Article

How Foreign Language Emotions Affect Continuation Task Performance: The Mediating Role of Learning Engagement

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Abstract: With the comprehensive advancement of the new College Entrance Examination (CEE) reform, the continuation task, as a core task type for assessing students' higher-order thinking and integrated language proficiency, often triggers complex foreign language emotions among learners due to its high cognitive load. Grounded in the Control-Value Theory (CVT), this quantitative empirical study investigates the dynamic interplay among foreign language emotions (foreign language enjoyment and foreign language anxiety), learning engagement, and continuation task performance, drawing on a sample of 381 Senior Grade One students. The findings reveal that foreign language enjoyment (FLE) not only directly and positively predicts continuation task performance (CTP) but also exerts a significant partial mediating effect through learning engagement (LE). Conversely, foreign language anxiety (FLA) negatively predicts continuation task performance (CTP), and the mediating effect of learning engagement in this path is non-significant. The study suggests that in high-load language output tasks, stimulating positive emotions and enhancing multidimensional learning engagement are more conducive to improving students' continuation task performance than merely suppressing anxiety.

Keywords: foreign language enjoyment; foreign language anxiety; learning engagement; continuation task

1. Introduction

The continuous advancement of the new College Entrance Examination reform has gradually transformed the continuation task from a pilot item into an integral component of high school English assessment. As a task that tightly links reading input with written output, the continuation task requires learners to infer the plot, ensure discourse cohesion, and produce creative expressions based on their comprehension of the source text. Consequently, it assesses not only linguistic knowledge and discourse competence but also higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation [1,2]. For this reason, the continuation task is widely regarded as a crucial pathway to facilitate the reading-writing connection and enhance comprehensive language use ability. However, the high cognitive load and strongly evaluative nature of this task imply that learners' performance depends not solely on their linguistic foundation, but is also significantly influenced by their emotional experiences and state of task engagement. This issue is particularly salient for high school students, who are currently in the phase of adapting to this new task type.

To date, research on the continuation task has long been skewed towards linguistic alignment, textual features, and instructional effectiveness, paying scant attention to learners' emotional experiences. In particular, there is a paucity of empirical studies that simultaneously incorporate foreign language enjoyment (FLE), foreign language anxiety (FLA), and learning engagement into a single model [3,4]. Furthermore, existing research

has predominantly focused on university students. High school students, especially those in ethnic minority regions, exhibit distinct particularities in terms of linguistic foundation, examination pressure, and socio-cultural environment. Therefore, current findings are insufficient to fully explicate their psychological mechanisms during high-load writing tasks. In light of this, the present study investigates the overall characteristics of, and interrelationships among, FLE, FLA, and learning engagement among high school students, as well as their pathways of influence on continuation task performance, further examining the mediating role of learning engagement.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Foreign Language Emotions

In recent years, second language (L2) research has gradually shifted from an exclusive focus on linguistic knowledge and cognitive processing to concurrently addressing learners' emotional experiences and the mechanisms underlying the learning process. The Control-Value Theory (CVT) posits that academic emotions are not directly determined by objective instructional contexts; rather, they are elicited by learners' subjective appraisals of control and value, and they further influence learning processes and outcomes through mediating mechanisms such as cognition and motivation [5]. Therefore, in complex tasks like the continuation task, which entails comprehension, inference, and creative output, foreign language emotions and learning engagement are indispensable. They urgently need to be situated within a core psychological framework to systematically evaluate task effectiveness.

In the research on foreign language emotions, FLE and FLA constitute the two most representative emotional variables. The conceptualization of FLE is founded on the distinction between "enjoyment" and "pleasure," emphasizing the positive experiences learners acquire when breaking through challenges via effort in demanding situations [6]. In the L2 context, FLE is defined as a complex positive emotion arising from overcoming difficulties and achieving growth during classroom interactions and linguistic practices [7]. Conversely, FLA is typically regarded as a complex negative emotion attached to foreign language learning and communicative situations, with its core manifestations involving communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation [8]. Existing studies indicate that FLE is generally correlated with better foreign language performance, whereas FLA maintains a stable association with declined academic achievement [9,10]. Concurrently, recent research has transitioned from investigating single emotions to conducting comprehensive analyses of multiple emotions and ecological factors, placing greater emphasis on the co-constructive roles of the classroom environment, teacher characteristics, and individual learner differences in emotion generation [11,12].

