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Remembering English Class: Exploring Foreign Language Enjoyment Through Language Learning Histories

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Abstract

Foreign language enjoyment (FLE) has been a growing area of research within second language acquisition (SLA) studies over the last decade. Focusing on enjoyment in language education, FLE research has found links between higher rates of enjoyment and raising motivation and willingness to communicate while lowering anxiety in the classroom. However, research on FLE has gained little attention among scholars in Japan. Using a mixed methods approach and drawing on 154 questionnaire responses from university students attending a private Japanese university, this study seeks to fill this gap in the literature by examining changes in participants' (FLE) throughout their language learning histories (LLHs) stretching from elementary to high school. While the results demonstrated an overall decrease in FLE over the period under study, a closer inspection revealed a considerable degree of nuance in how participants made sense of the English LLHs. Teachers, interest, difficulty, and the amount of communicative activities were key factors in how participants assessed their experiences of studying English. Moving forward, educators should work to better understand their students' histories of learning English and help foster greater FLE to create more productive, welcoming, and enjoyable classrooms.

本研究では、日本の私立大学に通う大学生 154 名の質問紙回答をもとに、小学校から高校までの言語学習歴（LLH）を通して、参加者の外国語の楽しさ（FLE）の変化をミックス・メソッド・アプローチで検討しました。その結果、全体的に FLE が減少していることが示されたが、より詳細に検討すると、参加者が英語学習歴をどのように意味づけているかにはかなり

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のニュアンスがあることがわかりました。教師、興味、難易度、コミュニケーション活動の量は、参加者が英語学習の経験をどのように評価するかにおける重要な要素でありました。今後、教育者は、生徒の英語学習歴をよりよく理解し、より生産的で、歓迎され、楽しい教室を作るために、より大きな FLE の育成に取り組むべきであります。

Background

Positive psychology (PP) has been increasingly influential in the realm of second language acquisition (SLA). Developed in response to the strong focus on problems and negative-coded emotions such as anxiety and fear in general psychology, practitioners of PP have turned our attention to the wide range of positive emotions that humans feel, such as enjoyment, hope, and optimism (Lopez and Snyder, 2009). Although scholars in SLA have been employing a PP-grounded outlook since the early 2000s, these publications have been in the minority relative to scholarship working within a cognitive framework (Sharwood, 2017). However, in the last decade, the number of publications dedicated to PP has been increasing significantly (MacIntyre et al., 2016; Gabryś-Barker and Galajda, 2016; Mercer and Kostoulas, 2018) and have covered a variety of topics ranging from empathy (Oxford, 2016) and enjoyment (Ibrahim, 2016) to perseverance (Belnap et al., 2016) and love (Pavelescu and Petric, 2018).

Within PP, foreign language enjoyment (FLE) has garnered the most scholarly attention. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) are often credited with launching FLE as an area of research. The authors posed examining a positive emotion alongside a negative one to investigate whether a relationship exists. They settled on enjoyment, a facet of joy, and a core human emotion. Enjoyment, they argued, arises when psychological needs are met, making the possibility of success greater. Furthermore, language learners often speak of their enjoyment of a particular course or instructor, lending weight to the idea that enjoyment is a key affective state in human experience.

Although research on FLE has attracted attention in several parts of the globe, relatively few studies have been published in the Japanese context. Furthermore, most FLE research tends to zoom in on a relatively short period of time from a single class meeting to an academic year. Other fields within language research have taken a longitudinal approach, particularly scholars interested in analyzing L2 motivation. Looking at junior high school

students, a number of studies have found that participants' reflections on their junior high school years tended to follow a U-shaped curve where motivation to study English was high at the start of the first year, declined, and rose again by the end of the final year. Additionally, high schoolers expressed that motivation increased over the final year, although the drop in motivation between the first and second years tended to be less drastic than in the case of junior high schoolers (Sawyer, 2007; Hiromori and Izumisawa, 2015). To address these gaps in FLE scholarship, this study turns to a reflective longitudinal research design to examine how participants make sense of FLE across their language learning histories.

Positive psychology and foreign language enjoyment

In the decade since Dewaele and MacIntyre's seminal publication, scholarship on FLE has dramatically increased, resulting in several meta-analyses conducted in the 2020s. Zeng (2021) surveyed 17 studies published between 2014 and 2021. Several projects have developed scales used to measure FLE. The original FLE Scale produced by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) consisted of 21 statements that specifically targeted FLE and eight that examined foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA). Using a Likert-scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, participants rated statements, such as "I can be creative," "I enjoy it," and "I'm a worthy member of the FL class." Additionally, participants were asked to answer open-ended questions, including recalling an enjoyable moment in class in detail. This mixed methods approach resulted in a complex picture of enjoyment and the conclusion that enjoyment and anxiety may operate independently of each other despite some overlap. Subsequent studies have modified Dewaele and MacIntyre's scale to fit specific cultural contexts, such as China (Li et al., 2018; Jin and Zhang, 2018).

Next, Zeng reviews scholarship exploring the impact of demographic factors on FLE. Some studies have shown that younger learners tend to experience lower FLE, while older students, particularly ones in university, have higher FLE (Dewaele and MacIntyre, 2014, 2016; Dewaele et al., 2018). Meanwhile the role of gender seems to be inconclusive as Dewaele and MacIntyre (2016) found that female participants generally have higher FLE, but Mierzwa (2018) and Alenezi (2020) suggest that there is no significant difference between male and female students.

