The relationships between young Chinese EFL learners' classroom emotions, engagement and EFL proficiency[1]

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Abstract

The last decade has seen a proliferation of studies about emotions in FL teaching and learning. The present study examined three of the most researched and well-known FL emotions, *anxiety*, *boredom* and *enjoyment*, and their relationship with learners' *engagement* in EFL class and EFL test scores for reading, writing, listening, and speaking. One-hundred-and-eleven Primary 3-4 EFL children completed a questionnaire and FL tests. Various statistical analyses (correlation, hierarchical multiple regression, and path analysis) revealed that all five variables are significantly correlated, enjoyment was the strongest predictor of engagement and proficiency, followed by boredom. The path analysis evidenced that the hypothetical path of emotions→engagement→proficiency does not exist; rather, only two direct relationships were found in the model, namely enjoyment→engagement and enjoyment→proficiency, highlighting the significant role of enjoyment in FL teaching and learning. (131 words)

Keywords: FL emotions, enjoyment, boredom, anxiety, proficiency, engagement

Introduction

The novels of Enid Blyton have resonated with millions of children across the globe. The adventures of her young characters and the range of emotions they experience feel true to children. The character Dinah in *The Island of Adventure,* first published in 1947*,* points out that how children feel and think changes as they grow up:

> "Well, you know what grown-ups are,' said Dinah. 'They don't think the same way as we do. I expect when we grow up, we shall think like them - but let's hope we remember what it was like to think in the way children do, and understand the boys and the girls that are growing up when we're men and women." (2002, p. 117).

This admonishment applies to all applied linguists who have focused on the language learning emotions of teenagers and adults but have not yet investigated how children's emotions function in the Foreign Language (FL) classroom. We cannot assume that the pattern of relationships between emotions and other variables that exist among older learners are isomorphous among younger learners. The absence of research on the FL emotions of child learners is not necessarily the result of wilful neglect of this young age group but could possibly be linked to the difficulty of getting access to children in primary schools. There is no doubt that children learners experience the same emotions as older learners, but studies that included younger participants (aged 11+) did reveal that levels of both FL Enjoyment (FLE) and FL Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) were slightly lower for the pre-teens than for the teenagers (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Further research on secondary school learners showed that while FLE and FLCA remained quite stable across age groups, the predictors of both emotions changed over time (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2017). Comparisons of predictors of FL exam performance of secondary school pupils and university students also showed that the effects of FLE (but not FLCA) were very different in both groups (Dewaele, 2021).

[1] Pre-print of Tsang, A. & Dewaele, J. (2023). The relationships between young FL learners' classroom emotions (anxiety, boredom, & enjoyment), engagement, and FL proficiency. *Applied Linguistics Review*. https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2022-0077

The current study proposes to focus on the FL emotions of primary school learners, complementing FLE and FLCA with the latest emotion to have attracted growing interest because of its obvious pedagogical importance: FL Boredom (FLB) (Li, 2021a; Pawlak et al., 2020). More specifically, we will investigate to what extent these three emotions are related to primary school learners' engagement and proficiency. As such, the present study is situated at the cutting edge of learner emotion research (Li, 2021b).

Literature Review

When MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) and MacIntyre and Mercer (2014) introduced Positive Psychology in applied linguistics, it caused a surge of interest in learner emotions (Dewaele, Chen et al., 2019; Dewaele & Li, 2020; MacIntyre, Gregersen & Mercer, 2016, 2019). Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) argued that it was time was to turn away from an exclusive focus on FL Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) arguing that there was an urgent need to broaden the range of learner emotions and to adopt a more holistic perspective. The authors developed the concept of Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE), which they defined as:

> "a complex emotion, capturing interacting dimensions of challenge and perceived ability that reflect the human drive for success in the face of difficult tasks, pleasure is considered simply an agreeable feeling. On the one hand, enjoyment occurs when people not only meet their needs, but exceed them to accomplish something new or even unexpected; on the other hand, pleasure is a simpler feeling that something likable is happening" (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016, pp. 216-217).

