



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 12, Issue 04, 2023: 01-07

Article Received: 31-03-2023

Accepted: 04-05-2023

Available Online: 20-05-2023

ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18533/jah.v12i4.2339>

The Effect of Foreign Language Anxiety on College Students Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

Foreign language anxiety has always been regarded as a negative influencing factor on learning foreign languages. Exploring students' emotions in learning foreign languages online, especially in relieving anxiety, is conducive to promoting students to learn actively and adapting to new learning models and environments. Taking college students as the research subjects, through questionnaire and interview, this paper explores the impact of anxiety on their English learning effectiveness in the online classroom. Results show that online English learning reduces students' learning anxiety and changes their attitude of having classes, but it also increases their anxiety in English communication. In addition, online classes have also played a role in enhancing English listening and reading ability.

Keywords: Foreign language learning, anxiety, online classes, college students.

JEL Classification: I20, I21, I23, I29

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1. Introduction

The study of foreign language anxiety began in the early 1970s. Brown (1973) put forward the relationship between affective factors and successful second language learning, pointing out that anxiety is one of the main emotional factors impacting individual second language learners. But most of the existing research focuses on foreign language learning anxiety in traditional classrooms while neglecting that in other teaching forms. Therefore, based on the popularity of online foreign language teaching, this paper aims to explore the impact of foreign language anxiety on college students' English learning in the online classroom environment. It adopts an empirical research method to collect and analyze relevant data, exploring how foreign language learning anxiety of college students changes in online classes, and which aspects of foreign language learning will be affected by this anxiety fluctuation.

2. Literature review

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According to its root, anxiety can be divided into trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety (Spielberger, Gorsuch & Lushene, 1983). Foreign language anxiety is often studied as a kind of situation-specific anxiety because it is "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986:128). With the focus of foreign language teaching shifting to student-centered, anxiety has been attracting more and more researchers' attention (Phillips, 1992; Zhang Yuru, 2001).

American psychologist Horwitz has his understanding and full exploration of the concept and classification of foreign language anxiety. According to Horwitz(1986), foreign language anxiety involves communication anxiety, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication anxiety refers to "anxiety characterized by worry and concern when communicating with others"; Test anxiety refers to "behavioral anxiety caused by fear of failure in the exam"; And the fear of negative evaluation refers to "the fear of others' evaluation, the avoidance of evaluation occasions, and the expectation that others will make negative evaluations". In the same year, based on this classification, Horwitz et al. designed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which includes 33 projects. He tested the FLCAS on 75 University of Texas System students and then conducted a formal trial on 108 students. The results showed that FLCAS had good internal reliability (Cronbach $\alpha = .93$) and retest reliability ($r = .83, P = .001$). Therefore, Horwitz (1986) believes that foreign language learning anxiety is different from other general anxiety and can be reliably and effectively measured. In other words, as a single-dimensional scale, the FLCAS has a high level of reliability and validity, which is suitable for relevant research or practical work. Nowadays, the FLCAS has become the most authoritative and commonly used tool for measuring students' foreign language learning anxiety. In 1991, Horwitz and Yong edited and published the book "Foreign Language Anxiety: From Theory and Research to Classroom Implication", which marks that the research on foreign language anxiety has entered a relatively mature period.

Based on Horwitz's classification and scale, many scholars have explored the relationship between foreign language anxiety and different factors from various aspects, including learning motivation, learning strategy, teacher characteristics, classroom environment, and so on. These relationships are complex and the relevant research findings have large differences. But some variables have a clear relationship with foreign language anxiety, and the research conclusions are consistent. And it is sure that the uncomfortable classroom environment plays a significant role in causing negative language learning anxiety among the numerous and complex factors. The classification of foreign language learning anxiety by researchers also emphasizes the special relationship between learning anxiety and the classroom environment. However, the learning environment discussed in relevant studies is simple, most of which are on the basis of the traditional English learning environment. With the popularity of online classrooms and other emerging models, relevant research also needs to change direction to adapt to the development of teaching.

