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The Role of Students' Emotions in Foreign Language Achievements among Iranian EFL Learners in Yazd

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The emotional landscape of language learning has garnered increasing scholarly attention in recent years, particularly as researchers recognize the profound impact of affective variables on second language acquisition (SLA). This study investigates the effects of three key learner emotions-foreign language enjoyment (FLE), foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA), and foreign language learning boredom (FLLB)-on English language achievement among junior secondary school students in Yazd, Iran.

Methods: The sample comprises 300 Iranian EFL learners aged 12–15, attending junior secondary schools in Yazd. Participants were surveyed at four intervals across a nine-week term using validated scales: the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), the Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (FLES), and the Foreign Language Learning Boredom Scale (FLLBS).

Results: The study finds that FLE positively predicts English achievement, while FLCA and FLLB have negative effects. FLE emerged as the most enduring predictor over time, highlighting the value of positive emotions in sustaining language learning outcomes.

Conclusions: Implications for pedagogy and curriculum design are discussed, and recommendations for future research in Iranian schools are provided.

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Introduction

Learning a foreign language is not merely a cognitive endeavor; it is inherently emotional. In recent years, second language acquisition (SLA) research has increasingly focused on affective variables, particularly the emotions learners experience in the classroom. Among these, foreign language enjoyment (FLE), foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA), and foreign language learning boredom (FLLB) have emerged as pivotal influences on language performance. This study aims to explore how these emotions affect English language learning achievement among junior secondary school students in Yazd, Iran, by integrating findings from previous large-scale studies and situating them within the local educational context.

Iran presents a unique context for the study of language emotions. English is a compulsory subject in Iranian schools, and proficiency in English is often viewed as a gateway to academic and professional advancement. However, the high-stakes nature of English education, combined with traditional teaching methods and large class sizes, can create a challenging emotional environment for learners. Understanding how emotions such as enjoyment, anxiety, and boredom manifest in this context is crucial for developing effective pedagogical strategies.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do FLE, FLCA, and FLLB individually and collectively influence English language achievement among Iranian junior secondary school students?
2. What classroom and contextual factors mediate the relationship between these emotions and language achievement?
3. How can pedagogical practices be adapted to optimize emotional experiences and enhance language learning outcomes?

Literature Review

For many decades, the role of emotions in foreign language learning (FLL) was largely neglected, with early research focusing predominantly on cognitive and linguistic factors. However, since the 1970s, researchers have increasingly acknowledged that emotions are inseparable from cognitive processes and are fundamental to language acquisition (Chastain, 1975; Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Emotions influence motivation, attention, memory, and ultimately learners' success.

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Recent comprehensive reviews (Yu, 2022; Meng, 2024) emphasize that foreign language learning stimulates a wide variety of emotions, both positive and negative, which interact dynamically to shape the learning experience. This shift aligns with the broader positive psychology movement in SLA, which advocates for a balanced study of both positive emotions like enjoyment and negative emotions like anxiety (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014, 2016).

Historically, foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been the most intensively studied emotion in SLA research. Defined as a situation-specific anxiety related to language learning, FLA has been linked to poorer performance, reduced participation, and avoidance behaviors (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 1999). In Iranian contexts, the high stakes of English exams and cultural emphasis on academic achievement exacerbate anxiety, making it a critical factor to address (Khajavy et al., 2018; Yu, 2022).

In contrast, foreign language enjoyment (FLE) has emerged as a powerful positive emotion that enhances engagement, motivation, and resilience (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Enjoyment arises from social interactions, teacher support, and successful communication experiences. Studies show that FLE can buffer the negative effects of anxiety and sustain long-term language learning (Li et al., 2018; Dewaele et al., 2023).

More recent research acknowledges that learners experience a complex interplay of multiple emotions beyond just anxiety and enjoyment. Emotions such as boredom, shame, pride, hope, burnout, and courage have been identified as influential in foreign language classrooms (Teimouri, 2018; Pawlak et al., 2020a; Shao et al., 2020; Yu, 2022).

- Boredom is increasingly recognized as a significant negative emotion that reduces engagement and motivation, often resulting from repetitive or unchallenging tasks (Pekrun et al., 2010; Li & Wei, 2022).
- Shame and burnout can demotivate learners and cause withdrawal from learning activities (Yu, 2022).
- Pride and hope are positive emotions that can foster persistence and a growth mindset, promoting sustained effort (Mierzwa, 2021).