2.2. Learning Engagement

Paralleling the research on emotions is the continuous deepening of studies on learning engagement. Researchers introduced the concept of work engagement into the learning domain, arguing that learning engagement is the antipode of learning burnout [13]. It is defined as a state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption exhibited by individuals during the learning process. Learning engagement has evolved from an early, generalized description of classroom participation into a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, cognitive, and emotional involvement [14]. In the context of language learning, engagement is particularly manifested in learners' sustained participation, strategy application, emotional involvement, and interactive negotiation during tasks [15]. A substantial body of research demonstrates that learning engagement is a critical variable for explaining learning outcomes; when learners maintain higher levels of cognitive processing and behavioral participation in a task, their learning outcomes are generally more optimal [16]. Specifically in the domain of L2 writing,

previous studies have confirmed a significant positive correlation between learning engagement and writing quality, with cognitive and behavioral engagement demonstrating particularly salient explanatory power [17,18]. This implies that when analyzing continuation task performance, explanations relying solely on linguistic knowledge or strategy use are insufficient to uncover the deep-seated sources of variance in learners' task performance.

2.3. The Continuation Task

The continuation task, a paradigm encompassing both input and creative output, provides a highly fitting research ecology for exploring the complex interplay of the aforementioned psychological variables. The continuation task is regarded as a crucial task format that compels learners to establish deep interaction between reading input and written output, thereby achieving "creative imitation" [19]. Existing literature shows that this task not only enhances writing accuracy, complexity, and fluency but also facilitates vocabulary learning and linguistic alignment [20-24]. Meanwhile, as research boundaries have extended from superficial linguistic features to learners' psychological mechanisms, scholars have begun to focus on emotional experiences within the continuation task. Relevant studies reveal that the comparative continuation task helps alleviate L2 writing anxiety, and different combinations of reading-writing enjoyment and anxiety lead to differential task performance, among which the "moderate enjoyment-low anxiety" combination is more conducive to task completion [25,26].

Building on this foundation, the relationship among foreign language emotions, learning engagement, and the continuation task has presented a relatively clear logical chain. On the one hand, academic emotions and learning engagement are not parallel to each other but exhibit significant synergy; positive emotions are more likely to enhance learners' participation, persistence, and interaction, while negative emotions are more prone to attenuate their engagement levels [27-29]. On the other hand, existing research specifically addressing the continuation task has corroborated the link between learning engagement and task performance: learning engagement is significantly and positively correlated with continuation task performance, and cognitive engagement is particularly pivotal in predicting performance. Only by achieving multidimensional, high-level engagement are learners more likely to gain an advantage in linguistic expression and critical thinking performance [30,31]. Overall, however, current research on the continuation task still exhibits a tendency to emphasize linguistic alignment while neglecting psychological mechanisms, and direct empirical tests incorporating emotions, engagement, and task performance into a single analytical framework remain limited [32]. Therefore, proceeding from the "foreign language emotion→learning engagement→continuation task performance" chain to systematically investigate the psychological mechanisms of high school English learners during the continuation task not only powerfully supplements and enriches existing research perspectives but also helps propel continuation task research from superficial outcome description toward profound mechanistic explanation.

3. Research Questions

In summary, existing research on differences in foreign language academic emotions and learning states mostly focuses on conventional learning contexts, with insufficient attention paid to the high-cognitive-load continuation task under the background of the new College Entrance Examination (CEE) reform. Furthermore, although previous studies have explored differences in emotions and engagement triggered by learners' intrinsic demographic characteristics, the conclusions remain inconsistent due to sociocultural constraints. For instance, there is still debate in the academic community regarding the impact of gender on emotions [33-35]. The profound influence of specific group attributes and sociocultural backgrounds on emotional expression needs to be

further elucidated within the unique ethnic and cultural ecology of high school students. Meanwhile, grounded in the Control-Value Theory (CVT), divergences exist regarding the mediating mechanism of LE between academic emotions and academic performance [36]. This mediating path is highly susceptible to specific group characteristics and test tasks; whether it applies to the specific context of high school students facing complex language output tasks still awaits adequate empirical testing.

