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Research Article

Do Enthusiastic EFL Teachers Adopt a Loving Pedagogy? The Mediating Role of Foreign Language Teaching Enjoyment

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ABSTRACT

Although love, as an affective variable, has been mostly marginalized in the realm of foreign language education, researchers are now starting to highlight its importance in education. The growth of research on positive psychology in applied linguistics has pointed to the need to investigate the interplay of different positive emotions in the field. Therefore, in this study, we investigated whether English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' enthusiasm might contribute to their dispositions toward loving pedagogy, through the mediating role of their foreign language teaching enjoyment. With this aim in mind, a survey was administered to 343 Iranian EFL teachers using the Teacher Enthusiasm Scale (Kunter et al., 2011), the Foreign Language Teaching Enjoyment Scale (Proietti Ergün & Dewaele, 2021), and the Dispositions Toward Loving Pedagogy Scale (Yin et al., 2019). Structural equation modeling was used to test the hypothesized model of the study. The main findings show that EFL teachers' enthusiasm can both directly and indirectly impact their dispositions toward loving pedagogy. In addition, foreign language teaching enjoyment partially mediated the relationship between EFL teachers' enthusiasm and loving pedagogy. The pedagogical implications of the study point to the interplay of teacher enthusiasm and teaching enjoyment in shaping practices of loving pedagogy, and the possibility of the reciprocal and contagious nature of these positive emotions in potentially contributing to the overall efficacy of language teaching and learning.

Keywords: teacher enthusiasm, loving pedagogy, foreign language teaching enjoyment, quantitative research design, structural equation modeling (SEM)

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INTRODUCTION

In line with the flourishing of positive psychology in foreign language education, loving pedagogy has recently received increasing attention among applied linguistics researchers (Derakhshan et al., 2022b). Loving pedagogy is the practice of teaching with a loving and caring attitude toward diverse students (Azari Noughabi et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2022). Its relevance has been highlighted in general educational studies (Darder, 2017; Loreman, 2011), as well as in applied linguistics (Barcelos, 2021; Li & Wang, 2022). As stated by Yin et al. (2019), teachers who follow a pedagogy of love and care for their learners typically show empathy toward them and include kindness in their instructional practices. In particular, research suggests that a positive disposition toward a pedagogy of love can play a crucial role in enhancing English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' engagement, creativity, and professional success (Derakhshan et al., 2022b; Zhi & Wang, 2023).

Although the importance of loving pedagogy has been recognized in foreign language education (Barcelos & Coelho, 2016), research on this emotional aspect of language teaching and its antecedents remains scarce (Barcelos, 2019; Culham et al., 2018). This issue might be attributed, among other factors, to the pure novelty of the notion of loving pedagogy, especially within the field of applied linguistics (Azari Noughabi et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2022). In addition, although a series of recent studies on loving pedagogy has identified its positive outcomes (Chen, 2023; Zhao & Li, 2021), to date there is little research on the emotional and psychological factors that lead language teachers to adopt a loving pedagogy in their classroom practice (Derakhshan et al., 2022b). Accordingly, due to the benefits of a pedagogy of love in language classes (Wang et al., 2022), it is crucial to recognize the factors which can contribute to shaping language teachers' dispositions toward loving pedagogy. This study may be viewed as a response to calls to investigate loving pedagogy with other possible mediator constructs related to positive psychology (Kunter et al., 2011; Zhao & Li, 2021).

Earlier research indicates that teacher enthusiasm, defined as the emotional state of enjoyment, which can be behaviorally displayed in class (Kunter et al., 2011), can be a possible predictor of positive dispositions toward loving pedagogy. When a teacher is enthusiastic about their subject and their professional role, they are more likely to teach with enjoyment, sustain their engagement, and experience job satisfaction (Chen et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2026). Therefore, teacher enthusiasm, as perceived by learners, may affect the way teachers instruct while, of course, planning is also shaped by learners' differences, professional hurdles, and institutional objectives (Dewaele & Li, 2021; Liu et al., 2021). In particular, language teachers who are perceived as enthusiastic are more likely to enhance their learners' engagement, and those language teachers who have higher levels of enthusiasm experience job satisfaction despite existing adversities (Dewaele & Li, 2021; Liu et al., 2026).

In addition to enthusiasm, teachers' foreign language teaching enjoyment (FLTE), defined as a positive emotion shaped by teachers' personal and social enjoyment as well as their students' appreciation (Proietti Ergün & Dewaele, 2021) can be a potential factor that positively affects EFL teachers' dispositions toward loving pedagogy. While teacher enthusiasm is the emotional state of enjoyment, FLTE is a positive emotion encompassing teachers' enjoyment and students' appreciation. EFL teachers who experience FLTE show high levels of mindfulness, engagement, and well-being (Azari Noughabi, Yang, et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2023), which subsequently help them develop a caring and positive atmosphere in the class (Azari Noughabi, Yüce, et al., 2024). In addition, recent research indicates that FLTE mediates the relationship between EFL teachers' enthusiasm and their job satisfaction (Liu et al., 2026). Therefore, experiencing FLTE may create a positive loop that enhances EFL teachers' work engagement, promotes greater sensitivity to learners' individual differences, and enables them to foster a more enjoyable learning environment (Azari Noughabi, Yüce, et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2023). In this sense, FLTE can act as a catalyst that increases teachers' enthusiasm and subsequently leads to happiness, satisfaction, and growth (Liu et al., 2026). This suggests that FLTE may act as a mediator of the relationship between EFL teachers' enthusiasm and loving pedagogy.

