

# A Review of Foreign Language Enjoyment Research: Retrospect and Prospect

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**Abstract:** Foreign language enjoyment (FLE) is a positive emotion in second language learning and a growing focus in second language acquisition research. This review traces FLE research from conceptual exploration and empirical expansion to mechanism-oriented inquiry, synthesising theories, conceptualisation, measurement, antecedents, outcomes, limitations, and future directions. Control-value, broaden-and-build, and complex dynamic systems theories offer complementary perspectives on emotional appraisal, positive-emotion functions, and dynamic interaction. Studies link FLE to learners' psychological resources, teacher support, classroom environments, digital contexts, motivation, engagement, willingness to communicate, and language achievement, although relationships vary across learners, tasks, and contexts. Future research should improve cross-context measurement and use longitudinal, multi-method, and intervention designs to clarify pathways and conditions.

**Keywords:** Foreign Language Enjoyment, Measurement, Influencing Factors, Mechanisms.

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## 1. Introduction

Early emotion research in second language acquisition focused mainly on negative experiences such as foreign language anxiety. As positive psychology entered language education research, positive emotions arising when learners cope with tasks, perceive progress, and participate in interaction received increasing attention [1]. Dewaele and MacIntyre introduced FLE into foreign language classroom research, giving it independent research value as a construct [2]. Existing studies indicate that FLE is domain-specific and related to, but relatively independent of, foreign language anxiety; the two emotions may coexist during the same learning process [2, 3].

Over the past decade, FLE research has moved from conceptual exploration and scale development to antecedents, learning outcomes, the ways enjoyment may influence learning, and differences across learning contexts. Chinese, comparative, and short-form scales have provided tools for this empirical work [4-6]. Longitudinal tracking and micro-dynamic measurement have enabled researchers to observe emotional change over time [7, 8], while meta-analytic and generative-AI studies have extended the field to learning outcomes and new learning settings [9, 10]. Researchers have also drawn on complementary theories to explain why learners experience enjoyment, what changes it may bring about, and why it may vary across time and contexts [11-13].

Several issues still require closer attention. Measures differ in dimensional structure, item design, and target language skill, so findings cannot always be compared directly [5, 14]. Although studies of antecedents and outcomes are abundant, the temporal ordering of teacher support, learner characteristics, enjoyment, engagement, and achievement, and whether these factors influence one another, have not been tested consistently [15-17]. Cross-sectional questionnaires and learner self-reports also remain common, making it difficult to determine which variable changes first or whether a relationship persists over time [7, 15]. Samples, language skills, and learning settings are unevenly represented, and findings from digital and AI-supported

learning often depend on a particular task or tool.

Accordingly, this review draws on classic work and representative recent empirical studies in the FLE field, with particular attention to EFL classrooms and digital and AI-supported learning. It first traces the development of the field and its theoretical perspectives, then examines how FLE is defined and measured, which factors influence it, and how it may be related to learning behaviour and outcomes. It subsequently considers whether scales can be used across learning settings, whether theories account for existing findings, whether research designs support causal claims, and which learners and contexts are represented. The review aims to show how the field has developed, which findings are relatively consistent, and the learning settings to which those findings may apply, thereby informing future research and language teaching.

## 2. Development of Foreign Language Enjoyment Research

Research on FLE developed from conceptual exploration and scale development toward examining its antecedents, learning outcomes, possible pathways, and differences across learning settings. Based on shifts in research topics, measurement tools, and methodological emphasis, this review broadly distinguishes three connected stages. The first focused on what FLE is; the second developed scales and extended empirical topics; and the third more often examined the pathways through which FLE may be related to learning, its change over time, and emerging learning settings.

### 2.1. The Conceptual Exploration Stage

Research conducted between 2014 and 2017 may be characterised as the conceptual exploration stage of FLE. Early work on second language emotions focused mainly on negative experiences such as foreign language anxiety. Dewaele and MacIntyre examined FLE as an important positive emotion in foreign language classrooms, helping develop it from a description of general positive experience into a domain-specific construct with independent research

value [2]. Subsequent research placed FLE and foreign language anxiety within the same analytical framework, stressing that they may coexist and should not be treated simply as opposite ends of a single emotional continuum [3]. A 2017 study examined the co-occurrence and changing patterns of enjoyment and anxiety among learners of different ages [18], providing early indications for later dynamic research. Overall, this stage addressed the foundational questions of what FLE is and how it relates to foreign language anxiety, thereby establishing a conceptual basis for later measurement development and empirical research.