One of the main research questions in Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) was to find out what the relationship is between FLE and FLCA. Are they opposite poles on a single dimension or are they actually two different dimensions? The authors developed a 21-item FLE scale, in addition to an 8-item short version of Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLCA scale. Horwitz et al.'s (1986) defined FLCA as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128). Horwitz (2017) explained that FLCA is a situation-specific combination of trait and state anxiety: "When individuals experience Language Anxiety, they have the *trait* of feeling *state* anxiety when participating in language learning and/or use" (p. 33). Horwitz attributes the cause of FLCA to the ego-threatening nature of FL interactions. This may hamper the establishment of authentic connections with interlocutors. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) also collected a database of over 50,000 words elicited through an open question about enjoyable episodes in the FL class. A significant but moderate negative correlation between FLE and FLCA suggested that they are really independent dimensions. This meant that no seesaw relationship existed between them and that is was possible for learners to experience high levels of FLE and FLCA simultaneously, such as in public speech in front of the class, or absence of any emotion when they felt bored. Analyses of the sources of FLE showed that it was positively linked with the number of languages learners knew, perceived proficiency, relative standing in the FL class, age, female gender and level of education. With the exception of gender, FLCA showed an inversed pattern. Qualitative analysis showed that learners' FLE was linked to classroom activities, specifically activities that gave learners a degree of autonomy and agency. FLE also depended on both personal and social aspects in the classroom, namely friendly peers and teachers who were positive, well-organised and supportive.

Follow-up studies on the relationship between FLE and FLCA generally confirmed the original pattern: moderate negative correlations between FLE and FLCA were reported for FL learners from different parts of the world (for an overview, see Dewaele, 2022). Studies on the origin of the emotions revealed that FLCA appeared to be mostly linked to learner-internal psychological variables such as Neuroticism, Introversion and Emotional

Intelligence (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2019; Li, Huang & Li, 2020) whereas FLE was found to be more strongly related to learner-external variables (Dewaele, 2022; Li et al., 2020). The teacher was found to play a central role in students' FLE (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Dewaele et al., 2018; Elahi Shirvan, Taherian & Yazdanmehr, 2020; Li, 2020). Teacher's friendliness, unpredictability, frequency of use of the FL, frequency of joking and learners' positive attitudes toward the FL teacher were strong predictors of FLE (Dewaele, Magdalena Franco et al., 2019; Dewaele, 2022; Elahi Shirvan et al., 2020).

Dewaele and Li (2021) focused on teacher enthusiasm and how it affected 2002 Chinese university EFL learners' emotions and their engagement. Significant positive relationships were found between perceived teacher enthusiasm, FLE, and learning engagement, while negative relationships emerged between the same variables and FLB. FLE and FLB co-mediated the relationship between perceptions of teacher enthusiasm and students' engagement in class.

Finally, Li et al. (2018) reported how specific tasks such as role-play, story-telling, puzzle-solving and recitation can boost FLE because they allow learners to engage, to shape the activities and to bond with group members. Dewaele and Li (to appear) argued that task-specific FLE in the FL class can lead to a more general FLE in the classroom. Teachers can thus select tasks that are sufficiently but not overly challenging, inherently enjoyable and not overly anxiety-provoking in order to motivate their students.

Abundant research exists about the learner-internal and learner-external sources of FLCA. In addition to personality traits, FLCA had been linked to sociobiographical variables such as age, gender, social class, education level (Dewaele, 2013), but also to learners' linguistic profile (degree of multilingualism, age of onset and context of learning the FL, FL proficiency, attitude towards the FL, relative standing among peers). Learner-external variables have also been identified as sources of FLCA, such as classroom environment (Li & Dewaele, 2021), attitude towards the FL teacher, the use of the FL by the teacher, teacher predictability, teacher age, teacher strictness (e.g., Dewaele et al., 2018, 2019; Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). Similarly, Li et al. (2020) found that both trait emotional intelligence and classroom environment predicted Chinese EFL learners' FLCA. Trait emotional intelligence and learner autonomy were shown to affect both FLE and FLCA of 510 European tertiary-level EFL learners in Resnik and Dewaele (2021). Participants were found to report significantly lower levels of both FLE and FLCA in their online classes than in their pre-pandemic in-person classes. More autonomous and more emotionally intelligent students reported lower FLCA in both modalities.

