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Differences in Foreign Language Enjoyment and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety in Relation to Year of Study and Gender among Polish Students of English

Abstract

The following article examines emotional factors related to foreign language learning, specifically foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA), which can significantly influence students' motivation and academic performance. Adopting a quantitative, cross-sectional approach, the paper examines the differences in perceived levels of FLE and FLCA and the relationship between them across three years of study, as well as the gender-related differences in FLE and FLCA among Polish students majoring in English. The research material comprises data collected using a self-report questionnaire from 108 Polish undergraduate students enrolled in a bachelor's programme in English across three academic years. The results indicate that FLE was significantly lower in relation to the year of study, while FLCA was relatively comparable. No significant correlation was observed between FLE and FLCA in any year. Additionally, FLCA levels were consistently higher among female students, but gender seemed to have no effect on FLE. However, the findings related to gender were not statistically significant.

Keywords: foreign language learning, emotions, enjoyment, anxiety, higher education

Introduction

Learning a foreign language is a complex and challenging endeavour. During the process, students encounter various factors that can significantly affect their learning outcomes, either beneficially or detrimentally. Among these factors, both positive and negative emotions are of substantial importance (Dewaele, MacIntyre 2014; Shao *et al.* 2019). They greatly influence individuals' intellectual development, motivation, language learning progress, and academic performance (Friedrickson 2001, Horwitz *et al.* 1986, MacIntyre *et al.* 2019, Pekrun *et al.* 2002). However, the impact of emotions on the foreign language

learning is considered to be long overlooked by researchers (Dewaele, Li 2020). It was not until the 1970s that researchers began to recognise a link between emotions and the effectiveness of language learning, with the emphasis being put primarily on negative emotions (see *e.g.* Horwitz *et al.* 1986, MacIntyre 1999; MacIntyre, Gardner 1989, 1991, 1994). This focus started to shift with the emergence of positive psychology at the turn of the new millennium (Guo, Qiu 2022).

In general, positive psychology can be defined as a study of positive aspects of life, such as joy and prosperousness, that emphasises the potential of individuals and aims to determine factors that contribute to people's welfare and subjective successfulness (Boniwell 2012). Moreover, it attempts to identify the conditions that allow people to thrive, fostering well-being, optimism and positive emotions, while acknowledging their significance across multiple areas of life (Compton, Hoffman 2013). The first scholar who is considered to use this term is Abraham Harold Maslow (Lopez, Gallagher 2009). In 1954, he argued that worldwide research should not be limited to negative aspects of humankind, but rather focus on "such matters as spontaneity, acceptance and human's potential" (Maslow 1954: 360–363). More than forty years later, at the end of 1900s, the term was reintroduced by Martin E. P. Seligman, the former president of the American Psychological Association (Lopez, Gallagher 2009; Compton, Hoffman 2013), and shortly afterwards positive psychology started to become a widely recognised field. In 2014, with the publication of a special issue in the journal *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, positive psychology was officially introduced to the field of Second Language Acquisition (Shirvan *et al.* 2020). Since then, the focus has shifted from studying solely negative emotions toward a more holistic approach to foreign language education that aims to determine the complex interplay between emotions, well-being, and efficient learning (Dewaele, Alfawzan 2018).

While negative emotions are still acknowledged to have an impact on learning outcomes, positive psychologists do not solely focus on identifying and addressing the challenges they create. Instead, they aim to enhance positive emotions by fostering greater engagement and appreciation of life and its activities (MacIntyre, Mercer 2014, as cited in Shirvan *et al.* 2021). By adopting this approach, researchers deriving from positive psychology have brought attention to the long-standing neglect of the impact of positive emotions on language learning. In particular, the work of Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) has shed light on the importance of understanding and enhancing positive emotions in language learning, and their findings have significantly influenced the current discourse on emotions in Second Language Acquisition. Consequently, the past decade has seen extensive research on the impact of both positive and negative emotions on foreign language learning (see *e.g.* Alberth *et al.* 2023; Barrios, Acosta-Manzano 2022; Huang, Wang 2024; Mierzwa 2018; Wang 2022; Yeşilçınar, Erdemir 2022).