## **2.2. The Empirical Expansion Stage**

Between 2018 and 2021, FLE research entered a stage of measurement development and empirical expansion. Chinese, comparative, and short-form scales were validated or developed, improving measurement standardisation and practicality and supporting empirical work across learner groups and learning contexts [4-6]. At the same time, research topics gradually expanded from construct and measurement issues to relationships involving teacher and classroom environments, learner engagement, and language achievement [15, 19]. Research in this period nevertheless relied mainly on cross-sectional questionnaires and correlational analyses. Although some studies began to use mixed methods, explanations of causal direction and dynamic emotional processes remained limited. Overall, the main change was not simply the confirmation that FLE existed, but the growing examination of its antecedents, learning outcomes, and links with learning processes alongside the continuing development of measurement tools.

## **2.3. The Mechanism-Deepening Stage**

Since 2022, FLE research has more often examined the processes through which enjoyment is related to learning and whether these relations vary across contexts. Longitudinal tracking and micro-dynamic measurement have been used to observe developmental trajectories and momentary fluctuation in FLE [7, 8], while meta-analytic and structural models have further examined its relations with engagement, motivation, and language achievement [9, 16]. A complex dynamic systems perspective has encouraged greater attention to change over time, different learner trajectories, and the effects of tasks and classroom environments [13]. Research settings have also extended from conventional classrooms to informal digital learning, including studies of the possible role of FLE between digital learning experiences and willingness to communicate [21]. Studies have begun to compare different types of enjoyment and their links with achievement [29]. In generative-AI contexts, research has examined learners' acceptance of writing tools and emotional experience [23], as well as learner characteristics, patterns of use, and interaction partners [24, 25]. Overall, research in this stage does not merely report whether variables are related; it also asks when FLE arises, through which learning processes it may be linked to outcomes, and why these relations differ by task, medium, and learner. Measurement work has likewise begun to design or adapt tools for particular skills, tasks, and media and to combine longitudinal with momentary measures in order to reflect actual emotional change more closely.

Overall, FLE research has moved from conceptual development and scale construction to broader empirical topics and then to closer study of pathways and learning

contexts. This periodisation describes changes in emphasis rather than a complete replacement of earlier work: research on concepts, measurement, antecedents, outcomes, and pathways continues to overlap.

## **3. Theoretical Perspectives on Foreign Language Enjoyment**

FLE can be understood from several theoretical perspectives because its emergence, possible contribution to learning, and change over time involve both individual judgements and social interaction. This section focuses on control-value theory, the broaden-and-build theory, and complex dynamic systems theory. Together, they help explain how learners evaluate language activities, how enjoyment may support learning, and how enjoyment changes across tasks and classroom events. The three perspectives are complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

### **3.1. Control-Value Theory**

Control-value theory explains how learners' appraisals of language tasks may give rise to enjoyment. Pekrun argues that achievement emotions are shaped mainly by perceived control over an activity or its outcomes and by the value attached to them [11]. In language learning, control concerns whether learners believe they can understand, complete, or master a task. Value concerns whether the task is interesting, useful, important, or personally meaningful. Learners are therefore more likely to experience enjoyment when they feel capable of completing a task and consider it worth pursuing. Low control may produce anxiety or frustration, whereas low value may lead to boredom. The theory also suggests a possible cycle: learners appraise a task, experience an emotion, and decide whether to engage; the resulting performance and feedback may then influence later appraisals [11]. Foreign language studies provide support for parts of this process [2, 19]. However, language learning is strongly social and interactive, so teacher support, peer relations, and classroom climate cannot be explained entirely by individual appraisal.

