

Original Paper

Current Status and Prospect of Research on Foreign Language Learning Enjoyment

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Abstract

This study adopts the literature research method to analyze a total of 20 empirical studies on foreign language learning enjoyment from 2018 to 2023, and the results show that foreign language enjoyment positively predict foreign language learning effectiveness, and foreign language enjoyment plays a mediating role between second language grit and other factors such as communicative willingness. However, most of the previous studies focus on college students from urban areas, and the research methods are mainly quantitative, with few tracking studies and qualitative interviews. Thus, future research can pay more attention to lower grade students from rural areas, and increase observational or tracking studies to enhance the research reliability.

Keywords

second language acquisition, foreign language learning, enjoyment emotions, positive psychology

1. Introduction

For a long period, second language acquisition was regarded by scholars as a brain-driven and emotionless process (Dewaele et Li, 2020). It was not until MacIntyre and Gregersen first introduced positive psychology into the second language acquisition field and proposed that positive emotions can improve foreign language learners' ability to focus on new things during language learning process and help learners absorb more linguistic information (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012), that scholars began to realize that second language acquisition was a process influenced by emotions, and started a systematic exploration of what roles learners' emotions play in the process of second language acquisition (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

Positive psychology advocates the positive side of psychology, studies the positive mental qualities of human beings, and pays attention to the health, happiness, and harmonious development of human beings.

Inspired by the fundamental theory of positive psychology, broaden-and-build theory, scholars have categorized emotions into positive and negative emotions and explored the different influencing mechanisms of positive and negative emotions on foreign language learning (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Based on the fact that the research on foreign language learning emotions in China is still in the developmental stage, this study searches and sorts out 20 core studies focusing on foreign language enjoyment emotion published from 2018 to 2023, and analyzes the current status of the field in terms of its definitional connotation, theoretical foundation, research content, research background, and research methodology, and provides relevant topics for the future research on positive emotions in the field of second language acquisition.

2. Definition and Theoretical Basis of Foreign Language Enjoyment

2.1 Conceptual Connotations

Enjoyment is one of the basic emotions of human beings, including specific emotions such as happiness, pleasure, gladness, etc. It refers to the psychological state of pleasure, tranquility, peace, and fulfillment that people bring to their hearts when they feel the external things or the surrounding environment. Generally, enjoyment emotions have two major sources: internal state of mind and external environment. Scholars' definition of foreign language enjoyment mainly focuses on the emotional characteristics of the emotion. Foreign language enjoyment is one of the positive emotions experienced by most learners in the process of foreign language learning, which can effectively improve foreign language learners' classroom participation and foreign language learning efficiency (Saito et al., 2018).

Dewaele and MacIntyre defined foreign language enjoyment as "a broad range of positive emotions experienced by foreign language learners during the process of engaging in language learning activities", and they collected empirical data to compare foreign language enjoyment and anxiety, pointing out that foreign language enjoyment is a sense of achievement and reward through breakthroughs in challenging foreign language activities, which can contribute to personal well-being and self-development (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Teimouri defined foreign language enjoyment as "the positive emotions that language learners experience during the process of learning or using the target language, either in a specific pedagogical context or in an authentic, real-life situation (Teimouri, 2018)". Based on the control-value theory of academic emotion, Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia argued that enjoyment belonged to the category of activity emotion, which was a positive emotion with high arousal (Pekrun & Linnenbrink, 2012). Learners are likely to feel enjoyment when they perceive positive value in academic achievement activities and when they are learning to the best of their ability. Dewaele and MacIntyre pointed out that enjoyment not only occurred when people's needs are met, but also motivated them to continue to do something new or unexpected (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016). Jin and Zhang believed that enjoyment was the most important emotion for foreign language learners in second language acquisition field, and they thought enjoyment was a type of trait-like enjoyment perceived by foreign language

learners in a foreign language learning situation, and it was closely related to the academic situation (Jin & Zhang, 2018).

