

RESEARCH INSIGHTS

Is there any link between emotions and Extramural English?

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1. Introduction

Recent studies have demonstrated a link between learner emotions and both their progress in FL learning and the learning process (Li et al., 2023). Consequently, the achievements of language learners are increasingly associated not only with cognitive abilities and motivation but also with the dynamic interplay of emotions (Dewaele et al., 2024). Among these, three emotions stand out in the classroom: Foreign Language Enjoyment, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and Foreign Language Classroom Boredom.

While anxiety has been widely studied (MacIntyre, 1999), research into enjoyment and boredom is more recent. Enjoyment entered Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research about a decade ago (Dewaele & Macintyre, 2014) and has since become central in Positive Psychology approaches (Botes et al., 2022). Boredom, by contrast, remains comparatively underexplored, though recent studies have highlighted its prevalence in language classrooms (Kruk & Zawodniak, 2018; Li, 2022; Pawlak et al., 2020). Only in the last few years have researchers begun to systematically study Foreign Language Enjoyment, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and Foreign Language Classroom Boredom together (Dewaele, 2023).

Another key factor in today's classrooms is Extramural English (EE), defined as "incidental and also intentional learning of L2 English through learner-initiated contacts with the target language outside the walls of the classroom" (Sundqvist & Uztosun, 2023, p. 2). EE has been linked to linguistic gains and motivation, but its connection to learner emotions remains underexplored.

In Switzerland, the issue is particularly salient. English is introduced early (grade 3 or 5, depending on the canton) and is now the most widely spoken foreign language nationally. The canton of Zug, one of the cantons where this study was conducted, has a



ABSTRACT

This article investigates the links between three learner emotions – Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE), Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) and Foreign Language Classroom Boredom (FLCB) – and Extramural English (EE) among Swiss lower secondary students. A mixed-methods study (N=192) explored how these emotions interrelate, how they correlate with EE engagement and which classroom activities students associate with each emotion. The findings reveal a strong negative correlation between enjoyment and boredom, but no significant relationship between enjoyment and anxiety. EE is widespread, particularly through social media and gaming.

While EE was not linked to enjoyment, it showed a moderate negative correlation with anxiety and a weak positive correlation with boredom. Open responses illustrate which classroom tasks students connect with enjoyment (group projects, games, creative activities), boredom (repetitive grammar drills, copying vocabulary) and anxiety (oral exams, spontaneous speaking). The results provide both a scientific analysis and practical insights into how emotions shape the EFL classroom experience.

BIOGRAPHY

Alsu Hug, MA, from St. Gallen University of Teacher Education (PHSG) and University of Fribourg, is a research associate and lecturer in English and foreign language methodology at PHSG. From 2011 to 2023, she taught English, German and French at the lower secondary level and also worked as a course instructor for English, German and Russian in adult education. Her fields of research and practice include teacher education, multilingual pedagogy and methodology, foreign language methodology, student emotions and diversity. She currently leads the project HomeLanguageEnglish@sec1, funded by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture (BAK). The project focuses on developing tasks for lower secondary English lessons tailored to students with English as a heritage language as well as learners with high levels of English proficiency due to extramural contact with English.

significant number of native speakers and learners with high EE exposure alongside peers with less experience. Native-speaker learners are often reported to feel underchallenged and bored (Nadig, 2022) while non-native speaker learners may experience more anxiety. Yet little empirical research has examined how these group dynamics shape emotions in Swiss lower secondary classrooms.

This study addresses this gap by investigating:

1. the contexts in which students engage with EE;
2. the relationships between Foreign Language Enjoyment, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and Foreign Language Classroom Boredom in Swiss lower secondary classrooms;
3. the correlations between these emotions and EE engagement;
4. the classroom activities students themselves associate with enjoyment, boredom or anxiety.

By combining quantitative and qualitative data, the study aims to provide both statistical patterns and learners' lived experiences. This dual perspective is relevant for researchers in SLA and for teachers seeking to understand the emotional climate of their classrooms.

2. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method research design (Kuckartz, 2014), integrating both quantitative and qualitative research methods as well as the investigation of all three emotional dimensions of Foreign Language Enjoyment, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and Foreign Language Classroom Boredom simultaneously within a single framework.

