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# ARTICLES



**FOREIGN LANGUAGE ENJOYMENT AMONG  
ENGLISH PHILOLOGY STUDENTS:  
WHAT DO STUDENTS ENJOY WHILE LEARNING  
ENGLISH AS A FL?**

*Ewelina Mierzwa*

**Abstract**

The aim of the present study was to investigate Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) among English Philology students in southwestern Poland. The results revealed that Polish students of English do not differ significantly in their FLE experience when their gender and proficiency are taken into consideration. The qualitative section of the questionnaire, which invited participants to share their positive and enjoyable moments in their Foreign Language learning experience, revealed that the participants of the study pointed most frequently to teacher-related variables as the main source of FLE (e.g. the attitude of the teacher, support, the variety of teaching strategies, techniques and classroom activities which all gave them the possibility of competing, discussing, having fun and learning at the same time). The social and private dimension of FLE was indicated less frequently. Interestingly, the results revealed that the experience of enjoyment is often accompanied by a number of different emotions, both of a positive and negative nature (e.g. pride, excitement, appreciation, but also fear and anxiety).

**Keywords**

Foreign language enjoyment, enjoyment, positive emotions, positive psychology, second language acquisition

\* \* \*

**1. Literature Review on Enjoyment**

ENJOYMENT can be classified as an activity focused, positive achievement emotion (Pekrun and Perry 2014, 121). Once it is assumed that achievement emotions are domain-specific, it is reasonable to believe that enjoyment is related to specific subject areas, e.g. learning a foreign language (FL). The very process of learning and acquiring a second language is particularly prone to the lingering effects of negative emotions, such as boredom, anxiety, hopelessness, shame, etc. Nevertheless, recent trends in positive psychology have led to a significant increase in the

number of studies that investigate the importance and role of positive emotions in the foreign language classroom, as well as the relevance of these experiences on students' learning and academic achievement (Dewaele and MacIntyre 2014; Hagenauer and Hascher 2014; Oxford 2015; Dewaele, Witney, Saito and Dewaele 2017; Dewaele and Alfawzan 2018; Dewaele et al. 2019).

As a multidimensional construct, enjoyment embraces five components: affective, cognitive, motivational, expressive and physiological (Hagenauer and Hascher 2014, 497). As suggested by its name, the *affective* component of enjoyment refers to the emotions, and more specifically, to the sense of joy and excitement experienced while learning a FL. The *cognitive*, in turn, deals with the positive evaluation of the learning situation. In this vein, enjoyment might be described as the feeling of excitement experienced when taking up a new, puzzling and challenging task that arouses curiosity (Pekrun et al., 2007, 13-36) and generates interest (Ainley and Hidi 2014, 205-220). Further, the *motivational* component of enjoyment signifies learners' willingness to sustain that positive experience by motivating them, both internally and externally, to take up future FL challenges (Dewaele et al. 2014, 241; Villavicencio and Bernardo 2012, 330). Moreover, FLE prompts a learner to go through the foreign language experience by fully and actively participating in a given task. As such, it may operate as both an internal and external motivator to learn and acquire new foreign language skills, to expand experience, and to strengthen learners' awareness of the language input. The two remaining components of enjoyment, *physiological* and *expressive*, embrace the bodily reaction to this positive emotional experience.

Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) can be conceptualised as “a complex emotion, capturing interacting dimensions of challenge and perceived ability that reflect human drive for success in the face of difficult tasks” (Dewaele and MacIntyre 2016, 216). FLE can be further described as a psychologically positive activating state which is believed to propel the FL learner into action and strengthen the motivational processes.

