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INVESTIGATING FOREIGN LANGUAGE ENJOYMENT AMONG NON-ENGLISH MAJOR MALAYSIAN UNDERGRADUATES

Adi Afzal Ahmad^{1*}

¹ Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Perlis, Malaysia

Email: adi_afzal@uitm.edu.my

* Corresponding Author

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Abstract:

Emotion has been shown to play a significant role in language learning. For decades, researchers have been carrying out studies on negative emotion such as foreign language anxiety, its influence on second language learners and the learning process. Not many studies have been conducted on positive emotion such as foreign language enjoyment. This study, therefore, aims to fill in the gap by exploring the role of foreign language enjoyment among non-English major Malaysian undergraduates. The main objective of the study was to identify the level of foreign language enjoyment among the undergraduates. Subsequent objectives included examining the role of gender and identifying the factors that contribute to foreign language enjoyment. A total of 338 university students took part in the study by completing the research questionnaire. Data analysis indicated a high level of foreign language enjoyment among the students. In addition, gender was found to have a significant influence on the level of foreign language enjoyment. Finally, some of the key contributing factors to foreign language enjoyment, as indicated by the students, included perceived benefits, supportive peers and instructors, and positive classroom atmosphere.

Keywords:

Education, Foreign Language Enjoyment, Higher Education, Positive Psychology, Second Language Acquisition

Introduction

Mastering another language is not an easy thing to do for many second language learners. Many factors are known to influence the second language learners' attitude, motivation, and engagement in their second language learning. In addition, affect or emotion in second

language acquisition has also been known to play a significant role in influencing the learner's language learning experience (Kaplan, 2022). To date, many studies have investigated negative emotion such as foreign language anxiety since its presence can have a detrimental effect on the language learner's second language learning and achievement (Ahmad & Awang Hashim, 2023, Horwitz et al., 1986). Some researchers feel that investigating the negative emotion only is not enough. These researchers recommend that the role of positive emotion such as foreign language enjoyment to be investigated as well (Barrios & Acosta-Manzano, 2022; DeWaele and MacIntyre, 2016). In the context of learning English as a second language in Malaysia, studies on foreign language anxiety abound. Studies on foreign language enjoyment, however, are still lacking. This paper, therefore, aims to fill in the gap by investigating foreign language enjoyment among undergraduates at a Malaysian university.

Literature Review

The Role of Emotion in L2 Learning

Emotion can be defined as a short-term feeling that can trigger some kind of reaction or response to help someone face or tackle important events in their life (Reeve, 2018). Studies have shown that emotion can influence language learners' language learning experience (Shao et al., 2020). For example, students who experience enjoyment in class tend to have a more positive outlook of their language learning endeavour (Wijaya, 2024). On the other hand, students who experience anxiety tend to shy away from participating in classroom activities. Emotion also has been shown to act as an 'enhancer' of the students' learning experience (Méndez López and Peña Aguilar, 2013). Students who are motivated to learn will become even *more* motivated to learn when they experience enjoyment in the language classroom. Meanwhile, students who are not motivated to learn, will feel even more demotivated in the classroom when they experience boredom or anxiety.

Foreign Language Anxiety

In second language acquisition (SLA) field, researchers have been focusing a lot on the negative aspect of emotion. This could be seen from the proliferating studies focusing on foreign language anxiety (FLA), its impact on L2 learners and the L2 learning process. Since Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) published their seminal paper on FLA, research on FLA has been flourishing. In fact, even until now, a few decades later, research on FLA is still being conducted. Many things have been discovered about FLA; for example, researchers know the factors that cause FLA, the positive and negative effects of FLA on the learners, the relationship between FLA with other language learner variables, coping strategies, and so on. While there is still a need for FLA to be investigated, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014, 2016) feel that it is timely that the role of positive emotion such as foreign language enjoyment (FLE) to be investigated as well.

