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Exploring Foreign Language Anxiety in the Chinese EFL Classroom: A case study

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the factors affecting foreign language anxiety (FLA) in Chinese tertiary EFL classrooms. This study adopted a descriptive case study design involving 490 EFL students from one public university in China. Data were collected via a self-reported questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The findings reported a moderate level of FLA among the students. Internal and external factors affected the student's FLA, including performance anxiety, perceived lack of proficiency, low motivation, relationship challenges, and learning environment-related challenges. These findings implied universities should enhance the physical and pedagogical learning environment to sustain quality EFL teaching and learning.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety; learning environment; quality EFL teaching and learning

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1.0 Introduction

China is now adopting the “bring in” and “go global” strategy and lays great importance on introducing China to the whole world. Possessing good English language proficiency for people has become the premise for internationalization. Henceforth, English as a foreign language (EFL) is taught at almost every level of study ranging from elementary to tertiary levels. Despite learning EFL for decades, the proficiency of most tertiary Chinese EFL learners still needs to improve (Cai, 2020). According to EF English Proficiency Index (2022), China's English proficiency level ranked 62 globally, displaying Chinese EFL learners' low English proficiency. Therefore, determining the factors influencing English language learning has been an important issue for Chinese educators and researchers.

Researchers such as Ellis (2008) have highlighted that external and internal factors influence second language acquisition (SLA). Among the internal factors, language anxiety has received much attention (Dewaele et al., 2023). It was defined as the feelings of worry and negative emotions when learning and using a second language (MacIntyre, 1994). Studies have generally concluded that language anxiety is a destructive and debilitating force on language learning (Von Worde, 2003), meaning that foreign language anxiety (FLA) negatively affects language performance and achievement. However, research also shows the facilitating effect of FLA and its variation in different cultures and educational contexts (Kim, 2009). Therefore, there is a necessity to evaluate multiple factors that interact and influence FLA, including learner-related factors, interpersonal and social surroundings (MacIntyre, 2017).

Considering the EFL learning background in China and the importance of FLA to language acquisition, the research on factors affecting FLA in the Chinese context can contribute to a better understanding of Chinese EFL learners' FLA and English language

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learning. Therefore, the main objective of this study was to examine the factors that affect Chinese EFL tertiary students' foreign language anxiety. Accordingly, the study was guided by the following two research questions:

- What is the level of Chinese EFL tertiary students' FLA?
- What factors affect Chinese EFL tertiary students' FLA?

2.0 Literature Review

FLA has been SLA's most widely studied affective factor since the 1970s (MacIntyre, 2017). In the past decades, many theoretical and empirical studies have been devoted to the research of FLA, involving the nature of FLA, the design of scales measuring FLA and skill-specific anxieties, the correlation between FLA and language performance, affecting variables, and applied research in teaching (Valieva, 2023). Among the numerous studies, Horwitz et al. (1986) established FLA as a situation-specific concept. They put forward three primary sources of FLA communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Based on this theory, they constructed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to measure levels of FLA, which was proved to be of good reliability and validity and has been widely accepted. Research of FLA in SLA began to flourish (MacIntyre, 2017). FLCAS has been commonly utilized in China to measure Chinese foreign language learners' FLA, and many studies concluded that Chinese EFL learners are of moderate to high levels of FLA (Li, 2020; Naudhani et al., 2018)

Most studies have focused on the negative influence of FLA on language learning and have viewed anxiety as a barrier to SLA (Hu et al., 2023). Accordingly, much research has been conducted to explore the sources of FLA (Li & Li, 2016; Oad, 2020). Research has indicated that FLA is often a result of various factors, such as negative evaluation and assessment from others, teacher's attitude and classroom procedures, learner's traits, and students' proficiency level (Dewaele, 2017). Much research concluded that FLA is more related to learner-related factors (Trang et al., 2013).

Since the introduction of positive psychology into the field of SLA in 2012, there has been a "positive turn" in the study of emotional factors in SLA. Currently, researchers explore the positive aspect of FLA and its relationship with other positive emotions, such as enjoyment and pleasure (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). This development opens a new perspective to studying FLA with its debilitating and facilitating effect on language learning.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive case study with explanatory sequential research, as triangulating findings obtained from both quantitative and qualitative methods gave the researcher a chance to better understand research problems. Besides that, a mixed methods approach further added credibility and trustworthiness to the findings obtained (Creswell, 2018).

