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Exploring the Relationship among Environment, Enjoyment, and Performance to Sustain Students' EFL Learning: Evidence From the Investigation of a Chinese University

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Abstract: The study aims at a deeper understanding of English classroom environment (CE) and foreign language enjoyment (FLE) in the context of a Chinese university and further explores the relationship among CE, FLE, and students' performance in learning English as a foreign language. The 336 participants in this study were mostly from science departments, and about one-third of them came from Tibet and Xinjiang Autonomous Region. The findings indicate that the participants' CE and FLE were at a moderate level and that significant positive correlations were detected among CE, FLE and English performance. The study has some practical implications for EFL (English as a foreign language) teaching and learning: (a) The establishment of a good healthy CE can effectively promote students' performance; (b) The students' FLE can help them learn English better; (c) Teachers and students should attach importance to the process of English learning, where teachers ought to actively play their part in building a healthy CE and enhancing students' sense of FLE in English learning.

Keywords: Chinese college students, classroom environment, English performance, foreign language enjoyment.

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Introduction

Driven by the "affective turn" (Pavlenko, 2013) which reaffirms the role of emotions in second language acquisition (SLA) (Chen & Zhang, 2022), and theoretically boosted by the "positive directions" (Prior, 2019) in light of Positive Psychology, the role of emotions experienced by learners has drawn increasing attention from researchers (Dewaele & Li, 2020; Oxford, 2015). Many new psychological and emotional factors came to the field of SLA, such as flow (Liu & Song, 2021), buoyancy (Liu et al., 2023), resilience (Chu et al., 2024; Duan et al., 2024; Liu & Han, 2022), grit (Liu et al., 2023) and enjoyment (Jin & Zhang, 2019; Li, 2021). As one of the focal emotions experienced prevalently in SLA, FLE has been studied from various perspectives, like the general profile of FLE (Li, 2021), the dimensions and construct of FLE (Jin & Zhang, 2019), learner-internal and learner-external variables (Dewaele, 2017), and the possible influence it has on students' language performance (Jin & Zhang, 2018). The most recurring findings show that FLE can be influenced by various contextual and individual factors. However, previous studies have vastly investigated FLE separately or decontextualized it rather than considered it in a certain context. And only recently has classroom environment (CE) been recognized as a contextual factor in SLA (Li, 2021). Besides, previous studies have mostly focused on high school students and their learning of sciences, with scant attention given to college students learning English as a foreign language. Nonetheless, students' FLE in the general sense, that is, with no reference to specific English courses, could be distinctly different from that in a contextualized English course. Besides, the experience of high school students learning sciences could be different from that of college students learning English. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is twofold. For one thing, it is intended to find out the status quo of CE and FLE in the context of EFL learning of Chinese college students; for another, it is aimed at delving into the correlative relationship between CE, FLE, and student performance in EFL learning.

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Literature Review

Classroom Environment (CE)

CE, as defined in Fraser (1998), is a kind of context that can be influenced by social, psychological, and pedagogical factors. Learning takes place in CE and then in turn acts upon students' attitudes and academic achievement. To date, a number of studies have been conducted on outcome-environment associations in different subjects and across varied academic levels, (Khoo & Fraser, 1997, 1998; Li et al., 2021; Liu & Fan, 2024; Wong et al., 1997). Meanwhile, researchers have probed into students' perceptions of CE as well as their emotional experiences within the classroom, combining individual differences with external atmosphere. CE is deemed as a kind of atmosphere, mood, tone, or climate that pervades in a particular instructional setting (Dorman et al., 2006). By and large, positive CE is linked to positive affective outcomes, including interest, enjoyment, emotional competence, motivation, comfort, positive attitudes towards the subject and engagement, while negative CE to negative ones including anxiety, frustration, discomfort, confusion, aggression and other emotional difficulties (Li et al., 2021).

Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE)

Enjoyment shares a similar tenet with some concepts like pleasure or happiness from the perspective of positive psychology (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). However, different from the sense of pleasure which can be satisfied with little time or effort involved, enjoyment is always achieved when performing a challenging task that "requires more intellectual attention" (Boudreau et al., 2018). Enjoyment can be seen as the sense of satisfaction retrieved from activities and outcomes of these activities, and it features a kind of novelty and accomplishment with energy invested (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). In SLA, FLE refers to the enjoyment that foreign language learners experience, which is typically linked with less anxiety and higher scholastic attainment (Brantmeier, 2005; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). FLE is a positive achievement emotion with high activation arising from ongoing learning activity or task. It has positive consequences for various L2 learning outcomes including L2 motivation, engagement, as well as learning achievement (Dewaele & Li, 2020; Jin et al., 2023; Jin & Qin, 2024; Li, 2020a, 2020b; Li et al., 2021; Zhi & Liu, 2021).

Previous Studies on the Relationships Between CE/FLE and Students' Performance

As regards the relationship between CE and students' performance, Khajavy et al. (2018) reported a close link between CE and students' enjoyment and willingness to communicate. Students enjoyed more pleasure, felt less anxiety, and had a higher willingness to communicate when they had a positive perception of CE. Xia and Xu (2018) found that university students tended to experience negative emotions, including anxiety, boredom, guilt, and helplessness when they were in a negative CE, which was characterized by perceived negative teacher feedback, unsatisfied autonomy, tense competitiveness, and the like. Besides, Fraser et al. (1993) unveiled a close association between CE and senior high school students' performance in science. In the same vein, Gupta and Fisher (2012) found a positive association between high school science CE and students' performance via a questionnaire assessing science CE among high school students in India. Similar results have also been unveiled in a Chinese Math classroom where positive correlations between Math CE and their learning outcomes were identified (Yang, 2013).