Researchers in the last couple of years have started investigating Foreign Language Boredom (FLB) defined as "a negative emotion with extremely low degree of activation/arousal that arises from ongoing activities (…) (that) are typically over-challenging or under-challenging" (Li, Dewaele & Hu, 2020, p. 12). The authors based the definition on Pekrun (2006) and Putwain et al.'s (2018) Control–Value Theory of achievement emotions. These emotions are organised along the valence (positive-negative) and arousal dimensions (passive-active) and categorises following the focus of the emotion (either arising from an ongoing activity or linked to future or past outcomes of these activities). FLE is seen as a positive moderately to highly activating activity-related achievement emotion, FLCA is a negative moderately to highly activating outcome-related achievement emotion and FLB is a negative deactivating activity-related achievement emotion (Pekrun & Perry, 2014). Li (2021a) found that different control–value appraisals predicted FLB among Chinese EFL learners. Learners who rated their FL competence low (low control) and did not like their English classes much (low engagement) reported higher levels of FLB. FLB could result from being overchallenged or underchallenged in class. The key is thus to use challenging

tasks at the appropriate level of difficulty to allow learners to feel excited and to allow them to build a sense of confidence, competence and control. The teacher can thus create a positive emotional classroom atmosphere where learners experience high levels of FLE, and low levels of FLCA and FLB.

Research on the relationship between learner emotions and learner performance in the FL shows that how learners feel is strongly linked to how they perform and progress. Li (2020) found that Chinese EFL learners with higher levels of FLE had significantly higher proficiency scores and test results. A recent meta-analysis by Botes, Dewaele and Greiff (2022) of 53 studies confirmed that FLE was moderately positively correlated both with actual and self-perceived academic achievement in the FL. A stronger positive correlation was found between FLE and Willingness to Communicate. Other meta-analyses have shown that FLCA has the opposite effect. Highly anxious FL learners perform less well and progress more slowly (Teimouri et al., 2019). Botes, Greiff and Dewaele (2020) focused on 67 studies that used Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLCA and found a moderate negative correlation between FLCA and reading, writing, listening, and speaking in the FL. Although it is too early for meta-analyses on the relationship between FLB and academic performance in the FL, early findings suggest that a clear negative relationship exists, as bored students feels disengaged and are less likely to work hard to do well (Li, 2021a). Comparing the effect of FLE and FLCA on FL exam performance of secondary school pupils and university students, Dewaele (2021) found that FLCA was the only emotion variable to negatively predict the FL exam performance of Kazakh secondary school pupils learning Turkish (the effect size was small), while both FLCA and FLE predicted the FL exam performance of university students (the effect size was small).

Recent research has also started to investigate to what extent FLE, FLCA and FLB are linked with each other. Li and Han (2022) reported significant negative correlations between Chinese EFL students' FLE and FLCA, between FLE and FLB, and a positive correlation between FLA and FLB. FLCA emerged as the only significant negative predictor for FL test scores, but FLE and FLB were significant positive predictors of learners' perceived achievement. Similarly, Dewaele, Botes and Greiff (2022), using an international sample of FL learners, found that FLE was significantly negatively linked with FLCA and FLB. A significant positive relationship emerged between FLCA and FLB. FLCA was the only emotion to have a (negative) effect on learners' FL academic achievement.