The majority of previous research on FLTE has focused either on its predictors (Derakhshan et al., 2022a) or its outcomes (Chen et al., 2024). Only a few studies to date have explored the mediating potential of FLTE between enthusiasm and other constructs, for example, job satisfaction (Liu et al., 2026). Moreover, although teacher enthusiasm has been extensively studied in general education (Burić & Moè, 2020), less is known about the enthusiasm of EFL teachers and its impact on various aspects of psychological growth and professional success (Liu et al., 2026). In addition, few attempts have been made to identify the potential contributors to EFL teachers' disposition toward loving pedagogy (Derakhshan et al., 2022b; Wang et al., 2022). Drawing on the tenets of positive psychology (Gabryś-Barker & Gałajda, 2016), the present study aims to investigate whether EFL teachers' enthusiasm contributes to their dispositions toward loving pedagogy through the mediating role of their FLTE. The current study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What significant associations are there among English as a foreign language teachers' teaching enthusiasm, enjoyment, and loving pedagogy?

RQ2: To what extent do English as a foreign language teachers' teaching enjoyment mediate the relationship between their enthusiasm and dispositions toward loving pedagogy?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The current study is among the first inquiries into the emotional and psychological predictors of language teachers' tendency toward a pedagogy of love. In particular, to our knowledge, the present study is among the first research on modeling the mediating role of FLTE in the relationship between EFL teachers' enthusiasm and loving pedagogy. The results of the present study can help increase our understanding of the underlying mechanisms through which EFL teachers tend to follow a loving pedagogy. In the upcoming subsections, we synthesize earlier research on loving pedagogy, teacher enthusiasm, and FLTE.

Loving Pedagogy

The field of applied linguistics tends to adopt constructs and terms from psychology to better understand what leads to effective teaching and learning of languages. Following this tendency, the importance of love emerged in psychology with the shift from the pathology-centered view toward the humanistic movement and positive approach to psychology (Seligman & Csíkszentmihályi, 2000). There is extensive research on positive emotions, and even though researchers have acknowledged the importance of love as a positive affective construct, this emotion has been largely overlooked in the field of education (Li & Miao, 2022; Zhao & Li, 2021) and has even been considered taboo (Wang et al., 2022). The emotion of love, which is a basic human need (Seligman, 2011; Yin et al., 2019), has been classified as a social emotion in Pekrun's (2014) taxonomy. Love was first associated with a sentimentalist interpretation, which led to inconvenience among teachers due to the emotional closeness they might have experienced (Derakhshan et al., 2022a; Zhao & Li, 2021). Therefore, other terms were used to describe this notion, which could not fully grasp what is behind the notion of love, such as passion, care, bond, and affection (Derakhshan et al., 2022a; Wang et al., 2022). As Wang et al. (2022) phrased it, the instructional environments, for some, were associated with feelings of detachment and a place where positive emotions should not be addressed. Similarly, Barcelos and Coelho (2016) presented two major myths about love in education. The first myth concerns the misbelief that emotions disrupt academic rigor. The second myth posits that emotions are counterproductive in professional environments. Naturally, these were only acknowledged as misinterpretations about the role of love in education.

With the aim of disambiguating love in education from other types of love, researchers eventually coined the terms pedagogical love, professional love, and subsequentially, loving pedagogy (Chen, 2023; Derakhshan et al., 2022a; Li & Miao, 2022; Loreman, 2011; Wang et al., 2022; Yin et al., 2019). Wang et al. (2022) established a model of 15 core components of loving pedagogy as an aggregation of Loreman's (2011) nine elements and Barcelos and Coelho's (2016) six psycho-emotional constructs associated with it. The former involved kindness, passion,

intimacy, empathy, sacrifice, bonding, acceptance, forgiveness, and community, while the latter involved care, ethics, freedom, respect, growth, and dialogue. According to Barcelos and Coelho (2016), love in general means accepting and respecting each other. Integrating this lens into education, pedagogical love is viewed as caring, listening, encouraging, creating a safe space, and establishing a nurturing environment where students can grow, practicing collaboration, and giving constructive feedback. Yin et al. (2019) also added that love in education means caring about students and attending to their needs and growth. To measure this, Yin et al. (2019) developed the Dispositions Toward Loving Pedagogy Scale in the Canadian context originally with 29 items. Since then, the scale was adapted to different contexts; for instance, it was employed by Chen (2023) and Li and Miao (2022) in the Chinese context. In addition, Derakhshan et al. (2022a), in response to Yin et al.'s (2019) call, used it across different contexts involving many countries all over the world.