With reference to the relationship between FLE and students' performance, copious research has documented a significant positive relationship between FLE and L2 performance, including both self-perceived and actual L2 performance (Dewaele, 2017; Dewaele et al., 2018; Li et al., 2021). For instance, Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018) reported positive effects of FLE on L2 learning in a Saudi Arabian university context. Subsequently, similar findings were yielded in Chinese and Japanese classroom contexts. Students who perceived more enjoyment got higher grades in their L2 speaking test (Chen & Zhang, 2022; Li et al., 2021; Saito et al., 2018). In 2018, Jin and Zhang developed a special scale for measuring Chinese senior high school students' FLE, which disclosed a correlative relationship between FLE and L2 learning and indicated that the sub-dimension of Enjoyment of English Learning has a stronger relationship with students' English performance than the other two sub-dimensions, i.e. Enjoyment of Teacher Support and Enjoyment of Student Support.

Research Questions of the Present Study

Given that most of the previous studies are focused on high school students and their learning of sciences, there has been a dearth of research on college students learning English as a foreign language in the Chinese context. The present study aims to probe into CE and FLE, and further explore the relationship among CE, FLE and students' performance in EFL learning. The three research questions to be addressed in this study are as follows.

RQ1: What is the status quo of CE of Chinese college students learning English as a foreign language?

RQ2: What is the status quo of FLE of Chinese college students learning English as a foreign language?

RQ3: What is the relationship among CE, FLE and students' English performance?

Methodology

The study was quantitative in nature, involving statistics and analysis of data collected from two questionnaire surveys, namely CE and FLE, and one end-of-the-term examination. Altogether 336 students were invited to participate in the study, and the data were collected from September 2023 until January 2024.

Research Participants

The participants were 336 Chinese college students, including 162 boys and 174 girls, with their ages ranging from 20 to 21. They came from different majors like accounting, auto maintenance and repairs, electronic information, and about one third of them came from Tibet and Xinjiang Autonomous Region. They had two English classes every week, each lasting 50 minutes, and they were deemed to be at the preliminary level in terms of English proficiency.

Research Instrument

Two questionnaires were employed for data collection in the present study, namely English Classroom Environment Inventory (ECEI) and Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (FLES), which were used to quantify the subjects' CE and assess their FLE in their English classroom respectively. And the end-of-the-term English examination scores of the previous semester were used to determine students' English performance.

English Classroom Environment Inventory (ECEI)

ECEI, which was developed by L. Liu and Y. Liu (2010), contains 25 items along three dimensions, namely relationship, personal development, and system maintenance and change. It has been extensively used to assess Chinese senior high school English CE in the form of five-point Likert Scale, where the participants are required to circle the answer for each item from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always) to indicate their opinions. The possible scores for the scale fall into a range from 25-125, of which items 5, 11, 13, 16, 20, 23, 25 are reversely coded, and a higher score indicates a higher level of CE. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.902 for the whole scale, and 0.852, 0.799, 0.833 for three constituent dimensions respectively, indicating a satisfactory level of reliability. The detailed information about the whole questionnaire is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Items and Dimensions of the ECEI

Dimensions	Descriptions	Specific Items
Relationship	Extent to which the teacher supports students, and students help each other.	1, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25
Personal Development	Extent to which students achieve expected results and focus on their learning.	3, 6, 9, 14, 15, 18
System Maintenance and System Change	Extent to which students obey discipline in class.	2, 13, 22

Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (FLES)

FLES, which was adopted for the study, was developed by Jin and Zhang in 2019, aiming at evaluating Chinese senior high school students' FLE. It is a 16-item questionnaire along three dimensions, namely Enjoyment of English Learning, Enjoyment of Teacher Support, and Enjoyment of Student Support. All 16 items in this scale are positively worded, and subjects choose from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The possible scores for this scale range from 16-80. A higher score indicates a higher level of enjoyment in the classroom. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha for the whole scale was 0.898, and 0.779, 0.852, 0.762 for the three dimensions respectively, indicating a satisfactory reliability of the scale. Table 2 presents the detailed information of the FLES.

Table 2. Items and Dimensions of the FLES

Dimensions	Descriptions	Specific Items
Enjoyment of Teacher Support	Extent to which the teacher is friendly, encouraging, and supportive.	11, 12, 13
Enjoyment of English Learning	Extent to which students reflect positive responses to English learning.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9
Enjoyment of Student Support	Extent to which the social bonds exist among students.	10, 14, 15, 16

End-of-the-Term Examination

The end-of-the-term examination was taken as the measurement of students' English performance in this study, which was administered at the end of the semester to assess students' performance in the English course. The examination

consisted of five items, namely, listening, reading, multiple-choice cloze, sentence translation, and essay-writing (based on given prompts), with a total score of 100.

Data Collection

A convenience sampling procedure was employed to recruit the participants based on their availability, and all participants came from intact classes. The data were all collected between September 2023 and January 2024. To be precise, the CE questionnaire was administrated in September 2023, the FLE questionnaire was administered in October, and the end-of-the-term examination scores were collected in January 2024. Before distributing the questionnaires, the participants were told that the data collected would be only used for a research purpose and that their teachers would not get access to the participants' responses to the questionnaire items. The participants were encouraged to give honest answers without reserve. The participants' end-of-the-term examination scores for the English course were collected afterwards with consent from both students and teachers.

Data Analysis

For research questions 1 and 2, descriptive analyses (SPSS 25.0) were conducted to ascertain the status quo of CE and FLE, and then statistics related to the constituent dimensions of two questionnaires were analyzed at length. To answer the third research question, regression analyses were performed to investigate the relationship among CE, FLE and students' English performance. The measurements fit all assumptions of analyzing techniques.

