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How Emotional Intelligence Shapes Anxiety and Enjoyment in Learning English: Insights from Saudi University Students

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the dynamic interaction among Trait Emotional Intelligence (trait EI), Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), and Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) among Saudi university students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), with a particular focus on classroom speaking activities. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 14 second-year EFL learners at Al Jouf University, the research investigates how different dimensions of trait EI—namely self-control, emotionality, well-being, and sociability—influence students’ emotional responses during oral communication tasks. The findings reveal that students with higher levels of self-control, sociability, and well-being tend to experience lower anxiety and greater enjoyment, facilitating active classroom participation and communicative confidence. While FLA and FLE often coexist, learners with strong emotional competencies navigate between these states more effectively. Self-control emerged as the most influential EI dimension in regulating speaking-related stress. This study underscores the importance of integrating emotional intelligence training and social-emotional learning (SEL) into EFL pedagogy to promote emotional resilience and enhance language learning outcomes. By highlighting learners’ emotional experiences in speaking activities, the study provides pedagogical implications for fostering supportive classroom environments that reduce anxiety and enhance enjoyment. It further suggests that teacher awareness of students’ emotional profiles can inform more adaptive instructional practices. Ultimately, the research contributes to the broader understanding of affective

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factors in SLA, particularly within culturally specific educational settings like Saudi Arabia, and offers valuable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to optimize language learning experiences and outcomes.

Keywords: Trait Emotional Intelligence; Foreign Language Anxiety; Foreign Language Enjoyment; EFL; Saudi University Students; Speaking Activities

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the role of emotions in second language acquisition (SLA), largely influenced by the “affective turn” in the field^[1,2]. This shift has expanded the focus beyond predominantly negative emotions, such as foreign language anxiety (FLA), to encompass a more comprehensive perspective that includes both positive and negative emotional experiences. Among the key emotional constructs studied are Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) and FLA, which, while related, have been shown to be distinct yet interrelated dimensions that correlate differently with various learner variables^[3,4]. In addition, trait emotional intelligence (trait EI)—the self-perceived ability to recognize, process, and manage emotional information—has emerged as a significant factor influencing language learning outcomes^[5]. Placing FLE and FLA within the broader framework of trait EI allows for a deeper exploration of how emotional traits influence language learning, providing insights into their interrelationships and combined effects. This line of inquiry holds valuable theoretical and practical implications, as it supports a better understanding of learners’ emotional experiences and informs strategies for fostering a supportive emotional environment in language classrooms^[6,7]. Chen et al. found that among Chinese post-graduate EFL learners, trait EI was significantly correlated with both FLA and FLE, but demonstrated a stronger predictive relationship with FLA^[8]. Their findings offer a valuable framework for examining the emotional dynamics involved in second language acquisition. However, similar investigations within the Saudi Arabian context remain limited, despite the increasing emphasis on English language proficiency and the emotional challenges associated with oral communication in EFL classrooms. Building upon the work of Chen et al.^[8], the present study aims to replicate and extend their findings by examining the relationships among trait EI, FLA, and FLE in Saudi university EFL students. Particular attention is given to speaking activities, which are

widely recognized as a primary source of language learning anxiety.

Although international studies, such as Chen et al.^[8], have examined the relationships among trait EI, FLA, and FLE, these investigations have largely been conducted in non-Saudi contexts and relied predominantly on quantitative survey methods. Research exploring these constructs together within the Saudi EFL environment remains scarce, particularly in relation to speaking activities. This study addresses this gap by adopting a qualitative interpretative paradigm to capture the nuanced, lived emotional experiences of Saudi university students in speaking classrooms. To the best of the researcher’s knowledge, it is the first qualitative study in the Saudi context to integrate EI, FLA, and FLE within the broader frameworks of positive psychology and the affective turn in SLA. The originality of the study lies in its culturally specific factors, such as gender-segregated learning environments and the national emphasis on communicative competence—and in its use of in-depth, interview-based thematic analysis to uncover learners’ coping strategies and emotional regulation processes. This contextual and methodological distinctiveness allows the study to generate insights that not only advance theoretical understanding but also offer practical implications for pedagogy, institutional policy, and curriculum design in EFL education.

