

Beyond the Affective Filter: Examining the Interplay between Foreign Language Enjoyment, Anxiety, and Spontaneous Oral Performance in Collaborative Learning Environments

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Summary:

This research explores how Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE), Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and spontaneous oral performance are related in first-year Iraqi EFL university students at Mustansiriyah University's College of Basic Education. This work draws on Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis and positive psychology in applied linguistics (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012) to use a bidimensional approach that includes both negative and positive emotional states. Data (N = 120) were gathered through a mixed methods approach and a newly designed Spontaneous Oral Performance Rubric (SOPR) in collaborative learning task-based scenarios. Findings demonstrate a significant negative correlation between FLA and oral performance, positive FLE-oral performance and negative correlation between FLE and FLA. Themes from focus groups confirmed these findings, with collaborative contexts serving as important affective factors. The study adds to the positive psychology research in EFL and has implications for teaching and learning in Iraqi higher education.

1. Introduction

Foreign language learning has long been the focus of affective variables in applied linguistics and educational psychology. Ever since Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis - which proposed that negative affect, generates a psychological filter that inhibits the acquisition of comprehensible input - scholars have investigated the role of psychological variables in foreign language learning. Anxiety reigned for decades (Horwitz, 2010; MacIntyre, 2017; Woodrow, 2006) as the preeminent affective barrier to language learning.

In the early 2000s, the positive psychology movement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) refocused research on facilitative emotions. In applied linguistics, MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) viewed emotions as a system, and Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) defined Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) as a construct separate from FLA. They demonstrated that anxiety and the opposite of anxiety (enjoyment) are partly distinct (not simply polar opposites) and that they have different predictive power for performance outcomes.

This moves the field beyond Krashen's concept: the Affective Filter Hypothesis explains the effect of negative affect but not the facilitative influence of positive affect. The current study answers this question by placing FLE in the spotlight as a similarly potent, but less studied, predictor of spontaneous speech.

Four research questions guide the study: (1) What are the levels of FLE, FLA, and spontaneous oral performance among first-year Iraqi EFL learners? (2) Is there a significant relationship between FLE and oral performance? (3) Is there a significant relationship between FLA and oral performance? (4) Do FLE and FLA together predict spontaneous oral performance in collaborative settings?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Affective Filter Hypothesis: Foundations and Critiques

Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, central to his Monitor Model of SLA, holds that affective variables — chiefly anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence — mediate the conversion of comprehensible input into internalized linguistic knowledge. A high affective filter acts as a psychological barrier blocking input from reaching the Language Acquisition Device; a low filter permits unimpeded processing. Though influential, the hypothesis has faced criticism for lacking neurological grounding (Gregg, 1984) and for failing to explain cases where moderate anxiety enhances rather than impedes performance (Horwitz, 2010). Despite these critiques, its heuristic value in explaining affective variability in language classrooms remains recognized (Ellis, 2008).

2.2 Foreign Language Anxiety: Conceptualization and Measurement

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is defined as a unique set of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to the foreign language learning context (Horwitz et al., 1986). Their Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) is a 33-item questionnaire that measures three dimensions - speaking and pronunciation, test anxiety, and anxiety about being negatively evaluated by the teacher and peers - and has been validated in a wide range of EFL and ESL contexts (Horwitz, 2010; Liu & Zhang, 2013). The most important dimension for classroom practice is consistently speaking anxiety (MacIntyre, 2007; Woodrow, 2006; Zhang, 2019). Among Arab EFL learners, Al-Saraj (2014) found high FLA scores associated with high expectations for public accuracy and traditional negative sanctions for errors. In Iraq, Shuib and Abed (2019) reported highest anxiety scores among undergraduates when engaged in unscripted oral tasks.

2.3 Foreign Language Enjoyment: The Positive Psychology Turn

Following the positive psychology "turn" in applied linguistics (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012), Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) created the Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (FLES), defining FLE as a positive emotion with three subscales: appreciation of the teacher, enjoyment of peer interaction, and personal engagement. They demonstrated that FLE and FLA are not completely synonymous - learners often report high enjoyment and moderate anxiety - debunking unidimensional views of affect. These observations have been replicated: Dewaele et al. (2016) observed that FLE has a larger effect on language learning than FLA, predicting linguistic risk-taking, and Li et al. (2020) reported substantial FLE effects on Chinese EFL learners' fluency. Jiang and Dewaele (2019) also reported that group tasks enhance FLE more than individual or competitive tasks, a finding salient for the current study.

