



## Examining the level of enjoyment and anxiety among Turkish EFL students<sup>1</sup>

Zekiye Özer<sup>a 2</sup> , İsmail Fırat Altay<sup>b</sup> 

<sup>a</sup> Niğde Ömer Halisdemir University, Turkey

<sup>b</sup> Hacettepe University, Turkey

### APA Citation:

Özer, Z., & Altay, İ.F. (2021). Examining the level of enjoyment and anxiety among Turkish EFL students. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(Special Issue), 663-671.

Submission Date:19/09/2020

Acceptance Date:10/11/2020

### Abstract

This research examines the role of positive and negative emotions in language learning. To this end, enjoyment and anxiety, which are widely studied emotions in language education, were chosen for the current study. A quantitative research design was adopted to provide a deeper understanding of learners' language enjoyment and anxiety levels as well as the determinants of those emotions. 233 fifth-grade students studying in secondary school participated in the study. The results indicated that participants experience a higher level of enjoyment and moderate anxiety in language learning. The anxiety and enjoyment levels of participants appeared to be unaffected by gender differences. The difference between the three achievement groups for anxiety and enjoyment was significant. Further analysis showed that language anxiety was the best predictor of language enjoyment.

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*Keywords:* emotions; foreign language anxiety; foreign language enjoyment

## 1. Introduction

A considerable amount of literature has been published on the importance of emotions in language learning (Horwitz, 2010; MacIntyre & Vincze, 2017; Shao et al., 2019). These studies suggest that emotions play a vital role in learners' performances in a foreign language. Previous research recognizes the impact of negative emotions on language achievement (Aida, 1994; Horwitz et al., 1986). However, a search of the literature has revealed few studies investigating the associations between language learning and positive emotions. (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Dewaele et al., 2016). In recent years, depending on the positive psychology movement in education, there has been an increasing amount of literature on positive emotions in second language acquisition (SLA) (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; 2016). In their seminal article, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) indicate a need to investigate both positive and negative emotions to better understand the role of those emotions in language learning. In this vein, this study attempts to explore the effect of positive and negative emotions on Turkish EFL learners' performances.

<sup>1</sup> This study was based on doctoral dissertation written by the first author under the supervision of the second author.

<sup>2</sup> Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [zekiye.ozero@ohu.edu.tr](mailto:zekiye.ozero@ohu.edu.tr)

### 1.1. Literature review

Historically, research investigating the determinants of the learners' performances in a foreign language has mostly focused on the influence of negative emotions (Horwitz, 2001). In this regard, foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been an object of research over the years (Aida, 1994; Horwitz et al., 1986; Horwitz, 2001; Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999). The FLA construct was first articulated by Horwitz et al. in 1986 and popularized in their ground-breaking article. The authors provided a reliable instrument to measure learners' anxiety levels. The existing body of research on FLA suggests that language anxiety is generally seen as a factor strongly related to language performance (Azher et al., 2010; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Horwitz et al., 1986; Horwitz, 2001; Saito & Samimy, 1996). Elkhafaifi (2005) investigated the relationship between anxiety and the listening performances of students. The author pointed out that language anxiety had a detrimental effect on learners' achievement in listening skills. Similarly, Saito and Samimy (1996) concluded that language anxiety was responsible for poor language performance. These studies indicate a need to understand FLA's contributing factors to decrease level of anxiety among learners and increase their performances. For this reason, a great deal of previous research has attempted to explain the sources of language anxiety (Young, 1991; Young, 1994; Zhang & Zhong, 2012). As noted by Young (1991), "personal and interpersonal anxieties; learner beliefs about language learning; instructor beliefs about language teaching; instructor-learner interactions; classroom procedures; and language testing" are the leading causes of FLA (p.427). Moreover, several studies suggest that gender is also associated with FLA (Aydın, 2008; Azher et al., 2010; Koul et al., 2009; Wu, 2010). Azher et al. (2010) conducted a study with university students. They demonstrated that males were more anxious than females in language classes. This outcome is contrary to that of Koul et al. (2009), who found female students had higher FLA levels than their male counterparts. Their finding is in agreement with Wu's (2010) findings, which showed that females become vulnerable when put on the spot in the class. Concerning causes of anxiety, Aslan and Thompson (2018) stated that learners' beliefs about learning shaped their FLA levels. They also noted that self-confidence and FLA are negatively correlated. Having reviewed FLA's key aspects, the next section of this paper will address foreign language enjoyment (FLE).

