

An Analytical Study on How Enjoyment Influences English Language Proficiency and Anxiety among University Students

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ABSTRACT

A primary goal of foreign language (FL) teaching is to equip students to communicate effectively in the target language, making it essential for teachers to foster students' communication skills. This study examines how foreign language enjoyment (FLE) impacts anxiety and proficiency in English as a foreign language among university students. Using a correlational research method, it explores the relationships between enjoyment, proficiency, and anxiety. The findings reveal a negative relationship between enjoyment and anxiety, while enjoyment positively correlates with proficiency. Anxiety is shown to hinder students' performance in language classes, whereas positive emotions, such as enjoyment, enhance students' well-being and motivation, supporting their language learning process.

Keywords: Foreign Language Anxiety, Foreign Language Enjoyment, Proficiency.

INTRODUCTION

English has emerged as a dominant language in today's globalized world, serving as a vital medium for communication, education, and career opportunities. In countries where English is considered a foreign language (FL) (Saeed et al., 2018; Mohammed et al., 2023), such as Pakistan, mastering English is essential for academic and professional achievement (Teimouri et al., 2019). However, many students face challenges in learning a foreign language, often experiencing anxiety and a lack of motivation (Mohammed and Aljaberi, 2023; Mohammed et al., 2023).

Learning a foreign language, such as English, is frequently accompanied by several emotional elements that might impact the learning process and adjustment. Anxiety and stress are such elements (Al-Jaberi et al., 2019; Al-Jaberi et al., 2020; Aljaberi et al., 2021). Anxiety refers to the unease, apprehension, or fear that language learners experience when using or studying the target language. Foreign Language Anxiety (FLE) may hinder students' language learning progress, undermine their self-esteem, and prevent successful communication in the target language (Malik et al., 2021).

On the other hand, enjoyment pertaining to language learning is also an important component that can influence language learning outcomes. Learners who experience joy and satisfaction when learning a foreign language are more likely to participate actively, persevere, and acquire a positive attitude toward the language (Li et al., 2023; Musheer Abdulwahid et al., 2018; Mohammed et al., 2022). Enjoyment can reduce anxiety, boost motivation, and foster a welcoming learning environment, boosting the learning of foreign languages (Ozdemir and Papi, 2021). According to De Houwer and Hughes (2020), models of learning and communication processes are only comprehensive when positive emotions, personal strengths, and varied learning institutions and contexts are clearly considered. According to a recent study, there is a need to investigate the impact of different emotions in diverse language circumstances

and the interaction between these emotions and English language learning (Dewaele and Dewaele, 2020). This study aims to investigate the effect of Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) on the relationship between anxiety and the learning of English as a foreign language among Pakistani university students.

English is the language of the globalised village. It is key to success in the academic and professional world. Therefore, it is critical to understand the factors impacting learning. Anxiety and enjoyment are two constructs that surface in literature as important ones in relation to foreign language learning. Much is known about the impact of anxiety on language learning (Howard et. al., 2010) in contrast to the effect of enjoyment which is relatively a lesser-explored territory (Gardner, 2018). Language anxiety manifests in the form of fear of making errors and being judged leading to impaired performance. It tends to lower learner's engagement and willingness to learn the language (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016). Enjoyment has been shown to accelerate the process of language learning where the learner is motivated to achieve excellence (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018) owing to the favorable internal (positive state of mind) and external states (supportive classroom environment). Research demonstrates the individual impact of anxiety and enjoyment on language learning. Their interplay is largely understudied.

The present study aims to contribute to the existing literature on language learning by emphasizing the importance of enjoyment as a potential counter-effect to anxiety, thereby improving the process of acquiring English as a foreign language among university students in Pakistan. The research is driven by the following research questions:

- Does Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) influence anxiety levels among university students in Pakistan learning English as FL?
- Does Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) affect the proficiency of English as FL among university students in Pakistan?

LITERATURE REVIEW

For decades, anxiety, as a major factor contributing to the negative effects of foreign language learning, has been the most widely studied factor. Since the 1980s, mainly since the seminal work of Horwitz, "language anxiety in the classroom has been defined as a set of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to language learning". Tanveer (2007) argues that anxiety distracts people by reducing the effectiveness of cognitive processing like memory and comprehension. Disrupting factors such as fear of potential failure and fear of peer opinion can lead to decreased performance in language learning. With the advent of positive psychology in the FLA., the profession has seen a major shift from focusing solely on negative emotions to recognizing the role of positive emotions, known as Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE), which refers to a state of joy in a person's life when learning a language (Dewaele et al., 2019).