2. Aims and Objectives

The foremost objective of this research endeavor is to investigate the emotional framework of Saudi university students engaged in the acquisition of EFL, with a particular emphasis on the significance of trait EI in relation to FLA and FLE. More specifically, the inquiry aims to elucidate how trait EI impacts students’ emotional reactions during verbal communication activities, which are extensively acknowledged as emotionally charged and anxiety-provoking components of the language learning experience. To fulfill this objective, the study delineates the subsequent aims: a)

to analyze the perceived degrees of trait EI, FLA, and FLE among second-year Saudi university EFL students, b) to investigate the interrelations between trait EI, FLA, and FLE as experienced by learners within the educational environment, c) to examine the predictive capacity of trait EI in determining the levels of FLA and FLE, particularly within the context of speaking activities in the classroom, d) to ascertain which dimensions of trait EI (well-being, emotionality, self-control, sociability) students regard as most significant in shaping their emotional experiences during oral communication tasks. The following research questions will be explored in this study:

1. What are the self-perceived levels of trait EI, FLA, and FLE among Saudi university EFL students?
2. What self-perceived connections exist between EI, FLA, and FLE?
3. What are Saudi university EFL students' perceptions of how EI predicts or shapes FLA and FLE in the Saudi EFL speaking classroom context?
4. Which dimensions of EI (well-being, emotionality, self-control, sociability) are perceived by students as being most influential in their emotional experiences during speaking activities?

Significance of the Study

Grounded in the frameworks of positive psychology and the affective turn in second language acquisition, this study offers both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of EFL education. Theoretically, it extends current scholarship by examining the interplay between trait EI, FLA, and FLE within the under-researched Saudi higher education context, where socio-cultural and institutional factors—such as gender-segregated classrooms, high-stakes English proficiency requirements, and national educational reforms—shape learners' emotional experiences. By situating the findings within these broader frameworks, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how emotional competencies influence language learning in culturally specific environments.

Practically, the study provides concrete implications for multiple stakeholders. For EFL teachers, the findings underscore the importance of integrating EI-focused strategies—such as role-play, collaborative speaking tasks, and reflective

emotional journals—into classroom practice to enhance self-control, well-being, and sociability, thereby reducing anxiety and fostering enjoyment. For educational administrators, the research highlights the value of professional development programs that can equip teachers with practical tools to address students' emotional needs. It also underlines the importance of creating policies that promote emotionally supportive learning environments. At the policy-making level, incorporating EI competencies into national EFL curricula can facilitate a more holistic approach to language education, addressing both cognitive and affective dimensions. Collectively, these contributions aim to cultivate more resilient, confident, and communicatively competent learners, ultimately enhancing speaking performance and engagement in Saudi EFL classrooms.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Studies on Foreign Language Anxiety and Enjoyment

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) and Foreign language enjoyment (FLE) include crucial emotional elements that have a significant effect on language acquisition, as shown by many empirical studies. These studies revealed that FLE generally has an affirmative influence on augmenting motivation, language learning, engagement and positive perceptions toward both language and educators, whereas FLA can obstruct these aspects in a negative way by affecting mental well-being and learning and educational outcomes^[9,10]. For example, students from a Japanese university indicated a higher tendency for enjoyment than anxiety in English classes in terms of positive attitudes and proactive language use, in contrast with anxiety which resulted from challenges in communication and the presence of unfamiliar interlocutors^[11]. In a similar vein, the enjoyment experienced by Chinese students was elevated by engaging content and thoughtfully structured activities, while anxiety was provoked by the demands of public speaking and peer expectations^[12]. Conversely, Indian ESL learners exhibited lower levels of anxiety relative to their counterparts in other Asian countries, with enjoyment being nurtured by reverence for proficient language users and an encouraging educational atmosphere^[13].

The relationship between FLE and FLA is intricate and contingent upon context, with research indicating that these

emotional states may oscillate in their interrelation, shaped by individual characteristics and external influences such as pedagogical approaches and classroom environments^[14]. Furthermore, cultural contexts play a significant role in shaping these emotional experiences; for instance, in the case of Turkish learners, external factors such as instructional guidance and institutional support appear to exert a more pronounced effect on enjoyment than internal factors^[15]. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the significance of social-emotional learning; however, in its aftermath, cognitive outcomes have predominantly eclipsed the affective dimension of learning, notwithstanding evidence suggesting that positive emotions, including enjoyment, contribute to improved educational outcomes^[16]. Consequently, cultivating a nurturing and enjoyable classroom atmosphere, emphasizing the affective experiences of students, and offering social support are vital strategies for alleviating anxiety and fostering enjoyment within the context of language education^[17]. These findings highlight the imperative for educators to harmonize these emotional facets to enhance language learning outcomes across varying cultural and educational landscapes.

3.2. Studies on Emotional Intelligence in SLA

The significance of EI in the domain of SLA, particularly concerning the acquisition of English, has been examined through diverse lenses, elucidating both its prospective advantages and constraints. Numerous investigations underscore a positive relationship between EI and outcomes in language learning. For example, research conducted with Vietnamese students majoring in English revealed that EI exerts a considerable influence on motivation, self-assurance, and interpersonal capabilities, which are indispensable for proficient language acquisition^[18]. In a similar vein, a study performed in a Spanish high school accentuated the critical role of EI in cultivating a comprehensive educational experience, positing that the awareness and regulation of emotions can augment language learning^[19]. Furthermore, an inquiry into productive language competencies, including speaking and writing, illustrated a robust correlation between EI and language proficiency, suggesting that emotional competencies may serve as predictors of success in these domains^[20].