In general, the classroom environment of the related research can be divided into formal and informal classroom environments. The former refers to the complete traditional classroom in the formal school, while the latter refers to various kinds of language-intensive training courses, such as online classrooms, summer language camps, and language laboratories. Nevertheless, with the impact of the epidemic and the development of the Internet, online classes have been rapidly popularized in a wide range. Some scholars also found this teaching trend, for example, Li Chengchen and Han Ye (2022) studied the impact of learning emotions, including anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom, on the learning effectiveness of online classes. In the traditional classroom, many factors can cause foreign language anxiety, and this anxiety will have a negative impact on the process and results of second language learning. Although the scale of online foreign language teaching, on the whole, is gradually expanding and has become the mainstream trend, the existing research mainly focuses on the traditional classroom and pays less attention to the online or hybrid classroom environment.

The information-based teaching of foreign language has the characteristics of personalization and diversification (Zheng Xinmin, Su Qiujuan 2020), which is likely to cause changes in students' learning investment and self-regulation (Deng Di 2016). Learning engagement and self-regulation are closely related to learning emotions (Macklem, 2015), which directly affect the effectiveness of foreign language teaching. And in the online classroom, the learning environment and teaching methods are greatly different from those in the traditional classroom. Therefore, with the deep integration of information

technology and foreign language teaching, the research on foreign language anxiety also needs to expand the research focus from the traditional physical classroom to the online teaching environment. The existing foreign language emotion research mainly focuses on the traditional physical classroom but pays insufficient attention to the second language emotion in the online class environment.

3. Research design

3.1 Participants and research questions

The participants selected in this paper are 28 college students, who receive online English learning in college. The criteria for selecting the research subjects are: having the experience of learning a second language in traditional classroom, having accepted online second language learning for more than 3 months, and having participated in related tests. This paper aims to answer the following two questions:

1. What are the anxiety levels of college students in learning English in online classes?
2. How does foreign language anxiety in online classes affect their English learning?

3.2 Instruments

The research method of this paper is the online questionnaire, which adopts the FLCAS and is based on Horwitz's (1986) division of foreign language anxiety. The questionnaire used in this paper can be divided into six categories: (1) Expressing anxiety, which refers to the feeling of panic and fear caused by active or passive English speaking. (2) Learning anxiety, which involves the tension and uneasiness caused by English learning, focusing on learning preparation, teacher correction, English learning progress and other behaviors. (3) Test and evaluation fear, which involves the fear of the evaluation of English tests, teachers and students. (4) English classroom attitude, which involves the attitude and feelings towards English class. (5) Confidence anxiety, which involves confidence in learning and using English. (6) Speaking environment anxiety, which involves the influence of language environment on speaking English. The content of the open-ended questions focus on two general aspects: (1) Learners' self-assessment of their English online learning effects, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. (2) The emotional changes between learners' online English classes and traditional classes involve anxiety, boredom, enjoyment, etc.

On the whole, the online questionnaire has 38 items, including 33 multiple-choice questions, 4 open-ended questions and 1 question to verify the validity of the questionnaire. For detail, in this questionnaire, 29 multiple-choice questions (87%) involve typical difficulties related to listening, speaking, reading, writing, language memory, and language processing speed. The open-ended questions focus on the participants' English learning effectiveness, learning emotions in the online class, preferences for ways of learning English, and so on. In this survey, the questions are translated into Chinese to enable the participants to understand accurately. The measurement table adopts the Likert 5-point scale system, with 5 options from "strongly agree" (1 point) to "strongly disagree" (5 points) under each question. All reverse questions are scored in reverse during data statistics. The higher the score on the scale, the higher the degree of anxiety of the learners.

4. Results and discussion

Data analysis shows that online classes lead to anxiety fluctuations and affect students' English learning in various aspects. Besides, about 25% of the participants said that online learning was more enjoyable, about 25% thought that online learning was more relaxing, and about 36% considered that online learning was more boring.

4.1 Online English learning anxiety levels

Table 1 shows the specific situation of learners' English learning anxiety. It adopts the 5-subscale system of Likert : the average value equal to or higher than 3.5 is high-frequency use, between 2.5 and 3.4 is medium-frequency use, and equal to or lower than 2.4 is low-frequency use (Oxford & Burry-Stock 1995: 12).

Table 1.

Statistics of English learning anxiety levels.

