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Foreign language enjoyment overcomes anxiety and boredom to boost oral proficiency in the first year of English foreign language learning

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The study has been carried out in accordance with The Code of Ethics of the World Medical Association (Declaration of Helsinki). After obtaining ethical approval from their research institutions and approval from the three participating secondary schools, the second and third authors explained to the respective headmasters, teachers and pupils' parents what the study would entail. Anonymity was guaranteed. Participants filled out the printed version of the questionnaire after ticking a consent box at the start.

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Abstract

The current study investigates the effect of three foreign language learner emotions on the amount of gain in oral proficiency over one school year of 159 eleven-year-old pupils starting English foreign language classes in France. Previous cross-sectional studies have shown positive relationships between foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and various performance and achievement measures, as well as negative relationships between foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA), foreign language classroom boredom (FLCB), and FL performance and achievement measures. A common finding is that negative emotions explain more variance in Foreign Language (FL) performance and achievement measures at a single point in time than positive emotions. Correlation analyses revealed that the amount of gain was positively linked to FLE and negatively linked FLCA and FLCB. A first multiple regression analysis showed that, surprisingly, FLE was the only (positive) predictor of gain in oral proficiency. A second multiple regression analysis revealed that the FLE teacher dimension was the only predictor of gain in oral proficiency. This suggests that positive emotions, and especially the ability of teachers to meet the psychological needs

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of their students, have a stronger long-term effect while negative emotions are more likely to disrupt performance in the moment. Pedagogical implications are presented.

KEYWORDS

foreign language classroom anxiety, foreign language classroom boredom, foreign language enjoyment, oral proficiency gain

Résumé

La présente étude examine l'effet de trois émotions de 159 élèves de onze ans commençant des cours d'anglais langue étrangère en France sur le degré de gain en compétence orale au cours d'une année scolaire. Des études transversales antérieures ont montré des relations positives entre le plaisir (*enjoyment*) des langues étrangères (FLE) et diverses mesures de performance et de réussite, ainsi que des relations négatives entre l'anxiété en classe de langue étrangère (FLCA), l'ennui en classe de langue étrangère (FLCB) et les mesures de performance et de réussite en langue étrangère. La littérature suggère que les émotions négatives expliquent plus de variance dans les mesures de performance et de réussite en langue étrangère à un moment donné que les émotions positives. Les analyses de corrélation ont révélé que le gain était positivement lié au FLE et négativement lié au FLCA et au FLCB. Une première analyse de régression multiple a montré que le FLE était le seul prédicteur (positif) du gain en compétence orale. Une deuxième analyse de régression multiple a révélé que la dimension FLE-Enseignant était le seul prédicteur de gain en compétence orale. Cela suggère que les émotions positives, et notamment la capacité des enseignants à répondre aux besoins psychologiques de leurs élèves, ont un effet à long terme plus fort, tandis que les émotions négatives sont plus susceptibles de perturber la performance sur le moment. Les implications pédagogiques sont présentées.

MOTS CLÉS

Plaisir en classe de langue étrangère, anxiété en classe de langue étrangère, ennui en classe de langue étrangère, gain de compétence orale, anglais

1 | INTRODUCTION

Foreign language learner emotions have recently come in the spotlight (Li et al., 2024). There is growing acknowledgment in applied linguistics that learners' progress is not just linked to their cognition, to their motivation, but also to the ever-changing combination of emotions they experience in the classroom. These emotions are highly dependent on the classroom context including behavior and characteristics of teacher and peers, teaching modality, teaching method, tasks performed but also to less predictable factors such as seating arrangements, conversation topics, and test results (for an overview, see Dewaele, 2022; Elahi Shirvan et al., 2024). There can also be past events in the learners' journey that affect their classroom emotions in the present and may make them decide to communicate or not at any particular point in time (Dewaele & Pavelescu, 2021; Elahi Shirvan & Talebzadeh, 2020).

Meta-analyses have shown that positive learner emotions are linked to better FL performance or self-reported academic achievement while negative emotions have the opposite effect (Botes, et al., 2020, 2022; Teimouri et al., 2019). However, most of the studies included in the meta-analyses were cross-sectional in nature, which means they considered the relationships between independent and dependent variables at a single point in time. These cross-sectional designs are popular because they are relatively easy to implement and they can uncover interesting complex relationships between variables in potentially large databases which allow sophisticated statistical analyses. The drawback is that they only capture a single snapshot of a highly dynamic system in constant evolution (Dörnyei, 2007). Longitudinal designs which involve "an ongoing investigation of people or phenomena over time" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 78) require more effort and rely on smaller number of participants, often because of a relatively high drop-out rate. These designs do have the advantage of being able to capture change and to identify the independent variables that best predict change. The present study is not longitudinal but it relies on data collected in such a design. The English oral performance of a group of 159 eleven-year-old French school children was measured at the start and at the end of the school year using an established protocol. A previous study on the same database showed that progress in oral proficiency was significantly higher in the experimental group with a teaching method that privileges authentic social interactions in the target language than in the control group that had the standard communicative approach (Dat, et al., 2024). A separate study on the same database revealed that pupils in the experimental group reported significantly stronger positive emotions and significantly weaker negative emotions (Dewaele et al., 2024). The current study will investigate the final missing link, namely the relationship between the three FL learner emotions of the whole sample and the amount of progress as measured by the difference in *Oral Proficiency Interview* (OPI) scores between the start and at the end of the school year.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

When MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) introduced positive psychology to the field of applied linguistics, they precipitated a paradigm shift. Rather than continuing to focus exclusively on negative emotions, researchers started adopting a more holistic perspective, including both positive and negative learner emotions in their research designs (Dewaele et al., 2019; Li et al., 2024). MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) pointed out that positive emotions allow learners to develop intellectual, psychological resources and social resources. They are the perfect antidotes for the corrosive effects of lingering negative emotions and they can boost both ego resilience and life satisfaction (Cohn et al., 2009). From the mid-2010s, more researchers and education professionals started to realize that FL students should not be perceived as flawed and incomplete individuals, waiting for their many errors to be filtered out through cold formal instruction and shamed with failing grades. They also realized that measures of success could not just be exam scores but had to reflect learners' well-being and flourishing (Jellab & Marsollier, 2019; MacIntyre et al., 2019; Mercer & Gregersen, 2023). Happier students are by definition better students.

The literature review is organized as follows: After briefly presenting the pioneering studies on foreign language enjoyment (FLE), foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA), and foreign language classroom boredom

(FLCB), presenting their definitions and instruments, and briefly mentioning studies that considered the effect of teaching modality, the review will focus on recent cross-sectional and longitudinal studies that have included FLE, FLCA, and FLCB in their research designs and considered the relationships between them. This will be followed by general information about standard English foreign language (EFL) teaching in France and a description of a small-scale project using the neurolinguistic approach (NLA) in EFL classes—which half of the participants in the current study had—before concluding with the presentation of studies that measures the effect of the NLA on learners' linguistic progress.

2.1 | Foreign language classroom anxiety

FLCA is the best known and the most investigated FL learner emotion in applied linguistics (MacIntyre, 2017). Interest in FLCA soared after Horwitz et al. (1986) published a psychometrically solid 33-item scale that drew global attention. Reflecting later on the causes of FLCA, Horwitz (2017) mentioned the ego-threat that all FL learners and users experience to some extent: “the discomfort some language learners have when they must interact in the language but are unable to present themselves authentically when doing so” (p. 42). The inability to be as smooth, funny, well-spoken in the FL as in their first language(s) causes FL learners and users to worry (excessively) about their performance. They may display physical symptoms of anxiety like a racing heart and sweating. MacIntyre (2017) pointed out that FLCA is linked to both the social context and to the learner's internal context.

FLCA does not appear fully formed in the FL learner but develops gradually through repeated anxious experiences in the FL classroom. As such, FLCA starts as being a situation-specific state and it gradually becomes more stable and trait-like (Horwitz, 2017). MacIntyre (2017) pointed out that FLCA (like other emotions) is highly dynamic, as it is “continuously interacting with a number of other learner, situational and other factors including linguistic abilities, physiological reactions, self-related appraisals, pragmatics, interpersonal relationships, specific topics being discussed, type of setting in which people are interacting and so on” (p. 23). There is no doubt that FLCA has no facilitating effect at all on FL performance. MacIntyre (2017) sees FLCA as being purely debilitating: “(it is) both a consequence and a cause of language performance. Experimental evidence shows that anxiety arousal causes declines in performance” (p. 27). FLCA can extinguish learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) and condemn them to self-imposed silence (cf. Elahi Shirvan et al., 2019; Li et al., 2022). Multiple meta-analyses have confirmed that high FLCA is linked to weaker FL performance and lower WTC (Botes et al., 2020; Teimouri et al., 2019).

Horwitz (2017) always maintained that FLCA was a unidimensional construct. This was confirmed in Botes, van der Westhuizen et al. (2022) who validated the eight-item *Short-Form Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (S-FLCAS) used in Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014). Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses confirmed its unidimensional structure. The S-FLCAS had strong internal consistency and good convergent and discriminate validity. The measure was found to be fully invariant across L1 groups, gender, age and participants' educational levels (Botes, van der Westhuizen et al., 2022).

Although FLCA is strongly linked to learner-internal variables such as neuroticism, and is more weakly linked to learner-external variables such as teacher characteristics and behavior (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2019), it has also been linked to teaching modality. FL learners reported significantly less FLCA in online FL classes than in in-person classes with the same teachers (small effect sizes) (Dewaele et al., 2024; Resnik et al., 2023a).