The fundamental role of FLE has been grounded on Barbara Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory of positive emotions (2001), the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 2014), as well as the Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions (Pekrun and Perry 2014). The mechanisms behind these theories work together to improve academic achievement. It is reasonable to believe that FLE operates in a similar way in the FL environment, provided that we perceive it as a prime example of positive, activating achievement emotion and inextricably intertwined with the experience of flow. To date, it has been found that FLE is positively

correlated with high academic achievement and proficiency in a foreign language (Dewaele and MacIntyre 2014; Hagenauer & Hascher 2014; Oxford 2015; Ranelucci, et al. 2015; Dewaele et al. 2017; Dewaele and Alfawzan 2018; Dewaele et al. 2019). Further, FLE encourages a positive attitude to learning a FL (Goetz, et al. 2008; Villavicencio, & Bernardo 2012; Hagenauer & Hascher 2014). It coincides with a stronger and more enduring effort in the processes of learning and prevents boredom in the FL classroom. Eventually, FLE may play a protective function against the deleterious effects of negative emotions (MacIntyre, 2016). This idea might be partially explained by Stephan Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982). In line with this theory, every language learner is equipped with an Affective Filter that may either decrease or increase the intake of comprehensible language input (9). Krashen (1982) suggested that certain negative emotional variables can hinder the comprehensible input from reaching the part of the brain responsible for acquiring a language (9-10). When a learner experiences negative emotions, the affective filter is 'up' and the comprehension of language input is prevented, as a consequence, it impedes language acquisition. A high level of stress and anxiety may create such a situation. On the contrary, positive emotions appear to be necessary for second language acquisition to take place. When students experience positive emotions, such as foreign language enjoyment, their affective filter is 'low' and they are psychologically open to the intake of the language input (9-10).

Foreign language enjoyment is believed to be positively mediated by social interactions; first of all, with a friendly and supportive group of peers; second, with a teacher who is positive, supportive, motivating and who offers a variety of challenging, novel and interesting FL activities (Dewaele and MacIntyre 2014, 264; Dewaele and MacIntyre 2016, 227; Pavelescu and Petric 2018, 73-101). In this vein, two main dimensions of foreign language enjoyment can be distinguished: FLE related to teacher specific variables (e.g. teaching practices, his/her creativity) and FLE connected with the atmosphere in the FL classroom (peer interaction, positive atmosphere, positive engagement) (Li et al. 2018, 183-196). Nonetheless, there is one more dimension of FLE which has not yet been mentioned. That is the private dimension of FLE coalescing around personal progress and self-development. To be more specific, it is the sense of pride and satisfaction derived from dealing with a challenging task and completing it successfully (Li et al. 2018, 183-196). More often than not, FL students experience all aforementioned types of FLE. Thus, in line with Barbara Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build theory (2001), it can be stated that foreign language enjoyment, as an example of positive activating emotion, is a vehicle for an individual's growth as well as for the development of rich and satisfying social connections.

## **2. The Present Study**

The aim of the present study was to examine foreign language enjoyment (FLE) among English Philology students in southwestern Poland, as well as to investigate sources of this particular emotion. There were three main research questions this study aimed to answer:

RQ1: What is the level of FLE among English Philology students in Poland? What is the effect of independent variables (e.g. gender and proficiency) on FLE?

RQ2: What sources of FLE are indicated most frequently by the participants of the study? (quantitative)

RQ3: What do the participants of the study derive joy from while learning English as a FL? (qualitative question)

## **3. Instrument**

The main instrument of the study was a paper-based questionnaire. Despite the participants' good command of English, all the questions were formulated in the participants' mother tongue, that is, in the Polish language. The questionnaire comprised questions of both a quantitative and qualitative nature. In the first part, the students were asked to answer questions regarding their sociodemographic information (e.g. gender, age, year of study, etc.) and proficiency.

The subsequent part of the questionnaire included the Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (developed by Dewaele and McIntyre in 2014). The operational definition of FLE was reflected by the number of points achieved on the FLE Scale. In total, the scale included 21 questions, all phrased positively. Foreign Language Enjoyment was measured through such items as "I enjoy learning a FL," "I have fun while learning a FL," "I feel proud of my accomplishments in the FL." The reliability of the scale in terms of Cronbach alpha was equal at .88.