Foreign Language Enjoyment and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety

Two specific emotional constructs that have gained attention in the field of Second Language Acquisition are foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA). FLE pertains to positive feelings that learners experience while studying a foreign language, including an interest in and fondness for the language, as well as the joy and fulfilment gained from the learning process (Su 2024). It is associated with a multitude of beneficial outcomes, such as improved academic performance (Jin, Zhang

2021), increased motivation (Méndez-López, Aguilar 2013; Zhang *et al.* 2020), greater engagement in the learning process (Wang 2022), and enhanced willingness to communicate in a foreign language (Khajavy *et al.* 2018). Diversely, FLCA refers to feelings of tension, unease, and nervousness associated with learning a foreign language (MacIntyre, Gardner 1994; Su 2024). High levels of FLCA among learners may hinder the language learning process, and have a negative impact on academic achievement (Aida 1994, Horwitz *et al.* 1986), willingness to communicate in a foreign language (MacIntyre 1999), vocabulary retention (MacIntyre, Gardner 1989), and interest in engaging in classroom activities (Jackson 2002). Both emotional constructs may be influenced by a variety of internal and external factors.

One of the factors that is widely researched in terms of its influence on FLE and FLCA is gender, but the findings on this relationship are inconsistent. Some research indicated that female learners demonstrated higher levels of both FLE and FLCA than male participants (Dewaele, MacIntyre 2014; Dewaele *et al.* 2016; Siahpoosh *et al.* 2022). However, other study (Wu 2024b) demonstrated that both genders exhibited comparable levels of FLE, but female students reported noticeably higher levels of FLCA. Another research (Dewaele, MacIntyre 2019) also indicated that the gender factor affected FLCA, which was higher among female participants but did not significantly influence FLE. In contrast, the study of Liu and Hong (2021) showed that female participants generally exhibited lower levels of FLCA and higher levels of FLE. Some other studies (Alenezi 2020; Dewaele, Jiang 2019; Mierzwa 2018), however, did not demonstrate a significant difference in the levels of FLE and FLCA between opposite gender participants. Therefore, the impact of gender on those two emotional constructs remains ambiguous.

Recently, there have been some studies that aimed to determine the dynamics of FLE and FLCA during the course of English learning. For example, Shirvan and Teherian's (2018) longitudinal study examined how the level of FLE and FLCA varies among university students throughout a semester. It involved an analysis of 367 undergraduate students enrolled in a course of general English. The study found that participants experienced a significant increase in FLE and a decrease in FLCA over the semester. Moreover, the initial levels of FLE and FLCA did not predict changes over time. Additionally, Shirvan and Teherian (2018) reported that at the start of the semester, there was a low yet significant negative correlation between students' FLE and FLCA, which intensified to a strong negative correlation as the semester progressed. Contrastingly, the study conducted by Liu and Hong (2021) among 709 students aged between 9 and 16 found that as students progressed through grade levels, their FLCA tended to increase while their FLE decreased. Notably, grade 7 marked a turning point in this trend, creating an inverted V-curve where anxiety peaked and enjoyment was at its lowest. Additionally, a strong correlation was found between anxiety and enjoyment levels for students in grades 4 to 8.

The study conducted by Wu (2024a) revealed similar trends in FLE and FLCA across academic levels. The study examined 288 non-English students enrolled in bachelor's, master's, and PhD programmes. Wu (2024a) reported that the level of FLE decreased significantly from undergraduate to master's students and increased slightly at the PhD level among the participants. In contrast, the level of FLCA increased from undergraduate to master's students before declining in PhD students. The findings indicated that master's students experience the highest FLCA and lowest FLE. Furthermore, the study indicated that the level of FLE varied significantly, while the level of FLCA remained relatively static. Interestingly, another study carried out by Wu (2024b) found that the level of FLCA notably increased among second-year students, compared to first-year students, while the level of FLE did not change significantly.

Overall, it is commonly recognised that a variety of emotions, both positive and negative, emerge during language learning and have a substantial influence on achievement and performance in a foreign language. Positive emotions like interest, enjoyment, and enthusiasm can positively influence students' capacity to focus and remember, supporting acquiring and retaining new information (Méndez-López, Aguilar 2013). Moreover, positive emotions are considered to enhance individuals' intellectual development and lead to overall happiness and well-being (Friedrickson 2001, 2003). Contrastingly, negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, and frustration have a detrimental effect on learners' motivation (Méndez-López, Aguilar 2013), and impede progress and performance in language learning (Horwitz *et al.* 1986). Among these emotions, FLE and FLCA have been numerously proven to significantly affect the language learning process (see *e.g.* Aida 1994, Horwitz *et al.* 1986; Jin, Zhang 2021; Khajavy *et al.* 2018; MacIntyre, Gardner 1989; Méndez-López, Aguilar 2013; Wang 2022; Zhang *et al.* 2020). While the levels, causes and relationship between these two emotional constructs have been widely examined, there are only a few studies that focus on examining the change in the levels of FLE and FLCA during the course of foreign language learning in an academic setting (Wu 2024a).