Adopting a loving pedagogy has been found to be beneficial for both learning and teaching efficacy (Loreman, 2011; Yin et al., 2019). As Barcelos and Coelho (2016) phrased it, "language and love are essential parts of being human and, thus, fundamental aspects of any kind of teaching and learning" (p. 138). Zhao and Li (2021) also added that it is important that teachers realize that, when they apply loving pedagogy, they have a considerable potential to contribute to a more efficient way of learning and teaching. Many researchers claimed that teaching in itself involves much more than simply delivering the instruction of the materials (e.g., Barcelos & Coelho, 2016; Yin et al., 2019). Indeed, as Zhao and Li (2021) put it, love is the essence of teaching. The importance of loving pedagogy can also be seen from the positive influence it has on other psychological variables, such as students' well-being (Zhao & Li, 2021) and teachers' well-being (Chen, 2023). As highlighted by MacIntyre and Mercer (2014) and Chen (2023), well-being contributes to teaching and learning efficacy, so these positive psychological constructs are interrelated. In this sense, "as love is a meta-construct including at least 9 interrelated concepts […], by establishing a pedagogy of love, teachers can cause many positive outcomes in L2 education" (Zhao & Li, 2021, p. 3). Researchers investigating the role of loving pedagogy

concluded that this positive psychological construct should be incorporated into pre-service teacher programs, for example, by integrating it into methodology courses (Chen, 2023; Derakhshan et al., 2022a; Li & Miao, 2022). According to Azari Noughabi et al. (2025), due to the importance of creating a positive atmosphere in language classes where language learners are cared and loved by their teachers, it can be promising to identify which factors affect EFL teachers' disposition loving pedagogy. In addition, due to the importance and benefits that loving pedagogy can bring about in education, we continue to review two possible predictors of loving pedagogy, namely, teacher enthusiasm and FLTE.

Teacher Enthusiasm

The role of teacher enthusiasm in effective language teaching is well established in the literature; however, scholars have yet to reach a consensus on its definition (Kunter et al., 2011). Enthusiasm has been defined as both a positive affective construct and as a form of intrinsic motivation (Kunter et al., 2011) which "reflects the subjective experience of enjoyment, excitement, and pleasure, and which is manifested in certain teacher behaviors in the classroom" (p. 290). These behaviors might include, for instance, an engaging way of teaching and signs of eagerness during instruction, according to Kunter et al. (2011). Dewaele and Li (2021), drawing on Kunter et al. (2011), employed an affective-behavioral approach to investigating the construct enthusiasm; they viewed enthusiasm as a subjective feeling that encompasses an observable pattern of behavior. Similarly, as Keller et al. (2015) put it, enthusiasm subsumes enjoyment and expressive behavior. Keller et al. (2015), drawing on Collins (1976), named eight behaviors and described them using the low, medium, and high anchors of enthusiasm. These were related to verbal and non-verbal cues, namely, vocal delivery, facial expression, eyes, body movements, gestures, acceptance of ideas and feelings, word selection, and finally, overall energy levels (Collins, 1976, pp. 41–42). Kunter et al. (2011) also distinguished between teaching (activity-related) enthusiasm and subject (topic-related) enthusiasm. They

argued that the former is context-dependent and likely to vary across settings, whereas the latter is expected to remain relatively stable. To measure this, Kunter et al. (2011) developed the Teacher Enthusiasm Scale, which included items related to both teaching enthusiasm and subject enthusiasm.

Several studies concluded that reciprocal effects occur between teachers' and students' emotions. Drawing on Hatfield et al. (1993), Kunter et al. (2011) refer to these reciprocal effects as "emotional contagion" (p. 299). Students' enjoyment seemed to be linked to teachers' enthusiasm, so these are considered to be interrelated positive emotions (Dewaele & Li, 2021; Kunter et al, 2011). Keller et al. (2018) employed latent profile analysis to investigate different profiles based on teacher enthusiasm (as perceived by both teachers and students), student enjoyment, and student boredom. They investigated lesson-level profiles, meaning that the focus was not only on individuals but the whole lesson. The researchers identified four clusters, namely, 1. high enthusiasm, in which both teachers and students reported high perceived levels of teacher enthusiasm; 2. externalized enthusiasm, in which learners perceived a high level of teacher enthusiasm but teachers did not; 3. internalized enthusiasm, in which teachers reported a high level of enthusiasm while learners did not, and low enthusiasm, in which neither teachers nor students reported a high level of teacher enthusiasm. While experienced enthusiasm tended to vary from lesson to lesson, the study revealed that enthusiastic teaching behaviors remained relatively stable over time (Keller et al., 2018). Learners reported higher levels of enjoyment and lower boredom when the teachers were perceived to be enthusiastic by them and when the teachers also perceived themselves to be enthusiastic.

Dewaele and Li's (2021) study on teacher enthusiasm and student enjoyment led to similar results. They found that teacher enthusiasm and student enjoyment showed positive interrelationships, while a lack of student enjoyment and the presence of boredom occurred due to a perceived lack of teacher enthusiasm. Further evidence for the reciprocal effects of teacher enthusiasm was provided by Patrick et al. (2000), who concluded based on two studies that teacher enthusiasm may have a positive

impact on students' intrinsic motivation and psychological vitality. They also highlighted the presence of an emotion contagion, leading them to conclude that enthusiasm can be transmitted by teachers to students. Because teacher enthusiasm is a form of positive teaching-related feeling (Keller et al., 2018) that is linked to teachers' enjoyment (Liu et al., 2026), in what follows, we review FLTE.