Nonetheless, not all empirical findings align consistently. Investigations concerning Iranian EFL learners indi-

cated the absence of a significant correlation between EI and interlanguage pragmatic competence or overall English proficiency, implying that EI may not serve as a dependable predictor across all contexts^[21]. Additionally, a study focusing on secondary school students engaged in English language learning revealed the dual nature of emotional influence, wherein positive emotions such as hope were predominant in speaking and listening proficiency, while negative emotions like anxiety also exerted an influence, thereby highlighting the intricate interplay of emotions in the process of language acquisition^[22]. A critical review of emotional factors in SLA from the vantage point of positive psychology further posits that while EI is an integral component, the field necessitates the implementation of more innovative research methodologies and tools to comprehensively elucidate its impact^[23]. In summary, while EI appears to be a beneficial element in the enhancement of language learning, its influence may fluctuate depending on contextual variables and the specific language skills under development. Consequently, educators are urged to incorporate EI into language learning curricula to foster supportive environments that cater to both linguistic and emotional requirements^[18–20,22,24].

3.3. Rationale of the Study

In recent years, the affective facets of SLA have attracted heightened scholarly scrutiny, particularly in light of the emergence of the “affective turn” within the domain of applied linguistics^[1,2]. This paradigm shift has underscored the significance of emotions in the language learning process, transitioning the emphasis from predominantly negative emotional experiences—such as FLA—to include positive emotional experiences like FLE. Although these two emotional states are conceptually differentiated, empirical evidence indicates their interconnections and the distinct ways they affect learner outcomes^[3,4].

Concurrently with this emotional reorientation, trait EI—defined as the self-perceived capacity to identify, comprehend, and regulate emotions—has surfaced as a vital individual difference variable in SLA research. Trait EI has been empirically linked to both FLE and FLA, and it is hypothesized that it assumes a regulatory function in shaping learners’ emotional responses throughout the language acquisition process^[5,8]. Recent empirical investigations illustrate that trait EI can serve as a significant predictor of both en-

joyment and anxiety within foreign language classrooms, particularly in the context of speaking tasks^[8].

Notwithstanding the burgeoning international scholarship, there is a conspicuous lack of research examining the interaction between trait EI, FLA, and FLE within the Saudi EFL milieu. This deficiency is particularly pertinent given the increasing prioritization of communicative competence and oral proficiency in Saudi higher education institutions, where speaking exercises frequently elicit anxiety among students. Furthermore, the emotional experiences of Saudi learners in English language classrooms may be influenced by distinct cultural, pedagogical, and institutional dynamics that necessitate localized inquiry.

The present study, therefore, aspires to replicate and expand upon previous international research by scrutinizing the interrelationships among trait EI, FLA, and FLE in Saudi EFL university students, with a concentrated emphasis on the speaking classroom environment. It also endeavors to investigate how the four dimensions of trait EI (well-being, emotionality, self-control, and sociability) correlate with learners' emotional responses during oral communication activities. By achieving these aims, this study seeks to contribute both theoretically and practically: it will enhance our comprehension of emotion-driven individual differences in SLA and yield implications for the design of emotionally supportive language learning environments specifically tailored for Saudi learners.

4. Methodology, Research Design, and Paradigm

This scholarly investigation utilized a qualitative research framework grounded within the interpretative paradigm, which aims to determine the significances individuals derive from their lived experiences within particular contexts^[25,26]. The interpretative approach was deemed suitable for this inquiry as it facilitates a comprehensive examination of students' emotional experiences, specifically the interrelationships among trait EI, FLA, and FLE within the EFL speaking environment. The interpretative paradigm posits that reality is socially constructed and multifaceted, thereby underscoring the significance of participants' subjective interpretations. In this investigation, meaning is co-created between the researcher and participants through dialogic

engagement^[27].

Although the relational nature of the study variables—trait EI, FLA, and FLE—could also be investigated using a quantitative approach, this research was intentionally situated within a qualitative interpretative paradigm to enable an in-depth exploration of participants' lived emotional experiences during speaking activities. The qualitative design was selected to uncover the nuanced, contextually embedded perceptions, coping strategies, and emotional dynamics that might be overlooked in purely quantitative analyses. While quantitative methods could measure the extent of relationships, the present approach aimed to capture the complexity and richness of learners' self-reported experiences in the Saudi EFL classroom context. Accordingly, the research questions were designed to emphasize exploration and description rather than statistical testing, with a focus on how participants perceive and articulate the interplay between EI, FLA, and FLE. Furthermore, the thematic analysis process was reinforced by explicitly describing how each theme and sub-theme emerged from the interview data and by clearly linking these themes to representative participant quotations. This enhanced transparency ensures that the conclusions drawn about the influence of EI on FLA and FLE are firmly grounded in the evidence. Finally, it is acknowledged that future research could adopt a mixed-methods or quantitative approach to complement and extend the findings of this qualitative investigation.

