



# The Role of Emotion in Language Education

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**Abstract.** There is a heated topic in the area of emotions in second language (SL) or foreign language (FL) contexts, especially since the emergence of positive psychology (PP). However, most studies have emphasized the effects of foreign language enjoyment (FLE) on language performance without treating in much detail its effects on various other aspects and the ‘positive forces’ of negative emotions. The present paper examines the focus of two key theories in the affective domain in the FL classroom, including broaden-and-build theory (BBT) and control-value theory (CVT), and their applicability to SLA, respectively. Additionally, this article explores the interaction between foreign language anxiety (FLA) and motivation and the effects of FLE and FLA on different aspects, including learners’ FL performance, motivation, cognition, and psychology. The paper emphasizes that both positive and negative emotions play a vital role in SL/FL education, and it is suggested that language instructors and learners be cautious when dealing with FLA and take a ‘balanced’ view of the anxiety level in the language learning process.

**Keywords:** Emotion · Foreign language enjoyment · Foreign language anxiety · Second/foreign language education

## 1 Introduction

A variety of emotions, including both negative and positive ones, might be generated throughout the language education process, and these emotions are critical for learners’ success in SL/FL learning [1]. Studies in the affective domain in SL/FL education were initially focused on negative emotions, such as anxiety and burnout. However, since the emergence of positive psychology (PP), there has been a growing research interest in a spectrum of emotions, especially positive ones [2]. By interpreting some key research, the paper examines the importance of emotions in SL/FL education.

By reviewing the broaden-and-build theory (BBT) and control-value theory (CVT), the first section of the paper evaluates the applicability of the two theories in SLA and points out the importance of both positive and negative emotions. In the following section, the effects of positive achievement emotions on language outcomes are discussed, with a focus on foreign language enjoyment (FLE). The next part explores the effects of negative achievement emotions (e.g., anxiety) on FL learning and explains the interaction between foreign language anxiety (FLA) and motivation and how this interaction affects language learning outcomes. Further, a more balanced way of considering negative and positive emotions is introduced in this part, based on which a conclusion is drawn.

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B. Majoul et al. (Eds.): ICLAH 2022, ASSEHR 726, pp. 1097–1103, 2023.

[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-97-8\\_139](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-97-8_139)

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Broaden-and-Build Theory (BBT) and Control-Value Theory (CVT)

As the theoretical base of Positive Psychology (PP), broaden-and-build Theory (BBT) emphasizes that there is a clear distinction between positive and negative emotions. Fredrickson outlines the argument that each negative emotion is often related to a certain action propensity, an urge toward a particular form of activity [3]. For instance, anger might provoke the impulse to smash something to pieces, frustration causes the urge to quit, and fear prompts self-protection behaviours. In contrast, positive emotions can broaden one's "momentary thought-action repertoire" and further builds one's physical, psychological, intellectual, and social resources [3].

Similarly, MacIntyre and Gregersen make a clear differentiation between positive and negative emotions and claim that they should not even be considered as two ends of the same spectrum [4]. They contend that certain attributes in a learner can have positive-broadening forces, which is consistent with Fredrickson's definition of positive emotions as actively supporting well-being rather than just being the absence of negative emotions [5].

In interpreting the BBT, Dewaele and MacIntyre further accentuate the significance of positive emotions, which they believe play a crucial role in alleviating the aftereffects of negative emotions and developing one's perseverance in the face of adversity [6]. It seems that there is a dichotomy between positive and negative emotions and that the importance of negative emotions is small enough to be ignored.

The control-value theory (CVT), which has newly been introduced from educational psychology into the study of emotion in SLA, focuses on the activation of achievement emotions, with control appraisals and value appraisals functioning as determinants of achievement emotions [7]. The term 'control appraisals' is defined as one's perception of his or her own capacity to exert control over actions that are taken to achieve certain goals [8]. 'Value appraisals' relate to the degree of significance attached to certain tasks [2]. It is hypothesized that low levels of control and value can constrain the levels of positive emotions and lead to the generation of negative emotions [8]. For instance, in the process of FL learning, anxiety might emerge when a student thinks s/he is not competent in the learning materials while getting high marks is highly valued.