Turning to the connection between FLE and other variables, including willingness to communicate (WTC) and FLCA, Zeng shows that scholarly opinion is weighted towards a

negative corelation between FLE and FLCA (Dewaele and Dewaele, 2017; Dewaele and Alfawzan, 2018; Resnik and Dewaele, 2020) and the possibility that higher FLE can help to raise WTC (Khajavy et al., 2018; Dewaele, 2019; Elahi Shirvan and Taherian, 2022). Additionally, while the topic of engagement in second language acquisition (SLA) has been growing over the last decade, Mercer and Dornyei (2020) published one of the few studies that has found a positive correlation between engagement and FLE. Finally, on the dynamic nature of FLE and individual learner differences, Zeng outlines studies that show FLE can fluctuate based on years of FL study experience and the topic under study (Elahi Shirvan and Talebzadeh, 2018), and that a teacher's use of the target language and chemistry with learners can affect FLE (Dewaele and Dewaele, 2020).

In Botes et al.'s review of FLE research (2022), the authors surveyed 56 studies carried out between 2014 and 2022. Specifically, this overview zoomed in on the correlation between FLE and four variables: FLCA; WTC; academic achievement; and self-perceived achievement. They found that FLE and FLCA have a negative correlation and may likely be circular. That is, when anxiety lowers, enjoyment increases, leading to less anxiety. Several teaching methods have been shown to increase FLE and decrease FLCA, including the use of multimedia (Oxford, 2017) and employing positive thinking techniques (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004). As for WTC and FLE, Botes et al. show that they are strongly positively correlated with high levels of WTC present in cases with high FLE. Upon reviewing both FLE and academic achievement, FLE and self-perceived achievement yielded moderate positive correlation. Ultimately, Botes et al. argue for the importance of FLE in the classroom and its instrumentality in several positive learning outcomes.

In a recent look at the state of the FLE field, Zhang et al. (2024) systematically reviewed 118 empirical studies published between 2014 and 2023. The authors concluded that over 80% of studies drew on sample sizes that numbered more than 100 participants, making them meet the minimum requirements to generalize research findings. Furthermore, adult learners were the main subjects of research with nearly half of all participants being university students. About 60% of participants identified as Chinese or Persian first-language speakers and English was overwhelmingly the target language (78%). About two-thirds employed a quantitative methods approach, while the remaining third used mixed-methods. Importantly for the current study, only six studies used a reflective approach in conjunction with other methods to gauge FLE. In addition to interviews and questionnaires, participants used reflective journaling to make sense of FLE during their language learning histories.

FLE in Japan

Research on FLE in Japan is still in its infancy. According to Zhang et al.'s survey of FLE literature (2024), the authors found only a single study across six major research databases from the last decade focused on Japanese first-language speakers (Saito et al., 2018). Looking more closely, we can find a handful of studies about FLE in the 2020s, but, as several authors point out, it is an understudied subject in the Japanese context (Xethakis et al., 2021; Inada, 2022; Oyama, 2024).

In a cross-sectional and longitudinal study lasting three months with 108 Japanese high school students, Saito et al. (2018) demonstrated that FLE levels related to Social Enjoyment and Private Enjoyment (Dewaele and MacIntyre, 2016) could help predict participants' motivation to study English with higher motivation leading to greater improvements in comprehensibility. Additionally, students who had a clearer vision of their L2 future selves were likely to have higher rates of enjoyment and lower levels of anxiety in L2 communication.

Kitaoka (2021) conducted a study with 137 Japanese university students that used music in the classroom to increase FLE in hopes of lowering FLCA and shyness. In every weekly meeting of the English course, music was played throughout the period except for times when students were required greater concentration, such as during a test. At the end of each class, students watched an English language music video with the aim of singing it together as a group. Using a mixed-methods approach, Kitaoka surveyed participants in the first and final week of classes about their experience studying English with music. Using music in the classroom for creating a positive atmosphere, practicing pronunciation through singing, and encouraging group cohesion via dancing led to high FLE and lower FLCA and shyness.

Surveying 596 students enrolled at a private university in western Japan using a mixed-methods approach, Xethakis et al. (2021) found that participants recorded significantly greater FLE than FLCA and students with more favorable attitudes towards English study and English output reported higher levels of FLE and lower levels of FLCA. Meanwhile, students who expressed less favorable views of English often had greater anxiety, especially during communicative activities. According to the qualitative data, the authors demonstrate that enjoyment tended to be the result of contextual variables, such as the teacher or

classroom atmosphere, while anxiety was understood as an internally generated by lack of confidence or fear of making errors.

In a study with 93 Japanese university students, Inada (2022) examined the relationships between independent variables such as age, gender, language of instruction, FLE, and FLCA, and a dependent variable, the change between participants' scores between the mid-term and final exams. The results show that high levels of FLE have a strong correlation with increased proficiency. Furthermore, it appears that enjoyment may have a stronger impact on proficiency rather than anxiety or even language of instruction.

Turning our attention to online instruction, Oyama (2024) studied the relationships between FLE and emotional intelligence (EI), FLE and the use of learning strategies, and the fluctuation of FLE over a year from a group and individual perspective. Like the other studies on FLE in the Japanese context, Oyama took a mixed-methods approach. The author collected quantitative data by combining an adapted version of the FLE scale (Dewaele and MacIntyre, 2014), Oxford's (1995) Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL), and the Japanese version of the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (Toyota and Yamamoto, 2011). Open-ended questions about student perceptions of FLE, EI, and strategy use followed. Analyzing the data from 67 Japanese university student participants, Oyama revealed that there was a significantly positive correlation between FLE and EI in two of the three classes surveyed and FLE and strategy use were significantly positively correlated across all groups. Although all classes demonstrated changes in their FLE throughout the year, they tended to show similar rises and falls that were related to times with peer interactions, lesson topics, and teaching style. Finally, at the individual level, approximately 20% of participants reported significant changes in their FLE over the span of the course.