Research questions

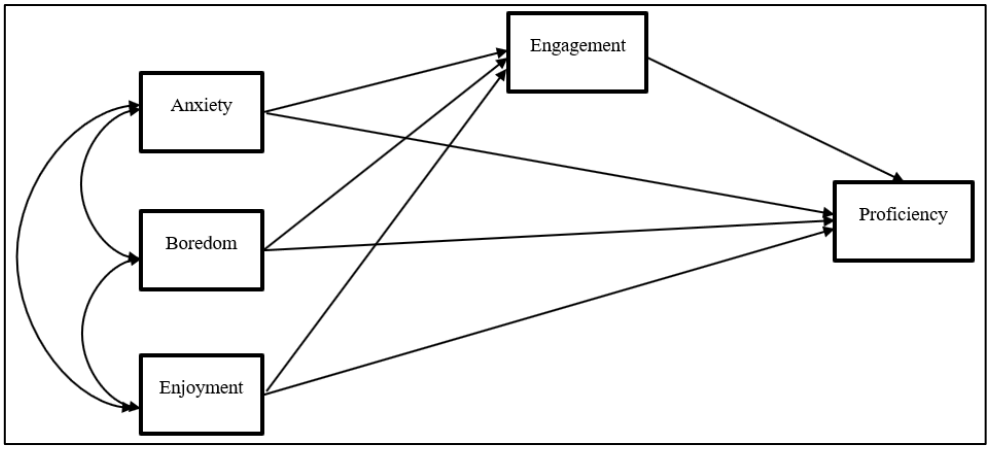
This cross-sectional study is part of a larger longitudinal project examining young EFL learners' proficiency, learner-related (e.g. emotions) and socio-environmental (e.g. input beyond the classroom) variables. The research questions were as follows:

[1] What are young learners' levels of FLCA, FLB, and FLE in the EFL classroom?

[2] How do the three emotions relate to their engagement in EFL classes and overall proficiency?

Based on the literature review, the hypothesized model is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The hypothesized model



Methods

Participants

One-hundred-and-eleven primary 3-4 EFL learners (M_{age}=8.99, *SD*=0.52; 51 males, 60 females) completed the study voluntarily. A mass invitation was sent to primary schools in Hong Kong. Among those indicating interest to participate, four schools were selected based on their different locations and achievement levels in order to recruit students with as diverse a range of abilities as possible (this was proven in their proficiency scores; see results). These 111 learners and their parents consented to participate in this study. Having completed all the instruments, the learners were awarded a certificate of participation. An average EFL learner at this stage in Hong Kong has learnt English for around five to six years (three years in kindergartens and starting from Primary 1), reaching upper A1 to A2 level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; see Council of Europe, 2020). This enabled tests of four macro-skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) to be administered for proficiency measurement.

Measures

Four proficiency tests and a questionnaire were administered to the participants. Due perhaps to the self-selection nature of sampling, all 111 participants completed these instruments in a satisfactory manner (e.g. not having randomly ticked choices).

The proficiency tests

The English proficiency tests adopted were created by Cambridge Assessment English, a world-renowned English assessment organization. Tests produced by the organization have undergone rigorous validation procedures (e.g. see Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2022b) and used in previous empirical studies (e.g. Tsang & Lo, 2020; De Wilde, Brysbaert, & Eyckmans, 2020). Considering different factors (see Procedure below), *Flyers Listening*, *Reading*, and *Speaking*, and *A2 Key for Schools Writing* tests were chosen (see descriptions and sample papers in Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2022a). Both *Flyers* and *A2 Key for Schools* are suitable for learners at the A2 proficiency level. It was unanimously agreed (see Procedure below) that the writing section in *Flyers* (writing 20 or more words on one topic; see sample papers) was too simple for the target participants, limited in scope, and unable to assess writing skills comprehensively. The *A2 Key for Schools Writing* test, which comprises two slightly longer pieces of different genres (one 25 and another 35 words or more), were adopted instead. Table 1 describes the four papers. Each paper contributed equally to the overall proficiency score of 400. The reliability was very high, α=.89.

Table 1. The four proficiency tests

Paper	Parts (Total items)	Time (minutes)
Listening	5 (25)	Around 25
Reading	6 (43)	30
Speaking	4 (24)	Around 7-9 per candidate
Writing	2 (2; one email/letter and one story)	20

Anxiety

The 3-item L2-Classroom Anxiety scale was adopted from Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008). The items measured learners' FLCA in EFL lessons (e.g. *I am afraid that my classmates will laugh at me when I have to speak in English lessons*). The reliability was high, especially considering that there were only three items, α=.80 (it was only .63 in Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008). Participants rated from 1(definitely not) to 6(totally true), following the original scale.

