

FOREIGN LANGUAGE ENJOYMENT AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN ACADEMIC RESILIENCE AND WTC: IMPLICATIONS FOR QUALITY EDUCATION (SDG 4)

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this study is to investigate the relationships among academic resilience (AR), foreign language enjoyment (FLE), and second language willingness to communicate (WTC), with the aim of emphasising emotional and psychological factors in language learning, in alignment with SDG 4: Quality Education.

Theoretical Framework: In this topic, the main concepts and theories that underpin the research are presented. The Model of Motivation and the Broad-and-Build Theory (BBT) of positive emotions stand out, providing a solid basis for understanding the context of the investigation.

Method: The methodology adopted for this research comprises a quantitative approach, with data collected through a questionnaire administered to 306 undergraduates. Correlation, regression, and mediation analyses were employed to assess the relationships among AR, FLE, and L2 WTC.

Results and Discussion: The results obtained revealed significant correlations between AR, FLE, and L2 WTC. These findings are interpreted through BBT, highlighting how positive emotions foster resilience and communication willingness. Limitations, including convenience sampling and the cross-sectional design, are also discussed.

Research Implications: The practical and theoretical implications are discussed, offering insights on L2 learning practices by fostering supportive environments and positive emotional experiences, contributing to quality education.

Originality/Value: This study contributes to the literature by exploring FLE as a mediator between AR and L2 WTC in the Chinese second language acquisition context, with potential to influence both theoretical advancements in Positive Psychology and practical L2 teaching strategies, supporting the global agenda for SDG 4.

Keywords: academic resilience, foreign language enjoyment, willingness to communicate, second language acquisition, SDG 4, sustainable development goals (SDG).

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1 INTRODUCTION

Willingness to communicate in a second language (L2 WTC), defined as the “readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2” (MacIntyre *et al.*, 1998, p. 547), is widely acknowledged as both a precursor to speaking in L2 and a final hurdle before engaging in authentic L2 use (Oveisi & Nosratinia, 2019). It has emerged as a pivotal goal in second language acquisition (SLA) and a key determinant of communicative success (MacIntyre *et al.*, 1998). Most research on L2 WTC has concentrated on its influencing factors, particularly within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context.

One such factor is academic resilience (AR), defined as the capacity to cope with academic challenges and stress (Martin & Marsh, 2006). Recent studies indicate that AR significantly predicts L2 WTC (e.g., Oveisi & Nosratinia, 2019), enhancing learners’ capacity to sustain effective communication in the face of academic stressors. In China, English majors experience unique challenges, balancing the demands of academic achievement with career aspirations. Their communicative competence, often accounting for a significant portion (40%) of academic assessments, plays a crucial role in both coursework and high-stakes exams, such as the Test for English Majors (TEM), which affects postgraduate opportunities and employment prospects (Qian & Cumming, 2017). In this context, AR emerges as a key factor supporting students’ adaptability, perseverance, and sustained L2 engagement.

Another influential factor is foreign language enjoyment (FLE), defined as a positive emotion associated with language learning, which has been shown to boost L2 WTC (Kun *et al.*, 2020). However, the role of FLE as a mediator between AR and L2 WTC remains under-explored, particularly within the Chinese EFL context.

This study contributes to SDG 4 (Quality Education), aiming to enhance language learning environments and educational outcomes by examining the psychological and emotional factors that influence L2 WTC.

Objectives:

- a) Examining the relationships among AR, FLE, and L2 WTC;



- b) Comparing the predictive effects of AR and FLE on L2 WTC among Chinese university students;
- c) Investigating whether FLE mediates the relationship between AR and L2 WTC.

Through these objectives, this study seeks to deepen understanding of how psychological and emotional factors interact to shape L2 WTC and provide practical insights for optimising language learning environments in China, ultimately contributing to the achievement of SDG 4.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the field of resilience research, risk factors are generally conceptualised as “negative predictors of individuals’ development” (Li, 2017, p.2), whereas protective factors are viewed as elements that can mediate or modify the adverse effects of risk, rather than directly fostering normative development (Li, 2017; Rutter, 1985). Within educational contexts, students demonstrating AR typically exhibit higher levels of protective factors and/or lower levels of risk factors. These factors, as outlined in the Model of Motivation (Martin, 2002), are classified as “boosters” and “guzzlers”, respectively, with boosters fostering resilience and guzzlers inhibiting it. To effectively cope with the pressures and stresses inherent in L2 learning, students must work to enhance their boosters while minimising their guzzlers. This balance fosters AR, enabling students to overcome setbacks and thrive in their learning environments. An elevated level of boosters or a reduced presence of guzzlers contributes to increased motivation and engagement, thereby enhancing academic outcomes and self-perceived L2 proficiency.