Results

Results of Classroom Environment

The status quo of CE is shown in Table 3. And in line with the ECEI developed by Liu (2015), the results obtained were placed into one of three different groups. Scores below 75 were classified as "with no to little developed" CE, while scores that fell between 75 and 100 were identified as "with a moderately developed" CE. Scores above 100 were identified as "with a well-developed" CE.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the Status Quo of Classroom Environment

Min	Max	Mean	SD
54	125	94.97	11.62

According to Table 3, the participants' CE is at a moderate level, and the mean score for CE is 94.97, lower than the high-level standard, indicating that the participants generally perceived their CE as moderately developed. Some students perceived their CE as "no to little developed" (Min.=54 < 75), which was much lower than the level of moderately developed CE, whereas some others exhibited "a well-developed" level of CE (Max=125), perceiving their English CE as excellent and well-developed.

Additional frequency analysis shows that out of 336 participants, 9 (2.68%) fell into the 'poorly-developed' level of CE, while 212 (63.1%) and 115 (34.23%) fell into the 'moderately-developed' and 'well-developed' levels of CE, respectively, indicating that students generally perceived their CE as moderately-developed to well-developed. The general profile of CE is displayed in Figure 1.

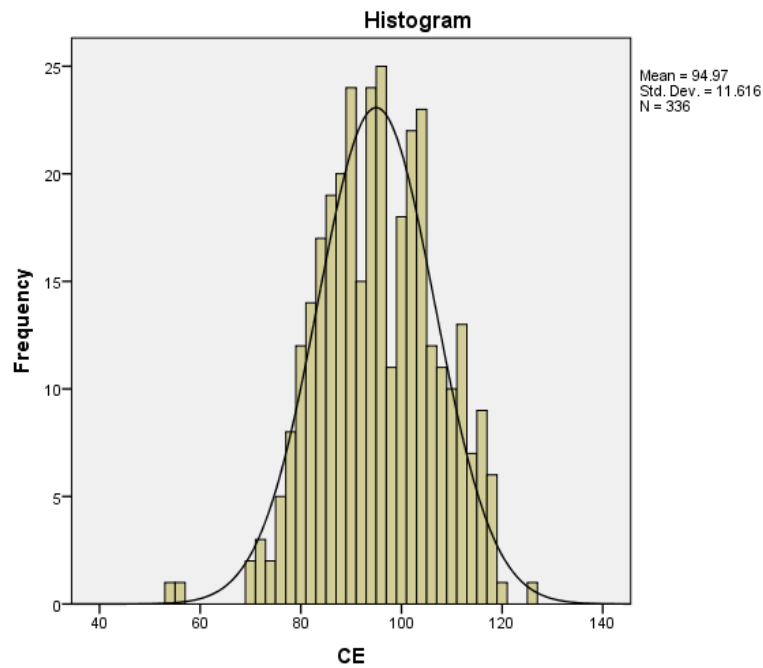


Figure 1. Distribution of CE Scores of All Participants

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Constituent Dimensions of CE

Dimensions	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Relationship	2.13	5	3.71	0.48
Personal Development	2.17	5	4.01	0.57
System Maintenance and System Change	2	5	3.82	0.56

Apart from the general profile of the participants' CE, the descriptive statistics of the three constituent dimensions of CE are presented. As can be seen in Table 4, the means of Relationship, Personal Development and System Maintenance and System Change are 3.71, 4.01, and 3.82, respectively. And the mean of personal development is the highest and the mean of relationship is the lowest, which indicate that participants showed more positive attitudes towards their personal development but were less concerned about their relationship with teachers or classmates. In addition, system maintenance and system change also have some room for development. By and large, the participants perceived their CE as good to excellent concerning all three constituent dimensions.

When it comes to the mean and standard deviation of each individual item, Item 16 "Some of our classmates do not like others" ($M=2.99$), and Item 25 "Our English teacher seldom communicates with us students" ($M=3.02$), both belonging to the category of Relationship, scored a lowest mean of 2.99 and 3.02 respectively, still signifying a lack of cooperative relationship in English classroom. By contrast, the highest mean is that of Item 1 "Our English teacher likes us very much" ($M=4.44$), and Item 2 "Our English class is well organized" ($M=4.34$), indicating that teachers' attitude towards students as well as the class order played a significant role in the English learning classroom, which aligns with the typical Chinese learning context. Confucianism-based culture is a typical cultural phenomenon where teachers have the final say in most cases, though students are warmly welcomed to propose questions and interact with their teachers.

With a view to probing deeper into the impacts of Relationship, Personal Development, System Maintenance and System Change on CE, regression analysis was conducted, the results of which is shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Regression Statistics of Constituents to CE

Independent	Dependent	B	Beta	P	VIF	R ²	ΔR^2
Relationship	CE	.640	.663	.000***	2.596	1.000	
Personal Development		.240	.296	.000***	1.955		
System Maintenance and System Change		.120	.146	.000***	1.923		

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The regression coefficient of Relationship to CE was 0.640, the regression coefficient of Personal Development to CE was 0.240, and the coefficient of System Maintenance and System Change to CE was 0.120. The regression coefficient of the relationship to CE was the highest in the three sets of data, which indicates that the Relationship contributed mostly to

CE. Therefore, the level of Relationship largely affected the total level of CE, and thus, developing a good relationship is of primary importance to overall CE. Figure 2 presents the regression relationship of the three dimensions to CE. With regard to the potential multicollinearity issue, the VIF values for each dimension in Table 5 are all below 5, which indicates that multicollinearity among the independent variables is not a significant concern in this case. Thus, the results suggest that the model is relatively stable and the relationships between the variables can be interpreted with confidence.

