



The Relationship between Foreign Language Enjoyment and Students' Willingness to Communicate in EFL Context

Shengliang Wang

Faculty for College English, Zhejiang Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages, Shaoxing, China
Email: 35390372@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Wang, S.L. (2026)
The Relationship between Foreign
Language Enjoyment and Students'
Willingness to Communicate in EFL
Context. *Open Access Library Journal*, 13:
e15851.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1115851>

Received: August 5, 2026

Accepted: September 12, 2026

Published: September 15, 2026

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Open
Access Library Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative
Commons Attribution International
License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Foreign language enjoyment (FLE), a key affective variable grounded in positive psychology, has received increasing attention in L2 acquisition in recent years. Based on a review of the conceptualization and classification of FLE, and drawing on theoretical models of willingness to communicate in the second language (L2 WTC), this paper explores the mechanisms underlying the relationship between FLE and L2 WTC. Findings indicate that FLE is positively associated with L2 WTC through pathways such as reducing communicative anxiety, enhancing psychological safety, and stimulating intrinsic learning motivation. Accordingly, this paper proposes pedagogical strategies from three perspectives: creating an emotionally supportive classroom environment, designing meaningful communicative tasks, and optimizing teacher feedback practices, aiming to provide implications for foreign language teaching practice.

Subject Areas

Language Education

Keywords

Foreign Language Enjoyment, Willingness to Communicate, Pedagogical Strategies

1. Introduction

Willingness to communicate (WTC) is a key antecedent of learners' actual use of the target language for communication (MacIntyre *et al.*, 1998) [1], directly affecting the frequency and quality of their language practice opportunities. How-

ever, learners' reluctance to communicate due to anxiety and lack of confidence is common in EFL classrooms, making the enhancement of students' communicative intention an important issue in foreign language teaching. In recent years, the rise of positive psychology has made Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) an important construct in second language acquisition research. Existing studies have shown that FLE is significantly predictive of Willingness to Communicate in the second language (L2 WTC) (Dewaele, 2019) [2], but systematic studies into the relationship between these two constructs and practical classroom enhancement strategies remain insufficient. Through a narrative review of literature on the relationship between FLE and L2 WTC, this paper discusses the mechanism underlying their relationship and proposes corresponding classroom strategies for enhancing students' L2 WTC.

2. Definition of FLE

Positive psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (1990) [3] defined enjoyment as a component of "flow", which refers to complete immersion in a behavior due to intrinsic motivation. Csikszentmihalyi (2014) [4] distinguished between enjoyment and pleasure in their definitions. Enjoyment is defined as the positive feeling that arises from pushing one's limits, surpassing oneself, and accomplishing new or even unexpected things, especially when facing difficult tasks. Conversely, pleasure is simply considered the positive feeling when one's homeostatic needs (such as food, rest and sleep) are met. For example, in language learning, when learners encounter particularly difficult articles or language structures, enjoyment may arise, and the learner's performance may exceed expectations, with complete focus on learning. Dewaele & MacIntyre (2016) [5] argued that enjoyment is a complex emotional state, a feeling of success achieved through effort, reflecting the human desire for success when facing difficult tasks. They distinguish enjoyment from happiness, believing that happiness does not require effort to attain. Ainley & Hidi (2014) [6] defined enjoyment as a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment arising from an activity or its outcome.

In the field of L2 acquisition, enjoyment is defined as an emotion that learners experience during the learning process and is closely related to the learning context (Jiang, 2020) [7]. Pavelescu & Petric (2018) [8] pointed out that enjoyment is related to teacher support, friendly peers, and a positive learning experience. Hao (2022) [9] added that enjoyment is a non-rational emotional experience inseparable from the language learning environment, having contextual characteristics.

The above studies all suggest that enjoyment is a positive psychological emotion, a sense of satisfaction from completing a task. In this study, FLE refers to senses of satisfaction, accomplishment and pleasure experienced during foreign language learning, a context-specific form of enjoyment closely related to the learning context. Since most Chinese students learn English as a **foreign** language, this study primarily focuses on FLE in the English classroom.