It is now well established that language anxiety is a crucial factor in learners' success in language classes. However, the influence of positive emotions on performance has remained unclear (Arnold & Brown, 1999). Based on this, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) studied the positive emotions to reveal whether they promote language learning. The authors chose enjoyment as a specific positive emotion and developed a pioneering scale to assess learners' FLE levels. As stated in the previous section, FLA and FLE were investigated together in their study to understand the role of emotions better. In their groundbreaking research, they concluded that learners' FLE levels were higher than FLA levels. On gender differences, they found that females' anxiety and enjoyment levels were higher than males'. A few years after their study, in 2018, Mierzwa conducted a study to shed light on the effect of gender on learners' enjoyment levels. Their findings showed that no significant difference between the males and females was evident.

To date, researchers attempted to evaluate the relationship between FLE and language achievement (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Li et al., 2020). Li et al. (2020) put forward that "learners at lower achievement level tend to experience more foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) and less FLE because of a loss of confidence and a perceived lack of FL proficiency, which might tempt them to give up" (p.21). This outcome is consistent with the data obtained in an earlier study conducted by Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018). They found out that a positive correlation existed between FLE and achievement. In previous studies on enjoyment, different variables are related to FLE among students (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; Dewaele et al., 2018; Dewaele et al., 2019; Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). For example, in their comprehensive study, Dewaele et al. (2019) examined the effect of teacher

characteristics on language enjoyment and anxiety. They identified that teacher friendliness and foreign accent in English were the best predictors of FLE. On the other hand, they found that teacher strictness had a significant influence on language anxiety.

Taken together, these studies support the notion that both positive and negative emotions are essential determinants of language performance. However, there remain several aspects of FLE about which relatively little is known. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to this growing area of research by exploring the FLE and FLA levels of Turkish EFL students. It will generate fresh insight into the impact of gender, achievement, and teacher strictness on learners’ anxiety and enjoyment levels.

*1.2. Research questions*

This study set out to investigate FLE and FLA among Turkish EFL students. To this respect, the following research questions were formulated.

1. What are the FLE and FLA levels of Turkish EFL students?
2. What are the main and interaction effects of gender and GPA over participants' FLE and FLA levels?
3. Which is the best predictor of FLE: FLA, teacher strictness, or GPA?

**2. Method**

This section describes the research questions, procedures, and methods used in this investigation.

*2.1. Setting and participants*

The current study was conducted in a secondary-level state school in Turkey. A total of 233 fifth-grade students were recruited for the study. Just over half the sample (54.1%) was male, and the rest (45.9%) were female. Participants were classified according to their GPA using K means clustering. As the table below illustrated, 40.3% of participants were categorized as mid-achievers; 37.8% were categorized as high achievers, and 21.9 % were classified as low achievers. In addition, a minority of participants (25%) indicated that their teachers were not strict; 38.8 % of participants stated that their teachers were a little strict and 36.2% of them indicated that their teachers were too strict. Detailed information about the participants is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographic information about the participants

Variables		n	%
Gender	male	126	54.1
	female	107	45.9
GPA	low	51	21.9
	mid	94	40.3
	high	88	37.8
	not at all	58	25.0
Beliefs about teacher strictness	a little	90	38.8
	too strict	84	36.2
Total		233	100

*2.2. Instrument(s)*

Data were collected using the FLE scale, children’s FLA scale, and a demographic information form.

The researchers prepared *the demographic information form* to reveal participants' gender, GPA, and beliefs about their language teachers' strictness.

*Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale* was developed by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) to measure FLE level of learners. It consists of 21 items in a 5-point Likert-type scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. The researchers translated all the items into Turkish through translation- back-translation procedure because the scale was initially in English. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients of FLE scale for the current study were calculated as .84.

*Children's Foreign Language Anxiety Scale* was developed by Aydın et al. in 2017. The authors adapted the scale from “The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale” (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) because no valid instrument existed to assess young learners' FLA levels. The scale was made up of 20 items. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients of scale for the current study were calculated as .74.

### 2.3. Data collection and analysis

Having obtained ethical permission for the study, data were collected by the researcher by visiting students in their school. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study at first. Then, questionnaires have distributed to the students on a volunteer basis. On the completion of data collection, the process of data analysis started. Data management and analysis were performed using SPSS 22 software. The first set of analyses was examined to check the assumption of normality. Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated that data were normally distributed for both FLE and FLA scales at  $p < .05$  level. Following the normality check, descriptive statistics, a two-way MANOVA, and standard multiple regression analysis were carried out to analyze data.

## 3. Results

The first set of analyses examined the participants' perceived levels of FLE and FLA. While the high mean value indicates a high level of enjoyment for FLE scale, it indicates a low level of anxiety for the FLA scale. Table 2 provides the results obtained from descriptive statistics.