Motivation has been closely linked to the perceived internal locus of control, where internal reinforcements such as personal interest and excitement play a pivotal role (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Engagement, similarly, is influenced by students’ affective learning experiences (Oga-Baldwin, 2019). Both motivation and engagement are, inherently, emotional processes. This



emotional component is particularly prominent in the case of AR, which is increasingly recognised for its connection to students' emotional states. The Broad-and-Build Theory (BBT) (Fredrickson, 2001) offers a theoretical explanation for this relationship, positing that positive emotions, such as FLE, broaden students' cognitive and behavioral repertoires. This expansion facilitates the absorption of new information, thereby enhancing students' capacity to continue learning and improving their L2 proficiency. In the context of SLA, this theory suggests that positive emotions like FLE contribute to more effective language learning by expanding students' cognitive resources.

Theoretical frameworks such as the BBT have sparked a new wave of psychological and emotional studies that explore the interactions between resilience, motivation, engagement, and L2 learning. Previous literature has investigated the relationship between AR and L2 WTC (e.g., Oveisi & Nosratinia, 2019), the connection between FLE and WTC (e.g., Dewaele, 2019), and the association between resilience and foreign language teaching enjoyment (e.g., Ergün & Dewaele, 2021). However, the relationships among AR, FLE, and L2 WTC remain inconclusive. While previous studies have examined these variables in isolation, few have explored their interconnectedness within a unified framework. To the best of our knowledge, no research has yet investigated the relationships among AR, FLE, and L2 WTC specifically within the context of English major students.

Therefore, the present study adopts Martin's (2002) Model of Motivation and AR to conceptualise AR as a psychological antecedent of L2 WTC and theorise FLE as a positive emotion grounded in the BBT. This study aims to explore the interrelationships among these constructs, offering new insights into the complex dynamics that influence students' readiness to communicate in a L2.

2.2 AR AND L2 WTC

Resilience, the hypernym of AR, is recognised as a positive form of adaptation that may influence the development of WTC in a L2 (Abbott *et al.*, 2009). This relationship has garnered significant academic interest. Studies



suggest that emotions, especially positive ones, enhance students' L2 WTC (Dewaele, 2019), indicating that AR, either alone or combined with emotional factors, plays a crucial role in learners' academic performance and language outcomes (Abbott *et al.*, 2009).

Two perspectives dominate the discussion on the connection between resilience and academic achievement. On one hand, several studies have found a significant positive correlation between resilience and success. Kim and Kim (2017) identified persistence—an aspect of resilience—as a key factor in L2 proficiency. Similarly, Najafzadeh *et al.* (2018) demonstrated that resilience predicted language achievement in Iranian English learners, while Liu and Han (2022) found a positive, though weak, correlation between resilience and English achievement in Chinese high school students. On the other hand, some studies report no direct relationship between resilience and academic success. For instance, Toprak Çelen (2020) found no significant impact of AR on academic performance, and Xie *et al.* (2021) similarly found no direct link between AR and academic achievement in Chinese eighth-grade students, suggesting that positive emotions may mediate this relationship.

The connection between AR and L2 WTC remains underexplored in the context of SLA. The study by Oveisi and Nosratinia (2019) is one of the few to examine this link, finding a positive correlation between psychological resilience and WTC. This supports the hypothesis that AR may significantly influence L2 WTC. Consequently, the present study hypothesises that AR will impact L2 WTC among Chinese English learners.

2.3 AR AND EMOTIONS

Resilience has been widely recognized as an inner strength that allows individuals to function despite adversity. In L2 learning, AR has been particularly explored to understand the psychological processes that help learners overcome obstacles in language acquisition (Quinto & Castillo, 2016). Recently, there has been growing interest in the role of emotions, particularly positive emotions, in fostering resilience, supported by Fredrickson's (2001) BBT. This theory posits that positive emotions expand cognitive and behavioral



repertoires, which in turn help individuals build resilience (ibid).

Positive emotions, such as joy and pride, are essential for fostering resilience, as they enable individuals to cope with academic and personal challenges (Ong *et al.*, 2010). In contrast, negative emotions tend to limit cognitive flexibility, leading to lower resilience. However, the impact of negative emotions on resilience is not uniform across individuals. Some learners may experience functional impairments when facing negative emotions, while others may demonstrate remarkable mental toughness.

