



Foreign Language Enjoyment or Classroom Anxiety? An Exploratory Study of Their Relative Predictive Power for Engagement and Achievement

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ABSTRACT: Emotions play a central role in second language learning, yet the relative importance of positive and negative emotions remains debated. This exploratory study examined the comparative predictive power of foreign language enjoyment and foreign language classroom anxiety for learning engagement and academic performance among EFL students in Chinese private universities. Using survey data from 120 undergraduate EFL students, the study employed correlation and hierarchical regression analyses to investigate how enjoyment and anxiety relate to both process-oriented and outcome-oriented indicators.

The results showed that enjoyment was positively associated with learning engagement and academic performance, whereas classroom anxiety was negatively associated with both outcomes. When considered simultaneously, enjoyment emerged as a slightly stronger predictor of learning engagement, while anxiety exerted a more pronounced negative influence on academic performance. These findings suggest an asymmetrical pattern in the roles of positive and negative emotions in language learning. By directly comparing enjoyment and anxiety within the same analytical framework and focusing on an under-researched educational context, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the emotional dimensions of second language learning. The findings also highlight the value of exploratory analyses in informing future large-scale and longitudinal research.

KEYWORDS: Foreign language enjoyment; Foreign language classroom anxiety; learning engagement; EFL learners.

I. INTRODUCTION

Emotions have long been acknowledged as a central component of second language acquisition

(SLA), influencing learners' engagement, persistence, and academic success. Early research in this domain predominantly focused on negative emotional experiences (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 2017), particularly foreign language classroom anxiety, which has consistently been associated with reduced participation and poorer language performance (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 2017). In recent years, however, the emergence of positive psychology in SLA has shifted scholarly attention toward positive emotional experiences, such as foreign language enjoyment, highlighting their facilitative role in sustaining learner engagement and promoting achievement (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; MacIntyre et al., 2019).

A growing body of empirical research suggests that both foreign language enjoyment and classroom anxiety are closely linked to learners' behavioral and academic outcomes. Enjoyment has been found to positively predict learning engagement, willingness to communicate, and language achievement across diverse instructional contexts (Dewaele & Li, 2021; Teimouri et al., 2019), whereas classroom anxiety has been shown to undermine learners' confidence, restrict classroom participation, and negatively affect academic performance (Botes et al., 2020; Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018). Despite these advances, the literature remains divided regarding the relative importance of positive versus negative emotions in shaping language learning outcomes. While some studies emphasize the enduring and debilitating impact of anxiety on language learning,



conceptualizing it as a relatively stable emotional experience that interferes with cognitive processing and performance (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Horwitz, 2001; Teimouri et al., 2019), others argue that enjoyment may exert a stronger influence by broadening learners' cognitive and behavioral repertoires (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016).

Importantly, although an increasing number of studies have examined foreign language enjoyment and classroom anxiety concurrently (e.g., Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Li et al., 2020; Botes et al., 2022), fewer have explicitly compared their relative predictive strength within the same analytical framework, particularly when both learning processes and learning outcomes are considered simultaneously. A substantial portion of existing research has often focused on a single criterion, such as achievement or affective engagement, which makes it difficult to determine whether and how positive and negative emotions play differentiated roles across process-oriented and outcome-oriented dimensions. Learning engagement, reflecting learners' sustained involvement, effort, and investment in learning activities, has been increasingly recognized as a key process variable linking emotions to academic performance (Oga-Baldwin & Fryer, 2020; Reschly et al., 2020). However, its role in comparative examinations of enjoyment and anxiety remains insufficiently specified.

In addition to these theoretical considerations, contextual imbalances persist in the literature. Research on foreign language enjoyment and classroom anxiety has been conducted across diverse settings, including overseas contexts (e.g., Dewaele et al., 2018; Shao et al., 2020) and Chinese secondary education (e.g., Li, 2020; Li & Dewaele, 2021). Comparatively less attention, however, has been paid to learners in Chinese private higher education, particularly in local, institution-specific contexts. Private universities often serve academically diverse student populations, and such contextual features may shape learners' emotional experiences and engagement patterns in distinctive ways (Li & Dewaele, 2021; Zhang & Tsung, 2021). Addressing these underrepresented higher-education contexts is essential for developing a more comprehensive and ecologically valid understanding of affective variables in SLA.