Foreign Language Teaching Enjoyment

FLTE is a relatively recent affective construct introduced by Proietti Ergün and Dewaele (2021). Although enthusiasm and enjoyment seem to have much in common, it is necessary to differentiate between these two concepts. Based on Keller et al. (2015), in general terms, enthusiasm is a larger category which subsumes behavioral components, while enjoyment reflects the affective element of enthusiasm. This means that enthusiasm is mainly displayed through actions, while enjoyment is related to the emotions the person experiences during these actions. FLTE subsumes social enjoyment, personal enjoyment, and the feeling of student appreciation in foreign language teaching (Proietti Ergün & Dewaele, 2021). Due to the novelty of the concept, research on FLTE is still in its infancy. One recent study (Mierzwa, 2019), for instance, examined FLTE and foreign language learning enjoyment in the Polish context and concluded that there are high levels of teaching and learning enjoyment in this setting regardless of background variables such as gender, the languages taught by the participants, their level of education, and the type of institution in which they teach. The researcher highlighted the teachers' responsibility and potential in shaping the classroom climate, ultimately leading to students' flourishing.

Proietti Ergün and Dewaele (2021) developed a scale including 9 items for assessing FLTE, which has been used in more recent studies (e.g., Derakhshan et al., 2022a). The FLTE scale was based on Dewaele and MacIntyre's (2014) foreign language enjoyment scale for learners and Botes et al.'s (2022) short-form scale for teachers. The findings of these studies revealed that teaching enjoyment has a contagious nature as it contributes to student enjoyment, engagement, resilience, and

overall well-being (Dewaele & Li, 2021; Proietti Ergün & Dewaele, 2021). The causal relationship between these positive psychological constructs is intriguing to examine to be able to detect factors that can contribute to increased efficacy of teaching and learning (as also highlighted by Zhang, 2023). A recent study (Azari Noughabi, 2022), for example, found that psychological well-being and emotion-regulation contribute to FLTE. Following the notion of emotion contagion, Talebzadeh et al. (2019) proposed the so-called enjoyment contagion, which refers to the reciprocal nature of enjoyment in the language learning classroom. Earlier research also revealed that EFL teachers' dispositions toward loving pedagogy could be influenced by their engagement levels, enthusiastic behaviors, and positive emotions (Azari Noughabi et al., 2025). By postulating that teacher enthusiasm may be a predictor of teachers' dispositions toward loving pedagogy (Kunter et al., 2011), and that FLTE may have a potential mediator role between the two (Azari Noughabi, Yang, et al., 2024, Azari Noughabi, Yüce, et al. 2024, Chen et al., 2024, Liu et al., 2026; Yang et al., 2023), this study sets out to examine the interrelationships between loving pedagogy, teacher enthusiasm, and teaching enjoyment. This is especially timely and relevant as, to our knowledge, modeling the associations between these constructs and particularly how teachers' FLTE play a meditating role in the disposition toward loving pedagogy has not been investigated yet. Due to the well-established potential link between enjoyment and enthusiasm and loving pedagogy, these three constructs are under scrutiny in this paper.

RESEARCH METHODS

In this study, we employed a cross-sectional quantitative design to measure teachers' self-reported enthusiasm, FLTE, and dispositions toward loving pedagogy. Although self-reported data has been criticized by researchers because it may lead to potential social desirability biases (Chen, 2023), investigating these constructs by means of teacher self-reports rather than by student reports or observational data may be a more direct measure (Kunter et al., 2011). In what follows, we describe the background

information of the participants, the three scales used for data collection, and the data analysis procedures.

Participants

A total number of 343 Iranian EFL teachers (n_{male} = 53, n_{female} = 290) from different regions of Iran were recruited for this study through snowball sampling (Ness Evans & Rooney, 2013). They were teaching English in different contexts and across different education levels (public schools, language institutes, and tertiary-level educational institutions, including colleges and universities). Their teaching experience ranged from 1 to 35 years (*M* = 7.36, *SD* = 6.73). Their average age was 31.44 (*SD* = 9.38) and ranged from 19 to 72 years old. Most participants (75.5 %) had majored in English language teaching and held either Bachelor of Arts (42.6 %) or Master of Arts (37.3 %) degrees. Informed consent form was obtained from all the participants. Table 1 presents the participants' demographic information.