The dynamic nature of resilience, shaped by personal and environmental factors, further complicates the relationship between AR and emotions. Resilience is not a static trait but a process shaped by ongoing interactions between the individual and their environment (González *et al.*, 2019).

This section underscores the importance of both positive and negative emotions in shaping resilience and how these factors interact in the context of L2 learning.

2.4 EMOTIONS AND L2 WTC

The role of emotions in L2 WTC has been widely discussed, with both situational and individual factors influencing this construct. Research has consistently shown that emotions play a significant role in L2 WTC. While negative emotions, particularly anxiety, have been extensively researched and found to negatively impact WTC (Peng & Woodrow, 2010), less attention has been paid to positive emotions. Positive emotions, especially FLE, have been shown to have a weak but positive effect on L2 WTC (e.g., Khajavy *et al.*, 2018). FLE is described as “a complex emotion, capturing interacting dimensions of challenge and perceived ability that can reflect the human drive for success in the face of difficult tasks” (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016, p.216). While the relationship between FLE and L2 WTC is less explored, existing studies suggest that FLE plays a role in enhancing learners' WTC in the target language.

Given the limited research on the interplay between AR, emotions, and L2 WTC, there is a clear need for further exploration in this area. Moreover, cultural contexts, such as the Chinese context, must be considered, as most



existing studies focus on Western settings. This study, therefore, seeks to investigate the relationships between AR, FLE, and L2 WTC in Chinese students, addressing the following research questions:

- (1) What are the relationships among students' AR, L2 WTC, and FLE in the Chinese context?
- (2) Is there a significant difference between the predictive effects of students' AR and FLE on their L2 WTC in the Chinese context?
- (3) Does students' FLE mediate the relationship between AR and L2 WTC in the Chinese context?

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 PARTICIPANTS

A total of 306 Chinese undergraduate English majors (92.48% female) aged 17 to 23 ($M_{age}=19.02$, $SD=1.48$) participated in the study at a central China-based normal university. All participants were studying EFL and were required to demonstrate their language proficiency through successful performance in various assessments, including oral English tests, national English tests, employment interviews, and postgraduate entrance interviews.

3.2 INSTRUMENTS

3.2.1 AR scale

A 6-item AR scale (Martin & Marsh, 2006) was used to assess participants' AR levels, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). The scale demonstrated good reliability (Cronbach's Alpha=0.84) and construct validity (KMO=0.86, Bartlett's test=0.000, $p<0.05$). According to Hu and Bentler (1999), the model fits well when $\chi^2/df<3$, $TLI>0.90$, $CFI>0.90$, $RMSEA<0.06$, and $SRMR<0.08$. The fit indices of AR scale in present study indicated good model fit ($\chi^2/df=2.60$, $TLI=0.97$, $CFI=0.98$, $RMSEA=0.07$, $SRMR=0.03$).



3.2.2 L2 WTC scale

The L2 WTC scale, comprising four items for classroom WTC and three for outside classroom WTC (Lee *et al.*, 2021), was rated on a 5-point scale (1=definitely not willing to 5=definitely willing). The scale showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha=0.87) and construct validity (KMO=0.86, Bartlett's test=0.000, $p<0.05$). Model fit indices of L2 WTC supported good validity ($\chi^2/df=2.88$, $TLI=0.96$, $CFI=0.98$, $RMSEA=0.08$, $SRMR=0.03$).

3.2.3 FLE scale

The 11-item modified FLE scale (Li, 2020), adapted from Dewaele and MacIntyre's (2014) 21-item version, assessed students' FLE. The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha=0.88) and construct validity (KMO=0.85, Bartlett's test=0.000, $p<0.05$). Fit indices of FLE scale confirmed good model fit ($\chi^2/df=2.23$, $TLI=0.97$, $CFI=0.98$, $RMSEA=0.06$, $SRMR=0.07$).

3.3 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

To achieve the study's aims and address the three research questions, an online convenience sampling survey was conducted using Wenjuanxing, where a composite questionnaire was uploaded. A QR code linking to the survey was distributed to students in a classroom setting. Informed consent was obtained, and participation was voluntary. Participants were given approximately 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Data were analysed using IBM SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0 to address the research questions.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Before addressing the first two research questions, the reliability, validity, linear relationships, homoscedasticity, and normality of the data will



be examined, with preliminary analyses for the third research question reported afterward.

To assess the linear relationships among AR, FLE, and L2 WTC, scatter plots revealed no non-linear patterns, confirming linearity and homoscedasticity. Normality tests showed both skewness and kurtosis values of studied variables between 1 and -1 as shown in Table 1, indicating normal distributions (Kunnan, 1998).

