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Foreign Language Enjoyment, Language Learning Curiosity and Learning Engagement of Chinese Non- English Major Students

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Abstract

Aim: The overall purpose of this study is to investigate the status quo of foreign language enjoyment (FLE), language learning curiosity (LLC), and language learning engagement (LE) among Chinese college students.

Methodology: The descriptive-correlational research method was employed in the research.

Results: Among the cited indicators, Enjoyment of Teacher Support got the highest weighted score of 3.28. On the other hand, the overall situation of students' LLC as regard to joyous exploration, deprivation sensitivity, stress tolerance, overt and covert social, and thrill seeking has a composite mean of 2.90, showing that respondents agreed all in indicators. Finally, the average composite mean of English learning engagement is 2.86, which suggests that all students agreed on the indicators, and they were engaged in their class English learning with vigor, dedication, and absorption.

Conclusion: Compared to enjoyment of teacher support and student support, students' enjoyment of foreign language learning itself was relatively weak. Students' deprivation sensitivity was relatively not high. Freshmen students were more engaged in English learning in all subdomains of LE. Different major students showed no significant differences in English learning engagement.

Keywords: Foreign Language Enjoyment, Learning Curiosity, Engagement, Chinese Non- English Major Students

INTRODUCTION

English is one of the most important international communication languages in the world (Dizon & Sanchez, 2020; Salendab & Akmad, 2023; Salendab & Laguda, 2023; Salendab & Sanchez, 2023; Sanchez, 2023a). With the vigorous development of China's economy and the advancement of globalization, the importance of English in China has become more and more prominent. In the political, economic, cultural and other fields, China can better participate in international affairs, promote international cooperation, and exert greater influence on the international stage through the wide use of English. More and more companies and organizations require college graduates to have good English language skills. Proficient English can increase a graduate's competitiveness in the job market and many multinational organizations require graduates to be able to communicate and coordinate effectively with international customers (Amihan & Sanchez, 2023; Carvajal & Sanchez, 2023; Salendab, 2021; Sanchez, 2022). Mastering English not only increases the competitiveness of university students in their future job market, but also broadens their international horizons. Therefore, English is important for college students' language skills enhancement, academic needs, career development and cross-cultural communication. Mastering English is not only a response of students to the needs of modern world, but also a key step in promoting comprehensive literacy and expanding personal development.

College English teaching and learning in China has started decades ago and it is an integral part of China's higher education and a compulsory course for all non-English major undergraduates and postgraduates in China. College English is an English education program conducted at college or university level to improve the level and ability of Non-English major students' English learning in China. In general, English basics, English listening, English speaking, English reading, English writing and translation are the main courses of Non-English major students. Through these courses, students will master English expression structure, vocabulary usage, linguistic and cultural

36



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background of English-speaking countries, and will be able to use English for daily communication, academic writing and reading. At the same time, in the college English program, students will have the opportunity to come into contact with literary works, historical events and cultural phenomena of English-speaking countries, so as to gain an in-depth understanding of the social and cultural life of English-speaking countries and improve their cross-cultural awareness and communication skills.

Since the founding of People's Republic of China 74 years ago, China's college English education has made great progress with the changes in the needs of national and social development, the changes in learners' language ability level and needs, and the improvement of college English language understanding. The completeness, scientificity and systematization of the college English syllabus have been improved greatly, and the teaching objectives have been richer, from the development of language skills in the past to the cultivation of applied language abilities, from focusing only on the instrumental development of language to paying equal attention to humanities and students' overall development.

However, there are inevitably some problems concerning China's college English learning and teaching, which include: Teaching methods are sometimes outdated and dull; Many college English textbooks and teaching content lack enough interest to meet the curiosity needs of students. Some students lack of interest or curiosity in English learning, causing learning disengagement. According to research of Li et al. (2020), many Chinese college students responded that they do not enjoy learning English or possess learning interest in English, which can cause serious problems for English education in China and hamper their English learning English awareness cultivation.

