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EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL FRAMEWORK LINKING ANXIETY, ENJOYMENT, AND WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE

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Abstract

The contemporary study of foreign language learning increasingly recognizes that successful communication depends not only on linguistic knowledge but also on learners' capacity to understand, regulate, and use emotions productively. This article examines the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in foreign language education and develops an integrative framework connecting EI with foreign language anxiety (FLA), foreign language enjoyment (FLE), willingness to communicate (WTC), teacher support, and AI-mediated practice. The article is based on an integrative review of theoretical and empirical literature, with particular attention to recent systematic reviews, meta-analytic evidence, and studies published in 2024–2026.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence; foreign language learning; EFL; foreign language anxiety; foreign language enjoyment; willingness to communicate; communicative competence; artificial intelligence; positive psychology; language education.

Introduction

The contemporary study of foreign language learning increasingly recognizes that successful communication depends not only on linguistic knowledge but also on learners' capacity to understand, regulate, and use emotions productively. This article examines the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in foreign language education and develops an integrative framework connecting

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EI with foreign language anxiety (FLA), foreign language enjoyment (FLE), willingness to communicate (WTC), teacher support, and AI-mediated practice. The article is based on an integrative review of theoretical and empirical literature, with particular attention to recent systematic reviews, meta-analytic evidence, and studies published in 2024–2026.

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Introduction

Foreign language education has traditionally been described in terms of linguistic input, cognitive processing, practice, and measurable proficiency. However, the communicative use of a foreign language is inherently emotional and interpersonal. Learners must tolerate uncertainty, respond to corrective feedback, manage embarrassment, interpret other people’s intentions, maintain motivation after unsuccessful performance, and decide whether to speak when linguistic resources are incomplete. Consequently, the psychological conditions under which language knowledge is activated have become an important area of research in second- and foreign-language acquisition.

Emotional intelligence provides a useful construct for explaining this interface between emotion and language learning. In the classical ability model, emotional intelligence concerns the perception, understanding, use, and regulation of emotion (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). Broader mixed and trait approaches additionally emphasize self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social functioning. In language classrooms, these resources can affect how learners interpret mistakes, respond to evaluation, cooperate with peers, cope with anxiety, and persist in communicative tasks.

The relevance of EI has become particularly visible in the positive-psychology turn in language education. Research has increasingly moved from a predominantly anxiety-oriented perspective toward a more balanced examination of anxiety, enjoyment, engagement, resilience, confidence, and

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willingness to communicate. Recent evidence supports this shift. A 2025 meta-analysis synthesizing 47 independent studies and 63 effect sizes found a positive relationship between EI and language achievement, including $r = .24$ for subjective achievement and $r = .41$ for objective achievement. The authors also reported meaningful moderation by educational level, target language, language skill, and publication year (Peng & Li, 2025).

At the same time, a 2026 systematic review of 121 empirical studies identified a strong concentration of research on speaking and affective variables, with 78% of studies using survey designs and only a small proportion using qualitative approaches. The review also found that most EI measures were self-report instruments and that research remained geographically concentrated, particularly in Iran and China. These patterns indicate that the field has accumulated substantial correlational evidence but still needs more longitudinal, experimental, mixed-method, and context-sensitive research. The current article therefore addresses a timely problem: how can emotional intelligence be conceptualized not as an isolated personality characteristic, but as part of a dynamic educational system in which teacher support, learner emotions, communication confidence, and emerging AI-mediated language practice interact? The purpose is to synthesize current evidence and propose a practical conceptual framework for emotionally responsive foreign-language education. EI can be interpreted through several complementary traditions. The ability model treats EI as a set of emotion-related cognitive abilities; trait approaches conceptualize emotional self-perceptions as relatively stable dispositions; and mixed models combine emotional abilities with motivational and interpersonal characteristics. These distinctions matter methodologically because different instruments may measure substantially different constructs. Consequently, an observed relationship between “EI” and language performance should not automatically be interpreted as evidence for a single homogeneous psychological capacity. For language learners, four functions are particularly relevant. First, emotional perception can help learners identify anxiety, frustration, enthusiasm, or confidence before these states become behaviorally disruptive. Second, emotional understanding can help learners interpret why a communicative situation feels threatening or rewarding. Third, emotion

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regulation can support persistence and strategic coping after mistakes. Fourth, interpersonal emotional competence can facilitate empathy, turn-taking, conflict management, and adaptation to interlocutors. These functions are directly connected with communicative language use, where success requires more than grammatical knowledge.