In the Polish context, emotions related to foreign language learning have been previously examined in various contexts, including secondary school (Baran-Łucarz 2011, Mierzwa 2018, Piechurska-Kuciel 2012a, 2012b), higher education (Bielak 2022; Bielak, Mystkowska-Wiertelak 2024, Mystkowska-Wiertelak 2018), third language learning (Piechurska-Kuciel 2017), and online learning (Półtorak 2022). Research has shown that FLE is associated with lower levels of foreign language learning boredom (Kruk *et al.* 2022) and enhanced second language fluency (Bielak 2022), whereas FLCA has been found to suppress the positive effects of agreeableness on foreign language learning (Piechurska-Kuciel *et al.* 2024). In terms of gender and the two emotional constructs, the results of one study indicated that language anxiety levels are similar between apprehensive males and females, but nonapprehensive males report significantly less anxiety than nonapprehensive females (Piechurska-Kuciel 2012a). Moreover, another research showed that the levels of FLE do not differ significantly between female and male participants in the context of Polish secondary grammar schools (Mierzwa 2018). A separate study, which measured the difference in the levels of FLCA perceived by secondary school students from various residential areas, has shown that the level of FLCA lowers among participants in relation to the year of study (Piechurska-Kuciel 2012b). However, despite existing body of research, there seem to be no studies that examine how the levels of FLE and FLCA differ in relation to the year of study and gender in the context of Polish higher education.

Research Aims and Methodology

The purpose of the current study is to examine the differences in perceived levels of foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) in relation to the duration of learning English in the context of Polish higher education. Furthermore, the study intends to investigate the difference in the correlation between the two emotional constructs across three years of study and the potential differences related to gender. To accomplish these objectives, the current study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the levels of FLE and FLCA perceived by Polish students majoring in English differ in relation to the year of study?
2. How does the correlation between the reported levels of FLE and FLCA differ in relation to the year of study among Polish students majoring in English?
3. What are the differences related to gender in the perceived levels of FLE and FLCA across three years of learning English among Polish students majoring in English?

By analysing how the levels of both emotional constructs differ among the English major students in different stages of their academic journey, this research aims to discover whether extended exposure and experience related to foreign language learning are associated with reduced anxiety or enhanced enjoyment, or if other trends emerge. Understanding this relationship could provide a valuable insight into foreign language learning, and further extend the body of knowledge associated with emotions in learning a foreign language.

The current study constitutes secondary research, aiming to focus on different aspects of previously collected data (Gopalakrishnan, Ganeshkumar 2013). Therefore, some information about the methods applied in this study are derived from the primary research. The primary research (Łodej, Osmola 2024; Osmola 2023) was designed as a conceptual replication of Fang and Tang's 2021 investigation into the foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) experienced by Chinese university students majoring in English. Conceptual replications are studies that start with a similar research question as the original study but utilise a new research design to validate the original results (Abbuhl 2012). Accordingly, the primary research (Łodej, Osmola 2024; Osmola 2023) examined the levels and causes of FLE and FLCA among Polish students of English. It was a cross-sectional study based on a mixed-method approach, which involved both quantitative and qualitative data. To provide a deeper understanding of the examined phenomena, the study adopted a concurrent nested design, where both types of data were collected simultaneously (Kroll, Neri 2009) using a questionnaire. The first part of the utilised questionnaire collected quantitative data, which was gathered using a bipolar 5-point Likert scale. The quantitative data provided numerical measurements of the participants' perceived levels of FLE and FLCA. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions, which gathered qualitative data on the causes of both emotional constructs. The current study, however, focuses exclusively on the quantitative data collected during the primary research using 40 items rated on a 1–5 Likert scale, as the examination of the underlying causes of FLE and FLCA based on qualitative data obtained through open-ended questions was addressed in the previously published research (*i.e.* Łodej, Osmola 2024).