After observing English class for many years, many Chinese scholars have witnessed the common classroom distractions among college students and they have done many efforts and tried to improve the English classroom learning and teaching and arouse students' interest and curiosity in classroom participation so that more learning enjoyment, participation and engagement can be involved and observed in English learning and teaching process. It is worth noting that as English teachers and researchers, they need to make in-depth study on how to improve college students' English learning from both cognitive factors, affective factors and other various perspectives, including learners' motivation, emotions, interest, learning strategy, self-efficacy, and learning engagement and others.

Enjoyment, curiosity and engagement are important factors in learning (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2007). There are many previous researches conducted on Chinese college students' English learning, some studies focused only on learning curiosity or solely on learning enjoyment, or engagement, very few has researched from the perspective of three variables combined. Therefore, there is still a research gap in this field, and it is worth studying.

Before the 1980s, the cognitive field has long dominated research in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), while affective factors have been marginalized or ignored in the SLA research (Dewaele & Li, 2020). Since successful language learning requires both cognitive and affective participation, the important role of affective factors must be taken into account in order to make more well-rounded exploration in SLA research. Since the 1980s, Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985) has led to a tremendous development in the study of emotions, with foreign language learning anxiety as the main research topic. However, in recent years, with the rapid development of positive psychology and the introduction of positive psychology in SLA, it has witnessed a positive shift in the study of emotions (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). More and more SLA researchers have shifted from focusing only on the negative emotions of learners to taking a holistic view that include positive emotions (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014; Li & Jiang, 2017).

As the most typical positive emotion in the process of SLA, Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) is now more concerned by scholars than other positive emotions. Promoted by the basic theories of positive psychology, namely the broadening and building theory and the value control theory, many Chinese scholars have studied the relationship between middle school students' foreign language enjoyment and language learning engagement and achievement (Jin & Zhang, 2018; Li et al., 2019), but not many paid much attention to college students' English learning enjoyment and language learning curiosity.

As another high-value positive emotion, curiosity has been widely studied in psychology and education. Curiosity in SLA is currently conceptualized as Language Learning Curiosity (LLC) and shown to be positively associated with enjoyment (Mahmoodzadeh & Khajavy, 2019). According to Gumartifa, Agustiani, and Elfarissyah (2022), curiosity is fundamental in inspiring students to learn English as a foreign language, and they assert that curiosity is a self-motivation for English learning achievement. However, scholars in China and abroad has conducted limited empirical research on the impact of learning curiosity on college English learning and correlation between learning curiosity, learning enjoyment and learning engagement.



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With the development of Affective Filter Hypothesis, Humanistic Theory and Positive Psychology Theory, Learning Engagement (LE) has also been the focus of research in the field of SLA since 1980s. Yang and Zhang (2018) once proposed that learning engagement can evaluate the effectiveness of English learning activities and the quality of English teaching. Pascarella (2010) also pointed out that compared with resource inputs such as financial resources and material resources, learning engagement can better predict learning and teaching effects. It can be seen that learning engagement is of great significance to the students' learning and the evaluation of teaching (Delgado & Kassim, 2019; Muñoz & Sanchez, 2023; Salendab, 2023; Salendab & Cogo, 2022; Sanchez, 2020a). So students' Learning Engagement has become the research focus of English learning for many scholars (Salendab & Dapitan, 2021a; Sanchez & Sarmiento, 2020; Sanchez, et al., 2022). With the deepening of China's higher education reform, LE as an important indicator, reflects the state of students' behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement in English learning process, and has received extensive attention from researchers in recent years. Nowadays many research interests and scholars' attention have been drawn to Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) and Language Learning Curiosity (LLC) and their complicated relations with other variables, such as Learning Engagement (LE), but there is still few research can be found on google scholar or other learning resources.