2.2 | Foreign language enjoyment

Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) developed a 21-item FLE scale that attempted to cover all the potential personal and social sources of enjoyment in the FL classroom. This include feelings of creativity, pride, fun, acknowledgment of being less than perfect, absence of boredom, as well as feelings of social belonging and of teacher appreciation. Dewaele

and MacIntyre (2016) later defined FLE as “a complex emotion, capturing interacting dimensions of challenge and perceived ability that reflect the human drive for success in the face of difficult tasks (...) enjoyment occurs when people not only meet their needs, but exceed them to accomplish something new or even unexpected” (pp. 216–217). Elahi Shirvan et al. (2024) used a longitudinal confirmatory factor analysis curve of factors model that confirmed the validity of the original 21-item FLE scale. FLE develops gradually in the FL classroom, starting as a state, linked to specific tasks, transient and variable (Li et al., 2024) before gradually moving toward the trait end of the continuum where it becomes “a long-term predisposition or enduring tendency, persisting for a relatively long period from weeks and months, to years, and thus being relatively stable and constant” (Li & Dewaele, 2024, pp. 90–91). The FLE scale presented in Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) tapped into the stable end of the dimension, with items about habitual emotions and attitudes, rather than the variable end.

Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) was a convergent parallel mixed methods study based on data collected through an online questionnaire from 1746 FL learners from around the world. The authors were particularly interested in the nature of FLCA and their newly conceptualized FLE. A weak negative correlation emerged between FLE and FLCA, which suggested that they were not opposite poles of a single dimension but rather two independent dimensions. This moderate negative relationship was later confirmed in Botes, Dewaele et al. (2022). The meta-analysis also found a strong positive relationship between FLE and WTC and a more moderate positive correlation between FLE and various measures of FL academic performance. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data in Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) revealed that participants most frequently mentioned classroom activities that they had particularly enjoyed. These typically involved collaborations with peers, activities where teachers had given them a degree of trust and autonomy, various tasks that required authentic and creative use of the FL, in a general atmosphere of mutual respect and humor. Studies on the sources of FLE later revealed that FLE was linked to some sociobiographical and psychological variables of the learner (such as cultural empathy) but that FLE was mainly shaped by contextual variables such as teacher and peers (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2019; Dewaele et al., 2022, 2018). The teacher in particular has the power to raise enjoyment levels in class by engaging in appropriately challenging and fun activities that learners find meaningful and satisfying.

Botes, Dewaele et al. (2021) developed a psychometrically solid nine-item, *Short Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale* (S-FLES). Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses revealed a three-factor hierarchical model with a higher-order FLE factor. The lower-order dimensions included Teacher Appreciation (FLE Teacher), Personal Enjoyment, and Social Enjoyment. The new instrument was found to have good fit statistics for the factor structure, good internal consistency, strong convergent and discriminant validity.

Resnik et al. (2023b) used the S-FLES to investigate the effect of teaching modality on FLE. Four hundred and thirty-seven German-speaking EFL students in online classes reported significantly lower levels of FLE compared to their in-person classes. A similar pattern emerged for FLE among the 168 Arab and Kurdish EFL learners in Dewaele et al. (2024).

2.3 | Foreign language learning boredom

FL language learning boredom (FLLB) has recently been included alongside FLE and FLCA in research designs. Its ubiquity in FL classes has been highlighted (Pawlak et al., 2024). Li et al. (2023) defined FLLB as “a negative emotion with an extremely low degree of activation/arousal that arises from ongoing activities (...) (that) are typically over-challenging or under-challenging” (p. 12). The authors drew on a database from 2223 Chinese EFL learners to develop an appropriate instrument. Their final 32-item FLLB scale consists of seven factors. It was validated through exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, followed by validity and reliability analyses. The first factor was Foreign Language Classroom Boredom (FLCB) consisting of eight items that have been used as a separate short scale in a number of later studies. In an attempt to identify the causes of FLLB, Li (2021) analyzed both qualitative and quantitative data from 2002 Chinese EFL learners. She discovered that high proficiency was linked to higher levels of engagement and lower

levels of FLLB. Learners got bored when they felt either overchallenged or underchallenged in their EFL class. This in turn could lead to a loss of confidence and a perceived lack of control. Using the same database, Dewaele and Li (2021) showed that teacher enthusiasm boosted learners' engagement and FLE while lowering their FLLB. FLE was found to positively mediate the effect of teacher enthusiasm on engagement while FLLB mediated the same effect negatively. Li (2022) found a strong negative relationship between FLLB and FLE among her 868 Chinese EFL learners. Li et al. (2024) used structural equation modeling that revealed a negative relationship between FLLB and achievement and proficiency of 1109 Chinese EFL learners. In a further longitudinal sub-study of the same sample (one academic year), the authors used cross-lagged panel modeling that showed that L2 achievement predicted FLLB negatively, while FLLB did not predict subsequent L2 achievement.

Dewaele et al. (2024) found that teaching modality had a significant effect on EFL learners' FLCB. They reported significantly higher levels of FLCB in online classes compared to their in-person classes (small-to-medium effect size).