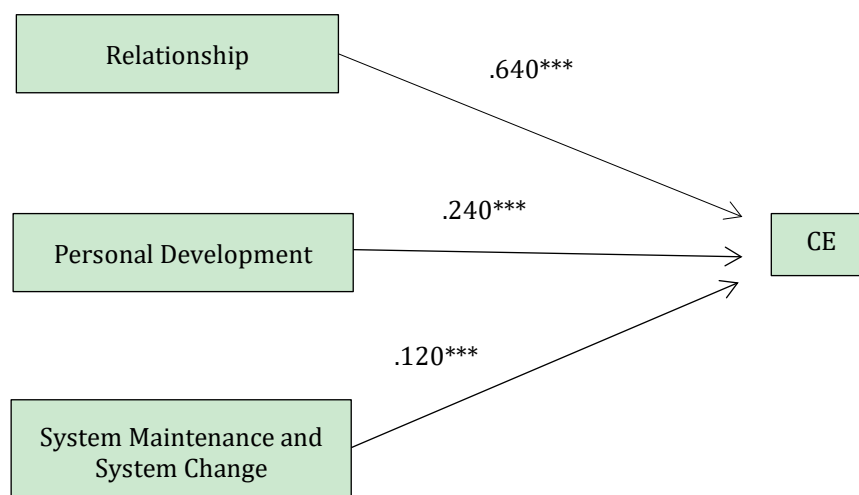


Figure 2. The Regression Relationship of Constituents to CE

Results of Foreign Language Enjoyment

Descriptive and frequency analysis were conducted to quantify the status quo of the participants' FLE as well as the three constituent dimensions, namely, Enjoyment of English Learning, Enjoyment of Teacher Support, and Enjoyment of Student Support. In line with Li and Xu (2019), the FLES adopts a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from '1 (Strongly disagree)' to '5 (Strongly agree),' with possible scores ranging between 16 and 80. Within the range, a total score below 48 indicates low or no FLE, and a total score between 48 and 64 signifies a moderate level of FLE, and a score above 64 represents a high level of FLE.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of the Status Quo of FLE

Min	Max	Mean	SD
42	80	66.38	8.08

For FLE, the participants had a mean score of 66.38, with a minimum of 42, and a maximum of 80, with most of the parameters falling into the high level of FLE. The general profile of FLE is displayed in Figure 3. Moreover, additional frequency analysis indicates that 8 (2.4%), 145 (43.2%), and 183 (54.5%) out of the 336 participants fell into the low, middle and high level of FLE respectively, suggesting that most students perceived themselves with a moderate to high degree of English language enjoyment.

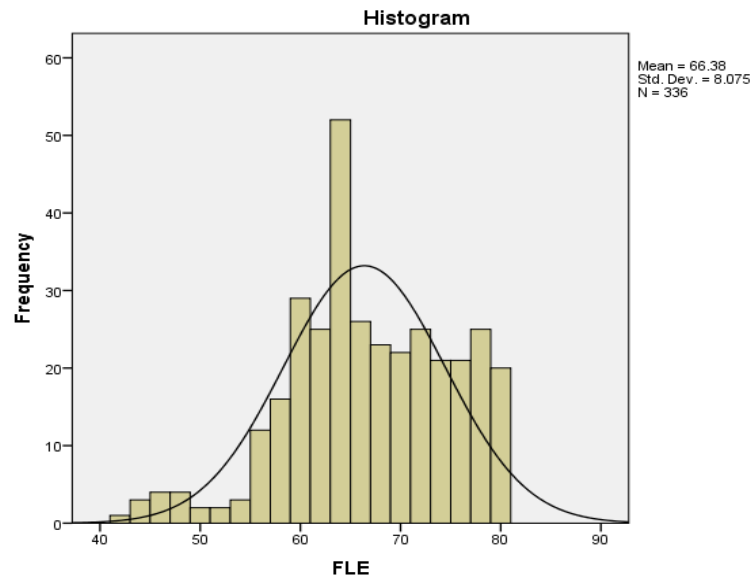


Figure 3. Distribution of Foreign Language Enjoyment Scores in the Sample

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics of Constituent Dimensions of FLE

Dimensions	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Enjoyment of English Learning	2.22	5	4.04	0.57
Enjoyment of Teacher Support	2	5	4.20	0.61
Enjoyment of Student Support	2	5	4.41	0.58

Apart from the general profile of the participants' FLE, the descriptive statistics of three constituent dimensions of FLE can be seen in Table 7. Of the three constituent dimensions of FLE, the participants' enjoyment of English learning ($M=4.04$), enjoyment of teacher support ($M=4.20$), and enjoyment of student support ($M=4.41$) all fell into the high level, which echoed previous research findings that L2 learners scored relatively high in the aspects of enjoyment of teacher support and enjoyment of student support (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018).

When it comes to the individual item of FLE, the means were all a bit higher or lower than 4. The lowest mean is 3.63 for Item 4 (I am an important member of the English class), which is included in Enjoyment of English Learning and the highest mean is 4.51 for Item 10 (The teacher is amiable and friendly), which belongs to Enjoyment of Teacher Support. Table 8 shows the impacts of three dimensions to FLE.

Table 8. Regression Statistics of Constituents to FLE

Independent	Dependent	B	Beta	P	VIF	R ²	ΔR ²
Enjoyment of English Learning	FLE	.562	.631	.000***	1.711	0.994	
Enjoyment of Teacher Support		.249	.303	.000***	2.163		
Enjoyment of Student Support		.184	.210	.000***	1.773		

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The regression coefficient of enjoyment of English learning to FLE was 0.562. The regression coefficient of enjoyment of teacher support to FLE was 0.249, and the regression coefficient of enjoyment of student support to FLE was 0.184. Among the three sets of data, enjoyment of English learning contributed the most to FLE, suggesting the enjoyment of English learning greatly impacted the participants' FLE. Figure 3 presents the regression relationship of the three dimensions to FLE.