The following part of the questionnaire aimed to assess the sources of FLE. The participants were provided with a list of nine sources of enjoyment (e.g. interesting lesson topic, having the possibility of using language authentically, the teacher's sense of humor, a positive and enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom, demanding/challenging activities, playing games, role-plays, fun activities, a supportive teacher and supportive peers) and they were asked to point to at least 1 and at most 3 aspects which, in their opinion, had the greatest impact on their FLE experience. The participants had the opportunity to suggest their own source of enjoyment which was not listed in the questionnaire.

The final part of the questionnaire included a question of a purely qualitative nature. The students were asked to describe one specific moment in their foreign language learning experience which they derived joy from and describe that experience in as much detail as possible.

#### **4. Analyses**

Data collection lasted two weeks. The data was computed by means of the statistical program STATISTICA, with the main operations being descriptive statistics (Means and *SD*), and inferential: a T-test for independent samples (between group comparison) and one-way ANOVAs. The T-test was used to compare the performance of two groups (e.g. males/ females or students' taking part in the Positive Psychology Course versus those not taking part in the course) on a scale measuring their Foreign Language Enjoyment. One-way ANOVA was used to compare the performance of more than two groups (age, proficiency).

#### **5. Participants**

There were 40 participants in the study. The majority of the participants were female learners ( $N=31$ ). The age range was from 19 to 23 with the  $M=20.5$ .

In order to determine their level of proficiency, the participants of the study were asked about their overall results in the Practical English Exam (aimed to measure the four language skills of reading, listening, speaking, and writing), which they had taken at the end of the previous semester. It enabled the researcher to divide the participants into three categories: intermediate, upper-intermediate and proficient students. In the present study, there were 5 intermediate students, 31 upper-intermediate students and 4 proficient ones.

Additionally, 15 out of 40 respondents (group 1) attended an elective course called *Positive Psychology of Learning and Academic Achievement* organized at the University of Opole, Poland. The course embraced key theories regarding positive psychology, motivational needs, emotional intelligence, and flow. During the course, students had the chance to discuss different affective factors that may contribute to either high or low academic achievement. These participants filled out the questionnaire in the class (at the end of the semester). The remaining group of students (group 2) did not participate in that course. The questionnaire was distributed to them during regular classes organized at the university. All of the participants took part in the study voluntarily. It is worth mentioning that this seemingly biased group of learners



(group 1) was not chosen accidentally by the researcher. It was done on purpose. The author of the present study was interested in whether those students who were particularly interested in positive psychology and the role of affective factors in SLA differed in terms of their FLE than those who were not interested.

## 6. Results

Not surprisingly, the results of the present study revealed that English Philology students experienced a relatively high level of FLE ( $M=3.98$ ,  $SD=0.36$ ). Male participants had a slightly higher level of FLE ( $M=4.05$ ) than their female peers ( $M=3.96$ ). Nevertheless, the T-test did not reveal any statistically significant gender differences in terms of FLE. Table 1 below shows these results in greater detail.

**Table 1**

Mean SD for FLE for all the participants and for males and females separately

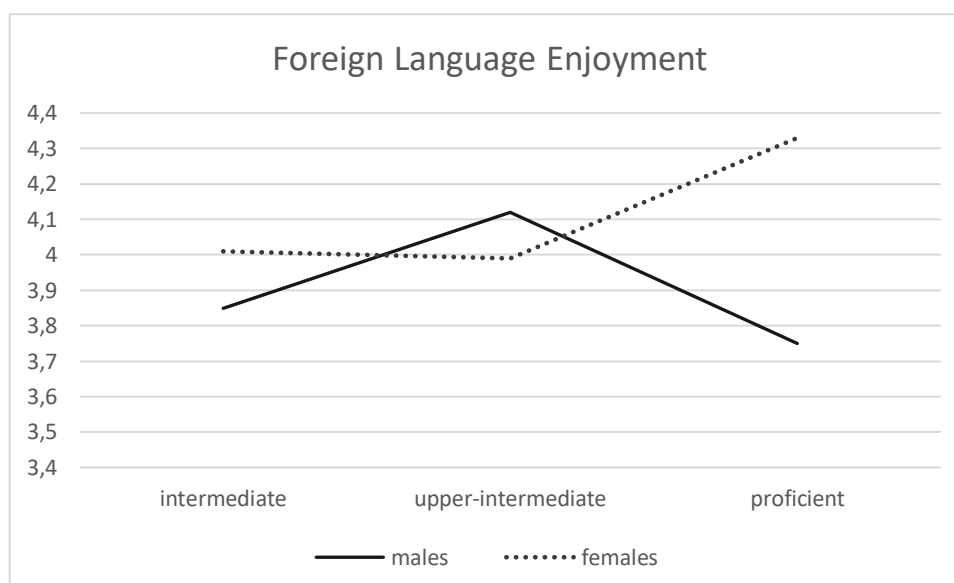
Variable	All (N=40)		Females (N=31)		Males (N=9)		T
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
<b>FLE</b>	3.98	0.36	3.96	0.36	4.05	0.36	<b>0.613*</b>

