

A Case Study on the Causes of Foreign Language Enjoyment of a Chinese EFL Learner

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Received 17 December 2022; accepted 25 January 2023

Published online 26 February 2023

Abstract

This study investigates a Chinese EFL learner's experience of learning English from childhood to adulthood and analyzes the factors contributing to his foreign language enjoyment (FLE) from primary school to university. The main factors are personal progress, excellent performance, and the teacher's supportive and encouraging attitude toward the student. Finally, several suggestions for teachers' teaching are given according to those factors.

Key words: English learning experiences; Foreign language enjoyment; Positive psychological responses

Tian, L., & Du, Y. (2023). A Case Study on the Causes of Foreign Language Enjoyment of a Chinese EFL Learner. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 26(1), 35-39. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/12894>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12894>

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of people-oriented education has been deeply rooted, which advocates respecting and caring for students' nature, cultivating their rich and various personalities, and focusing on their comprehensive and sustainable development (Yao, 2011). Therefore, students' emotional factors have become the focus of research. In addition to anxiety, the influence of positive emotions on learning is gradually receiving attention. Enjoyment, as an important component of positive emotions (Fredrickson,

1998), has been of interest to researchers in recent years. A study has concluded that enjoyment has a positive effect on information memory in accounting and company image management class (Hernik & Jaworska, 2018). Therefore, improving students' enjoyment of learning has also become a key issue for teachers of various subjects. And to address this problem, the primary measure is to understand the reasons why students feel enjoyment while learning, and thus teachers can use appropriate teaching strategies to arouse students' positive emotions. English, as a subject and a second language for Chinese students, its learning process involves foreign language enjoyment (FLE) that deserves attention and in-depth research in the field of second language acquisition. Based on this, this study will conduct a case study on a Chinese EFL learner to investigate the reasons for his FLE, so as to provide some insights for teachers to take measures to improve students' enjoyment while learning a foreign language.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definitions of Enjoyment and FLE

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) mentioned that enjoyment is the good feeling people experience when they break their limits. They experience good feelings when they do something beyond themselves, such as at sporting events, artistic performances, good deeds, stimulating activities, etc. Boudreau et al. (2018) also mentioned that enjoyment includes different dimensions, such as focused intellect, high concentration and optimal challenge. When it comes to foreign language learning, foreign language enjoyment (FLE) is considered to be the most common type of positive emotion for foreign language learning (Dewaele et al., 2018). FLE can be felt by learners after overcoming learning difficulties, completing academic tasks and achieving psychological needs in foreign language learning (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014, 2016).

2.2 Relevant Studies on FLE

Before the concept of FLE was introduced, several scholars researched enjoyment in the language classroom. In order to explore students' perceptions of the enjoyment and effectiveness of English learning activities, Green (1993) investigated 263 students of the University of Puerto Rico who learned English as a second language and found that students gained more enjoyment when engaging in communicative activities than non-communicative activities, and the relationship between enjoyment and effectiveness was a moderately high positive correlation. Brantmeier (2005) surveyed 88 college students whose second language was Spanish to explore learners' levels of self-assessment skills and levels of enjoyment and the effects of these factors on students' language reading comprehension skills. The results showed that the level of self-assessment ability was positively correlated with enjoyment and that both self-assessment ability and enjoyment significantly affected open-ended quiz questions in reading comprehension but not on multiple-choice questions. Campbell and Storch (2011) found that enjoyment is the key to persevering with language learning for learners. All of these studies suggest that enjoyment has a positive effect on foreign language performance.

Subsequently, after the introduction of the concept of FLE by Dewaele and MacIntyre, people started to develop the FLE scale, as well as the division of the scale dimensions. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) developed the first Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (FLES) in their study. One of their studies in 2016 showed that foreign language enjoyment was influenced by gender, with women having higher levels of FLE than men. Moreover, this study revealed the importance of teachers' professional and emotional skills and supportive peer groups on FLE. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2016) conducted a factor analysis of the 21-item FLES and came up with a two-dimension structure, namely Social Dimension and Private Dimension. Social Dimension reflects the satisfaction that a learner can draw from a buzzing, positive foreign language classroom and a good relationship with teachers and peers. The enjoyment of the Private dimension reflects learners' internal feelings, such as pride, satisfaction, and accomplishment they can experience when something difficult has been achieved. Li, Jiang and Dewaele (2018) conducted an empirical study on FLE in the Chinese context, and they modified the items according to the FLES (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014) to fit the Chinese cultural context. The modified 11-item scale is the Chinese Version of the Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (CFLES), and they divided English learning enjoyment into three dimensions: The first dimension is *FLE-Private*, mainly related to personal progress, excellent performance or interesting experiences; the second dimension is *FLE-*