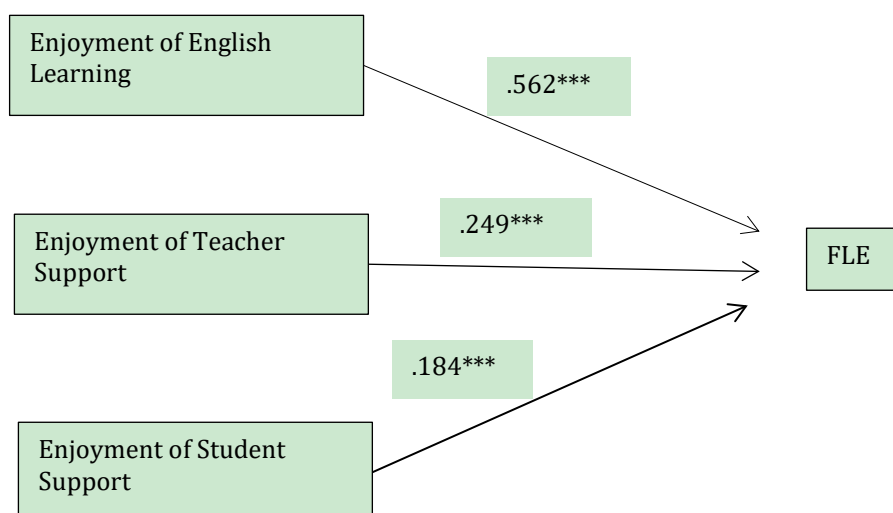


Figure 4. The Regression Relationship of FLE

Relationship Among Classroom Environment, Foreign Language Enjoyment, and Students' English Performance

Correlation Analysis

Both micro- and macro-level information could be seen via correlational relationships among CE, FLE, and the participants' English performance. The Pearson Correlation Statistics of the 7 Dimensions can be seen in the following table.

Table 9. Pearson Correlation Statistics of 7 Dimensions

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Relationship	1						
2. Personal development	.692**	1					
3. System maintenance and system change	.686**	.545**	1				
4. Enjoyment of English learning	.596**	.474**	.469**	1			
5. Enjoyment of teacher support	.512**	.339**	.359**	.629**	1		
6. Enjoyment of student support	.412**	.274**	.311**	.513**	.646**	1	
7. English performance	.636**	.542**	.530**	.450**	.310**	.241**	1

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Statistically, there were significant positive correlations among the 7 constituent dimensions. The significant coefficients of the relationship with three constituent dimensions of FLE and English performance were bigger than 0.40. The significant coefficients of Personal development with the three constituent dimensions of FLE were bigger than 0.20 but smaller than 0.60. The significant coefficients between system maintenance and system change with the three constituent dimensions of FLE ranged from 0.30 to 0.50. Therefore, the relationship revealed stronger positive correlations between the three constituent dimensions of FLE and students' English performance.

In addition, the significant coefficients of the participants' English performance with the constituent dimensions of CE and FLE were 0.636**, 0.542**, 0.530**, 0.450**, 0.310**, and 0.241**. Among these dimensions, the relationship, Personal development, System maintenance and system change, and Enjoyment of English learning showed stronger positive correlations with students' English performance.

As for the Pearson correlation statistics of CE, FLE, and English performance, the correlation coefficient between CE and FLE, between CE and students' English performance, and between FLE and students' English performance were 0.613**, 0.659**, and 0.428** respectively, which showed a significant positive correlation between CE and FLE, between CE and students' English performance, and between FLE and students' English performance. In summary, there were significant positive correlations between CE, FLE and students' English performance, with the correlation coefficient between CE and students' English performance bigger than the other two correlation coefficients.

Regression Analysis

To know the regression relations of relationship, personal development, system maintenance and system change, enjoyment of English learning, enjoyment of teacher support, and enjoyment of student support to students' English

performance, the dimensions of CE and FLE were taken as independent variables and students' English performance was taken as dependent variable. Table 10 displays the regression statistics of them.

Table 10. Sub-dimensions Regression to English Performance

Independent	Dependent	B	Beta	P	VIF	R ²	ΔR^2
Relationship	English performance	8.866	.396	.000	3.074	.445	.435
Personal Development		2.997	.159	.006	1.987		
System Maintenance and System Change		2.765	.145	.012	1.942		
Enjoyment of English Learning		2.345	.123	.039	2.086		
Enjoyment of Teacher Support		-0.847	-.048	.434	2.238		
Enjoyment of Student Support		-0.803	-.043	.434	1.781		

Figure 5 shows that statistical assumptions like the normal distribution of residuals were all met (Xu, 2013). The results show that the six independent variables collectively significantly predicted students' English performance ($F[6, 329] = 43.904, f^2 = .802, p < .001$). The three dimensions of CE, namely the relationship ($f^2 = .405, p < .001$), personal development ($f^2 = .034, p < .01$), and system maintenance and system change ($f^2 = .021, p < .05$), all significantly contributed to the prediction, and so did one dimension of FLE, namely enjoyment of English learning ($f^2 = .014, p < .05$). However, the two other dimensions of FLE, enjoyment of teacher support and enjoyment of student support, did not significantly contribute to the prediction ($p > .05$), as shown in Table 10. The data weights, as presented in Table 10, indicate that relationship and personal development contributed most to predicting students' English performance. The R square value was .445, which indicates that 44.5% changes of students' English performance could be explained, suggesting that the dimensions of CE and FLE collectively account for a significant portion of the differences observed in students' English performance. However, 55.5% of the variability remains unexplained, indicating the influence of other factors not included in this model. The formula is that English performance = $.396 \times \text{relationship} + .159 \times \text{personal development} + .145 \times \text{system maintenance and system change} + .123 \times \text{enjoyment of English learning} - .048 \times \text{enjoyment of teacher support} - .043 \times \text{enjoyment of student support}$.

