

Foreign Language Enjoyment and Learning Outcomes among English Majors: The Mediating Role of L2 Motivational Self-System

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Abstract: This study explores the relationship between foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and learning outcomes of English majors, with a focus on the mediating effect of the L2 motivational self-system. A mixed-methods research design was adopted, involving 227 English majors from a university in East China. Data were collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and academic performance records, and analyzed using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0. The results indicate that English majors' FLE (including personal enjoyment and teacher-related enjoyment) and L2 motivational self-system (encompassing ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience) are at a medium-to-high level. FLE has a significant positive predictive effect on both learning outcomes and the L2 motivational self-system. The ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience in the motivational self-system play a partial mediating role in the relationship between FLE and learning outcomes, while the ought-to L2 self shows no significant mediating effect. These findings enrich the theoretical framework of positive psychology in second language acquisition and provide practical implications for optimizing English teaching strategies for English majors.

Keywords: English Majors, Foreign Language Enjoyment, L2 Motivational Self-System, Learning Outcomes, Mediating Effect.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Second language acquisition (SLA) research has shifted from a sole focus on cognitive mechanisms to the integration of affective and motivational factors in recent decades. Positive psychology has emerged as a pivotal theoretical lens, highlighting the critical role of positive emotions and motivation in facilitating effective language learning[7,9]. Foreign language enjoyment (FLE), defined as the pleasure and positive affect experienced during language learning activities, has been proven to enhance learning engagement and academic performance[1,6]. Meanwhile, Dörnyei's L2 motivational self-system, which includes the ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience, serves as a core framework for explaining language learning motivation[4,5].

English majors, as specialized language learners, face higher academic requirements and more complex learning tasks compared to non-English majors. However, existing studies have mainly focused on non-English majors or general language learners, with insufficient attention to the unique affective and motivational characteristics of English majors[10]. Additionally, the internal mechanism linking FLE and learning outcomes remains under-explored, particularly regarding whether the L2 motivational self-system functions as an intermediary bridge. Clarifying this mechanism is crucial for deepening the understanding of SLA's complexity and optimizing targeted teaching practices.

1.2. Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to investigate the relationship between FLE, L2 motivational self-system, and learning outcomes among English majors, and verify the mediating role of the L2 motivational self-system. Three research questions are proposed:

- 1) What are the current levels of FLE, L2 motivational self-system, and learning outcomes among English majors?
- 2) What are the correlations between FLE, L2 motivational self-system, and learning outcomes?
- 3) Does the L2 motivational self-system mediate the relationship between FLE and learning outcomes?

1.3. Significance of the Study

Theoretically, this study enriches the empirical research on positive affective factors and motivation in SLA, particularly for specialized language learners. It clarifies the mediating mechanism of the L2 motivational self-system, supplementing the existing theoretical framework. Practically, the findings provide insights for English teachers to design emotion-oriented teaching strategies, cultivate students' ideal L2 self, and enhance learning experience, thereby promoting English majors' comprehensive language competence.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE)

FLE was formally defined by Dewaele & MacIntyre [2] as a positive emotional state characterized by pleasure, excitement, and satisfaction during foreign language learning. It consists of two core dimensions: personal enjoyment (e.g., sense of achievement, interest in language) and teacher-related enjoyment (e.g., positive teacher-student interaction, supportive classroom environment)[6]. Recent studies have confirmed that FLE is negatively correlated with foreign language anxiety and positively associated with learning motivation and academic performance [1,10]. For example, Fathi et al. found that FLE directly predicts L2 speaking proficiency among EFL learners [6]. Wei et al. further verified that personal FLE has a significant predictive effect on non-English majors' academic achievements [10].

2.2. L2 Motivational Self-System

Dörnyei's L2 motivational self-system includes three components: ideal L2 self (the desired future self with proficient language skills), ought-to L2 self (the self that meets external expectations), and L2 learning experience (immediate emotional responses to learning contexts)[3]. The ideal L2 self is considered the most effective motivational driver, as it reflects learners' intrinsic aspirations[4,5]. Fan found that Chinese university students' language learning investment and motivation are significantly driven by their imagined identities (ideal L2 self) [4]. The L2 learning experience, influenced by classroom environment and teaching methods, directly affects learners' emotional engagement [8]. However, the predictive power of the ought-to L2 self on learning outcomes remains inconsistent across studies [10].

2.3. Relationship between FLE, L2 Motivational Self-System, and Learning Outcomes

Existing research has shown that positive emotions such as FLE can promote the development of the ideal L2 self [9]. A supportive learning environment that fosters FLE helps learners construct positive imagined identities and enhance learning experience [8]. Meanwhile, the L2 motivational self-system is closely linked to learning outcomes: the ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience positively predict academic performance, while the role of the ought-to L2 self is less significant [4,10].