Gaps in FLE scholarship

This study addresses three gaps in research about FLE. First, most research on FLE is focused on a relatively short time scale that can be as short as a single assignment to as long as an academic year. While these studies allow us to deeply probe a slice of a student's language learning experience, they tell us little about how those moments relate to the overall experience of language study. Second, alongside FLE, this body of scholarship tends to highlight a small number of parallel themes, particularly FLCA. Again, although conclusions have been able to find links between FLE and other factors, such as anxiety, motivation, and

academic achievement, studies have generally overlooked the wider range of variables that may influence how a student makes sense of their language learning experience. By allowing student participants to guide us through the salient aspects of their English study, we can explore what is meaningful to learners rather than what is meaningful to researchers. Finally, as has already been established, FLE in the Japanese context is understudied. As criticisms over Japan's English curriculum continue to mount (Borg, 2023), especially as academic results based on recent changes to the program come to light, it would be pedagogically beneficial to examine the base emotion of enjoyment, how it rises and falls, and what it means to enjoy or not enjoy English study.

Aims

The aim of this study is to explore FLE in the language learning histories of students studying at Kyushu Sangyo University. Analyzing qualitative and quantitative data collected from questionnaires, I will map out the historical ebbs and flows in participants' like and dislike of their English study careers. This project will consider two research questions, the first based in quantitative data and the second in qualitative:

Q1: How do participants' ratings of their enjoyment of studying English change across different educational stages (elementary school, junior high school, and high school)?

Q2: How do participants narrate and make sense of changes in their enjoyment of studying English over time through their language learning histories?

Sampling and Methods

Language learning histories

To study how students have experienced FLE in their English study experience, participants created their own language learning histories (LLHs). LLHs are reflections looking back on past language learning experiences. They are often created by a participant working in conjunction with a researcher or teacher and can take the form of an interview, written text, or a combination of both. LLHs offer participants several reflective opportunities that are distinct from other autoethnographic exercises such as diaries. For example, learners

have a chance to make sense of their studies in their entirety or near-entirety and usually long after the period of study discussed has passed. In mapping out their past experiences and isolating dominant memories, students can give meaning to their lived experiences (Benson, 2011). Furthermore, they give learners an opportunity to reflect on their English studies and narrate what happened, why something happened, and the result of something happening (Oxford, 1995). For educators, LLHs also offer valuable insights into how learners experience their language study and can help us create more student-centered learning environments to better meet students' wants and needs (Nunan, 2013).

Data collection

LLHs were created via questionnaires on Google Forms. As with most research on FLE, this study employed a mixed methods approach. There were both quantitative and qualitative elements to the questionnaire and questions were organized chronologically. After providing basic biographical information, such as gender, year of study, and major, participants were asked to rate their overall experience studying English. Following this, respondents progressed through chronological stages beginning with elementary school and ending with high school. First students rated their enjoyment of studying English within a given educational stage on a Likert scale that ranged from 1 (I hated it) to 7 (I loved it).

Next, a qualitative-based question followed each quantitative one. Here too, the qualitative questions used the same format: describe the experience in one to three sentences. At the end of each stage, there was another qualitative question: what could have improved your experience? Please write one to three sentences. In addition to these mandatory questions, each section had several optional questions about studying English in *juku* (cram schools) and private English conversation schools. Respondents who had experiences in these settings could both rate and describe their experiences, while those who did not were able to skip and continue to the next section. The final section of the questionnaire allowed participants to include any additional information related to their LLH.

Although nearly all research on FLE uses or adapts the original FLE Scale (Dewaele and MacIntyre, 2014), this study instead opts for a simpler, more global rating system for two reasons. With a retrospective longitudinal research design, the FLE Scale is too fine in its mode of inquiry for a time frame stretching upwards of a decade. Adapting the scale for a multi-year reflection would necessitate a much longer questionnaire and, in this author's

opinion, potential strain on the participant to complete the identical set of questions for every year of English study. Additionally, by narrowing the Likert scale portion of the questionnaire to rating enjoyment, participants could freely interpret how they make sense of that enjoyment in the following open-ended question. This shift away from the FLE Scale's two open-ended questions on recalling enjoyable and anxiety-provoking moments also invites participants to interpret their enjoyment or lack of enjoyment in broad terms.

A questionnaire was used for several reasons. From a practical perspective, at approximately ten minutes to complete, this questionnaire required relatively little time commitment on the part of participants. As a result, participation was high with 154 choosing to answer the questionnaire and 6 declining. Furthermore, employing a questionnaire allows us to examine a high number LLHs within a short amount of time, particularly once the data is exported into Microsoft Excel. Understandably, most studies on LLHs use interviews as their primary source of data for the rich narratives they can produce. However, as many proponents of discourse analysis contend, the advantage of qualitative sources lie in their ability to relate the significance of a given object of study. Although one to three sentences multiplied by the number of mandatory sections results in an absolute minimum of 6 sentences of text per participant seems minuscule compared to the possibilities of an interview, we should remind ourselves that while the form differs, the function remains the same. Research participants create both kinds of narratives based on engaging with a prompt, whether it be an interview question or an online questionnaire. Furthermore, small stories research has been developing within the field of narrative inquiry over the last decade. Small stories can be short stories within larger narratives that may or may not be connected to the overall arc of the text. Or, small stories can be fragmentary, incomplete with no definitive ending. These narratives need not only speak to a lived past, but to paths not taken or imagined futures. As other researchers have also shown with studies about social media posts, the "small" in small stories may also refer to the length of a text which can be much shorter than interviews lasting an hour or more (Georgakopoulou 2013; 2015; Georgakopoulou and Giaxoglou 2018; Georgakopoulou et al. 2023). Broadening our scope to include small stories is not to dismiss longer ones, but to encourage greater engagement with narrators outside the paradigm of the long narrative form. This approach to narrative inquiry has been employed in a diverse array of fields and has resulted in research on migration (Dausien and Thoma, 2023), political discourse (Fetzer and Bull, 2019; Zentz, 2021), health