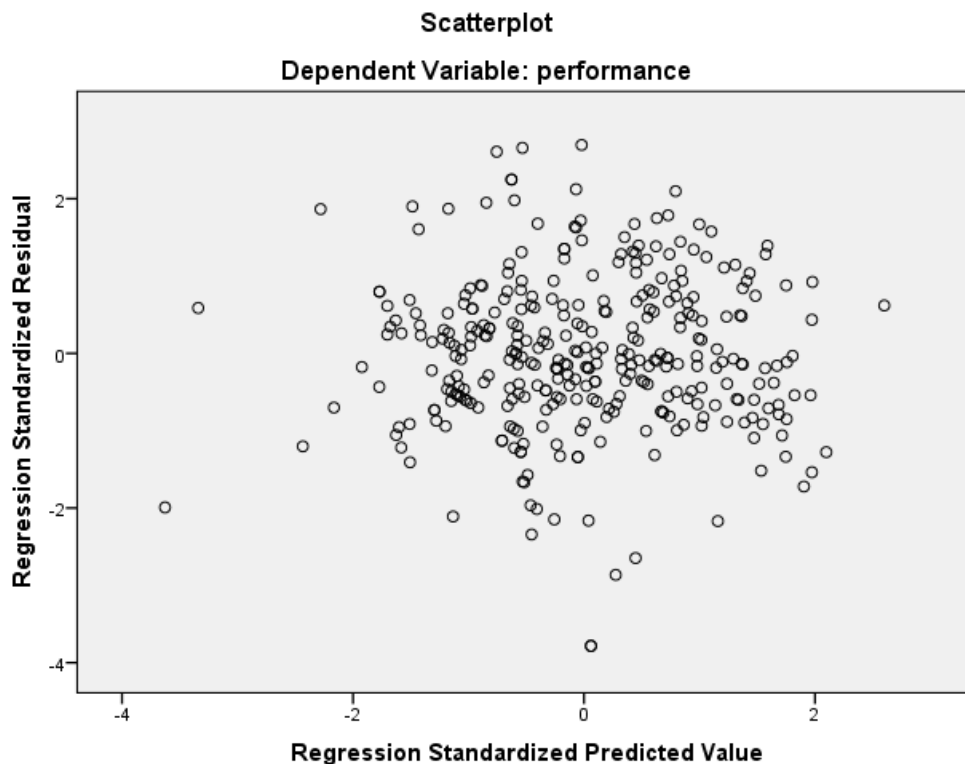


Figure 5. Multiple Linear Regression: Standardized Predicted Value and Residual (1)

After the regression analysis of various dimensions to students' English performance, the regression analysis of CE and FLE to students' English performance was also conducted, where CE and FLE were taken as independent variables and English performance as dependent variable. The regression statistics of CE and FLE to English performance are shown in Table 11.

Table 11. Regression Analysis of CE and FLE to English Performance

Independent	Dependent	B	Beta	P	VIF	R ²	ΔR^2
CE	English performance	.613	.659	.000	1.000	.435	.433
CE	FLE	.426	.613	.000	1.000	.376	.374
CE	English performance	.591	.637	.000	1.602	.436	.432
FLE	English performance	.050	.037	.473	1.602		

Note. CE=classroom environment; FLE=foreign language enjoyment

It can be seen from the above table that the R square was 0.436, which means that CE and FLE could explain 43.6% of the changes in students' English performance. This indicates that CE and FLE collectively account for a significant portion of the differences, whereas 55.5% of the variability remains unexplained, suggesting the influence of other factors (e.g. motivation, learning background, etc.) not included in this model. The F test ($F=128.591$, $f^2=.772$, $p<.001$) indicates that it was valid. And the standardized regression formulation is English performance = $.591 \times CE + .050 \times FLE$. Thus, there is a closer relationship between CE and English performance. Statistical assumptions were all met in the analysis and presented in Figure 6.

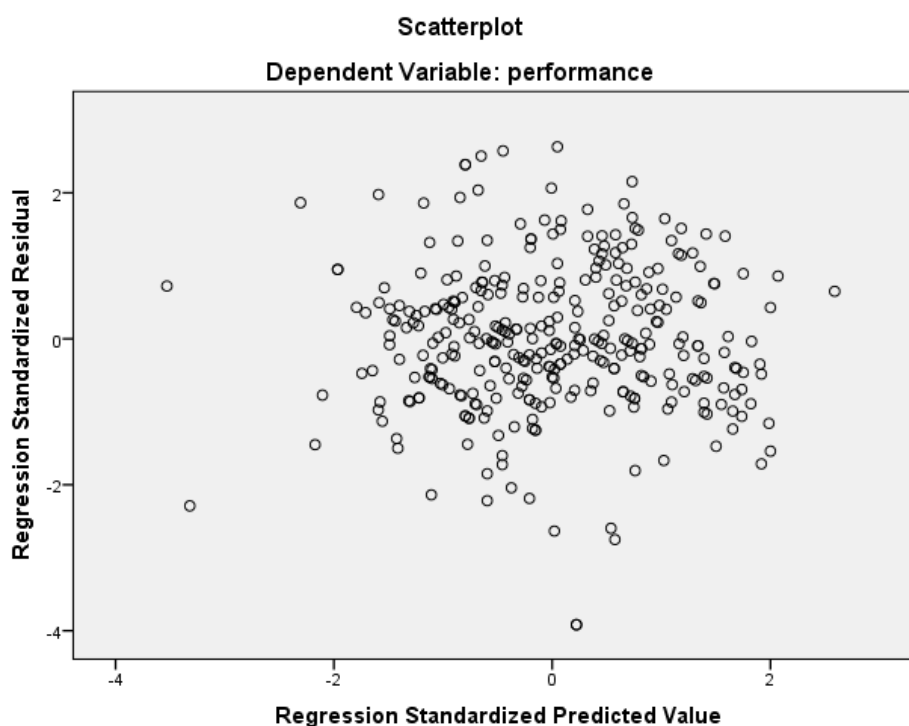


Figure 6. Multiple Linear Regression: Standardized Predicted Value and Residual

Discussion

This part will be unfolded from three respects in line with the findings in relation to CE, FLE and the relationships among CE, FLE and students' learning performance. And the data will be interpreted according to the following analytical framework.