Teacher, which emphasizes the teacher's supportive and encouraging attitude toward students and his or her experience in teaching practice; the third dimension is *FLE-Atmosphere*, mainly manifested in classroom group activities, where both teachers and peers can create a positive classroom atmosphere. Subsequently, Jin and Zhang (2018) conducted a study with 320 Chinese high school students who were learning English as a foreign language and invited them to complete an adapted version of the FLES called the English Classroom Enjoyment Scale (ECES). The researchers conducted a factorial analysis which unfolded a 3-factor solution for the ECES for the adapted scale, including *Enjoyment of Teacher Support*, *Enjoyment of Student Support*, and *Enjoyment of English Learning*. Personal or private factors are important factors affecting the production of FLE and should be a separate dimension, so the factorial analysis done by Li et al. (2018) is more appropriate than the factorial analysis done by Jin and Zhang (2018). Based on these previous studies, Wang (2019) then conducted a study on the relationship between enjoyment and anxiety in high school English learning. The results showed that an increase in enjoyment in English learning helps to reduce anxiety. In addition to studying the FLE of learners who speak English as a foreign language, there is also a study on international students in China who speak Chinese as a foreign language, according to which teachers are an important factor in students' enjoyment of learning a foreign language (Sheila, 2019).

Further, the relationship between FLE levels and the achievement of second language learners has been studied again. Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018) found that FLE was a significant predictor of actual second language performance, and the positive effects of FLE were slightly greater than the negative effects of foreign language anxiety (FLA). Similar results were also found in second language phonological competence in the Japanese context, with one study showing that more frequent use of the second language in enjoyment resulted in better second language proficiency and fewer negative emotions. (Saito et al., 2018).

Therefore, understanding the causes of FLE can help to understand the mechanisms of FLE production, thus improving second language achievement of second language learners by enabling them to produce FLE. Comparing the different ways of dividing the dimensions of FLES, the three dimensions divided by Li et al. (2018) highlight the three subjects in the classroom: the learners themselves, the teacher and the peers, which is a clear way of dividing dimensions. Therefore, this paper will adopt the three dimensions of FLES classified by Li et al. in the Chinese cultural context to explore and classify the factors contributing to the FLE of this study's participant.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Research Question

What are the factors that contribute to the participant's FLE?

3.2 Participants

This study is a case study of a senior student, Daniel (a pseudonym), majoring in nuclear engineering and technology at North China Electric Power University(NCEPU). He entered NCEPU in 2018 and scored 137/150 in English in the college entrance examination. He passed the CET4 with a score of 567 in the first semester of his freshman year and the CET6 with a score of 530 in the second semester of his freshman year. Previously, the Classroom Emotion Questionnaire (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019) was distributed to 10 college students from different majors, respectively. Among the returned data, Daniel was the only student whose FLE mean was higher than the FLCA mean, 3.18 and 1.97, respectively. Therefore, he was selected to provide the corpus for this study.

3.3 Instrument

3.3.1 Classroom Emotion Questionnaire

The Classroom Emotion Questionnaire is an 18-item questionnaire in which Jiang and Dewaele (2019) have condensed and integrated two previous scales. Ten items were extracted from the Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale with 21 items initially (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014), and eight were extracted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale with 33 items initially (Horwitz et al., 1986).