(Sools, 2013; Giaxoglou, 2022) and language education (Barkhuizen, 2010; Juzwik and Ives, 2010).

Sample

This study was carried out with 154 undergraduate students taking an English course at Kyushu Sangyo University in the 2023-24 and 2024-25 academic years. Of those who took the questionnaire, 73 identified as male, 80 as female, and 1 responded "secret" to the question of gender. There were 100 first-year and 54 second-year students. In terms of proficiency level, respondents ranged from A2 to B2 on the CEFR scale.

This study examined the collected data quantitatively and qualitatively. First, all data was exported into a Microsoft Excel file. Then, I analyzed the quantitative data of each participant individually. Comparing the three ratings of studying English at the elementary, junior high and high school stages, I studied the variability of the curve and described how it rose, fell, or remained stable. Meanwhile, I also calculated measures of central tendency and measures of variability. Zooming out to the entire dataset, I conducted the same calculations.

Next, in carrying out a qualitative analysis of the data, I returned to the individual level. In a separate Excel sheet, I coded each sentence written by a participant. To create the initial code matrix, I read the first quarter of the respondents' written answers and recorded themes that emerged. After this primary scan and with a preliminary matrix in hand, I examined the entire dataset and coded each participant's answers. While completing the first full sweep, I added additional themes to the code matrix and went through the participants' responses again for a final pass.

Analysis

Quantitative data

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate participants' enjoyment of their English study in three educational stages, elementary school, junior high school, and high school. In Figure 1, we can see that participants generally enjoyed studying English less as they progressed from elementary school to high school. The highest scores (six and seven) were given less frequently with each passing stage of education. While 30 students rated their enjoyment of

studying English a seven in elementary school, for instance, the number of participants who gave the same score for high school decreased by over two-thirds to eight. Although less of a decline, we see a similar phenomenon in the number of participants who gave studying English a six nearly half between elementary school (23) and high school (12). Meanwhile, the number of respondents who scored their English study experience a three, which signals low-level dissatification, almost tripled over the same span of time with an increase from 13 to 35.

Figure 1

Comparison of FLE scores over time

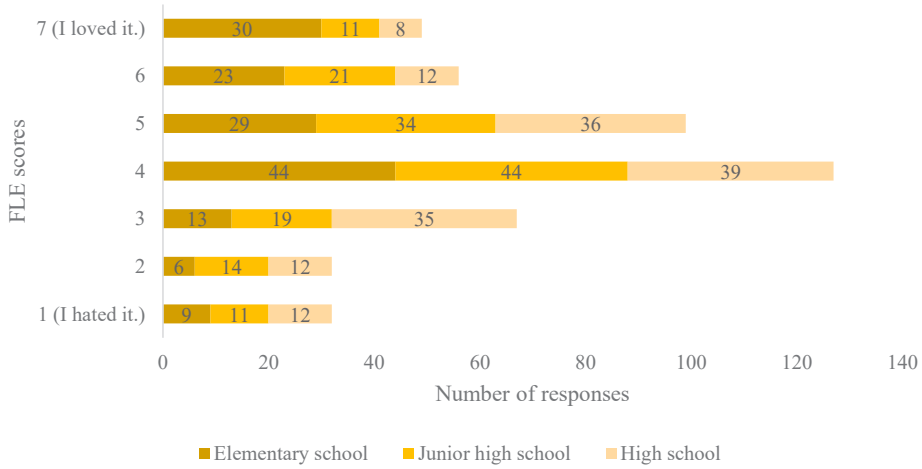
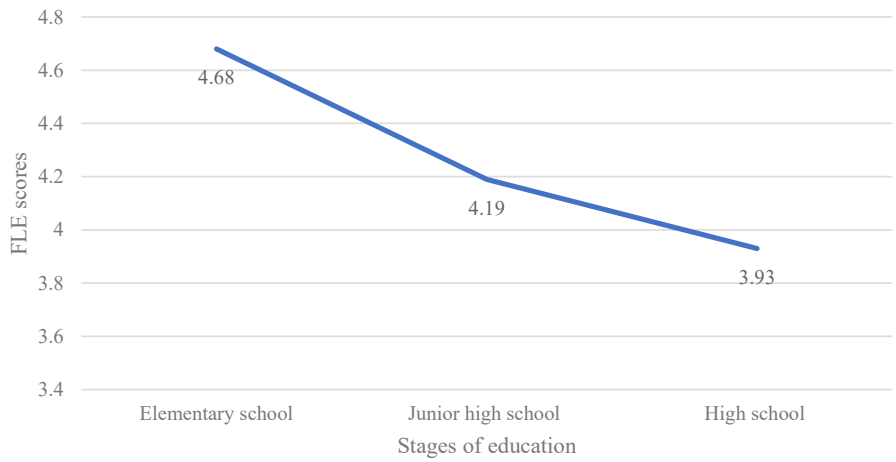


Figure 2 takes a broader look at the data and compares the mean ratings of all participants across the three stages of education. Here, we see an overall decline in students' enjoyment of studying English. Significantly, between junior high school and high school, the mean scores drop from 4.19 to 3.93 and just pass the threshold from indifference to the shallow end of disliking studying English.

