English Learning Anxiety: A Case Study of a Female Chinese Graduate Studying in UK

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ABSTRACT

Anxiety is a complex psychological phenomenon peculiar to language learners, and it is also one of the affective factors that affect second language acquisition. This study aims to explore the English learning anxiety of a female Chinese graduate student studying in the UK under the environment of taking English as a foreign language. This paper summarizes the causes of the anxiety of the production student from both inside and outside the classroom, and draws a conclusion after qualitative analysis of the learner's interview. This study further shows that foreign language learning anxiety of foreign students is widespread. Communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety are the three factors that cause the participant's classroom anxiety, and extracurricular learning anxiety is related to the English level of peers and the foreign language learning environment of the learner. At the end of the study, the author provides two pedagogical implications for teachers and students on how to reduce anxiety. The researcher suggested that teachers and students should cooperate to create a relaxing learning environment. And foreign language learners should improve their self-confidence.

1. Introduction

Anxiety 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). It is widely believed to be detrimental to language learners, especially international students. Anxiety will lead them not knowing how to express themselves in English in their daily life, affecting their understanding of the course, and making it difficult to integrate with the local environment. This study focuses on a Chinese graduate student studying in the UK and explores

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the factors and degrees of foreign language learning anxiety of a student who has experienced two completely different cultures. This study adopts a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis methods. In the past year, a female student majoring in Translation and Technology (with interpretation) at University College London participated in this research. Quantitative data is collected through questionnaires, and qualitative data is collected through online interviews, which is later encoded and transcribed for further analysis. Then, it points out the factors and degree of anxiety in and out of the classroom. It is found that communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety are the factors that cause the participant's classroom anxiety, with fear of negative evaluation contributing the most, and extracurricular anxiety is related to the peers' English level and the learner's foreign language learning environment. According to the participant's reaction, the cooperation between teachers and students to create a relaxing learning environment is helpful to alleviate the anxiety of foreign language learning in class. Foreign language learners focus on themselves and improve their self-confidence, which can help alleviate the anxiety of extracurricular learning. Finally, two pedagogical implications are given.

2. Literature review

Since the 1960s and 1970s, foreign scholars conducted in-depth research on anxiety in second language learning. At the beginning of the 21st century, there was also a discussion about second language learning anxiety in China. Scholars at home and abroad continue to enrich and expand the research contents of language anxiety, mainly including the source and degree of language anxiety (Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017; Mamun, 2021), the impact of language anxiety on language learning achievement (CheeKeong et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2018), the related factors of language anxiety (Zhong & Zhong, 2015; Fallah, 2017), and the expansion of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Liu, 2006; Martin & Ibis, 2017; Kitano, 2001; Hewitt&Stephenson, 2012; Šafranj et al., 2019).

Many studies on foreign language learners mainly focus on participants learning foreign languages in their own countries (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Fallah, 2017; Abdullah, 2021). The study on the anxiety of students studying abroad has also attracted the attention of some scholars. Cheng and Erben (2012) discusses the influence of foreign residence time, major, gender, and cultural adaptation on the language anxiety level of Chinese graduate students in a public university in the United States. The results shows that the longer the residence time, the lower the anxiety level of the students. Moreover, gender and cultural adaptation have certain effects on language anxiety. Roitblat et al. (2017) also finds similar results. In the beginning, the temporary change of country and school leads to an increase in the anxiety level in about one-third of the participants. However, it will drop to the normal level after an extended stay. The relationship between the time spent abroad and anxiety scores has different practical significance (Thompson & Lee, 2014). As far as the classroom is concerned, learners become more comfortable, and experience less anxiety and more enjoyment while studying abroad. However, despite the continuous improvement of classroom comfort levels, learners still show physiological signs of increased overall anxiety (Dewey et al., 2018). Regarding the reasons for the significant differences in the gain in Second Language Willingness to Communicate, Lee (2018) believes that it is related to the participant's perception of the adjustment of target countries, the improvement of international communication, and the reduction of second language anxiety.

While most studies are using the international students as their research subjects, this study will use a female Chinese graduate student studying in the United Kingdom as the participant, aiming to answer the following questions: What factors lead to the English classroom learning anxiety of this Chinese graduate student? How do the different factors influence her English classroom learning anxiety, and what is her extracurricular learning anxiety?