Against this backdrop, the present study adopts an exploratory, cross-sectional design to examine the relative predictive power of foreign language enjoyment and foreign language classroom anxiety on learning engagement and academic performance among EFL students in Chinese private universities. Rather than seeking to establish causal relationships, the study aims to compare the strength and direction of associations between positive and negative emotions and two key learning outcomes within the same analytical models. By directly juxtaposing enjoyment and anxiety, the present research contributes to ongoing debates concerning the differentiated roles of positive and negative emotions in language learning. Moreover, by focusing on an under-researched learner population, the study offers context-sensitive insights with potential implications for both theory development and classroom practice.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews empirical and theoretical research relevant to the emotional dimensions of second language learning, with a particular focus on foreign language enjoyment and foreign language classroom anxiety. Rather than providing an exhaustive overview of affective variables in SLA, the review selectively synthesizes studies that have examined the relationships between these two emotions and key learning outcomes, namely learning engagement and academic performance. This focused approach is intended to clarify how enjoyment and anxiety have been conceptualized and empirically linked to learning processes and outcomes in prior research.

The review is organized into three parts. First, studies examining the role of foreign language enjoyment in relation to learning engagement and achievement are discussed. Second, research on foreign language classroom anxiety and its associations with engagement and academic performance is reviewed. Finally, theoretical perspectives that support the comparison of positive and negative emotions are introduced to highlight the need for examining the relative predictive power of enjoyment and anxiety within the same analytical framework. Together, this review establishes the conceptual and empirical foundation for the research questions addressed in the present study.



2.1 Foreign Language Enjoyment and Learning Engagement and Achievement

Since the introduction of foreign language enjoyment (FLE) into SLA research, a growing number of studies have documented its positive associations with learners' engagement and academic outcomes. Drawing on positive psychology, FLE has been conceptualized as a multidimensional emotional experience encompassing learners' personal satisfaction, perceptions of classroom atmosphere, and interactions with teachers and peers (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Dewaele & Li, 2020). Empirical evidence consistently suggests that learners who experience higher levels of enjoyment tend to display greater behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in language learning activities.

Recent studies have shown that FLE is positively related to learners' willingness to communicate, sustained effort, and classroom participation, all of which are central components of learning engagement (Dewaele & Li, 2021; Oga-Baldwin & Fryer, 2020). For example, Oga-Baldwin and Fryer (2020) demonstrated that enjoyment was a strong predictor of engagement and persistence among language learners, even when controlling for other motivational variables. Similarly, Dewaele and Li (2021) found that enjoyment mediated the effects of teacher-related factors on students' social-behavioral engagement in Chinese EFL classrooms, underscoring its functional role in shaping learning processes.

In addition to engagement-related outcomes, FLE has also been linked to language achievement. Studies conducted across diverse educational contexts have reported moderate to strong positive correlations between enjoyment and learners' self-reported proficiency, course grades, and standardized test performance (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Teimouri et al., 2019). These findings suggest that enjoyment may contribute not only to learners' immediate classroom involvement but also to longer-term academic success. However, much of this research has examined enjoyment in isolation or has treated anxiety merely as a control variable, rather than explicitly comparing the relative predictive strength of positive and negative emotions.

Despite the accumulating evidence supporting the beneficial role of FLE, two limitations are

notable. First, many studies focus primarily on affective or behavioral outcomes, such as engagement or motivation, without simultaneously examining objective indicators of achievement. Second, relatively few studies directly assess whether enjoyment remains a stronger predictor of engagement or achievement when anxiety is considered alongside it. As a result, the relative importance of FLE in comparison with classroom anxiety remains insufficiently clarified.

2.2 Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and Learning Engagement and Achievement

Foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) has long been recognized as one of the most influential affective variables in SLA. Since its conceptualization by Horwitz et al. (1986), extensive research has documented its negative associations with learners' engagement, participation, and academic performance. Anxiety has been shown to interfere with learners' cognitive processing, reduce their willingness to communicate, and discourage active involvement in classroom tasks (MacIntyre, 2017).