Figure 2

Comparison of mean scores over time



In Figures 1 and 2, we can see a steady decline in enjoyment over time from elementary school to high school. Reflecting on elementary school, Figure 1 shows that 82 participants had a favorable view of their English class compared to 28 who expressed an unfavorable attitude. Forty-four were indifferent. By junior high school, while the number of students expressing indifference remained stable, the number of participants who enjoyed their English studies declined by 12 to 66. Meanwhile, the number of learners who disliked English study rose to 44, up from 28 in the elementary school section. Assessing their high school period of English study, most participants (59) held an unfavorable view in contrast to the 56 who enjoyed it. Meanwhile, Figure 2 clearly illustrates an overall decrease in FLE.

While Figures 1 and 2 show a decline in the enjoyment of studying English from elementary school to high school, it is also important to examine changes at the individual level. Studying one participant at a time, we can ascertain a more nuanced picture of how FLE fluctuates between the three periods. To analyze an individual's data, I compared their enjoyment ratings from one educational stage to the next. Table 1 shows Participant no.1's FLE scores. Contrary to the picture provided in Figures 1 and 2 which demonstrates declining enjoyment, Participant no.1's LLH tells a story of growing enjoyment over time. I have labelled this trend of rising enjoyment between elementary and junior high school followed by stability between junior high and high school as "rising plateau" to describe this change in FLE over time.

Table 1

Participant no.1's FLE scores over time

Participant no.1	Elementary school	Junior high school	High school
FLE score	1	7	7

Table 2 displays nine trends that describe the rise, fall, and stability of participants' enjoyment of studying English study from elementary school to high school after conducting individual analyses. The trend present in each participant's responses was determined by comparing how they scored their enjoyment of studying English in elementary, junior high, and high school. Specifically, I was interested in how the enjoyment score increased, decreased or remained the same from one educational stage to the next.

Table 2

Nine trends in participants' FLE ratings

Trend name	Description
Valley	Lowest FLE score in junior high school
Peak	Highest FLE score in junior high school
Falling	Highest FLE score in elementary school and lowest in junior high school
Falling basin	Highest FLE score in elementary school followed by a decline in junior high school and similar score in high school
Flat	No change in FLE scores across all three educational stages
Plateau fall	Stable FLE scores in elementary and junior high school followed a decline in high school
Basin rise	Stable FLE scores in elementary and junior high school followed by an in increase in high school
Rising plateau	Lowest FLE score in elementary school followed by an increase in junior high school and similar score in high school
Rising	Lowest FLE score in elementary school and highest in high school

Table 3 shows the nine trends with the aggregated mean scores of all participants who comprised each type. They have been ordered in terms of frequency with valley as the most common and rising as the least common trends. The vast majority of trends demonstrate some variation in FLE between elementary and high school, while only 17 (11%) reflect no changes.

Table 3

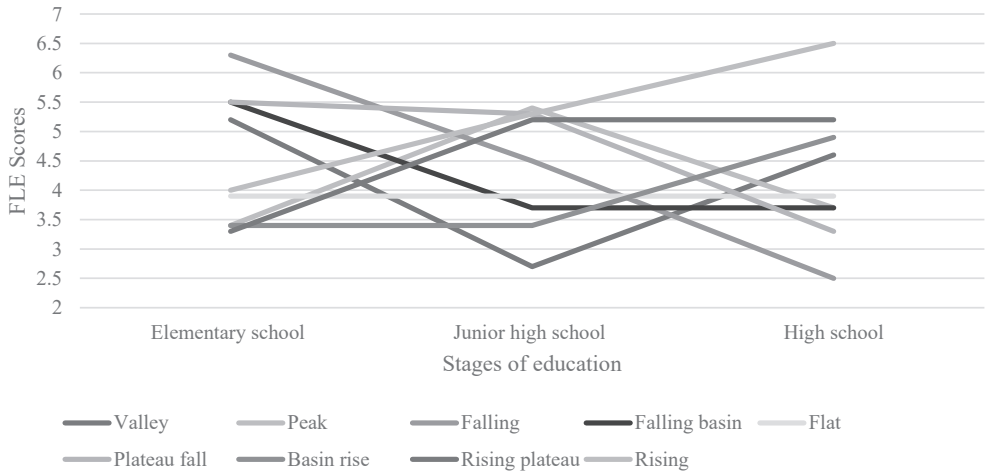
Nine trends in participants' FLE ratings and the aggregated mean for each stage of education

Trend name	Elementary school	Junior high school	High school	Frequency
Valley	5.2	2.7	4.6	31
Peak	3.4	5.4	3.7	27
Falling	6.3	4.5	2.5	25
Falling basin	5.5	3.7	3.7	19
Flat	3.9	3.9	3.9	17
Plateau fall	5.5	5.3	3.3	13
Basin rise	3.4	3.4	4.9	12
Rising plateau	3.3	5.2	5.2	6
Rising	4	5.3	6.5	4

Figure 3 compares all nine trends in a line graph. The lowest value recorded was 2.5 and appears on the falling trend while the highest value was 6.3 on the falling trend. Consistent decrease in FLE illustrated by the falling trend (25 occurrences) was six times more common than consistent increase reflected in the rising trend (4 occurrences). Three curves (falling, falling basin, and valley) show a decrease in FLE from elementary to junior high school. Meanwhile, three curves (peak, rising plateau, and rising) demonstrate an increase in FLE over the same period. Furthermore, falling, falling plateau, and peak show an increase in FLE between junior high and high school, while peak, plateau fall, and falling show a decline.