**Table 2.** Participants' level of FLE and FLA

	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
FLE	233	3.87	.394
FLA	233	3.19	.574

As shown in the table above, participants experience a high level of enjoyment in their language classes ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = .574$ ). It is also displayed that participants have a moderate level of anxiety in their courses ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = .394$ ).

A two-way MANOVA analysis was conducted to examine the impact of gender and GPA on the FLE and FLA levels of participants. The interaction effect of gender and GPA on language enjoyment and anxiety were not detected  $F = (4,452) = 1.339$ ,  $p > .05$ ; Wilks'  $\Lambda = .977$ . Table 3 illustrates the summary statistics obtained from two-way MANOVA.

**Table 3.** Main and interaction effects of gender and GPA over FLE and FLA scores

Variables	Two-way MANOVA									
	Main effect					Interaction effect				
	$\lambda$	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta_p^2$	$\lambda$	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta_p^2$
Gender	.988	2;226	1.340	.264	.012					
GPA	.929	2;226	4.238	.002	.036					
Gender*GPA						.977	4;452	1.339	.254	.012

When the main effect for gender was examined, no significant difference was evident among males and females for anxiety and enjoyment ( $F = (4,452) = 1.340, p > .05$ ; Wilks'  $\Lambda = .988$ ). A statistically significant main effect for GPA on FLE and FLA was detected. After the Bonferroni adjusted level of .025, both FLE ( $F = 8.315; p = .00$ , partial eta squared .068) and FLA ( $F = 4.371; p = .014$ , partial eta squared .037) reached statistical significance. Further analysis of descriptive statistics indicated that GPA difference for FLE levels was in favor of high achievers and it decreased depending on the achievement levels. Analysis results demonstrated that mean values for FLE were (high achievers =  $M = 4.07, SD = .503$ , mid achievers =  $M = 3.77, SD = .581$ , low achievers =  $M = 3.70, SD = .579$ ). Similarly, an inspection of mean scores indicated that GPA difference for FLA levels was in favor of low achievers (high achievers =  $M = 3.29, SD = .342$ , mid achievers =  $M = 3.15, SD = .408$ , low achievers =  $M = 3.10, SD = .421$ ).

A standard multiple regression analysis was used to identify how well teacher strictness, GPA, and FLA predict FLE. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Teacher strictness, GPA, and FLA as the predictors of FLE

Predictors	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Correlations		
				Zero order	Partial	Part
Teacher strictness	.025	.473	.637	.100	.031	.025
GPA	.157	2.963	.002	.267	.193	.154
FLA	.567	10.57	.000	.601	.574	.549

Note:  $R^2$  for model = .386

Closer inspection of Table 4 demonstrates that all the independent variables entered into the model explained 38% of the variance in FLE,  $F(3, 228) = 47.685, p = .00$ . Further regression coefficients revealed three independent variables entered in the model, and 2 of them significantly predicted FLE. Among all these three independent variables, FLA makes the strongest unique contribution by explaining 30% of the unique variance ( $\beta = .567, t = 10.57, p = .00$ ). This pursued by GPA which contributed to the model by explaining almost 2% of the unique variance ( $\beta = -.157, t = .267, p = .002$ ).

#### 4. Discussion

This paper attempts to show language enjoyment and anxiety among Turkish EFL students. The first question in this study seeks to determine the FLE and FLA levels of participants. The results indicate that participants enjoy the course of language learning. They experience moderate level anxiety in their classes. These findings suggest that learners enjoy their lessons. This finding broadly supports the work of other studies in this area (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Dewaele et al., 2018). The results may be

explained by the fact that learners have positive attitudes towards English and are motivated to learn a foreign language. Therefore, they experience positive emotions in the course of learning English

On the question of the impacts of gender and GPA, this study finds out that no interaction effect of those variables on students' enjoyment and anxiety levels was detected. Moreover, this study's results did not show any significant gender difference in FLE and FLA levels of students. However, this result has not previously been described (Dewaele et al., 2016; Mierzwa, 2018). For example, Dewaele et al. (2016) question whether gender plays a role in determining FLE and FLA among participants. They conclude that females have more fun in their English classes than males. Concerning anxiety, they also point out that females feel more anxious in language classes. This discrepancy in results might be related to socio-cultural factors. These results, therefore, need to be interpreted with caution. It might be that students, regardless of their gender, had fun in language classes. It is also possible that both male and female students can overcome their anxious feelings.