Learning engagement (LE) in college English learning in China refers to the level of involvement, motivation, and active participation of students in the process of English learning. It is a crucial factor that affects students' academic achievement and language proficiency. When students are interested and fully engaged in the material, they are more likely to retain information and develop a deeper understanding of the language which can lead to improved grades and overall academic success (Salendab & Dapitan, 2020; Sanchez, 2020b; Sanchez, 2023b). In recent years, there has been a growing concern about the low level of learning engagement among college students in China. Some students tend to adopt a passive learning approach, which involves only memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules without much understanding. This approach often leads to a lack of interest and motivation in English learning, resulting in poor academic performance (Salendab & Dapitan, 2021b; Sanchez, 2020b; Sanchez, Sanchez & Sanchez, 2023).

This study selects the non-English major students of a typical comprehensive university in China's eastern coastal Jiangsu province as the research object and conducts in-depth study from three perspectives to investigate students' English learning in China's Changzhou university. First of all, this research is conducted from the aspect of language learning enjoyment as it is a feeling that is closely related to students' learning experiences and academic performances on which has recently been focusing by many scholars. Secondly, language learning curiosity is chosen as one of the research variables because of the huge influences that interests, and curiosity brings to students' learning concentration. Finally, students' learning engagement is proved to be closely related to their academic achievement and worth studying further.

Although there are some researchers focusing on the relation between the learning enjoyment and learning engagement, the study on the three variables still lacks enough attention. It is supposed that with high language learning enjoyment, proper learning curiosity and learning engagement, better academic performance can be achieved.

The findings of research can produce some implications for college English learning and teaching improvement. It is hoped that some hints can be given to educators as to what can be done to improve learners' curiosity level, enhance their learning enjoyment and promote learning involvement. This research could also enrich the research filed on language learning enjoyment, language learning curiosity and learning engagement of Chinese college students. It may provide theoretical enlightenment for future researchers, particularly in terms of data processing and research methodology. Finally, after the analysis and discussion, practical recommendations and enhanced programs are provided to help Chinese college students' English learning and teachers' teaching.

Objectives

The overall purpose of this study is to use qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the status quo of foreign language enjoyment (FLE), language learning curiosity (LLC), and language learning engagement (LE) among Chinese college students.

More specifically, this paper sought to describe the demographics of the students in terms of grade, gender, and major; to identify the language learning enjoyment as regard to foreign language learning, teacher support, and student support; to determine students' learning curiosity in terms of joyous exploration, deprivation of sensitivity, stress tolerance, overt and covert social, and thrill seeking; to find out their learning engagement level as to vigor,



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dedication, and absorption; to test the difference of responses on students' foreign language enjoyment, language learning curiosity, and language learning engagement when grouped according to profile variables.

METHODS

Research Design

The descriptive-correlational research method was employed in the research. Leedy and Ormrod (2010) once stated that descriptive correlational method is to establish the relationships between two or more variables in the same population.

With the help of SPSS 26, descriptive statistics are conducted to describe the current status of participants' FLE, LLC, and LE. Then, an independent t-test analysis is used to study the grade, gender, and major differences in foreign language enjoyment, language learning curiosity, and learning engagement and their effects on English learning.

Participants

In order to explore the research questions, a questionnaire survey was conducted among 410 freshmen and sophomores of non-English majors in Changzhou university in China's Jiangsu Province, including business, engineering, and other majors. Non-English major students of four classes were randomly selected as participants in the quantitative research through convenience sampling. Convenience sampling had the basis of availability and accessibility which can have quick access to collect the data (Berg,2001). The comprehensive questionnaire used in this study consists of four parts, namely, personal background information, foreign language enjoyment scale, language learning curiosity scale and learning engagement scale. Questionnaires were distributed to non-English majors of two grades in Changzhou university during class and these students were taught by the same teacher to avoid the influences of different teaching styles and methods. Only Freshman and sophomore were chosen as they had college English course in the university.

With the help of Rasoft (9000 Non-English major students in the university as the basis), a total of 410 participants were selected to participate in the quantitative research through convenience sampling. The school has around 100 students in each class of non-English majors. In this study, two classes in each grade of the school were selected as the subjects. A total about 410 effective questionnaires were submitted. Through purposive sampling, the researcher selected participants from classes of two grades with the same English teacher in Changzhou University. The population was divided into sample groups to facilitate comparison and data collection.