Figure 3

Comparison of the nine trends of changing FLE over time



Qualitative data

While all 154 participants in this study provided written comments to explain their enjoyment rating of English class, only 10 individuals compared and contrasted their experience of English study within or across educational stages. An edited version of their responses are reproduced in Tables 4-13. In addition to their participation number, information includes how they scored their experience learning English in elementary school, junior high school, and high school as well as their memories of those periods. While these 10 participants are not necessarily representative examples of trends or experiences, they offer an opportunity to qualitatively analyze changes in FLE over time. Looking at Tables 4-13, quality of teachers, difficulty, interest, and the amount of communicative activities are the most dominant reasons why students' level of enjoyment studying English fluctuated over time.

Table 4

Participant No.1 Selected Quantitative and Qualitative Responses

Item	Response
Rate your experience of elementary school.	1
Describe your experience.	I didn't know what the teachers were saying.
Rate your experience of junior high school.	7
Describe your experience.	I was praised by a teacher at school.
Rate your experience of high school.	7
Describe your experience.	I liked English from junior high school and continued to like it. I learned a lot of vocabulary.

Table 5

Participant No.9 Selected Quantitative and Qualitative Responses

Item	Response
Rate your experience of elementary school.	2
Describe your experience.	I don't remember much, but we learned simple English, like apple and monkey.
Rate your experience of junior high school.	2
Describe your experience.	In junior high school, I didn't enjoy English and didn't understand the content of the class. I didn't refer to textbooks much because I learned more by studying in my own way than by following the textbooks.
Rate your experience of high school.	4
Describe your experience.	I was not good at English in the first and second years of high school, but I came to like English through Western movies and music, and decided to study at a university with an international focus.

Table 6

Participant No.15 Selected Quantitative and Qualitative Responses

Item	Response
Rate your experience of elementary school.	2
Describe your experience.	We played many mini-games. I got a chance to experience English for the first time.
Rate your experience of junior high school.	1
Describe your experience.	My Japanese English teacher was not very interesting. I was able to acquire basic English vocabulary.

Rate your experience of high school.	5
Describe your experience.	It was interesting when foreign teachers came, but I didn't enjoy the English of Japanese teachers. I could get used to real English because I could talk with many foreign teachers.

Table 7

Participant No.16 Selected Quantitative and Qualitative Responses

Item	Response
Rate your experience of elementary school.	7
Describe your experience.	We studied basic English on the radio. I learned English by talking with ALT teachers and speaking English. By doing so, I came to like English.
Rate your experience of junior high school.	7
Describe your experience.	At first, I disliked reading English sentences. However, when I entered the school, I learned how to read long sentences from my English teacher, and I became so good at English that I could almost get a perfect score in English, and I loved it. At first, I avoided reading English, but after joining the school, I continued to read long sentences. I also became able to read long sentences by drawing lines and circling conjunctions and important words.
Rate your experience of high school.	3
Describe your experience.	In junior high school, I liked English because I could read sentences without knowing the meanings of many words, but in high school, the number of words increased and I didn't like it anymore. There was a foreign student from Finland for six months, so I had more conversations with her and actively spoke English with her.

Table 8

Participant No.34 Selected Quantitative and Qualitative Responses

Item	Response
Rate your experience of elementary school.	5
Describe your experience.	It was easy because I only had to learn the names of simple everyday objects. I think I learned “How are you? etc. I think I learned them in elementary school.
Rate your experience of junior high school.	4
Describe your experience.	In junior high school, I didn't have much interest in it and studied at random. I started working seriously on grammar in my third year of

	junior high school, and I understood a little more about the basics of English.
Rate your experience of high school.	6
Describe your experience.	I enjoyed English in high school because I like English. I could not read at all because of weak vocabulary, but I could understand it by reading every day.

Table 9

Participant No.53 Selected Quantitative and Qualitative Responses

Item	**Response**
Rate your experience of elementary school.	4
Describe your experience.	I don't remember much.
Rate your experience of junior high school.	6
Describe your experience.	It was interesting to read books written in English and listen to Western music at the beginning of class.
Rate your experience of high school.	4
Describe your experience.	English in high school wasn't very interesting and I didn't listen to the lessons and didn't understand much, but I thought it was good to learn English at university because I could enjoy the lessons.

Table 10

Participant No.132 Selected Quantitative and Qualitative Responses

Item	**Response**
Rate your experience of elementary school.	7
Describe your experience.	I participated in English class through games and songs.
Rate your experience of junior high school.	7
Describe your experience.	I could communicate and learn with my friends.
Rate your experience of high school.	3
Describe your experience.	In high school, I didn't like idioms and grammar because I had to memorize them all the time, but in university, it is easy to learn because we learn while communicating with each other. I wanted to change from memorizing to communicating and engaging in English.

Table 11

Participant No.141 Selected Quantitative and Qualitative Responses

Item	Response
Rate your experience of elementary school.	5
Describe your experience.	I did English in a circle, but I didn't like it that much because the teacher was odd.
Rate your experience of junior high school.	7
Describe your experience.	I enjoyed listening to music and talking with ALT teachers in class.
Rate your experience of high school.	5
Describe your experience.	I fell in love with English when I was in junior high school. In high school, I became a little bit poor in grammar, but I still like English. I wanted more opportunities for speaking.

