



An Exploration of Chinese English Language Learners' Foreign Language Anxiety

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Abstract. Language anxiety is one of the challenges faced by many international students, which will influence students' transition to a new environment. This article provides an overview of existing research focusing on the foreign language anxiety (FLA) of Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Many researchers talk about students' FLA experience, factors influencing FLA, especially psychological emotions related to FLA, and students' own strategies to cope with FLA. By reviewing previous studies, this article summarizes the implications for teachers, students, and institutions and provides suggestions for future studies.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety, English language learner, Chinese students

1 Introduction

Anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with arousal of the nervous system [1]. Based on this notion, scholars widely discussed a specific type of anxiety in the condition of language learning - foreign language anxiety (FLA). FLA refers to the worry and negative reaction aroused when learning or using a foreign language, which becomes reliably associated with the language class, differentiated from other contexts. For many learners, foreign language learning can be traumatic. In Worde's study, almost half of the class reported experiencing debilitating anxiety levels in learning a second language [2].

As international students from China, Chinese students have also experienced difficulty overcoming foreign language barriers. Afraid of mistakes and communication failures, many students will keep silent and avoid conversations as much as possible. Chinese students tend to be quieter than those from other countries in a cross-cultural class [3]; they may also lock themselves in their room to avoid intercultural communication in a mixed-gender apartment where residents come from different parts of the world. Under some circumstances, such foreign language anxiety negatively affects their mental health [4].

This study has reviewed the existing literature on Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' FLA. The fundamental purpose is to explore the reasons for FLA

and the strategies to cope with it. After synthesizing the past studies, the article concludes with four themes frequently discussed in those studies: students' FLA experience, factors related to FLA, FLA and other psychological emotions and strategies students used to cope with FLA. Then the article comes up with implications for students, teachers, and institutions and suggestions for future research.

2 Students' FLA experience

Students are more likely to define their FLA experience and feelings about FLA negatively. When students were asked to talk about their moments of FLA, several negative words were frequently used by them to describe those moments, such as "awkward", "anxious," "bad," "helpless," "frustrated," "upset," and "nervous" [5]. Some students could convert negative feelings of anxiety into positive stimuli and regard anxiety as their motivation before exams. Those students still got excellent scores even though they thought FLA would negatively influence their academic performance [6]. FLA mainly manifests in communication anxiety, including speaking and listening [5][7].

3 Factors related to FLA

There are many factors that influence or relate to student FLA. This study has divided the factors mentioned in the previous studies into six categories: student-related factors, cultural factors, psychological factors, and academic factors.

3.1 Student-Related Factors

Students who have stayed in America for a while or who are already in the middle of their programs tend to have lower anxiety than those who have just come to America [7][8]. Female students are less anxious than male students. Students in art programs are more likely to have lower anxiety in communication than those in the science major. One reason is that art students have more interactions with their classmates in the class through group discussions and projects, presentations, and discussing topics in seminar class formats, which helps them go through the process of acculturation [8]. In addition, students' English proficiency level, relative standing among peers, attitudes towards English, and attitudes towards the teacher are all negatively related to their anxiety level [9][10].

3.2 Cultural Factors

Chinese students are influenced by Confucianism culture, which places a high value on self-images [7]. This influence can be reflected in the fact that students are afraid of making mistakes and are unwilling to show their weaknesses. The in-class activities such as group discussions, oral presentations, and Q&A will lead to their anxiety, giving students limited time to prepare [5][7]. When talking to native speakers, Chinese

students cannot understand their jokes, topics and slang because they lack cultural knowledge and conversational language [5][6][7]. Cultural differences in course organization, classroom activities, and approaches the instructors use to teach will affect students' adjustment to a new environment and influence their anxiety [7].

3.3 Psychological Factors

The experience of being asked to repeat something in a rude, mean, impatient or exaggerated tone and isolation makes Chinese students afraid that others cannot understand them, fear of negative evaluation and making mistakes, which causes more anxiety [5][6][7]. Some students show low self-confidence in speaking English and low self-efficacy, leading to high-level speaking anxiety [11]. Students' unwillingness to communicate can positively predict their FLA [12].

3.4 Academic Factors

Chinese students will meet some difficulties in adjusting to academic life in America. They have to deal with some complex professional words, theories and terminologies, which also increases the difficulty for them to express perspectives in academic language and spend lots of time understanding the logic behind the words [7]. Students also struggle with the reading materials because the reading load is very big and the in-class reading gives them limited time to understand, and it takes them a long time to check the grammar and vocabulary [6][10][11]. Assessment always means a lot for Chinese students, which also gives students more anxiety. However, many students indicate that the more accessible assessment criteria lower their anxiety and motivation [13].

The research also indicates that the combination of students with English proficiency levels can help reduce the anxiety of students with lower English proficiency levels since students who are good at English can provide support for other students and reduce their embarrassment and active engagement [13]. The combination of international students and native speakers can improve students' communication mindset and efficacy, even though it does not influence anxiety levels [14].