4.1. Participants

Participants were intentionally selected to ensure the collection of rich, information-laden data^[28]. The sample comprised 14 participants (7 males and 7 females) who were second-year undergraduate students enrolled in the English Department at Al Jouf University, Saudi Arabia. All participants were native speakers of Arabic and had been learning English as a foreign language. They were within the age range of 19 to 21 years old and had engaged in English studies since approximately the age of ten, commencing in Grade 4 of primary education. At the time of data collection, they possessed over a decade of experience in learning English. The rationale for including both males and females participants was to capture a diverse array of emotional perspectives and to investigate potential gender-related disparities in emotional responses during speaking tasks. Purposeful

sampling was conducted by the principle of maximum variation to bolster the transferability of the findings^[29]. Potential participants were informed about the study through in-class announcements and email invitations. Those who expressed interest received an information sheet and consent form detailing the study's purpose, procedures, confidentiality, and voluntary nature. All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation. Maximum variation was sought in gender, academic performance, and self-reported confidence in speaking English to capture a diversity of emotional experiences.

4.2. Data Collection Tool

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, a methodology extensively employed in qualitative research to explore participants' perspectives while preserving both flexibility and depth^[30]. Semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to adhere to a guided protocol while concurrently modifying inquiries based on participant responses, thereby fostering the emergence of rich, contextualized data^[31]. An interview guide was meticulously constructed, based on the research inquiries, to encompass the following themes:

- Students' self-assessments of their emotional intelligence.
- Experiences of anxiety encountered during English-speaking tasks.
- Occurrences of enjoyment within classroom speaking contexts.

Each interview spanned approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted in a tranquil, private environment to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality. All interviews were audio-recorded with prior consent and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

5. Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews underwent thematic analysis, a versatile and extensively applied methodology for recognizing, scrutinizing, and interpreting patterns of significance within qualitative data^[32]. This methodological choice was fitting for the present investigation as it permitted the researcher to

delve deeply into the emotional experiences of Saudi EFL students, with particular emphasis on the interplay between trait EI, FLA, and FLE within the context of speaking in the classroom.

5.1. Analytical Procedure

The analytical process adhered to Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework for thematic analysis^[32]:

1. Familiarization with the Data: All audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher engaged in multiple readings of the transcripts to achieve immersion in the data and to initiate the documentation of initial insights and potential patterns.
2. Generating Initial Codes: Utilizing NVivo 12 software, open coding was performed on the transcripts. This process entailed labeling significant statements and segments of text that encapsulated meaningful characteristics of the participants' emotional experiences during English speaking activities.
3. Searching for Themes: The codes were assessed and categorized into broader classifications and prospective themes grounded in conceptual similarities and interrelations. These themes were intended to encapsulate recurrent ideas and patterns throughout the dataset pertaining to emotional intelligence, anxiety, and enjoyment.
4. Reviewing Themes: The preliminary themes were evaluated against the complete dataset to verify their accurate representation of the participants' perspectives and experiences. Some themes underwent refinement, merging, or division to more aptly reflect the data.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Upon finalization, each theme was distinctly defined and designated a name. Sub-themes were also recognized to encapsulate more nuanced dimensions of the data. Clear definitions were formulated to ensure coherence and distinctiveness among the themes.
6. Producing the Report: The concluding phase involved the selection of vivid and representative quotations from participants to exemplify each theme and substantiate the interpretations. These themes were subsequently discussed in relation to the research queries and pertinent literature.

5.2. Trustworthiness of Analysis

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis^[29], several strategies were implemented: (a) Triangulation through the comparison of data across participants to discern consistent themes, (b) Peer debriefing, wherein the coding and thematic framework were evaluated by a fellow researcher to mitigate bias, (c) Thick description was employed in reporting participants' quotations and experiences to augment transferability, (d) The application of NVivo software enhanced the analytical rigor by systematically organizing the data, facilitating efficient retrieval of coded segments, and supporting transparency throughout the analysis process.

6. Findings

The thematic analysis revealed four themes related to the research focus arising from the interviews with 14 participants. These themes were the levels of trait EI, FLA, and FLE among Saudi EFL students; the nature of the relationship between EI, FLA, and FLE; the predictive role of trait EI on FLA and FLE; and the influential dimensions of trait EI in speaking activities.