2.4 | Studies combining FLE, FLCA, and FLCB

An early study in the combined effects of FLE and FLCA on FL performance of 189 British FL learners and 152 Saudi EFL learners showed that the effect of FLE was stronger on test scores and LEXTALE scores (lexical decision task) than that of FLCA (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018).

In the last 2 years, applied linguists have started including FLE, FLCA, and FLCB simultaneously in their research designs to measure their differential effects on FL progress and performance. Dewaele et al. (2023a) collected data from an international sample of 332 FL learners to identify their sources and to establish how the three emotions were linked to academic performance. FLE was found to be significantly negatively linked to FLCA and FLCB, while the latter were positively correlated. Linear mixed models revealed that teacher's frequency of use of the FL in class had a positive effect on FLE but did not affect FLCB nor FLCA. Only FLCA had a significant negative effect on FL performance.

Similarly, Tsang and Dewaele (2023) looked at FLE, FLCA, and FLCB of 111 primary school pupils learning English in Hong Kong. They also found a negative correlation between FLE and both FLCA and FLCB—which were positively linked. Only FLE predicted learners' engagement and proficiency.

Following this avenue, Li et al. (2022) carried out a mediation analysis to identify direct and indirect effects of the classroom environment, FLE, FLCA, and FLLB on the WTC of 2268 EFL learners in Chinese universities. FLE was again found to be negatively related to both FLCA and FLLB, which were positively correlated. FLE was positively linked to WTC while FLCA and FLLB were negatively linked to it.

Similar patterns emerged in Li and Han's (2022) study of 348 Chinese EFL learners. FLE was negatively linked with FLCA and FLLB, which were positively correlated. FLE was positively linked with final English exam scores and self-perceived English achievement in the online English course. Both FLLB and FLCA were negatively linked with the dependent variables but only FLCA was a significant negative predictor of final English exam scores.

Addressing slightly different research questions, Li and Wei (2023) used a longitudinal design to investigate variation in the effects of FLE, FLCA, and FLLB on EFL performance of 954 junior secondary pupils in rural China. The predictive power of the three emotions waxed and waned over the 9-week period. FLE had the strongest positive effect from Time 2 to Time 4. FLCA only had a significant negative effect at Time 2 and Time 3 while FLLB only had a significant negative effect at Time 1.

Investigating the simultaneous the effect of FLE, FLCB, and FLCA on EFL test results of 502 Moroccan learners, Dewaele et al. (2023b) found FLCA and FLCB to be positively correlated, while FLCA and FLCB were negatively correlated with FLE. A latent dominance analysis revealed that FLCA (and to a lesser extent FLCB) had a strong negative effect on test performance. FLE was found to have a significant positive effect.

A cross-sectional mixed methods investigation by Dewaele et al. (2024) based on a slightly larger version ($N = 181$) of the database on which the current study is based, aimed to establish whether the intensity of FL emotions of the

89 learners in English classes that used the NLA teaching method (see the following section) was different from those of the 92 learners in standard action approach classes. Structural equation modeling revealed that the NLA teaching method had a significant positive effect on FLE, and had slightly weaker but still significant negative effects on FLCB and FLCA. FLCA and FLCB were found to be positively correlated with each other and negatively correlated with FLE. An axiological analysis of the emotional stances expressed through adjectives, adverbs, nouns, and verbs in the descriptions of enjoyable and anxiety-provoking episodes in class showed that NLA pupils reported more FLE, less FLCB but equal levels of FLCA compared to their peers in the standard EFL classes. Re-analysis of the qualitative data on the whole sample showed that the most frequent orientation was enjoyment ($n = 258$, 82%), followed by anxiety ($n = 130$, 41%), evaluative pressure ($n = 116$, 37%), and boredom linked to teaching method ($n = 105$, 33%).

Adopting a short-term longitudinal design, Guedat-Bittighoffer and Dewaele (2023) investigated variation in FLE, FLCA, and FLCB of seven adult immigrant learners of FL French in five successive NLA classes over a 3-week period. Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data revealed that in lesson three—that happened to be taught by a different teacher—learners' FLCA peaked and their teacher appreciation dropped.

2.4.1 | The teaching of English in public schools in France

FL instruction in France is linked to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) which is based on an action-oriented approach that focuses on genuine communicative practices in addition to cognitive and cultural skills.¹ The aim for absolute beginners in France is to develop their agency and to reach the A1 level for oral and written communication within the first 5 school years. This includes five language activities: Listening and understanding; Reading and understanding; Producing fluent speech; Writing, reacting, and conversing; Discovering cultural aspects of the foreign language (*Bulletin Officiel de L'Education Nationale*, 2020). The official focus on communication belies the fact that in practice, spontaneous authentic communication in class is rather infrequent as teachers often focus more on written language, on grammar exercises, on vocabulary lists, and on linguistic accuracy.