In light of this, situated within the unique ecology of Senior Grade One students at a high school, the present study investigates their current state of foreign language academic emotions (FLE and FLA) and LE during the initial stage of adapting to the continuation task under the new CEE. It subsequently explores the interrelationships among the core variables and finally provides an in-depth analysis of the mediating mechanism of LE between foreign language emotions and Continuation Task Performance (CTP). The specific research questions are as follows:

1. What are the overall levels and distribution characteristics of FLE, FLA, LE and CTP among high school students? Are there significant inter-group differences in these variables across demographic characteristics?

2. What are the correlations among FLE, FLA, LE and CTP among high school students?

3. What mediating role does LE play in the relationship between foreign language academic emotions (FLE and FLA) and CTP among high school students?

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Participants and Context

Conducted against the backdrop of the teaching reform wherein the continuation task was comprehensively introduced into the "new CEE," this study selected Senior Grade One students from a high school as the primary participants. A total of 381 valid questionnaires were collected. The sample maintained a balanced gender distribution (males: 50.13%; females: 49.87%). The ethnic composition primarily consisted of Tibetan students (77.95%), followed by Han students (19.95%) and students of other ethnicities (2.10%).

4.2. Instruments

4.2.1. Foreign Language Anxiety Scale

The Foreign Language Anxiety Scale contains 6 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, utilized to measure learners' nervousness in the English classroom. The Cronbach's α coefficient for this scale was .888.

4.2.2. Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale

The Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale drew upon the instrument developed by Khajavy et al. (2018). It comprises 3 items that positively evaluate the individual's positive affective state in English learning, with a Cronbach's α coefficient of .862. The construct validity of the foreign language emotion model was highly ideal: CMIN/df = 2.625 < 3, RMSEA = .065 < .08, PGFI = .555 > .5, CFI = .976 > .9, IFI = .976 > .9, GFI = .961 > .9, AGFI = .932 > .9, NFI = .962 > .9, and RFI = .947 > .9.

4.2.3. Learning Engagement Scale

The Foreign Language Learning Engagement Scale was revised to fit the foreign language context. It encompasses four sub-dimensions: cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social engagement. After purification via Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), 21 items were retained, yielding a Cronbach's α coefficient of .926. The initial construct validity indices were: CMIN/df = 2.919 < 3, RMSEA = .071 < .08, PGFI = .694 > .5, CFI = .923, IFI = .923, GFI = .876, AGFI = .843, NFI = .887, and RFI = .871. As suggested by Doll, Xia, and Torkzadeh

(1994), when the number of estimated parameters in a model increases, the standard >.90 can be appropriately relaxed to .80, indicating that the model construction is reasonable.

The EFA results revealed a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value of .899 and a significant Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p < .001$), indicating strong partial correlations within the data suitable for factor analysis. Six common factors were extracted, explaining 67.884% of the cumulative variance, and the variance explained by the first principal factor did not exceed the 40% threshold, ruling out severe Common Method Bias (CMB). Furthermore, the standardized factor loadings for all scales were > .6, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were > .5, and Composite Reliability (CR) values were above the .7 threshold. The square root of the AVE for each latent variable was greater than the absolute value of its correlation coefficients, demonstrating good discriminant validity. The final Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) validity indices (CMIN/df = 2.143 < 3, RMSEA = .055 < .08, PGFI = .740 > .5, CFI = .924, IFI = .924, GFI = .862, AGFI = .839, NFI = .866, RFI = .854) confirmed that the model construction was highly reasonable.