### **3.2. Broaden-and-Build Theory**

The broaden-and-build theory explains how positive emotions can expand attention, thinking, and action, and gradually build cognitive, psychological, and social resources [12]. In foreign language learning, enjoyment may encourage learners to communicate, try unfamiliar expressions, use learning strategies, and persist with challenging tasks. These behaviours create more opportunities for language input, output, feedback, successful experience, and social support. Such resources may strengthen later confidence, engagement, and enjoyment, forming a positive cycle. The observed relations between FLE, motivation, engagement, willingness to communicate, and language achievement are consistent with this explanation [15, 20, 21]. Nevertheless, these associations do not prove that enjoyment directly causes higher achievement. Whether enjoyment supports learning through resource accumulation requires behavioural and longitudinal evidence.

### **3.3. Complex Dynamic Systems Theory**

Complex dynamic systems theory emphasises that FLE is shaped jointly by learners, tasks, interaction partners, classroom environments, and time [13]. Enjoyment may

therefore differ across learners and fluctuate with task difficulty, teacher feedback, peer interaction, evaluation pressure, and learning progress. A classroom event may increase one learner's enjoyment but have little effect on another. Enjoyment can emerge from immediate interaction and may subsequently influence participation and later emotion, creating reciprocal change. Existing studies provide initial evidence of developmental change, individual trajectories, and relations between FLE, anxiety, and engagement [7, 8, 18], although direct tests of non-linear processes remain limited. This perspective therefore encourages longitudinal tracking, experience sampling, classroom observation, and dynamic measurement rather than a single fixed causal model.

Overall, these theories provide different but connected explanations. Learners' appraisals may contribute to the emergence of enjoyment; enjoyment may broaden participation and help build learning resources; and learning behaviour, outcomes, and social feedback may reshape later appraisals. This analytical framework clarifies how FLE may arise, support learning, and change across time and contexts.

## 4. Major Content of Research on Foreign Language Enjoyment

This section examines how FLE is conceptualised and measured, what factors influence it, and what learning outcomes it is associated with. It also considers the mechanisms through which FLE may be related to these outcomes, including motivation, engagement, willingness to communicate, and language use.

### 4.1. Conceptualisation and Measurement Tools

FLE is generally understood as a domain-specific positive emotion closely related to foreign language learning activities and language use. It is typically experienced when learners participate in language tasks, deal with challenges, perceive progress, or engage in classroom interaction. In this respect, FLE differs from general well-being, momentary pleasure, and stable personality traits. Following the early work of Dewaele and MacIntyre, research has increasingly examined how task experiences, perceived competence, and social interaction jointly shape learners' enjoyment [2].

FLE is not a unidimensional feeling. Early research distinguished personal enjoyment from social enjoyment. Li et al. validated three dimensions among Chinese secondary learners: personal enjoyment, teacher-related enjoyment, and classroom-atmosphere enjoyment [4]. Jin and Zhang's comparison of enjoyment scales further showed that different instruments emphasise teachers, learning experiences, or peer interaction in different ways [5]. These studies suggest that FLE includes both personal and social-contextual experiences. Its specific dimensions, however, may vary according to the items selected, the characteristics of the sample, and the learning environment. Therefore, the meaning of FLE needs to be considered in relation to the construct and context examined in each study.

FLE is also relatively distinct from, while dynamically related to, other emotions. It is not simply the opposite of foreign language anxiety, and the two emotions may coexist during the same learning process [18]. The intensity of FLE may change with tasks, feedback, and interaction [8]. Yu et al. further identified different developmental trajectories of enjoyment and found that enjoyment and engagement may

develop in coordination [7]. FLE therefore includes both relatively stable differences between learners and state-like changes arising from particular activities and classroom events.

The Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale developed by Dewaele and MacIntyre provided an important foundation for subsequent measurement research [2]. Li et al. later validated an 11-item Chinese version [4], Botes et al. developed a nine-item short form [6], and Jin and Qin developed a scale for English-speaking enjoyment [14]. These instruments have been used for general classroom research, brief assessments, and skill-specific studies, reflecting the gradual development of FLE measurement from overall classroom experience toward shorter and more contextualised forms.

Measurement approaches have also been extended to dynamic and technology-mediated learning contexts. Enjoymeter was designed to capture short-term fluctuations in learners' enjoyment [8], while studies of generative-AI-supported learning have adapted existing items to fit particular tools and tasks [24]. These developments show that FLE can be examined at different levels, including general classroom experience, specific skills, particular tasks, learning media, and momentary emotional change. Accordingly, researchers need to select or adapt instruments according to the construct and context under investigation, while clearly reporting the basis of such adaptations. Taken together, existing measurement tools provide complementary approaches to understanding the multidimensional and context-sensitive nature of FLE.