The academic factors can be teacher-related as well. The instructions given by some professors are not well-organized and comprehensible, hindering students' understanding. Some students think their professors speak too fast because they are native speakers, and it is hard for them to catch up with what they are talking about [7]. Instructors' friendliness and joking are found to be negatively related to students' FLA. In contrast, teachers' strictness and unpredictability positively predict students' FLA [9].

4 FLA & other psychological emotions

Foreign language learning can be a complicated cognitive process in which various psychological emotions intertwine to create the learning experience as a whole. Emotional feelings have a strong influence on the learners' second language acquisition.

Research indicated that Chinese EFL learners tended more to encounter speaking problems due to psychological factors such as anxiety, fear of mistakes and unwillingness to express themselves rather than linguistic factors like lack of vocabulary, pronunciation, insufficient knowledge of grammar rules, reading and oral presentation [11]. As a specific type of inner feeling, FLA is also found to be connected with other kinds of psychological emotions. Among all the emotions, we synthesized the current research findings into three topics, motivation, unwillingness to speak, and foreign language enjoyment [9][10][11][12][15].

4.1 Motivation

Fundamentally, motivation is the study of why people think and behave in their way and what pushes or pulls people to start, sustain, and complete an activity [16]. The degree of motivation is closely related to the students' learning and achievement. It is believed that in a well-designed learning environment where the learners are highly motivated, they are more likely to perform better [17]. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the relationship between motivation, FLA and foreign language learning.

In terms of different kinds of motivation, researchers concluded that Chinese EFL learners' instrumental motivations are more dominant than their integrative motivations [11]. Instrumental motivation, as a type of extrinsic motivation, refers to a practical or pragmatic reason for language study, while integrative motivation refers to a favorable attitude toward the target language community [18]. In other words, compared with a wish to integrate, adapt to, or get familiar with a new culture, Chinese EFL learners are more fascinated by the practical outcomes of foreign language learning, such as academic success or the convenience of daily communication. Their FLA is also tied with such instrumental needs. For example, they might be anxious about their language performance in front of others and worried about making mistakes [13].

In general, Chinese EFL learners embrace complicated feelings in terms of motivation levels. On the one hand, some of their emotions might be negatively related to their motivation and engagement. Chinese learners are always nervous about using their second language. Sometimes, they might feel a sense of cultural alienation, especially when they are under intercultural circumstances such as exchange or international students [10]. However, on the other hand, they could also be motivated to learn English as a foreign language because of their inner passion, enthusiasm, and positive attitudes to speaking the language effectively [10]. As a result, it is necessary for both the educators and students to mediate the relationship between FLA and motivation to boost the learners' study.

4.2 Unwillingness to Speak

As observed by the researchers, the unwillingness to speak is one of the common phenomena among Chinese EFL learners. For the English classes supervised by the beginner teachers, most students remained silent and reticent when the instructors required them to respond to particular oral tasks [19]. However, the fact was that most of the students were willing to participate in interpersonal conversations in their minds, but

only that many of them did not like to risk using English in class [12]. Even though the students bore an excellent intention to practice speaking, they were blocked by the instrumental factors we discussed above.

The EFL learners' unwillingness to communicate and their FLA correlated significantly with each other, while many predicting variables were shared between them as well [12]. Both such unwillingness and FLA were correlated with the students' self-rated English proficiency and access to English. With a higher proficiency and broader access to the language, they might perform a lower state of unwillingness to communicate as well as FLA [12]. In addition, the lack of confidence among Chinese EFL students was a serious threat to the development of their speaking skills and communicative behavior in second language classes [10]. This echoes the affective filter hypothesis that negative emotions might prevent sufficient language input [20].

4.3 Foreign Language Enjoyment

Foreign language enjoyment (FLE) refers to the positive emotions that learners feel after overcoming learning difficulties, completing academic tasks, and realizing their psychological needs during the process of foreign language learning [21]. FLE is the most heavily studied research subject on FLL's positive emotions [15]. Studies have shown that FLE can serve as a facilitator to help the learners have a better acquisition of a target foreign language [22][23]. Thus, it is beneficial for the students to cultivate their FLE in pursuit of satisfactory learning outcomes.

The relationship between FLE and FLA has been widely discussed; however, the results are mixed. Some scholars claim that FLE is significantly negatively correlated with FLA, which means that the higher the learners' FLE, the lower their FLA level would be [24]. Meanwhile, other researchers argued that the relationship between FLE and FLA was complicated. The positive and negative emotions might coexist in foreign language learning processes with complex interaction, and it was possible that the learners could have high levels of both FLE and FLA [25].