4.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire survey was distributed and collected collectively by class. A total of 399 questionnaires were distributed, and 396 were collected on-site. During the data entry phase, invalid questionnaires with missing key data or extreme patterned responses were strictly eliminated, ultimately retaining 381 valid matched samples. The Continuation Task Performance (CTP) was obtained from the school's final standardized city-wide English joint examination (out of a maximum 25 points). It was evaluated by a unified municipal grading panel according to the CEE scoring rubrics to maximize the objectivity and reliability of the dependent variable data.

Upon completion of data entry and cleaning, this study employed SPSS 27.0 and AMOS 26.0 statistical software for data processing. The specific analytical steps were as follows: First, reliability and validity testing of the scales and a CMB check were conducted. Second, descriptive statistics were performed to assess participants' current states of emotions and engagement. Third, independent samples t-tests and one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were utilized to examine differences across demographic variables. Finally, based on Pearson correlation analysis verifying pairwise relationships among the variables, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was constructed to deeply analyze the paths and mechanisms of learning engagement between academic emotions and CTP.

5. Results

5.1. Overall State and Differences in Foreign Language Emotions and LE Among High School Students

Descriptive statistics revealed that the participants' scores in the continuation task exhibited a distinctly positive skewed distribution (skewness = 2.407), with 76.38% of the sample clustered in the extremely low score range of 1 to 5. This indicates a certain floor effect, objectively reflecting that this task type imposes a high cognitive load on Senior Grade One students in this region. Regarding academic emotions and LE, students' FLA (M = 3.144, SD = 0.861) was slightly higher than FLE (M = 3.053, SD = 1.010), with both falling within the moderate level. Overall LE was at an upper-middle level (M = 3.378, SD = 0.605), with emotional engagement being the highest and cognitive engagement the weakest. Normality tests of the data indicated that the absolute values of skewness and kurtosis for all key variables were less than 3 and 8, respectively, conforming to the lenient criteria for approximate normal distribution in Structural Equation Modeling.

Difference tests further revealed the impact of demographic characteristics on the research variables. Independent samples t-tests showed that females scored significantly higher than males in total LE and its four sub-dimensions (behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social), as well as in FLA levels ($p < .05$), but there were no significant

gender differences in FLE. One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) results showed that Han students scored significantly higher than Tibetan and other ethnic minority students in overall LE, the sub-dimensions of cognitive and emotional engagement, and FLA. Conversely, Tibetan students reported significantly higher FLE experiences than other groups.

5.2. Correlations Among Foreign Language Emotions, LE, and CTP for High School Students

As shown in Table 1, the results indicated that FLE was significantly and positively correlated with CTP (r = .263, p < .01) and LE (r = .224, p < .01), verifying the facilitative role of positive emotions in language processing and learning motivation. Conversely, FLA showed a significantly weak negative correlation with CTP (r = -.226, p < .01) and LE (r = -.113, p < .05). Furthermore, a significant inverse relationship was observed internally between anxiety and enjoyment (r = -.374, p < .01). LE itself also demonstrated a significant positive correlation with the final CTP (r = .236, p < .01).

Table 1. Correlations Among the Variables.

Variable	CTP	FLA	FLE	LE
CTP	1			
FLA	-0.226**	1		
FLE	0.263**	-0.374**	1	
LE	0.236**	-0.113*	0.224**	1

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

5.3. Influence Mechanism of Foreign Language Emotions on CTP Among High School Students: The Mediating Role of LE

The results of the structural equation modeling and mediation analysis are summarized in Table 2 and Table 3. The tests for direct and mediating effects revealed that FLE not only had a significant direct positive predictive effect on CTP (β= .176, p = .001), but also produced a significant partial mediating effect through LE (indirect effect β= .044, 95% CI [0.008, 0.096]), accounting for 20.1% of the total effect. In contrast, the direct impact of FLA on LE did not reach statistical significance (β= -.025, p = .677), and LE did not exhibit a mediating effect between FLA and CTP (the 95% CI included 0). FLA primarily and significantly predicted CTP negatively through a direct path (β= -.159, p = .013). The above quantitative results clearly delineate the differential pathways through which positive and negative academic emotions drive high-difficulty L2 output tasks.