\*statistically not significant

The results revealed that the oldest (23 years old) group of participants had a higher level of FLE than all the remaining groups. The results were as follows: 19-year-old students:  $M= 4.12$ , 20-year-olds:  $M=3.82$ , 21-year-olds:  $M=4.01$ , 22-year-olds:  $M=3.95$ , and finally, the 23-year-olds:  $M=4.48$ . Overall, however, the age of the participants did not have a statistically significant effect on FLE as revealed by one-way ANOVA:  $F(6, 34)=1.6912$ ,  $p=.15327$ .

The analysis of the effect of proficiency on the level of FLE produced interesting results. Figure 1 below shows a visual representation of the data. The most proficient (female) learners had the highest level of FLE. These results dovetail with those of previous studies and confirm that FLE increases with learners' proficiency (Dewaele & McIntyre 2014), yet only to some extent. In the case of male participants the tendency was quite the opposite. The highest level of FLE was experienced by upper-intermediate learners. In order to verify whether the differences between the proficiency groups were statistically significant, an inferential statistical

procedure was carried out. The results of this one-way ANOVA revealed that there were not statistically significant differences, neither for the female participants:  $F(2, 29)=1.8212$ ,  $p=.17986$ , nor for the male participants  $F(2,6)=.36054$ ,  $p=.71144$ . This means that the results of this study cannot be generalized on a greater scale.



**Fig 1** The relationship between FLE and proficiency, for males and females separately.

Further, the results of the present study revealed no statistically significant difference between the level of FLE experienced by students who participated in the Positive Psychology course and those who did not (as shown by the T-test results). Both groups had nearly the same level of FLE (see Table 2 below).

**Table 2**

Mean SD for FLE for the two groups: students who attended the Positive Psychology (PP) course and those who did not

Variable	Attended the PP course (N=15)		Did not attend the PP course (N=25)		T
	M	SD	M	SD	
<b>FLE</b>	3.99	0.36	3.96	0.37	<b>0.3208*</b>

\*statistically not significant

## *Foreign Language Enjoyment Among English Philology Students*

As the aforementioned analysis did not reveal any statistically significant effect of independent variables (gender, proficiency, age, course) on FLE, it is now time to focus on the analysis of the sources of FLE.

The participants were asked to point to three factors that made English learning most enjoyable for them. The vast majority of respondents (33 out of 40) pointed to a positive/enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom. The second most frequently indicated source of FLE was seen to be the teacher, and more precisely his/her support (31 responses). An interesting lesson topic was the third most frequently indicated source of FLE. The participants in the present study pointed the least frequently to such variables as: a teacher's high emotional skills, challenging FL activities, and supportive teachers. Table 3 below shows the results for all the sources of FLE.