This study was conducted in one public university in Hunan Province, China wherein the data was collected over a span of one month. First data were collected through a questionnaire survey in the traditional paper-and-pencil way with random sampling. It was conducted on 510 Year Two tertiary students. Four hundred and ninety-seven returned at a response rate of 97.5%. After data screening and cleaning, a total of 490 valid questionnaires were obtained and used to determine Chinese EFL tertiary students' FLA levels. After the quantitative data analysis, fifteen (15) volunteer students were interviewed utilizing semi-structured interviews to examine the factors affecting students' FLA.

The validity of research instruments was established through a panel of two experienced experts, i.e., one English language professor with 25 years of English teaching and one senior lecturer with a doctoral degree in Education. The questionnaire was adapted from Zhang and Guo's (2018) version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) for its validity and reliability in the Chinese context. The reliability of the questionnaire was established via a pilot study involving 190 students who were not involved in the actual research, while Cronbach's alpha score for the questionnaire was 0.91. For the triangulation of qualitative data, the transcripts were first translated into English and then checked by a bilingual translator through backward translation. After that, the Chinese transcripts and their English translations were sent again to the respondents for member checking to confirm their accuracy and truthfulness.

The quantitative data were analyzed with SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics such as mean score and standardized deviation were calculated to analyze the participants' FLA level. The qualitative data were analyzed utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic framework to generate codes and themes through the software NVivo version 12.

Research ethics were maintained throughout the whole process. Consent from all the participants was obtained, all the participants were given pseudonyms, and data were kept in a password-encrypted laptop.

4.0 Findings

This section provides the main findings based on the two research questions in this study.

4.1 Students' Level of FLA

Research Question One explored the level of students' FLA, and the results are presented in Table 1. As shown in Table 2, all the values of Skewness and Kurtosis were between the absolute value of 1 (-0.630 to 0.447), indicating that the data were acceptable (Mishra et al., 2019).

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for FLA (n=490)

Construct	Sub-construct	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
FLA	Communication Apprehension	2.93	0.874	0.183	-0.505
	Communication Apprehension between Students and Teachers	2.82	0.866	0.288	-0.466
	Fear of Negative Evaluation	2.99	0.734	-0.002	-0.005
	Positive Affirmation	3.23	0.916	-0.148	-0.630
	Low Self-confidence in English Class	2.94	0.837	0.172	-0.249
	Negative Attitudes Toward English Class	2.84	0.870	0.447	-0.393
Overall		2.96	0.589	0.223	-0.341

Scale: 1.00-1.80=low, 1.81-2.60=low to moderate, 2.61-3.40=moderate, 3.41-4.20=moderate to high, 4.21-5.00=high

Students' overall level of FLA and levels of each sub-construct were examined. The mean value for students' overall FLA was 2.96 (SD=0.223), which indicated that the students experienced a moderate level of FLA. A similar sentiment was expressed in the six sub-constructs of FLA.

Their moderate level of FLA was also admitted by students in the interviews. For example, Respondent RM2 (Student#2, moderate FLA level) stated his happiness and anxiety: "I am nervous when answering questions without preparation, but I am happy with the classroom atmosphere." A majority also felt anxious when asked to perform specific tasks or skill-based tests, which further illustrated the nature of FLA being situation-specific.

4.2 Factors Affecting FLA among Chinese EFL Tertiary Students

Research Question Two examined the factors affecting Chinese EFL tertiary students' FLA when learning English. These factors were identified from the semi-structured interviews (N=15). The factors were grouped into two themes: internal factors and external factors. The total number of reported occurrences was 747. 54.1% (N=404) of the total reported occurrences in internal factors and 45.9% (N=343) in external factors.

4.2.1 Internal Factors

The internal factors affecting Chinese EFL tertiary students' FLA are factors that the students can control. The students reported being made anxious when learning English by nine elements which were grouped into three categories, namely performance anxiety (N=138), EFL learning ability (N=134), and low motivation (N=132). The results are shown in Fig. 1.