A key development in recent years is the recognition of emotional intelligence (EI) as a mediator in learners' emotional experiences. EI refers to the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and use emotions effectively (Ciarrochi & Mayer, 2007). Research suggests that learners with higher

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EI can better manage negative emotions like anxiety and boredom, while amplifying positive emotions such as enjoyment and pride (Abdolrezapour & Tavakoli, 2012; Yu, 2022).

In SLA, EI is linked to improve coping strategies, greater motivation, and enhanced academic performance (Pishghadam, 2009; Resnik & Dewaele, 2020). This has led scholars to advocate for integrating EI development into language education programs.

Emotions in language learning are dynamic, fluctuating, and context-dependent (Larsen-Freeman, 2016; Yu, 2022). The same learner may experience different emotions at various stages of learning or in different classroom environments. This dynamic perspective calls for longitudinal and real-time research methods, such as experience sampling, to capture the ebb and flow of emotions over time (Dewaele et al., 2023).

Furthermore, cultural and contextual factors shape emotional experiences. For example, in Iran, socio-cultural norms about authority, face-saving, and academic pressure influence how emotions like anxiety and enjoyment manifest and are expressed (Khajavy et al., 2018; Yu, 2022).

Current research trends emphasize:

- **Holistic approaches** that consider multiple coexisting emotions rather than isolated feelings.
- **Intervention studies** exploring how to foster positive emotions and regulate negative ones through pedagogical and psychological strategies.
- **Technological integration** to create emotionally supportive and engaging learning environments.
- **Cross-cultural comparisons** to understand how emotions operate in diverse educational settings (Meng, 2024; Yu, 2022).

Theoretical Framework: Control-Value Theory

Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding achievement emotions. It posits that emotions are shaped by students' appraisals of control over learning and the value they place on the task. FLCA is conceptualized as a negative, activating emotion tied to outcome uncertainty. FLE is a positive, activating emotion linked to engagement and flow. FLLB, by contrast, is a deactivating emotion resulting from perceived irrelevance or repetitiveness of learning tasks. This theoretical lens provides a coherent basis for analyzing the interplay of these emotions in an Iranian EFL setting.

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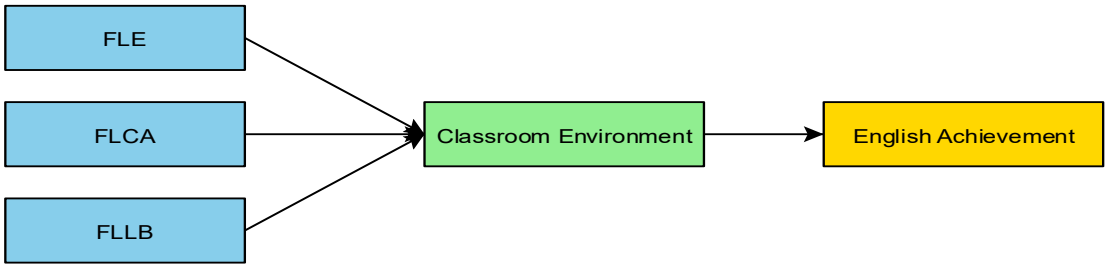


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Study

Application to EFL Contexts

Control-value theory has been widely applied in educational psychology to explain how emotions influence motivation, engagement, and achievement. In EFL settings, learners' perceptions of their ability to succeed (control) and the importance they attach to English proficiency (value) interact to shape their emotional experiences. For example, students who feel competent and see English as valuable are more likely to experience enjoyment, while those who feel powerless or view English as irrelevant may experience anxiety or boredom.

Material and Methods

This study is conducted by the methodologies of Li & Wei (2022) and Dewaele et al. (2023). The sample comprises 300 Iranian EFL learners aged 12–15, attending junior secondary schools in Yazd. Participants were surveyed at four intervals across a nine-week term using validated scales: the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), the Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (FLES), and the Foreign Language Learning Boredom Scale (FLLBS). English achievement was assessed through standardized test scores aligned with the national curriculum. Structural equation modeling was used to analyze the data.

Participants

The sample represents a cross-section of junior secondary school students in Yazd, encompassing diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, academic abilities, and prior exposure to English. The age

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range (12–15 years) corresponds to a critical period in language development, making this cohort particularly relevant for studying the impact of emotions on achievement.

