

Do Girls Have All the Fun? Anxiety and Enjoyment in the Foreign Language Classroom

Jean-Marc Dewaele, Peter D. MacIntyre, Carmen Boudreau, Livia Dewaele

<https://doi.org/10.31261/tapsla.3941>

DEPTH	EXPERTISE	VOICE	GENERATED
Overview (10-15 min)	Balanced	Adam	September 05, 2026

Picture a language classroom. Someone is conjugating a verb aloud in front of their peers — heart rate up, cheeks flushed, and hyper-aware of every syllable. Now here's what the data show: the same students who feel that nervousness most acutely are also the ones reporting the most genuine delight in the class. That's not a contradiction. According to Dewaele and MacIntyre, it's a profile — and understanding it might change how we think about who thrives in a language classroom and why.

The puzzle starts with a question that sounds simple but turns out to be surprisingly hard to answer: do men and women feel differently in the foreign language classroom? Researchers have been circling this for decades, and the evidence has been frustratingly inconsistent. Some studies find higher anxiety in women, some find lower, and some find no difference at all. Part of the problem, Dewaele and MacIntyre argue, is methodological. Most research compares average scores — a single number meant to capture something as varied as emotional experience in a language class. That kind of blunt instrument can mask the real story. So their study asks a sharper question: not whether gender differences exist overall, but where exactly they live, item by item.

The two emotional dimensions they're measuring are Foreign Language Enjoyment, or FLE, and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety, or FLCA. These are related but distinct. Dewaele and MacIntyre's earlier work found a modest negative correlation between them, around negative 0.36, meaning more enjoyment tends to come with slightly less anxiety, but only slightly. FLCA follows MacIntyre's definition: the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language. FLE captures the positive side — creativity, pride, interest, fun, and the

pleasure of the teacher and the peer group. Both had previously been linked to gender in composite form, with women scoring higher on both. This study breaks those composites apart.

The sample is large and international. Dewaele and MacIntyre surveyed one thousand seven hundred thirty-six foreign language learners from ninety nationalities — one thousand two hundred eighty-seven female and four hundred forty-nine male, with a mean age of twenty-four. The largest group was learning English, followed by French, Spanish, Dutch, and German, with forty-nine percent of respondents studying English. Belgians were the largest national group, followed by Britons, Chinese learners, and Americans. Most participants — eighty-four percent — were studying one foreign language at the time.

The questionnaire gave each participant twenty-nine statements to rate on a five-point Likert scale, from "absolutely disagree" to "strongly agree." Twenty-one of those items measured FLE, covering things like fun, interest, pride, boredom, laughter, group belonging, and feelings about teachers and peers. Eight items came from the established Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale developed by Horwitz and colleagues in nineteen eighty-six, targeting nervousness, physical symptoms, and confidence. Two of the anxiety items were reverse-coded so that higher scores consistently meant higher anxiety. Beyond the Likert items, participants answered an open-ended question: describe one specific event in your foreign language class that you really enjoyed. One thousand seventy-six people answered that prompt, producing over fifty-two thousand words of narrative — a qualitative layer used to add human texture to the numbers.

The item-level results are where the study earns its keep. On enjoyment, female participants scored significantly higher on several specific items. They reported having more fun in class, felt they were learning interesting things, and felt prouder of their foreign language performance than their male peers. These weren't subtle differences — they replicated and extended the composite findings from prior work. But here's the more textured finding: it wasn't that women enjoyed everything more. The item-level analysis showed that many FLE items carried no significant gender gap. The differences clustered around particular kinds of pleasure — the sense of genuine learning, of pride in performance, and of finding the material interesting.

On the anxiety side, the picture is equally specific. Female participants scored significantly higher on two FLCA items: worrying more about making mistakes and feeling less confident using the foreign language. That's it. The more dramatic anxiety items — panic, frequent freezing up from embarrassment, and anxiety despite

being well prepared — showed no significant difference by gender. The authors are careful here. They describe the female anxiety advantage as mild. There were tendencies for women to report feeling more nervous and confused, or a pounding heart more often, but those didn't reach significance. What did reach significance was a particular flavor of self-monitoring anxiety: caring about errors and doubting confidence.