Table 1. *Demographic Information of the Participants*

Background information		***n***	**%**
Learning Context	Language Institute = 57	122	35.6
	School = 16	149	43.4
	College/University	52	15.2
	Others	20	5.8
Academic Degree	Bachelor of Arts	146	42.6
	Master of Arts	128	37.3
	Ph.D.	49	14.3
	Others (e.g., Associate of Arts)	20	5.8
Major	English Language Teaching	259	75.5
	English Language Literature	28	8.2
	English Translation Studies	25	7.3
	Linguistics	21	6.1
	Others	10	2.9

The Context

In the Iranian EFL context, English is taught in both public and private sectors. In the public sector, students at high schools typically have two English sessions a week. English teachers, who are non-native speakers, are encouraged to follow a communicative language teaching approach. The materials and assessment procedures are established by the Ministry of Education. In the private sector, students who are willing to enhance their language skills pay tuition fees and attend various language proficiency courses. In private language institutes, the materials and assessment procedures may vary based on their syllabi and curriculums. Public-and private-sector EFL teachers are no exempt from professional hurdles. However, research shows that Iranian EFL teachers who are working in public language institutes are more autonomous (Moradkhani & Haghi, 2017). However, they also typically experience a heavy work schedule, less support from administrators, and lower levels of enjoyment (Akbari & Eghtesadi Roudi, 2020).

Instruments

The questionnaire administered in the study has three main scales, the teacher enthusiasm scale, the foreign language teaching enjoyment scale, and the dispositions toward loving pedagogy scale. Before the content-related items, biographical questions were formulated for sample description. These included participants' teaching experience in years, their age, gender, their major, their learning context, and their academic degree.

Teacher Enthusiasm Scale

In the current study, the Teacher Enthusiasm Scale, developed by Kunter et al. (2011), was used to assess teachers' enthusiasm. The measure contains 10 items on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The scale includes two subscales: teaching enthusiasm (e.g., "I teach in this class with great enthusiasm") and subject enthusiasm (e.g., "Engaging in my subject is one of my favorite activities"). The Teacher Enthusiasm Scale was validated for its intended use,

namely, for measuring teacher enthusiasm (Kunter et al., 2011). In the current study, the reliability of this scale, assessed through Cronbach's alpha (α = .949) and McDonald's omega (ω = .949), was high (Straub et al., 2004).

Foreign Language Teaching Enjoyment Scale

To measure EFL teachers' FLTE, we used the Foreign Language Teaching Enjoyment Scale developed by Proietti Ergün and Dewaele (2021). The scale consists of 9 items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The scale includes three subscales: personal enjoyment (e.g., "In class, I feel proud of my accomplishments."), student appreciation (e.g., "The students are stimulating."), and social enjoyment (e.g., "We form a tight group."). Previous research has shown that the Foreign Language Teaching Enjoyment Scale is a reliable and valid instrument for assessing EFL teachers' enjoyment (Azari Noughabi et al., 2022; Derakhshan et al., 2022a; Yang et al., 2023; Zolfaghari et al., 2025). In the present study, the reliability of this scale, assessed through Cronbach's alpha (α = .894) and McDonald's omega (ω = .893), was high (Straub et al., 2004).

Dispositions Toward Loving Pedagogy Scale

To measure EFL teachers' perceptions of loving pedagogy, a modified version of the Dispositions Toward Loving Pedagogy Scale (Yin et al., 2019) was employed in this study. The scale includes 29 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*), which measure six subscales: acceptance of diversity and classroom community (e.g., "All students, no matter what their individual differences are, are welcomed in my classroom"), intimacy (e.g., "It is important for me to feel a close emotional connection with students"), bonding and sacrifice (e.g., "I undertake specific activities in my classes aimed at promoting bonding between students"), empathy (e.g., "I deliberately engage in daily kind acts with my students in the context of my teaching"), forgiveness (e.g., "I am obliged to forgive students when they ask for it"), and kindness in the pedagogical context (e.g., "Being kind to students is important to me"). Yin et al. (2019) reported high reliability and validity for this scale. Evidence from applied linguistics has also shown high reliability and validity

(Derakhshan et al., 2022b). In the present study, the internal consistency of the scale, measured via Cronbach's alpha (α = .955) and McDonald's omega (ω = .955), was high (Straub et al., 2004).

Data Collection

The online survey form was designed via Google Forms, and the survey link was shared with the participants through social media and communication apps (e.g., Telegram, Instagram, WhatsApp). The original scale items were included in the survey as the scales had been previously validated and used in different studies in the Iranian context. Therefore, there was no need to pilot the instruments before the main data collection took place. The language of the survey was English as the participants were expected to have a good command of this language, and no major hindrances to their understanding were anticipated. Participants were informed that they could voluntarily participate in the study, and their confidentiality would be ensured (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2011). The consent form was also obtained from all the EFL teachers who participated in the current study. No deadline was set for the participants to complete the form. Data collection process lasted four months, from January to April in 2024.