It can be concluded that scholars agree foreign language enjoyment is a positive feeling produced by learners in foreign language learning process that promotes the motivation of learning foreign language, and is highly situational in nature, and has a close relationship with the teacher and the learning environment. It's shown that foreign language enjoyment can significantly promote learners' foreign language learning effectiveness and enhance students' classroom experience, thus promoting foreign language learning efficiency (Li, 2022; Dong & Liu, 2022). In addition, foreign language enjoyment is positively related with learners' foreign language achievement. When learners' foreign language achievement improves, foreign language enjoyment will be improved accordingly, and the learners may have better performance in the subsequent foreign language learning process; on the contrary, if learners' foreign language achievement is lower than expected, foreign language enjoyment will be reduced, or even negative, which will have negative impact on foreign language learning. Therefore, most of the existing emotion research has been devoted to explore interventions to enhance positive emotions and reduce negative emotions, with the aim of maximizing positive emotions during the learning process to stimulate students' passion for foreign language learning and improve the efficiency of foreign language learning.

2.2 Theories Related to Foreign Language Enjoyment Research

Academic emotions are an important area of research in educational psychology, among which theories of the causes of learner emotions in second language acquisition have sparked a great deal of discussion among scholars. Broaden-and-build theory and control-value theory are the two core theories in the field of emotion research in second language acquisition. Broaden-and-build theory believes that negative and positive emotions exist simultaneously and play different roles in foreign language learning process; control-value theory was proposed by Pekrun in 2016, the three-dimensional framework of this theory advocates defining academic emotions in terms of the three dimensions of potency, activity, and targeting, which is considered the most comprehensive and systematic theory of academic emotions at present because of its focus on the causes of emotions and the comprehensive explanation of the cyclical relationship between academic emotions, their antecedents, and their consequences. In addition, there are other theories of emotion causes including control-process theory, emotion attribution theory, well-being theory, and so on.

The 20 collected studies are mostly based on control-value theory, for example, Li and Han investigated the levels of enjoyment, anxiety, and boredom and the relationship among the three emotions of non-English-major freshmen in online foreign language classes in China through questionnaires from the perspective of control-value theory, explored the individual and collaborative predictive effects of the three emotions on the learning effectiveness of the online foreign language classes, and it is confirmed that foreign language boredom has more negative effects on foreign language achievement than foreign language anxiety does (Li & Han, 2022). Based on the control-value theory, Li analyzed how foreign

language enjoyment and foreign language boredom are related to the internal factors of the learners and the teachers, and found that foreign language emotions are affected by both learners and teachers, and suggested that foreign language classrooms should increase the number of activities that promote foreign language enjoyment and reduce boredom (Li, 2022). However, the theory has not paid enough attention to foreign language teachers so far, which could be a breakthrough for future research. In addition, most of the studies based on extension-construction theory and control-value theory have been conducted mainly offline, so the applicability of these theories of emotion causes to other learning modes remains to be explored. Some of the collected studies only reviewed and described foreign language emotion theories in the literature review section (Mihai et al., 2022), but did not explain the connection between the research questions and theories, and failed to use these theories to explore the research findings in depth.

3. Research Methodology and Research Questions of Foreign Language Enjoyment

3.1 Research Methodology

In empirical research, the research methodology includes the nature of the research method used (quantitative/ qualitative/ mixed methods), the number of subjects, the research instrument, the instrument reliability, and validity as well as the type of study and the cycle time of the study. Among the 20 studies, there are 16 quantitative studies, for example, Dewaele and Li used a questionnaire to collect information from 1415 subjects to investigate the relationship between self-efficacy, foreign language enjoyment and English proficiency, and Wei et al. also used a questionnaire to confirm the mediating role of enjoyment in the relationship between linguistic thinking patterns and willingness to communicate with a second language (Wei, Wu, & Chen, 2021). There are 3 qualitative studies, specifically, Cui and Meng used questionnaires and interviews to study the relationship between college students' self-efficacy, foreign language enjoyment and English proficiency (Cui & Meng, 2023). There is only one mixed-method study, that is, Li et al. adopted a mixed-method approach to test the reliability and validity of the Chinese version of the Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (FLES) (Li, Jiang, & Dewaele, 2018). The sample sizes of the 20 studies range from 6 to more than 2,000, and most of the quantitative instruments are the Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (FLES) and self-reported scales, while the qualitative instruments include interviews, writing questionnaires, as well as Q&A, and some of the quantitative studies are accompanied by English language tests. Of all the studies, six report the reliability of the questionnaires, and in terms of the type of study, all the studies are cross-sectional, with no experimental or tracking studies, and most of the studies are conducted only once.