Sit with that combination for a moment. More fun. More pride. More interest. And also more worry about mistakes and more self-doubt about fluency. These aren't opposite findings — and that's precisely the argument Dewaele and MacIntyre want to make.

They frame this as heightened emotionality, and they reach for Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory to explain why it might actually help rather than hurt. Fredrickson's formulation holds that positive emotions broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources. Dewaele and MacIntyre extend this: enjoyment encourages playful exploration and creative risk in the classroom, while concomitant mild anxiety generates focused investment when something is at stake. When learners find the foreign language genuinely interesting — when they care about getting it right — some anxiety comes along for the ride. But that anxiety, mild and channeled rather than paralyzing, may sharpen attention and effort rather than shutting it down.

The qualitative responses back this up. Learners described how a good essay mark boosted pride and determination. They wrote about collaborative activities that built social bonds and a sense of belonging in the foreign language class. They described the thrill of actually using the language — accomplishing something real with it — and how game-like or creative tasks raised their motivation. What emerges across those fifty-two thousand words is a portrait of emotional engagement that is genuinely mixed: excited and a little scared, proud and a little uncertain. And the authors' contention is that this mix, not calm detachment, is what drives acquisition forward.

Crucially, they are not arguing that teachers should induce anxiety. The data don't support that. What they support is a different reading: when teachers design activities that are meaningful — public performances, graded tasks, identity-adjacent work — some mild anxiety may naturally accompany high engagement. The ratio of positive to negative emotion may be the critical variable. Enjoyment doesn't protect learners from all anxiety; it seems to create conditions where mild anxiety becomes useful rather than corrosive.

There are real limits to what this study can claim. The design is cross-sectional and based on self-report, so causal arrows are impossible to draw. The sample skews heavily female — nearly three women for every man — which makes the male group a thinner basis for comparison. Recruitment relied on open calls and snow-ball sampling, so self-selection is a genuine concern. And the study is deliberately decontextualized, pooling learners across ninety nationalities, which means cultural variation in how gender and emotion interact in classrooms is smoothed over rather than examined.

Still, the contribution is real. The move from composite averages to item-level analysis is methodologically important — it shows that "women are more anxious" is too coarse a claim, and that "women worry more about mistakes and feel less confident, but not more panicked or more frequently frozen" is a meaningfully different and more useful one. And "women enjoy class more" becomes "women report more fun, more pride in performance, and more interest in what they're learning" — which points toward very different pedagogical levers.

The broader implication Dewaele and MacIntyre land on is this: the foreign language classroom is an emotional environment before it is a cognitive one. Treating it as such — designing for enjoyment, normalizing error, and building pride and belonging — isn't soft pedagogy. It's the intervention the data point to. If heightened emotional engagement really does benefit acquisition, then the question for teachers isn't how to make class feel neutral and low-stakes. It's how to make it feel worth caring about.

This lecture was created by ennepō.

Go to <https://ennepo.ai> to Discover, Create and Follow the latest research in your field.

Read when you can. Listen when you want to.

CREDITS

AI-generated lecture by ennepō.ai, adapted from:

- "Do Girls Have All the Fun? Anxiety and Enjoyment in the Foreign Language Classroom", Jean-Marc Dewaele, Peter D. MacIntyre, Carmen Boudreau, Livia Dewaele (Theory and Practice of Second Language Acquisition, 2016). doi:10.31261/tapsla.3941. CC-BY-SA (<https://creativecommons.org/share-your-work/cclicenses/>)

Restructured, summarized and explained. Not endorsed by the authors.

This lecture (script and audio) is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/>)

licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

<https://ennepo.ai/lecture/d0db378c-0b55-4cf8-8222-15241fa1b034>

Generated by ennepō