A total of 192 secondary school students from Zug and St. Gallen participated in the study. They completed an online questionnaire with both closed and open questions. Quantitative data were analysed with correlational tests; qualitative responses were coded thematically using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022).

The quantitative component of the questionnaire employed validated short scales to measure the three emotional variables, including: Short-Form Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (Botes et al., 2021), Short-Form Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Botes, Dewaele, et al., 2022), Foreign Language Classroom Boredom Scale—a subscale (Factor 1) of the Foreign Language Boredom Scale (Li et al., 2023). Emotional responses related to the three emotions were measured using a 5-point Likert Scale, with 1 meaning “strongly disagree” and 5 “strongly agree”.

EE was measured as a composite mean score based on students' reported frequency of using English in four contexts: with friends, on social media, for gaming and for video streaming (e.g. TV, Netflix or YouTube).

The qualitative component consisted of three open-ended



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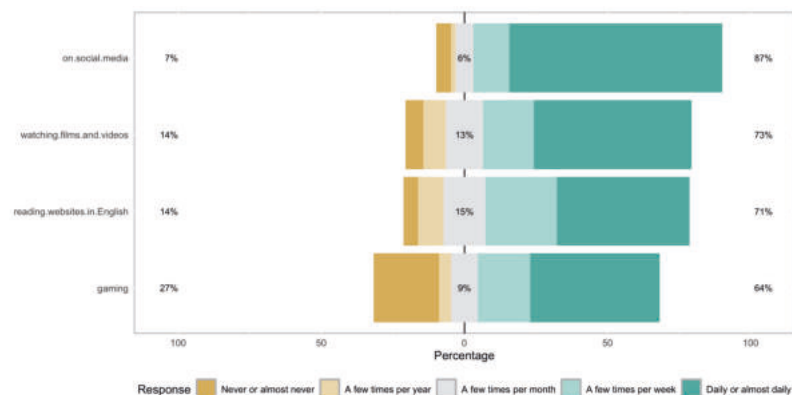
questions embedded in the questionnaire, offering perspectives on what specific classroom activities the students associate with enjoyment, anxiety and boredom.

3. Results

3.1 Extramural English (EE): A daily habit

One of the most striking findings of the survey was the prevalence of EE.

- Social media use was by far the most widespread: 87% of students reported using platforms such as TikTok, Snapchat or Instagram in English at least a few times per week.
- The second most popular activity was watching videos, films or series (TV, YouTube or Netflix) in English, in which 55% of students engaged daily or almost daily and another 18% a few times per week.
- Reading websites in English was also common: 71% of students reported doing this at least weekly.
- Gaming followed closely, with 64% of students engaging at least weekly.



- By contrast, reading books in English was less frequent: only 33% of students reported doing so daily or almost daily. This shows a clear preference for digital and interactive media over traditional reading.

English also featured in students' social contacts:

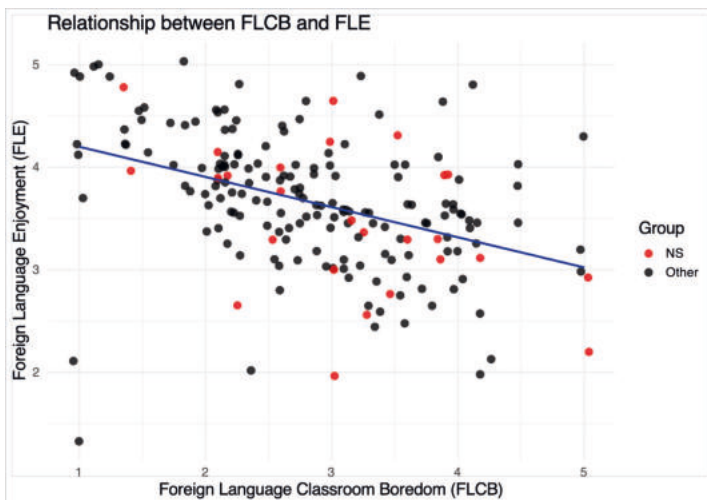
- More than half (55%) reported using English with friends at least a few times per week.
- 42% of students indicated using English at least a few times a week in more formal group work in subjects other than English.
- 34% reported using English informally during breaks at school.

