

Research on the Relationship between Foreign Language Classroom Enjoyment and the Reading Proficiency of English Majors

Xuanji He*

School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Geely University of China, Chengdu, China
hexuanji@guc.edu.cn

*Corresponding author

Abstract: In recent years, with the “affective turn” in the field of second language acquisition, an increasing number of scholars have begun to attend to the emotions of foreign language learners. In this context, this study adopted a mixed research method to explore 189 English learners’ overall level of foreign language enjoyment (FLE), the relationship between the FLE and the English reading proficiency, and the gender difference in the former two aspects. The results showed that: (1) English majors’ FLE was generally at a high level, and among the three dimensions of FLE, the mean scores of FLE-teacher and FLE-atmosphere were high but FLE-private was at a medium level; (2) Students’ overall FLE was positively and weakly correlated with their English reading proficiency. Based on the research results, this study suggests that English teachers should strive to create a pleasant learning environment in their teaching process, increase English learners’ overall enjoyment level in their learning process, and thus improve their English reading ability.

Keywords: English Majors, Foreign Language Enjoyment, English Reading Proficiency

1. Introduction

For a long time, researchers in Second Language Acquisition or SLA have downplayed learners’ emotional factors in language learning. This tendency may stem from the influence of the traditional exam-oriented education, where English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learners contend with the pressure of entrance exams and various English exams. Furthermore, foreign language teachers tend to prioritize language knowledge and skills over EFL learners’ psychological well-being, potentially leading to a range of negative emotions in English learning. Influenced by positive psychology, there has been an increasing research interest in the positive emotions experienced by foreign language learners^[1]. This shift is crucial as it acknowledges that students also experience positive emotions in foreign language learning, beyond just negative emotions^[2]. For instance, Khajavy et al.^[3] demonstrated that enjoyment significantly contributes to enhancing students’ willingness to communicate in foreign language classrooms, boosting their confidence in expressing themselves in English, and improving their English proficiency.

Nonetheless, there remains a marked lack of research interest in the role of positive emotions in SLA. Consequently, there have been calls to investigate learners’ enjoyment in foreign language learning and teaching due to the dearth of research in this area^[4]. With this research context in mind, the present study aims to address this gap by examining whether college English majors experience enjoyment in EFL learning and evaluating if their level of enjoyment impacts their reading proficiency. It is anticipated that this study will contribute valuable insights to college English teaching.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE)

The concept of enjoyment in positive psychology has been defined by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi^[5], who distinguish it from pleasure. Pleasure is described as the positive sensation derived from meeting basic needs such as hunger, sex, and comfort, whereas enjoyment is associated with the positive feelings resulting from surpassing homeostatic limits, achieved when individuals

engage in activities that challenge and push them beyond their normal boundaries. This can occur in various contexts such as athletic events, artistic performances, acts of kindness, or stimulating conversations. The distinction between pleasure and enjoyment is crucial, as the latter is believed to be more conducive to personal growth and long-term happiness. Csikszentmihalyi^[6] further characterizes enjoyment as involving “a sense of novelty and accomplishment”. It is emphasized that while pleasure can be experienced without effort, enjoyment requires substantial investment of effort, and it is through the experience of enjoyment that long-term personal growth is fostered. Dewaele and MacIntyre^[4] offer a perspective on FLE, asserting that it serves as an emotional motivator that unleashes learners’ potential in foreign language learning, creating an enjoyable and psychologically secure environment for EFL learners. Concurrently, Chen et al.^[7] emphasize the significance of FLE by highlighting its role in fostering positive interpersonal relationships among learners in daily language learning, allowing them to continuously progress towards their language learning objectives. These studies collectively emphasize that the experience of enjoyment plays a crucial role in enhancing language proficiency and maintaining the mental well-being of learners. Furthermore, this perspective aligns with the aim of instituting quality-oriented education in China.

2.2. Empirical Research

Researchers have conducted various studies to explore the relationship between FLE and foreign language learning, and their findings consistently show that FLE can promote foreign language learning. For instance, Saito et al.^[8] surveyed 108 Japanese high school students’ English proficiency and found that FLE positively impacted their foreign language level. Additionally, Mierzwa^[9] conducted a questionnaire survey on 233 students in southwest Poland and discovered through statistical analysis that students with high FLE achieved higher grades, and their enjoyment of the language increased with their proficiency. Dewaele and MacIntyre^[4] developed the Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale, which determined a positive correlation between students’ foreign language proficiency and FLE, as well as a negative correlation with foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA). Their study also observed that compared to learners in other regions, Asian learners experienced less enjoyment and more anxiety, with female learners reporting more enjoyment than their male counterparts^[10]. This disparity could be attributed to different educational settings.

In the Chinese EFL context, scholars have extensively studied negative emotions such as anxiety and boredom, with little attention given to positive emotions. Jiang and Li^[11] were the first to focus on positive emotions in SLA. Subsequently, Li^[12] conducted a study with 1,307 second-year students in a senior high school, using questionnaires and English test papers to explore the relationship between students’ traits, emotional intelligence, emotions, and academic performance. The research revealed a correlation between FLE, FLCA, and academic performance, indicating that students with high FLE rarely experience anxiety in foreign language classrooms and perform better academically. Furthermore, Jiang^[13] studied 646 first-year non-English majors and identified teacher factors that influence students’ FLE, including teacher personality, support, teaching skills, content, and classroom activity arrangements.

