dewaele, Botes, and Greiff (2023), and Pan and Zhang (2021). Based on their findings, pedagogical implications will be discussed later.

3.1. Study by Dewaele & Alfawzan (2018)

Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018) investigated whether positive emotions (FLE) are stronger indicators of FL performance than negative emotions (FLCA) in two contexts: British secondary school children in the UK (study 1) and adult university students in Saudi Arabia (study 2).

In study 1, the participants were 189 secondary students from two London schools, aged 12 to 18, many of whom were

bilingual or multilingual and thus had a superb language level. Ten items from the FLE scale and eight from the FLCAS were used as independent variables, while the students' latest foreign language test results served as the dependent variable. Spearman correlation analysis was conducted to assess the relationships between FLE, FLCA, and test results. Study 2 included 152 current and former Saudi English learners, aged 18 to 40 ($M=26$, $SD=6$). The FLCAS, FLES, and two open-ended questions were used as independent variables, with the final score of the English version of LexTALE (Lemhöfer & Broersma, 2012) as the dependent variable. Again, Spearman Rho correlation analysis was employed.

Dewaele & Alfawzan (2018) found similar results in both studies. The relationship between FLE and test results was positive and significant, while the relationship between FLCA and performance was weaker and negative. This indicates that positive emotions have a stronger impact on academic performance than negative emotions on FL proficiency. Qualitative data from study 2 revealed that anxiety stemmed from low proficiency, negative perceptions of teachers, and poor pedagogical practices, creating a vicious cycle. Conversely, positive emotions, peer communication in English, and successful presentations enhanced enjoyment and reduced anxiety. Without these factors, students were likely to drop out or disengage from the FL course.

However, a significant limitation of the study was the potential sample bias, as there was a high proportion of successful FL learners. This may affect the validity and generalizability of the results to a broader population (Lash et al., 2014).

3.2. Empirical Study of Li & Wei (2023)

The acquisition of L2 learning is influenced by various internal and external factors. With growing attention to socio-psychological aspects in L2 learning, Li and Wei (2023) aimed to determine how anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom predict FL achievement over four-time points (Time 1-Time 4). Their large-scale empirical study involved 954 secondary students in rural China over ten weeks to see if emotions faded or snowballed. FLCAS, CFLES, and FLLBS were assessed at Time 1 as independent variables. English test scores at T2 (one week after T1), T3 (five weeks after T1), and T4 (nine weeks after T1) served as dependent variables. Covariates such as participants' age, gender, and socioeconomic status were considered.

The study found that when three emotions were investigated separately, higher FLE, lower FLCA, and lower FLLB at T1 predicted higher FL accomplishment at T2 and T3, with FLE as the only significant predictor at T4. Whereas three emotions were considered jointly, enjoyment negatively correlated with boredom, and boredom positively linked to anxiety. No significant correlation was found between enjoyment and anxiety. The predictive effect of boredom on achievement diminished over time, while anxiety and enjoyment predicted FL achievement from T2-T3. Enjoyment emerged as the only significant predictor at T4 ($\beta = .05$, $p < .01$).

The study revealed that FLE, FLCA, and FLLB independently predicted subsequent performance, with FLE having the most substantial and persistent impact. However, two limitations were noted, uncontrolled variables and the classroom-specific context. Other emotions like excitement, anger, and pride may also influence FL achievement. Additionally, this research is largely limited to the context

within the classroom, especially reflected by the measurement item of FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986). It is recommended to consider extracurricular emotions in future studies.

3.3. Empirical Study of Dewaele et al. (2023)

Dewaele et al. (2023) explored how FLE, FLCA, and FLB are influenced by learner-internal factors (attitude to FL) and perceived teacher behaviors (FL use and unpredictability), and how these variables impact FL achievement. Using structural equation modeling, they formulated six research questions. The study involved 332 foreign language learners worldwide, with an average age of 25.46. Participants were diverse in nationality, multilingualism, and target language, with English, French, and Spanish being the most common languages studied. Short-term FLCAS, FLES, and FLBS were used to examine emotional variables, while simple items assessed FL attitude, teacher FL use, and predictability. The last foreign language test marks were used as evidence of FL achievement.

The results were established after descriptive statistics analysis, correlation coefficient calculated by SPSS, and SEM exploration. The study found that higher enjoyment correlated with less anxiety and boredom, and a positive correlation between FLCA and FLB. Teacher FL use positively affected FLE, while unpredictability positively influenced FLE and negatively affected FLB. Enjoyment positively influenced FL attitude, which in turn boosted academic performance. No significant effect was found between FLCA, FLE, and FL achievement.

In sum, SEM allows researchers to uncover dynamic interrelationships between three learner emotions with learners' internal (attitude) and external variables (teacher use of FL and unpredictability); thus, in turn, influences the academic performance of learners. However, it is not without limitations. Firstly, context-specific effects, such as the impact of age, gender, and cultural background, were not all taken into account because of the diverse range of the participants. Additionally, Gender imbalance among participants also introduced potential sample bias, limiting the generalizability of the findings

3.4. Empirical Study of Pan & Zhang (2023)

Pan and Zhang (2023) conducted a 16-week longitudinal study to investigate changes in FLE and FLA over time, their relationship with motivational factors (e.g., motivated behavior, ideal-L2, ought-to L2), and personality traits (e.g., extraversion). The study involved 55 Chinese English major students from a top provincial university in China. FLE/FLA questionnaires (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014), personality trait questionnaires (Spielberger, 1983; Eysenck et al., 1985), and FL motivation questionnaires (Taguchi et al., 2009) were utilized. Students completed personality and motivation questionnaires at the semester's start and FLE/FLA questionnaires after each of the 42 Communicative English for Chinese Learners (CECL) sessions.