Empirical studies consistently report that higher levels of FLCA are associated with lower learning engagement. Anxious learners tend to avoid communicative activities, participate less frequently, and exhibit reduced persistence when facing linguistic challenges (Botes et al., 2020; Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018). Meta-analytic evidence further confirms that anxiety exerts a small-to-moderate but robust negative effect on language achievement across contexts and proficiency levels (Botes et al., 2020). These findings highlight the pervasive influence of anxiety on both learning processes and outcomes.

In the Chinese EFL context, FLCA appears to be particularly salient due to high academic expectations, exam-oriented instruction, and sociocultural concerns related to face and error avoidance. Recent studies have shown that Chinese university students experiencing higher anxiety report lower classroom engagement and poorer academic performance, especially in speaking and listening tasks (Li et al., 2020; Zhang & Tsung, 2021). However, similar to research on enjoyment, studies on anxiety often examine its effects independently, without systematically comparing them with those of positive emotions.



Importantly, while anxiety is frequently portrayed as debilitating, some scholars caution against viewing it as uniformly detrimental. The control-value theory of achievement emotions suggests that anxiety may exert different effects depending on learners' perceived control and task value (Pekrun, 2006). Nevertheless, empirical studies that directly contrast the functional roles of anxiety and enjoyment in predicting engagement and achievement remain limited. This gap makes it difficult to determine whether anxiety continues to dominate learning outcomes when positive emotions are taken into account.

2.3 Comparing enjoyment and Anxiety: A theoretical rationale

The need to compare foreign language enjoyment and classroom anxiety is further supported by theoretical perspectives that emphasize the distinct functional roles of positive and negative emotions. According to the broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions such as enjoyment broaden individuals' momentary thought-action repertoires and facilitate the accumulation of enduring cognitive, social, and psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2001). In language learning contexts, enjoyment may therefore promote exploratory behavior, sustained engagement, and adaptive learning strategies.

In contrast, the control-value theory of achievement emotions posits that negative emotions such as anxiety arise from learners' appraisals of control and task value and tend to narrow attentional focus, potentially constraining engagement and performance (Pekrun, 2006). From this perspective, enjoyment and anxiety are not simply opposite ends of the same continuum but qualitatively different emotional experiences that may exert asymmetric effects on learning processes and outcomes.

Recent SLA research increasingly acknowledges that learners often experience enjoyment and anxiety simultaneously in the classroom, and that their effects may not cancel each other out in a linear manner (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; Botes et al., 2022). This coexistence underscores the importance of examining both emotions within the same analytical framework. However, despite theoretical support for asymmetrical emotional effects, empirical studies that directly compare the relative predictive power of

enjoyment and anxiety—particularly with respect to both engagement and achievement—remain scarce.

Taken together, the existing literature highlights the importance of both foreign language enjoyment and classroom anxiety but leaves open the question of their relative influence on key learning outcomes. Addressing this gap requires comparative, exploratory analyses that examine how these emotions jointly and differentially predict learning engagement and academic performance, especially in under-researched educational contexts.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As reviewed above, existing research has shown that foreign language enjoyment and classroom anxiety are closely associated with learners' engagement and academic performance. However, many prior studies have examined these emotions in isolation, leaving their relative predictive power insufficiently understood. In addition, comparatively few studies have simultaneously considered both process-related outcomes, such as learning engagement, and outcome-related indicators, such as academic performance, particularly in under-researched EFL contexts.

To address these gaps, the present study adopts an exploratory approach to examine the relative predictive power of foreign language enjoyment and foreign language classroom anxiety among EFL students in Chinese private universities. Rather than testing directional hypotheses, the study aims to compare the magnitude and pattern of associations between positive and negative emotions and two key learning outcomes.

Accordingly, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1. What are the relationships among foreign language enjoyment, foreign language classroom anxiety, learning engagement, and academic performance among EFL students in Chinese private universities?

RQ2. To what extent do foreign language enjoyment and foreign language classroom anxiety differ in their predictive power for learning engagement?

RQ3. To what extent do foreign language enjoyment and foreign language classroom anxiety differ in their predictive power for academic performance?



IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This section outlines the research design, participants, instruments, and data analysis procedures employed in the present study. Consistent with the exploratory nature of the research, the methodological choices were guided by the aim of examining the relative predictive power of foreign language enjoyment and classroom anxiety using survey data. The following subsections describe the overall research design, the characteristics of the participant sample, the measurement instruments used, and the analytical procedures adopted to address the research questions.

4.1 Research Design

This exploratory study adopts a quantitative research design using data collected in the initial phase of a larger research project. This design was considered appropriate given the study's aim to examine the relative predictive power of foreign language enjoyment and foreign language classroom anxiety on learning engagement and academic performance, rather than to establish causal relationships. By adopting an exploratory approach, the study sought to identify patterns of association among affective variables and learning outcomes and to provide empirical evidence to inform subsequent large-scale research.

Data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire complemented by an indicator of academic performance. All variables were measured at a single point in time, consistent with the cross-sectional nature of the study.

4.2 Participants and Context

Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses at private universities in Guangzhou, China. These institutions primarily admit students with relatively heterogeneous academic backgrounds and lower entrance examination scores compared to public universities, making them an under-researched yet pedagogically important learner population.

A total of 130 questionnaires were initially distributed and returned. After data screening and cleaning procedures, 120 valid responses were retained for analysis. Among the valid participants, 43 were male (35.8%) and 77 were female (64.2%). The participants were drawn from non-English

majors and ranged from first- to third-year undergraduate students. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, no identifying information was collected, and all responses were used solely for research purposes.

4.3 Instruments

All instruments used in the present study were adopted from well-established and widely validated scales in the fields of second language acquisition and educational psychology. To ensure suitability for the Chinese EFL context, all questionnaire items were administered in Chinese, following established practices in prior research. The instruments were selected based on their strong theoretical grounding, extensive empirical use in previous studies, and demonstrated reliability in both international and Chinese contexts. Reliability analyses confirmed that all scales used in this study exhibited satisfactory to excellent internal consistency.

4.3.1 Foreign Language Enjoyment

Foreign language enjoyment was measured using the Chinese version of the Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale adapted and validated for the Chinese EFL context by Li et al. (2018). The scale is a five-point Likert-type instrument consisting of 11 items and comprises three dimensions: personal foreign language enjoyment (FLE-Private) (five items; e.g., "I enjoy it"), teacher-related foreign language enjoyment (FLE-Teacher) (three items; e.g., "The teacher is encouraging"), and classroom atmosphere-related foreign language enjoyment (FLE-Atmosphere) (three items; e.g., "There is a good atmosphere") (Li & Li, 2024).

The short version employed in this study consists of 11 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In the present study, the CFLES demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.857, exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70. This indicates that the scale was reliable for assessing foreign language enjoyment among EFL students in Chinese private universities.



4.3.2 Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety

Foreign language classroom anxiety was measured using an eight-item short version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed and validated by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), with items selected from the original 33-item FLCAS (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Item analysis indicated that the two reverse-worded items (Reverse-coded FLCA04 and Reverse-coded FLCA05) showed poor psychometric performance, as reflected in negative corrected item-total correlations (-.568 and -.506, respectively). Given the potential for reverse-worded items to introduce measurement artefacts and reduce scale coherence in questionnaire research, these two items were removed to improve conceptual clarity and internal consistency. The resulting six-item scale demonstrated good reliability in the present sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .817$). Following methodological recommendations, future research in similar learner populations may re-examine the functioning of these reverse-worded items or consider rewording them to reduce potential misunderstanding.

4.3.3 Learning Engagement

Learning engagement was measured using the student version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-S) developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002) and later adapted for use with student populations (Schaufeli et al., 2006). The UWES-S conceptualizes engagement as a multidimensional construct comprising vigor, dedication, and absorption and has been widely applied in educational research across different learning contexts.

The UWES-S consists of 17 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In the present study, the scale exhibited excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.938, well above the recommended threshold. This suggests that the UWES-S was highly reliable for capturing learning engagement among EFL students in the current context.