3. Methodology

This study adopts a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. The questionnaire is used to collect quantitative data on classroom learning anxiety. A structured interview is used to investigate further qualitative data on the anxiety of the research subject in and out of the classroom.

3.1 Instruments

The questionnaire is adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) created by Horwitz et al. (1986). The scale used in this paper includes 22 multiple-choice questions, which can be divided into three dimensions: (1) Communication apprehension, which refers to a psychological reaction in which an individual experiences fear and anxiety due to fear of the outcome of communication when communicating with others. It has eight items in the questionnaire, accounting for 36.36%. (2) Fear of negative evaluation, which involves learners' fear of receiving negative evaluations due to poor performance in foreign language learning activities. It has nine items, accounting for 40.91%. (3) Test anxiety, which is a tense negative emotional response that refers to learners' overall concern about foreign language learning in the context of an exam. It has five items, accounting for 22.73%. Each multiple-choice question has 5 degrees (A. Strongly Agree, B. Agree, C. Neither Agree Nor Disagree, D. Disagree, E. Strongly Disagree), representing different anxiety levels.

In addition to the questionnaire survey, six questions related to classroom teachers, classmates, and extracurricular communication are compiled as the interview to get a deeper understanding of the potential sources of language anxiety and to analyze her views on language learning in and out of the classroom, to ensure that the questions identified in this study can reflect and represent the culture of the research subject.

3.2 Participant

The participant of this study is a 23-year-old Chinese female, who is an undergraduate majoring in Translation at North China Electric Power University in the academic year 2017-2021, and a graduate student majoring in Translation and Technology (with interpretation) at University College London in the academic year 2021-2022. Her courses are related to translation and interpretation.

3.3 Data collection

First of all, the purpose of the questionnaire is explained to the participant, that is, to analyze the foreign language learning situation of English learners, but does not indicate that it is a scale about language learning anxiety so as to prevent the participant from being affected when filling in. She is informed that there is no right or wrong between the options, and the questionnaire results will be strictly confidential. To guarantee the validity of the data, the same questionnaire was conducted twice. The first time was on June 30, 2022. At that time, the student had completed all the courses, but she was still in the UK. The second time was on October 30, 2022, when the participant returned to China. In addition, an interview was recorded on June 30, 2022 in the form of a WeChat voice call. Finally, the questionnaire and the interview questions' answers are integrated and analyzed.

3.4 Data analysis

In order to judge whether the three factors of foreign language learning anxiety affect Chinese graduate students, SPSS software is used to conduct a paired sample T-test (Table 1) on two samples and a variance homogeneity test (Table 2) of the degrees of Strongly Agree and Agree on two samples. Table 1.

Paired sample t-test on two samples.

Paired Variables	Mean Value±Standard Deviation			t	df	P	Cohen's d
	Paired 1	Paired 2	Paired Differences (Paired 1-Paired 2)				
First Sample Pair up Second Sample	2.75±1.658	2.75±1.215	0±0.443	0	11	1.000	0

Table 2.
Variance homogeneity test of the degrees strongly agree and agree on two samples.

	Samples（Standard Deviation）		F	P
	First Sample（n=4）	Second Sample（n=4）		
Strongly Agree and Agree	1.414	0.957	0.3	0.604

In order to explore the differences in the influence of different factors on the student's classroom English learning anxiety, data statistics (Table 3) are completed.

Table 3
Different Factors of Anxiety and Different Proportions

	Communication Apprehension	Fear of Negative Evaluation	Test Anxiety	Total Value
Strongly Agree	0	0	0	0
Agree	13.63%	27.27%	13.63%	54.53%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	13.63%	9.1%	0	22.73%
Disagree	9.1%	4.54%	9.1%	22.74%
Strongly Disagree	0	0	0	0
Total Value	36.36%	40.91%	22.73%	100%

4. Results and discussion

When both questionnaire samples are integrated into the three tables above, the results are discussed in combination with the structured interview.