Foreign Language Enjoyment

FLE refers to the positive emotional state and pleasure that individuals experience while learning and using a second language. It is a construct situated within the field of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It is also linked to improved language learning outcomes and performance. FLE encompasses feelings of engagement, satisfaction, and enjoyment that learners experience during language learning activities.

It was hypothesised that when learners enjoy the language learning process, they are more motivated, less anxious, and more likely to continue learning and using the language. FLE is considered a crucial factor in language acquisition, contributing to learners' overall language proficiency and their willingness to engage in language learning activities. It is a key component of positive emotion and attitude that can enhance the language learning experience.

Research on FLE

In their pioneering research on FLE, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) found that the participants in their studies had high level of FLE. Findings by other researchers such as Aydin and Akkas (2023) and Özer and Altay (2021) involving Turkish students also returned similar results in which the respondents reported high level of FLE. Other studies, however, reported the opposite. Findings by Li (2020) and Su (2022) involving Chinese students reported low to moderate level of FLE. These discrepancies could be due to the participants' language level and their language background. For example, low intermediate students tend to report low level FLE (Li, 2020) compared to more advance students (Özer & Altay, 2021). In addition, students who are bilingual and trilingual tend to report higher level FLE (Proietti Ergun & Ersoz Demirdag, 2022) compared to the monolingual.

In terms of the significance of gender, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), Dewaele et al. (2016), and Huang and Jiang (2022) found that gender has a significant role in influencing the level of FLE among the students. In their studies, female students reported significantly higher level of FLE compared to male students. Meanwhile, studies by Aydin and Akkas (2023), Özer and Altay (2021), Su (2022), and Mierzwa (2018) found the opposite to be true. In their studies, gender does not play a significant role in determining the level of FLE among the students. These discrepancies could be due to sociocultural factors (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018), regional or educational differences among the participants (Dewaele et al., 2016).

Several variables are hypothesized to influence FLE. Key elements such as learners' personality traits, motivation, and previous language learning experiences significantly impact their enjoyment level (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018). Environmental factors like engaging lessons, supportive classmates, and positive teacher attitudes also play critical roles in fostering FLE (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Apart from that, studies also found that the students' grade point average (GPA) (Özer & Altay, 2021) and a sense of achievement (Chin et al., 2022) were also factors that contribute to FLE.

Research Gap

Despite the growing interest in positive psychology in second language learning, research on enjoyment is still in its infancy (Yeşilçınar & Erdemir, 2023). This could also explain as to why there is a lack of data on FLE research involving Malaysian second language learners. In Malaysia, English is a compulsory subject and is taught from the kindergarten level all the way up to the tertiary level under the Malaysian education system. Students do not have a choice as to whether they want to follow an English class willingly or not since it is compulsory and they must take it. And since Malaysia was once colonised by the British, there are some negative sentiments towards the teaching and learning of English language among certain parties. This unique historical landscape amidst Malaysian's own unique multicultural and multilingual backdrop presents distinct challenges and opportunities for the English as a second language (ESL) learners.

Without the understanding of the extent to which students enjoy learning another language, both the educators and policymakers cannot accurately assess or improve the language learning curriculum. This oversight can lead to incomplete evaluations of educational practices and missed opportunities to foster a more engaging, supportive, and successful language learning experience.

Apart from the need to conduct research on FLE involving Malaysian students, there is also a need to examine the role of gender on the level of FLE among the students. This is due to the fact that there is an inconsistency in findings regarding its significance on FLE. As evident in studies on behavioural and psychological constructs, demographic variable such as gender can have a significant impact on such constructs. Therefore, the role of gender in FLE research warrants further investigation.

Finally, there is also a need to know the factors that affect or impact FLE particularly among Malaysian second language learners. This is because, factors that affect Malaysian students' FLE could be different due to the different culture and background of the learners. Conversely, the factors might be the same as the ones found in other studies in which this would indicate a commonality of experience across cultures and educational background. Research on FLE involving this demographic is very much needed as it can enrich our understanding of the construct under investigation.

