

## **“I enjoy learning German”: An empirical study on the level and factor structure of foreign language enjoyment among 437 Chinese university students majoring in German**

Positive emotions have a significant effect on students' success in learning a foreign language. However, scholarly attention has long focused on their negative counterparts such as anxiety or boredom (Dewaele/MacIntyre 2014). With the development of positive psychology, the field of foreign language teaching and acquisition has witnessed a “positive turn” over the past decade, with growing interest in the positive side of learners' emotions (e. g., enjoyment).

The concept of foreign language enjoyment (FLE) was first introduced systematically in the field by Dewaele/MacIntyre (2014). In their subsequent study, they defined FLE 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” (Dewaele/MacIntyre 2016, p. 216). Their mixed-methods approach has since gained considerable popularity due to its efficiency and scientific rigor, with numerous studies typically relying on relatively small samples of foreign language learners within a single country or region (e. g., Li/Jiang/Dewaele 2018). Despite this surge in academic interest, studies to date have mainly concentrated on EFL (English as a foreign language) students while research on languages other than English (e. g., German) is much needed.

In China, German is experiencing a steady growth in importance, with the number of learners at tertiary level rising threefold compared with the turn of the century (Auswärtiges Amt 2020, p. 12). By contrast, in the era of Artificial Intelligence, more than 101 Chinese universities and colleges stopped offering foreign language majors between 2018 and 2022 (Shu 2025, p. 432), which makes the present study particularly noteworthy. Against this backdrop, it addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What are the levels of FLE among Chinese university students majoring in German as measured by the adapted scale? To what extent do learner-internal variables (e. g., age, gender, and language proficiency) predict participants' FLE?
- 2) What sources of FLE can be identified in the qualitative data?

A mixed-methods approach was employed following Dewaele/MacIntyre (2014, 2016). Starting with a demographic section, our questionnaire was based on their original 21-item FLE scale. It was administered to 437 students majoring in German across 32 different universities and colleges in 13 provinces of China.

The quantitative data underwent exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses using SPSS, revealing a three-factor model (termed *FLE-Learner*, *FLE-Teacher*, and *FLE-Atmosphere*) comprising 18 items that was subsequently used to measure FLE (research question 1).

For the qualitative item, the participants were asked to describe an enjoyable episode while learning or using German. Using NVivo 15, we performed a thematic analysis to identify the sources of FLE for each factor (research question 2). Additionally, the

qualitative data provided illustrative quotes that could validate and embellish the quantitative findings.

	<b>M</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>
<i>FLE-Overall</i>	<b>3.72 (SD = 0.62)</b>	<b>1.11</b>	<b>5</b>
<i>FLE-Learner</i>	3.44 (SD = 0.75)	1	5
<i>FLE-Teacher</i>	4.52 (SD = 0.68)	1	5
<i>FLE-Atmosphere</i>	3.73 (SD = 0.76)	1.33	5

Table 1: FLE levels among 437 Chinese university students majoring in German

Table 1 shows that the overall mean FLE score was 3.72/5, indicating a relatively high level of enjoyment. Among the three dimensions, *FLE-Teacher* received the highest rating ( $M = 4.52$ ), followed by *FLE-Atmosphere* ( $M = 3.73$ ) and *FLE-Learner* ( $M = 3.44$ ).

One-way ANOVA indicated that students' *FLE-Overall* ( $F = 3.839, p = 0.010$ ) and *FLE-Atmosphere* ( $F = 9.725, p = 0.000$ ) differed significantly by the year of study, with students in higher grades scoring significantly lower. Meanwhile, students with higher language proficiency in German reported a significantly lower *FLE-Atmosphere* ( $F = 5.985, p = 0.003$ ).

Factor	<i>FLE-Learner</i>	<i>FLE-Teacher</i>	<i>FLE-Atmosphere</i>
Sources of FLE	Improved Language Proficiency (108)		
	Interpersonal Interaction (102)		
	Pursuit of Personal Hobbies (58)	Learning Activities (61)	Positive Atmosphere in Classroom (37)
	Knowledge of German Culture (44)	Teacher Feedback (28)	Cooperative Learning (34)
	German Language Itself (44)	Pleasant Teaching Style (19)	Increased Intimacy with Friends (28)
	Self-Expression (42)	Support from Classmates (9)	
	Practical Application in Daily Life (38)	High Teaching Competence (2)	
	Working with German (15) Discovery of a New Self (1)		
Total	452	119	99

Table 2: Sources of FLE among 437 Chinese university students majoring in German (frequency of mentions)

*FLE-Learner* had the lowest mean score for FLE yet it was the most frequently mentioned dimension in the thematic analysis. In line with previous studies (e.g., Chen/Chen/Liu 2023), *FLE-Learner* was often associated with perceived improvements in language

proficiency (see Table 2), which enhance students’ sense of control and eventually trigger enjoyment. Interpersonal communication with native German speakers or pursuing personal hobbies further strengthened the perceived value of learning German, supporting the Broaden-and-Build Theory by expanding students’ social resources and experiences, which in turn promotes sustained engagement and emotional well-being.

Another source related to *FLE-Learner* appears to lie in the language itself. As indicated by the qualitative data, students with a longer experience of foreign language learning often identified unusual and intriguing grammatical or word-formation rules through cross-linguistic comparison. These distinctive properties of German could therefore boost students’ interest and enjoyment, aligning with previous motivation studies on German learning (e. g., Liu 2019).

The teacher emerged as a key driver of FLE in both the quantitative and qualitative analyses, *FLE-Teacher* thus highlighting the crucial role of instructors in fostering FLE. Innovative learning activities were reported to elicit high levels of FLE by aligning task demands with students’ skills, thus facilitating flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi 1975). Immediate positive feedback from teachers, such as praise or encouragement, further enhanced students’ control and value appraisals, supporting sustained attention and positive emotions over time.

Finally, *FLE-Atmosphere* underscored the importance of a positive learning environment and was the only factor to exhibit statistically significant differences across groups of participants. First-year students reported significantly higher scores for *FLE-Atmosphere* than seniors, suggesting greater peer interaction and shared laughter in early undergraduate German classes. These findings support the notion that cooperative learning enhances students’ autonomy and control appraisal, contributing to a positive classroom atmosphere and improved emotional states (Resnik/Dewaele 2023). This is also consistent with the concept of “social play”, which is characterized by shared joy, excitement, and smiles, which can foster enduring social bonds (Fredrickson 2001, p. 220).

Several pedagogical implications emerge from our findings. First, the relatively low scores of *FLE-Learner* among the target group could be increased through “emotional scaffolding” by teachers (Meyer/Turner 2007). Second, especially in the senior years of undergraduate study, it is recommended to integrate diverse instructional formats (e. g., cooperative learning) and innovative learning activities (e. g., role playing) to enhance *FLE-Atmosphere*.

The present study also has its limitations. The analysis focuses primarily on the microlevel of German classrooms, without systematically addressing potentially influential macrolevel factors such as national policies or the employment situation. Future research should also employ a broader range of qualitative methods (e. g., in-depth interviews) and integrate theoretical approaches from positive psychology, such as the control-value theory and the broaden-and-build theory, to deepen our theoretical understanding of FLE in foreign language learning and teaching.

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