Data Analysis

Initially, data was checked to ensure any lack of missing data. Then, we checked the normal distribution of the data (see Table 2). To answer the first research question about the associations between enthusiasm, enjoyment, and loving pedagogy, descriptive statistics, correlations, and regression analyses were conducted with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS; version 29 and subsequently 30). When the assumptions of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) were met, CFA and SEM were performed via AMOS 24 to answer the second research question about the extent to which enjoyment mediates the relationship between enthusiasm and dispositions toward loving pedagogy. CFA was

conducted to check the factor structure of the observed variables. SEM was also employed to evaluate the multivariate causal associations among the main variables in the hypothesized model. To check the model fit, the chi-square/*df* ratio (χ^2/df), the comparative fit index (CFI), the goodness of fit (GFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) were taken into account (Byrne, 2016; Hair et al., 2019; Hu & Bentler, 1995). A mediation model was hypothesized with teacher enthusiasm as the predictor variable, loving pedagogy as the outcome variable, and FLTE as the mediator of the relationship between enthusiasm and loving pedagogy. The significance of the mediation model was assessed utilizing bootstrapping with 5000 sub-samples (95% confidence interval) with a maximum likelihood estimator (Biesanz et al., 2010). The hypothesized mediation model is depicted in Figure 1. When both direct (b1) and indirect (a1 + c1) effects are statistically significant, a partial mediation model is achieved. A total mediation model is claimed when only the indirect (a1 + c1) effect is significant.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and the normality of the data using skewness and kurtosis indices. As displayed in Table 2, the skewness and kurtosis values were between the acceptable range of ± 2 as suggested by Collier (2020) and Kunnan (1998). Although the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated that the data are not normally distributed ($p < .05$), we acknowledge that normal distribution is unlikely to be achieved in large samples (Field, 2024). Even though the means are not comparable across the scales as one of the scales is based on a 5-point scale while the other two have 4-point scales, it is important to note that the teachers in this sample display relatively similar levels of enthusiasm, enjoyment, and loving pedagogy as visible from the low standard deviations. Their self-reported enthusiasm is higher than 3.00 on a 4-point scale, their enjoyment is higher than 3.50 on a 5-point scale, and in

general, they tend to employ loving pedagogy, based on the mean that is larger than 3.00 on a 4-point scale.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics and Normality of the Data*

	Min.	Max.	*M*	*SD*	Skewness	Kurtosis
FENTH	1.70	4.00	3.387	.587	–.822	–.298
FENJ	2.22	5.00	3.754	.676	–.273	–.833
FLOVP	1.72	4.00	3.111	.513	–.616	–.077

Note. FENTH = teacher enthusiasm (4-point scale), FENJ = foreign language teaching enjoyment (5-point scale), FLOVP = loving pedagogy (4-point scale), *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation.

The Correlation Matrix

In terms of the associations among the investigated constructs, addressed by the first research question, the Pearson correlation coefficients between teacher enthusiasm, FLTE, and loving pedagogy were checked. As shown in Table 3, the correlations between the latent variables were significant. In addition, based on the correlation matrix, no possibility of multicollinearity was observed as the estimated coefficients were beyond .80 (Field, 2024). The estimated VIF values (= 2.011) fell below the recommended critical value of 5 (Larson-Hall, 2010) indicating no possibility of collinearity issues. As shown in Table 3, there is a high correlation between the three scales, pointing to a strong relationship between these constructs.

Table 3. *Correlation Coefficients Between the Main Constructs*

Variable	FENTH	FENJ	FLOVP
FENTH	–	.709 ***	.709 ***
FENJ		–	.631 ***
FLOVP			–

Notes. FENTH = teacher enthusiasm, FENJ = foreign language teaching enjoyment, FLOVP = loving pedagogy.

***$p < .001$.

To evaluate the explanatory power of the hypothesized model of the study, the coefficient of determination (R^2) was calculated. The results (adjusted R^2 = .536, $F(2,340) = 196.532$, $p < .001$, VIF = 2.011) revealed that the proposed model explained 53.6% of the variance in EFL teachers' loving pedagogy, which means that enthusiasm and enjoyment seem to explain more than half of the variance in loving pedagogy. Besides this, the contribution of enthusiasm to loving pedagogy is larger (β = .526, $p > .001$) than the impact of enjoyment (β = .258, $p < .001$).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

In the following subsections, we present the answer to our second research question, which addressed the extent to which FLTE serves as a mediator between teacher enthusiasm and dispositions toward loving pedagogy. The results of CFA revealed that the factor loadings in each construct were higher than the cut-off point (> .50), as suggested by Kline (2011). The estimated composite reliability (CR) values were beyond .70, indicating acceptable internal consistency. In addition, the estimated average variance extracted (AVE) values for the latent variables were > .50, suggesting acceptable convergent validity (Hair et al., 2022). Furthermore, the CRs were higher than the AVEs for each of the latent variables. The goodness-of-fit indices are provided in Table 4. Model fit indices were in the acceptable range ($\chi^2/df < 3$, GFI > .90, CFI > .90, TLI > .90, RMSEA < .08), as suggested by Hair et al. (2010), confirming the factor structure of the observed variables.