In summary, scholars have consistently found that learner and teacher factors can concomitantly affect foreign language enjoyment. Most of the research on FLE has focused on EFL learners in primary and secondary schools, with a predominant emphasis on its influence on spoken English and vocabulary learning, while its impact on English reading remains underexplored. Addressing this research gap, the present study seeks to conduct a questionnaire survey on second-year English majors enrolled in a reading course to investigate the influence of FLE on English reading proficiency.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Questions

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between English majors’ FLE and their English reading proficiency. The following four research questions were formulated:

- (1) What is the overall level of English majors’ FLE?
- (2) What is the relationship between students’ FLE and their English reading proficiency?

3.2. Research Subjects

A total of 200 English majors from 6 classes filled out the Chinese Version of the Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (CFLES). Students' individual consent was obtained prior to the questionnaire survey. Students were informed of the significance and purposes of the research before the questionnaires were distributed. What is more, teachers and the author were present to supervise participants to fill in the questionnaire. For the authenticity of the questionnaire, the paper-and-pen questionnaire was used in class. A total of 189 (94%) valid questionnaires were collected. The average age of the respondents was 19.6 with a range from 18 to 21 years old. The basic information of the 189 subjects whose responses were valid is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Background information of the 189 respondents

	Category	Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	33	17.46
	Female	156	82.54
Class	Class 1	35	18.52
	Class 2	35	18.52
	Class 3	33	17.46
	Class 5	28	14.82
	Class 6	29	15.34
	Class 8	29	15.34

Additionally, when the questionnaire survey was administered, students enrolled in these classes were taking *English Reading II*, a mandatory course for English majors that served as a crucial foundational course to provide students with ample exposure to English reading materials and to develop their reading proficiency. The goal of the English reading course was to nurture students' English reading ability, promote meticulous language observation and logical thinking skills, enhance students' reading skills such as skimming and scanning, and facilitate vocabulary expansion. Furthermore, this course also aimed to elevate students' language awareness, foster their continuous accumulation of diverse language knowledge, and deepen their cultural understanding.

3.3. Research Instruments

To measure students' FLE, this study employed the *Chinese Version of the Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale* developed by Li et al.^[14], which comprises three dimensions and 16 items. The three dimensions are FLE-Private, FLE-Teacher, and FLE-Atmosphere. FLE-Private refers to positive feelings, including enjoyment, accomplishments, and interesting experiences in EFL learning. FLE-Teacher pertains to positive emotions elicited by teachers' encouraging and supportive attitudes, as well as certain pedagogical practices. FLE-Atmosphere encompasses positive feelings fostered by a conducive learning environment in which the self, peers, and teachers are actively engaged, forming a positive learning community. Each item on the scale is rated on a standard 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "1 (strongly disagree)" to "2 (strongly agree)." Higher scores indicate a greater degree of enjoyment experienced by the respondents. In order to ensure the reliability of the research findings, the quantitative scale was evaluated for consistency. The results revealed that the Cronbach Alpha coefficients of FLE-Private, FLE-Teacher, FLE-Atmosphere, and the overall FLES are 0.889, 0.747, 0.788, and 0.924, respectively, demonstrating the scale's good reliability.

The test scores for students' English reading skills were obtained from the final examination of the course English Reading II, which was designed by experienced teachers of the school. The examination comprised five parts: word match, sentence completion, blanked cloze, reading comprehension, and short-answer questions. To ensure consistency and reliability, the test papers were scored by three different teachers according to a pre-determined division of responsibilities: Teacher 1 assessed the word match and sentence completion sections, Teacher 2 was tasked with evaluating the blanked cloze and reading comprehension parts, and Teacher 3 graded the short answer questions.

3.4. Data Analysis

The research questions were addressed through the use of SPSS 23.0, which permitted the implementation of reliability analysis, descriptive statistical analysis, and Pearson correlation analysis. The descriptive statistical analysis aimed to elucidate the general level of students' language enjoyment, while the correlation analysis was employed to examine the relationship between the overall enjoyment

level and reading performance.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Overall Level of Foreign Language Enjoyment

A descriptive analysis of the quantitative data was carried out in order to gain insights into the current situation of students' FLE. Skewness and kurtosis statistics, which were within the range of -2 to +2 as depicted in Table 2, indicated that all variables were normally distributed. The results, as shown in Table 2, encompassed the maximum, minimum, average, observed range, and standard deviation.

Table 2: Descriptive results (N=189)

Variable	Range	Mean (Factor)	Mean (Item)	SD	Min.	Max.	Skewness	Kurtosis
Factor 1	9-45	33.550	3.675	5.686	16	73	1.838	0.832
Factor 2	3-25	12.122	4.041	1.638	7	15	-0.271	0.447
Factor 3	4-20	15.857	3.965	2.079	10	20	-0.152	0.501
Total	11-80	61.529	3.846	8.318	36	101	0.669	1.829

SD, standard deviation; Factor 1, FLE-Private; Factor 2, FLE-Teacher; Factor 3, FLE-Atmosphere.