A number of French schools have run pilot projects using the NLA in their FL classes (Bel, 2023). The core idea of NLA is that declarative memory does not play a central role in FL acquisition and that teachers should instead train learners' procedural memory through spontaneous oral communication in classrooms (Germain, 2018; Netten & Germain, 2004, 2005). Germain argues that rather than accumulating knowledge through lists of words and grammar rules, FL learners should focus on acquiring oral and written skills in authentic communication through intensive use. Teachers are advised to activate learners' limbic system in order to boost their WTC (Germain, 2018). Guedat-Bittighoffer (2024) points out that NLA boosts learners' oral and written proficiency and also helps them develop a sense of safety and well-being in the classroom.

Nocus and Maksud (2023) carried out an NLA intervention study spread over a period of 7 months with 91 young teenagers of immigrant background learning French in France. Learners in the experimental group had NLA instruction while the control group had the traditional action approach. The 44 learners in the experimental group were found to have made significantly stronger progress than the 44 peers in the control group for OPI scores (small effect size) but no significant differences emerged for other linguistic variables reflecting oral and written skills (receptive vocabulary, phonological awareness, names of letters, identification of written words, number of words and utterances produced in a written task, including number of adjectives and adverbs).

Dat et al. (2024) investigated to what extent the NLA teaching method was linked to better progress in oral proficiency of 179 young EFL learners over one school year compared to standard action approach EFL classes. The effect was significant (medium effect size), with the experimental group increasing by an average of 1.9 OPI values by the end of the year compared to an average increase of 0.7 OPI values in the control group ($p = .11$). Additional analysis of the data showed that the OPI scores of 77 out of 78 of participants in the experimental group increased by one or more points compared to only 45 out of 81 participants in the control group. The authors attribute the success of the experimental group to their authentic social use of the target language which allowed them to develop

conversation skills in English. OPI values of the experimental group were significantly lower at Time 1 than those of the control group but that they had overtaken the control group by the end of the year. This study did not investigate the link between FL learner emotions and the amount of progress in OPI values.

Summing up, the literature review has shown that applied linguistic investigations into FL learner emotions cover a wider range of emotions—now typically including FLE, FLCA, and FLCB—that all affect performance to some degree. Negative emotions in particular seem to typically explain more variance in performance than positive emotions. What remains to be investigated is whether the three emotions have similar effects in cross-sectional and in longitudinal designs. In other words, do they affect performance in the moment as much as they shape progress over a longer term? The current study relies on OPI gain scores obtained from a previous longitudinal study but is cross-sectional in nature.

The following research questions were formulated:

1. To what extent is the gain in oral proficiency over one school year linked to participants' levels of FLE, FLCA, and FLCB measured half-way through the school year?
2. To what extent do the three dimensions of FLE (Teacher Appreciation, FLE Personal, FLE Social) predict gain in oral proficiency over one school year?

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Participants

Participants were 159 pupils (91 female and 68 male) in eight beginner EFL classes in three public secondary schools in France²: a semi-urban secondary school, a semi-rural secondary school, and an urban secondary school in a priority education zone. Half of the classes had their English instruction based on the NLA method while the other half had the standard action-oriented approach combined with traditional elements (explicit grammar and vocabulary instruction). The three participating NLA teachers had received a 5-day instruction seminar (Dat et al., 2022). All students were taught the same curriculum.

Participants were pre-teens (*Mean age* = 11.2 years, *SD* = 0.40). All had French as a first language and 29 pupils had another first language (mostly Arabic: *n* = 22). They started their formal instruction in English with four 1-h classes a week over a period of 36 weeks.

3.2 | Research design

The research design was purely quantitative. Data was collected on the pupils' sociobiographical background and on their FL emotions through Likert-scale items during a single data collection in March 2022, 6 months into the school year. Data about the dependent variable, oral proficiency, were collected twice. The first OPI happened in late September 2021, 1 month into the school year. The second OPI happened in mid-June 2022, at the end of the school year. Interviewers were two teacher-researchers and one senior academic specialized in English who had received training by a specialist from MacfarLingua Language Services in News Brunswick, Canada on how to carry out the OPIs and on scoring procedures. The team was supervised by the third author.

3.3 | Instruments used to collect data on the independent variables

All the instruments had been translated into French and very slightly adapted to fit the EFL context (see the appendices in Dewaele et al., 2024). The first instrument was the nine-item S-FLES (Botes et al., 2021). In this study only

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics for the independent and dependent variables.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Skewness</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>
FLE	3.38	1.02	1.30	5.00	-0.26	-1.10
FLCA	2.67	0.99	0.75	5.00	0.47	-0.38
FLCB	2.50	1.09	1.00	5.00	0.41	-0.88
FLE Teacher	3.32	1.32	1.00	5.00	-0.26	-1.29
FLE Personal	3.76	1.02	1.00	5.00	-0.76	-0.12
FLE Social	3.04	1.13	1.00	5.00	-0.10	-0.97
OPI Time 1	11.04	0.75	10.00	14.00	1.01	2.46
OPI Time 2	12.33	1.07	10.00	15.00	0.02	-0.73
OPI gain score	1.30	1.03	-1.00	4.00	0.87	-0.36

Abbreviations: FLCA, foreign language classroom anxiety; FLCB, foreign language classroom boredom; FLE, foreign language enjoyment; OPI, Oral Proficiency Interview.

the higher-order factor of FLE was used. Items included were, for example: “J’aime cette classe en anglais” (It’s fun) and “La/le prof d’anglais est toujours prêt/e à aider » (My English teacher is supportive). All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Internal consistency was very good ($\alpha = 0.901$).