4.3.4 Academic Performance

Academic performance in English was measured using students' Grade Point Average (GPA) obtained from their Fundamental English course. In SLA research, English language performance has been assessed through standardized proficiency tests, self-reported measures, and course-based assessments. While standardized tests such as TOEFL or IELTS offer internationally comparable benchmarks, they are not always feasible in institution-specific contexts (Li & Xu, 2022). Self-reported measures have also been widely used but may be subject to reporting bias (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2019). Consequently, course-based assessments, particularly final grades and GPA, are commonly adopted as contextually valid indicators of learners' academic achievement (Shobikah, 2020).

Within the Chinese university context, GPA derived from English foundation courses provides an institutionally standardized indicator of English language performance. These courses assess integrated language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and percentage-based final grades are routinely converted into a 4.0 GPA scale for standardized comparison (Yogendra & Andrew, 2017). In the present study, students' English language performance was operationalized as their final GPA in the Fundamental English course completed during the first semester of the 2024–2025 academic year. As a compulsory course for first-year undergraduates, Fundamental English follows uniform instructional and assessment criteria, ensuring that GPA serves as a contextually appropriate and methodologically comparable outcome measure (Wu & Zhou, 2022).

V. RESULTS

This section presents the results of the statistical analyses conducted to address the research questions of the study. Following a stepwise analytical approach, descriptive statistics and distributional properties of the main variables are first reported. This is followed by correlation analyses examining the bivariate relationships among foreign language enjoyment, classroom anxiety, learning engagement, and academic performance. Finally, hierarchical multiple regression analyses are presented to compare the relative predictive power of enjoyment and anxiety for learning engagement and academic performance, while controlling for gender.

5.1 Descriptive Statistics and Distributional Properties

A total of 120 valid responses were included



in the analyses. The sample comprised 43 males (35.8%) and 77 females (64.2%). Descriptive statistics for the main study variables are presented in Table 1. On average, participants reported moderate levels of foreign language enjoyment (FLE_Total: $M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.70$, range = 1.36–4.91) and classroom anxiety (FLCA6_Total: $M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.83$, range = 1.00–4.83). The mean level of learning engagement

was also moderate (LE_Total: $M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.84$, range = 1.41–4.71). The mean English Fundamental GPA (0–4) was 2.84 ($SD = 0.53$, range = 1.80–4.00). Skewness and kurtosis values indicated no notable departures from normality for the four variables (skewness: -0.119 to 0.137 ; kurtosis: -0.948 to -0.324), supporting the use of parametric analyses.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 120)

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
						Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
FLE	120	1.36	4.91	3.1038	0.70203	-0.119	0.221	-0.354	0.438
FLCA	120	1	4.83	2.8306	0.82559	0.137	0.221	-0.324	0.438
LE	120	1.41	4.71	3.1422	0.84285	-0.061	0.221	-0.948	0.438
GPA	120	1.8	4	2.8412	0.52538	0.094	0.221	-0.56	0.438
Valid N (listwise)	120								

5.2 Correlation Analysis (RQ1)

Pearson correlation coefficients among foreign language enjoyment, classroom anxiety, learning engagement, and English academic performance are presented in Table 2. Foreign language enjoyment was negatively correlated with classroom anxiety ($r = -0.324$, $p < .001$) and positively correlated with learning engagement ($r = .587$, $p < .001$) and English GPA ($r = .403$, $p < .001$). In contrast, classroom anxiety was negatively associated with both learning

engagement ($r = -.574$, $p < .001$) and English GPA ($r = -.492$, $p < .001$). Learning engagement showed a strong positive correlation with English GPA ($r = .681$, $p < .001$).

Overall, the correlation pattern indicates that foreign language enjoyment and classroom anxiety are systematically related to both process-oriented (learning engagement) and outcome-oriented (academic performance) indicators, albeit in opposite directions.



Table 2 Correlations among enjoyment, anxiety, engagement, and GPA

		FLE	FLCA	LE	GPA
FLE	Pearson Correlation	1			
FLCA	Pearson Correlation	-.324**	1		
LE	Pearson Correlation	.587**	-.574**	1	
GPA	Pearson Correlation	.403**	-.492**	.681**	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

5.3 Hierarchical Regression Analyses (RQ2–RQ3)

To examine whether foreign language enjoyment and classroom anxiety differed in their relative predictive power, two hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted. Gender was entered as a control variable in Step 1, followed by enjoyment in Step 2 and anxiety in Step 3. Collinearity diagnostics indicated no multicollinearity concerns (VIFs \approx 1.02–1.14).

