



Exploring the Levels of Foreign Language Enjoyment among Thai Students and Its Contributing Factors through the Lens of Positive Psychology

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Introduction

The recent introduction of the Positive Psychology theory (PP, hereafter) to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Dewaele & Li, 2020; MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014) appears to have captured the interest of scholars across different linguistics and educational contexts (Oyama, 2022; Wang et al., 2021). SLA researchers have notably redirected their attention toward the exploration of positive emotions, such as love, happiness, and enjoyment (Dewaele et al., 2019a) among teachers and students. This stands in contrast to the prior prevailing emphasis on the examination of negative emotions, such as anxiety, anger, and fear (Wang & Zhang, 2021). To this end, many studies on positive emotions are being conducted across the SLA milieu (Dewaele & Li, 2020; Wang et al., 2021), with particular attention to foreign language enjoyment (FLE) (Dewaele et al., 2019a). The belief is that learners who enjoy the learning process and experience happiness are more likely to achieve greater success (Seligman, 2011). Some aspects of FLE that have captured the attention of SLA scholars are the examination of levels of FLE among foreign language (FL) learners (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Dewaele et al., 2018), relationship between FL learners' language proficiency and their FLE levels (Dewaele et al., 2019a; Su, 2022), and the exploration of factors that contribute to FLE (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Li et al., 2018).

This said, since FLE emerged as a prominent subject of discussion within the SLA community primarily following the influential research by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), there still exist several FL teaching and learning contexts where aforesaid aspects have not been comprehensively investigated. It is fair to say that Thailand is undoubtedly one of these contexts because as in any other context, the literature review indicated that Thai SLA scholars were directed toward investigating aspects of negative emotions such as anxiety, stress, and boredom (Charoensukmongkol, 2019; Shimray & Wangdi, 2023). There is a dearth of research on positive aspects of emotions in Thai contexts and more specifically there is a gap in the knowledge on the levels of FLE among Thai learners, the relationship between learners' language proficiency and their FLE levels and factors that contribute to Thai learners' enjoyment in English classrooms, particularly from the lens of positive psychology.



Hence, the present study was conducted to fill this research gap. The findings of this study are anticipated to offer valuable guidance for English educators in the context and beyond on how to cultivate positive emotions and address negative emotions among foreign language (FL) learners. Because the cultivation of positive emotions within learners is believed to help them acquire the target language better and subsequently improve their learning outcomes (Dewaele et al., 2019a). Furthermore, this study is expected to provide a new direction for future researchers who are inclined to delve into positive emotions through the lens of PP theory. The study seeks to answer the following three questions.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of FLE among Thai university students?
2. Is there a relationship between learners' SPLP and their levels of FLE?
3. What are the underlying factors that contribute to the FLE of Thai university students?

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework of the Study

The current research is conducted based on one of the latest emerging theories in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA): Positive Psychology. PP draws its foundation from two well-established theories: the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2004) and the control-value theory of achievement emotions (Pekrun, 2006). These theories emphasize the importance and benefits of cultivating positive emotions among learners. These two theories serve as the underpinning principles for PP, guiding its exploration of human flourishing and well-being. Positive Psychology (PP) centralizes its attention on enhancing human well-being. Its objective is to create a means of cultivating positive emotions while also alleviating negative emotions among individuals. PP addresses three main areas of focus: understanding positive internal experiences, including emotions; exploring positive individual characteristics, such as traits associated with well-being; and studying institutions that contribute to people's development (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014).

Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE)

Enjoyment in a foreign language classroom is defined as a favorable emotional state experienced by language learners when their psychological requirements are fulfilled while engaging in challenging language-learning tasks (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Owing to the benefit enjoyment has on learners' language learning, motivation to learn language, and language achievement, recent years have seen a surge in interest among SLA researchers regarding the role of enjoyment in the foreign language classroom (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Dewaele et al., 2019a). Different aspects of FLE, such as students' levels of FLE and its relationship with their language proficiency, and factors that influence FLE are currently under extensive investigation (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Dewaele et al., 2019a).

Levels of FLE among FL Learners

As for levels of FLE, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) investigated FLE levels of European, North American, South American, and Arab FL learners. The study involved 1746 foreign language learners and their FLE was assessed based on their attitude towards peers, teachers and learning experience. In doing this, the study's findings found that the average mean score of FLE among these students was 3.82 (SD = 0.46), with Asian FL learners having the lowest FLE level and North American learners the highest.