6.1. Levels of Trait EI, FLA, and FLE among Saudi EFL Students

The interviews revealed a spectrum of themes that were both diverse and recurrent regarding the Saudi students' emotional and psychological experiences. These findings provide an enhanced comprehension of students' self-reported levels of trait EI, FLA, and FLE within classroom settings, particularly during speaking exercises.

6.1.1. Moderate to High Emotional Awareness and Self-Regulation

The findings revealed that a majority of the interviewed students described themselves as having a significant degree of emotional awareness, coupled with the capacity to reflect upon and regulate their emotions to varying extents. Numerous participants recounted instances in which they consciously tried to manage their anxiety or maintain a positive outlook during educational activities. One student articulated, "I endeavor to remain composed when I experience stress. I acknowledge that it is a natural part of the learning process to feel anxious occasionally" (S2). In addition,

they tend to use techniques such as positive self-talk and stress management, which may facilitate better classroom engagement, alleviate frustration and help prevent disengagement during language tasks. For example, one student shared a strategy of positive self-talk for oral tasks: "when I feel very nervous before speaking, I remind myself: 'YOU ARE PRACTICING this, you can do it, you can do it.' It helps me calm down and be more focused" (S4). In terms of empathy and group dynamics, S13 indicated that 'I noticed my classmate was shy during group work, I asked her to share her ideas first, so she felt included. In that way, we all learned better.' For managing exam stress constructively, S7 mentioned that 'before our speaking test, I tried to take a few deep breaths and visualized a successful presentation. It made me less anxious and more focused.' However, two out of fourteen students (S1, S9) showed they have low emotional intelligence. This is evident in S9's inability to handle mistakes: 'when I make a mistake, I just want to stop talking. I feel embarrassed and think everyone is judging me.' In the case of S1, there is even avoidance of language interaction: 'I always skip the speaking part, I get too stressed, and I don't want to be laughed at'. However, overall the students' reflections indicate a self-perceived level of trait EI that is predominantly moderate to high, especially in terms of emotional awareness and self-regulation. Students with high EI use coping strategies and show social awareness that boosts participation and enjoyment. Those with low EI often experience overwhelming anxiety and disengage from learning opportunities.

6.1.2. Low EI and Withdrawal from Speaking

FLA was frequently reported, particularly concerning speaking in front of classmates. The majority of students acknowledged experiencing tension, fear of making errors, or concerns about being evaluated. One student (S3) commented that 'even when I am aware of what to articulate, I feel anxious when everyone's gaze is upon me. My heart races, and I sometimes forget my words.' Although anxiety was prevalent, its intensity was found to fluctuate based on the classroom dynamics, the nature of the tasks, and individual self-assurance. Also, some students (S1, S12, S8, S3, and S9) indicated that their anxiety increased during their performance of oral presentations, finding it difficult to respond under pressure and experienced task-related anxiety fluctuations. For example:

“I feel confident when practicing at home, but the moment I stand in front of my classmates, my hands tremble. I forget my vocabulary and can’t organize my ideas.” (S1)

“When the teacher asks a question, I panic. Even if I know the answer, I can’t speak clearly. The pressure makes my mind go blank.” (S8)

“I feel more relaxed in pair work, but when it’s a formal speech or debate, I get nervous. I wish we had more informal speaking chances to build confidence.” (S9)

6.1.3. Experiences of FLE in the Classroom

In spite of the presence of anxiety, a significant number of students also expressed enjoyment in their English classes, especially in environments characterized by support. Some students articulated feelings of pride, exhilaration, and personal development during participation in interactive or stimulating tasks. One student (S5) remarked, ‘I experience happiness when I can convey my thoughts in English, particularly when the instructor encourages us. It instills a sense of well-being in me.’ In addition, some students expressed their views that their enjoyment happened because of their supportive teacher. For instance, S10 stated ‘my teacher always smiles and encourages us to speak. Even when I make a mistake, she says, ‘Good try!’ It makes me enjoy the class, even though I’m still a bit nervous.’ Another student (S4) described the fun of interactive activities, for instance, indicating that “role-plays and games are my favorite. We laugh, we speak more, and I forget about being shy. I enjoy it even though I make grammar mistakes.” (S4)

These statements imply that FLE is frequently experienced and often exists concurrently with anxiety, rather than serving as a replacement. Students may feel nervous or fearful beforehand, but supportive environments, positive outcomes, and peer interaction contribute to moments of joy, pride, and emotional reward.

To conclude, qualitative data suggest that Saudi university EFL students predominantly perceive themselves as possessing moderate to high levels of emotional intelligence. They encounter varying degrees of anxiety, but are frequently capable of deriving enjoyment from the learning experience, particularly in emotionally nurturing environments. These findings underscore the intricate emotional dynamics of lan-

guage acquisition, wherein students concurrently navigate both challenging and affirmative experiences.