Foreign language anxiety is one of the most established affective variables in language education. Anxiety can reduce attention, increase avoidance, and make learners less willing to participate in communicative activities. In contrast, foreign language enjoyment represents a positive emotional experience associated with interest, social connection, achievement, and perceived progress. Contemporary positive-psychology research emphasizes that enjoyment and anxiety are not simply opposite ends of one continuum; learners can experience both simultaneously.

Recent studies increasingly examine the mechanisms connecting positive emotion to communication. For example, a 2024 study with 441 Chinese undergraduates reported that foreign language enjoyment positively predicted willingness to communicate through motivation and communication confidence. Another experience-sampling study involving 9 teachers and 162 students found dynamic reciprocal relationships among teacher enjoyment, learner enjoyment, and L2 willingness to communicate. These findings suggest that the emotional climate of a language classroom is socially distributed rather than produced solely inside individual learners.

Willingness to communicate (WTC) is especially important because it connects psychological resources with actual communicative behavior. A learner may possess sufficient vocabulary and grammar but still remain silent because of anxiety, low confidence, fear of negative evaluation, or lack of perceived interpersonal safety. Conversely, a learner with imperfect linguistic resources may communicate actively when the classroom environment supports experimentation and psychological safety.

Recent evidence strengthens the relevance of EI for WTC. A 2026 study of 412 Chinese EFL college students found that EI positively predicted willingness to communicate and that foreign language anxiety and in-class WTC jointly mediated the relationship between EI and willingness to communicate beyond

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the classroom. Another 2026 study with 352 university students found that teacher support predicted WTC partly through EI and foreign language enjoyment, with EI and enjoyment operating as chain mediators. Together, these findings point toward a multilevel process rather than a simple EI-to-proficiency relationship.

This article uses an integrative literature-review design rather than presenting new empirical participant data. The synthesis prioritizes peer-reviewed theoretical, empirical, systematic-review, and meta-analytic publications addressing emotional intelligence, foreign language learning, anxiety, enjoyment, willingness to communicate, classroom support, and AI-mediated language practice. Particular attention is given to research published from 2024 through 2026 because these studies reflect the current direction of the field. The review was organized around five analytical dimensions: (1) the conceptualization and measurement of EI; (2) the relationship between EI and language achievement; (3) affective mechanisms involving anxiety and enjoyment; (4) communication-related outcomes, especially WTC; and (5) emerging technological environments that may alter emotional conditions of practice. This structure permits comparison of evidence from correlational, intervention, experience-sampling, structural-equation, systematic-review, and meta-analytic studies without treating them as statistically interchangeable.

A major methodological implication of the recent literature is the need to distinguish association from causation. Survey-based correlations can identify relationships but cannot demonstrate that increasing EI will necessarily increase proficiency. Intervention studies, longitudinal designs, repeated-measures approaches, and mixed methods are therefore especially valuable for the next generation of research.

The recent evidence base demonstrates substantial growth in the field. The 2026 systematic review by Deepika and Mary Jennifer synthesized 121 empirical studies of EI and ESL/EFL learning. Approximately 78% were survey-based, 20% were experimental/intervention studies, and 2% were exclusively qualitative. The same review reported that EI has been examined most frequently in relation to speaking and affective variables such as anxiety and enjoyment. It

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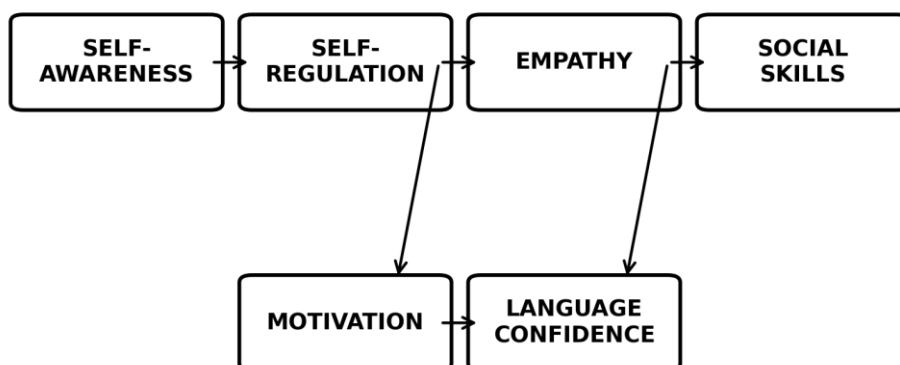
also identified a relatively small body of research involving school students, listening, environmental factors, and qualitative inquiry.