Table 4. *The Goodness-of-Fit Indices for the Scales*

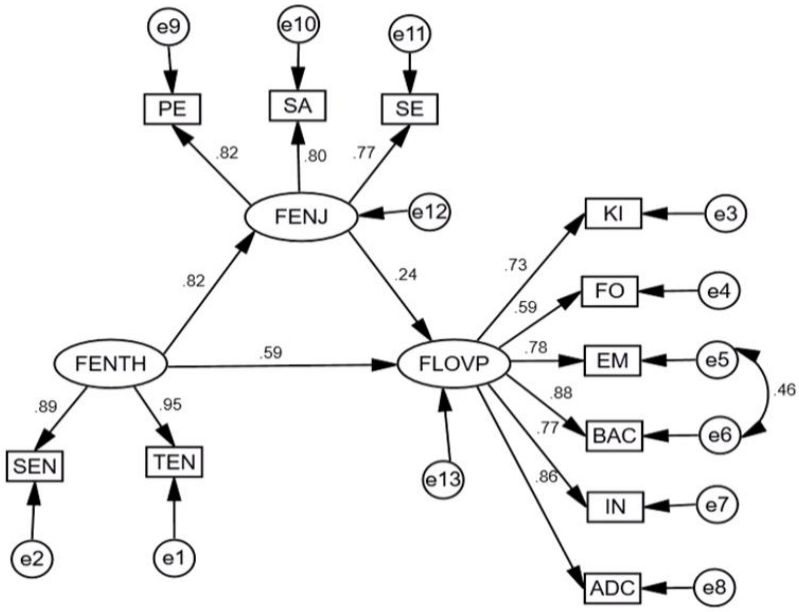
	χ2/df	GFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
FENTH	2.761	.950	.981	.972	.072
FENJ	2.703	.960	.974	.959	.071
FLOVP	2.037	.870	.938	.928	.055

Note. χ2/df = Chi-square value divided by degrees of freedom, GFI = goodness-of-fit index, CFI = comparative fit index, TLI = Tucker-Lewis index, RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation, FENTH = teacher enthusiasm, FENJ = foreign language teaching enjoyment, FLOVP = loving pedagogy.

Mediation Model of EFL Teachers' Teaching Enjoyment, Enthusiasm, and Loving Pedagogy

The hypothesized mediation model (as shown in Figure 1) was tested via SEM to examine the mediating role of teachers' FLTE in the relationship between their enthusiasm and disposition toward loving pedagogy. The error terms of two subfactors of loving pedagogy (empathy, and bonding and sacrifice), which had items with similar wordings were correlated to obtain an improved model with higher fit indices (Brown, 2015). The results of SEM revealed that the data fitted with the hypothesized mediation model (Kline, 2015); $\chi^2/df = 2.78$, GFI = .920, CFI = .959, TLI = .944, RMSEA = .090, $p < .001$. Furthermore, the results (as shown in Table 5) confirmed a partial mediation model, which is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *The Mediation Model*



Note. FENTH = teacher enthusiasm (TEN = teaching enthusiasm, SEN = subject enthusiasm), FENJ = foreign language teaching enjoyment (PE = personal enjoyment, SE = social enjoyment, SA = student appreciation), FLOVP = loving pedagogy (KI = kindness in the pedagogical context, FO = forgiveness, EM = empathy, BAC = bonding and sacrifice, IN = intimacy, ADC = acceptance of diversity and classroom community).

$p < .001$.

The results of the mediation model analysis are shown in Table 5. Findings revealed significant direct effects were found between EFL teachers' enthusiasm and

FLTE (β = .819, p < .001) and between their FLTE and dispositions toward loving pedagogy (β = .243, p < .01). As the direct effect of EFL teachers' enthusiasm on loving pedagogy was statistically significant (β = .593; p < .001), it appears that FLTE partially mediated the relationship between EFL teachers' enthusiasm and their disposition toward loving pedagogy (β = .172; p < .001).

Table 5. *The Results of the Mediation Model*

	Estimate
Direct effects	
FENTH → FENJ	.819***
FENJ → FLOVP	.243**
FENTH → FLOVP	.593***
Indirect effects	
FENTH → FENJ → FLOVP	.172***

Note. $^{**}p$ < .01, $^{***}p$ < .001.

In sum, the findings revealed that a) EFL teachers' enthusiasm could directly influence their dispositions toward loving pedagogy; b) EFL teachers' enthusiasm could affect their dispositions toward loving pedagogy indirectly through affecting their FLTE; and c) FLTE partially mediated the relationship between EFL teachers' enthusiasm and loving pedagogy. Therefore, the mediating effect of FLTE on the relationship between teacher enthusiasm and loving pedagogy was partial, albeit statistically significant.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the associations between EFL teachers' teaching enthusiasm, FLTE, and dispositions toward loving pedagogy and to examine the extent to which FLTE can mediate the relationship between their enthusiasm and dispositions toward loving pedagogy. To achieve these aims, we employed a quantitative research design with three scales administered to 343 Iranian EFL teachers.

The results of the descriptive statistics showed that this sample of EFL teachers has a relatively high level of teaching enthusiasm, enjoyment, and they tend to employ loving pedagogy based on their self-reports. This is fortunate given that all three constructs are associated with positive learning atmosphere and outcomes (e.g., Chen, 2023; Loreman, 2011; Yin et al., 2019; Zhao & Li, 2021). Based on correlational analyses, we can claim that the three constructs are positively and strongly interrelated, lending further support to the findings of previous studies (e.g., Dewaele & Li, 2021; Keller et al., 2018; Kunter et al., 2011; Patrick et al., 2000; Talebzadeh et al., 2019; Zhang, 2023). As correlations do not imply causality, we checked causal relationships using regression analysis, and we can state that teacher enthusiasm and teaching enjoyment highly contribute to positive dispositions toward loving pedagogy. In fact, the two predictors explained more than half of the variance in the dispositions toward loving pedagogy scale, with teacher enthusiasm having a larger impact. We therefore conclude that teacher enthusiasm and teaching enjoyment may have an important role in shaping practices of loving pedagogy and thus the effectiveness of instruction, as also suggested by previous studies (e.g., Chen, 2023; Loreman, 2011; Yin et al., 2019; Zhao & Li, 2021).