3. Classification of FLE

Dewaele & MacIntyre (2016) [5] categorized FLE into two dimensions: FLE-social and FLE-private. The former refers to the satisfaction learners experience in a positive classroom environment, evoked by peer encouragement, supportive teachers, and a supportive environment. The latter refers to the personal emotions learners experience when difficulties are overcome, including personal pride and satisfaction.

Based on positive psychology and the actual situation of Chinese students' foreign language learning, Li *et al.* (2018) [10] divided FLE into three dimensions: FLE-private, FLE-teacher, and FLE-atmosphere. Specifically, students' personal enjoyment, teachers' teaching attitudes and methods, and a positive classroom environment can all enhance students' FLE. FLE-private is associated with the personal enjoyment derived from pushing beyond personal limits or personal progress, outstanding performance, and exciting experiences in foreign language learning, for example, achieving improvement in writing skills. FLE-teacher captures students' enjoyment derived from the inspirational and supportive attitude of their foreign language teachers during foreign language learning, for example, high praise from English teachers for students. FLE-atmosphere refers to how students perceive the positive atmosphere created in the foreign language classroom through group activities, for example, engaging in enjoyable role-playing in a foreign language with teammates.

Jin and Zhang (2018) [11] proposed that FLE consists of three dimensions: enjoyment of English learning, enjoyment of teacher support, and enjoyment of student support. Enjoyment of English learning concerns learners' personal enjoyment and is related to learners' autonomy, sense of accomplishment, and the learning process itself. Enjoyment of teacher support and enjoyment of student support stem from positive teacher-student and student-student relationships.

4. Willingness to Communicate

MacIntyre *et al.* (1998) [1] argued that the goal of L2 teaching is to enable learners to actively engage in L2 communication, and that WTC in an L2 is a key antecedent of actual communication. To explain individual differences in L2 WTC, MacIntyre *et al.* (1998) [1] constructed a pyramid model of L2 WTC, systematically categorizing its potential influencing factors into four levels: situational antecedents, motivational orientation, affective-cognitive environment, and social-individual environment. Based on the Chinese cultural background and the context of English learning, Wen & Clément (2003) [12] further explained how communicative desire is transformed into L2 WTC within the pyramid model, suggesting that social environment, personality factors, motivational orientation, and affective factors are important contributors to this transformation process. Related empirical studies have shown that positive emotional experiences, such as FLE, can predict L2 WTC (Wei *et al.*, 2022) [13].

Pekrun's (2006) [14] control-value theory also provided a theoretical basis for

research on L2 WTC. This theory posits that the external environment can evoke corresponding academic emotions by influencing learners' control and value appraisals. Learners' perceived control over learning activities and outcomes, along with their value assessment, are key factors influencing the generation and development of academic emotions (Pekrun, 2006) [14]. Therefore, this theory provides important theoretical support for exploring how learners' control and value assessment affect FLE, which further influences their L2 WTC.

The three dimensions of FLE identified by Li *et al.* (2018) [10]—FLE-private, FLE-teacher, and FLE-atmosphere—can be meaningfully mapped onto MacIntyre *et al.*'s (1998) [1] pyramid model of L2 WTC. Specifically, FLE-private, which concerns personal enjoyment derived from surpassing one's own limits and making progress in language learning, corresponds to the affective-cognitive level of the pyramid, where self-confidence and perceived communicative competence are central. FLE-teacher, reflecting students' enjoyment of teachers' supportive and inspirational attitudes, relates to the situational level, as teacher behavior constitutes an immediate antecedent in the classroom context. FLE-atmosphere, capturing the positive peer dynamics and group climate in the classroom, also operates at the situational level, as a positive classroom environment directly shapes learners' willingness to engage in communication at a given moment. This mapping suggests that FLE is not a single monolithic construct but operates across multiple levels of the L2 WTC pyramid, providing a theoretical basis for understanding how classroom emotional experiences may collectively shape learners' communicative readiness.