As can be seen from the above explanations of the BBT and CVT, they both emphasize the vital role of positive emotions in people's health, well-being, and accomplishment [2]. However, the BBT addresses general human emotions, while the CVT is primarily concerned with the study of emotions in academic settings [2]. Apart from that, the two theories seem to hold divergent views in terms of the relationship between positive and negative emotions. The BBT makes a clear differentiation between positive and negative emotions, downplaying the role of the latter. By contrast, the CVT applied in SL/FL education emphasizes the coexistence of positive and negative emotions, which according to Dewaele and Li, has more applicability in SLA research [9]. This implies that positive and negative emotions are inextricably linked, both of which play a prominent role in language education.

Having discussed the two critical theories in the affective domain in the FL classroom and the important role of both positive and negative emotions as a whole, the following two parts focus specifically on two achievement emotions: enjoyment and anxiety.

## 2.2 Effects of Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) on FL Learning

In the Control-Value Theory (CVT), achievement emotions refer to feelings that are closely related to the results or actions that can lead to achievements [7]. Based on the CVT's taxonomy of achievement emotions, in which enjoyment is classified as an activating positive emotion, MacIntyre and Gregersen introduce the concept of foreign language enjoyment (FLE) [4, 7]. When the language learning experience is perceived as enjoyable by learners, they are more likely to build resources for better language learning and become more actively involved in the learning process [10].

Another significant aspect of FLE research is its relationship to 'intrinsic motivation', which refers to engaging in an activity for its inherent pleasure rather than seeking separate benefits [11]. Jin and Zhang, as MacIntyre and Vincze suggest, note that high L2 'intrinsic motivation' itself includes foreign language enjoyment [12, 13]. Thus, even in the absence of external regulations, instructed learners who have a high level of enjoyment of FL learning will spontaneously set language achievement goals and stick to them.

It is also argued that students with FLE are less likely to suffer the negative consequences of negative emotions [14]. Furthermore, foreign language enjoyment can prompt approach behaviours, which means that learners with higher levels of FLE engage more frequently with their counterparts and instructors in the FL classroom, strengthening interpersonal relationships, which in turn increases their enthusiasm for FL learning [15].

The emotion of enjoyment can also influence students' language proficiency by mediating their cognitive processes [16]. When learners enjoy FL learning, they are more inclined to utilize various learning techniques and broaden their frontiers of thought, which improves their learning effectiveness. This process is underpinned by the fundamental concepts in the broaden-and-build theory (BBT).

Previous research indicates that the construction of FLE in EFL classrooms can have an impact on language outcomes from various perspectives, including learners' FL performance, psychology, motivation, cognition, and behaviour [12, 17].

Further, Jin and Zhang's research reveals two dimensions of FLE, namely, the academic dimension and the social dimension [12]. The findings show that Enjoyment of Foreign Language Learning (academic dimension) has a direct positive impact on language achievement (i.e., test scores) and that Enjoyment of Student Support and Enjoyment of Teacher Support, both of which belong to the social dimension, can have an indirect effect on language performance via the Enjoyment of Foreign Language Learning.

However, it appears that existing L2 studies have placed too much emphasis on the effects of emotions on this particular aspect of language performance, paying less attention to other language outcomes (e.g., motivation, cognition, and well-being) [1]. Even when reviewing previous literature, it seems possible to fall into the trap of "overgeneralization".

For example, Wang et al., generalize the effects of FLE in Jin and Zhang's research to a simple improvement of academic performance, although it could be argued that instead of exclusively addressing the language performance resulting from the positive emotion of enjoyment, Jin and Zhang present a rather comprehensive interpretation of the impact of FLE from various angles [12, 18]. Specifically, the study demonstrates that the effects of FLE can be interpreted in terms of psychology, motivation, cognition, behaviour, etc.

To sum up, previous studies on positive achievement emotions in language education primarily focus on foreign language enjoyment and tend to discuss the effects of FLE on foreign language achievement, which to some extent, might lead to inadequate explorations of some other positive emotions (e.g., pride, hope) and the situations where a combination of different positive emotions are possible. Moreover, the effects of FLE on various other aspects might be understudied.