Boredom

A shortened 3-item boredom scale was used based on Li (2021a). The items measured learners' levels of FLB in EFL lessons (e.g. *I can't concentrate in English class because I am so bored*). The reliability was very high, α=.91. Participants rated the items from 1(strongly disagree) to 5(strongly agree).

Enjoyment

The 10-item FLE scale by Dewaele, Magdalena Franco and Saito (2019) was employed. The items measured learners' levels of enjoyment in EFL lessons (e.g. *There is a good atmosphere*). The reliability was very high, α=.90. Participants rated the items from 1(strongly disagree) to 5(strongly agree).

Engagement

To measure English class engagement, the 4-item scale from Bai, Nie and Lee (2020) was administered. An example is "*I listen carefully when the teacher explains something*". The reliability was very high, α=.87. Participants rated the items from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Procedure and analysis

Due to the participants' limited proficiency, the questionnaire was in their L1 (i.e. Chinese). All items were translated and checked by two highly proficient bilinguals; discrepancies were discussed until the final version was compiled. All the instruments were piloted with six P3 students (two relatively high, two mid, and two low proficiency levels). Informal feedback was sought from them after completing each instrument. Twenty-six primary EFL teachers were also invited to comment on the questionnaire and tests. Based on the above, it was concluded that the instruments were suitable with tests pitched at appropriate to slightly difficult levels. Only minor changes were needed (e.g. the original writing paper required learners to write an email, but it was pointed out that not all learners would have learnt this genre at this stage, so we changed the task to *email OR letter*).

The questionnaire and the reading, writing, and listening tests were administered to the participants in groups with two to three project assistants in each room. The assistants explained what each instrument was about, provided guidance, monitored their progress, clarified queries, and checked the questionnaires and tests when collecting them. Breaks were given between the tests to prevent fatigue. The speaking tests were conducted individually

following the *Flyers* speaking test procedure with two examiners. All speaking tests were audio-recorded.

The reading and listening papers were scored according to marking schemes. All the answers were straight-forward and objective. Each paper was marked by one research assistant, then second-marked and checked by another assistant (both majoring in English education). Discrepancies and queries were relayed to the first author and the three discussed until a consensus was reached. The writing papers were marked by two in-service primary EFL teachers with experience in marking writing tests. The participants' papers were first typed verbatim (e.g. all misspellings, symbols, and format were retained) in a WORD file and checked by a research assistant. This ensured that participants' handwriting would not affect markers' assessment. The files were then sent to both teachers, who marked all the papers independently. Following the official marking scheme, a score of 0-5 was given (for content, organization, and language each). For scores that showed a 1-mark difference, the average was taken as the final score (e.g. 3 and 4 gave 3.5). For scores with 2-or-more-mark differences, the teachers were asked to remark the paper and discuss until a consensus was reached. 5.26% of the scores showed 2-or-more-mark differences. The markers re-graded and discussed those papers, ultimately resulting in all scores within a 1-mark margin. Similarly, for methodological rigour, each speaking assessment was carried out by two markers. All markers have EFL education backgrounds with experience in speaking assessment. Following the official marking scheme, a score of 0-5 was given (for vocabulary & grammar, pronunciation, and interaction). For scores with a 2-or-more-mark difference (9.31% in total), the teachers were asked to discuss immediately after each session. When no consensus could be made, the audio-recorded tests were marked by a third and fourth markers. The final scores were all within a 1-mark difference. All collected data were checked carefully again (e.g. if done conscientiously) and entered into spreadsheets. It was confirmed that the data from these 111 participants were valid with no missing values.

The skewness and kurtosis of all data were well within ±2 (see Table 1), showing normal distribution (Roever & Phakiti, 2017). All five variables show (very) high reliability. Using SPSS, Pearson's correlation was conducted to examine association between the variables, followed by (hierarchical) multiple regression to investigate how the three emotions (predictors) are related to engagement and proficiency (outcomes). Finally, the hypothesized path model was scrutinized employing AMOS.