6.2. The Relationship between EI, FLA, and FLE

The interview data illuminated a multifaceted and evolving relationship among EI, FLA, and FLE among the university EFL students. The narratives provided by participants indicated that the emotional competencies of students, specifically their capacity to comprehend and regulate their own emotions, play a crucial role in influencing their language learning experiences.

6.2.1. High EI as a Buffer against Anxiety

Students who reported high levels of emotional intelligence often felt more capable of managing stressful classroom situations. These individuals conveyed that their proficiency in emotional regulation mitigated feelings of anxiety during tasks involving speaking or presenting in English. One participant articulated, ‘I know how to calm myself down when I feel nervous. I focus on my breathing or remind myself that mistakes are okay’ (S3). Such testimonies suggest that EI serves as an individual coping strategy that alleviates the severity of FLA.

Concurrently, these emotionally adept students tended to report elevated levels of enjoyment in their language learning endeavors. They expressed feelings of increased confidence, motivation, and social connectedness during class activities, particularly when engaging with supportive peers and instructors. For instance, one student observed, ‘I enjoy class more when I feel emotionally safe. If I feel accepted, I’m more open to speaking and participating’ (S3). This underscores the significance of EI in cultivating positive emotional involvement.

6.2.2. Low EI Linked to High Anxiety and Reduced Enjoyment

Conversely, students who exhibited diminished levels of emotional awareness or regulation frequently articulated experiences of heightened anxiety and diminished enjoyment. These individuals often perceived themselves as overwhelmed by classroom demands, apprehensive about committing errors, or uncomfortable in social exchanges. One student confessed, ‘Sometimes I feel like I can’t speak because I’m too worried about being wrong. It makes me hate the activity’ (S6).

6.2.3. Reciprocal Influence of Anxiety and Enjoyment

Numerous students highlighted the interconnected and reciprocal nature of anxiety and enjoyment. Several underscored how a transformation in one emotional state could swiftly influence the other, and that EI facilitated their ability to maintain equilibrium. One participant explained, ‘If I start enjoying the class, the anxiety goes away. But if I feel judged or stressed, even fun activities become unpleasant’ (S13).

In summary, the interviews indicate that EI functions as a pivotal moderator between FLA and FLE. It empowers learners to navigate negative emotions while augmenting their capacity for enjoyment. The relationship is characterized by dynamism rather than linearity—elevated EI seems to diminish anxiety and foster positive classroom experiences, whereas reduced EI may exacerbate anxiety and curtail enjoyment. These findings highlight the critical importance of cultivating emotional intelligence within foreign language education to enhance both emotional well-being and academic engagement.

6.3. Predictive Role of EI on FLA and FLE

The interviews elucidated that trait EI significantly influences and shapes learners’ emotional responses, specifically, FLA and FLE, within the context of classroom speaking activities.

6.3.1. Self-Control and Emotional Regulation Reduce Anxiety

A number of students characterized trait EI as a mitigating factor against anxiety, particularly during oral communication tasks. Learners exhibiting elevated self-control and emotional regulation capabilities reported a heightened ability to manage the pressures associated with speaking in English. One participant (S10) articulated, ‘I do not experience panic when I engage in class discussions due to my capacity to regulate my stress. Even in instances of making mistakes, I can swiftly move forward.’ These observations imply that an increased level of trait EI enables learners to mitigate the adverse emotional consequences of performance-related stressors.

6.3.2. Low Regulation Skills Increase Avoidance

Conversely, students who indicated lower levels of emotional regulation articulated a heightened susceptibil-

ity to speaking-related anxiety. Some participants detailed how their difficulties in managing nervousness culminated in avoidance behaviors, such as remaining silent or eschewing eye contact. One student (S7) confessed, ‘When I experience anxiety, I simply wish to vanish. My cognitive clarity diminishes, and I forget even the most basic vocabulary.’ These accounts suggest that diminished emotional intelligence may exacerbate anxiety and hinder effective communication performance.

6.3.3. Emotional Awareness and Sociability Enhance Enjoyment

In contrast, students with high emotional awareness and sociability reported elevated levels of enjoyment during speaking activities. They recounted affirmative classroom experiences derived from confidence, comfort with peers, and a sense of accomplishment. As one learner (S6) expressed, ‘When I maintain a calm demeanor and a positive mood, I find joy in speaking. I even find myself volunteering to answer questions or engage more with my classmates.’ Such reflections underscore the predictive significance of trait EI in promoting FLE by fostering an environment of emotional safety and engagement.