Table 2. (Structural Path Coefficients).

Path	β	B	SE	CR	p
FLA→LE	-.025	-.016	.039	-.416	.677
FLE→LE	.245	.160	.041	3.927	.000***
LE→CTS	.177	1.027	.335	3.065	.002**
FLA→CTS	-.159	-.607	.200	-3.038	.002**
FLE→CTS	.176	.662	.207	3.205	.001**

Table 3. (Decomposed Effects on CTP).

Path	Effect	β	95% CI	p
FLA→LE→CTS	Direct effect	-.159	[-0.283, -0.036]	.013*
	Indirect effect	-.004	[-0.035, 0.029]	.823
	Total effect	-.163	[-0.284, -0.041]	.012*
FLE→LE→CTS	Direct effect	.176	[0.064, 0.280]	.003**
	Indirect effect	.044	[0.008, 0.096]	.009**

Total effect	.219	[0.108, 0.324]	.000***

6. Discussion

6.1. Overall State and Differences in Foreign Language Emotions and LE Among High School Students

Both FLE and FLA among high school students are at a moderate level, though FLA is slightly higher than FLE (M_{FLE} = 3.053; M_{FLA} = 3.144). This indicates that while students can derive certain positive experiences from the high-cognitive-load continuation task, it is more frequently accompanied by feelings of tension and uncertainty. FLA is fundamentally a complex emotional response triggered collectively by self-evaluation, communicative pressure, and task demands within the foreign language learning context [37], whereas foreign language emotions fluctuate dynamically with individual characteristics and environmental conditions [38]. For the sample in this study, the continuation task requires the simultaneous execution of text comprehension, plot construction, and linguistic output; this high task complexity easily compresses the enjoyment experience and amplifies processing anxiety [39]. From the perspective of the Control-Value Theory, when students perceive a lack of control over a task, positive emotions tend to attenuate while negative emotions are more easily activated [40]. Therefore, the finding that "anxiety is higher than enjoyment" in this study reflects not only the inherent difficulty of the task but also the superimposed effects of evaluative and adaptive pressures during high school.

Females exhibited significantly higher FLA than males, while there were no significant gender differences in FLE. This suggests that gender differences are primarily manifested in sensitivity to errors and evaluations, rather than in the overall level of positive emotions. Existing research notes that females are more prone to exhibiting anxiety in language learning and attach greater importance to teacher and peer feedback (Horwitz et al., 1986); thus, they are more susceptible to fear of negative evaluation in comprehensive output tasks like the continuation task. Regarding ethnic differences, Han students showed higher anxiety, while Tibetan students reported higher enjoyment. Under varying sociocultural and educational contexts, familial expectations for higher education, cross-regional schooling adaptation, and perceptions of competitive evaluation all influence students' emotional experiences.

In terms of LE, students overall were at an upper-middle level (M = 3.378), with emotional engagement being the highest and cognitive engagement the lowest. This indicates that students do not lack the willingness to participate, but still exhibit deficiencies in deep strategy application and sustained reflection. When task content possesses a certain appeal and students have some autonomous space, emotional engagement is more easily stimulated; however, when task difficulty exceeds their current proficiency level, the sense of competence is frustrated, leading to an initial decline in cognitive engagement. Behavioral and social engagement were at intermediate levels, suggesting that students can maintain basic participation, but this participation does not necessarily translate into high-quality deep processing. Difference tests revealed that females scored higher than males in overall LE and its sub-dimensions, which aligns with previous findings that females generally exhibit greater persistence and task responsibility in complex language tasks. Regarding the ethnicity variable, Han students scored slightly higher than other groups in overall, cognitive, and emotional engagement, whereas social engagement showed no significant differences. This may imply that some ethnic minority students face a more complex L3 (third language) switching load in English learning, thereby attenuating their sense of competence and sustained engagement in high-difficulty tasks.