The study found significant correlations between FLE/FLA and motivation, with ideal/ought-to L2 self, linguistic confidence, attitude towards L2 learning and foreign culture, classroom atmosphere, and learning behavior positively correlating with FLE and negatively with FLA. Extroverts showed higher levels of enjoyment and lower levels of anxiety compared to introverts. FLE was more likely to be affected by external factors than FLA.

However, there are three shortcomings. First, the sample

size was relatively small. Second, since FLE/FLA questionnaire was completed more than 40 times in only 16 weeks, attrition may influence the reliability of the results. Lastly, this study based on a single school in China with students at the same proficiency level, may not be readily applicable to a broader context due to the potential influences of different environments and proficiency levels on FLA and FLE.

3.5. Discussion and its Pedagogical Implications

In the previous sections, the theoretical background and empirical studies on the source, effect, and interrelation of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) were reviewed. Here, we discuss three critical questions based on the findings and propose pedagogical implications to enhance foreign language (FL) learning experiences and outcomes.

Our first question: how do FLA and FLE contribute to foreign language performances? could be summarized as follows. First, in the static situation, Dewaele & Alfawzan (2018) found a positive correlation between FLE and FL achievement and a weaker negative correlation between FLA and performance. Conversely, Dewaele et al. (2023) reported that only FLA negatively impacted performance, with no significant correlation between FLE and achievement. The differing sample characteristics and measurement methods likely contributed to these inconsistencies. Specifically, Dewaele & Alfawzan's (2018) study focused on British and Saudi students, while Dewaele et al. (2023) included a more diverse, global sample. Furthermore, Dewaele et al. (2023) utilized single-item measures in their structural equation modeling, which might not capture the full complexity of emotions. Second, considering the dynamic and interlinked nature of these factors Li & Wei (2023) provided additional insights by demonstrating that FLE had a more prolonged and profound impact on FL achievement compared to FLA and FLB, persisting for at least nine weeks. This finding aligns with Dewaele & Alfawzan's (2018) results, suggesting that enjoyment's positive effects outweigh anxiety's negative impacts over time.

In terms of the second question: what are the correlational effects between FLA, FLE, and FLB? Dewaele et al. (2023) showed that anxiety and boredom are positively correlated, while higher enjoyment correlates with lower anxiety and boredom. However, Li & Wei (2023) found no significant correlation between FLE and FLCA when assessed at a single time point. The difference may arise from the single-time-point assessment's limitations, suggesting a need for repeated emotional measurements at various time points for more reliable predictions. The samples' different contexts might also influence the results. Li & Wei (2023) studied junior secondary students in rural China, whereas Dewaele et al. (2023) included a global sample with diverse languages and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, cultural and contextual factors must be considered when interpreting these findings.

The empirical research of Dewaele & Alfawzan (2018), Dewaele et al. (2023), and Pan & Zhang (2023) uncover the third question: what are the sources of FLA and FLE? The answer could classify into internal and external factors. Internally, Pan & Zhang (2023) found that the ideal/ought-to L2 self, extraversion, positive attitudes towards the target language and teachers, linguistic confidence, and learning

behavior positively correlated with FLE and negatively with FLA. Dewaele et al. (2023) confirmed that higher FLE positively influenced learners' attitudes towards FL. Externally, teachers' use of FL and unpredictability in teaching positively affected FLE, but not FLA. However, Dewaele et al. (2023) found that predictability increased satisfaction among Arabic learners, suggesting that teaching techniques should be context-specific. Pan & Zhang (2023) also highlighted the importance of a positive classroom environment, where supportive peers and teachers can reduce FLA.

3.6. Pedagogical Implications

First, it is recommended that mutual trust should be built between FL teachers and learners. The qualitative data collected by Dewaele & Alfawzan (2018) showed students who received negative practices, comments, and even physical abuse performed by some teachers could lower their self-esteem and abandon language learning, which has a lasting effect for years even after graduation. Therefore, teachers should foster a trusting relationship with students. Positive feedback and avoiding negative practices can boost students' self-esteem and FL attitudes, enhancing their linguistic confidence and performance.

Second, given motivation factors (e.g. ideal/ought-to L2 self) were found to be associated with FLE/FLA (Pan & Zhang, 2023), teachers should focus on motivating students by aligning their ideal/ought-to L2 selves with realistic and inspiring goals. Encouraging students to see FL learning as a means to broader communication and cultural understanding can foster enjoyment and reduce anxiety.

Third, concerning the learning atmosphere associated with FLE/FLA (Pan & Zhang, 2023), creating a positive and collaborative learning atmosphere would be helpful. Inclusive activities and collaborative learning can promote mutual trust and reduce anxiety (Lage et al., 2000). A positive classroom environment with supportive teachers and peers can significantly enhance students' enjoyment and reduce boredom and anxiety.

4. Conclusion

The review and empirical studies highlight the complex interplay between FLE, FLA, and FL achievement. While enjoyment generally has a positive and lasting impact on performance, anxiety tends to hinder it. The sources of these emotions are multifaceted, involving both internal and external factors.

Future research should first investigate how different target languages affect FLE, FLCA, and performance across various cultural backgrounds. In addition, while anxiety research has been extensive, there is a need for more studies on enjoyment, given its significant and lasting impact on achievement (Li & Wei, 2023), and its vulnerability to external influences compared to anxiety. Moreover, employing diverse measurement models, including single-item and multi-item measures, alongside qualitative approaches like interviews and diary studies, can provide deeper insights into these phenomena. Lastly, exploring a broader range of emotions such as excitement, anger, relaxation, and pride in relation to FL achievement is crucial. Understanding these emotional dynamics can enrich our understanding of language learning processes.

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