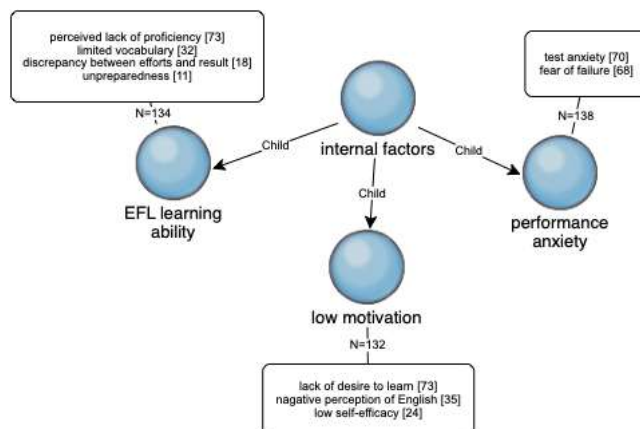


Fig. 1 Internal Factors Affecting Chinese EFL Tertiary Students' FLA

Performance Anxiety

In this context, performance anxiety refers to EFL learners' apprehension about their ability to perform well when learning English. According to the qualitative findings, test anxiety (N=70) and fear of failure (N=68) were the two sources of performance anxiety.

Most of the students admitted that they were anxious and uneasy during English tests and exams. Respondent RM3 highlighted the physical symptoms "My heart beats fast...I am in a cold sweat and feel feeble." Meanwhile, the students experienced anxiety when asked to accomplish skill-specific tasks, mainly for fear of public speaking. Respondent RM3 stated, "I am afraid of being asked to answer questions in class." However, his anxiety disappeared "when others are picked out." All these excerpts displayed the students' emotional reactions and physical symptoms of performance anxiety.

EFL Learning Ability

EFL learning ability refers to the EFL learner's ability to acquire and apply English language knowledge, skills, and information in this study. This category included perceived lack of English proficiency (N=73), limited vocabulary (N=32), the discrepancy between effort and result (N=18), and unpreparedness (N=11).

The number of "perceived lack of proficiency" occurrences was the highest in this category. Thirteen out of the fifteen respondents reported perceived low proficiency and no progress in learning English. This anxiety echoes the low English proficiency level rated by EFL EPI.

Anxiety over limited vocabulary was high among the students when they took tests or performed skill-based tasks. The students became less anxious and happy when they enlarged their vocabulary. Respondent RH3 (Student#3, high FLA level) realized the importance of vocabulary and displayed her initiative in enlarging vocabulary, "not waiting for the teacher to give direction on memorizing words."

The occurrences of FLA over the discrepancy between efforts and results (N=18) and unpreparedness (N=11) were relatively few among the students. However, at least 50% (N=8) of the interviewees reported being anxious when unprepared for tests or in-class activities, and 60% (N=9) reported disappointment and pain over the discrepancy between much effort and little gains in learning English.

Low Motivation

Based on the students' reported experience of FLA, the students were weakly motivated to learn English more by their lack of desire to learn (N=73) than by their negative perception of English (N=35) and low self-efficacy (N=24). These students were "absent-minded and inactive in English class" and "did not practice and exercise unless required."

The students' negative perception of English also increased their low motivation and anxiety when learning English. RM5 believed that "I would have obtained a higher score in the NCEE had English not been compulsory." Likewise, low self-efficacy was common among the students, and only one respondent did not report low self-efficacy.

4.2.2 External Factors

The external factors affecting Chinese EFL tertiary students' FLA are factors from outside and cannot be controlled by the students. The eleven elements were grouped into two categories: pedagogical factors and sociocultural factors shown in Fig. 2.