The results of this study also indicate that achievement affects the level of FLE and FLA among learners. It is revealed that high achievers experience more fun in English classes. This study confirms that a high level of enjoyment is associated with high English achievement (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018). Another finding of the study is that high achievers feel a low level of language anxiety. The current study's findings support the previous research (Aida, 1994; Saito & Samimy, 1996). It might be that a higher level of enjoyment and a lower level of anxiety increase learners' performance. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2016) stated that positive emotions have a facilitator role in learners' success. When learners enjoy their classes, their motivation and self-confidence levels increase. As a result, they reveal excellent performance. In general, the study finds out that students who have high academic performance feel a low level of FLA in language classes. It may be due to the exam-oriented education system in Turkey. Since secondary school students need to do English test to pass the high school entrance exam, they may feel pressure to do their best. This pressure may lead to stress and, as a result, high anxious students show lower performance in their exams.

Concerning the predictors of FLE, this study finds out that language anxiety is the best predictor of enjoyment. This outcome further supports the idea of language enjoyment and anxiety are related to each other; however, they are still two independent emotions (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). It is possible, therefore, that learners may experience anxiety and enjoyment at the same time. These results support the hypothesis that investigation of a single emotion does not provide necessary information to understand learners' emotional processes. Additionally, the observed difference between teacher strictness and FLE in this study was not significant. This outcome seems inconsistent with other research that found that teacher strictness is negatively correlated with FLE (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). The prior study suggests that teacher strictness is a significant determinant of FLA (Dewaele et al., 2019). This discrepancy may be attributed to the difference in learners' expectations related to the teacher. The current result confirms that positive teacher characteristics are determinants of FLE (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). A further qualitative study focusing on teacher strictness is recommended to see the effect of teacher characteristics on learners' emotions.

## 5. Conclusions

The present research aimed to examine language anxiety and enjoyment levels of Turkish EFL learners. The research showed that learners experience enjoyment more than anxiety in language classes. One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that although gender made no difference, achievement significantly impacted the FLE and FLA levels of participants. Language anxiety emerged as a reliable predictor of anxiety. These findings suggest that, in general, enjoyment and anxiety are two separate emotions.

Moreover, they should be investigated together to interpret the emotional experiences of learners better. These findings have significant implications for the understanding of how emotions facilitate language learning. The present study adds to the growing body of research that indicates that the ratio of positive and negative emotions is more important than the existence or absence of either of them. Students with a high level of FLE are more successful. This study suggests that teachers should foster students' FLE. In this sense, teachers should create a positive classroom environment. This is useful to decrease FLA and boost FLE among students.

This research has thrown up many questions in need of further investigation. The sources of enjoyment and anxiety should be explored to determine underlying reasons for classroom emotions. A further qualitative study should be undertaken to explore which classroom activities are responsible for students' anxiety and enjoyment levels.

## 6. Ethics Committee Approval

The authors confirm that ethical approval was obtained from Hacettepe University (Approval Date: 23/06/2020).

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## İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen Türk öğrencilerin keyif alma ve kaygı düzeylerinin incelenmesi

### Özet

Bu araştırma, olumlu ve olumsuz duyguların dil öğrenmedeki rolünü incelemektedir. Bu amaçla, dil eğitimi alanında yaygın olarak çalışılan duygular olan keyif alma ve kaygı bu çalışmada kullanılmıştır. Öğrencilerin yabancı dilden keyif alma ve yabancı dil kaygı düzeyleri ile bu duyguların belirleyicilerini daha iyi anlamak için nicel bir araştırma tasarımı benimsenmiştir. Araştırmaya ortaokulda öğrenim gören 233 beşinci sınıf öğrencisi katılmıştır. Sonuçlar, katılımcıların dil öğrenimi sırasında daha yüksek düzeyde keyif ve orta düzeyde kaygı yaşadıklarını göstermiştir. Katılımcıların kaygı ve keyif alma düzeyleri cinsiyet farklılıklarından etkilenmemiş görünmektedir. Üç başarı grubu arasındaki kaygı ve keyif alma farkı anlamlıdır. Ayrıca dil kaygısının, yabancı dilden keyif almanın almanın en iyi göstergesi olduğu ortaya çıktı.

*Anahtar sözcükler:* duygular; yabancı dil kaygısı; yabancı dilden keyif alma

### AUTHOR BIODATA

Zekiye Özer received her Ph.D. degree in ELT at Hacettepe University. She is currently works at Niğde Ömer Halisdemir University.

İsmail Fırat Altay an Assistant Professor at Hacettepe University, Faculty of Education, Department of Foreign Language Teaching, Division of English Language Teaching. After graduating from Hacettepe University, Faculty of Education, Department of Foreign Language Teaching, he completed his MA and PhD at the same university in English Language Education. He was a Fulbright scholar in USA for a year as a Foreign Language Teaching Assistant during PhD studies. His fields of interest include teaching language skills, pronunciation teaching and foreign language testing.