Results

The descriptive statistics and correlation matrix are shown in Table 1. The mean scores show that the participants did experience some FLCA (M=2.90, SD=1.60) but very little FLB in EFL lessons (M=1.90, SD=1.12). They scored higher on FLE (M=3.58, SD=0.95), and highest on engagement (M=4.04, SD=0.92). Their average mark was 202/400 (SD=83.08). All the variables are significantly intercorrelated. Particularly strong correlations are seen between FLE and engagement (r=.76, p<.001) and FLE and FLB (r=-.65, p<.001).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix

	M(SD)	Range	*α*	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3	4	5
1 FLCA	2.90(1.60)	1-6	.80	.47	-1.04	1.00				
2 FLB	1.90(1.12)	1-5	.91	1.21	0.48	.45***	1.00			
3 FLE	3.58(0.95)	1.1-5	.90	-0.92	0.17	-.35***	-.65***	1.00		
4 Engagement	4.04(0.92)	1-5	.87	-1.31	1.45	-.31**	-.48***	.76***	1.00	
5 Proficiency	201.90(83.08)[#]	42.95-358.06[#]	.89	0.07	-0.93	-.20*	-.26**	.34***	.23*	1.00

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001; n=111; [#]maximum score=400

As all three emotions are significantly correlated with engagement, they were entered in a multiple regression model. All VIF values are below 2, well below the threshold of 10, indicating no cause for concern for multicollinearity (Field, 2018). The model was significant, $F(3, 107) = 50.48$, p<.001, $R^2 = .59$. However, Enjoyment was the only significant predictor (b=0.76, β=0.78, SE=0.08, p<.001), with Anxiety and Boredom failing to reach significance (see Model 2 in Table 2). To test how the two negative emotions alone relate to engagement, hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted. The results, shown in Table 2, indicate that both models are statistically significant. In Model 1, Boredom was a significant predictor but not Anxiety. Two more models were tested in a reversed manner, with Model 3 (FLE) and Model 4 (all three emotions). The results show that there is no significant F change from Model 3 to Model 4. The semi-partial (sr) correlations were also telling. For FLB, sr=-.38, p<.001, in Model 1. However, after FLE was added in Model 2, it became insignificant, sr=.04, p=.52. Enjoyment has a significant semi-partial correlation with engagement (Model 2), sr=.59, p<.001.

Table 2. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis of emotions and engagement

	F ($df_{regression}$, $df_{residual}$)	p	R^2	ΔR^2	b	β	SE	p
Model 1	17.12 (2, 108)	<.001	.24					
FLCA					-0.07	-0.12	0.05	.20
FLB					-0.35	-0.42	0.08	<.001
Model 2	50.48 (3, 107)	<.001	.59	.35, p<.001				
FLCA					-0.01	-0.01	0.04	.81
FLB					0.05	0.06	0.06	.43
FLE					0.80	0.80	0.07	<.001

Next, the relationships between the three emotions and proficiency were examined. As all variables were found to be significantly intercorrelated, a multiple regression model was conducted. All VIF values are below 2, hence multicollinearity not being a concern. The model was significant, $F(3, 107) = 5.06$, p=.003, $R^2 = .12$. Again, only FLE was significant (b=25.54, β=0.29, SE=10.49, p=.02), but not the two other emotions (see Model 6 in Table 3).

