

# A Study of Non-English Majors' Foreign Language Enjoyment and Anxiety in Project-based Learning

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**Abstract:** Based on briefly reviewing studies on foreign language enjoyment and anxiety, this article mainly covers students gains from project-based learning, their enjoyment and anxiety in conducting projects. Questionnaire investigation about students enjoyment and anxiety is conducted after one-semester project-based learning. The results show students have benefited from project-based learning and meanwhile they experience various levels of enjoyment and anxiety while carrying out the projects.

**Keywords:** non-English majors, foreign language enjoyment, foreign language anxiety, project-based learning

## Introduction

With the flourishing of positive psychology in second language acquisition, the critical role of emotions such as enjoyment and anxiety in foreign language learning has been recognized by more and more scholars. And these emotions play an important part in determining students' learning outcomes and they are particularly significant for non-English majors, who often face more challenges. Project-based learning (PBL), which emphasizes active participation and collaboration, helps to enhance students positive emotions and reduce negative ones, benefiting promoting students' all-round development.

### 1. Studies on foreign language enjoyment and anxiety

Compared with positive emotions, anxiety, as a negative emotion, has been one of the central research topics in the field of second language acquisition for nearly 40 years. With the introduction of positive psychology, more and more scholars begin to focus on learners' foreign language enjoyment.

#### 1.1 Foreign language enjoyment and anxiety

Foreign language enjoyment (FLA) occurs when an individual's psychological needs are satisfied and it is a key component of flow experience, which is crucial for language learning and development<sup>[1]</sup>. Enjoyment is a positive affective state that combines challenge, happiness, interest, fun, sense of pride, and sense of meaning<sup>[2]</sup>. Foreign language anxiety (FLA) was defined as 'the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language'<sup>[8]</sup>. Foreign language learners experience classroom anxiety because of distress at their inability to be themselves and to connect authentically with other people through the limitation of the new language<sup>[5]</sup>.

#### 1.2 Related studies on factors affecting foreign language enjoyment and anxiety

FLE and FLA are the most common emotions experienced by learners in language learning process. They coexist in foreign language learning and they are significantly negatively correlated, but two emotions are independent of each other<sup>[1]</sup>. Following the pioneering study by Dewaele & MacIntyre (2014), researchers further delved into the sources of FLE and FLA. Many factors have been identified to be significant predictors of both emotions.

Some studies explored these factors affecting FLE and FLA<sup>[3][4][7]</sup>. Some factors can be categorized into internal and external factors. For example, Dewaele et al. (2018) found that internal variables of learners such as age, gender, attitudes towards the foreign language, and foreign language proficiency level were correlated with both FLE and FLA, while external variables such as attitudes towards the foreign language teacher, teacher's language use were not significantly related to FLA but strongly related to FLE. According to Li and Han (2022), learners rich in positive emotions are more self-confident and have higher self-evaluations of their academic performance, whereas learners who are frequently exposed to negative emotions are prone to negative self-evaluations of their performance<sup>[6]</sup>. Meanwhile, learners with higher self-confidence and higher self-assessment of their academic performance were more likely to experience enjoyment in learning a foreign language and less likely to feel anxious or bored.

FLE and FLA are affected by many factors. It is necessary for teachers to explore sources that affect their own students' FLE and FLA so as to create better language learning experiences for them.

## **2. Research process**

In this study, research subjects are 206 non-English major freshmen from a university in northwest region of China. The PBL experiment lasts for one semester in which students work in small groups and finish 4 projects.

In this experiment, projects are from college English textbook *OVER TO YOU: An Integrated Course 2*. Students products of PBL include oral presentations and video making. As to the teaching procedure of PBL, at the beginning of each unit, students are made clear about the final project of the unit. Then in class and after class, students make use of scaffolding provided by the textbook and teachers to finish the project step by step. The final step is that students are asked to make oral presentations about their group projects to the whole class. For all the presentations, different forms of assessment are conducted.

After one-semester experiment, a questionnaire investigation was conducted in which students were asked to narrate what they have benefited from PBL, give detailed descriptions and explanations about their happy moments and anxious moments in the process of project-based learning.

## **3. Research results**

The qualitative analysis software Nvivo 12 is used to analyze data from the questionnaire and results are as follows.

### **3.1 Students gains from PBL**

About students' gains from one-semester PBL, five key nodes have been coded and identified: cooperation, ability, learning, speech and knowledge. Among these five aspects, ability ranks the first( 40%), speech accounting for (17%), cooperation and knowledge being the same(15%), and learning accounting for 13%.