Existing research also investigated the comparison between Chinese students and EFL learners from other countries. Results showed that the Chinese participants reported similar levels of FLE but higher levels of FLA compared to the international sample in Dewaele & MacIntyre's study [24], which could be attributed to the Chinese educational context [9]. The traditional Chinese culture particularly emphasizes "face", based upon a core concept of "honour", resulting in pursuing satisfactory performances and hiding their weaknesses [26]. Therefore, Chinese students might be more anxious than learners from other cultures because they care more about conducting "perfect" practices and others' comments.

5 Students' strategies to cope with FLA

Influenced by their emotions, experience and other factors discussed above, learners develop different attitudes to cope with FLA. Some may actively address FLA and attempt to use a wide range of learning strategies to facilitate their own foreign language

learning. For example, the learners can make friends with native speakers, actively participate in teamwork to communicate with others, or devote more time to practice on their own extensively and intensively [5][8]. Overall, maximizing their exposure to the English language both in and out of class is very helpful in overcoming FLA obstacles [10]. In the meantime, other learners may negatively circumvent FLA as well. They opted to avoid the anxiety-provoking situations, which may “serve to lower the anxiety until they were able to confront it at a later date” [5]. However, by avoiding speaking, they are just postponing the time to deal with the barriers, which would not release the FLA but would extend the time of suffering from the nervousness instead. Therefore, the learners should try to actively cope with FLA with the assistance of peers and teachers to improve their language skills.

6 Implications

6.1 For Students

Students should keep in mind that there is no shame in making mistakes; instead, it is a process of learning English. They should keep a positive mindset and challenge their comfort zone [5]. Taking cross-discipline courses or courses that involve many peer collaboration activities can help students get in touch with students and staff in different disciplines and gain more opportunities to communicate with local people [8]. Students should regard learning English as a lifelong process and keep practicing English by socializing with native speakers, watching native English movies and attending in or out of class activities [7][11]. Besides speaking and listening skills, teachers should also pay more attention to students’ reading and writing skills, helping them with complex grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation [10].

6.2 For Teachers

Teachers should always pay attention to students’ emotional needs and language challenges and create a friendly, relaxed, supportive, and inclusive atmosphere to reduce isolation and discrimination [5][6][7][13]. It is necessary for teachers to provide student guides that include the lesson plan and class materials, pay attention to their speaking pace, and give some time for students to respond [9]. Language teachers should teach English in a more student-centred way and design more exciting activities designed to engage students to practice speaking English in class [13]. In order to improve students’ self-confidence and reduce their anxiety, teachers can gather more instructional strategies, such as holding class debates and oral presentations and giving immediate feedback and encouragement [11][12]. Besides speaking and listening skills, teachers should also pay more attention to students’ reading and writing skills, helping them with complex grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation [10].

6.3 For Institutions

Schools should provide students with more student-centred services and programs that put students' needs, learning styles and interests in the first place, and help them learn more about American culture and life instead of focusing on academic performance [5]. Schools can hold workshops to provide tutorials for students, help them recognize their FLA situations and build strategies to cope with such situations [27]. Peer programs will be helpful to students' process of acculturation and English improvement by matching international students with local students or more experienced international students [7]. Schools should give teachers more freedom in assessment [9].

7 Limitations and future research

After reviewing the articles, we identified the limitations of current research and further provided some suggestions for future scholars. First, the research perspectives can be expanded. As a combination of psychology and language learning, the issue of FLA can be investigated across different disciplines, including psychology, neurolinguistics, ecology, education, and perhaps even computer science. Meanwhile, rather than only discussing FLA, the researchers may switch to considering the psychological emotions as a whole to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the EFL learners' minds.

Second, future studies can also enrich the research topics on FLA. Currently, the existing research mainly focuses on the contributing factors of FLA instead of the intervention strategies to deal with it; yet, exploring effective learning strategies might be more beneficial for the students. Considering this, the researchers may focus more on the intervention strategies in the future. Also, the relationship between FLA and learning outcomes has not yet been sufficiently examined. It could also be a direction for future research. Meanwhile, rather than only concentrating on a single group of EFL learners, the comparison between different students might be interesting as well. The scholars can compare diverse participants, for example, students from different sociocultural backgrounds, students living inside and outside the language environment, and students studying different disciplines.

Last, the innovation of research methods should be considered. The relevant research at present is primarily qualitative. In the future, more quantitative and mixed methods can be used to examine FLA-related topics. Furthermore, the audience and participants can be extended. The subject groups in existing studies are mainly students in higher education. Since early childhood is a crucial period for language development, especially oral speaking, perhaps we can pay more attention to primary school students regarding their FLA [28]. The FLA status of adolescent students at secondary school can be investigated as well.

8 Conclusion

Most students have negative feelings when talking about their FLA moments, affecting their mental health, social experience, and academic achievement. Therefore, it's vital

for students to keep a positive mindset, and teachers should also pay attention to students' emotional needs and consider their challenges, while institutions pay more attention to international students' transition, not just academic performance. For future studies, we can use a mixed research method to explore FLA in different situations or across different disciplines.

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