3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interview

This study mainly adopts a qualitative research approach based on a semi-structured interview. The researcher prepared open-ended interview questions in advance, and the interview lasted 15 minutes. The whole interview was videotaped and recorded with the consent of the participant, and the researcher converted the recorded material into text after the interview. The researcher was flexible in asking questions or adjusting the order of questions during the interview process to prompt more detailed feedback from the participant in order to obtain more detailed and valuable data. This interview focused on the pleasant experiences of the participant in learning English.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

In the interview, the author asked Daniel about his experiences of learning English in elementary school, secondary school and university and about the experiences that made Daniel feel enjoyable learning English. The answers given by the participant in the interview were sorted out, and the rest of the answers were transcribed

into textual form by deleting the repetitive descriptions. The textual form of answers was analyzed by Nvivo 12 software. First, the text was coded according to emotion. The enjoyment occurring for the same reason was classified in the same way, and a new category was established only when the enjoyment arose for the reason that had not previously been mentioned. After that, the frequency of occurrence of keywords related to enjoyment in the text was calculated. Finally, those keywords were extracted and categorized according to the three dimensions of English learning enjoyment that Li et al. (2018) distinguished in the Chinese context: FLE-Private, FLE-Teacher, and FLE-Atmosphere. Words such as making progress and doing well in class corresponded to the FLE-Private. Words such as the gentle and sincere attitude of the teacher corresponded to the FLE-Teacher. However, during the interviews, the participants did not mention keywords related to FLE-Atmosphere, such as classroom group activities and classroom atmosphere. The author conducted word frequency statistics for the extracted keywords, and the results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
The Dimensions of FLE Sources

Dimension	FLE-Private			FLE-Teacher
Subcategories	Personal progress	Real-life task fulfillment	Excellent performance	The teacher's supportive and encouraging attitude
Source	make progress, improve a lot in English, felt very confident in the class	helpful	felt quite proud of myself, doing well in class	gentle and patient with the students, treat her students with sincerity, treating us sincerely
Word frequency	6			3

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 FLE-Private

The first dimension is the FLE-Private, which emphasizes the enjoyment of the foreign language that comes from personal progress, excellent performance and real-life task fulfillment. Daniel was exposed to foreign movies during his extracurricular recreational activities in elementary school. The lines in the movies impressed him and helped him to distinguish words with the same pronunciation that had been bothering him for a long time, and he made progress in learning the words. This experience gave him a sense of enjoyment in learning English.

“The first experience that gave me enjoyment was watching foreign movies that helped me differentiate words, and I made progress in vocabulary memorization. Children would often

remember sentences they saw in movies. Subsequently, these sentences would be deeply rooted in their hearts. For instance, I kept thinking of the sentence ‘Son, where are you?’ in a movie and kept thinking about that scene in that movie. Because of this sentence, I remembered S-O-N is SON, which means a male child. Then I was naturally able to distinguish the words SON and SUN.”

In addition to this experience, Daniel also made progress in vocabulary by watching foreign films and TV series during his college years. He was able to easily handle the terminologies in English that appeared in his course on nuclear power, which gave him a sense of enjoyment, a better class experience, and an interest in continuing with his course.

“During my college years, I was more exposed to English in terms of entertainment. Mostly I watched foreign TV series. Uh, I think the most helpful thing about watching US TV series is that I can learn a lot of new words in English and more authentic expressions, which makes me improve a lot in English. For example, *The Big Bang Theory* is about four physicists, so it involves a lot of atomic physics, astrophysics, and other aspects of professional vocabulary, and those English terminologies appear frequently. I took a major course in my senior year, which was English for Nuclear Power. When I heard familiar terminology in class, I was like, ‘Yep, this word, I know it. Hey, I knew that word too!’ I felt pleasant. I was familiar with many English words in this course, and I felt very confident in the class and interested in taking this course.”

Besides watching foreign movies during elementary school, Daniel also liked playing video games. The language of the game system was English. He used his knowledge of English to help him get the game through, which gave Daniel enjoyment in learning English as well.

“When I was a kid, I played games with my dad. At that time, I was in the fourth grade, but have a little bit of knowledge of fifth-grade English. I relied on my vocabulary to guess the meaning of the English task prompts in order to get through the game. After the game passed, I was very happy, and I also realized that learning English is helpful for me to play the game. Up to now, I still adhere to the concept of ‘happy playing and happy learning.’ I think this is a positive feedback process.”