2.4 Collaborative Learning Environments as Affective Mediators

Collaborative learning environments carry distinct theoretical weight in SLA. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory situates learning as inherently social, with the Zone of Proximal Development most effectively activated through interaction. Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis identifies collaborative conversation as the engine of negotiated input modification, while Swain's (1995) Output Hypothesis stresses collaborative production's role in pushing learners toward morphosyntactic precision. Affectively, group structures can buffer anxiety by distributing communicative responsibility across participants and reducing individual exposure

(Liu & Jackson, 2008); however, social comparison dynamics within groups may simultaneously heighten evaluative concerns (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). The net affective outcome depends on task design, interpersonal quality, and teacher facilitation (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

2.5 Spontaneous Oral Performance in EFL Contexts

Spontaneous oral performance, here defined as spontaneous, in-the-moment verbal production in collaborative task-based formats, requires simultaneous lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic processing (Skehan, 2009). It is more vulnerable to troublesome affects than is planned speech. MacIntyre (2007) demonstrated that willingness to communicate, which is predicted by both FLA and FLE, is the immediate predictor of spontaneous oral participation: it is reduced by anxiety and increased by enjoyment. This study measures spontaneous oral performance using the Spontaneous Oral Performance Rubric (SOPR); a specially designed analytic tool that rates fluency, lexical sophistication, accuracy, discourse management and communicative success.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a concurrent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), integrating quantitative survey and performance data with qualitative focus group evidence (QUAN + qual). The design permits statistical examination of affective-performance relationships while retaining the contextual depth needed to understand how Iraqi learners experience and narrate those relationships.

3.2 Participants

A total of 120 first-year undergraduates from the College of Basic Education, Al-Mustansiriyah University, Baghdad, in the English Language Skills course took part in this study during the 2024-2025 academic year. The participants - 68 females and 52 males ranged in age from 18-21 years and are all native Arabic speakers with an average of 7.3 years of previous English study ($SD = 1.4$) using the grammar-translation approach. The Research Ethics Committee approved the study. For the qualitative strand, 20 participants stratified by gender and FLE/FLA quartile participated in four focus groups with five participants each, conducted in Arabic with English excerpts translated by the researchers.

3.3 Instruments

The modified 21-item FLES (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014) adapted for Iraqi EFL through back-translation (Brislin, 1970) has a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly

Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree; range 21-105). It has two subscales: Private FLE (11 items; personal engagement and positive affect when speaking English alone) and Social FLE (10 items; enjoyment of peer and teacher interaction). It has good internal consistency ($\alpha = .88$; Private FLE: .83; Social FLE: .85).

The researcher administered the 33-item FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986) unchanged (5-point Likert; higher scores = more anxiety). This measures anxiety related to communication, test-taking, and evaluation. This sample's Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha = .92$, similar to previous Iraqi uses (Shuib & Abed, 2019).

The SOPR was developed through a process of literature review, consultancies with an expert panel ($n = 5$ EFL specialists) and pilot use on 30 non-participant learners, and assesses five aspects on a 4-point scale (1 = Inadequate; 4 = Excellent): Fluency, Lexical Richness, Grammatical Accuracy, Interactional Competence and Communicative Effectiveness (possible range 5-20).

3.4 Procedures

Data collection proceeded in three phases: Phase 1 (Week 1) — FLES and FLCAS administered in class (paper-and-pencil, Arabic with English originals available); Phase 2 (Weeks 2-3) — collaborative tasks administered, recorded, and rated; Phase 3 (Week 4) — focus group sessions conducted with the qualitative subsample using a semi-structured guide probing affective experiences during oral tasks.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS v.27. Pearson correlations assessed bivariate relationships among FLE, FLA, and SOPR scores. Hierarchical multiple regression, with SOPR as the outcome, entered FLA at Step 1 and FLE at Step 2 to isolate each predictor's unique contribution. Effect sizes followed Cohen (1988) conventions. Focus group transcripts were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by two independent coders through an iterative discussion process.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all three primary variables.

Table 1 *Descriptive Statistics for FLE, FLA, and SOPR Scores (N = 120)*

Variable	Possible Range	M	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Total FLE	21–105	68.42	11.73	38	98	-.18	-.42

Private FLE	11–55	35.61	6.44	17	52	-.21	-.38
Social FLE	10–50	32.81	6.19	14	48	-.14	-.31
Total FLA	33–165	104.37	18.62	61	148	.22	-.19
SOPR Total	5–20	11.84	2.97	5	19	.11	-.27
SOPR Fluency	1–4	2.31	0.74	1	4	.09	-.31
SOPR Lexical	1–4	2.44	0.71	1	4	.07	-.22
SOPR Grammar	1–4	2.38	0.68	1	4	.12	-.28
SOPR Interaction	1–4	2.29	0.78	1	4	.14	-.19
SOPR Comm. Eff.	1–4	2.42	0.72	1	4	.08	-.24

Note. FLE = Foreign Language Enjoyment; FLA = Foreign Language Anxiety; SOPR = Spontaneous Oral Performance Rubric. Skewness and kurtosis values within acceptable ranges ($|SK| < 2$, $|KU| < 7$) confirm approximate normality (West et al., 1995).