Table 12. The analytical framework for data interpretation

Research Questions	Variable	Method
RQ1 (1) Status quo of CE	CE	Descriptive analyses
(2) 3 dimensions of CE	1. Relationship 2. Personal Development 3. System Maintenance and System Change	Descriptive analyses
RQ2 (1) Status quo of FLE	FLE	Descriptive analyses
(2) 3 dimensions of FLE	1. Enjoyment of teacher support 2. Enjoyment of English learning 3. Enjoyment of student support	Descriptive analyses
RQ3 The relationships among CE, FLE and end-of-the-term examination performance	1. CE 2. FLE 3. End-of-the-term examination performance	Pearson correlation analysis

With reference to RQ1, that is, the status quo of CE, most of the participants perceived their CE as moderately developed and well developed. Of the three constituent dimensions, the mean of personal development was the highest, whereas that of relationship was the lowest, suggesting that the subjects were more positive towards their personal development but less concerned about their relationship with teachers or classmates. To many Chinese students, the learning of English is function-oriented, i.e., the students attach great importance to the learning of English in relation to their future development and sometimes to its immediate effects. A case in point is that Chinese students tend to be more reserved and less ostentatious in class. They have been taught since childhood to be respectful to teachers who are always deemed as authorities in class. Students seldom challenge or question teachers either in class or after class. Nonetheless, the results of regression analysis indicate that the coefficient of the relationship to CE was higher than the other two dimensions, suggesting that the relationship contributed mostly to CE and largely affected the total level of CE. The findings concur with Hamre and Pianta's (2007) that a positive CE permeates a classroom if teachers are sensitive and responsive to students' academic and emotional needs, trying to establish warm, congenial, caring, and nurturing bonds with students, showing sympathy and reckoning with students' opinions. Students are, by and large, concerned about the judgments made by their teachers and are afraid of making mistakes in front of their teachers and classmates. Therefore, maintaining a healthy relationship is the most effective way to develop and enhance the overall CE.

With reference to RQ2, that is, the status quo of FLE, the participants' enjoyment of English learning, enjoyment of teacher support, and enjoyment of student support all fell into the high level, with enjoyment of student support being higher than the other two. Such findings are in alignment with what has been concluded in previous research (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014, 2016; Joe et al., 2017). As a socializing process, language learning is highly demanding, and learners may encounter unpredictable challenges when social support, including both teacher support and student support, appears to be a natural way to help individuals tackle academic or psychological challenges (Liu & Li, 2023). As for teacher support, a consensus has been reached that teachers can greatly influence the student's learning experiences. The Chinese context is generally considered "a high acceptance of power and authority" (Rao, 2006), where students tend to favor a teacher-centered classroom so the teacher can set either a positive or negative tone in class and, in most circumstances, regulate and manage the whole class. As for student support, it can help boost the students' levels of FLE, with which they can be actively engaged in classroom socialization and are more willing to join in learning activities and feel more relaxed about their learning. Nonetheless, the results of regression analysis indicate that the coefficient of enjoyment of English learning to FLE was much higher than that of enjoyment of teacher support and enjoyment of student support, suggesting the enjoyment of English learning greatly impacted the participants' FLE.

With reference to RQ3, that is, the relationships among CE, FLE, and students' English performance, a caring and harmonious classroom environment could help foster students' learning in the aspects of teacher's encouragement, collaborative work, classroom discipline and the like, which in turn, would generate positive emotions among learners who would be more dedicated to their second foreign language learning (Khajavy et al., 2018). The findings align with Li et al. (2021) and Jin et al. (2023) that students who perceived their English class environment as more positive tended to enjoy more and feel less anxious about English learning, and vice versa, thus achieving better performance. A good classroom environment will improve the level of enjoyment in second foreign language learning, and further foster students' English learning and develop their English performance. The positive influence of FLE on students' English performance has been documented in SLA literature. Compared with negative emotions, such as foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA), FLE is more likely to be triggered by teachers and has a more significant influence on foreign language performance (Li et al., 2018; Piniel & Albert, 2018). Likewise, student support is also conducive to maintaining relationships and elevating students' learning performance (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

Conclusion

As for CE, most of the participants perceived themselves as moderately to highly developed, though a small number of them being poorly-developed. Of the three dimensions, relationship contributed more to CE than personal development

and system maintenance and system change. As for the FLE, all the three dimensions, namely, enjoyment of English learning, enjoyment of teacher support and enjoyment of student support, were at a high level, with enjoyment of student support being higher than the other two. As for the inter-relationships, significantly positive relationships among the three variables (CE, FLE and students' English performance) were revealed, and all the dimensions of CE and FLE were correlated with each other. And a triangular relationship pattern between CE, FLE and English performance was ascertained.