### 4.2. Antecedents of Foreign Language Enjoyment

Existing research explains variation in FLE mainly through learners' resources and social-educational environments involving teachers, peers, and classrooms. Digital media add new conditions by changing feedback, interaction partners, and opportunities for autonomous practice. These factors may shape whether learners view tasks as manageable and worthwhile, feel competent, and feel safe, thereby influencing enjoyment. Research has thus moved beyond demographic differences such as gender and age toward relations among learners, teachers, classrooms, and media.

Individual factors include language proficiency, emotional and cognitive resources, and learners' interpretations of tasks and environments. In AI-supported learning, gender, English proficiency, and tool-use duration may be associated with differences in FLE [24]. In general classroom settings, trait emotional intelligence and perceived classroom climate have positively predicted FLE [26]. These findings suggest that FLE depends both on learners' resources and their perceptions of learning environments, with effects varying across samples, tasks, and contexts.

Teachers and classroom social environments are important sources of FLE. Dewaele and Li found that teacher enthusiasm was related to student enjoyment and social-behavioural engagement, with enjoyment mediating this association [19]. Classroom climate has also been found to predict FLE [26]. Teacher behaviour may therefore influence enjoyment through perceived support, competence, and classroom interaction rather than operating independently of learner perception. The same behaviour may have different emotional effects across learners and classrooms.

Digital and AI-supported learning creates further conditions by changing interaction partners, feedback, and

learner autonomy. FLE mediated the relationship between informal digital learning of English and willingness to communicate [21]. Generative-AI-assisted speaking practice has shown potential to increase speaking enjoyment [10], while interaction with human or AI peers may influence willingness to communicate through different enjoyment experiences [27]. AI use does not automatically produce enjoyment; tool acceptance, technological anxiety, self-efficacy, feedback quality, duration of use, and task design may shape its effects [22, 24, 25].

Overall, individual resources, social-educational environments, and digital-media conditions interact. Learner resources shape interpretations of task difficulty and external support; teacher and classroom relationships affect perceived support, competence, and safety; and digital tools reorganise feedback, interaction, and autonomous learning. FLE is therefore best understood as an outcome of ongoing interactions between learner characteristics and specific learning environments.

### 4.3. Outcomes and Mechanisms of Foreign Language Enjoyment

FLE is generally positively associated with motivation, engagement, and willingness to communicate, although these associations do not establish direct effects. In terms of motivation and behaviour, higher FLE relates to continued learning, classroom participation, and willingness to use the target language [15, 20, 21]. Longitudinal evidence suggests that FLE and engagement may develop together rather than through a simple one-way relationship [7], while sequential mixed-methods research identifies links among enjoyment, engagement, achievement, and absenteeism [15]. Enjoyment may support participation and persistence, whereas successful participation and positive feedback may enhance later enjoyment.

For learning outcomes, meta-analytic structural equation modelling indicates an overall positive relationship between FLE and achievement, although its strength varies across language skills and learner characteristics [9]. Skill-specific studies examine writing and speaking enjoyment in relation to corresponding outcomes [22, 28], while latent-profile research compares different enjoyment configurations and L2 achievement [29]. Other studies suggest that willingness to communicate, self-efficacy, self-regulation, or the ideal L2 self may partly explain these relationships [17, 21, 23]. FLE is therefore better viewed as an emotional condition that may support learning than as a sufficient condition for achievement.

Beyond these general associations, findings on the specific pathways through which FLE may influence learning are not fully consistent. FLE has mediated the relationships between informal digital learning and willingness to communicate and between teacher enthusiasm and engagement. In AI-mediated writing, it has also formed part of a sequence linking growth mindset to engagement through the ideal L2 self and enjoyment [17]. Other research finds that self-efficacy and self-regulation participate in the relationship between FLE and AI-assisted writing engagement [23]. However, in AI-mediated informal learning, growth mindset sometimes influenced engagement mainly through adaptability, with no significant independent mediation by FLE [16]. These differences may reflect tasks, media, samples, and model specifications, suggesting that FLE does not follow one pathway across learning settings.