The items used in the questionnaire were derived from a study conducted by Fang and Tang in 2021. The authors of the research reported that it was developed using two sources. The first source was the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), a questionnaire created in 1986 by Horwitz *et al.* to examine foreign language anxiety in classroom settings. The second source was the Chinese Version of the Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (CFLES), which was based on Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale developed in 2014 by Dewaele and MacIntyre, and then adapted for use in China by Li *et al.* in 2018. The questionnaire in Fang and Tang's study (2021) included a total of 42 items, with 11 items drawn from the CFLES and 31 questions taken from the FLCAS. Consequently, the survey used a combination of established scales to measure both FLE and FLCA levels among the participants. In order to be applicable

in the context of Polish students majoring in English, the items were modified, and a pilot study was conducted. During the pilot study, a preliminary version of the questionnaire was presented to five Polish students of English, who were asked to assess its clarity. The instrument was further revised based on their suggestions. After the amendments, the questionnaire utilised in the current study contained a total of 40 items, of which 10 pertained to the perceived levels of FLE, and 30 examined the levels of FLCA among the participants (see Łodej, Osmoła 2024).

The data was collected during the summer semester 2022/2023. The paper-and-pen version of the questionnaire was distributed to students enrolled in a bachelor's programme in English during their classes at a mid-sized Polish university. Following completion, the participants gave in the completed questionnaires directly to the researcher. In order to create a digital database, the data was then manually transferred into Google Forms to enable easier data management, which was essential for effective and efficient analysis. The respondents were 108 students in total, including 41 (38%) first-year students, 35 (32,4%) second-year students, and 32 (29,6%) third-year students. Of the participants, 76 (70,4%) identified as female, and 32 (29,6%) identified as male. Despite the fact that the questionnaire did not collect information about the age of the respondents, it has been estimated to be between 18 and 25 years old based on the structure of the Polish higher education system.

Results

The study utilised descriptive statistics and Pearson's r correlation coefficient to examine the differences and the relationship between the perceived levels of foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) with reference to participants' year of study and gender. Descriptive statistics measured means for both emotional constructs relative to the year of study (Figure 1), and to the year of study and gender (Figures 2 and 3). Pearson's r correlation coefficient investigated the relationship between FLE and FLCA in relation to the year of study (Table 1). Figure 1 displays the differences in levels of FLE and FLCA across three years of learning English in the academic setting. For the first year, the FLE mean score was 3.46, while the FLCA mean score was 2.97. For the second year, the mean scores were 3.18 for FLE and 2.81 for FLCA. For the third year, the FLE mean score was 3.09, and the FLCA mean score was 2.88. This shows that the reported levels of FLCA were relatively comparable across the years of study, while the reported levels of FLE were considerably lower in relation to the year of study. This is further confirmed by the results of a Student's t -test, which indicate that the difference in the levels of FLE between the first and third years of study is statistically significant ($t(31)=2.76$, $p=.010$), but the difference in the levels of FLCA bears no statistical significance ($t(31)=0.42$, $p=.676$).

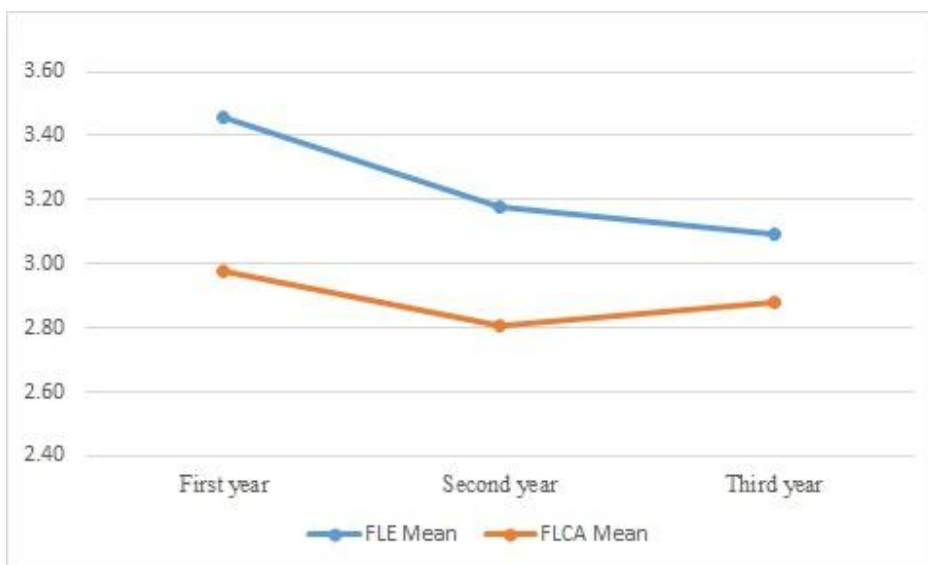


Figure 1. The levels of foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) in relation to the year of study. The author's own elaboration