Table 12

Participant No.142 Selected Quantitative and Qualitative Responses

Item	Response
Rate your experience of elementary school.	6
Describe your experience.	A native English speaker taught me English while playing fun games.
Rate your experience of junior high school.	6
Describe your experience.	I had more chances to talk than in high school. I wanted to study abroad. I wanted to improve my English skills more by talking to local people.
Rate your experience of high school.	5
Describe your experience.	I never studied much speaking in high school, so I focused more on reading. I would have liked more opportunities for speaking and learning to create your own English sentences.

Table 13

Participant No.152 Selected Quantitative and Qualitative Responses

Item	Response
Rate your experience of elementary school.	6
Describe your experience.	It was fun because it was like playing a game.
Rate your experience of junior high school.	2
Describe your experience.	I didn't understand anything.
Rate your experience of high school.	6

Describe your experience.	I didn't like English in junior high, but I found a good English teacher and my grades improved, so I came to like it. I hated that I was learning unnatural English phrases that I would not be able to communicate with when I went there. I want to learn English so that I can communicate with native speakers when I go there.

Discussion

Quantitative data

The quantitative data collected in this study forges new ground in FLE scholarship by employing a reflective longitudinal research design. While research on FLE in Japan covers a time span of a single assignment to an academic year, this study provides a historical approach that allows us to examine FLE across educational stages.

Oyama (2024) gives the closest parallel to the current study in terms of tracking changes in FLE over an extended period. Looking at their research participants as a whole, Oyama identified four points in the year when fluctuations were likely to occur. These dips and rises in FLE were usually associated with assignments, such as exams and oral presentations. In the present study, as we will explore further in the following section, increases and decreases were less associated with individual assignments, but, rather, structural issues, such as teaching styles and opportunities to engage with classmates.

Because FLE research in Japan is in its infancy, we must turn to motivation scholarship for similarities in a longitudinal research design and the correlation between high motivation and high FLE. Table 3 shows that the most frequent trend, valley, exhibits a decline in enjoyment in junior high school before rising again in high school. This aligns with several studies on L2 motivation in Japan that demonstrated that motivation tended to drop upon entering junior high before rising at the end of high school (Sawyer, 2007; Hiromori and Izumisawa, 2015). However, if we expand our scope to our entire data set, only 47 students, less than a third of all participants, spread across valley, basin rise, and rising trends expressed growing interest between junior high and high school. Therefore, the quantitative data collected for this project provides a more nuanced view of FLE, and to some degree motivation, over time.

Qualitative data

Tracing the inclusions and omissions in participants' qualitative responses from one educational stage to the next alongside their quantitative scores in Tables 4-13 can help us better understand the rise and fall of FLE from elementary school to high school. Among the themes that emerge from the data, four appear to be significant factors that impacted students' reflections on their LLHs: teachers, difficulty, interest, and amount of communicative activities.

Teachers

Shunsuke (no.1) was a male, second year student majoring in international culture. Reflecting on his time in elementary school, he rated his experience a one and expressed that he could not understand what his English teachers were saying. Junior high school English class was a better experience as Shunsuke recalled receiving praise from his teacher and noting in the high school section of the questionnaire: "I liked English from junior high school and continued to like it." While these short answers may not reveal much about what factors influenced his enjoyment of English study, his broader answers provide additional insights. The participant went to *juku* during junior high and high school and rated both a seven, the same as his junior high and high school experience. Writing about studying English in *juku* during junior high school, he noted: "The teacher who taught me English was interesting," while on his high school-era *juku* experience, he said: "The teacher who taught English was kind." For Shunsuke, his positive experiences with English teachers since junior high school resonate in his responses. Although he had few written reflections in his questionnaire, the frequent spotlighting of good teachers in conjunction with increases in Shunsuke's ratings demonstrate the importance of educators in his LLH.

Rio (no.152), a first-year female student in information design, did not like her junior high school English classes, recording a two on the Likert scale and writing, "I didn't understand." She reemphasized her dislike of junior high school in the high school section of the questionnaire, stating: "I didn't like [English] in junior high, but I found a good teacher and my grades improved, so I came to like it." Rio scored her high school experience a six, an increase influenced by a teacher she liked and an improvement in her academic achievement. Like participant Shunsuke, Rio also singled out her junior high school-era cram

school English teacher as kind and rated that experience a four, two higher than her contemporaneous junior high school classes.

Like Shunsuke and Rio, Keisuke (no.15), a second-year commerce student, similarly cited teachers to explain his like and dislike of English study. Specifically, he had an unfavorable view of his Japanese English teachers and favorable attitudes towards his foreign-born ones. Scoring his junior high school English experience the lowest possible, one, he also pointed out, “My Japanese English teacher was not very interesting.” While his enjoyment of English improved in high school with a score of five, Keisuke still remarked, “I didn't enjoy the English of Japanese teachers.” The higher rating is likely explained by the introduction of foreign-born teachers and the value that Keisuke believes they have: “It was interesting when foreign teachers came [and] I could get used to real English because I could talk with many foreign teachers.”