5.3.1 Predicting Learning Engagement (RQ2)

As shown in Table 3, gender did not significantly predict learning engagement in Step 1 ($R^2 = 0.001$, $F_{change} = 0.148$, $p = .701$). Adding enjoyment in Step 2 substantially improved the model ($\Delta R^2 = 0.355$, $F_{change} = 64.547$, $p < .001$), with enjoyment emerging as a strong positive predictor (Step 2: $\beta = 0.601$, $p < .001$).

Table 3 Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Learning Engagement

Predictor	Step 1 β	Step 2 β	Step 3 β
Gender	-.035	-.112	-.089
FLE	—	.601***	.461***
FLCA	—	—	-.424***
Model fit	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
R^2	0.001	0.356	0.517
ΔR^2	0.001	0.355	0.16
F change	0.148	64.547	38.533
Sig. F change	0.701	< .001	< .001

Note. *** $p < .001$. Gender was entered in Step 1, foreign language enjoyment in Step 2, and foreign language classroom anxiety in Step 3.

In Step 3, adding anxiety produced an additional significant increase in explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.160$, $F_{change} = 38.533$, $p < .001$), yielding a final model explaining 51.7% of the variance in

engagement ($R^2 = 0.517$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.504$). In the final model, both enjoyment ($\beta = 0.461$, $t = 6.690$, $p < .001$) and anxiety ($\beta = -0.424$, $t = -6.208$, $p < .001$) uniquely predicted engagement, while gender



remained non-significant ($\beta = -0.089, p = .175$). These results indicate that enjoyment and anxiety made comparable, yet oppositely directed, unique contributions to engagement, with enjoyment showing a slightly stronger standardized effect.

5.3.2 Predicting Academic Performance (RQ3)

The regression results predicting English Fundamental GPA are presented in Table 4. Gender did not significantly predict GPA in Step 1 ($R^2 = 0.000, F_{change} = 0.030, p = .863$). Adding enjoyment in Step 2 significantly improved model fit ($\Delta R^2 = 0.167, F_{change} = 23.458, p < .001$), and

enjoyment was a positive predictor of GPA (Step 2: $\beta = 0.412, p < .001$).

In Step 3, adding anxiety further increased explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.144, F_{change} = 24.180, p < .001$), resulting in a final model accounting for 31.1% of the variance in GPA ($R^2 = 0.311$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.293$). In the final model, enjoyment remained a significant positive predictor ($\beta = 0.279, t = 3.398, p < .001$), whereas anxiety was a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -0.401, t = -4.917, p < .001$). Gender was not significant ($\beta = -0.047, p = .549$). Notably, in predicting GPA, anxiety showed a stronger unique standardized effect than enjoyment.

Table 4 Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting GPA (N=120)

Predictor	Step 1 β	Step 2 β	Step 3 β
Gender	-.016	-.068	-.047
FLE	—	.412***	.279***
FLCA	—	—	-.401***
Model fit	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
R ²	0	0.167	0.311
ΔR^2	0	0.167	0.144
F change	0.03	23.458	24.18
Sig. F change	0.863	< .001	< .001

Note. *** $p < .001$. Gender was entered in Step 1, foreign language enjoyment in Step 2, and foreign language classroom anxiety in Step 3.

VI. DISCUSSION

As an exploratory cross-sectional survey study, the present research focuses on identifying association patterns rather than making causal claims. This section discusses the findings of the present study in relation to the research questions and the existing literature on foreign language enjoyment, classroom anxiety, learning engagement, and academic performance. The discussion first summarizes the key results and interprets their theoretical significance within established frameworks of language learning emotions. It then considers the pedagogical implications of the findings for EFL instruction in private university contexts, before addressing the study's limitations and outlining directions for future research.

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

This exploratory study examined the relative predictive power of foreign language enjoyment and foreign language classroom anxiety in relation to learning engagement and academic performance among EFL students in Chinese private universities. Three key findings emerged.