3.2 Research Questions

According to the analysis of the collected studies, it is found that the current research on foreign language enjoyment emotions mainly focuses on the following aspects.

First, correlations between foreign language enjoyment and other emotions such as anxiety, boredom, and grit (Li C. & Li W., 2023). For example, foreign language boredom has a more negative impact on

foreign language enjoyment than foreign language anxiety, and enjoyment has a small to moderate negative correlation with anxiety, a medium to high negative correlation with boredom, while anxiety has a small to moderate positive correlation with boredom (Dong & Liu, 2022).

Second, the predictive effect of enjoyment on foreign language learning effectiveness is also one of the focuses of research. For example, Jin and Zhang investigated the different aspects of the construct of foreign language enjoyment and how these aspects affect the pattern of foreign language learning effectiveness, and the analysis results showed that foreign language enjoyment has a direct effect on students' English performance, while teacher-supportive enjoyment and peer-supportive enjoyment indirectly affect English performance through foreign language enjoyment (Jin & Zhang, 2018). Based on the control-value theory, Li and Li investigated how three emotions, enjoyment, boredom, and anxiety, affect foreign language learning achievement among junior high school students in rural China, and the results showed that enjoyment was the strongest predictor of foreign language learning achievement (Li C. & Li, 2023). Dong and Liu examined the effect paths of foreign language enjoyment on foreign language achievement through structural equation modeling, and showed that foreign language enjoyment significantly and positively predicted foreign language learning outcomes (Li & Han, 2022). Third, other factors that affect foreign language enjoyment are also a major part of the research. Anna and Hande investigated the extent to which positive language education improves learners' enjoyment of a foreign language based on the extensional-constructive theory (Anna & Hande, 2023). Rezazadeh and Zarrinabadi investigated the different aspects of "need for closure" and "need for cognition" that can directly or indirectly predict anxiety and boredom in a foreign language by means of a self-report questionnaire, confirming that cognitive factors play an integral role in the development of learners' emotions (Rezazadeh & Zarrinabadi, 2023). In addition, teachers also play an important role in promoting students' foreign language enjoyment, and their educational practices such as classroom task design, value orientation of classroom activities or content, emotional intervention and emotion regulation can enhance students' positive academic emotions (Mihai, 2022; Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). Thinking styles also have an impact on foreign language enjoyment, for example, based on the control-value theory and thinking mode theory, Li et al. found that there were significant differences in the levels of foreign language enjoyment and anxiety among students with different types of thinking styles by one-way ANOVA, which further supported the applicability of control-value theory in second language acquisition field from the perspective of the individual (Li et al., 2023). A comparative study of the extent to which Chinese students' foreign language enjoyment and foreign language anxiety differ from those of foreign students was conducted, and it was found that there were similarities and differences between domestic and foreign students in terms of foreign language emotions, and finally it was suggested that foreign language enjoyment is more likely to be stimulated by teachers, while foreign language anxiety is more related to students' internal factors.

The fourth one is the mediating role of foreign language enjoyment in teaching and learning. For example, Wang explored the effect of second language grit on selected English majors' communicative intention

and the mediating role of foreign language enjoyment and anxiety through structural equation modeling method by using the expansion-construction theory and control-value theory as the theoretical framework (Wang, 2023). The results showed that foreign language enjoyment was significantly positively correlated with communicative intention, and anxiety was negatively correlated with it. Wei et al. investigated the effects of emotional intelligence on the second language communicative intention of selected Chinese non-English-major freshman, and also tested the moderating role of linguistic thinking patterns and learning emotions by means of a questionnaire survey and structural equation modeling, which confirmed that emotional intelligence had a direct predictive effect on second language communicative intention, and enjoyment played an important role in the moderation of linguistic thinking patterns and learning emotions in the moderating role of linguistic thinking patterns and learning emotions, which also confirmed Pekrun's control-value theory which holds that positive learning emotions can enhance learners' cognition, effectively regulate learning behaviors, and increase learning engagement.