Latitude	Factors	Average Value	Standard Deviation	Variance	Total Score
Classroom anxiety	Speech anxiety	3.5	0.382	0.146	3.22
	Learning anxiety	3.3	0.294	0.086	
	Test and evaluation fear	3.4	0.355	0.126	
	English classroom attitude	3.2	0.176	0.031	
	Self-confidence anxiety	3.0	0.066	0.004	
	Language environment anxiety	3.0	0.537	0.288	

On the whole, the foreign language classroom anxiety level of college students in online English learning is medium. However, according to the data, the English speaking anxiety of college students is up tilted, with a score of about 3.5, which belongs to high-frequency use. It means that learners are not very confident in their oral English and have concerns about whether they can exercise and improve their English pronunciation, fluency, logic, and so on in the classroom. In terms of the open-ended questions, online learning will affect the interaction and communication between teachers and students. About 64% of the students said they would prefer to have traditional English classes because it is more convenient to share ideas.

In addition, the student's test and evaluation fear level is also high, with a score of about 3.4, close to high-frequency use. Based on the interview, online learning has little impact on this aspect. Whether receiving online or offline English teaching, the test and evaluation fear of learners has always been high. On the one hand, due to the influence of China's education model, testing is prominent as a way to check students' learning levels and effectiveness. Results play a significant role, so tests inherently bring learners certain psychological pressure. On the other hand, it is related to Chinese traditional culture. China stresses collectivism and public opinion. Therefore, learners will value the evaluation of others, especially the negative evaluation caused by their insufficient ability or poor performance.

The anxiety of college students about learning English and having English classes is similar, which is in medium-frequency use but a little high, with 3.3 and 3.2 points respectively. Online learning has an effect on reducing the anxiety of these two aspects. In terms of learning, because the online class has unique functions such as recording and playback, it alleviates learners' anxiety caused by not keeping up with the course and not understanding language points, such as grammar, semantics and so on. From the perspective of the English classroom attitude, due to the changes in the classroom form, the opportunities for face-to-face communication between students and teachers are reduced considerably, and the direct authority brought by teachers is also decreased, students will naturally feel more relaxed and abate their resistance to English classes.

The anxiety level of students in English learning confidence is consistent with that of English-speaking environment, both at medium-frequency use, with 3.0 points. According to the interview, online learning has little impact on these two aspects. English learning confidence depends greatly on learners' personal factors, such as language professions, learning experience, etc. Changes in teaching form have little impact on anxiety in this aspect. In terms of the English-speaking environment, it is mainly because the English classroom is the main place for learners to speak English no matter which way they take classes. Therefore, learners have low anxiety and little change in this respect.

In a word, online English learning can affect college students' anxiety in speaking, acquiring knowledge, and having classes. Consistent with this fact, college students have a high level of speech anxiety, with moderate levels of learning anxiety and English classroom attitude anxiety. Although college students have high anxiety about testing and evaluation, online English learning has little impact on this side. Besides, because college students have certain learning confidence and low requirements of language learning environment, online English learning also has a minor influence on self-confidence anxiety and language environment anxiety.

4.2 The effect of foreign language anxiety on online English learning

Table 2.

The self-evaluation of online English learning.

Dimension	Increase	Decrease	No Obvious Change
Listening	25%	14%	61%
Reading	25%	18%	57%

Speaking	18%	18%	64%
Writing	18%	14%	68%
Total	22%	16%	62%

Table 2 shows the participants' self-evaluation of their English learning effect: 62% of the participants believe that the change of teaching form has no significant impact on English learning, 22% believe that online learning is conducive to improving English learning, and 16% believe that online learning will reduce English learning effect.

Detailed analysis shows that 22% of the learners believe that online classes can improve their English learning effect for the following reasons: first, the learning environment is more comfortable and quiet. Unlike traditional English classes with dozens of students, online classes are mostly studied through the Internet in dormitories or at home. Generally, 1 to 4 people are in a learning space, listening to the class with headphones on. Compared with studying English in the classroom, it also makes learners feel more pleasant and relaxed in the dormitory or at home. Secondly, the online teaching method, which can make learners more focused on class, is equivalent to the one-to-one teaching mode, and the audio-visual effect is better. Third, the online class has the function of recording, broadcasting, and playback. When a learner can't keep up with the rhythm of the teacher's class because he can't understand, distract, take notes, or other reasons, he can independently check and fill in gaps by watching the recorded video after class.