First, consistent with previous research, both enjoyment and anxiety were significantly associated with learning engagement and English academic performance, albeit in opposite directions. Enjoyment was positively correlated with engagement and GPA, whereas anxiety showed significant negative associations with both outcomes. These findings provide further support for the view that positive and negative emotions



coexist in the language classroom and jointly shape learning processes and outcomes.

Second, the hierarchical regression analyses revealed that foreign language enjoyment and classroom anxiety made substantial and unique contributions to learning engagement. When entered simultaneously into the regression model, both emotions remained significant predictors, explaining a large proportion of variance in engagement. Notably, enjoyment demonstrated a slightly stronger standardized effect than anxiety in the final model, suggesting that positive emotional experiences may play a particularly salient role in sustaining learners' engagement in EFL classrooms.

Third, a different pattern emerged when academic performance was examined. Although enjoyment initially showed a strong positive association with GPA, classroom anxiety emerged as the stronger predictor when both emotions were included in the model. This finding indicates that anxiety may exert a more direct and constraining influence on measurable academic outcomes, even when learners report moderate levels of enjoyment.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

The findings of the present study contribute to a growing body of SLA research that conceptualizes language learning emotions as coexisting and functionally differentiated rather than as opposite ends of a single continuum. Recent studies have increasingly emphasized that positive and negative emotions can operate simultaneously in the language classroom and exert distinct influences on learning processes and outcomes (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; Botes et al., 2022). The present findings provide further empirical support for this perspective by demonstrating that enjoyment and anxiety uniquely predict engagement and academic performance in different ways.

From the perspective of the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), the strong predictive role of foreign language enjoyment for learning engagement observed in this study is theoretically meaningful. Positive emotions are assumed to broaden individuals' momentary thought-action repertoires, facilitating exploratory behavior, persistence, and the development of

adaptive learning resources. In SLA contexts, enjoyment has been shown to promote learners' sustained involvement and active participation in classroom activities (Oga-Baldwin & Fryer, 2020; Dewaele & Li, 2021). The present findings extend this line of research by showing that enjoyment remains a robust predictor of engagement even when classroom anxiety is considered simultaneously.

In contrast, the stronger predictive role of classroom anxiety for academic performance aligns with assumptions derived from the control-value theory of achievement emotions (Pekrun, 2006). According to this framework, anxiety arises from learners' appraisals of control and task value and is associated with heightened cognitive interference and attentional narrowing, which may directly impair performance outcomes. Empirical studies in SLA have consistently reported negative associations between anxiety and test performance or course grades (Botes et al., 2020; Teimouri et al., 2019). The present findings corroborate these results and further suggest that anxiety may exert a more immediate and constraining influence on outcome-oriented indicators such as GPA.

From a contextual perspective, the stronger negative association between classroom anxiety and academic performance observed in the present study may be partly attributable to characteristics of the private university EFL context in China. Previous research has suggested that the effects of language learning emotions are sensitive to contextual and institutional conditions (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018). In learning environments where academic evaluation is salient, anxiety may be more directly linked to outcome-oriented indicators such as GPA.

From the perspective of the control-value theory of achievement emotions (Pekrun, 2006), learners' emotional experiences are shaped by their appraisals of control and task value. In contexts characterized by heightened evaluative demands and limited academic resources, anxiety may exert a stronger constraining influence on performance outcomes. Research on Chinese EFL classrooms has highlighted the role of sociocultural and institutional factors in shaping learners' emotional experiences (Zhang & Tsung, 2021), as well as the importance of classroom environment and support



in regulating enjoyment and anxiety (Li & Dewaele, 2021). Together, these findings suggest that the relative salience of anxiety for academic performance may vary across educational contexts, underscoring the need for context-sensitive interpretations of emotion-achievement relationships.

Importantly, the present study highlights an asymmetrical pattern in the effects of enjoyment and anxiety. While enjoyment appears to be more influential for process-oriented outcomes such as learning engagement, anxiety may be more consequential for outcome-oriented indicators such as academic performance. Similar asymmetries have been noted in recent comparative studies of language learning emotions (Li et al., 2020; Botes et al., 2022), which argue that positive and negative emotions may play qualitatively different roles at different stages of the learning process. By directly comparing enjoyment and anxiety within the same analytical framework, the present study helps reconcile seemingly contradictory findings in prior research and underscores the theoretical value of examining multiple emotions alongside multiple learning outcomes.