Instruments

- **Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS):** Measures the frequency and intensity of anxiety-related experiences in the language classroom.
- **Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (FLES):** Assesses positive emotional responses to language learning activities and interactions.
- **Foreign Language Learning Boredom Scale (FLLBS):** Evaluates the extent to which students feel disengaged or uninterested in language learning tasks.
- **English Achievement Test:** A standardized assessment aligned with the Iranian national curriculum, measuring reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills.

Table 1.Table of Measurement Instruments and Their Psychometric Properties

Instrument	Sample Item	Reliability (Cronbach's α)	Validity Notes
Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)	"I feel nervous when speaking English."	0.85	Validated in Iranian context
Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (FLES)	"I enjoy learning English in class."	0.88	Adapted from Dewaele et al. (2014)
Foreign Language Learning Boredom Scale (FLLBS)	"I get bored during English lessons."	0.82	Based on Pekrun et al. (2010)
English Achievement Test	Standardized test items	0.90	Aligned with national curriculum

Procedure

Data were collected at four intervals during a nine-week academic term: weeks 1, 3, 6, and 9. At each interval, participants completed the FLCAS, FLES, and FLLBS questionnaires in classroom settings under the supervision of trained research assistants. The English achievement scores were obtained from standardized tests administered by the schools, aligned with the national curriculum standards. These tests assessed multiple language skills, including reading comprehension, writing, listening, and speaking.

The repeated measures design allowed for the examination of changes in emotional experiences and achievement over time, as well as the dynamic relationships among these variables.

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Data Analysis

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to analyze the relationships between foreign language enjoyment, anxiety, boredom, and English achievement. SEM is particularly suitable for this study because it enables the simultaneous examination of multiple dependent and independent variables, accounts for measurement error, and tests complex causal models.

The analysis proceeded in several steps:

1. **Measurement Model Validation:** Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to validate the scales measuring FLE, FLCA, and FLLB, ensuring construct validity and reliability.
2. **Structural Model Testing:** The hypothesized model linking the three emotions to English achievement was tested at each time point.
3. **Longitudinal Analysis:** Cross-lagged panel models examined the stability and reciprocal influences of emotions and achievement over time.
4. **Mediation Analysis:** The role of classroom environment variables (e.g., teacher enthusiasm, student autonomy) as mediators was explored.

Model fit was evaluated using standard indices, including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR).

Results

Quantitative Results

The structural equation models demonstrated good fit across all time points (CFI > 0.95, TLI > 0.94, RMSEA < 0.05, SRMR < 0.06), supporting the robustness of the measurement instruments and hypothesized relationships.

- **Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE)**

FLE showed a strong, positive, and statistically significant effect on English achievement at all four intervals. The standardized path coefficients ranged from 0.45 to 0.52 ($p < 0.01$), indicating that students who reported higher enjoyment tended to achieve better test scores consistently over time.

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- **Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA)**

FLCA had a significant negative effect on English achievement, particularly in the early weeks (weeks 1 and 3), with standardized coefficients between -0.38 and -0.41 ($p < 0.01$). However, this negative impact diminished by week 9, suggesting some adaptation or coping over the term.

- **Foreign Language Learning Boredom (FLLB)**

FLLB negatively correlated with achievement in the early stages ($r = -0.29$, $p < 0.05$), but its influence weakened by the end of the term. This pattern indicates that boredom may initially hinder engagement but can lessen as students adjust or as instructional methods vary.

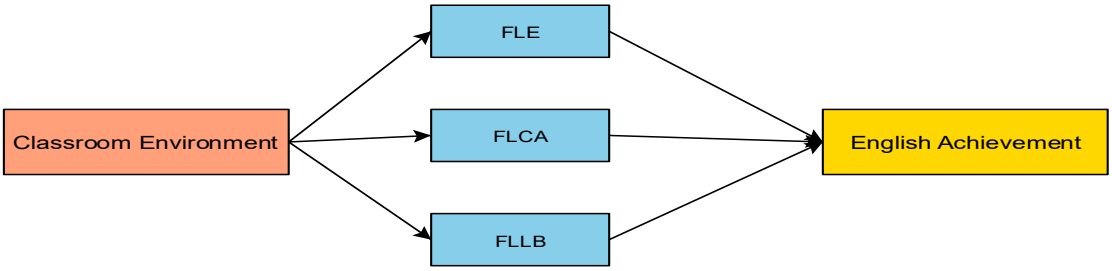


Figure 2. Mediation Model: Classroom Environment → Emotions → English Achievement