4.1 The general factors of classroom learning anxiety

As shown by the results of paired sample T-test in Table 1, the P value of the first variable paired with the second variable is 1.000. There is no significance at the level. Therefore, there is no significant difference between the first and second pairing. The cohen's d value of the difference range is 0.0, which is very small. As shown in Table 2, the results of the variance homogeneity test show that for the degrees of Strongly Agree and Agree, the significance P value is 0.604 > 0.05, which is not significant at the level. Hence, the data satisfy the homogeneity of variance. Therefore, we can draw a conclusion that communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety influence the English classroom learning anxiety of this Chinese graduate student in the UK.

4.2 The degree of classroom learning anxiety factors

According to the data results in Table 3, the participant does not choose the options of Strongly Agree or Strongly Disagree, which shows that her attitude towards anxiety is rational and has no extreme thoughts. Among the three options in the middle, Agree accounts for 54.53%, reaching more than half the value, and Disagree is 22.74%, more than one-fifth. It can be seen that although the participant takes every class in English while studying abroad, there is still anxiety in the process of foreign language learning.

Table 3 clearly shows that fear of negative evaluation will most likely cause foreign language learning anxiety in the participant, reaching 27.27%. Among the options of Disagree, the proportion of fear of negative evaluation is the least, only 4.54%. The results of Šafranj et al. (2019) research also showed that students prone to fear of negative evaluation are more inclined to experience foreign language anxiety. The participant explains that she remained passive most of the time in class because she was afraid of making language mistakes in communication. "When I speak, I always think about the reaction of other people in the class, and I am afraid of being laughed at by them." In general, the

interviewee expresses her fear of negative evaluation, mainly due to the explanation of potential classmates, language errors, and the damage to her self-image.

Communication apprehension and test anxiety have the same proportion of Agree and Disagree. The participant rejects the communication apprehension of "I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers." She experiences various uncontrollable things in the classroom, such as being suddenly asked to answer questions by the teacher in class, and occasionally standing in front of the class to give a presentation, which can cause fear. Regarding test anxiety, the participant rejects the item that "I am usually at ease during tests in my language class," and says, "During the exam, I am faced with many things that make me anxious, including time, scores, and the format of the question." In this case, these factors will cause anxiety and lead to forgetting the test materials. Therefore, she is concerned about the possibility of failing and that exam results do not meet her expected goal. Oral tests, the combination of speaking and testing, will make the participant more anxious. "Since childhood, there are fewer opportunities for oral English tests and little relevant experience. Moreover, the oral test of the interpretation course determines the final score of the whole course or accounts for a large proportion. I am afraid of the low score on the final exam."

On the whole, these differences show that the participant is most concerned about the negative evaluation of teachers and classmates, and the speech performance is the same as the test results. However, fear of negative evaluation is a personality trait, which may produce fear tendency in any case, so it isn't easy to eliminate it. This requires the participant not to pay too much attention to others' views in the process of learning a foreign language but to keep moving forward according to her own goals.

4.3   The reasons of extracurricular learning anxiety

According to the interview, the participant's extracurricular anxiety exists in the English learning process. However, it is obviously lower than that in class, and it is mainly from the English of her peers. In daily life, the participant generally does not communicate with her peers in English, but occasionally communicates in some funny ways. Because all her peers are Chinese, and their English level is limited, which is not as good as that of native English speakers. It will be more convenient and effective to communicate in Chinese. The participant said, "If we must communicate in English, there will be a feeling of showing off and affectation." However, she will secretly compare her English level with her peers. English proficiency is reflected in many aspects, such as pronunciation and fluency of spoken English, the choice of vocabulary, the idiomaticity of expression, and the professionalism of academic writing. Everyone has his own strengths, and almost no one is perfect in every aspect. When the participant meets a peer with a higher English level than her, "I will be a little envious, and then I will pay more attention to the performance of the peer and learn silently." From this point of view, extracurricular anxiety is not only a negative effect. On the contrary, it also encourages the participant to learn English.