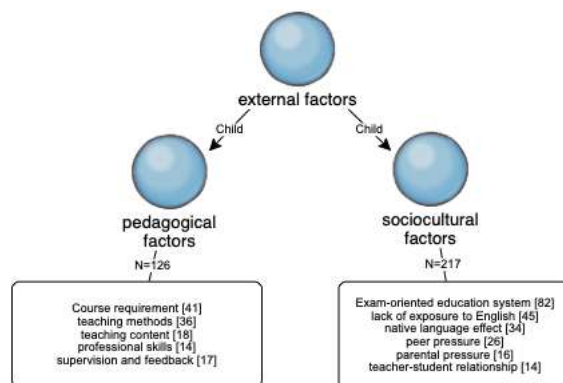


Fig. 2 External Factors Affecting Chinese EFL Tertiary Students' FLA

Pedagogical Factors

Pedagogical factors were related to the teaching activities, methods, course requirements, teachers' professional skills, and supervision and feedback to students' test performance and daily practice in this study.

The findings indicated that course requirements contributed much to students' FLA (N=41). According to the students, there were fewer English classes and exams in university than in middle school. On the one hand, as Respondent RL4 (Student#4, low FLA level) put it, the students could "choose to do what we want and try different methods of learning English." On the other hand, as Respondent RH1 admitted, they "get lazy," which could lead to their lack of desire to learn.

The students stressed "interesting" ten times regarding teaching methods and content. In contrast, the students became bored and anxious when the teacher carried out rigid learning activities and practices. Respondent RH3 noted, "the teacher reads the PPT or text in class...and we lose interest." This highlighted the link between teaching methods and low motivation in learning English, which finally led to FLA experiences.

Teachers' professional skills are part of the teaching system that affects students' FLA. Twelve out of the fourteen occurrences in "professional skills" were related to teachers' speaking proficiency. Respondent RH5 highlighted the negative influence of the teacher's accent when speaking English: "It is hard to know what he was talking about, which made me disappointed and anxious." Likewise, teachers' supervision and feedback influenced students' FLA negatively and positively. The students tended to be less anxious with less teacher supervision. Meanwhile, three of the five high FLA students expressed their expectation of the teacher being "stricter" and "giving more assignments."

Sociocultural Factors

Sociocultural factors are the social and cultural factors contributing to students' FLA learning English in this study. According to the qualitative findings, students were made anxious by six sociocultural elements, namely, the examination-oriented education system (N=82), lack of exposure to English (45), native language effect (N=34), peer pressure (26), parental pressure (16), and teacher-student relationship (N=14).

The impact of the examination-oriented education system had a twofold influence on students' FLA. On the one hand, students worked hard to pass English exams and thus were unhappy with learning English for test purposes. Respondent RL1 stated, "It has

been depressing with years of learning English and taking exams." On the other hand, students reported less motivation to learn English after the NCEE.

The lack of exposure to English and native language effect was emphasized as essential factors that caused FLA in students. Limited chances for students to communicate with native English speakers made it hard for them to practice their speaking skills, which lowered their motivation and increased their negative perception of English. The native language of Chinese served the dual function of anxiety-provoking and anxiety-reducing in students. On the one hand, students found learning English easy and were happy with translating for learning. On the other hand, the limited vocabulary blocked them from understanding the English material when translating, which added to their anxiety. Respondent RL4 noted her translating writing models from Chinese to English in tests, but she "*became panicked when I do not know the corresponding English expression for the Chinese one.*"

The relationship with peers, parents, and English teachers positively and negatively affected students' FLA. For one thing, the students feel pressured and anxious with hardworking peers and expectations from parents. For another, they were motivated to learn under this pressure. As Respondent RH3 said, "*I am under pressure, but I am happy when I make progress under such pressure.*" Likewise, the quality of the teacher-student relationship affected students' FLA and even English learning. Teacher bias was emphasized as an essential element contributing to students' FLA, as it caused a feeling of unfairness, leading to unhappy and negative experiences in learning English.

5.0 Discussion

This section presents a brief discussion of the main findings that were obtained from this study.

5.1 Students' Levels of FLA

The Chinese EFL tertiary students were found to have a moderate level of FLA, which was consistent with the findings of Li (2020) ($M=3.06$, $SD=.60$) and Jiang and Dewaele (2019) ($M=3.14$, $SD=0.54$). However, the mean score of FLA in this study was lower than the mean scores reported in the two studies. It may be related to the different samples with different English proficiency levels and learning environments.