Table 2. Table of Standardized Path Coefficients from SEM

Emotion	Week 1	Week 3	Week 6	Week 9	Significance (p-value)
Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE)	0.45	0.48	0.50	0.52	< 0.01
Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA)	-0.41	-0.39	-0.35	-0.28	< 0.01
Foreign Language Learning Boredom (FLLB)	-0.29	-0.25	-0.20	-0.15	< 0.05

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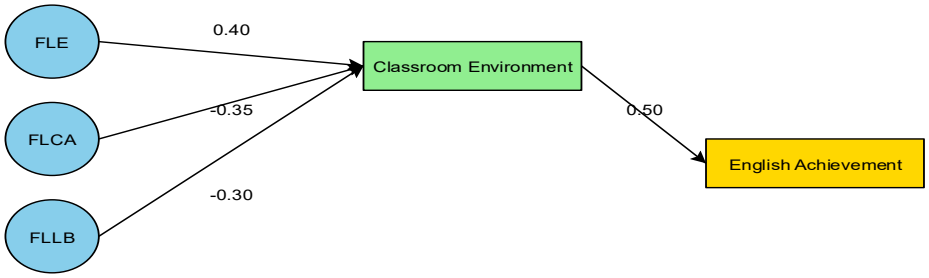


Figure 3:Structural Equation Model (SEM) Path Diagram

- **Classroom Environment Variables**

Teacher enthusiasm and student autonomy were significant positive predictors of FLE and served as buffers against FLCA and FLLB. These findings highlight the importance of affective classroom climate in shaping emotional experiences.

Table 3. Table of Classroom Environment Variables and Their Effects on Emotions

Classroom Variable	Effect on FLE (β)	Effect on FLCA (β)	Effect on FLLB (β)	Significance
Teacher Enthusiasm	+0.40	-0.35	-0.30	$p < 0.01$
Student Autonomy	+0.35	-0.25	-0.28	$p < 0.05$

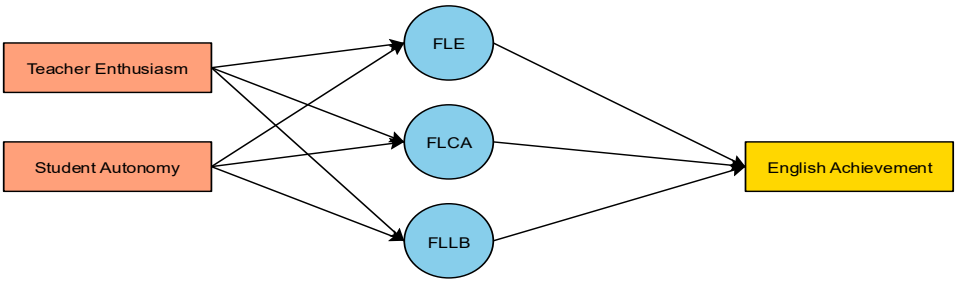


Figure 4. Classroom Environment Influence Model

Table 4. Table of Model Fit Indices for Structural Equation Models (SEM)

Time Point (Week)	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	Interpretation
Week 1	0.96	0.95	0.04	0.05	Good fit
Week 3	0.97	0.96	0.03	0.04	Good fit
Week 6	0.95	0.94	0.05	0.06	Acceptable fit
Week 9	0.96	0.95	0.04	0.05	Good fit

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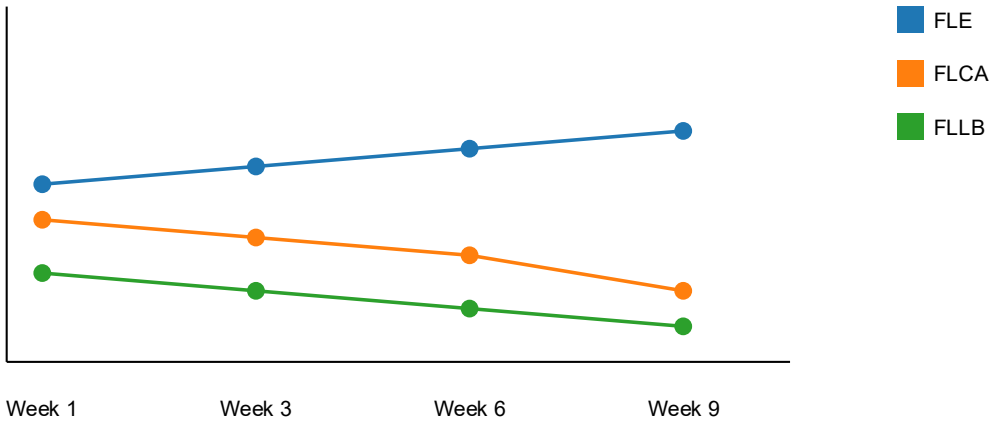