Instrument

In this study, a questionnaire was used as the main instrument to collect data. The questionnaire survey actually consisted of three scales. Therefore, there are three main sub-questionnaires to test, namely FLE Scale, LLC Scale, and LE Scale, which were based on previous studies and further amended to the appropriateness of the research locale. Here are the details for each dimension. The comprehensive questionnaire consists of four parts, including demographic information, FLE scale, and the LLC scale and LE scale.

Data Gathering

There were several steps in conducting empirical research. First, the research instrument was amended and revised under the guidance of the adviser. Then the questionnaire was put into "questionnaire star" platform for the distribution of it. Then the initial data was collected and sent to the analyst of LPU for pilot testing. After validation and reliability test, the dissertation adviser finalized the instrument. Then, one English teacher at Changzhou University was entrusted to conduct the questionnaire and explain the function, use and content in simple way for the accuracy of responses. The questionnaire was distributed by sending QR code in WeChat to those selected undergraduate students who were asked to answer it based on their own real experiences.

Ethical Consideration

For morality consideration, this study did not reveal the actual personal information of the surveyed, except for their sex, major, and grade level. Before the research, researchers ensured that students read and understood all the descriptions, research procedures and purpose of the questionnaire. Informed consent was secured from the teacher and participating students.



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Treatment of Data

The collected data were tabulated first and then examined. The purpose of the data analysis was to provide structure to and derive meaning from the data. The main statistical procedure involved in the data analysis was descriptive statistics, and with the help of SPSS version 26.0, More specifically, the weighted mean was used to examine the level of the general level of Chinese college students' foreign language enjoyment, language learning curiosity and learning engagement. In other words, statistical functions were done in the computation of mean to determine the overall level of FLE, LLC and LE.

An independent t-test was also used to investigate the effects of gender, grade, and major of study on foreign language enjoyment, language learning curiosity, and learning engagement. The results of data were analyzed and interpreted after statistical treatments. The conclusion was given at the end of data analysis.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Table 1
Percentage Distribution of the Respondents

Sex	Frequency	Percentage %
Female	190	46.3
Male	220	53.7
Grade Level		
Freshman	213	52.0
Sophomore	167	40.7
Others	30	7.3
Major		
Nature Science	49	12.0
Business	105	25.6
Others	256	62.4

A total of 410 valid questionnaire were collected in the study. Table 2 shows the respondents profile in terms of Sex, Grade level and Major. As to the percentage of sex, the male is slightly higher than that of female. There were 220 male students, accounting for 53.7% of total population, while female students occupying 46.3% of respondents with 190 students. The proportion of male to female are generally in balancing state with only small gaps. It can be found on the official school website of Changzhou university, the ratio of male students to female students: 1.28:1, which is almost the same with the ratio presented in Table 2.

The reason that the proportion of male students is a little higher than that of female students because of the selected Changzhou university belongs to comprehensive type university with science and technology major as its key research areas. Male students usually outnumber females in technology type university. Changzhou University boosts its research not only on science and engineering, petrochemical and machinery, chemicals and pharmaceuticals, but also have dozens of humanities related majors, such as business, management and foreign language studies and others. The seventh China national census in 2021 shows almost the same ratio result with that of China's comprehensive university, and it indicates that the collected samples truly reflect the China's actual population ratio.