Dewaele et al., (2018) conducted a similar study with 189 secondary students in London who were learning foreign languages such as German, Spanish, and French. These participants were made to respond to the FLE scale based on their social FLE and Private FLE (see, Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016) and the findings of the study unveiled an average FLE mean score of 3.9 (SD = 0.6). Later, Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018) looked at the FLE levels of 152 Saudi university students on an English lexical decision task. The average FLE mean score for this participant was 3.4 (SD = 0.9), slightly lower than the findings of the previous studies discussed in this section. In a study conducted by Dewaele et al. (2019) with 210 Spanish EFL learners, the average mean value of FLE was found 3.92 (SD = .54), similar to those of 564 Chinese undergraduate English as foreign language learners, with average FLE mean scores of 3.94 (SD = 0.54) (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019).

Relationship Between Proficiency and FLE Levels

Su (2022) explored potential variations in FLE levels between intermediate and low English proficiency with 231 Chinese EFL learners and it was found that there was no significant difference in FLE levels between these two proficiency groups. In sharp contrast, Dewaele et al. (2018) reported in their study that students with better language abilities have higher levels of FLE. Botes et al. (2020) also shared a similar finding, where they found FL learners with higher self-perceived foreign language proficiency have a higher level of FLE. A similar claim was made by Mierzwa (2018), who conducted a study in Poland with 233 secondary students. The author pointed out that learners with higher language proficiency levels have higher levels of FLE and vice-versa. Furthermore, it was said that there exists a positive correlation between learners' proficiency and their levels of FLE. Jiang and Dewaele (2019) carried out a study with 564 Chinese undergraduate FL learners and they confirmed that there is a positive relationship between learners' English language proficiency and their levels of FLE. More recently, Wang et al. (2023) further affirmed that learners' language proficiency is directly proportional to their FLE.

Contributing Factors of FLE

Regarding the factors that contribute to students' enjoyment in foreign language classrooms, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) identified classroom activities and teachers' personality traits as notable sources of FLE among FL learners. They highlighted that while boring classroom activities can negatively influence students' FLE, teachers who exhibit qualities such as happiness, positivity, supportiveness, humor, and respect for students can improve the level of students' FLE. Furthermore, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2016) noted that an individual's interactions and relationships with teachers and peers, instances of laughter within the classroom, common interests among students, feelings of pride, enjoyable experiences, and the sense of accomplishment felt by students are some other sources of FLE. Elahi Shirvan and Talebzadeh (2018) suggested that the way students are grouped in the classroom can also impact learners' FLE levels. According to the authors, students who share common interests in topics tend to experience greater enjoyment in the classroom compared to their peers who do not share such common interests. Moreover, gender (with older learners exhibiting higher FLE), language proficiency, as well as classroom atmosphere, have been identified as contributors to learners' FLE (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2017). Additionally, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) divulged those learners demonstrating greater self-efficacy beliefs – perceiving themselves as more capable than their peers – displayed higher levels of FLE. Li et al. (2018) categorized factors that contribute to learners' FLE into three major dimensions: teacher-related, private-related, and atmosphere-related.

Methods

Research Design

The present study employed a concurrent mixed-method research design. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the same time. While quantitative data primarily focused on investigating the levels of FLE among Thai FL learners based on three dimensions: teacher-related, personal-related, and social-related proposed by Botes et al. (2021), the emphasis of the qualitative data was on exploring the factors that contribute to Thai learners' FLE in the English classroom.

Research Participants

This study involved 121 participants (55 males and 66 females) aged between 18 and 22. The participants consisted of first-year students who willingly took part in the research. All these individuals were enrolled in General English courses at Walailak University and were native Thai speakers. They were from diverse faculties such as Nursing, Political Science and Law, Public Health, Allied Health Sciences, Architecture and Design, Engineering and Technology, Informatics, and Management. The Self-Perceived Language Proficiency (SPLP) of these participants was moderate (63.63%) and low (36.36%).