The results presented in Table 2 show that the mean score for the entire scale was 61.529, with a maximum of 101, a minimum of 36, and a standard deviation of 8.318. This suggests that university students' overall enjoyment level was moderately high. The Chinese Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale comprises 16 items, resulting in an average score of 3.846 for each item (61.529/16). Analysis of the subscales revealed that participants reported a high level of enjoyment in FLE-private (average score for each item=3.675), FLE-teacher support (average score for each item=4.041), and FLE-atmosphere (average score for each item=3.965). Importantly, the mean scores for each item were all above the theoretical neutral value of 3. EFL students experienced the highest level of FLE in the teacher support domain, followed by FLE-atmosphere and FLE-private. The large gap between the maximum total score of 101 and the minimum of 36 indicates substantial variability among students. This is further supported by the standard deviation of 8.318, reflecting the wide fluctuation in FLE levels among students. These findings provide valuable insights for teachers to recognize and address individual differences in students' emotional experiences within the classroom. The results also align with Li et al.'s research on enjoyment in English classes for high school students, where similarly, the role of the teacher was central to creating a positive classroom atmosphere^[14]. Notably, Li et al.'s study found high school students scoring highest on FLE-teacher, followed by FLE-private and FLE-atmosphere^[14], while in the current study, college students scored highest on FLE-teacher, followed by FLE-atmosphere and FLE-private. However, the average score of each item in each subscale in this study was higher than that of Li et al.'s study^[14], indicating a relatively high overall foreign language enjoyment level among college students. These results further emphasize the influential role of the teacher in fostering a positive learning environment where students can thrive and experience FLE^[15-16].

4.2. Correlation between Students' Enjoyment and English Reading Proficiency

This section addresses the second research question which examines the relationship between students' FLE and their English reading level. The results indicate an average overall reading score of 66.686 points ($SD=9.0638$), suggesting that students' English reading proficiency is at a moderate level. The correlation analysis in Table 3 reveals a very weak positive correlation ($r=.116$) between FLE score and the overall reading score. Notably, this contradicts Li et al.'s observation that higher FLE scores correspond to higher FLE levels and increased reading scores^[14]. It is important to consider the context of the reading test, which was conducted offline before the shift to online learning due to the outbreak of the pandemic, leading to significant changes in the learning environment and teaching methods. These changes could have impacted students' emotions to some extent. Additionally, the postponement of the final exam to the following academic year may have contributed to students' lack of motivation and reduced engagement with the course content during the long winter vacation, potentially resulting in lower grades. Valizadeh's suggestion that the online classroom setting led to feelings of suffocation and isolation among students aligns with the observed impact of limited interactions and less effective classroom activities in the online learning environment^[17]. It is established that FLE-teacher and FLE-atmosphere mainly influence students' enjoyment emotion. However, the restrictions imposed by the online learning environment may have diminished the impact of these crucial dimensions. Consequently, these factors may have contributed to the lack of significant correlation between students' enjoyment and

their reading levels.

Table 3: Results of the correlation between FLE and test scores

Variable	Test Scores
Factor 1	.157*
Factor 2	.002
Factor 3	.044
Total	.116

Note: *means that the correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

5. Conclusions

This study investigated the connection between English majors' enjoyment and their proficiency in English reading using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The main findings are as follows.

Firstly, the study revealed that students exhibited a relatively high level of FLE, which was positively correlated with their English reading proficiency. Students reported deriving enjoyment primarily from their teachers and the overall learning atmosphere, with the impact of FLE-private being relatively minimal. These findings align with previous research, emphasizing the significant influence of teachers and the learning environment on students' emotional experiences. The study suggested that fostering FLE can be achieved through direct teacher intervention or indirectly through facilitating peer interactions and creating an environment conducive to pleasurable and joyful learning experiences. Secondly, while a positive correlation was observed between FLE and English reading proficiency, the correlation was not statistically significant, except for Factor 1.

The practical implication of this study is twofold. Firstly, it assists English teaching practitioners in gaining an understanding of the overall situation of learners' FLE and the primary factors influencing students' enjoyment. This knowledge equips English teachers in the Chinese EFL teaching setting to implement effective classroom interventions. For instance, teachers are able to utilize innovative teaching techniques and practices, such as peer interaction, activities that foster student participation, and attentiveness to students' emotional well-being in the classroom. These interventions aim to create a conducive and comfortable learning environment for students.

This study delved into the correlation between English majors' foreign language enjoyment and their performance in English reading. The findings hold significant implications for English language teaching. However, it is important to note that this study has its limitations. One such limitation is the narrow scope of the research, which solely involved second-year English majors from a single university. Consequently, the generalizability of the research findings may be affected. This calls into question the persuasiveness and representativeness of the study. Moreover, the study's exclusive focus on the influence of foreign language enjoyment on academic performance neglects to consider the potential impact of other factors such as anxiety, motivation, and boredom. It is vital to acknowledge these limitations, as they may have implications for interpreting the research findings.

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