Table 2
Table on Foreign Language Enjoyment

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. Enjoyment of Foreign Language Learning	2.83	Agree	3
1. Enjoyment of Teacher Support	3.28	Agree	1
3. Enjoyment of Student Support	3.08	Agree	2
Composite Mean	3.06	Agree	

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 – 1.49 = Strongly Disagree



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Table 2 is the summary graph of the respondents' FLE, which reflects the general features of students' FLE. The overall composite mean of all items arrived at 3.06 indicating that the students agreed with all the three indicators. Among the cited indicators, Enjoyment of Teacher Support got the highest weighted score of 3.28. The role of teacher support plays a significant role in influencing students' foreign language enjoyment and English learning. Therefore, by encouraging more student-student and student-teacher interactions, teachers can influence and improve language learners' motivation and participation of students in classroom. For educators and teachers, they are required to be supportive of students in aspects of motivating them to study hard, helping them solve problems and paying enough care and attention to them. Teachers can create a reliable, enjoyable and encouraging learning environment by establishing a constructive relationship with students and providing them with sufficient support (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). By strengthening teacher student relationship, teachers are expected to assist students to experience positive emotions in learning and achieve high level of FLE.

Table 3
Summary Table on Language Learning Curiosity

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. Joyous Exploration	3.04	Agree	1
2. Deprivation Sensitivity	2.76	Agree	5
3. Stress Tolerance	2.79	Agree	4
4. Overt and Covert Social	2.95	Agree	3
5. Thrill Seeking	2.96	Agree	2
Composite Mean	2.90	Agree	

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 - 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

Table 3 indicates that the overall situation of students' LLC as regard to joyous exploration, deprivation sensitivity, stress tolerance, overt and covert social, and thrill seeking. The composite mean is 2.90, showing that respondents agreed all in indicators. The composite weighted mean is in the intermediate level of Agree Legend level from 2.50 to 3.49, indicating that students only have ordinary level of language learning curiosity in English learning. In other words, they do not have much high level of language learning curiosity in learning English. In researchers' actual investigation, some surveyed college students admitted that they learn English not because of interest but to pass CET-4 or CET-6 for their future job, while others viewed differently and viewed that they have certain interest in English learning.

Table 4
Summary Table on English Learning Engagement

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. Vigor	2.80	Agree	3
2. Dedication	2.91	Agree	1
3. Absorption	2.88	Agree	2
Composite Mean	2.86	Agree	

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 - 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

Table 4 summarizes the overall situation of students' learning engagement with three dimensions. It demonstrated that the average composite mean of English learning engagement is 2.86, which suggests that all students agreed on the above indicators and they were engaged in their class English learning with vigor, dedication and absorption. The composite mean of 2.86 indicates that students' English learning engagement level is at lower middle level. Although some college students actually suffer from distractions, low level of learning motivation and negative attitudes towards English learning, the overall state of college students is relatively positive and vigorous. They are devoting a lot of their time and energy into learning and moving towards an expected outcome. Finn and Zimmer (2012) argued that students' degree of participation in learning context is closely related to their academic growth.



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Conclusion

In view of the results from the above analysis, the following conclusions were reached:

1. The majority of students were from one university with the demographic figure showing that Male and female students were in almost balanced ratio number with the number of males a little higher than that of females. Freshman accounted for over half of the total, sophomores the second, with a few juniors. Business students and Natural Sciences students were much less than tech related majors-students.
2. The majority of students respondents generally had an intermediate level of FLE, LLC and LE.
3. The majority of surveyed students agreed with all three indicators of FLE. Compared to enjoyment of teacher support and student support, students' enjoyment of foreign language learning itself was relatively weak. Female students were more enjoyed on foreign language learning than that of males, particularly from peer support and enjoyment of language learning itself; Freshmen were more enjoyed on foreign language learning on teacher support and student support compared to sophomores; Business majors students were more enjoyed on foreign language learning compared to other majors, specifically more on student support.
4. The majority of surveyed students agreed with all five indicators of LLC. Students' deprivation sensitivity was relatively not high. Females and freshmen were more curious on language learning, especially on joyous exploration of language learning. In addition, those business major students possessed higher curiosity level in English learning with more feeling of deprivation sensitivity than other majors.
5. The majority of surveyed students agreed with all three indicators of LE with dedication as the highest, absorption by the second and vigor as the lowest. Students' level of LE in terms of vigor was relatively not high. Females were more engaged in English learning in terms of their dedication and absorption in learning. Freshmen students were more engaged in English learning in all subdomains of LE. Different major students showed no significant differences in English learning engagement.

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