5. The Relationship between Classroom FLE and L2 WTC

With the development of positive psychology, research on the relationship between classroom FLE and L2 WTC has gradually increased, however, related studies remain relatively limited. Khajavy *et al.* (2018) [15] used a doubly latent multilevel analysis to explore the relationship among academic emotions, classroom atmosphere, and L2 WTC. The results showed that classroom FLE was significantly correlated with L2 WTC at both the individual student level and the classroom level, demonstrating a significant positive predictive effect of classroom FLE on L2 WTC. Dewaele (2019) [2] investigated the factors influencing L2 WTC among Spanish learners of English. Through multiple regression analysis, the study found that English classroom anxiety was the strongest negative predictor of L2 WTC, while classroom FLE and teachers' frequency of English use for communicative purposes were the strongest positive predictors. Lee (2009) [16] examined the relationship between classroom FLE and L2 WTC among six Korean learners of English. The results of hierarchical regression analysis showed that classroom FLE significantly predicted learners' WTC in English classrooms.

Chinese scholars have also investigated the relationship between classroom FLE and L2 WTC. Yin *et al.* (2020) [17] examined 128 Chinese university students and found a significant positive relationship between their classroom FLE and WTC

in English classrooms. However, existing research on the relationship between classroom FLE and L2 WTC has often focused on broader academic emotions, such as the combined effects of English classroom anxiety and enjoyment, while studies specifically examining the relationship between classroom FLE and L2 WTC remain relatively limited.

To further understand the mechanisms underlying the relationship between FLE and L2 WTC, FLE may be linked to learners' willingness to communicate by reducing communication-related anxiety and enhancing psychological safety. When learners experience positive emotions in the language classroom, they may pay less attention to potential language errors and negative evaluations from others, and instead become more engaged in language use and interaction. Such a relaxed emotional state can reduce learners' psychological barriers to communication, encourage active participation, and enhance their willingness to express themselves in the target language.

6. Strategies to Enhance Students' FLE and Promote Their L2 WTC during Class

6.1. Creating a Positive and Inclusive Emotional Support Environment

To construct an environment conducive to enhancing students' FLE, teachers should first create a safe, inclusive, and emotionally supportive classroom space. Teachers should use both verbal and non-verbal means to convey acceptance and respect to students. Teachers' language feedback should be mainly encouraging and constructive, especially when students try to communicate in English. Teachers are encouraged to focus on the meaning conveyed and the ideas expressed by students, giving timely and specific positive reinforcement to their efforts rather than focusing solely on linguistic accuracy. Non-verbal behaviors, including open body posture, gentle eye contact, sincere smiles, and attentive listening, constitute silent but powerful signals of support (Zhou, 2023) [18].

Establishing clear and consistent emotionally supportive classroom norms involves conveying appropriate beliefs about errors in the language learning process, namely that attempts and so-called errors during language development are inevitable and serve as valuable learning resources and evidence of learning and growth. Classroom rules should emphasize mutual respect and support among classroom members, and any form of mockery or negative commentary on others' attempts to express themselves should be explicitly prohibited. Instead, constructive help and positive peer encouragement should be strongly advocated and demonstrated. An atmosphere should be created where students deeply understand that the classroom is a community of shared exploration and mutual support, and that communicating in English within this space is a psychologically safe experience. Beyond classroom norms, emotional support should be reflected in teacher-student relationships and student-student interactions. Teachers should demonstrate genuine concern for individual students in daily interactions by un-

derstanding their interests and potential concerns, allowing students to feel recognized and valued as unique individuals. This includes showing care through brief daily conversations, respecting students' opinions, and expressing heartfelt appreciation for their progress.

6.2. Designing Communicative Tasks That Balance Interest, Meaning, and Challenge

As the focus of language teaching shifts from the transmission of linguistic knowledge to the development of communicative competence, designing meaningful communicative tasks has become essential in enhancing students' FLE and stimulating their L2 WTC. The primary consideration in task design is to ensure meaningfulness, allowing students to understand the value and purpose of using the target language for communication. Specifically, teachers should integrate the learning of target language forms into task situations that serve real communicative goals and design tasks with clear goal orientation in which students use specific language structures and functions to negotiate, discuss and cooperate in order to achieve meaningful outcomes. The theme and content of tasks should be closely related with students' life experiences, cognitive levels and personal interests, enabling them to perceive language as a tool for expressing thoughts, facilitating interaction and solving problems (Li, 2022) [19].