### 2.3 Effects of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) on FL Learning

As one of the most prominent emotions, anxiety was characterized by Rachman as a sense of unsettling suspense and has been extensively studied in the field of foreign language education [19]. Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is described as the concern and unpleasant emotional reaction caused by learning or using a foreign language [20].

This type of negative emotion is often assessed using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) established by Horwitz et al. [21]. Research suggests that although FLA can promote foreign language learning, it primarily plays a negative role [22–24].

For instance, in Liu's research, learners with high anxiety levels have poorer performance than their low-anxious counterparts [23]. High-anxious learners may speak in a shaky voice when asked to speak the target language and sometimes they may stutter or pause for long periods of time. This situation might result in their reluctance to interact in class, which further leads to a regression in their foreign language proficiency.

It is clear that the research emphasizes the negative effects of FLA and pays little attention to the positive aspects of negative emotions. By proposing the L2EPP (second language emotions and positive psychology) model, however, Shao et al. provide a more 'balanced' approach to the study of emotion in SLA [1]. They highlight that while negative emotions might harm students' overall language achievement, they also possess "positive forces" that are worth exploring.

Foreign language anxiety and some other negative emotions can be detrimental and might initially weaken learners' SL/FL learning outcomes. However, they might be transformed into motivating forces depending on how second language learners perceive these negative emotions during the language learning process [1]. As Kleinmann points out, FLA and FL performance may be positively correlated, negatively correlated, or not correlated at all [25]. Furthermore, Swain's study reveals that as a negative achievement emotion, embarrassment can enhance students' foreign language learning since students might be reluctant to embarrass themselves in front of their peers [26]. Additionally, some other negative emotions (e.g., anger) can even motivate students to learn the FL as a retaliatory practice against perceived biased treatment by the school headmaster [1].

In addition to the aforementioned two research aspects on foreign language anxiety (i.e., main effects of FLA and possible positive forces of FLA), there is research seeking the integration of FLA and motivation.

Motivation has been extensively studied and is acknowledged as a significant factor affecting foreign language learning [27]. The crux of some motivation theories is that motivation facilitates foreign language learning, maintains students' enthusiasm for language learning and it interacts with FLA, FL proficiency, self-assurance, and so forth [27]. It is believed that motivation and FLA both have a significant impact on language performance, and they are interconnected throughout the foreign language learning process [27]. However, research on the simultaneous occurrence of motivation and FLA in SL/FL education settings appears to be somewhat limited.

It is in this context that Liu and Huang conduct research in the EFL context in Chinese colleges, which is aimed to investigate the relationship between FLA and motivation of FL learning and examine the degree to which the interaction between these two factors influences language performance [27]. The findings of the study suggest that 1) FLA and the motivation to learn English are significantly inversely correlated, and 2) both FLA and motivation to learn English are strongly correlated with learners' English learning outcomes. Regarding the scales the study adopted, it is worth noting that foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCAS) and fear of being negatively evaluated (FLCAS1) are the two most dominant predictors of learners' language performance.

Therefore, to improve learners' FL learning outcomes, it is recommended that both language instructors and students take steps to relieve anxiety as this emotion has been found to be the most potent and negative predictor of learners' language proficiency. Yet a 'balanced' view of the level of anxiety should be introduced because, as discussed above, fear of being negatively judged may also turn out to be a positive predictor of language learning outcomes. When students are engaged in some activity, a certain amount of pressure on them could be beneficial for their performance. Thus, it is necessary that instructors and students act prudently when attempting to manage FLA.

### 3 Conclusion

By reviewing some key studies, the present paper highlights the important role of emotion in language education. It is a widely held view that building FLE in FL classrooms can have a positive impact on language learning outcomes. Nevertheless, positive and negative emotions should not be separated or polarized, both of which have powerful effects on SL/FL learning. The paper suggests that effective language teaching is more than simply using cutting-edge teaching techniques to deliver knowledge, it is also an endeavour that emphasizes the role of emotions where language instructors passionately impart the subject matter and interact with students in an enjoyable learning environment.

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