Instruments

A survey questionnaire was employed for this study. The first part of the survey questionnaire included a brief introduction of the present study, options where participants could provide their consent, demographic information of participants (e.g., gender, age, and major), SPLP (e.g., high, moderate, and low), and Shortened Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (S-FLES). The S-FLES was developed and validated by Botes et al. (2021) and it consisted of 9 items, focused on assessing three key dimensions of FLE: teacher-related, personal-related, and social-related enjoyment. Each of these dimensions was represented by a set of 3 items. The Cronbach's Alpha value of the survey questionnaire for this study was 0.881.

The second part of the survey involved two open-ended questions devised to investigate factors that contribute to Thai learners' FLE. The questions were: 'From your perspective, what are a few distinct factors that add to your enjoyment while studying the English language' and 'Narrate one or two particular instances in which you experienced a strong sense of enjoyment while learning English.' Both survey and open-ended questions were translated into Thai and were provided in both Thai and English. Participants were given options to choose their preferred language to respond.

Data Collection

Employing a convenience sampling method, researchers shared the Google Forms link with their students by using a Facebook group that was created as a communication channel between teachers and students. Although the link to the survey was shared with more than 200 students, only 121 of them responded. Students were given two weeks to complete the survey.

Data Analysis

In response to the first research question, a descriptive analysis such as mean and standard deviation were calculated using SPSS 26. Followed by an independent sample t-test to assess potential differences in the levels of FLE between moderate and low-level English language proficiency students and the Pearson correlation coefficient to gauge the relationship between students' SPLP and their levels of FLE. For the

second research question, we conducted a thematic analysis following the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This analysis was applied to the responses collected from the open-ended questions. The process involved familiarising, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing. Every expressed emotion or factor that adds to learners' enjoyment was treated as an individual coding unit. For example, if participants mentioned two sources of enjoyment within a single statement, both were acknowledged and presented as sub-themes within the main themes (cf. Shimray & Wangdi, 2023).

Results

Thai University Students' Levels of FLE

The descriptive analysis of the mean and standard deviation of participants' levels of FLE is presented in Table 1. The average FLE means scores on three dimensions: teacher-related enjoyment (items 1,2 &3), personal-related enjoyment (items 3,4 & 5), and social-related enjoyment (items 6,7 & 8) was 4.25 (SD = 0.78). The participants reported mean scores of teacher-related were the highest (M = 4.56, SD = 0.63), followed by personal-related (Mean = 4.13, SD = 0.84) and social-related enjoyment (Mean = 4.06, SD = 0.88).

TABLE 1

Participants FLE levels

Items	Mean	SD
1. The English teacher is encouraging	4.41	0.76
2. The English teacher is friendly	4.69	0.53
3. The English teacher is supportive	4.59	0.60
4. I enjoy learning English	4.17	0.84
5. I have learned interesting things in English classrooms	4.19	0.80
6. In English class, I feel proud of my accomplishments	4.05	0.87
7. My friends and I get along very well in the English classroom	4.21	0.84
8. My friends and I share common "interests" and sometimes make jokes in the classroom	4.03	0.84
9. My friends and I laugh a lot in the English classroom	3.95	0.97
Average	4.25	0.78

TABLE 2

Difference in Levels of FLE Based on Their SPLP

Proficiency Levels	N	Mean	SD	t-value	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Low	44	3.98	0.64	-4.26	119	0.000
Moderate	77	4.41	0.45	-3.89		

The result presented in Table 2 shows that there is a significant difference in the levels of FLE between those students who perceived having moderate and low language proficiency levels. The average FLE mean scores of low and moderate English language proficiency levels students were 3.98 (SD = 0.64) and 4.41 (SD = 0.45) respectively, with a significant difference of average FLE mean value at $P < 0.001$.

Relationship between SPLP and FLE

The Pearson Correlation Coefficient analysis revealed a significant (at $p < 0.01$) relationship between SPLP and learners' FLE levels. The analysis is presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Relationship between SPLP and FLE

		FLE	SPLP
FLE	Pearson Correlation	1	0.364
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000*
	N	121	121
SPLP	Pearson Correlation	0.364	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000*	
	N	121	121

Note. *Correlation is significant at $p < 0.01$.