Taken together, these findings confirm that EE is a central feature of students' everyday lives—digital, social and even in school contexts outside the English classroom.

3.2 Links between emotions

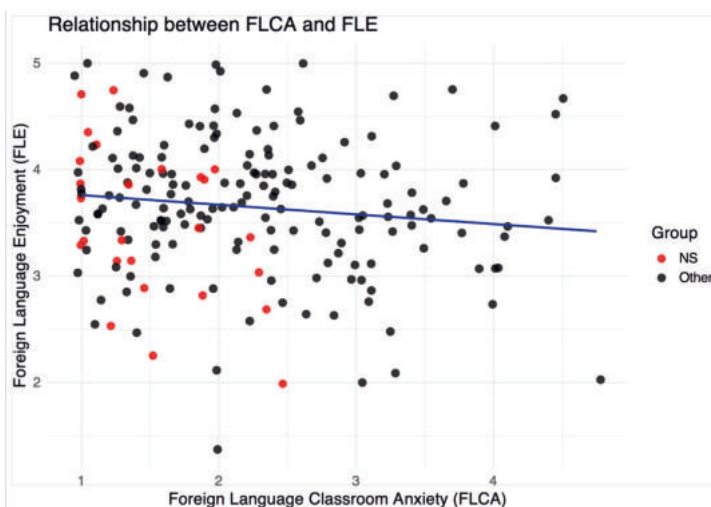
Enjoyment and boredom in the foreign language classroom

There is a relatively large negative correlation ($r = -0.484$) supporting and extending previous findings to a Swiss lower secondary school context (Dewaele et al., 2023). Students who reported higher enjoyment also reported lower boredom, and vice versa. This suggests that boredom and enjoyment are inversely related: students with higher levels of boredom are likely to experience reduced enjoyment in the foreign language classroom.



Enjoyment and anxiety in the foreign language classroom

There is a weak negative and statistically insignificant correlation ($r = -0.122$). Enjoyment and anxiety appeared largely independent in this context. This aligns with prior findings that, while these emotions coexist in the classroom, they represent distinct emotional dimensions (Dewaele & Macintyre, 2014). In practice, this means that learners can enjoy certain aspects of their English lessons while still feeling anxious in others—for instance, enjoying group work but feeling nervous about oral exams.