Notably, several students reflected that their emotional states in the speaking classroom are intricately connected to their capacity for self-understanding and emotional management. This reinforces the notion that trait EI not only correlates with but also meaningfully predicts both FLA and FLE within the Saudi EFL framework.

Qualitative findings indicate that trait EI serves as a robust predictor of both FLA and FLE, particularly in speaking contexts. Learners exhibiting higher degrees of emotional self-regulation and interpersonal competence generally experience diminished anxiety and heightened enjoyment. Conversely, lower emotional intelligence frequently correlates with increased anxiety and diminished engagement. These findings underscore the critical importance of fostering students’ emotional competencies to improve their performance and overall well-being within language learning settings.

6.4. Influential Dimensions of EI in Speaking Activities

The interviews illuminated diverse perceptions concerning which dimensions of trait EI most significantly in-

fluenced the emotional experiences of Saudi students during speaking tasks. Through the analysis of responses, three primary dimensions emerged: self-control, well-being, and the interaction between sociability and emotionality. Each dimension fulfills distinct roles, although some were regarded as more impactful than others.

6.4.1. Self-Control as the Most Critical Dimension

Self-control was the trait EI dimension most frequently mentioned and strongly underscored by students. Many students articulated that the capacity to regulate anxiety and emotional tension was vital for their engagement in speaking activities. One student (S4) articulated, ‘If I can’t control my nervousness, I just freeze. Controlling my emotions helps me keep talking even when I make mistakes.’ This observation implies that self-control functions as a stabilizing mechanism, enabling learners to perform effectively under pressure and manage apprehensions regarding judgment or failure.

6.4.2. Well-Being as a Source of Confidence

Well-being, frequently characterized by students as a state of feeling secure, optimistic, or emotionally stable, was also recognized as a significant factor. Several of the students (S3, S10, S13, S1) who had reported high levels of well-being indicated that they approached speaking tasks with enhanced confidence and a positive outlook. As one participant (S10) expressed: ‘when I feel good about myself, I enjoy speaking more. I feel I can express myself without worrying too much.’ Well-being appeared to cultivate resilience and emotional preparedness for public speaking engagements.

6.4.3. Sociability Supports Peer Interaction and Emotionality — Strength and Vulnerability

Sociability was regarded as very advantageous, particularly in peer-oriented speaking tasks or classroom discussions. Students who felt at ease initiating conversations or soliciting assistance tended to experience diminished anxiety and greater enjoyment. One student (S7) remarked, ‘I’m not shy to speak because I like connecting with others. Talking to my classmates makes it easier to practice.’ This observation indicates that sociability fosters emotional safety and collaborative engagement. Emotionality, conceptualized as the awareness and expression of one’s emotions, elicited

mixed responses. While some students (S1, S3, S11) valued being attuned to their emotions, with one stating, ‘knowing how I feel helps me stay calm,’ others (S2, S9) perceived that heightened emotional sensitivity increased their anxiety. This suggests that although emotionality may enhance self-awareness, it could also elevate vulnerability if not paired with robust self-regulation.

In summary, the dimension of self-control was most consistently regarded as essential to emotional management during speaking activities, closely followed by well-being and sociability. Although emotionality played a more complex role, its impact was contingent upon how students balanced emotional awareness with regulation. These insights underscore the significance of cultivating self-regulatory and interpersonal emotional competencies to enhance learners’ performance and comfort in speaking contexts.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the emotional dynamics of Saudi university students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), highlighting the interrelations among trait Emotional Intelligence (EI), Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), and Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) in the context of speaking activities. In alignment with prior studies, this research found that trait EI serves as a protective factor against FLA and a facilitator of FLE. Students with higher emotional regulation, self-awareness, and interpersonal sensitivity often demonstrated greater composure during oral tasks, even when confronted with errors or performance pressure. These findings are in concordance with Li, Huang and Li, who confirmed that trait EI significantly predicts lower anxiety and greater enjoyment, although FLE appears more strongly influenced by environmental factors such as classroom climate^[33].

Among the four dimensions of trait EI—self-control, emotionality, sociability, and well-being— self-control emerged as the most influential, particularly in managing speaking-related anxiety. Students frequently mentioned techniques like deep breathing, positive self-talk, and visualization to calm nerves and stay engaged during stressful tasks. This reflects prior evidence that students with strong self-regulation are better at mitigating the impact of negative affect on performance^[34]. Well-being and sociability were

also important. Students who described themselves as emotionally stable and socially outgoing tended to enjoy collaborative activities more and were less likely to disengagement. Emotionality, however, was more nuanced. While emotional awareness could lead to better coping, it also sometimes exacerbated vulnerability when not paired with adequate regulation. This observation underscores the complexity of emotionality as both a strength and a potential vulnerability in EFL contexts.