Table 1

Descriptive statistics and correlations matrix.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Tolerance	VIF	Skewness	Kurtosis	AR	FLE	L2WTC
AR	4.85	0.87	0.78	1.28	0.20	-0.32	1		
FLE	3.66	0.68	0.78	1.28	0.34	-0.22	0.47**	1	
L2 WTC	3.27	0.68			0.37	0.17	0.35**	0.42**	1

VIF = variance expansion coefficient; ** $p < 0.01$

Thus, Pearson's rho was used for correlation analysis, revealing significant positive correlations among all three variables (AR and FLE, AR and L2 WTC, FLE and L2 WTC, $p < 0.01$). A multiple regression analysis (Table 1) showed no multicollinearity ($VIF < 5$) and no autocorrelation (Durbin-Watson < 2), confirming the model's suitability.

Table 2

Coefficients for AR and FLE (n=306).

	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	p	95% CI
	B	Std. E	Beta			
	1.32	0.23	-	5.78	0.000	0.87~1.77
AR	0.16	0.05	0.20	3.40	0.001	0.07~0.25
FLE	0.33	0.06	0.32	5.57	0.000	0.21~0.44

Dependent variable, L2WTC; Std. E = standard Error. CI = confidence interval.

As demonstrated in Table 3, AR and FLE together predicted 20.3% of the variance in L2 WTC, with FLE ($\beta = 0.32$, $p = 0.000$) emerging as the stronger predictor compared to AR ($\beta = 0.20$, $p = 0.001$) as shown in Table 2.

**Table 3***Model summary for AR, FLE and L2WTC.*

R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Model Error	Std. RMSE	DW	AIC	BIC
0.45	0.203	0.20	0.61		1.86	571.21	582.38

Predictors: AR and FLE; Dependent variable: L2WTC; Std.= standard; RMSE = Root Mean Squared Error; DW = Durbin-Watson; AIC = Akaike Information Criterion; BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion.

Regarding the mediating role of FLE, as shown in Table 4, the total effect of AR on L2 WTC was 0.27 [$z=6.48$, 95% bias-corrected CI (0.19, 0.38), $p<0.001$], and the direct effect of AR on L2 WTC was 0.155 [$z=3.40$, 95% bias-corrected CI (0.07, 0.25), $p<0.05$]. These results indicate that both the total and direct effects of AR on L2 WTC were statistically significant.

Table 4*Mediation analysis: AR=>FLE=>L2 WTC.*

	Meaning	Effect	95% CI		Std.E	z or t	p	Conclusion
			Lower	Upper				
AR=>FLE=>L2 WTC a*b	Indirect	E 0.12	0.08	0.23	0.04	3.15	0.002	Partial Mediating Effect (43.37%)
AR=>FLE a	X=>M	0.37	0.29	0.44	0.04	9.22	0.000	
FLE=>L2 WTC b	M=>Y	0.33	0.21	0.44	0.06	5.57	0.000	
AR=>L2 WTC c'	Direct	E 0.16	0.07	0.25	0.05	3.40	0.001	
AR=>L2 WTC c	Total	E 0.27	0.19	0.36	0.04	6.48	0.000	

Std.E=, standard error; 95% CI = 95% confidence intervals.

Additionally, the SEM analysis confirmed that FLE partially mediates the relationship between AR and L2 WTC. The effect of FLE on L2 WTC was significant ($\beta=0.33$, $p<0.01$), illustrating that FLE plays a role in the mechanism through which AR influences L2 WTC. Results of the bootstrap analysis in table 5 show the direct, indirect, and total effects of AR on L2 WTC, with the mediating role of FLE. The 95% confidence interval for the total indirect effect of FLE was [0.08, 0.23] excluding 0, and the proposed structural model had a good fit to the data ($\chi^2/df=1.79$, TLI=0.94, CFI=0.95, RMSEA=0.05, SRMR=0.07), suggesting a significant mediation effect (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Taylor *et al.*, 2008).

**Table 5***95% Confidence interval of the effect sizes.*

Item	c Total Effect	a	b	a*b Mediating Effect	c' Direct Effect
AR=>FLE=>L2WTC	0.19~0.36	0.29~0.44	0.21~0.44	0.08~0.23	0.07~0.25

a*b = 95% bootstrap confidence intervals.

The primary aim of this study was to explore the relationships among students' AR, FLE, and L2 WTC, and to examine whether FLE mediates the connection between AR and L2 WTC. The findings revealed significant positive correlations among AR, FLE, and L2 WTC, supporting previous research by Liu and Han (2022) and Kim and Kim (2017).