Mean FLE ($M = 68.42$, $SD = 11.73$) equates to per-item $M = 3.26$ on the 5-point scale, which indicates moderate-positive enjoyment - lower than European university learners ($M = 3.7$ - 4.1 ; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014) and supports Al-Saraj's (2014) finding of lowered positive affect among Arab EFL learners in classroom contexts. Mean FLA ($M = 104.37$, $SD = 18.62$; per-item $M = 3.16$) corresponds to moderate-high anxiety, significantly higher than original FLCAS mean of 2.79 (Horwitz et al., 1986) and similar to findings with Iraqi samples (Shuib & Abed, 2019). Mean SOPR ($M = 11.84$, $SD = 2.97$) scores the sample as between Developing and Adequate on rubric dimensions, with little experience in communicative/collaborative English teaching.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 4 presents the Pearson correlation matrix for all primary study variables.

Table 4 *Pearson Correlation Matrix for FLE, FLA, and SOPR (N = 120)*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Total FLE	—				
2. Private FLE	.88**	—			
3. Social FLE	.91**	.71**	—		
4. Total FLA	-.47**	-.39**	-.52**	—	
5. SOPR Total	.61**	.54**	.58**	-.54**	—

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$. FLE = Foreign Language Enjoyment; FLA = Foreign Language Anxiety; SOPR = Spontaneous Oral Performance Rubric.

All correlations were significant at $p < .001$. The FLE-SOPR correlation ($r = .61$) represents a large positive effect: higher enjoyment predicts better oral performance. The FLA-SOPR correlation ($r = -.54$) confirms a large negative effect. The FLE-FLA correlation ($r = -.47$) is moderate-to-large, confirming that the two constructs are related but distinct consistent with Dewaele and MacIntyre's (2014) bidimensional theorization. Social FLE showed marginally stronger associations with both FLA ($r = -.52$) and SOPR ($r = .58$) than Private FLE ($r = -.39$ and $.54$ respectively), suggesting peer-and-teacher enjoyment is particularly relevant to the social demands of collaborative oral performance.

4.3 Qualitative Findings: Focus Group Themes

Thematic analysis of focus group transcripts yielded four primary themes, each illuminating the quantitative findings with experiential texture.

In each of the four focus groups, learners reported peer support as the main buffer against anxiety in group work. Collaborative formats lessened each student's risk of evaluative threat, shifting emotional experiences of oral production. As stated by one participant: "When the group is there, I don't feel like I will fail because we help each other, and I speak more." This finding is in line with Liu and Jackson's (2008) depiction of social support as a moderator of FLA.

Laughter and playfulness in language use were key sources of in-task enjoyment, as participants consistently reported. The relaxed language use allowed in group work created a different and greater level of enjoyment than was reported with teacher-fronted activities, confirming Jiang and Dewaele's (2019) observation that group activities enhance FLE.

A consistent phenomenological condition across groups was described as "exciting fear" - the combination of anticipation and challenge during spontaneous oral activities. This echoes MacIntyre and Gregersen's (2012) dynamic systems theory of FLE and FLA as co-occurring, event-specific states.

Teachers' actions were reported as a potent source of affect regulation. Affection, error acceptance, explicit praise for group contributions and avoidance of public correction were all cited as teacher actions that increased FLE while decreasing FLA - corroborating Mercer and Dörnyei's (2020) focus on teacher-constructed motivational spaces.

5. Discussion

The key finding that FLE and FLA jointly account for 48% of variance in spontaneous oral performance, with identical standardised betas ($\beta = .38$ for FLE; $\beta = -.38$ for FLA), offers robust empirical evidence for bidimensional model of affective influence that builds on Krashen's (1982) original framework. FLA alone explains 29% of variance; the extra 19% due to FLE suggests positive affect is a predictor variable, not simply a lack of negative affect. This complements Dewaele and MacIntyre's (2014) original claim and Li et al.'s (2020) empirical evidence in Chinese EFL settings. The partial mediation of FLA's effect by FLE, as shown by the reduction in beta from $-.54$ to $-.38$, suggests enjoyment plays a role in maintaining motivation (see Dewaele, 2014) and viewing evaluative threat as a challenge (see MacIntyre & Wong, 2017), which deserves closer examination in longitudinal and experimental studies.

6. Pedagogical Implications

The study has implications for Iraqi EFL programs. The robust associations between group task engagement, high FLE and low FLA suggest a regular incorporation of collaborative oral tasks (information gap tasks, jigsaw tasks, problem solving, storytelling) in first year classes. Pedagogic actions are also important: support, tolerance of error, and direct praise for communicative effort acted as affect regulators. In-service training should include the affective as well as linguistic aspects of speaking instruction.