Factors that Contribute to FLE

Figure 1 illustrates four overarching themes: Teacher-related, Task-related, Peer-related, and Personal-related and their corresponding sub-themes that contribute to Thai students' FLE of FLE. The result revealed teacher-related FLE (n= 80.99%) as the highest reported source of FLE. Followed by task-related FLE (n=71.07%), peer-related FLE (n=59.50%), and personal-related FLE (n=48.76%). The sub-themes with the corresponding number of students who mentioned the same source of FLE are presented in Figure 1.

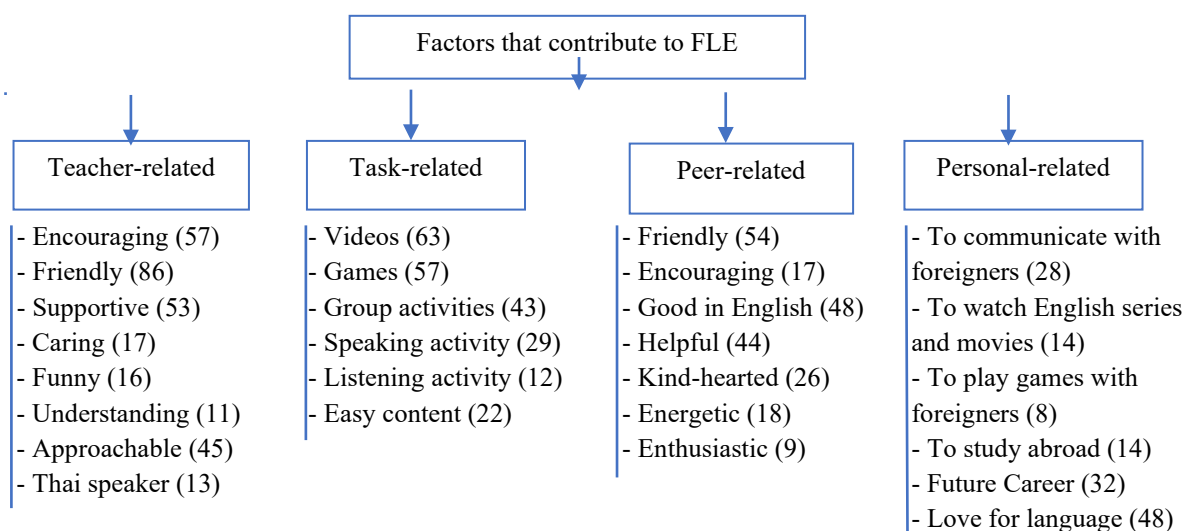


Figure 1. Factors that contribute to students' FLE.

Discussion

The current study investigated FLE levels among Thai university students. It explored potential variations in FLE levels based on differing levels of English language proficiency, examined the relationship between Self-Perceived Language Proficiency (SPLP) and FLE levels, and identified contributing factors to students' experience of FLE.

In doing this, our first finding revealed that the average mean score of FLE was 4.25 (SD = 0.78), comparatively higher than the reported mean score of 3.82 (SD = 0.46) by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), who investigated FLE levels of FL learners from Europe, North America, South America, and Arab countries. The average mean score of FLE of the present participants was also higher than those of Saudi university students with average mean scores of 3.4 (SD = 0.9) (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018), Spanish EFL

learners with an average mean score of 3.92 (SD = .54) (Dewaele et al., 2019), and finally Chinese FL learners whose average mean scores of FLE were reported to be 3.94 (SD = 0.54) (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). This finding suggests that Thai university learners find more enjoyment in learning English compared to certain FL learners in different settings. The possible explanation for having high levels of FLE among present participants might be attributed to the higher level of encouragement (57), friendliness (86), approachability (45), and support (53) exhibited by teachers. Moreover, the teachers' incorporation of videos (63), games (57), and group activities in the classroom seemingly have contributed to participants' higher FLE levels. Furthermore, the positive quality of peers, including being friendly (54), helpful (44), and proficient in English (48), along with the individual's intrinsic love for the language (48) and their career goal (32) could be some other reasons behind high levels of FLE among present participants. It is recommended that FL educators take these factors into account when aiming to enhance FLE levels among their students

Next, a significant difference in FLE levels existed between students who perceived their English language proficiency as moderate and those who perceived it as low. While this finding rejected the assumptions made by Su (2022), whose study's findings divulged a non-significant difference in FLE levels between intermediate and low language proficiency students, it was consistent with the findings of Mierzwa (2018) and Botes et al. (2020). This means those students who are proficient in the target foreign language are likely to enjoy more in learning foreign languages and vice-versa. Another noteworthy finding pertains to the observed positive correlation between SPLP and levels of FLE. This finding affirms the findings of prior research studies (Dewaele et al., 2018; Jiang & Dewaele, 2019; Wang et al., 2023), which similarly reported a positive correlation between learners' English language proficiency and their FLE levels. However, further studies are required to confirm the findings of the present study.