Research characteristic	Recent evidence	Interpretation	Priority for future research
Empirical studies reviewed	121 studies	Substantial but heterogeneous evidence base	Replicate across regions and age groups
Survey designs	78%	Correlational evidence dominates	Increase longitudinal and experimental designs
Experimental/intervention studies	20%	Growing evidence for trainable EI-related outcomes	Test duration and transfer effects
Qualitative-only studies	2%	Learner experience remains underexplored	Use interviews, diaries and classroom observation
Primary skill focus	Speaking	EI is closely linked to communicative behavior	Expand to listening, reading and writing
Common affective variables	Anxiety, enjoyment	Positive and negative emotions are central	Model emotion dynamics jointly
EI measurement	Predominantly self-report	Efficient but vulnerable to common-method bias	Combine self-report, performance and behavioral measures

The central proposition of this article is that EI should be positioned as a psychological resource that helps learners convert emotional information into adaptive learning behavior. The proposed mechanism is not linear. Instead, EI may influence language learning through several mutually reinforcing pathways. A learner with stronger emotion-recognition skills may notice rising anxiety; stronger regulation may prevent that anxiety from triggering avoidance; stronger empathy may facilitate interaction; and stronger motivational regulation may sustain practice. Repeated successful interaction can then increase confidence and enjoyment, creating conditions for further communication.

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Emotional Intelligence as a Learning Resource



Supports emotion regulation • interpersonal interaction • persistence • communicative confidence

Figure 1. Infographic of the principal EI resources relevant to foreign-language learning.

The infographic highlights a distinction that is important for pedagogy: EI should not be taught as an abstract “soft skill” detached from language. Self-awareness can be embedded in reflection after speaking tasks; self-regulation can be practiced through anxiety-management routines; empathy can be developed through perspective-taking and intercultural activities; and social skills can be trained through collaborative communicative tasks. In this way, emotional development and language development can occur within the same instructional activity.

Teachers should explicitly incorporate emotional awareness into communicative instruction. Before a speaking task, learners can identify anticipated emotions and predict possible coping responses. After the task, they can evaluate which strategies were effective. Such routines transform emotional regulation from an implicit expectation into a teachable learning process. Classroom tasks should also include graduated communicative risk. Learners may begin with individual rehearsal, continue with pair interaction, move to small-group communication, and finally perform before the whole class. This progression can provide

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repeated experiences of manageable success. The objective is not to eliminate anxiety completely but to prevent anxiety from becoming an avoidance trigger. Teacher preparation programs should develop teachers' own emotional competencies alongside instructional techniques. A teacher who can recognize classroom tension, regulate responses to learner mistakes, communicate empathy, and create psychologically safe interaction is better positioned to support WTC and positive classroom emotions. Recent experience-sampling evidence showing reciprocal relationships between teacher enjoyment and learner enjoyment reinforces the importance of teacher emotional functioning. Fourth, future research should investigate all four language skills rather than concentrating disproportionately on speaking. Fifth, studies should examine whether EI operates differently across proficiency levels, target languages, cultural contexts, and learning modalities. Sixth, AI-mediated learning should be examined not only for achievement but also for emotional regulation, confidence, autonomy, and the transfer of communication from AI environments to human interaction.

A particularly promising direction is the use of structural equation modeling and longitudinal mediation models to test pathways such as teacher support → EI → enjoyment/anxiety → WTC → communicative performance. Such models should be complemented by qualitative evidence that explains how learners actually experience these processes. The objective is to avoid reducing emotional intelligence to a single score and instead understand it as a dynamic resource operating within a social learning ecology.

The reviewed evidence supports a multidimensional understanding of foreign language learning. Linguistic competence remains indispensable, but the ability to use linguistic knowledge depends partly on whether learners are prepared to enter communicative situations, tolerate uncertainty, recover from mistakes, and interact effectively with others. EI is relevant precisely because it addresses these psychological processes.

At the same time, caution is necessary. The positive relationship between EI and language outcomes should not be interpreted as proof that EI alone determines proficiency. The recent literature is methodologically heterogeneous, and the dominance of self-report surveys creates potential common-method bias. In

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addition, different EI models and instruments are not interchangeable. Future studies should clearly identify whether they investigate ability EI, trait EI, or mixed emotional-social competencies.

Emotional intelligence has become an increasingly important construct in contemporary foreign language education because it connects cognitive language resources with the emotional and interpersonal conditions required for communication. Recent meta-analytic and systematic-review evidence demonstrates a positive relationship between EI and language achievement and shows that the research field has expanded rapidly, particularly around speaking, anxiety, enjoyment, and willingness to communicate.

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