The fifth is studies examining the relationship between self-efficacy, foreign language enjoyment and English proficiency. For example, Dewaele and Li examined how foreign language enjoyment and foreign language anxiety are related to foreign language learning effectiveness and self-accomplishment based on the control-value theory from six aspects, and the results showed that learners' self-efficacy could better predict foreign language enjoyment and anxiety than actual foreign language test scores do. Dong examined the predictive effects of foreign language learning control-value ratings on anxiety and enjoyment in the foreign language classroom by Chinese English language learners, and the study verified the effectiveness of the control-value paradigm of academic emotions in second language acquisition (Dong, 2022). Based on the perspective of positive psychology, Cui and Meng explored the relationship between self-efficacy, foreign language enjoyment, and English proficiency of 276 college students who were not majoring in English through a questionnaire survey and interviews, and some of the results showed that personal foreign language enjoyment was related to classroom atmosphere. Foreign language enjoyment mediated the relationship between self-efficacy and English proficiency (Cui & Meng, 2023).

Finally, research scholars continue to validate the reliability and validity of the foreign language enjoyment scale. The development of the scale requires the collection of data from a large number of learners of different ages and levels of foreign language learning to validate the reliability and validity of the scale statistically, so that the scale can be more widely used. Li et al. confirmed the reliability and validity of the Chinese version of the foreign language enjoyment scale through a quantitative-qualitative mixed-methods approach in Anhun province of China, and the results showed that the reliability and validity of the Chinese version of the foreign language enjoyment scale were good, and that students' foreign language enjoyment experiences were most influenced by teacher factors, secondly by self-enjoyment, and least influenced by environmental enjoyment(Li, Jiang, & Dewaele, 2018). This further

confirmed Dewaele et al.'s earlier finding that teachers play a key role in stimulating students' foreign language enjoyment experiences (Dewaele et al., 2017).

4. Discussion

In this paper, the research background and research methodology are discussed differently for the convenience of discussion. The research background refers to the research area, the native language of the subjects, the target language, the current level of foreign language, the level of education of the learning model, and the major, etc. The papers are sorted according to the last name of the authors of the 20 collected studies, and the specific backgrounds are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of the Background of Research on Foreign Language Enjoyment

Studies	Country area	Native language of learners	foreign language study mode	Foreign Language Study Segment
Anna & Hande (2023)	Turkey	Turkish	Off-line	College students
Cui & Meng (2023)	Shandong	Chinese	Off-line	Sophomore and Junior
Dewaele & Li (2022)	China	Chinese	Off-line	Second-year senior
Dong (2022)	A province of Western China	Chinese	Off-line	First-year senior
Dong & Liu (2022)	A province of Western China	Chinese	Off-line	First and second-year senior
Jiang (2020)	Beijing	Chinese	Off-line	Freshman
Jiang & Dewaele (2019)	Beijing	Chinese	Off-line	Freshman
Jin & Zhang (2021)	Shandong	Chinese	Off-line	First-year senior
Li (2022)	China	Chinese	Off-line	Undergraduate and graduate students

Li et al. (2018)	Anhui	Chinese	Off-line	Senior high students
Li et al. (2023)	Beijing	Chinese	Off-line	Freshman
Li& Han (2022)	China	Chinese	On-line	Freshman
Li & Li (2023)	Anhui	Chinese	Off-line	First-year junior
Mihai et al. (2022)	Romania	Romanian	On-line	Freshman and sophomore
Rezazadeh & Zarrinabadi (2020)	Iranian	Persian	Off-line	Undergraduates
Wang (2023)	Shanghai	Chinese	Off-line	Sophomore
Wang et al. (2023)	Northeastern China Shanghai,	Chinese	Off-line	Sophomore
Wei et al. (2021)	Jiangsu, Guizhou, Liaoning	Chinese	Off-line	Freshman
Yang (2023)	Iranian	Persian	Off-line	Bachelor of Arts
Zhang et al. (2021)	Shanxi	Chinese	On-line	Sophomore

Note. English is the target language for all participants

Table 1 shows that the foreign language enjoyment studies are mainly conducted in China (16 studies) and relatively few in other countries, Iran (2 studies), Turkey (1 study), and Romania (1 study). As far as the native language background is concerned, the corresponding 16 studies were in Chinese and the rest were in Persian, Turkish and Romanian. The target language of all the above studies is English. 12 out of 20 studies has reported subjects' foreign language proficiency (one of them is an English language teacher), and only 3 subjects' learning mode is online. In terms of subjects' educational level, only one of them targets middle school students in rural areas, while the rest studies target senior students such as college school students from universities, and the group of university students was also dominated by non-English majors.