The moderate FLA level in this study is also consistent with Dewaele and MacIntyre's (2014) findings that Asian foreign language learners were of the highest FLA level in an international survey. The mean value of FLA in this study is higher than the international FLA level ($M=2.75$, $SD=0.83$). This consistency implied the significance of sociocultural factors causing FLA. For example, the social norm of valuing academic achievement in society can lead to high FLA among Chinese EFL learners. It indicated that FLA is more than an internal construct. When considering factors affecting Chinese EFL learners' FLA, sociocultural elements should be included.

5.2 Factors Affecting FLA among Chinese EFL Tertiary Students

Internal and external factors were reported to affect Chinese tertiary students' FLA, which conforms to MacIntyre's (2017) conclusion that FLA has "both internal and social dimensions" (p.28).

Consistent with Jiang and Dewaele's (2019) and Trang et al.'s (2013) studies, this study showed that FLA was more related to students than teachers and other external factors. However, this study found an increasingly important role of external factors in affecting students' FLA. Moreover, it found that external factors displayed a more dynamic and complicated nature.

What is worth mentioning is the dual function of sociocultural factors, which could act on EFL learners and affect their English learning. The exam-oriented education system was connected to students' test anxiety and fear of failure. However, some students reported low motivation and FLA for learning English after the NCEE. It indicated the negative effect of the exam-oriented education system on EFL learners' psychology and learning performance. Therefore, a dynamic evaluation system that includes summative and formative assessments is needed in China's English education.

The findings also indicated that teachers exert influence on internal and external factors. On the one hand, teaching quality affects students' motivation and proficiency levels. For example, the student's FLA with limited vocabulary can be reduced by adopting systematic vocabulary learning strategies in EFL classrooms (Sidhu & Mohamad Nor, 2017). On the other hand, teachers should construct a quality emotional and pedagogical environment to make the students feel comfortable making and learning from mistakes (Wang et al., 2023). Otherwise, the emotionally and pedagogically uninteresting English teaching and learning environment would lead to routine and a lack of student engagement (Dewaele, 2015).

The positive tendency drawn from these factors was the students' positive perception of the anxiety-provoking factors. For example, the students could gain motivation from peer and parental pressure. Therefore, teachers and administrators should emphasize cultivating students' emotional intelligence.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

There are limitations to this study. Firstly, the sample from one public university in China is a limitation, which does not represent the geographical and pedagogical differences in China's tertiary English teaching and learning. It limited the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, another disadvantage is the lack of a longitudinal dataset on FLA and influencing factors. The data were collected from the Year Two tertiary students within one month. It would be better if the research were carried out in the first and fourth semesters among the same participants. The students would have more insight into their FLA, and more information about the dynamic nature of FLA

could be obtained. Therefore, future studies can conduct similar research by involving students from universities and colleges from different regions and types of courses to triangulate the data and by exploring the long-term effect of FLA and its sources.

However, the findings of this study may shed light on the quality of EFL teaching and learning in China at the tertiary education level. The consistent finding that Chinese EFL learners' FLA level is higher than the international sample implied the influence of external factors unique to Chinese English teaching and learning. The exam-oriented education system and English course requirements call for attention from higher education institutions to reform and implement student-centered English education. Meanwhile, there is evidence from the findings that students were able to reduce their FLA from peer pressure and parental pressure. Lastly, teachers should cultivate an emotionally engaging environment for the students with no bias and embrace more challenging and exciting activities in English classroom teaching. To summarize, EFL learners, educators, and institutions should enhance the psychological, pedagogical, and sociocultural learning environment to sustain quality EFL teaching and learning.

This study calls for future studies to evaluate FLA with its debilitating and facilitating effect, focusing on how to reduce FLA and how to utilize it for better EFL teaching and learning in Chinese EFL classrooms. Meanwhile, future studies should evaluate FLA in the broad sociocultural context and treat it as an internal factor and sociocultural construct.

Acknowledgments

None.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper has theoretical and practical contributions to the EFL classrooms highlighting the equal importance of internal and external factors affecting foreign language anxiety in Chinese English teaching and learning context.

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