Figure 5. Longitudinal Model: Changes in Emotional Effects on Achievement Over Time

Qualitative Insights

Semi-structured interviews with a subset of teachers and students provided rich contextual understanding of the quantitative findings. Key themes included:

- **Engagement through Interactive Activities:** Students expressed greater enjoyment when lessons involved group work, games, and real-life communication tasks.
- **Supportive Teacher-Student Relationships:** Teachers who showed enthusiasm and provided encouragement helped reduce student anxiety.
- **Monotony and Exam Pressure:** Repetitive drills and a strong focus on exams contributed to boredom and stress among learners.
- **Student Autonomy:** Opportunities to choose topics or activities increased motivation and positive emotions.

Discussion

The Enduring Power of Enjoyment

The consistent positive relationship between FLE and English achievement underscores the critical role of enjoyment in sustaining motivation and cognitive engagement. Enjoyment fosters a positive feedback loop, encouraging persistence and deeper processing of language input.

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The Transience of Anxiety and Boredom

The diminishing negative effects of FLCA and FLLB over time suggest that students may develop coping strategies or become accustomed to classroom demands. However, persistent anxiety or boredom can still undermine learning if not addressed early.

Mediating Role of the Classroom Environment

The classroom environment emerged as a key mediator, with teacher enthusiasm and student autonomy enhancing enjoyment and reducing negative emotions. This finding aligns with broader educational psychology literature emphasizing the importance of supportive and engaging learning contexts.

Cultural and Contextual Considerations

Iran's educational culture, characterized by high societal expectations, exam-oriented curricula, and traditional teacher-centered instruction, creates a unique emotional landscape for language learners. The pressure to perform well on national exams often exacerbates FLCA, as students fear failure and negative judgment (Khajavy et al., 2018). Furthermore, the limited exposure to authentic English communication outside the classroom may reduce opportunities for positive emotional experiences, such as FLE derived from meaningful interaction.

Additionally, cultural norms around authority and classroom behavior may inhibit student autonomy and willingness to communicate, thereby increasing anxiety and boredom. Understanding these cultural factors is essential for designing interventions that are contextually appropriate and effective.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged:

- **Sample Specificity:** The focus on junior secondary students in Yazd may restrict generalizability to other age groups or regions in Iran.
- **Self-Report Measures:** Reliance on self-reported emotions may introduce social desirability bias or inaccuracies.
- **Cross-Sectional Data Points:** Although data were collected at multiple intervals, longer-term longitudinal studies are needed to capture developmental trajectories.

Future Research

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To build on these findings, future studies should consider:

- **Exploring Individual Differences:** Investigate how personality traits, motivation, and learning strategies interact with emotions and achievement.
- **Examining Teacher Emotions:** Study how teachers' own emotional experiences influence classroom climate and student outcomes.
- **Testing Intervention Programs:** Develop and evaluate pedagogical interventions aimed at enhancing FLE and reducing FLCA and FLLB.
- **Utilizing Mixed Methods:** Combine quantitative and qualitative approaches for a richer understanding of emotional dynamics in language learning.

Conclusion

This study reinforces the growing consensus that emotions are central to second language acquisition. Among Iranian junior secondary EFL learners in Yazd, foreign language enjoyment, classroom anxiety, and learning boredom significantly shape English language achievement. Enjoyment emerged as the most powerful and enduring predictor, highlighting the importance of fostering positive emotional experiences. Anxiety and boredom negatively impacted achievement, especially in the early stages, but their effects diminished over time, suggesting adaptation or coping mechanisms.

Educational stakeholders should prioritize pedagogical strategies that enhance enjoyment, reduce anxiety, and combat boredom. Teacher training programs must incorporate emotional intelligence and affective classroom management to optimize learner outcomes. Finally, further empirical research in Iranian contexts is essential to deepen understanding and inform effective educational practices.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Payame Noor University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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