We conducted SEM analyses to answer our second research question investigating whether teacher enthusiasm contributes to the dispositions toward loving pedagogy through the mediator of teaching enjoyment. In light of our results, we can claim that teacher enthusiasm, which can have a direct impact on teacher disposition toward loving pedagogy, is not a negligible affective construct in achieving more effective teaching. The importance of high enthusiasm leading to higher quality of teaching ties well with previous studies (Kunter et al., 2011). Li and Miao (2022) also noted the importance of teachers' pedagogical love, well-being, enthusiasm, and engagement. FLTE served as a mediator variable between teacher enthusiasm and loving pedagogy in our study. In earlier studies, FLTE has been shown to be a contagious positive emotion among the concerned populations, meaning that if teachers have high enjoyment, students will be affected by this, and this is beneficial for every stakeholder (Dewaele & Li, 2021; Proietti Ergün & Dewaele, 2021). The

findings of previous studies may have a role in our study because they show that investigating FLTE is important due to its contagious nature. This highlights the potential reciprocal nature of positive emotions (Hatfield et al., 1993; Kunter et al., 2011) between teachers and learners. In sum, our study has shown that teachers' enthusiasm can directly as well as indirectly influence their own dispositions toward loving pedagogy, and that teaching enjoyment mediates the relationship between the two.

CONCLUSION

In this survey study, we examined associations among loving pedagogy, teacher enthusiasm, and teaching enjoyment, and the extent to which teaching enjoyment can mediate the relationship between their enthusiasm and dispositions toward loving pedagogy. The results revealed that EFL teachers' enthusiasm can directly as well as indirectly affect their dispositions toward loving pedagogy, and that FLTE partially mediated the relationship between EFL teachers' enthusiasm and loving pedagogy. Besides highlighting the importance of these affective constructs, the present study also stands in line to call for more investigations of these in the field of applied linguistics and education more broadly.

Major pedagogical implications of this study include the importance of focusing on positive affective constructs and their potential reciprocal and contagious nature in fostering student learning and teaching efficacy. In addition to the role of these affective factors in language-specific domains, it might be worthwhile to consider the potential reciprocal relationships and contagious nature of these constructs in domain-general and other educational fields. The present study lends support to studies where the integration of these constructs into the curricula were highlighted by paying attention enjoyment, enthusiasm, and loving pedagogy (e.g., Chen, 2023; Derakhshan et al., 2022a; Li & Miao, 2022). As there are considerable benefits from adopting a loving pedagogy, raising awareness of the importance of this construct as well as its

psychological antecedents may be of crucial importance in pre-service teacher training programs.

In addition, specific modules addressing EFL teachers' resilience, L2 grit, and engagement as contributors to enjoyment might be integrated into existing foreign language teacher education programs. Given that the appreciation of language teacher dedication can help increase their teaching enjoyment, school principals and institute supervisors are highly recommended to acknowledge and actively support EFL teachers' practices. In this way, the happiness and joy they experience can lead them to embrace a pedagogy of love.

Regarding the crucial role of enthusiasm in helping cultivate a pedagogy of love, it might be helpful to set realistic expectations for teachers in order to help them achieve their goals, enjoy their profession, and show pedagogical kindness while teaching a foreign language. Educational authorities should strive to reduce economical, administrative, or other non-teaching related stressors to help EFL teachers remain enthusiastic and experience enjoyment in their work. Holding regular sessions for hearing EFL teachers' voices, alongside developing supportive communities of practice might help achieve this goal.

As with all empirical studies, this piece of research also has some limitations; based on these, we formulated a couple of possible further research avenues. First, as data collection took place in the Iranian context, the results cannot be generalized to other EFL teacher populations. To address this limitation, it would be important to conduct replication studies across different contexts using the same or adapted versions of these instruments. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow for an examination of the potential malleability of these constructs; therefore, employing a longitudinal research design would provide us with more insight on whether these variables can change over time. Third, more qualitative studies would be needed to deepen our understanding of loving pedagogy, teacher enthusiasm, and teaching enjoyment.

Authors' Contributions

Mostafa Azari Noughabi participated in the design of the study and completed data collection. Mostafa Azari Noughabi worked on data analysis and Anna Zólyomi was involved in the writing of the manuscript. Mostafa Azari Noughabi and Anna Zólyomi drafted the manuscript and participated in the interpretation of the results. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethics Approval & Consent to Participate

Informed consent to participate and informed consent for publication was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Declaration of GenAI and AI-Assisted Technologies

The authors declare that no tool or service was used in the preparation of this work.

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