Pearson's r correlation coefficient measured the relationship between the levels of FLE and FLCA with reference to participants' year of study. The strength of positive and negative correlation, according to Hopkins *et al.* (2009), is very weak for $r = 0.00-0.09$, weak for $r = 0.10-0.29$, moderate for $r = 0.30-0.49$, strong for $r = 0.50-0.69$, very strong for $r = 0.70-0.89$, and perfect for $r = 0.90-1.00$. For the first year of study, the Pearson's r was -0.069 with a p -value $.667$, which indicates a very weak negative correlation. For the second year, the Pearson's r was -0.314 with a p -value $.066$, which denotes moderate negative correlation. For the third year, the Pearson's r was 0.153 with a p -value $.402$, which represents weak positive correlation. None of the correlations is statistically significant at the 0.05 level

Table 1. The correlation between the levels of foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) in relation to the year of study. The author's own elaboration

Correlation between the levels of FLE and FLCA	Pearson's r	p -value	Mean difference
First year	-0.069	$.667$	0.484
Second year	-0.314	$.066$	0.368
Third year	0.153	$.402$	0.217

The mean difference in terms of FLE and FLCA was 0.484 for the first year, 0.368 for the second year, and 0.217 for the third year. This, combined with the mean scores for a given year of study, indicates that the difference between the perceived levels of FLE and FLCA was relatively high for the first year's participants and considerably lower for the third year's participants.

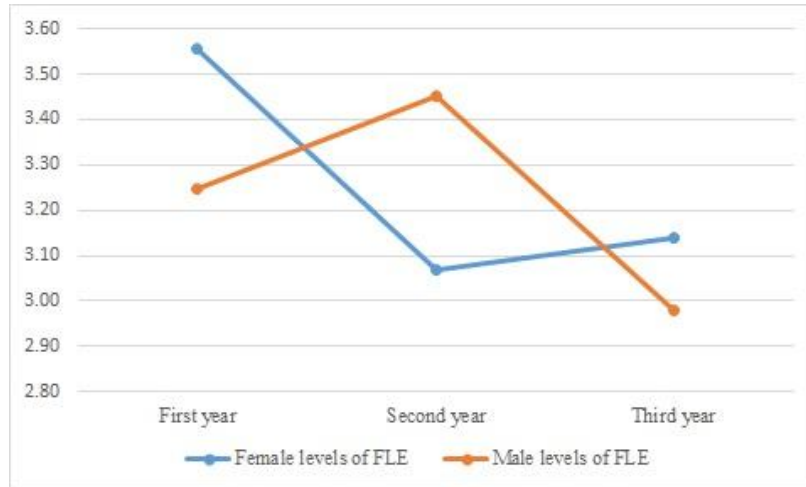


Figure 2. The levels of foreign language enjoyment (FLE) in relation to gender and to the year of study. The author's own elaboration

Descriptive statistics measured means for FLE and FLCA in relation to the year of study and gender. In terms of female participants, the FLE mean was 3.56 for the first year of study, 3.07 for the second year of study, and 3.14 for the third year of study. The FLE mean for male participants male was 3.25 for the first year of study, 3.45 for the second year of study, and 2.98 for the third year of study. This indicates that male participants reported lower levels of FLE in their first and third year of study, while in the second year of study their level of FLE was considerably higher compared to female participants. Additionally, Student's t-tests were conducted to examine the differences in perceived levels of FLE in relation to gender for the first year ($t(12)=1.42$, $p=.179$), second year ($t(9)=-0.98$, $p=.353$), and third year ($t(8)=1.35$, $p=.215$) of study. Despite the observable differences in the reported levels of FLE across female and male participants, none of the t-tests indicated significant results.