FLE can coexist with anxiety and boredom. Different enjoyment-anxiety combinations are not related to engagement through simple additive effects [30]; high enjoyment does not necessarily eliminate anxiety. Because much evidence relies on cross-sectional self-reports, temporal order and causal direction remain uncertain. Overall, FLE may be shaped by individual and contextual conditions and may relate to learning outcomes through motivation, engagement, willingness to communicate, and language practice, while later learning experiences may also influence subsequent emotional experiences.

## 5. Limitations of Existing Research

The preceding review shows that FLE research has made progress in conceptualisation, measurement, theoretical explanation, and the study of classroom, digital, and AI-supported learning. However, four areas still require clarification: measurement comparability, mechanisms, causal evidence, and the coverage of learners and contexts.

### 5.1. Measurement Adaptation and Comparability

Existing studies have developed general, localised, short-form, and skill-specific measures [5, 6, 14]. These tools improve the fit between measurement and particular learners or settings, but differences in item number, dimensions, target skills, and learning contexts make direct comparison difficult. The main concern is therefore not the lack of usable measures, but the limited comparability of results. Validation has mainly focused on reliability and validity within individual samples, while cross-context tests of measurement equivalence remain limited [4, 24]. Micro-scale tools capture short-term emotional change [8], but are less common in large-sample and long-term research.

### 5.2. Theoretical and Mechanism Testing Limitations

Existing studies have introduced several theoretical perspectives and examined relations between FLE and engagement, willingness to communicate, and achievement. However, most studies still focus on a small number of variables and rarely examine the full process from task appraisal to enjoyment, learning behaviour, and later evaluation. Findings on specific pathways are also inconsistent: some studies report mediating or sequentially mediating roles for FLE [17, 21], whereas others find no independent mediation [16]. The roles of self-efficacy and self-regulation have also been examined when FLE is treated as an antecedent [23]. Thus, the conditions under which particular pathways operate, and the interaction between FLE and anxiety, remain insufficiently clear [30].

### 5.3. Methodological and Causal Evidence Limitations

Longitudinal, micro-scale, and intervention studies have enriched the evidence base [7, 8, 10]. Nevertheless, cross-sectional questionnaires and learner self-reports remain common. These designs cannot determine whether FLE precedes engagement or whether successful engagement increases FLE. Structural equation modelling and mediation analysis can test theoretical relations but cannot establish causal direction on their own. Long-term follow-up, classroom observation, multi-source assessment, and

behavioural records remain less common, and limited intervention research leaves the durability and transfer of FLE-related effects uncertain.

#### **5.4. Limited Coverage of Samples and Contexts**

Research has expanded from traditional classrooms to online, informal digital, and AI-supported learning. However, samples remain concentrated among secondary and university EFL learners [4, 16], while younger learners, different proficiency levels, learning goals, language skills, and task types receive less systematic attention. Digital and AI studies also often focus on one platform or short-term task [25], so their findings may not apply directly to other learners, tasks, or media.

Overall, FLE research has established important foundations. The remaining concerns mainly involve the comparability of measures, the explanation of specific pathways, the strength of causal evidence, and the range of learners and contexts represented.

### **6. Future Directions and Prospects**

Foreign language enjoyment has become an important topic in second language research because it highlights learners' positive experiences and complements the traditional focus on anxiety and other negative emotions [1, 2]. Its significance extends beyond immediate emotional experience. As the preceding review shows, FLE is associated with learner resources, teacher support, classroom environments, engagement, willingness to communicate, language use, achievement, and emerging digital and AI-supported contexts. However, existing findings cannot yet be applied consistently across learners and settings because measures differ, mechanisms remain underexamined, causal evidence is limited, and some contexts are underrepresented. These gaps point to future research on measurement, theoretical explanations, research design, learning contexts, and teaching applications.