However, 16% of learners have the opposite opinion, which may be due to—first, the supervision effect of online English learning has a downward trend. The uncontrollable factors of online learning are increasing. Influenced by subjective and objective conditions such as platform service, network speed, learning equipment, and personal willingness, teachers have more difficulty supervising students' learning, which cannot achieve the same effect as offline classes. Therefore, students are more likely to wander and distract. What's more, some learners approve that online English learning is less interesting than offline English learning. The attractiveness of English classes is declining, while students' boredom is increasing. However, either for objective reasons, such as the strictness of online examination supervision, the difficulty of teachers' problem setting, or for subjective reasons, such as strong adaptability and determination, more than half of the learners believe that the change of class form will not affect their English grades.

Based on the answers to open-ended questions, the fluctuation of learning confidence, speaking environment and test and evaluation anxiety caused by online classes is small. Learners' self-perception of learning ability plays an important role in second language classroom anxiety. Learners with high language learning anxiety tend to derogate themselves, while learners without anxiety often praise themselves. If students underestimate their second language learning ability, feel inferior to other learners, and think they are looked down upon by others, they will be prone to anxiety in class. What's more, fear of negative evaluation is a personality trait, which may produce fear tendencies in any case, so it is difficult to remove. The nature of second language classroom learning determines learners' fear of negative evaluation because, in the classroom, learners' behavior will be evaluated by teachers and seniors from time to time. Students are highly sensitive to these evaluations, whether imaginary or real. But online classes have little impact on these two aspects.

On the contrary, online English learning will increase learners' anxiety when they are speaking. Because online classes reduce the chance of communication and interaction, learners can not practice their oral English immediately and effectively, which may also lead to low speech performance. However, this kind of anxiety is not a negative self-deprecating emotion and may stimulate learners' English learning under certain circumstances. Moreover, online English learning can reduce anxiety caused by knowledge learning and classroom attitude. The multimedia equipment used in information-based teaching has powerful functions, which makes the students' English learning more convenient. For example, the knowledge points that are not understood or missed in the classroom can be found and filled by playback after class. Therefore, it alleviates students' anxiety in acquiring English knowledge to a large extent. Besides, online English learning plays a role in facilitating the relationship between teachers and students. According to the answers of participants, the screen distance will relieve tension, anxiety, and other negative emotions when communicating with the teacher in the online class. Many studies have proved that the relationship between teachers and students can significantly impact

students' anxiety in the second language classroom, especially the means of error correction. Online teaching not only creates a more relaxed learning environment but also widens physical distance, eases the relationship between teachers and students, and reduces the pressure and tension of answering questions in front of teachers and other students. Hence, these advantages will improve learners' attitudes toward English classes, making them subconsciously think that English learning is not painful.

To sum up, the online English class has more influence on learners' anxiety produced by expression, knowledge learning, and classroom attitude, while it has less impact on that by tests and evaluation, learning confidence, and speaking environment. But on the whole, most learners think that online English lessons will not make people more anxious. Besides, only a few learners feel that online classes will reduce their English learning effects, while most of them believe that it will not affect or even benefit their learning effects. In general, English online learning will bring some anxiety fluctuations, but the level of anxiety is lower, which is also effective for promoting English learning.

5. Conclusion

Findings of the research shows that online learning can bring anxiety fluctuations, which plays a role in reducing foreign language learning anxiety. It can help reduce college students' English anxiety related to knowledge learning and having classes, but it also tends to increase their speaking anxiety. Compared with traditional classes, online English learning is conducive to checking leaks, filling the vacancy, and improving listening and reading performance. Moreover, the relationship between teachers and students tends to be more relaxed in online English classes. Students do not resist English learning, which also helps to reduce their foreign language anxiety and improve the learning effect.

Students in different learning environments have different anxiety levels. It is crucial to find specific ways to reduce students' foreign language anxiety and improve their learning effect. This paper suggests that teachers can establish emotional awareness, adjust teaching practices according to the negative emotions caused by the transformation from an offline to an online teaching model, and strive to create a positive foreign language learning atmosphere for students. Because lower foreign language anxiety can promote students to study actively, adapt to the new learning mode and environment, and help them achieve better academic achievements. Meanwhile, students can find out the causes of anxiety in their online learning, reduce unnecessary anxiety, and make themselves more committed to learning foreign languages effectively.

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