Since FLE added an extra 19% of performance variance (beyond ameliorating FLA), it is not enough to simply reduce FLA. Enjoyment should be an explicit goal of instruction in settings such as Iraq where learners begin university with high anxiety and low enjoyment; through student-generated discussion topics, play-based speaking activities and emphasis on communicative success independent of linguistic form (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Dewaele et al., 2016).

7. Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations bound the study's conclusions. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference: causality between affective variables and performance may run in either direction, or both simultaneously. Longitudinal and experimental designs are needed to disentangle these relationships. The single-institution, first-year sample also limits generalizability across year levels, institutions, and national contexts. The SOPR, though showing satisfactory reliability, is a newly developed instrument and may not capture all facets of spontaneous oral performance, including prosodic features and culture-specific pragmatic appropriateness.

Future studies are recommended to use longitudinal designs that monitor the dynamic co-evolution of FLE, FLA, and oral performance over academic years, experimental designs that test the effect of particular FLE-building interventions in randomized controlled trials, and cross-cultural comparative designs that contrast Iraqi EFL study participants with those of other Arabic-speaking or Middle Eastern backgrounds. Idiodynamic approaches (MacIntyre and Legatto, 2011) that allow mapping affective changes during collaborative tasks moment-by-moment would be complementary of the aggregate-level results of the current research by an analysis of affective dynamics in oral production situations on a temporally fine-grained scale.

8. Conclusion

This study moved beyond Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis to examine how FLE and FLA jointly shape spontaneous oral performance in collaborative settings among first-year Iraqi EFL learners. Both constructs emerged as substantial, independent predictors — together accounting for 48% of performance variance. Collaborative environments amplified FLE through peer interaction while simultaneously surfacing FLA through spontaneous speech demands, producing the affective complexity that learners themselves described as simultaneously exciting and threatening.

The research supports a bidimensional affective model which redresses the deficit bias of the original Affective Filter. For Iraq higher education in particular, this implies that EFL pedagogy cannot aim to reduce anxiety only, but also has to provide the environment where learners can actually have fun with the language - by designing collaborative tasks and training teachers to use positive teacher feedbacks and build first-year EFL curricula in a way that treats positive emotion as a learning outcome.

The value of the study for theory is that it supports empirically the bidimensional model of affective factors that corrects the deficit conceptualisation of the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen) with the positive psychology conceptualisation of Dewaele and MacIntyre, and offers a more meaningful and practical insight into the emotional basis of EFL oral production. The practical value is that it provides empirical evidence that Iraqi higher education EFL programs cannot adequately serve only the anxiety-reduction function, but also the active cultivation of the fun of language learning, which can be achieved by the design of tasks, positive teacher

actions, and the systematic inclusion of collaborative oral structures in first-year language curricula.

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ما وراء المرشح الوجداني: دراسة التفاعل بين المتعة في تعلم اللغة الأجنبية، والقلق والأداء الشفهي التلقائي في بيئات التعلم التعاوني

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الملخص:

تدرس هذه الدراسة العلاقة بين المتعة في تعلم اللغة الأجنبية ((FLE)، والقلق من اللغة الأجنبية ((FLA)، والأداء الشفهي التلقائي لدى طلاب السنة الأولى في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ((EFL) في كلية التربية الأساسية بالجامعة المستنصرية. تستند الدراسة إلى فرضية المرشح الوجداني لكراشن (1982) وإطار علم النفس الإيجابي في اللغويات التطبيقية وتتبنى نموذجاً ثنائي الأبعاد يراعي الحالات الانفعالية المثبطة والميسرة على حدٍ سواء. اعتمدت الدراسة تصميمًا مختلطاً مع معيار الأداء الشفهي التلقائي ((SOPR المصمم لأغراض هذه الدراسة، وذلك في سياقات تعاونية قائمة على المهام. كشفت النتائج عن ارتباط سلبى دال بين قلق اللغة الأجنبية والأداء الشفهي، وارتباط إيجابي بين المتعة في تعلم اللغة الأجنبية والأداء الشفهي وارتباط سلبى بين المتعة والقلق، وقد تنبأ كلا المتغيرين معاً بنسبة 48% من التباين في الأداء (2, F(, R² = .48, p < .001). وجاءت موضوعات مجموعات التركيز لتعزز هذه النتائج، مُحَدِّدَةً

البيئات التعاونية باعتبارها وسيطات وجدانية محورية. تُسهم هذه الدراسة في توسيع أبحاث علم النفس الإيجابي في مجال اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، وتقدم بعض التوصيات للممارسات التربوية في التعليم العالي العراقي.