The current research on foreign language learning enjoyment mainly focuses on its predictive effect on foreign language learning effectiveness, the relationship between foreign language enjoyment and other foreign language learning emotions, and exploring the mediating role of foreign language enjoyment. In recent years, the research in this field has become more and more perfect, but there are still some limitations, for example, as far as the subject learning mode is concerned, there are few studies exploring the online and offline mixed mode, so the future research can pay more attention to the process of mixed-mode foreign language teaching, and beside the most common offline and online teaching modes, the future research can also consider the impact of some innovative learning modes on foreign language learning emotions. In addition, the selection of research objects is biased toward senior students in urban areas, while less attention is paid to students in the lower sections from rural places. What's more, the research methodology of the existing studies is relatively limited, and most of the studies are based on cross-sectional and quantitative method, lacking observational or tracking studies. In the future, the study of foreign language enjoyment can take these limitations as breakthroughs to further perfect the study of foreign language enjoyment.

5. Conclusion and Prospect

The introduction of positive psychology in the second language acquisition has changed the focus of foreign language emotion research, scholars began to focus on foreign language enjoyment emotions, opening up the era of second language acquisition emotion research dominated by positive emotions, stimulating the interest of many scholars at home and abroad in the study of foreign language enjoyment, and the goal of positive psychology coincides with the concept of quality education, so we advocate positive education should be applied in foreign language teaching, maximize the positive emotions of students in the process of foreign language teaching, and then enhance students' foreign language achievement and happiness.

In this paper, 20 studies on foreign language enjoyment from 2018 to 2023 are sorted out, and the current status of some of the existing studies on foreign language enjoyment is presented by analyzing and organizing the research content, research background and research methodology:

First of all, from the perspective of research methodology, the existing research is mostly quantitative, while qualitative and mixed research is relatively lacking, and the number of cross-sectional studies is far more than tracking or experimental studies, most of the data collection is based on questionnaires, and there is almost no classroom observation or tracking records, so future research can increase the proportion of qualitative methods, and tracking as well as experimental studies are encouraged to enhance the reliability of the data.

Secondly, from the perspective of research objects, most of the research on foreign language emotions in China takes college students and other senior students as the objects, especially lacking of investigations on junior students in primary and secondary schools in rural areas like Northwest China. Under the premise of the national strategy of developing the western region, the educational research should pay

more attention to the students in the more remote areas. In addition, very few scholars have taken foreign language teachers as the objects of research, but teachers play an important role in foreign language teaching, therefore, future research can increase the study of the emotions of students in the lower grades in remote areas as well as the foreign language teachers.

Thirdly, from the viewpoint of the learning mode of the research objects, most of the studies are mainly offline, and the studies focusing on online learning account for a relatively small proportion, while in the information age, online learning mode is becoming more and more common and online learning plays an important role in cultivating students' independence, so the future research on foreign language enjoyment should pay more attention to the online mode or the online-offline mixed mode.

Finally, most of the studies only focus on the traditional foreign language teaching classroom, ignoring some other foreign language learning and education scenarios, for example, extracurricular speaking classes, English speech contests, English corners, and other learning scenarios, so that future studies can also start from these aspects to carry out a wider study of foreign language enjoyment emotions under foreign language learning scenarios.

There are still gaps in foreign language enjoyment studies that need to be explored. Enjoyment emotions are widely present in foreign language learning process, and studies have proved that foreign language enjoyment can effectively improve students' foreign language classroom experience as well as the effectiveness of foreign language learning. Therefore, future research can adopt the concept of positive foreign language education and explore classroom interventions that can effectively enhance foreign language enjoyment to increase the sense of academic achievement for students as well as the sense of occupational well-being for teachers.

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