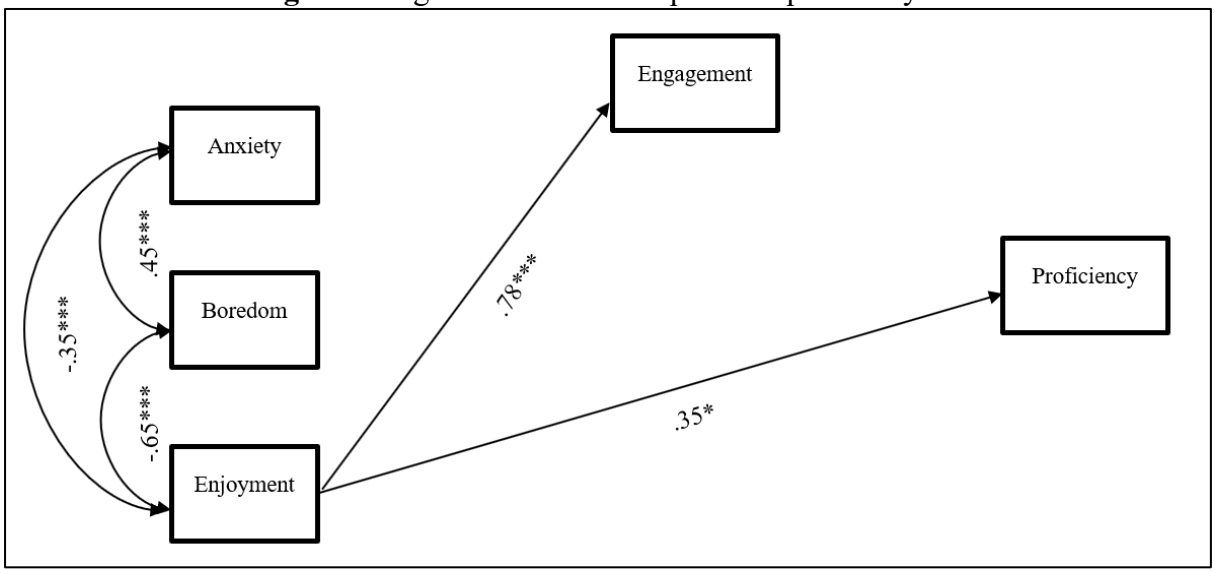
As above, hierarchical multiple regression analysis was employed to further examine the relationships between negative emotions and proficiency. Two more models were tested with Model 7 (FLE) and Model 8 (all three emotions). The results show that there is no significant F change from Model 7 to 8. In Model 5, Boredom had a semi-partial correlation of -.19, p=.05, with proficiency, but when FLE was introduced in Model 6, it dropped to -.02, and became insignificant p=.82. In Model 6 (a full model), only Enjoyment has a significant correlation with proficiency, sr=.22, p=.02.

Table 3. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis of emotions and proficiency

	F ($df_{regression}$, $df_{residual}$)	p	R^2	ΔR^2	b	β	SE	p
Model 5	4.42 (2, 108)	.014	.08					
FLCA					-5.67	-0.11	5.36	.29
FLB					-15.39	-0.21	7.65	.05
Model 6	5.06 (3, 107)	.003	.12	.04, p=.02				
FLCA					-4.62	-0.09	5.26	.38
FLB					-2.07	-0.03	9.27	.82
FLE					25.54	0.29	10.49	.02

A path analysis was conducted with the five variables under investigation making reference to their hypothesized relationships (Figure 1). The model showed a good fit: $\chi^2(1) = 1.27$, p=.26; GFI= .995; CFI= .999; TLI= .985; RMSEA= .05. However, only two of the hypothesized predictive relationships were significant and no indirect effects were found. The two only significant effects were direct ones: Enjoyment→Engagement (β=.78, p<.001) and Enjoyment→Proficiency (β=.35, p=.03). All three correlations were significant, ps<.001, FLCA and FLB (r=.45), FLCA and FLE (r=-.35), and FLB and FLE (r=-.65). Figure 2 shows a summary of the significant relationships in the model. In this model, 59% and 12% of the variance in engagement and overall proficiency respectively were explained. Appendix 1 shows all standardized weights in the model (output from AMOS).

Figure 2: Significant relationships in the path analysis



Discussion

The first research question focused on the levels of FLE, FLCA, FLB and engagement that our primary school learners experienced in the EFL classroom. It turned out that that they experienced relatively low levels of negative emotions and higher levels of positive emotions. Levels of FLB were low (M = 1.90) and levels of FLCA were moderate (M = 2.90). In contrast, levels of FLE (M = 3.58) and engagement (M = 4.04) were high. These results are comparable with those reported by Jiang and Dewaele (2019) for Chinese university EFL learners (M FLE = 3.94; M FLCA = 3.14) (p. 18); and for the Chinese secondary school EFL pupils in Li et al. (2018) (M FLE = 3.12) (p. 188) and Li and Dewaele (2021): Mean FLCA = 3.05. The mean for FLB among Chinese university EFL learners in Li (2021) is 2.83 on a 7-point Likert scale, which corresponds to 2.02 on a 5-point scale. It thus seems that the intensity of the classroom emotions of our primary school learners are very similar to that of their older peers, confirming patterns observed between 12 and 18 year-old FL learners in Dewaele and Dewaele (2017).