#### **6.1. Cross-Context Validation of Measurement Tools**

First, researchers should clarify whether they are measuring general classroom FLE or enjoyment specific to a particular skill, task, or medium. General classroom scales assess learners' overall experience over a relatively extended period, whereas skill- or task-specific instruments are more appropriate for examining speaking, writing, or AI-mediated interaction. When studies compare groups or learning contexts intended to represent the same construct, researchers should use the same instrument or, where necessary, a carefully validated adaptation that remains construct-equivalent. They should also test measurement invariance across educational stages, proficiency levels, language skills, and classroom or digital environments [4, 14, 24]. When studies measure different constructs or serve different purposes, score differences should be interpreted cautiously even if the instruments share the label "foreign language enjoyment." Direct cross-study comparison is appropriate only when the instruments are sufficiently comparable in their target construct, dimensional structure, and scoring system. This approach reduces the risk of treating differences caused by item wording, dimensions, or scoring procedures as genuine differences in learners' emotional experiences.

To examine changes over time, standardised scales can be combined with momentary emotion reports, experience sampling, or micro-level tools such as Enjoymeter [8]. Repeated measurement can help distinguish relatively stable individual differences from immediate experiences that vary with tasks and interaction. When items are adapted for particular skills or media, researchers should explain the rationale for the adaptation and report renewed evidence of reliability and validity, ensuring that the revised instrument preserves the core meaning of FLE.

#### **6.2. Theoretical Integration and Mechanism Development**

Second, theoretical integration should address explicit, testable questions. Researchers should not merely list several theories side by side or place every variable in one large model. Future studies can examine several connected smaller models covering different parts of a sequence from personal and contextual conditions through appraisal and FLE to learning behaviour, outcomes, and subsequent appraisal. Given inconsistent mediation findings [16, 17, 21], researchers should state clear hypotheses before comparing direct effects, mediation, moderation, or reciprocal relations, and should examine whether those relations differ by proficiency, task difficulty, language skill, educational stage, and medium. FLE should also be examined together with anxiety and other emotions [30]. The same model needs to be retested across samples, tasks, and timescales before relatively stable relations can be distinguished from results that occur only in one setting.

#### **6.3. Methodological Improvement and Causal Identification**

Third, methods should match the conclusions that researchers wish to draw. Cross-sectional surveys are suitable for describing whether variables are associated. Longitudinal tracking and experience sampling can show which change occurs first and how emotion fluctuates. Cross-lagged and multilevel models can estimate reciprocal relations and effects at different levels, such as individual differences and classroom conditions, but cannot establish causality from model results alone. Experiments and quasi-experiments with appropriate comparison conditions are better suited to testing whether an instructional intervention works. Questionnaires can be combined with classroom observation, platform records, and authentic language use to reduce reliance on learner self-reports and to determine whether different sources yield similar conclusions. Intervention studies should also include comparison conditions and delayed post-tests and assess enjoyment alongside engagement, language use, and proficiency to determine whether emotional change persists and transfers to other learning tasks [10].

#### **6.4. Broader Samples and Contexts with Pedagogical Application**

Finally, broader samples and learning contexts should address clear research questions rather than merely increase participant numbers or follow new technology. Future studies can deliberately include learners at different educational stages, proficiency levels, learning goals, and resource conditions and compare how listening, speaking, reading, writing, and particular tasks make different demands on perceived control, task value, and social interaction. Digital and AI-supported learning are important emerging settings,

but research should distinguish whom learners interact with, what feedback they receive, and whether they accept the tool [24, 25, 27]. These conditions should be examined alongside actual usage records to test whether enjoyment develops into sustained engagement and authentic language practice [21, 23]. Studies should also consider novelty effects, technological anxiety, and resource differences and extend the observation period to determine whether relationships remain after the novelty of a tool fades. For teaching applications, teacher support, positive feedback, appropriate challenge, and safe interaction can be designed as concrete, testable practices [18, 19], with enjoyment evaluated alongside language goals, learning behaviour, and proficiency development.

## 7. Conclusion

In sum, future research needs to distinguish different kinds of FLE more clearly and test whether the same scale produces comparable results across contexts. It also needs to turn theories into testable relations among variables, use dynamic and intervention research to establish the temporal ordering of those relations, and specify the conditions under which findings apply in skill-, task-, and digital-learning settings. Only when theory, measurement, and method correspond can researchers explain more accurately when FLE arises, how it is linked with learning behaviour and outcomes, and under what conditions it may support language learning.

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