Regarding the mediating effect, Pang et al. found that L2 learning experience mediates the relationship between classroom environment and learning engagement[8]. However, few studies have explored the mediating role of the entire L2 motivational self-system between FLE and learning outcomes, especially among English majors. This study fills this research gap.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

A convenience sampling method was used to select 227 English majors from a university in East China, including 58 freshmen, 65 sophomores, 52 juniors, and 52 seniors. There were 198 females (87.2%) and 29 males (12.8%), consistent with the gender distribution of English majors in Chinese universities. All participants had learned English for more than 10 years and were non-native English speakers.

3.2. Research Instruments

3.2.1. Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale

The scale was adapted from Dewaele & MacIntyre and Wei et al. , including 18 items across two dimensions: personal enjoyment (10 items) and teacher-related enjoyment (8 items)[2][10]. Using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), higher scores indicate higher FLE. The Cronbach's α coefficient of the scale was 0.89 in this study, indicating good reliability.

3.2.2. L2 Motivational Self-System Scale

Based on Dörnyei's theory and Wei et al.'s adaptation, the scale includes 21 items across three dimensions: ideal L2 self (7 items)[3,10], ought-to L2 self (7 items), and L2 learning experience (7 items). It uses a 5-point Likert scale, with a Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.91, showing high reliability.

3.2.3. Learning Outcomes Measurement

Learning outcomes were measured by students' academic performance (average score of core English courses in the latest semester) and self-reported language competence (listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation). The academic performance data were obtained from the university's educational administration system to ensure objectivity.

3.3. Data Collection

Questionnaires were distributed online and offline, with 240 copies issued and 227 valid copies collected (effective rate: 94.6%). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants (5 from each grade) to supplement qualitative data. The interview content focused on students' FLE experience, motivational sources, and learning challenges. Data collection was completed within one month to avoid temporal bias.

3.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the overall levels of the variables. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to test the relationships between variables. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to verify the mediating effect of the L2 motivational self-system. Qualitative interview data were coded and thematically analyzed to support quantitative results.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Variables (N = 227)

Variables	M	SD
Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE)	3.72	0.58
- Personal Enjoyment	3.78	0.61
- Teacher-related Enjoyment	3.65	0.59
L2 Motivational Self-System	3.68	0.56
- Ideal L2 Self	3.81	0.63
- Ought-to L2 Self	3.59	0.55
- L2 Learning Experience	3.64	0.57
Learning Outcomes	3.75	0.60

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of FLE, L2 motivational self-system, and learning outcomes. The average score of FLE was 3.72 (SD = 0.58), indicating a medium-to-high level. Among its dimensions, personal enjoyment (M = 3.78, SD = 0.61) was slightly higher than teacher-related enjoyment (M = 3.65, SD = 0.59). The average score of the L2 motivational self-system was 3.68 (SD = 0.56), with ideal L2 self (M = 3.81, SD = 0.63) scoring the highest, followed by L2 learning experience (M = 3.64, SD = 0.57) and ought-to L2 self (M = 3.59, SD = 0.55). The average score of learning outcomes was 3.75 (SD = 0.60).

4.2. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis (Table 2) shows that FLE is significantly positively correlated with L2 motivational self-system ($r = 0.68, p < 0.01$) and learning outcomes ($r = 0.62, p < 0.01$). All dimensions of FLE are positively correlated with the three components of the L2 motivational self-system and learning outcomes ($p < 0.01$). Among the L2 motivational self-system dimensions, ideal L2 self ($r = 0.71, p < 0.01$) and L2 learning experience ($r = 0.65, p < 0.01$) have stronger correlations with learning outcomes, while ought-to L2 self ($r = 0.43, p < 0.01$) shows a moderate correlation.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix of Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. FLE	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Personal Enjoyment	0.87**	1	-	-	-	-	-
3. Teacher-related Enjoyment	0.82**	0.69**	1	-	-	-	-
4. L2 Motivational Self-System	0.68**	0.65**	0.61**	1	-	-	-
5. Ideal L2 Self	0.64**	0.62**	0.57**	0.89**	1	-	-
6. Ought-to L2 Self	0.45**	0.41**	0.43**	0.78**	0.63**	1	-
7. L2 Learning Experience	0.66**	0.63**	0.60**	0.90**	0.75**	0.68**	1
8. Learning Outcomes	0.62**	0.60**	0.55**	0.73**	0.71**	0.43**	0.65**
Note: ** $p < 0.01$							

4.3. Mediating Effect Analysis

Structural equation modeling was used to test the mediating effect. The results show that the model fits well: $\chi^2/df = 2.31$, RMSEA = 0.07, CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.91, SRMR = 0.06.