Research Questions

This study, thus, seeks to find the answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the level of FLE among Malaysian ESL undergraduates?
2. Does the level of FLE among Malaysian ESL undergraduates differ significantly according to gender?
3. What are the factors that contribute to Malaysian ESL undergraduates' FLE in the L2 classroom?

This research is expected to make several significant contributions. Theoretically, it will extend the literature on FLE by providing empirical data from a Southeast Asian context. Methodologically, it will offer insights into effective ways of measuring and analysing FLE via a quantitative approach. In addition, it will offer insights on the factors that contribute to FLE via a qualitative approach. In terms of practicality, the findings will inform educators and policymakers on how to create more enjoyable and supportive language learning experience, ultimately enhancing students' motivation and success in second language acquisition.

Research Methodology

This study was predominantly quantitative in nature. As such, the primary data collection instrument was in the form of a questionnaire. Nevertheless, an element of qualitative research was also present in its questionnaire design.

The population of this study was 1565 second semester undergraduates at a Malaysian university campus situated in the northern peninsular of Malaysia. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970) and Sekaran (2003), the appropriate sample size for a population of 1600 is 310 respondents. A total of 350 questionnaires were prepared and distributed to 13 groups of second semester students based on the cluster sampling method. According to Salkind (2021), cluster

sampling is a form of probability sampling method. As such, the quantitative results derived from the 13 groups could be generalised to reflect the entire population of this study.

The questionnaire has three parts: Part A (Demographic), Part B (the FLE scale), and Part C (an open-ended question). Part A is the demographic section in which information such as gender, age, and respondents' perception of their level of mastery of English language is collected. Part B consists of the FLE scale. There are altogether eight items in the scale. The items were adapted from Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014). The items are statements of the respondents' perception of the L2 class and their own reflection of the L2 class. Sample items include: "The teacher is a positive person" and "I enjoy English class". The use of questionnaire is an effective means of data collection since it can gather information from many participants efficiently (Ahmad Feisal et al., 2025).

Students were required to read each item and rate their level of agreement for each item. In Dewaele and MacIntyre's (2014) study, the researchers used a 5-point Likert scales with the following anchors: 1=absolutely disagree, 2=disagree, 3=undecided, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree. Unlike their study, however, this study utilises a scale of 1 (very low) to 6 (very high) for the respondents to rate their level of agreement for each item in the scale. This change was carried out to make it easier for the respondents to indicate their level of agreement to the sentences in the scale. Finally, Part C consists of an open-ended question which asks the respondents to name one factor that contributes to their level of enjoyment in the L2 classroom. This open-ended question is optional.

The questionnaires were distributed to the students with the help of the lecturers who were teaching the selected 13 groups. A briefing for the lecturers were conducted via Google Meet and a printed instruction was given to the lecturers to help them with the administration of the questionnaires to the students. Due to the differences in the timetables, the lecturers were given two weeks to distribute and collect the questionnaires from their students. Finally, all questionnaires were returned to the researcher for data screening and analysis procedures.

Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28 was used to analyse the quantitative data. To identify the level of FLE among the respondents, the mean score for the construct was calculated. To determine whether the level of FLE differs significantly according to gender, a *t*-test for independent samples was carried out. Finally, to uncover the contributing factors to FLE among the respondents, a thematic analysis based on the *KJ Method* (Scupin, 1997) was utilised.

Results and Discussion

This study investigated matters related to FLE among second semester undergraduates as a university campus in the northern area of Peninsular Malaysia. In total, 338 second semester students took part in this study. 149 (44%) were male and 189 (56%) were female students. All of them were Malay students and their ages ranged from 18 to 21 years old. They were non-English major and came from various faculties. They were enrolled in an English proficiency course when the data was collected. When asked to rate their mastery of English language, 5 (1.5%) and 13 (3.8%) rated themselves as '*very poor*' and '*poor*' respectively, 202 (59.8%) rated themselves as '*average*', and 113 (33.4%) and 5 (1.5%) rated themselves as '*good*' and '*very good*' respectively.