**Table 3**

Sources of FLE and number of responses

	<b>Source</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>
<b>1</b>	Teacher's high emotional skills	13 (40)
<b>2</b>	<b>Interesting lesson topic</b>	<b>30 (40)</b>
<b>3</b>	Possibility for authentic use of language	27 (40)
<b>4</b>	Teacher's sense of humor	16 (40)
<b>5</b>	<b>Positive/enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom</b>	<b>33 (40)</b>
<b>6</b>	Demanding/challenging activities	12 (40)
<b>7</b>	Games, role-plays, fun activities	15 (40)
<b>8</b>	<b>Supportive teacher</b>	<b>31 (40)</b>
<b>9</b>	Supportive peers	14 (40)

Following the coding approach of Jean-Marc Dewaele and Peter McIntyre (2018), the emotion-related episodes were coded into three main categories: FLE-teacher, FLE-atmosphere, FLE-private. The results will be analyzed in reference to the aforementioned categories.

**Table 4**

The examples of FLE according to three categories and frequency of mentions by the participants (N=40)

	<b>Coding category</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Frequency of mentions</b>
<b>1</b>	<i>FLE-Teacher</i>	teaching strategies; constructive feedback; positive attitude; teacher's recognition, sense of humor  <b>teacher's qualities:</b> supportive, kind, creative, trustful, entertaining, friendly teacher, encouraging learners to broaden their knowledge on their own  <b>specific classroom activities:</b> games, role plays, charades, singing songs, telling stories, heated classroom discussions, native speaker visit, trips	<b>18 (40)</b>
<b>2</b>	<i>FLE-Atmosphere</i>	friendly and humane peers; strong relationships, integration; telling funny stories, nice atmosphere, integration, laughing at mistakes	<b>11 (40)</b>
<b>3</b>	<i>FLE-Private</i>	dealing with challenging tasks; participation in additional classes, possibility for authentic use of FL; <b>pride</b> in one's accomplishment, the sense of self-development, lack of negative emotions, lack of pressure, angry and surprised at the same time	<b>11 (40)</b>

The participants in the study pointed most frequently to teacher-related variables as their main source of enjoyment. There were a few characteristic features of a teacher that were mentioned several times, that is, a teacher who is supportive, kind, creative, trustful, entertaining, friendly, and one who encourages learners to broaden their knowledge on their own. The participants in the study emphasized that it is not only important what teachers do but also what they do not do. This was vividly described by one of the female participants who claimed that “the teacher

do[es] not make me feel guilty or bad because I answered incorrectly but instead he tries to give me some clues to correct myself.” Another participant described his experience in the following way: “I felt surprised and delighted at the same time that teachers can make classes so entertaining. The teacher was very kind, cheerful, everyone felt very comfortable at the classes. Also, I didn't feel any pressure of committing a mistake, I felt very spontaneous.”

The students also enumerated a variety of different activities and teaching strategies adopted by their educators which gave them the possibility of competing, discussing, having fun, and developing their language skills in a non-standard way. They strongly emphasized the importance of having fun and laughing while learning a FL.

There was an equal number of responses pointing to the private and social (atmosphere) dimension of FLE. Among the private dimensions of FLE, the students frequently mentioned dealing with a challenging activity as the main source of enjoyment, the urge for personal development, and the pride felt in giving an excellent performance in front of the class. Interestingly, some of the participants mentioned that enjoyment is often accompanied by a number of different emotions, both of a positive and negative nature (e.g. pride, excitement, appreciation, but also fear and anxiety). Table 4 above shows these results in greater detail.

## **7. Discussion and Implications**

There were three main research questions the study sought to answer. The results will be discussed in relation to these questions respectively.

Regarding the first research question, this study has been unable to demonstrate that age and gender have a significant effect on FLE. A possible explanation for this might be the small sample size and the fact that the group of participants consisted of students with a relatively high level of FL proficiency (all participants were students of English philology). In the case of female participants, the results of this study match those observed in previous studies, namely, that FLE increases with students' proficiency (Dewaele and McIntyre 2014; Dewaele et al. 2016; Dewaele and Mateb 2018).

In reference to the second research question (quantitative question) it has been found that learners find the greatest joy while learning English as a FL when there is a positive atmosphere in the classroom, the teacher is supportive and they find the topic/content of the lesson interesting. The qualitative section of the questionnaire, in turn, investigated the sources of FLE in greater detail. The participants of the study pointed the most frequently to teacher-related variables as the main source of enjoyment in the foreign language classroom. Thus, as much as it is fair to say that learners'

FLE is positively mediated by their relationship with the teacher, it is also fair to believe that the FL teacher might determine learners' FLE to a large extent.