The results suggest that students with higher levels of AR are more success-oriented in improving their L2 WTC and communication skills, even in the face of setbacks, challenges, or stress related to pronunciation and intonation learning. These students tend to respond proactively and positively, activating their volitional and motivational systems. This aligns with existing research on AR's protective factors, particularly individual traits such as a positive temperament, internal locus of control, high self-esteem, optimism, and moderate to high intelligence (McMillan & Reed, 1994). On the other hand, the study also suggests that if educators fail to adequately address students' AR and FLE, students may struggle to activate their L2 WTC, which could hinder their communication skill development. This highlights the significance of FLE in supporting AR, particularly among Chinese college L2 learners facing academic and employment pressures. The findings contribute to understanding how these two factors, AR and FLE, can motivate students to enhance their L2 WTC in competitive academic settings.

Moreover, this study provides new insights into the interaction between AR, FLE, and L2 WTC, offering valuable implications for identifying ways to maintain high protective factors and reduce risk factors in the Chinese context. The study also provides empirical support for Martin's (2002) Model of Motivation and AR, demonstrating that L2 WTC is influenced by both positive adaptation and emotional factors, which have not been sufficiently explored in prior research.





The second research question explored whether there is a significant difference between students' AR and FLE in predicting their L2 WTC. The results indicated that FLE was a stronger predictor of L2 WTC than AR, supporting Khajavy *et al.* (2018), who emphasised the role of enjoyment in enhancing WTC at both the individual and classroom levels. Students with higher levels of enjoyment tend to exhibit lower anxiety, demonstrate a greater preference for using English, and engage more frequently in English communication, both inside and outside the classroom. These findings align with Dewaele (2019) and Kun *et al.* (2020), who also observed a positive relationship between FLE and L2 WTC. The fact that FLE emerged as a more significant predictor of L2 WTC is further supported by Fredrickson's (2001) Broaden-and-Build theory, which highlights the influential role of emotions in L2 learning outcomes. This result contributes to the Positive Psychology framework of resilience, illustrating the interplay between positive emotional adaptation and individual factors that ultimately shape L2 learning performance.

The third research question addressed whether FLE mediates the relationship between AR and L2 WTC. The study found that FLE partially and significantly mediated this relationship, which is consistent with Najafzadeh *et al.* (2018), but contrasts with findings from Toprak Çelen (2020) and Xie and Kuo (2021). This result, however, should be interpreted cautiously due to the complex mechanisms involved. Two key factors are central to understanding this relationship. First, students with higher AR levels were found to experience greater FLE than their peers with lower AR profiles. This suggests that increased AR may enhance enjoyment in the language learning process, and conversely, higher FLE levels may further reinforce students' AR. This reciprocal relationship supports the idea that positive emotions can foster resilience, thus enhancing students' L2 communicative skills (Oveisi & Nosratina, 2019). Second, the proposed tripartite relationship model offers indirect support for the BBT, which posits that positive emotions broaden individuals' attention and cognition, facilitating adaptable and creative thinking. Additionally, positive emotions are believed to increase individuals' coping resources over time (Fredrickson, 2004). These enhanced coping resources could contribute to the development of AR, encouraging students to approach speaking tasks (or WTC)



with greater readiness, effort, and perseverance, even in the face of challenges during their language learning journey. However, it is important to recognize that these theoretical constructs should be applied with caution, as more complex processes may be influencing the observed relationships. Further research is needed to explore these underlying mechanisms and validate the theoretical implications of the study's findings.

5 CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the complex relationships among AR, FLE, and L2 WTC, comparing the predictive power of AR and FLE, and examining the mediating role of FLE in the connection between AR and L2 WTC. The findings revealed a significant positive correlation among these variables, with FLE emerging as a stronger predictor of L2 WTC compared to AR. FLE also played a partial mediating role in the relationship between AR and L2 WTC, suggesting that fostering a positive and enjoyable learning environment can enhance students' WTC in a second language. These results contribute to the growing body of research on the emotional dimensions of SLA, filling a gap in the study of FLE in Chinese EFL contexts and supporting the idea that these findings may apply across different SLA settings. Additionally, the research highlights the importance of promoting emotional resilience and a supportive learning environment to increase students' L2 WTC. This aligns with the communicative nature of modern language classes and emphasizes the need for pedagogical strategies that address students' emotional development. However, the study's cross-sectional design and potential inaccuracies in self-reported emotions suggest the need for further research with a mixed-method approach and better understanding of emotional perceptions to enhance the validity of future findings.



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