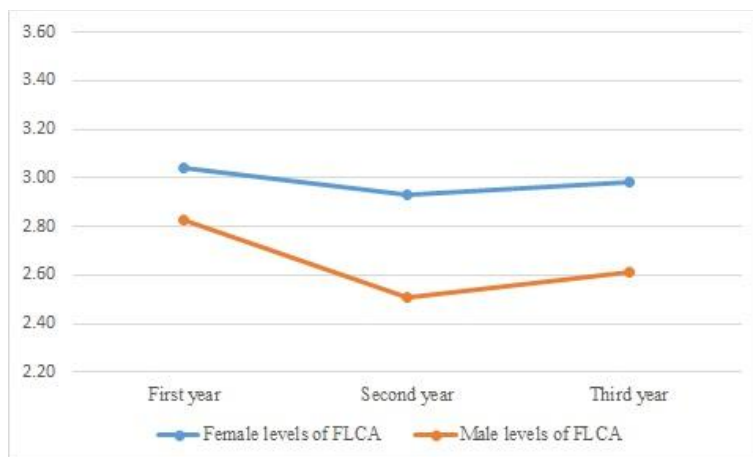


Figure 3. The levels of foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) in relation to gender and to the year of study. The author's own elaboration

The mean of FLCA for female participants was 3.04 for the first year of study, 2.93 for the second year of study, and 2.98 for the third year of study. In terms of male participants, the FLCA mean was 2.83 for the first year of study, 2.51 for the second year of study, and 2.61 for the third year of study. This indicates that the male participants generally reported considerably lower levels of FLCA in each of the three years of study. In order to further examine the differences in perceived levels of FLCA in relation to gender, Student's t-tests were conducted for the first year ($t(12)=2.39, p=.034$), second year ($t(9)=2.22, p=.054$), and third year ($t(8)=1.35, p=.215$) of study. The t-tests indicated that the difference was significant only in the first year, while no significant differences were found in the second and third years.

Conclusion

The study examined how the perceived levels of foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) differ in relation to the year of study among Polish students majoring in English, along with potential differences in their relationship across three years of study, and the gender-related differences connected to the two emotional constructs. The findings of the study indicate that the participants' levels of FLE were significantly lower in the third year compared to the first year of study. In contrast, the levels of FLCA appeared to be relatively comparable, with no statistically significant difference between the first and third years of study. This partially aligns with the findings of Wu (2024a) which demonstrated that the participants' level of FLE decreased significantly from undergraduate to master's level, while the level of FLCA increased, but remained comparatively consistent. Additionally, the findings of the current study showed that the relationship between FLE and FLCA across three years of study is inconsistent, varying from a weak negative correlation in the first year of study, through moderate negative correlation in the second year of study, to a weak positive correlation in the third year of study. However, none of them is statistically significant, which altogether suggests that both emotional constructs operate independently, confirming the thesis that FLE and FLCA are relatively separate dimensions (Dewaele, MacIntyre 2019). In terms of the impact of gender on FLE and FLCA, the findings of the current study demonstrated that the female participants generally reported higher levels of FLCA than male participants, but the difference was significant only in the first year of study. Furthermore, the levels of FLE varied in relation to the year of study among the participants of both genders, and no statistical difference was found in any of the three years. This partially corresponds to the findings of the studies of Dewaele and MacIntyre (2019) and Wu (2024b), where female participants reported higher levels of FLCA than male participants, but the respondents' gender seemed to have no significant effect on the levels of FLE.

The abovementioned results have several implications for future research. Firstly, as both FLE and FLCA have been proven to have a significant impact on students' academic achievement (Aida 1994; Jin, Zhang 2021), the significantly lower levels of FLE and relatively comparable levels of FLCA in relation to the year of study appear to be alarming. Consequently, it seems essential to thoroughly investigate the causes behind those trends and search for solutions to mitigate the negative relationship between the year of study and perceived levels of FLE, as well as to decrease FLCA levels throughout the course of study. Moreover, since the study was carried out on a limited number of participants from a single university, it

could be valuable to expand the scope of research to include multiple universities in Poland. To further explore gender differences in experiencing the two emotional constructs, future research might also examine groups with a more balanced gender distribution. Additionally, the investigation of whether the findings presented in the current study are consistent among students from diverse sociocultural backgrounds could offer meaningful insight. Overall, further examination of the dynamics of FLE and FLCA during the course of study and its underlying causes may provide solutions for enhancing students' motivation and willingness to learn and could positively contribute to mitigating drop-out rates in higher education.

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