Although the study did not find any major differences (statistically significant) between the group of students attending the course on Positive Psychology and those who did not, it is fair to believe that some key lessons from positive psychology should be taken into account by teachers in order to make learners successful in any subject (Fredrickson 2001; Fredrickson 2013; MacIntyre 2016). To be more specific, drawing on Martin Seligman's PERMA model of well-being, it is reasonable to believe that teachers should foster positive emotions in the FL classroom (optimism, enjoyment, amusement, etc). Second, they should attract the attention of their students and engage them fully in FL activities. Further, the teacher might benefit from focusing on accomplishments, appreciating learners' efforts and emphasizing that the key quality the learners need in order to succeed in FL teaching might be perseverance. Eventually, FL teachers may find that strengthening social relationships in the FL classroom can be beneficial since it develops close bonds among peers. In such a supportive group, the students might communicate more easily in a FL without feeling anxious, ashamed, or afraid of making mistakes or being laughed at. The teacher, in turn, will also have to deal with some inevitable conflicts in the classroom.

The author of the present paper believes that the emphasis should not be placed on implementation changes in EFL methodology, but rather on focusing on teachers' emotionals in the FL classroom, as they play a pivotal role not only in the teaching but also in the learning process. This is crucial due to the fact that the way both students and their educators respond to emotions may affect the learner's education in ways that may later translate into their social, emotional, and eventually, cognitive development. It is worth saying that the role of the teacher in the FL classroom is not only limited to transacting knowledge of the linguistic system but also to managing the emotional tenor of the foreign language classroom, creating a positive atmosphere, fostering social bonds and, ideally, teaching with joy, passion, and optimism (Dewaele et al. 2018).

A concluding remark for the present study might be the quote of a 20-year-old female student who claimed as follows: "I perceive my teacher as my friend (...) who let me feel like I can trust them, so making mistakes is not that scary; (...) It is much better than sitting and staring blankly into the board, or sitting quietly while being scared of making any mistakes (...). It is good to be educated, not belittled."

This is certainly a more positive model of teaching a FL than most of us have encountered at schools, yet, as indicated above, it is not an impossible model.

## **8. Conclusion**

Foreign Language Enjoyment is undeniably a complex and multidimensional emotion. It constitutes a new, promising, yet unexplored area of research in the field of SLA. The departure from the prime objectives of psychology (e.g. to reduce anxiety, overcome fears, etc.) towards a more positive direction has been needed and long-awaited, yet it might be not enough in order to understand the long and demanding process of foreign language learning. Given that enjoyment is often accompanied by a number of different emotions, both of a positive and negative nature (e.g. pride, excitement, appreciation, but also fear and anxiety), there is a call for a more dynamic approach in studying emotions in SLA. That is, foreign language enjoyment should be studied in connection with negative emotions in order to investigate whether and to what extent these emotions mutually shape one another. Only such an approach will allow us to look at the process of second language learning from a new perspective, and eventually it may help us to understand why some students succeed in language learning and for others this process is still perceived as a long, demanding, and nerve-wracking experience.

## **9. Limitations**

The generalizability of these results might be subject to certain limitations. The reader should bear in mind that the study is based on the responses of learners who filled out this questionnaire voluntarily. This, in turn, in the opinions of some researchers, may have led to biased results. Another limitation of the study was that female learners constituted a vast majority of the participants. Further, the research sample was a relatively small one. An examination of a wider group of students could have had a more positive impact on this study's reliability and the research results could have been generalized on a greater scale. Further, qualitative data were analyzed only by the author of the present study. To avoid biased results, an independent researcher with the same coding categories would be highly recommended. For a more complete understanding of the nature of enjoyment in the FL environment data triangulation is strongly recommended. That is, to investigate this particular emotion from the perspective of students and teachers simultaneously. This should, ideally, incorporate both a quantitative and a qualitative approach (a mixed method-approach).

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