This approach is consistent with Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) [3] flow theory, which suggests that enjoyment emerges when learners' skills are appropriately matched with task challenges. Task design should carefully calibrate the level of challenge and seek an optimal balance between students' current abilities and their potential for development. Insufficient challenge may make tasks monotonous and reduce students' interest and engagement, whereas excessive challenge may induce anxiety and decrease their willingness to participate. Ideally, task requirements should be slightly beyond students' current language proficiency and achievable through collaboration, available resources and appropriate support. This requires teachers to accurately assess students' language abilities, anticipate potential difficulties, and provide necessary language input and cognitive scaffolding, such as activating key vocabulary, providing examples of functional language expressions, or breaking complex tasks into manageable stages. Tasks should also include clear success criteria and specific operational guidelines, enabling students to develop clear expectations about their goals and accumulate small achievements throughout the process, thus enhancing their self-efficacy.

6.3. Optimizing Teacher Supportive Feedback and Interaction Methods

To enhance students' classroom FLE and promote L2 WTC, teachers, as facilitators of classroom interaction and key creators of the emotional climate, should optimize their feedback practices and daily interaction patterns. The core principle is to prioritize communicative meaning and learner agency in feedback. When

students communicate in English, teachers' primary focus should be on the meanings students intend to convey, the uniqueness of their viewpoints, or their approaches to problem-solving. By demonstrating active listening through behaviors such as nodding and expressing understanding or interest (e.g., I see your point about...), teachers can help students perceive that their thoughts are valued and that the communication has been successful. Such immediate feedback, which emphasizes meaning rather than form, allows students to experience the communicative function of language as a vehicle for expressing thoughts and emotions, thereby gaining intrinsic satisfaction through recognition. Simultaneously, teachers should adopt a selective approach to language form correction by temporarily delaying the correction of minor errors that do not impede communication and comprehension.

Building on this foundation, attention to language form needs to be embedded within a continuous supportive framework. Even when teachers choose to address certain language errors, the aim is to promote development rather than judgment. Specific operational strategies include using restatements to naturally introduce correct forms without interrupting communication; providing targeted practice on specific target language features rather than pointing out too many errors at once; or creating opportunities for students to engage in peer feedback or self-reflection. In addition, teachers need to clearly convey the core concept that mistakes are valuable indicators of learning and development within the classroom culture. Through personal demonstration and institutional guarantee, they can systematically reduce students' concerns about the social risks associated with language mistakes, maintain students' psychological comfort during learning attempts, and enable them to engage in more complex language production and risk-taking, thereby deepening their sense of competence and enjoyment from language practice (Liu, 2022) [20].

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, students' FLE is closely linked to their L2 WTC. Enhancing FLE through a positive and inclusive emotional support environment, meaningful and appropriately challenging communicative tasks, and supportive teacher feedback and interaction strategies can effectively promote learners' L2 WTC. These findings highlight the importance of integrating emotional factors into EFL teaching and provide practical implications for fostering students' communicative competence.

It should be acknowledged that the reviewed evidence discussed in this paper largely derives from English learning contexts in China and other EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings, where learners have limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom. The proposed pedagogical strategies, therefore, may not be directly transferable to all L2 learning contexts, such as ESL (English as a Second Language) environments where learners are immersed in the target language community, or to the learning of languages other than English. Future