As shown in Figure 1 and Table 3, FLE has a significant positive direct effect on learning outcomes ($\beta = 0.35, p < 0.001$). FLE also positively predicts ideal L2 self ($\beta = 0.72, p < 0.001$) and L2 learning experience ($\beta = 0.75, p < 0.001$), but its effect on ought-to L2 self is not significant ($\beta = 0.21, p > 0.05$). Ideal L2 self ($\beta = 0.30, p < 0.001$) and L2 learning experience ($\beta = 0.25, p < 0.001$) positively predict learning

outcomes, while ought-to L2 self does not ($\beta = 0.08, p > 0.05$).

The bootstrap test (95% confidence interval, 5000 samples) shows that the indirect effect of FLE on learning outcomes through ideal L2 self is 0.216 (CI: [0.142, 0.298]), and through L2 learning experience is 0.1875 (CI: [0.123, 0.265]). Neither interval contains 0, indicating significant partial mediating effects. The total mediating effect value is 0.4035, accounting for 53.8% of the total effect.

Figure 1. Mediating Model of L2 Motivational Self-System
(Note: Solid lines indicate significant paths, dashed lines indicate non-significant paths; *** $p < 0.001$)

Table 3. Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects

Paths	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
FLE → Learning Outcomes	0.35***	0.4035	0.7535***
FLE → Ideal L2 Self → Learning Outcomes	-	0.216***	0.216***
FLE → L2 Learning Experience → Learning Outcomes	-	0.1875***	0.1875***
Note: *** $p < 0.001$			

5. Discussion

5.1. Levels of FLE, L2 Motivational Self-System, and Learning Outcomes

English majors' FLE and L2 motivational self-system are at medium-to-high levels, which is consistent with Wei et al.'s findings on non-English majors[10]. The higher score of personal enjoyment than teacher-related enjoyment suggests that English majors derive more pleasure from personal learning achievements and language interest. The ideal L2 self scores the highest among the motivational components, reflecting their strong aspirations for proficient language

skills, which aligns with Fan's conclusion that imagined identities drive language learning[4].

5.2. Correlations between Variables

The significant positive correlations between FLE and learning outcomes confirm that positive emotions promote academic performance[1,6]. FLE is also closely correlated with the L2 motivational self-system, indicating that positive learning emotions help construct ideal L2 self and improve learning experience[9]. Additionally, the stronger correlation of ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience with learning outcomes suggests that intrinsic motivation and immediate emotional responses are more effective for specialized

language learning.

5.3. Mediating Role of L2 Motivational Self-System

The study verifies that the ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience play partial mediating roles between FLE and learning outcomes. This means FLE not only directly promotes learning outcomes but also indirectly affects them by fostering the ideal L2 self and enhancing learning experience. The non-significant mediating effect of the ought-to L2 self may be because English majors' learning motivation is more driven by intrinsic aspirations than external expectations [4,10].

These findings support Fathi et al.'s view that positive emotions interact with motivational factors to influence language proficiency [6]. They also extend Pang et al.'s research by confirming the joint mediating effect of ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the internal mechanism between FLE and learning outcomes [8].

6. Conclusion

6.1. Main Findings

This study reveals that English majors' FLE, L2 motivational self-system, and learning outcomes are at medium-to-high levels. FLE has a significant positive predictive effect on learning outcomes, and the ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience in the L2 motivational self-system play partial mediating roles in this relationship.

6.2. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study enriches the empirical research on FLE and L2 motivational self-system among specialized language learners, clarifying their interactive mechanism. Practically, it provides three implications for English teaching:

Cultivate FLE by designing interesting learning tasks and creating a supportive classroom environment to enhance students' personal enjoyment and teacher-related enjoyment.

Strengthen the construction of students' ideal L2 self through goal-setting guidance and role-model demonstration, stimulating intrinsic motivation.

Optimize L2 learning experience by improving teaching methods and reducing learning pressure, enhancing immediate emotional satisfaction.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample is limited to one university, affecting generalizability. Second, the cross-sectional design cannot capture the dynamic changes of variables. Third, qualitative data are relatively insufficient. Future research could adopt a longitudinal design,

expand the sample to multiple regions and universities, and combine more qualitative methods to explore the dynamic interaction between FLE, motivation, and learning outcomes. Additionally, exploring the moderating effects of individual differences (e.g., learning style, personality) would be a valuable direction.

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