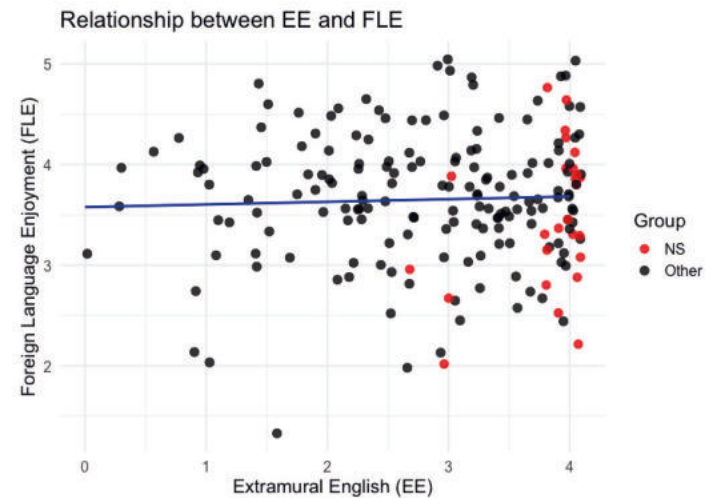


3.3 Links between Extramural English and emotions

EE and enjoyment in the foreign language classroom

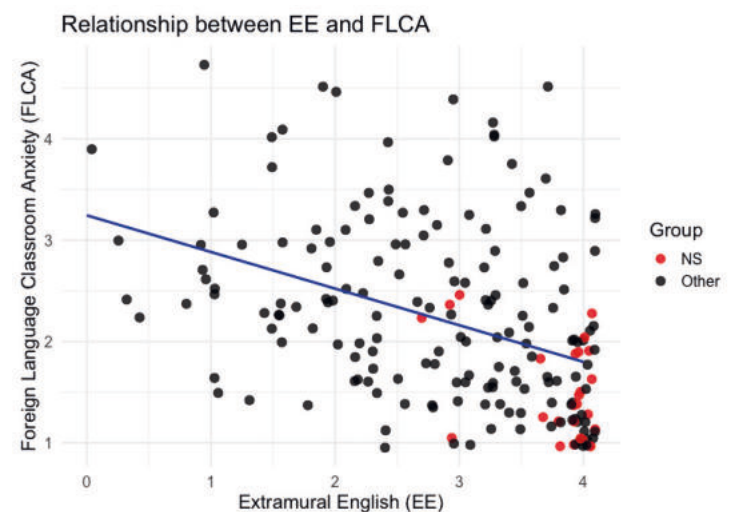
The analysis revealed no significant correlation between EE engagement and Foreign Language Enjoyment. While it was hypothesized that more EE might be positively correlated with

enjoyment in class, the data do not support this assumption. This suggests that enjoyment may be influenced more strongly by in-class factors, such as what teachers do, than by EE alone.



EE and anxiety in the foreign language classroom

The correlation between EE and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety was relatively large and negative (Spearman's $\rho = -0.466$, $p < .001$). Students with higher engagement with EE tended to report lower classroom anxiety. However, it is crucial to avoid claims of causality: while the data shows an association, it cannot be concluded that EE directly causes lower classroom anxiety.



EE and boredom in the foreign language classroom

The relationship between EE and Foreign Language Classroom Boredom was weak, positive and only marginally significant ($r = 0.142$, $p = .049$). This suggests that while the association exists, its effect size is small and unlikely to carry substantial practical implications. In other words, heavy EE users may feel slightly more bored in class, but the effect is minimal.



Recent studies have demonstrated a link between learner emotions and both their progress in FL learning and the learning process (Li et al., 2023).

3.4 Native vs. non-native learners

Group comparisons showed a mixed picture:

Foreign Language Enjoyment

The Kruskal–Wallis test indicated no significant difference between native and non-native speakers ($\chi^2 = 1.79$, $p = .181$). Although mean scores suggested slightly higher enjoyment among non-native speaker students, this difference is not statistically meaningful and is likely due to chance.

Foreign Language Classroom Boredom

Similarly, no significant difference was found for boredom ($\chi^2 = 2.08$, $p = .149$), despite slightly higher mean scores for NS learners. Both groups appear to experience comparable levels of boredom.

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety

In contrast, group differences for anxiety were highly significant. Native-speaker students reported much lower anxiety than non-native-speaker learners ($\chi^2 = 19.6$, $p < .001$). A Dwass–Steel–Critchlow–Fligner pairwise comparison confirmed this difference ($W = -6.26$, $p < .001$).

3.5 Which activities spark emotions?

The qualitative content analysis of open responses revealed how learners connect emotions to specific tasks.

Enjoyment

Students most often mentioned:

- gamification and play
- watching films or videos
- group discussions
- creative activities such as poster projects or making TikToks
- collaborative writing and presentations

"Mir gefällt, die Diskussionen in der Klasse, [in] welche[n] verschiedene Perspektiven und Meinungen gezeigt werden."

"Wir haben eine Dokumentation geschaut und ein kleines TikTok auf Englisch gedreht."

These examples show that tasks combining creativity, autonomy and collaboration were strongly linked to enjoyment.

Boredom

Students associated boredom primarily with:

- repetitive exercises
- textbook activities
- vocabulary copying
- grammar drills
- uninteresting topics or lengthy explanations

"Die Aufgaben im Coursebook sind zum Teil einfach langweilig, viele Aufgaben sind Abschreiben oder Repetition von unnötigen Dingen, die nicht relevant sind. (...)"

"What bores me a lot are grammar tasks because they are time wasting, easy and I learn basically nothing from them apart how to be patient."

"Es langweilt mich, wenn wir einfach Vokabular abschreiben müssen, denn dabei lernt, glaube ich, niemand etwas (auch die, welche nicht Englisch zu Hause sprechen)."

These comments suggest that lack of variety and low relevance were central triggers of boredom.