Daniel was interested in English rap songs in junior high school, and he accumulated a lot of English words while listening to English songs in order to understand their meanings. When the teacher examined their vocabulary in class, he answered the teacher’s questions faster than anyone else, and such excellent performance made the process of learning English enjoyable for him.

“When I was in junior high school, I started to learn English rap. The rap was a test of vocabulary, so I accumulated a large vocabulary in the process of learning rap. What impressed me is that during my junior year, we still had to go through the words before the senior high school entrance examination. I can answer most of the teacher’s questions about words. But the teacher sometimes asked about words that were difficult for us, such as the Chinese word ‘Outu,’ which can be translated to ‘vomit,’ but it can also be translated to ‘puke.’ It has these two words in English, right? Then I answered both of them, but the best students in our class at that time were unable to answer. At that time, I felt quite proud of myself for doing well in class.”

In the above descriptions, the participant focused on personal progress, using his knowledge of English to solve real-life problems and performing well in the English classroom. These enjoyments were derived from learners’ personal success and emotional satisfaction. These satisfactions also contributed to their positive emotions about learning English, making them subsequently willing to be more active and motivated to learn English.

5.2 FLE-Teacher

The second dimension consists mainly of the teacher’s encouragement and support, gentleness and sincerity. The teacher who impressed Daniel most in his English learning experience from elementary school to university was an English teacher he met in his senior high. The English teacher’s two attitudes of being strict in class but gentle after class deeply attracted Daniel. He thought the teacher treated them like her own children and was very sincere and considerate, and he built a good relationship with his teacher.

“Our new English teacher was particularly strict. If a student made a mistake in class, she would correct him or her mistake, not scolding him or her harshly, but just teaching correct students’ mistakes very strictly. On the contrary, she was very gentle and patient with the students after class, like a big sister or even like a mother. We felt that she was a different person in class and after class. I thought she was treating us sincerely, and then I didn’t want to let her down. I believed that if a teacher could treat her students with sincerity, students would be touched. Therefore, students would take the subject she teaches seriously. She didn’t only want her students to learn English well, but also wanted every student to have a good future.”

The teacher’s personality traits, such as friendliness, gentleness, kindness, and sincere treatment of students, express the teacher’s personality charm. These personality traits can ease learners’ tension and close the distance between teachers and learners, thus enhancing learners’ FLE.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Findings of the Study

After analyzing the interviews with Daniel, this paper found that four factors contributed to his enjoyment of learning a foreign language: personal progress, excellent performance, real-life task fulfillment and the teacher’s supportive and encouraging attitude toward students. According to the dimensions of FLE distinguished by Li et al., these subcategories belong to FLE-Private and FLE-Teacher respectively. Daniel did not mention the FLE brought by the atmosphere in class in the interview of this study.

6.2 Pedagogical Implications

Based on the above analysis and discussion, there are two suggestions for teachers to consider. First, teachers can introduce some classic English movies, TV series, and

music to students in class. Daniel mentioned several times that he likes to watch English movies and TV series and listen to English rap songs outside of class. He learned a lot of vocabulary and expressions from them, which allowed him to make progress in his English learning and to have excellent performance in the classroom, so he developed a sense of enjoyment in learning English. Based on this, teachers can introduce some English cartoon clips that are age-appropriate for students in primary classes and some classic English movie clips and songs for students to enjoy and learn in secondary classes and university classes. This kind of input is more likely to be remembered by students and makes the words and expressions more impressive in their minds.

Second, teachers should pay attention to their attitudes toward students. According to Daniel's above experiences, a good attitude of teachers toward their students will increase students' interest in learning English and enhance their sense of belonging. A good attitude does not mean simply indulging students or being overly lenient with them. Rather, it means that the teacher should strictly supervise students and correct their mistakes in class. After class, teachers should establish a rapport with their students, giving them encouragement and emotional support.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The present case study gives an in-depth analysis of an English learner's FLE. However, the small number of participants in this study led to a limited amount of data, and the relevant factors in terms of FLE-Atmosphere were not reflected in the data provided by the participants. This problem may have undermined the validity of this study. Future studies could select a larger number of participants to make the collected data more diverse and comprehensive.

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