The second research question addressed the relationships between the three emotions, and their links with engagement in EFL classes and overall proficiency. FLCA was found to be significantly positively linked FLB and negatively linked with the other variables. FLE was significantly negatively linked with FLB and positively with the other variables. FLB was significantly positively linked with FLCA and negatively with the other variables. These patterns reflect those reported in Li and Han (2022) and Dewaele et al. (2022), with the difference in the present study that all three emotions are significantly linked to proficiency whereas only FLCA was linked to FL performance measures in Li and Han (2022) and Dewaele et al. (2022). The negative link between FLCA and exam performance reflects the finding for both groups in Dewaele (2021), where FLE explained unique variance in the group of university students only. This suggests that the relationship between emotions and exam performance is not linear across age groups, and that other factors intervene.

A multiple regression model revealed that FLE was the only significant predictor of engagement, with FLCA and FLB failing to explain any unique variance. Focusing on the two negative emotions, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis showed that FLB was the only significant (negative) predictor of engagement.

A multiple regression model revealed a similar pattern for the emotions predicting proficiency: FLE was the only significant predictor. Further hierarchical multiple regression analysis revealed that FLB had a borderline significant negative relationship with proficiency until FLE was introduced, after which its effect faded. In other words, FLE was the strongest predictor of proficiency.

Finally, a path analysis was conducted with all variables to investigate their hypothesized relationships. Only two of the hypothesized predictive relationships were significant: FLE→Engagement (explaining 59% of the variance) and FLE→Proficiency (explaining 12% of the variance). This pattern reflects the findings for Chinese EFL learners in Dewaele and Li (2021) that showed that FLE was a strong predictor of engagement and the finding in Li (2020) that FLE was positively correlated with both self-perceived English achievement and actual English achievement. This seems to be universal pattern (Botes et al., 2022; Dewaele, 2022).

The primary school children in our sample experienced the same emotions -with comparable intensity- as their older peers in other studies. The difference was that being very young and at the start of their education, their classroom emotions were still spontaneous. We speculate

that they had not yet had time to develop a fully-fledged FLCA that might silence older learners and hamper their performance and progress. Similarly, they had not yet their minds up that the FL class was boring and that their interests lay elsewhere. It does not mean they could not occasionally feel anxious or bored, but it did not affect their optimism and the amount of effort they put into exam preparation. Their joy at learning this exciting new FL was unalloyed and spontaneous. They had not (yet?) been sufficient disappointed in their FL performance and testing results to lose their initial enthusiasm for the course. The high level of FLE fired up their engagement which led them to work hard and well and reach a high level of proficiency. Also, the absence of looming national exams meant the learners were not under too much pressure to obtain high scores.

The current study is not without limitations. Having opted for a purely quantitative design, we do not have the voices of participants on how they felt about their EFL classes, about their progress and performance, about their hopes to become fluent in English. Further research could focus on the transition between this age of positive innocence and the moment when FLCA and FLB start affecting proficiency. There are no obvious pedagogical implications from the current study. It merely shows that young children are wonderfully receptive to FL learning and that they start their linguistic journey joyfully.

Conclusion

We started the introduction with the words from one of Enyd Blyton's child characters asking her friends not to forget what it is to think like a child because adults think differently. The present study has shown that Chinese primary school EFL learners do experience FLE, FLCA and FLB at levels that are close to those of older learners. However, the relationship between these three emotions and their engagement and resulting proficiency in English were quite different. FLE turned out to be the sole significant positive predictor of both. This suggests that our young learners were starting their EFL journey with a clean slate. Their joy at discovering and mastering a new language was untainted by negative emotions. This is not to say that the negative emotions were absent but their tentacles had not yet affected the progression and performance. It is possible that our child learners were not yet too much burdened by thoughts about the destination. They spontaneously enjoyed their English classes which led them to focus and learn, like young plants soaking up rain drops and sunshine with equal pleasure.

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Appendix

Figure A: Standardized weights of the relationships in the model