Extracurricular foreign language learning anxiety also comes from a foreign language learning environment. The participant admits, "when I first arrived in the UK, I was a little afraid to communicate with supermarket guides, apartment managers, catering waiters, and others." Because, at that time, she knows fewer English expressions in these scenes, she is worried that she will encounter poor communication. However, it is necessary to communicate with these service personnel in daily life. After getting along with them several times, the participant will know how to express and use body language in these scenes. With confidence in using English, she gradually won't feel afraid. In addition, if someone asks her for directions on a foreign street, she also knows how to get there and is willing to describe it to him/her in English. Because "I have enough relevant experience, and the expression of describing the destination is relatively simple. At the same time, I have received a lot of help from others in my daily life, and I am very willing to help others."

In short, communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety reflected in the FLCAS are the factors that lead to the participant's foreign language learning anxiety. The participant's overall anxiety level in studying in the UK is relatively high, and she generally experiences moderate anxiety in foreign language classes. Among them, fear of negative evaluation has reached a high level of anxiety, which may be due to the fact that she has been studying English for a long time

and is influenced by Chinese face culture. Extracurricular anxiety is lower than classroom anxiety. At the same time, the participant is good at finding ways to relieve her anxiety in life.

5. Pedagogical implications

Every year, there are a lot of Chinese graduate students studying in the UK, and the participant is only one of them. They all have more or less similar feelings and experiences in learning a foreign language, and this learning experience may inspire other international students to learn a foreign language better. This study has two pedagogical implications for them.

First, students and teachers jointly should create a relaxing and harmonious learning environment to alleviate language learners' foreign language classroom anxiety. On the one hand, students need to cooperate with each other and strive to improve themselves. Students are more inclined to self-repair in cooperation and mutual assistance. Without teachers' correction at any time, students will reduce a lot of psychological pressure in the process of communication. In the usual language learning process, learners themselves should also earnestly learn how to effectively and comprehensively use various language learning strategies, accumulate knowledge and experience, and improve the efficiency of foreign language learning, so as to improve the quality of foreign language learning and become truly independent language learners. On the other hand, teachers should actively adjust and improve their teaching methods to improve the teaching effect. Foreign teachers can ask questions according to the actual situation of students, encourage and guide students to answer questions, give positive comments in a timely manner, and tactfully correct mistakes to maintain the "face" of China students. The ideal language teacher in the participant's mind is also a person who can "understand students' language ability and level very well, know where students will be confused in their study, and guide and supplement in time."

Secondly, the participant's foreign language learning anxiety, both in and out of class, is primarily rooted in her lack of self-confidence. For example, she is afraid of making language mistakes in class. The test results do not meet her expectations, and she is afraid that she cannot communicate with the British natives smoothly. The participant has high motivation for success, but her confidence in her English level is low, resulting in frequent anxiety. Focusing on ourselves and affirming self-worth is the first and most important way to face this situation. Everyone has different abilities, personalities, and specialties. What students need to do is find their own learning methods, seize every chance, and then stick to it. In addition, learn modestly and be good at consulting others. We should not imagine the excellent people around us as our imaginary enemies. Instead, we can observe more and learn from each other's good aspects. The participant did this very well. She will accumulate and learn from others' speeches and expressions in class and advanced vocabulary in writing model essays.

6. Conclusion

This study finds that foreign language learning anxiety is widespread in foreign language classrooms, and the participant's classroom anxiety is most obviously reflected in the negative evaluation brought by teachers and classmates. The combination of speech and examination could also easily cause her anxiety. Extracurricular leaning anxiety relates to the peers' English level and foreign language learning environment. The cooperation between teachers and students to create a relaxing learning environment is helpful in alleviating the anxiety of foreign language learning in class. The improvement of foreign language learners' self-confidence can help alleviate the anxiety of learning in and out of class. However, the major of the participant in this article is translation and technology (with interpretation), which has a certain impact on the research results. Nevertheless, anxiety does have obstacles and negative effects on foreign language learning. Anxiety in foreign language learning is inevitable, but it is controllable. We can reduce the degree of anxiety through some strategies and methods. Teachers can facilitate the students by creating a conducive, comfortable, and non-threatening class to help alleviating their foreign language anxiety. In addition, the key for foreign language learners to overcome anxiety is to improve their language level. Students should communicate boldly with different people on different occasions, enhance self-confidence in communication, and finally improve their language ability.

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