Positive emotions contribute to a student's well-being. They increase student motivation, improve the language learning process, and develop the resilience needed to mitigate the damaging effects of negative emotions. Since the early days of the positive psychology movement, happiness has been the only positive emotion to receive widespread attention. Several studies report that happiness is one of the most common positive emotions (Cameron et al., 2020). The researcher also described "enjoyment in a FL as a complex and stable emotion, distinct from the more superficial experience of pleasure. Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) and Acquisition of Foreign Language (AFL) are conceptualized as two distinct but related dimensions (Wu et al., 2021). They should not be viewed as a back-and-forth relationship, as an increase at one structural level does not necessarily imply a decrease at the other (Mavroudi et al., 2019). The current study attempts to investigate that relationship closely.

Foreign language learning is a complex process, influenced by an array of factors pertaining to learners, educator and the environment/resources. An extensive review of the literature has shown that the primary factor responsible for the successful execution of the process is the quality and quantity of the input provided to the learner effectively (Krashen, 1985; Piske & Doughty, 2008). It ensures that the learner has adequate exposure to the language which he absorbs to reproduce later. The second important factor is motivation itself. Here, enjoyment plays a key role in the reception, processing, and reproduction of the language (Dawaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Collaborative learning is another significant factor that relies on interpersonal interaction to increase the efficiency of the process (Stroch 2009). A key element of language learning is proficiency which is determined by the skills of the learner in the reading, writing, listening, and speaking domains of the language. Dornyei (2014) in his paper mentions that factors like motivation, anxiety, and self-efficacy influence learner's proficiency in second language learning. The findings are affirmed by further research in the field (Sparks, 2015). Based on this understanding, it has been proposed to make teaching and assessment strategies pertaining to foreign

language learning to be competency-based. It is recommended to leave the archaic practices of pedagogy where a student is made the passive recipient of information (Chapelle, 2018).

Almost 70% of foreign language learners are afflicted with anxiety (Horwitz et al., 2010). Language anxiety is demonstrated through negative thoughts, impact actions, and debilitating emotions of the learner, forming a vicious cycle. Anxiety tends to induce avoidance behaviors in the learners and decreases their motivation to learn. It is accompanied by fear of failure, lack of confidence, perceived incompetence, hostile and unsupportive learning environments, and strained teacher-student relationships (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

Enjoyment positively impacts the process of foreign language learning. It creates a positive learning experience for the learner who is motivated to communicate in a foreign language and engage with the learning material (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018). Enjoyment improves cognitive processing. It increases concentration, understanding, and retention of content (Dewaele, Chen, Padilla, & Lake, 2019). The construct relates to the intrinsic motivation of the student, prompting him to become a self-directed learner. Enjoyment is often accompanied by meaningful learning experiences, engaging teaching methodology, attainment of learning goals, and supportive interpersonal relationships in the classroom.

University students are expected to achieve proficiency in English but face challenges like anxiety that can hinder their progress. While the negative impact of anxiety is well-documented, the role of enjoyment in language learning remains less explored. The present study aims to investigate the relationship between enjoyment, anxiety, and English language proficiency in university students. By understanding how enjoyment influences proficiency and potentially mitigates anxiety, we can develop more effective learning strategies to support student success. The interplay between Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) and Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is complex in foreign language learning owing to individual differences of the learners. Understanding the interplay is instrumental in optimizing the process of language learning. The current study is led by the following hypotheses:

H1: Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) is negatively related to anxiety levels and English proficiency among university students in Pakistan learning English as a foreign language

H2: Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) is positively related to English proficiency among university students in Pakistan learning English as a foreign language

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The present study recruited 100 students (aged 18-22 years) from Edwards College Peshawar to investigate the phenomenon of anxiety and enjoyment in foreign language learning through a convenience sampling method. The participants enrolled in the B.S. English program were made part of the study.

MEASURES

Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) Scale. Is a 21-item self-report scale on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree=1 to strongly agree=5. The score is computed by adding value to each item. A higher score indicates higher enjoyment. The scale has excellent internal consistency reliability (.86) and construct validity with motivation, engagement, and willingness to communicate. The scale was negatively correlated with foreign language anxiety (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) Scale. Is a 23-item self-report scale on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree=1 to strongly agree=5. The score is collected by adding value to each item. A higher score refers to higher levels of anxiety. The Cronbach alpha is .93. The scale correlates well with language test anxiety and perceived language competence (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014)

English proficiency checklist. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) is a commonly used tool to assess the proficiency levels of language learners and users. The author in the current study made use of its self-assessment grid where participants rated themselves on their reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. The rubric determines six levels of proficiency from basic to advanced user

Research design

The current study is primarily a quantitative, correlational study to investigate and predict the link among foreign language learning, anxiety, and enjoyment. The data were collected through a survey sent to the participants. The number of participants chosen for this study was 100 university-going students in

Peshawar attending English literature classes. The responses gathered from the participants were analyzed through SPSS. The survey was conducted online as every student uses social media for their purposes. The study also evaluated whether enjoyment has a much bigger influence than anxiety or if they lie in the same spot for the students.