Difficulty

For some participants, changes in the level of difficulty in English class affected their enjoyment of language study. A second-year female student majoring in community development, Mei (no.16) had many positive comments about studying English in junior high school, an experience she gave the highest possible score, seven: “At first, I disliked reading English. However, when I entered school, I learned how to read long sentences from my English teacher, and I became so good at English that I could almost get a perfect score in English, and I loved it.” Reflecting on her reading strategies, Mei continued, “I also became able to read by drawing lines and circling conjunctions and important words.” Mei’s strong interest in reading is evident as well in her recollections of the junior high school-era cram school which she also scored a seven. However, in contrast to these positive experiences, she recorded a three for her high school experience. On reading, she juxtaposed her junior high and high school experiences: “In junior high school, I liked English because I could read sentences without knowing the meanings of many words, but in high school, the number of words increased and I didn't like it anymore.” Mei’s narrative reveals that her sense of enjoyment was rooted in her ability to read. Once the difficulty level rose past a certain threshold, Mei began to develop a lack of enjoyment in her English study.

Interest

Several students pointed to (the lack of) interest in English as a significant part of their LLH. Yusuke (no.53), a second-year economics major, rated junior high school English a six and mentioned, “It was interesting to read books written in English and listen to Western music at the beginning of class.” By high school, however, his interest waned and the difficulty increased, resulting in a lower, but still favorable, score of four. A female student in her second year studying international culture, Sara (no.9) rated junior high school English a two and high school a four. About junior high school, she wrote, “I didn't enjoy English and didn't understand the content of the class,” a sentiment that continued in her reflection on high school: “I was not good at English in the first and second years of high school.” But, like Yusuke, her interest seemed to have been piqued with the introduction of western culture: “I came to like English through Western movies and music, and decided to study at a university with an international focus.” Yusuke and Sara’s accounts of their LLHs agrees with Mercer and Dornyei’s study (2020) that shows as engagement lowers, so too does enjoyment.

Amount of communicative activities

Three participants highlighted the importance of English communication in their responses. Megumi (no.132), a first-year student studying childhood education, gave her junior high school experience the highest possible rating, noting: “I could communicate and learn with my friends.” Turning to high school which she rated a three, Megumi started to dislike English, adding that it became more difficult and she “wanted to change from memorizing to communicating and engaging in English.” Furthermore, looking to her present university English classes, Megumi opined, “In university [English class], it’s easy to learn because we learn while communicating with each other.” Two first-year female students majoring in international culture, Hina (no.141) and Haruna (no.142), concurred with Megumi quantitatively and qualitatively. Both participants’ enjoyment of English dropped between junior high and high school from seven to five and six to five, respectively. Additionally, Hina and Haruna wanted more chances to speak in their high school English classes.

Megumi, Hina, and Haruna’s desire for more communicative classroom designs agrees with several studies linking social interaction and higher levels of enjoyment. In their

study with 598 Japanese university students, Xethakis et al, (2021) found that social interaction was the second most-cited enjoyable experience (84) in a study measuring FLE and FLCA behind memories of a specific classroom activity (169).

Implications for educators

For educators, this study can be a starting point for thinking about and actively fostering FLE in the classroom. It can offer a chance to reflect on our own teaching practices. Indeed, teachers themselves were a key variable in FLE scores. Students, like Rio who was profiled above, highlighted teachers who provided clear explanations and helped to create an open, welcoming classroom atmosphere in their positive reflections of English class, while some also pointed out a lack of these elements in low FLE scores. A teacher's personality and their ability to make English and themselves interesting was also a key point for participants. As we saw with Keisuke above, the lack of an interesting teacher can lead to a low FLE score. Moving forward, we can work to better scaffold our exercises to improve the students' chances of success. Participants also appreciated supportive teachers. Shunsuke, who gave his junior high school experience a seven, justified his rating by writing simply, "I was praised by a teacher at school." Thus, when possible, it would be beneficial for teachers to interact one-on-one with students on a regular basis, providing feedback, giving appropriate praise, addressing difficult learning objectives, and creating a trusting relationship.

Next, participants also found peer work important in the classroom. When possible, it would be a good idea to introduce peer or small group work into English courses. Although it is important to develop a fruitful teacher-student relationship, it is also valuable to encourage a sense of community within the classroom. Giving junior high school a seven, Megumi pointed out the importance of connecting with her classmates in English class: "I could communicate and learn with my friends." Through this community, students can seek help with course material and find enjoyment in interacting with their peers. Learning becomes a communal experience and the lack of that community is often a negative remark in reflections about high school English classes.

Finally, many students want chances to practice speaking English. Haruna and Hina were disappointed in the lack of speaking opportunities relative to junior high school. Haruna recalled, "I would have liked more opportunities for speaking and learning to create your own English sentences," while Hina said, "I wanted more opportunities for speaking." While

including conversational activities may be easier in a speaking-focused course, speaking can also be effectively integrated into reading classes. For example, using reading and writing as preparatory steps for speaking can both develop classroom communities and help teachers engage with students individually.

Conclusion

Building on research on FLE, this study revealed several dimensions of FLE in the LLHs of 154 Japanese university students and makes a contribution to the slowly, but steadily growing body of research on FLE in Japan. Generally, students tended to gradually dislike their English study as they progressed towards high school. At the individual level, however, we can see a variety of changes in students' enjoyment of their English study. Turning to the qualitative data, students expressed a number of factors that impacted changes in their FLE, including views of teachers, difficulty in studying English, interest in English study, and the amount of oral communication. Here too, we see a diverse range of ways that students have made sense of the FLE and how it changes over time.

Although this study is valuable for offering a glimpse at how FLE can fluctuate over the years, it does have a key limitation. Namely, it is difficult to explore lifelong FLE without interviewing. The questionnaire format has advantages, such as convenience and relatively large sample size. However, examining a small number of rich interviews can open different, but not necessarily better, avenues of exploration.

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