As for the questionnaire, reliability analysis on the FLE scale indicated that it had a Cronbach Alpha of .83. This suggests that the scale was a reliable instrument to collect data on FLE for the study. All students rated the eight FLE items in the questionnaire. Only 55 out of 338 respondents answered the open-ended question in the third part of the questionnaire. Results for the four research questions are presented below.

RQ1: What Is the Level of FLE Among Malaysian ESL Undergraduates?

To answer the first research question, the mean score was calculated. The following cut-offs were used to assign meaning to the level of FLE: 1.00-2.99 = *Low*, 3.00-4.99 = *Moderate*, 5.00-6.00 = *High*. Table 1 below shows the mean score and standard deviation for all the items in the FLE scale.

Table 1: Mean Score and Standard Deviation for All FLE Items

Item	Mean	SD
1. I don't get bored in English class.	4.79	.987
2. I enjoy English class.	4.83	.865
3. I've learnt many interesting things in English class.	4.95	.808
4. I feel proud of my accomplishments in English class.	4.49	.928
5. Making errors is part of the language learning process.	5.34	.719
6. My classmates are nice.	5.19	1.00
7. The English teacher is a positive person.	5.59	.629
8. The atmosphere in English class is positive.	5.38	7.51
Total	5.0710	.571

In Table 1, the mean score for the FLE construct is 5.07 (SD=.57). This indicates that the respondents' overall level of FLE is high. Among the items that received high mean score are Item 7: 'The English teacher is a positive person', Item 8: 'The atmosphere in English class is positive', and Item 5: 'Making errors is part of the language learning process'. The two items that received the lowest mean score (while still belonging in the high category) are Item 4: 'I feel proud of my accomplishments in English class', and Item 1: 'I don't get bored in English class'.

RQ2: Does The Level of FLE Among Malaysian ESL Undergraduates Differ Significantly According to Gender?

To answer the second research question, a *t*-test for independent samples was conducted. The results are shown below:

Table 2: Group Statistics

			Std.		Error
Gender N			Mean	Std. Deviation	
FLE	Male	149	5.1493	.58408	.04785
	Female	189	5.0093	.55476	.04035

In Table 2, the mean score for male respondents (M=5.14, SD=.58) is higher than the female respondents (M=5.00, SD=.55). This suggests that male respondents enjoy the L2 class more than the female respondents. However, further analysis is needed to see whether this difference between the two genders is significant or not. The output of the analysis is given below.

Table 3: Independent Samples *t*-test

Independent Samples Test									
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of		Means	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. Mean (2 tailed) Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper	
FLE	Equal variances assumed	.540	.463	2.251	336	.025	.06221	.01769	
						.1400			.26244
					7				
	Equal variances not assumed			2.238	309.955	.026	.06259	.01691	
						.1400			.26323
					7				

The independent samples *t*-test analysis shows that male students ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 0.58$) scored significantly higher than female students ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 0.55$) on WTC, $t(336) = 2.25$, $p = .025$, $d = 0.26$. In other words, the level of FLE among the male and female respondents differ significantly according to gender.

RQ3: What Are the Factors That Contribute to Malaysian ESL Undergraduates' FLE In the L2 Classroom?

To answer the fourth research question, a thematic analysis using the KJ method (Scupin, 1997) was carried out. The respondents' answers to the open-ended question in Part C of the questionnaire was analysed and then grouped based on their similarities. A theme was assigned to each group of responses. Table 4 shows the themes, number of similar responses, and percentages that surfaced from the respondents' answers.