Recommendations

In light of the major findings of the study, some practical implications. Firstly, taking account of the findings that the participants witnessed moderately to well-developed CE in English learning, teachers should attach importance to the boosting of a healthy CE (Dewaele et al., 2018). And since CE was more concerned with relationship, classroom is like a community and all the students are bound together so that they should be cooperative and supportive. Moreover, personal development and system maintenance and system change also need to be carefully considered. Secondly, in keeping with the analyses of FLE, the students in the vocational institute had a high level of enjoyment during the process of English learning. Since the level of FLE had much to do with teachers and classmates. Therefore, teachers should be more facilitative and supportive, cultivating students' confidence and improving their motivation instead of sniffing at students' small mistakes (Oxford, 2015). In the meanwhile, teachers should encourage students to be more cooperative and understanding so that student support can also be sought when needed. Thirdly, due to the complex relationship among CE, FLE and English performance, showing that English performance is the co-product of the complex system of CE and FLE, English teachers should consider the complexity and interaction of the causal relationship between English performance and emotion-related factors, including the connection and interaction of CE and FLE. A better understanding of the nature and study of this casual cycle will help English teachers and students become more emotionally competent.

Limitations

Finally, this study is not without limitations. First, convenience sampling adopted in the present study inevitably has the concern of homogeneity in age and English learning context. Therefore, one sample from one university cannot represent all Chinese college students. Second, CE and FLE in this study are self-reported in nature, which indicates that the actual CE and FLE may differ from the self-perception of CE and FLE. It is more advisable for CE and FLE to be measured by other objective methods. Lastly, retrospectives have the limitations of memory bias. For instance, a certain emotional response that was significantly more impressive and occurred more recently tended to be recalled as representative of a general classroom emotional experience. Given their transient nature (Dewaele & Li, 2020), it is necessary to take account of the complexity and dynamics involved in the relationships and interactions between classroom emotions while exploring the internal variation of emotional development.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets and materials used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics Statement

All methods were carried out in accordance with the guidelines and regulations of the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments. Since this study does not involve intervention and is low risk, ethical review, and approval were waived according to the institutional review boards at the School of Foreign Language at Soochow University.

Each participant was required to sign a written form of informed consent. All participants were informed about the aim of the study and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. All methods were carried out in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Pu: Concept and design, drafting manuscript, supervision. Cai: Statistical analysis, results interpretation. Heng: Concept and design, drafting manuscript, critical revision. Tang: Data acquisition, material support.

Generative AI Statement

No generative AI or AI-supported technologies were used.

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Appendix

第一部分 (Part I): 课堂环境问卷 (Classroom Environment Questionnaire)

Number	Items (Chinese)	Items (English)
Q01	我们英语老师非常喜欢我们。	The English teacher likes us very much.
Q02	我们班的英语课组织得很有秩序。	The English class is very orderly.
Q03	我在上课时很用心。	I am very attentive in class.
Q04	我们班大部分同学能和其他同学平等地合作。	Most of the students can work with others as equals.
Q05	我们班同学之间经常闹矛盾。	The classmates are always at odds with each other.
Q06	我能为准时上课做好准备。	I can get ready for class on time.
Q07	在英语课上我和同学合作进行学习。	In class, I can cooperate with classmates in learning.
Q08	我们班英语老师上课讲得很生动。	The English teacher is very lively in class.
Q09	我知道自己在英语课上要做什么。	I can what I should do in English class.
Q10	在英语课上我们更喜欢合作而不是竞争。	We prefer cooperation to competition in English class.
Q11	我们班一些同学不愿意和其他同学融洽地相处。	Some of the classmates are reluctant to get along with others.
Q12	我们的英语老师更像是我们的朋友。	The English teacher is more like a friend of ours.
Q13	我们英语课的秩序很乱, 缺乏组织。	The English class is disorderly, lacking organization.
Q14	我知道每一节英语课的学习目标。	I know the learning objective of each English class.
Q15	我按时完成英语作业。	I can complete the assignments on time.
Q16	我们班有些同学不喜欢其他同学。	Some of the classmates do not like others.
Q17	英语老师重视我们提出的问题。	The English teacher values the questions proposed in class.
Q18	在课上我会尽力完成老师布置的任务。	In class, I will try my best to complete the tasks assigned by the teacher.
Q19	学习使我会和同学分享所收集的资料和书。	I will share the materials and books collected with classmates in learning.
Q20	我们班的一些同学让人讨厌。	Some of the classmates are annoying.
Q21	我们英语老师欢迎同学们随时提出问题。	The English teacher welcome questions from students at any time.
Q22	我们的英语课组织得井然有序。	The English class is well-organized.
Q23	我们有些同学只和他们亲近的同学在一起。	Some of our classmates are only with those they are close to.
Q24	英语老师会采纳我们的意见。	The English teacher takes our advice.
Q25	我们的英语老师很少和学生们交流。	The English teacher rarely interacts with students.

第二部分(Part II): 外语愉悦感问卷(Foreign Language Enjoyment Questionnaire)

Number	Items (Chinese)	Items (English)
Q01	在英语课堂上, 我思维敏捷。	I can be creative.
Q02	在英语课堂上, 我不觉得无聊。	I don't get bored.
Q03	我喜欢英语课。	I enjoy it.
Q04	我是英语课堂的重要成员。	I'm a worthy member of the FL class.
Q05	相比之前, 现在的我可以更好地用英语表达自己。	I learnt to express myself better in the FL.
Q06	我在英语课堂上学到了有趣的东西。	I've learned interesting things.
Q07	课堂上, 我对自己取得的成绩感到自豪。	In class, I feel proud of my accomplishments.
Q08	英语课堂妙趣横生。	It's fun.
Q09	老师挺激励士气的。	The teacher is encouraging.
Q10	老师和蔼可亲。	The teacher is friendly.
Q11	我们的英语老师更像是我们的朋友。	The teacher is more like a friend of ours.
Q12	老师乐于提供情感或其他方面的支持和帮助。	The teacher is supportive.
Q13	同学们友善。	The peers are nice.
Q14	课堂上, 同学之间关系紧密。	We form a tight group.
Q15	同学们有共同的谈资, 比如一些常讲的笑话。	We have common 'legends', such as running jokes.
Q16	课堂上, 同学们有很多欢笑。	We laugh a lot.