The second instrument was the S-FLCAS consisting of eight items (Botes, van der Westhuizen et al., 2022). Items included were, for example, “Je commence à paniquer quand je dois parler sans préparation en cours d’anglais” (I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in FL class). All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Internal consistency was very good ($\alpha = 0.844$).

The third instrument was the 8-item FL Classroom Boredom subscale from the 32-item FLLB scale (Li et al., 2023). It shares the context with FLE and FLCA. FLCB items included, for example, “Le temps passe lentement dans la classe d’anglais” (Time is dragging on in English class) and “La classe d’anglais m’ennuie” (The English class bores me). All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Internal consistency was very good ($\alpha = 0.909$).

The questionnaire concluded with two open-ended questions inviting participants to report a very positive and a very negative episode in the English class.

3.4 | Dependent variable

The dependent variable in this study was the difference in OPI scores between Time 1 (start of school year) and Time 2 (end of school year). Reliability for this instrument has been reported to be high (Surface & Dierdorff, 2004). Four major levels of proficiency are distinguished: novice, intermediate, advanced, and superior. The OPI levels correspond with the CEFR levels (Bärenfänger & Tschirner, 2012). The OPI scores of our participants ranged from 10 to 15, that is, from novice low-level speakers to intermediate high-level speakers (see Table 1).

3.5 | Data collection procedure

The study has been carried out in accordance with The Code of Ethics of the World Medical Association (Declaration of Helsinki). After obtaining ethical approval from their research institutions and approval from the three participating secondary schools, the second and third authors explained to the respective headmasters, teachers, and pupils’ parents what the study would entail. Anonymity was guaranteed. Participants filled out the printed version of the questionnaire after ticking a consent box at the start.

TABLE 2 Pearson correlation analysis between the three learner emotions and Oral Proficiency Interview gain scores ($N = 159$).

Emotion	OPI gain score
FLE	0.470***
FLCB	-0.426***
FLCA	-0.297***

Abbreviations: FLCA, foreign language classroom anxiety; FLCB, foreign language classroom boredom; FLE, foreign language enjoyment.

*** $p < 0.001$, two tailed.

TABLE 3 Pearson correlation analysis between the three foreign language enjoyment (FLE) dimensions and Oral Proficiency Interview gain scores ($N = 159$).

FLE dimension	OPI gain score
Teacher	0.460***
Personal	0.405***
Social	0.380***

*** $p < 0.001$, two tailed.

3.6 | Data analysis

Descriptive statistics for all variables were calculated in SPSS 28. Skewness and kurtosis values for the three emotions, the three dimensions of FLE, and the OPI gain scores fall within the acceptable range for normal distribution (Table 1). Skewness values fall within the recommended range of -2.0 to 2.0 and kurtosis values are well within the recommended range of -7.0 to 7.0 (Byrne, 2010).

4 | RESULTS

A Pearson correlation analysis was used to answer the first question on the relationship between pupils' emotions and the amount of change in the OPI scores. It showed that a significant positive relationship exists between FLE and the OPI gain scores (Table 2). In other words, pupils who enjoyed themselves most were the ones who made most progress. In contrast, significant negative correlations emerge between FLCB, FLCA, and OPI gain scores. Very bored and anxious pupils were less likely to have made much progress in oral proficiency.

To determine the contribution of each learner emotion in explaining variance in the OPI gain scores, a multiple regression analysis was run (enter method). The Durbin-Watson value (1.50) and the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for FLE, FLCB, and FLCA (2.29, 2.40, and 1.28, respectively) indicated no problem with autocorrelation nor multicollinearity. Normality and residual plots indicated linearity and homoscedasticity. A significant regression equation was found (adjusted $R^2 = 0.23$, $F(3, 155) = 16.42$, $p < 0.001$) with FLE as the only significant (positive) predictor ($\beta = 0.326$, $t = 3.08$, $p = 0.002$) (Figure 1). This represents a small effect size (Plonsky & Ghanbar, 2018). Both FLCB and FLCA failed to reach significance (with $\beta = -0.138$, $t = -1.27$, $p = ns$ and $\beta = -0.098$, $t = -1.23$, $p = ns$, respectively).

To answer the second research question on the relationship between the three FLE dimensions and OPI gain scores, we first ran a Pearson correlation analysis (see Table 3).