Table 6: Factors That Contribute to FLE

	Themes	No.	%
1	Perceived benefits	18	32.7
2	Supportive friends	14	25.5
3	Supportive teacher	11	20
4	Positive classroom environment	8	14.5
5	Activities	3	5.5
6	Perceived difficulty	1	1.8
	Total	55	100

As shown in Table 4, the number one contributing factor to FLE in ESL class according to the respondents is the perceived benefits derived from attending the language class. Some of the responses given were "*I get to learn new things*", "*I learn more about English language*", "*I can improve my English*", "*Can learn new vocabs*", and "*I get to improve my confidence in speaking*". All these responses indicated that the students were looking forward to gain something from attending the language class.

The second contributing factor to FLE in ESL class according to the respondents is having supportive friends. Among the responses given were *"My classmates are friendly"*, *"My friends are supportive"*, *"Positive friends"*, *"Helpful friends"*, and *"My friends are cooperative"*. These responses showed the importance and the influence of having good and supportive friends or peers in the language classroom.

The third contributing factor to FLE in the ESL class according to the respondents is having a supportive lecturer. Some of the responses given related to it were *"My lecturer is very supportive"*, *"My lecturer is friendly"*, *"Helpful lecturer"*, and *"Even though my teacher is very strict, he knows the right and fun way to increase his students' English level"*. All these responses highlighted the importance of having a lecturer who not only knew how to teach the subject but also knew when to be helpful and supportive to the students in the language classroom.

The fourth contributing factor to FLE in the ESL class according to the respondents is positive classroom environment. Some of the responses from the students regarding this aspect were *"Positive learning environment"*, *"Fun learning environment"*, *"Active and positive environment"*, and *"Cheerful environment"*. These responses showed the importance of having a positive classroom in stimulating FLE in the language classroom.

The fifth and sixth contributing factors to FLE in the ESL class according to the respondents are the activities and the perceived difficulty of the subject. Some of the responses are *"Games"*, *"No presentations!"*; and *"Subject is not hard like other subjects"*. While these two final contributing factors to FLE might be the least mentioned factors by the students, their existence should still be acknowledged as they have the potential to either increase or decrease the joy of learning English in the second language classroom.

Discussion

The first objective of this study was to identify the level of FLE among ESL Malaysian undergraduates. Findings indicated that Malaysian undergraduates have a high level of FLE. This suggests that, despite the challenges normally associated with learning a second language, the students still find the experience largely enjoyable and fulfilling. In fact, even though the English language syllabus at the higher education level is more 'academic' (and serious) in nature, it appears that the students still find enjoyment in their academic English classroom. This positive affective state is likely to contribute to better language learning outcomes and higher levels of academic achievement. This finding concurs with the findings by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) and by Özer & Altay (2021).

The second objective of this study was to determine whether there is a significant difference between the level of FLE among male and female respondents of this study. In other words, this study seeks to find out whether gender significantly influences the level of FLE among the respondents. Initial analysis indicated that male respondents have a higher FLE compared to female respondents. Subsequent analysis confirmed that the difference is significant. This shows that there is a significant difference between the level of FLE among the respondents based on their respective gender. This finding is both similar and different from Dewaele and MacIntyre's (2014) finding. In their study, while gender is a significant factor that determines the level of FLE, it was the female respondents who indicated higher FLE (compared to the male respondents) unlike in this study. The finding of this study also differs from Mierzwa

(2018) and Alenezi (2020) in which gender did not play a significant part in their studies. These mixed results regarding gender differences in language learning experiences suggest that males and females may have different emotional responses and coping mechanisms towards learning (Dewaele et al., 2019). Understanding these differences can help educators tailor their teaching approaches to better support both male and female students in their language learning journey.