Finally, one of the most important if not the most important findings of this study was being able to identify several factors that contribute to FL learners' FLE levels. Our findings identified four possible factors, which are likely to contribute to FLE among FL learners. These included teacher-related, task-related, peer-related, and personal-related factors. The findings were consistent with many previous studies (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2017; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; Elahi Shirvan & Talebzadeh, 2018; Li et al., 2018), most of whom have identified teachers, classroom activities, social environment and personal goals as factors that contributed to FLE among FL learners. More importantly, our findings not only supported the three dimensions of FLE proposed by Li et al. (2018), which are teacher-related FLE, personal-related FLE, and atmosphere-related FLE, it also extended by adding another new variable, which is task-related FLE. This finding may serve as a huge theoretical contribution to the field of SLA. On the whole, students appear to enjoy the most when their teachers are encouraging, friendly, supportive, caring, funny, understanding, approachable, and with the one who can use students' L1. The essence of such qualities of teachers, especially for Thai learners when learning the English language was indeed underscored in the study conducted by Wangdi and Shimray (2022a) who investigated perceived good qualities of English teachers from Thai students' perspective. Additionally, it seems that some students enjoy more with those who speak their first language (L1). Some participants testified that they enjoyed learning English with teachers who could speak their L1. This claim is consistent with Wangdi and Shimray (2022b), whose findings conclude that the use of L1 in English classrooms reduces the boredom, anxiety, and stress (negative emotions) of learners.

Another finding indicated that students enjoy their English classrooms more when their instructors incorporate videos, such as short clips from YouTube and some interactive elements like games (e.g., quizzes, Kahoot, etc.) into their lessons. Additionally, it is noteworthy that students express their appreciation for frequent group activities and a focus on speaking and listening exercises in their English learning experiences. Interestingly, there was no specific mention of a similar emphasis on writing and reading in their responses, suggesting that Thai students may have a preference for speaking and listening exercises over reading and writing tasks. Therefore, it is recommended that English instructors invest their efforts in devising exercises that primarily focus on listening and speaking skills, as this approach can contribute to cultivating an engaging and enjoyable learning environment. Besides, a social factor,

particularly their relationship with peers (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; Talebzadeh, 2018) also seems to add to learners' enjoyment levels in English classrooms. Some participants pointed out that they enjoy learning English with friends who exhibit friendliness and a high level of encouragement, are helpful, kind-hearted, energetic, enthusiastic to learn and are proficient in the English language. Finally, although students who reported personal-related factors (see, Li et al., 2018) were comparatively lower than the other reported factors, there were several important points worth nothing. Participants mentioned that they enjoy learning English because they want to master the language and communicate with foreigners, watch English series and movies, play games with foreigners, study abroad, as well as indulge in their individual passion to learn the target language. This indicates that intrinsic motivation to learn the FL is undoubtedly one of the contributing factors to FLE.

Conclusion

The first finding of this study found that Thai university students' FLE level is comparatively higher than those of FL learners from Europe, North America, South America, and Arab countries (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014), Saudi university students (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018), Spanish EFL learners (Dewaele et al., 2019), and Chinese FL learners (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). However, further studies are necessary to confirm this finding as it may not be representative of all students in the context. Second, there is a significant difference in FLE levels among moderate and low levels of English proficiency. There also exists a positive correlation between the language proficiency and FLE levels. Finally, the findings indicated that the levels of FLE among FL learners might be influenced by four primary categories of factors: those related to teachers, tasks, peers, and personal aspects. FL educators can thus take the findings of this study, particularly the reported factors into account to help learners increase their positive emotions (i.e., enjoyment) and mitigate negative emotions because research studies have evidenced that learners who enjoy the learning process and experience happiness achieve greater success (Seligman, 2011).

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