6.2. Correlations Among Foreign Language Emotions, LE, and CTP for High School Students

FLE was significantly and positively correlated with CTP (r = .263, p < .01), FLA was significantly and negatively correlated with CTP (r = -.226, p < .01), and LE was also significantly and positively correlated with CTP (r = .236, p < .01). This demonstrates that in the continuation task, enjoyment is not merely a positive feeling but more likely facilitates writing performance by broadening the scope of attention, enhancing the willingness to express, and sustaining task persistence. Conversely, anxiety occupies limited cognitive resources and interferes with textual integration and linguistic output, thereby inhibiting continuation performance. The positive correlation between LE and CTP further underscores that sustained effort, strategy use, and emotional identification with the task remain critical conditions for achieving good performance in the continuation task, which places equal emphasis on input and output.

6.3. Influence Mechanism of Foreign Language Emotions on CTP Among High School Students: The Mediating Role of LE

LE plays a partial mediating role in the "FLE → CTP" path. This indicates that FLE not only directly promotes continuation performance but also indirectly improves scores by enhancing students' participation, persistence, and strategic engagement. This finding is consistent with the view that positive emotions can broaden an individual's cognitive and behavioral resources, thereby enhancing task engagement. In contrast, the indirect effect of the "FLA → LE → CTP" path was non-significant, suggesting that anxiety does not stably affect scores through LE; rather, it primarily impairs performance through a direct path. Anxiety possesses both facilitative and debilitative properties, and these two effects offset each other at the behavioral level, rendering its net effect on observable LE non-significant. However, at the cognitive level, high anxiety still undermines the sense of competence and interferes with working memory processing, ultimately directly reducing writing quality.

Overall, this study demonstrates that in a high-load language output task like the continuation task, fostering positive emotions is more effective in leveraging LE and improving performance than merely reducing negative emotions. In other words, pedagogical interventions should not be limited to "anxiety reduction" but should focus on promoting more stable FLE and higher-quality LE by enhancing the sense of task controllability, competence, and supportive interactions [41].

7. Conclusion

This study explored the relationships and influence mechanisms among foreign language emotions, LE, and CTP among high school students. Overall, FLE and LE significantly and positively predict CTP, while FLA constraints learners' linguistic output and alignment effects to a certain extent. This finding not only validates the applicability of the Control-Value Theory within the continuation task context but also further elucidates the dynamic interactive mechanisms of non-intellectual factors in the L2 acquisition process.

Based on these findings, this study offers the following recommendations for optimizing continuation task pedagogy. Regarding teacher support, daily instruction should resolutely implement the concept of "separating teaching from testing" to guard against exacerbating student anxiety through "replacing teaching with testing." Simultaneously, task difficulty should be scientifically controlled, and generative AI could be utilized to provide differentiated pre-reading texts to meet the competence needs of students at varying proficiency levels. Furthermore, teachers can build scaffolds for textual comprehension by integrating local cultural elements. At the level of internal individual strategies and collaboration, students need to deepen their cognitive engagement and cultivate the habit of repeatedly "re-reading" the source text to trigger structural priming. They also need to transform extrinsic test-driven motivation into intrinsic developmental motivation, achieving visualization of language proficiency

growth by establishing a "writing feedback portfolio." Conducting peer alignment and assessment for learning to build deep peer-scaffolding interactions is also an effective pathway to deepen social engagement and break through bottlenecks in language development.

Despite yielding beneficial conclusions and pedagogical implications, this study has certain limitations. First, the research sample is limited and fails to encompass a broader range of educational stages and regions, which restricts the ecological validity of the findings. Second, relying solely on a single standardized final examination score as the metric for output quality is somewhat one-dimensional; there is an urgent need in future research to construct a multidimensional measurement system integrating formative and summative assessments. Finally, the cross-sectional research design and self-report questionnaires struggle to accurately capture the real-time dynamic fluctuations of emotions during the writing process. Future studies could introduce longitudinal tracking designs and multimodal data collection methods (e.g., eye-tracking, galvanic skin response) to more objectively monitor learners' emotional undulations and cognitive processing states during writing.

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