research is needed to examine whether the observed relationships and the effectiveness of the suggested strategies hold across different instructional settings, target languages, and learner populations.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] Macintyre, P.D., Clément, R., Dörnyei, Z. and Noels, K.A. (1998) Conceptualizing Willingness to Communicate in a L2: A Situational Model of L2 Confidence and Affiliation. *The Modern Language Journal*, **82**, 545-562.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1998.tb05543.x>
- [2] Dewaele, J. (2019) The Effect of Classroom Emotions, Attitudes toward English, and Teacher Behavior on Willingness to Communicate among English Foreign Language Learners. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, **38**, 523-535.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927x19864996>
- [3] Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990) *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harper and Row.
- [4] Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014) *Applications of Flow in Human Development and Education: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi*. Springer Science + Business Media.
- [5] Dewaele, J. and MacIntyre, P.D. (2016) 9 Foreign Language Enjoyment and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety: The Right and Left Feet of the Language Learner. In: MacIntyre, P.D., Gregersen, T. and Mercer, S., Eds., *Positive Psychology in SLA*, Multilingual Matters, 215-236. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783095360-010>
- [6] Ainley, M. and Hidi, S. (2014) Interest and Enjoyment. In: Pekrun, R. and Linnenbrink-Garcia, L., Eds., *International Handbook of Emotions in Education*, Routledge, 205-227.
- [7] Jiang, Y. (2020) Teacher Factors Affecting Chinese College Students' Foreign Language Enjoyment. *Foreign Language World*, **1**, 60-68. (In Chinese)
<https://doi.org/10.26971/j.cnki.flw.1004-5112.2020.01.007>
- [8] Pavelescu, L.M. and Petrić, B. (2018) Love and Enjoyment in Context: Four Case Studies of Adolescent EFL Learners. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, **8**, 73-101. <https://doi.org/10.14746/sslt.2018.8.1.4>
- [9] Hao, D.X. (2022) Foreign Language Enjoyment: A Review and Prospect. *Overseas English*, **16**, 52-54. (In Chinese)
https://www.zhangqiaokeyan.com/academic-journal-cn_overseas-%20english_the-sis/0201299786458.html
- [10] Li, C.C., Han, Y. and Li, B.B. (2022) The Relationship between Foreign Language Classroom Boredom and Foreign Language Achievement in Primary Schools: Urban-Rural Differences. *Foreign Language Education*, **43**, 50-55. (In Chinese)
<https://doi.org/10.16362/j.cnki.cn61-1023/h.2022.03.001>
- [11] Jin, Y. and Zhang, L.J. (2018) The Dimensions of Foreign Language Classroom Enjoyment and Their Effect on Foreign Language Achievement. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, **24**, 948-962.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2018.1526253>
- [12] Wen, W.P. and Clément, R. (2003) A Chinese Conceptualisation of Willingness to

- Communicate in ESL. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, **16**, 18-38.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07908310308666654>
- [13] Wei, X.B., Chen, X. and Yang, Y. (2022) The Roles of Emotional Intelligence and Class Social Climate in L2 Willingness to Communicate: Evidence from the Moderating Model. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, **6**, 88-99. (In Chinese)
<https://doi.org/10.13458/j.cnki.flatt.004904>
 - [14] Pekrun, R. (2006) The Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions: Assumptions, Corollaries, and Implications for Educational Research and Practice. *Educational Psychology Review*, **18**, 315-341. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-006-9029-9>
 - [15] Khajavy, G.H., MacIntyre, P.D. and Barabadi, E. (2018) Role of the Emotions and Classroom Environment in Willingness to Communicate: Applying Doubly Latent Multilevel Analysis in Second Language Acquisition Research. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, **40**, 605-624. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0272263117000304>
 - [16] Lee, G. (2009) Speaking up: Six Korean Students' Oral Participation in Class Discussions in US Graduate Seminars. *English for Specific Purposes*, **28**, 142-156.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2009.01.007>
 - [17] Kun, Y., Senom, F. and Peng, C.F. (2020) Relationship between Willingness to Communicate in English and Foreign Language Enjoyment. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, **8**, 4853-4862. <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2020.081057>
 - [18] Zhou, Y. (2023) A Study on the Influence of High School Students' Foreign Language Enjoyment on Their Willingness to Communicate in English in the Class. Master's Thesis, Central China Normal University. (In Chinese)
<https://doi.org/10.27159/d.cnki.ghzsu.2023.001438>
 - [19] Li, J. (2022) A Study on the Influence of High School Students' Foreign Language Enjoyment on Their Willingness to Communicate in English in the Classroom. Master's Thesis, Central China Normal University. (In Chinese)
<https://doi.org/10.27159/d.cnki.ghzsu.2022.002800>
 - [20] Liu, F.Z. (2022) A Study on College Students' Foreign Language Enjoyment and Its Improvement Strategies. Master's Thesis, Shenzhen University. (In Chinese)
<https://doi.org/10.27321/d.cnki.gszdu.2022.000716>