A multiple regression analysis was used (enter method) to determine how much unique variance the three FLE dimensions explained in the OPI gain scores. The Durbin-Watson value (1.49) and the VIF values for FLE, FLCB, and FLCA (2.82, 2.52, and 1.78, respectively) indicated no problem with autocorrelation nor multicollinearity. Normality

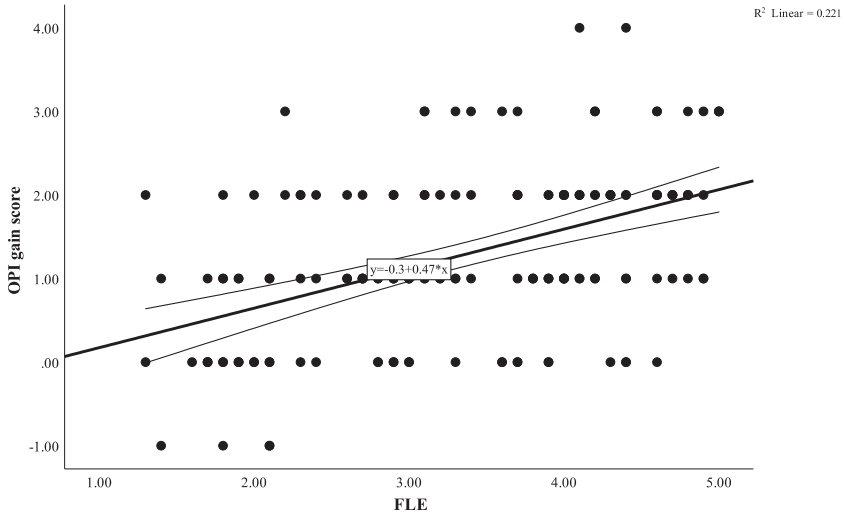


FIGURE 1 Regression line for foreign language enjoyment and Oral Proficiency Interview gain scores (with 95% confidence intervals).

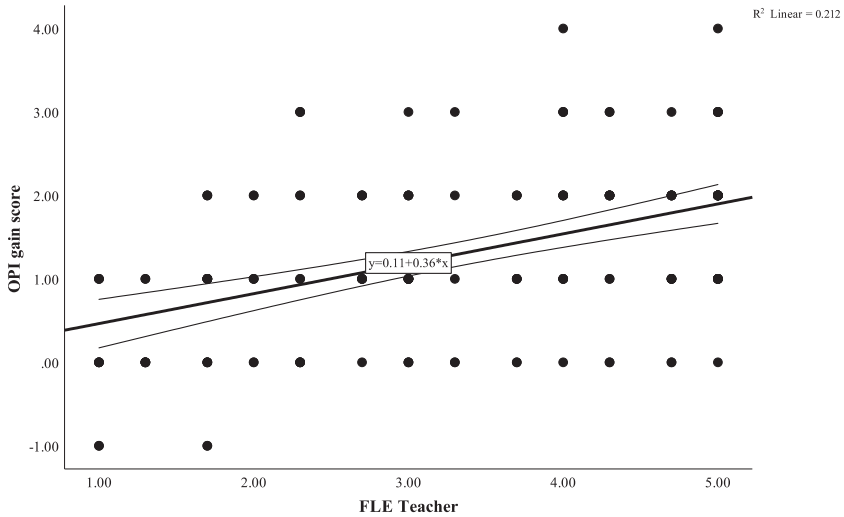


FIGURE 2 Regression line for foreign language enjoyment Teacher and Oral Proficiency Interview gain scores (with 95% confidence intervals).

and residual plots indicated linearity and homoscedasticity. A significant regression equation was found (adjusted $R^2 = 0.21$, $F(3, 155) = 15.21$, $p < 0.001$) with FLE Teacher as the only significant (positive) predictor ($\beta = 0.305$, $t = 2.58$, $p = 0.011$) (Figure 2). This represents a small effect size (Plonsky & Ghanbar, 2018).

5 | DISCUSSION

The first research question focused on the relationship between participants' levels of FLE, FLCA, FLCB, and their amount of gain on the OPI scale. The findings echo previous studies using different designs and a variety of

self-reported or non-validated performance measures, as well as a meta-analysis, that showed a strong positive relationship between FLE and achievement (Botes et al., 2022; Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Li & Han, 2022; Tsang & Dewaele, 2023), and a strong negative relationship between FLCA, FLCB, and achievement (Botes et al., 2020; Dewaele, Botes et al., 2023a; Li & Han, 2022). The most striking finding emerged in the multiple regression analysis where FLE turned out to be the sole (positive) predictor of gain in oral proficiency, albeit with a small effect size. This statistical pattern echoes the finding in the qualitative data about enjoyable and anxiety-inducing episodes reported by the same participants (Dewaele et al., 2024). The enjoyment orientation for the whole sample was twice as frequent as the anxiety orientation and more than double the frequency of the boredom orientation.