Statically analysis

The data collected from the participants through questionnaires was entered into IBM SPSS 26. Correlation and regression analysis operations were run to compute results and draw inferences.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring a complete understanding of the study's nature, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. Participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality throughout the data collection and analysis processes. Their right to withdraw from the study at any point was respected without consequence. The researcher was committed to conducting this research ethically and responsibly.

RESULTS

Table 1			
<i>Correlation analysis among FLE, FLA, and FLP</i>			
<i>N=100</i>			
	FLE	FLA	FLP
FLE ^a	-		
FLA ^b	-.646**	-	
FLP ^c	.619**	-.635**	-
Note. ^a Foreign Language Enjoyment, ^b Foreign Language Anxiety, ^c Foreign Language Proficiency			
**p<0.01			

Table 1 shows the correlations among three variables: anxiety, enjoyment, and proficiency in foreign language learning. There is a strong negative correlation between enjoyment and anxiety in foreign language learning ($r = -.646$, $p < .01$) and a significant positive correlation between enjoyment and proficiency ($r = .619$, $p < .01$). Similarly, there is a strong negative correlation between the anxiety and proficiency ($r = -.635$, $p < .01$). It suggests that as enjoyment and proficiency increases in foreign language learning, the levels of anxiety decrease. Overall, the findings show that anxiety, enjoyment, and proficiency have strong correlations, indicating that these variables are connected.

Table 2							
<i>Multiple regression analysis with enjoyment predicting anxiety and proficiency in foreign language learning</i>							
Dependent variables	B	SE	p	DF1	DF2	R ²	F
Foreign Language Anxiety	-.79	.36	.000	1	96	.41	68.7
Foreign Language Proficiency	.88	.1				.38	60.87

Multiple regression analysis in Table 2 reveals that enjoyment in foreign language significantly predicts anxiety ($R^2 = .41$, $F(1, 96) = 68.7$, $p = .000$) as well as foreign language proficiency ($R^2 = .38$, $F(1, 96) = 60.87$, $p = .000$).

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the effects of enjoyment of a foreign language on the anxiety and proficiency levels of English among university students who are learning English as a second language. The study's hypotheses suggested the relationship between enjoyment, proficiency, and anxiety which are corroborated by the result of the present study. Foreign Language Enjoyment predicts Foreign Language Anxiety and Foreign Language Proficiency. The greater the enjoyment, the lesser the anxiety levels and the higher the proficiency of the learner in the second language. Therefore, both hypotheses of the present study have been proven true.

The current study sheds light on the complex interplay of enjoyment, anxiety, and proficiency in second

language learning. Several studies have explored the relationships between FLE and FLA. Dewaele and Botes et al., (2020) established the connection between FLE and foreign language anxiety (FLA) among adult learners. Similarly, Chamot and Kupper (2013) also found a positive relationship between proficiency and enjoyment. A meta-analysis of 62 studies affirms these findings (Oxford & NYgurd, 2012). However, research has also shown that enjoyment, along with other internal factors like self-efficacy, should be explored as determining forces behind proficiency in the language (Dornyei & Ushiosda, 2011). Overall, the research landscape suggests a strong connection between enjoyment, anxiety, and proficiency in foreign language learning. However, the nature and strength of these relationships can vary depending on individual learners, learning contexts, and other factors.

In short, these findings add to our understanding of the intricate interplay of emotions, language learning, and anxiety. While more research is needed to validate these findings and understand the underlying mechanisms, they highlight the relevance of thinking about enjoyment as a potential mitigating factor for language learning anxiety. Furthermore, the findings support the idea that improved proficiency can reduce anxiety, highlighting the need for language education programs that promote both proficiency and good emotional experiences to maximize language learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The research is a correlational, quantitative study on university students enrolled in the B.S. English program in Edwards College, Peshawar. The data was collected through online questionnaires via social media platforms to attract the target participants. The result indicated a negative relationship between enjoyment and anxiety. When the student enjoys the course, the anxiety decreases. On the other hand, anxiety and proficiency have a negative relationship with each other, as when anxiety increases, proficiency is decreased. Moreover, there is a positive relationship between proficiency and FLE. This shows that students enjoy taking FL classes but also stress over them to do their best. The study helped evaluate whether the students enjoy this course or take stress in this subject.

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