Abilities that students have benefited from PBL include leadership ability, ability to make Power Point (PPT) and to deliver speeches etc. Examples from students' narration: "I can have an overall control when doing a project, from choosing a topic to finding information to write the final speech draft. My comprehensive ability has improved." "I was able to do research appropriately for different issues and increased my vocabulary recognition skills in the process of searching information for projects".

As to speech delivery, giving speech without referring to drafts, skills of making public speech are reported. Examples from students: "PBL honed my presentation skills and I am more confident in speaking in front of many people." "I have gained a lot from making speeches and I don't have stage fright anymore."

Cooperation is one of the key features in PBL and students have perceived the importance of group cooperation and PBL helps to improve their team spirit. In order to finish the projects, they seek more information and widen their horizon,

thus, they enrich their knowledge, not only in English, but also in different fields. And PBL creates good and relaxing learning environment and they have learned a lot from their group members.

### **3.2 Students' FLE in PBL**

As to students description about episodes or events that make them enjoyable, the results show five aspects: video making, speech delivery, preparation for the projects, the process of doing projects and final product sharing.

First, students enjoy working with group members to shoot videos. They get pleasure from communicating with group members to finish the video shooting and editing. Examples from students. "We had a lot of fun shooting videos for projects and enjoyed speaking English." "When I was shooting the video, my partners were talking about their future, and it was very inspiring to hear their plans." "Group members were very tolerant and I felt very meaningful and happy."

Second, some students report enjoyment and increased confidence and pride when they finish giving speeches. As a student says: "Going on stage to give an oral presentation was nerve-wracking, but I think it gave me a lot more courage to go on stage in the future and increased my confidence." And some students enjoy listening to other groups' presentations for they find it interesting to listen to other students' stories.

Moreover, students give descriptions about happy moments or episodes during different periods of PBL, such as period when they make preparations for the projects, when they carry out the projects or they finish the projects. For example, "I feel so happy when I have made full preparations for a project." "Shooting the video is really complex, but when the video can be shot smoothly because of full preparations. All of us feel proud and happy." "When I was the one to present our group's project product, I felt nervous but very excited at the time."

To sum up, PBL helps to enhance students' FLE as students have gained a sense of achievement and pride, increased confidence and enjoyment when they are learning by doing and collaborating with group members.

### **3.3 Students' FLA in PBL**

As for anxiety that students experienced in PBL, the results will be analyzed from the following five aspects.

First, some students are worried about PPT. They feel stressful about making high-quality PPT and nervous about playing PPT as they are worried about computer problems. Second, some students' anxiety is from project planning. As a student reports: "It is the first time to do a project in English. How to plan a project and get it started makes me very headache, especially when it comes to an unfamiliar topic. I feel it is really difficult." In addition, some students have relatively strong anxiety in conducting project of video making as they are not familiar with video editing software. Third, students' FLA is related to group work. Sometimes, it is hard to adjust division and collaboration among group members, which makes them worried. And another problem is some group members are not actively engaged in the project, which makes the whole project progress slowly. Fourth, it is not easy for group members to find time and discuss the project together, which brings anxiety. The fifth aspect is speech delivery. As some students report: "Although it is an opportunity to speak English in front of the whole class, I have stage fright and a little bit of pressure." "The moment I stand on the podium for English speech, I get so nervous that my whole body trembles."

In summary, students experience certain level of FLA in PBL. Some are caused by internal factors such as being unfamiliar with the concept of project or with video editing software, lacking related knowledge to conduct the project. Some are caused by external factors such as their tight schedule, unreasonable group division and collaboration or group members' poor engagement.

## **4. Conclusion**

PBL derives from Dewey's ideas on education such as "Education is life.", "School is society." and "learning by doing". PBL in College English teaching helps to develop the key competences that students should possess in the 21 century. When implementing PBL, teachers need to pay attention to students emotions such as FLE and FLA.

FLE and FLA are interconnected and they are not mutually exclusive emotions. Enjoyment can enhance motivation and persistence in students' learning, while anxiety may hinder progress and lead to avoidance behaviors. Therefore, it is

crucial to create a learning environment that fosters enjoyment and eases anxiety. In PBL, teachers can provide clear objectives and procedures for conducting a project, give personalized and supportive feedback, foster successful learning experiences, and ensure adequate resources and support. By doing so, a more positive learning environment will be created for students to accomplish projects.

### **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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