It thus seems that participants who enjoyed themselves in their English classes were more likely to throw off the shackles of FLCA and FLCB to improve their proficiency in English. This echoes the longitudinal findings of Li and Wei (2023) and Li et al. (2024) who found that the negative relationship between FLLB and EFL achievement weakened toward the end of the academic year, which the authors attribute to the neutralizing effect of positive emotions and attitudes. It is an encouraging observation because while it suggests that negative emotions act as a drag, it is enjoyment that provides the lift-off in proficiency after a while. As Fredrickson (2006) pointed out, positive emotions can broaden learners' thought-action repertoires and strengthen their resources allowing them to neutralize the lingering effects of negative emotions. It is likely that experiencing the right combination of emotions allow learners to engage in classroom activities, to control their anxiety, to speak up in class, to appreciate the progress in learning, to foster an optimistic mindset, and to commit to their learning in the long term (Dewaele et al., 2019; Li et al., 2022). We can only speculate why FLCA, which is typically a strong negative predictor of performance at a single point in time (Dewaele et al., 2023a, 2023b; Dewaele, Botes et al., 2023a; Li & Han, 2022; Li & Wei, 2023), did not turn out to be a strong predictor of amount of progress in proficiency. Could it be that FLCA is more likely to inhibit performance in tests and exams (MacIntyre, 2017)—which is how the relationship has mostly been investigated—but is less likely to affect longer-term growth in the ability to have a conversation? The OPI proficiency measure was based on an authentic oral interaction between the student and the interviewer. It was not a "test," and the interviewer was not the teacher. In other words, participants did not have to fear that a weak performance would lead to a poor grade. It was a conversation around a series of personalized questions on topics that students had covered during the school year. Moreover, participants knew exactly what to expect when they had their second OPI interview at the end of the school year. They may have experienced pride in demonstrating the progress they had made since the first interview. In other words, they may have enjoyed the second OPI interview more than the first, which may have added a further boost to their performance.

The second research question focused on the effect of the three FLE dimensions on OPI gains. It showed that FLE Teacher was the only significant predictor. This echoes the finding in Dewaele and Meftah (2024) that FLE is still developing among beginners and that while the different FLE dimensions may develop at comparable rates as learners progress in their journey, they do not affect the amount of gain to the same extent. Beginning learners have not yet developed much agency and their progress depends very much on having an encouraging, supportive, and friendly teacher.

The pedagogical implication of the present findings is one that has been repeated in learner emotions studies over the last few years, namely that linguistic progress does not just depend on learners' cognition but that it is also linked to their (positive) emotions during FL classes and to the psychological and motivational benefits that they bring. In creating a safe, fun, positive emotional atmosphere in their classroom with appropriately challenging tasks, teachers can create the conditions where meaningful communication with learners becomes possible, which will further boost the amount of trust, solidarity, and mutual respect between learners and teacher (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014, 2016, 2019; Dewaele et al., 2024; Li, 2021; Li & Dewaele, 2024; Li et al., 2024). In creating a space where learners feel safe (Guedat-Bittighoffer, 2024), teachers who clearly care about their students can lay the foundation of a positive feedback loop that will allow learners to soar (Cohn et al., 2009).

This study is not without limitations. Information on learner emotions was collected only once, half-way through the year. The reasoning was that these emotions needed to emerge, and might not have done so after a mere 2 weeks

of EFL classes when the first OPI interviews were held. Another limitation is that the qualitative information collected as part of the project did not focus on progress in oral proficiency, so we did not have the participants' views on why had (or had not) progressed over the year.

6 | CONCLUSION

The three FL learner emotions that were included in the present research design were found to shape FL performance and development differently. Previous research using cross-sectional designs showed that negative emotions such as FLCA and FLCB have a more powerful effect on FL performance than positive emotions at a single point in time. The current study suggests that these negative emotions have a weaker effect on measures of progress covering several months. While correlation analyses showed that the amount of progress over one school year was significantly positively linked with FLE and negatively linked with FLCA and FLCB—in line with previous research—a multiple regression analysis revealed that FLE was in fact the only significant (positive) predictor of the amount of progress in oral proficiency. More fine-grained analysis revealed that the FLE Teacher dimension was in fact the only predictor of amount of gain. What this suggests is that the FLE of these 159 young learners depended very much on their teacher's ability to meet their psychological needs. Their FLE may not yet have reached its fully formed trait-like shape but it was already powerful enough to significantly boost progress in English oral proficiency and to overcome the drag of FLCA and FLCB.

To conclude, learner emotions play a crucial role in FL learning. Positive emotions are the psychological basis on which engagement can grow and they sustain learners' performance and progress.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request from the authors.

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TRANSPARENT PEER REVIEW

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ENDNOTES

¹<https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/the-action-oriented-approach>

²Twenty-two of the original 181 participants in Dewaele et al. (2024) did not complete one or two of the Oral Proficiency Interviews and were therefore excluded from the present study.

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