6.3 Pedagogical Implications

The findings of the present study also yield important pedagogical implications for EFL instruction, particularly in private university contexts. Given the strong association between foreign language enjoyment and learning engagement, language teachers may benefit from creating classroom environments that actively foster positive emotional experiences. Previous research has shown that enjoyment is closely linked to supportive teacher–student relationships, engaging instructional practices, and a positive classroom atmosphere (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Dewaele & Li, 2020). Designing meaningful, interactive tasks and encouraging peer collaboration may therefore enhance learners' engagement by promoting enjoyment in the classroom.

At the same time, the pronounced negative impact of classroom anxiety on academic performance observed in this study suggests that reducing debilitating anxiety remains a critical instructional goal. Studies in SLA have identified fear of negative evaluation, excessive performance

pressure, and error sensitivity as key sources of anxiety among language learners (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 2017). In private university settings, where students may experience heightened evaluative pressure, these factors may be particularly salient. Pedagogical practices that emphasize formative feedback, normalize errors as part of the learning process, and provide scaffolded support may help alleviate anxiety and support learners' academic achievement (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014).

Importantly, the present findings suggest that enhancing enjoyment alone may not be sufficient to improve academic outcomes if anxiety remains unaddressed. This echoes recent arguments in SLA that effective emotion-oriented pedagogy should adopt a balanced approach, simultaneously cultivating positive emotions and mitigating negative ones (Dewaele et al., 2019; Botes et al., 2022). By attending to both enjoyment and anxiety, teachers may be better positioned to support learners' engagement and performance, particularly in contexts characterized by diverse learner backgrounds and varying levels of academic preparedness.

6.4 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the relatively modest sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. Although the sample size was sufficient for the exploratory analyses conducted, caution is warranted when extrapolating the results to broader EFL populations. Future studies employing larger and more diverse samples are needed to replicate and extend the present findings.

Second, the cross-sectional research design precludes causal inferences regarding the relationships among foreign language enjoyment, classroom anxiety, learning engagement, and academic performance. Emotions in language learning are dynamic and context-dependent, and longitudinal or experience sampling designs may offer deeper insights into how enjoyment and anxiety fluctuate over time and interact with engagement and achievement.

Third, while all instruments used in the study demonstrated satisfactory to excellent



reliability, the shortened version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale warrants further consideration. In the present study, two reverse-worded items from the eight-item short form were removed due to weak psychometric performance. Although the resulting six-item scale showed good internal consistency and conceptual clarity, future research may revisit these reverse-worded items. Specifically, subsequent studies conducted with similar learner populations could re-examine the functioning of these items or consider rewording them to improve clarity and reduce potential response bias, particularly in cross-cultural contexts.

Finally, the present study focused on direct associations between emotions, engagement, and academic performance. Future research could build on these exploratory findings by examining mediating and moderating mechanisms using more advanced analytical approaches, such as structural equation modeling. Such work may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how positive and negative emotions jointly shape language learning processes and outcomes.

VII. CONCLUSION

This exploratory study examined the relative predictive power of foreign language enjoyment and foreign language classroom anxiety in relation to learning engagement and academic performance among EFL students in Chinese private universities. The study provides empirical evidence that positive and negative emotions play distinct and asymmetrical roles in the language learning process. While enjoyment emerged as a slightly stronger predictor of learning engagement, classroom anxiety exerted a more pronounced negative influence on academic performance. These findings highlight the importance of examining multiple emotions alongside both process-oriented and outcome-oriented indicators within a single analytical framework.

By focusing on an under-researched educational context, this study extends existing research on language learning emotions beyond public or elite university settings and underscores the need for context-sensitive investigations. Importantly, the study demonstrates that exploratory analyses based on survey data can yield

theoretically meaningful insights when methodological claims are appropriately framed.

Future research is encouraged to replicate these findings using larger and more diverse samples and to employ longitudinal or structural modeling approaches to further clarify the mechanisms through which enjoyment and anxiety shape language learning outcomes. Overall, the present study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the emotional dimensions of second language learning and offers directions for both theory development and pedagogical practice.

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