The third objective of this study was to find out other possible contributors to FLE among ESL Malaysian undergraduates. The thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses identified several key factors contributing to FLE among Malaysian undergraduates. Perceived benefits, supportive friends, teachers, and the classroom environment, the activities, and perceived difficulty of the subject were highlighted as significant contributors to students' enjoyment. These findings are consistent with existing literature that emphasises the importance of motivation and having a supportive learning environment in fostering positive emotions in language learners (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Perceived benefits motivate the learners to follow the lessons. Supportive peers and teachers create a sense of community and belonging, further enhancing FLE. The positive classroom atmosphere, characterised by mutual respect and encouragement, also plays a critical role in reducing anxiety and promoting enjoyment. Finally having the perception that the language class is not hard and being partial to certain activities in the classroom further increase the students' FLE.

There are several implications for this study. First, even at higher education level where the course curriculum and syllabus are 'drier' than at the primary and secondary school levels, students can still find the lessons enjoyable if they are beneficial, meaningful and engaging to them. Lecturers do not need to turn into clowns to attract their attention. If the lecturer is positive and supportive, the peers are also positive and supportive, and the lessons are meaningful and engaging, the students would still derive enjoyment from following the class. By focusing on conducting engaging lessons, fostering supportive relationships among members of the class, and maintaining a positive and encouraging classroom environment, educators can significantly improve students' language learning experience.

Second, since gender is significant in determining the level of FLE among the students, it is very important for the lecturers to be aware of the differences between how the two genders perceived their language learning experience. Due to that, it is advisable for the lecturers to be more sensitive of the needs of both genders to provide the correct support to them.

Third, while having a positive teacher, supportive friends, and a conducive learning environment is important for language learning, it is knowing and experiencing the benefits of learning the language that is the most dominant factor that contributes to FLE. Educators, therefore, should take the opportunity to increase the students' FLE by explaining, at the beginning of the class, the skills, values, and benefits that the students would get from following the class.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has achieved its aim which is to investigate matters related to foreign language enjoyment (FLE) – a construct that is relatively new in the field of SLA – among Malaysian non-English major undergraduates. Findings indicated that the students enjoyed learning English. Nevertheless, male students were found to experience significantly higher FLE than female students. As for the factor that contributes to FLE among this demographic, it was found

that the most dominant factor was perceived benefits of language learning. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on positive emotion and FLE in language learning, particularly within the unique context of Malaysia.

Theoretically, this study reinforces the significance of positive psychology in second language acquisition, underscoring the importance of enjoyment alongside traditional focus areas such as anxiety and motivation. Methodologically, the use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches provided a comprehensive understanding of FLE. The independent samples t-test revealed critical gender differences, while thematic analysis offered nuanced insights into specific factors enhancing FLE. These combined methods present a robust framework for future research in this area.

Pedagogically, the study offers actionable insights for educators aiming to enhance FLE among students. By incorporating engaging and interactive lessons, fostering supportive peer relationships, and maintaining a positive classroom environment, educators can significantly improve students' enjoyment and, consequently, their language learning outcomes. These strategies can be integrated into curriculum design and teaching practices to create a more enjoyable and effective language learning experience.

Socially and environmentally, the findings highlight the role of a supportive learning community in fostering FLE. Positive interactions with peers and teachers, as well as a welcoming classroom atmosphere, are crucial for reducing anxiety and enhancing enjoyment. These elements contribute to a more inclusive and supportive educational environment, promoting greater student well-being and academic success. Addressing the social dynamics of the classroom can lead to broader educational benefits and improved student satisfaction.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences or observe changes in FLE over time. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, as students might overestimate or underestimate their level of FLE. The generalizability of the findings to other settings also might be limited.

Future studies might want to involve a larger sample size and participants from other universities. Future studies could also focus on uncovering more about teacher-factor and classroom teaching and learning activities that influence students' FLE. In addition, future research should consider longitudinal studies to track changes in FLE over time and explore causal relationships between enjoyment and language learning outcomes. Also, expanding the study to include diverse cultural contexts can enhance the generalizability of the findings. Further investigation into other demographic variables, such as socioeconomic status and educational background, could provide deeper insights into the factors influencing FLE. This continued research will contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of FLE, ultimately informing more effective and enjoyable language education practices.

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