The study reinforces that trait EI can predict both the reduction of anxiety and the enhancement of enjoyment, particularly in oral communication tasks. Learners with high trait EI appeared to harness internal resources—such as stress tolerance and empathy—to buffer speaking-related stress. This finding was echoed by Abusahyon et al., who emphasized that fear of evaluation and lack of confidence are primary triggers of speaking anxiety among Saudi EFL learners^[35]. Moreover, the findings align with studies suggesting that FLA and FLE can co-exist. Students often reported simultaneous feelings of nervousness and excitement, which were modulated by their emotional intelligence and the perceived safety of the classroom environment. This duality was observed by Yahya and Wardani, who highlighted that instructional support and feedback can rapidly shift learners' emotional responses, influencing both anxiety and enjoyment during language learning^[36].

Interpretations and Pedagogical Implications

The evidence suggests that developing emotional competencies—especially self-regulation and interpersonal sensitivity—can significantly improve students' engagement and resilience in language classrooms. As FLA and FLE are not mutually exclusive but are dynamically interrelated, interventions should aim to strengthen trait EI across all four dimensions.

Practically, this underscores the importance of embedding social-emotional learning (SEL) into EFL curricula. Activities promoting emotional expression, peer collaboration, and teacher–student trust can enhance enjoyment and reduce anxiety, thereby improving linguistic performance. Teachers should also be trained to recognize and support emotional diversity, providing tailored strategies to students with lower EI.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that trait EI is

a crucial determinant in modulating anxiety and enjoyment among Saudi EFL learners during speaking tasks. Higher EI—particularly in self-control, sociability, and well-being—predicts lower anxiety and greater engagement. Importantly, FLE and FLA can co-occur, and EI facilitates navigating between these emotional states. These findings underscore the importance of integrating emotional skills development within language education to enhance both affective well-being and communicative competence.

8. Limitations of the Study

While this investigation yields significant insights into the emotional dynamics experienced by Saudi EFL learners, several limitations warrant recognition. The first relates to sample size and limited generalizability. The research was predicated on interviews conducted with 14 second-year EFL students from a single Saudi university. Although the qualitative design prioritizes depth over breadth, the narrow and localized sample constrains the generalizability of the findings to more extensive populations or alternative educational contexts. Second, the study relied on self-reported. Emotional intelligence, anxiety, and enjoyment levels were evaluated based on participants' self-perceptions and narratives. Such reports are intrinsically subjective and may be susceptible to social desirability bias, limitations in recall, or students' lack of cognizance of their own emotional processes. Third, the study used a single methodological approach with a qualitative focus. The exclusive reliance on qualitative interviews, while rich in contextual detail, precludes the possibility of statistical analysis or broader pattern validation. The absence of methodological triangulation with quantitative measures (e.g., standardized EI or FLA/FLE scales) limits the capacity to compare findings across diverse populations or to empirically verify predictive relationships. Fourth, the focus of the study is on speaking tasks only. The emotional experiences investigated were restricted to speaking activities. Other language domains such as writing, reading, or listening were not scrutinized, despite the potential for these areas to also elicit anxiety or enjoyment and be influenced by emotional intelligence. Fifth, there is a cultural and institutional specificity to this research. The findings are influenced by the distinctive cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical context of Saudi Arabia. Differences in classroom dynamics, teacher–

student interactions, and social expectations in other regions or institutions may yield divergent emotional patterns and relationships. Sixth, a cross-sectional design was utilized. The study captures participants' emotional states at a singular point in time. It does not monitor how emotional intelligence or emotional experiences develop throughout the language learning process, thereby overlooking potential longitudinal changes or shifts resulting from instructional interventions. These limitations underscore the necessity for future research to employ mixed methods, larger and more diverse samples, and longitudinal designs to further substantiate and expand upon the emotional dynamics observed in this study.

9. Conclusions

This study accentuates the critical role of trait EI in influencing the emotional landscape of Saudi EFL students during speaking activities. The findings elucidate that students exhibiting higher levels of self-control, sociability, and well-being tend to experience diminished FLA and heightened FLE, which facilitates more active and confident participation in oral communication. Importantly, FLE and FLA were not mutually exclusive; rather, they coexisted within a dynamic emotional spectrum regulated by students' emotional competencies. Moreover, self-control emerged as the most significant dimension of trait EI, particularly in alleviating anxiety during high-pressure speaking contexts. These insights underscore the imperative of integrating emotional skills training and social-emotional learning (SEL) within EFL curricula to cultivate resilience, enhance communicative performance, and foster emotionally supportive classroom environments. In conclusion, this research advances our comprehension of the emotional interactions in language learning by establishing trait EI as both a predictor and moderator of learners' emotional responses. It offers actionable implications for educators striving to optimize emotional and linguistic outcomes within culturally contextualized EFL settings.

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The data used in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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