Anxiety

Anxiety was most often connected to performance tasks:

- speaking tasks
- presentations
- unexpected or unprepared tasks
- tests

"I barely get anxious but the only time when I feel a tiny bit of nervousity is when i need to present something but that is a common thing that happens to human beings no matter in what language."

"Wenn wir eine Präsentation hatten, ich bin immer nervös bei Präsentationen."

3.6 Discussion

The findings paint a complex picture of the emotional landscape in Swiss lower secondary classrooms.

The strong negative link between enjoyment and boredom confirms that these emotions function as opposites. The independence of enjoyment and anxiety shows that learners may enjoy some aspects of lessons while feeling anxious in others.

EE was strongly associated with lower anxiety, but not with enjoyment, and only weakly (positively) with boredom. This suggests that while EE can build confidence, classroom enjoyment and boredom are primarily shaped by in-class activities.

Native-speaker and non-native speaker learners did not differ in enjoyment or boredom but did differ sharply in anxiety. Non-native speaker students reported much higher Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety, underlining the need to consider background when interpreting classroom emotions.

Enjoyment was tied to creativity, collaboration and interactivity; boredom to repetition and lack of variety; anxiety to evaluation and unprepared speaking. Yet the same activity could elicit different emotions for different learners, underlying the complexity of the interplay of emotional reactions of individual students.

3.7 Implications for teachers

The findings of this study carry several implications for EFL teaching at lower secondary level. These are based on observed correlations, not causal relationships, and should be understood as tendencies rather than direct effects.

Addressing boredom is key to fostering enjoyment

Since enjoyment and boredom were strongly negatively correlated, higher boredom was associated with lower enjoyment. While this does not mean that reducing boredom directly causes more enjoyment, the pattern suggests that less repetitive, low-engagement tasks (e.g. vocabulary copying or routine grammar drills) tend to coincide with greater enjoyment. Incorporating variety, creativity and active involvement may support this association.

Anxiety and enjoyment are independent—both need attention

Teachers should not assume that raising enjoyment automatically reduces anxiety. Learners can enjoy certain activities but still feel nervous about oral tasks. Supporting anxious learners with preparation time, scaffolding and a safe classroom climate remains essential.

Outlook

The research and development project HomeLanguageEnglish@secI, led by Hug and Bleichenbacher at the Teacher Training University of St. Gallen (2024–2027), is currently focusing on developing differentiated tasks for lower secondary school students who need to be further challenged during their mainstream English lessons. The project aims to design materials that both support students with English as a heritage language and challenge those with high levels of language competence gained through extramural contact with English:

<https://www.phsg.ch/de/forschung-entwicklung/projekte/herkunftssprache-englisch>.

Drawing on insights from the research presented in this article, as well as on a needs analysis conducted through interviews with teachers during the initial stage of the project, these materials are intended to be cognitively demanding, creative and closely connected to students' everyday lives. They encourage interaction and help reduce monotony, addressing both the linguistic and emotional dimensions of learning while promoting engagement and enjoyment in the classroom.



English also featured in students' social contacts:

- **More than half (55%) reported using English with friends at least a few times per week.**
- **42% of students indicated using English at least a few times a week in more formal group work in subjects other than English.**
- **34% reported using English informally during breaks at school.**

What teachers do matters

No significant relationship was found between EE and enjoyment. This suggests that classroom enjoyment depends more on what happens inside the classroom than on outside exposure. Instructional design and teacher choices are therefore decisive. Teachers may bridge the gap by connecting to learners' EE worlds (through music, social media or interactive activities, for example) while ensuring tasks remain meaningful and academically rich. Students with lower EE engagement and non-native speaker learners experience more anxiety.

The data showed that learners with less engagement in EE tended to report higher levels of classroom anxiety. Similarly, non-native speaker learners reported significantly higher anxiety than native-speaker peers. While these are correlations rather than causal effects, they highlight that both language background and out-of-school exposure are associated with learners' emotional experience. Teachers should therefore pay particular attention to supporting non-native speaker students with limited EE contact, for example, by providing additional scaffolding and preparation time.

Call for participation

We would be delighted to hear any reactions or experiences related to the topic of native speakers of English and learners with high language competence in lower secondary schools, particularly from teachers who have worked with them as well as from the students themselves or their parents. Please contact alsu.hug@phsg.ch.



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