An Empirical Study on Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety of College Students

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Classroom anxiety could exert a tremendous influence on foreign language learners during their process of studying. Within this study, 353 college students of China Youth University of Political Studies (CYUPS) are selected as participants; the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) is applied as a tool and Statistic Package for Social Science (SPSS) software is used to analyze all the data to figure out whether there is difference on genders, grades, and majors among college students on their levels of foreign language classroom anxiety. The results show that considering all three anxiety perspectives: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, anxiety level between males and females are similar; there is also no significant difference among grades; however, English majors are significantly less anxious than non-English majors on test anxiety.

Keywords: college students, foreign language classroom anxiety, empirical research

Introduction

As one of the most important foreign languages, English has been taught in Chinese colleges for decades. In addition, Ministry of Education has set a series of tests and examinations to assess college learners’ performances. However, there are visible and invisible obstacles hindering learners’ listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities of foreign language that weaken their confidence to a large degree. As a result, a rather high percentage of college students are worrying about their foreign language academic performances.

To trace this kind of phenomenon to its source, learning anxiety, especially classroom anxiety should take responsibilities. Specifically, classroom anxiety could cause severe physical and emotional discomfort which would affect students’ learning efficiency as well as confidence. Thus, students may begin to question their learning abilities or even lose heart on studying. In general, classroom anxiety may jeopardize foreign language learners’ performance greatly.

It was noticed by foreign scholars and researchers in the 1970s that anxiety could be detrimental to learners. And a vast amount of efforts have been put to this study field since then. In the 1990s, domestic researchers initiated their empirical researches on the basis of their foreign peers. And over the years, conclusions of significant values have been figured out, yet more questions remain to be identified in further studies. In short, the purpose of researches in this field is not only to improve teaching outcomes but also to guarantee students’ mental well-being.

A considerable number of researches are made on the affecting factors for foreign language classroom anxiety. Most of these researches are focused on the conditions in key colleges or universities, or go to the
opposite to study students in less developed areas like Tibet. As a result, normal students’ samples, which account for a large percentage, are in need to clarify the whole picture of the situation.

To cover the shortage, the research aims to shed some light on the relationship between anxiety and gender—to find out whether there is anxiety level difference between genders. Also, foreign language classroom anxiety level among grades will be figured out. To compare the data, specific conditions of students will be shown such as the changes of anxiety level as time goes by. Additionally, the role of major, especially between English majors and non-English majors, in effecting foreign language classroom anxiety level could be analyzed through the research statistics. In general, this research will serve as a supplement and verification of the former studies. And current English-teaching efficiency and students’ mental health will benefit from the research outcomes.

**Literature Review**

During the process of acquiring a new language in classrooms, unusual symptoms are likely to be observed among students, such as sweat hands, flushing reaction on face, and so on. Because of these physical and emotional reactions, students can become reluctant or even afraid of continual study. In fact, this kind of phenomenon is called foreign language classroom anxiety, which has been researched by scholars both at home and abroad.

**Research Status Abroad**

Liu Ni (2011) summarized a consensus made by foreign linguists, educators as well as psychologists that researches on foreign language anxiety can be mainly divided into four phases: Firstly, anxiety became the focus of educational psychology between the 1940s and 1950s; secondly, there was a boom of researches on relationship between anxiety and learning effectiveness in the ensuing 10 years; thirdly, since 1970s, anxiety has been recognized as the vital factor for foreign language study. Fourthly, the book *Foreign Language Anxiety: From Theory and Research to Classroom Implication*, published by Horwitz and Young in 1991, showed that foreign language anxiety study had entered into the mature stage.

At the same time, a series of significant concepts and ideas were formulated by these scholars based on their empirical researches. For instance, Bailey (1983) stated that learners’ anxiety was produced when they compared themselves with others or their ideal conditions. However, according to E. K. Horwitz, M. B. Horwitz, and Cope (1986), foreign language anxiety is “as a distant complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process also differ from general communication anxiety” (p. 125).

Obviously, Horwitz’s definition is much more precise because it distinguishes itself from general communication anxiety, which few researchers noticed before. If these two types of anxieties were mixed up, the conclusions could be confused.

Horwitz and Young (1991) also argued that anxiety would attribute no positive effects to foreign language learning. However, Brown (1987) maintained that anxiety could be classified into two types: facilitating anxiety and debilitating anxiety. The former one could exert positive effects to learners while the latter may hinder their learning process. Later, Young (1986) found that there was no relationship between anxiety and language proficiency performance. In brief, it is complex to relate anxiety to foreign language learning.
Research Status at Home

In general, domestic researches on this field started much later. It was not until the reform and opening-up policy was carried out that scholars began to pay their attention to this field. Nevertheless, since the start of new millennium, an increasing number of Chinese scholars have been referring to the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which was designed by Horwitz and her colleagues in 1986, to conduct studies in China due to the rapid development of foreign language teaching.

In 2003, Wang Caikang (2003) translated the FLCAS into Chinese and applied the scale in his research on 418 college students. It turned out that its reliability and validity were quite satisfactory since its Chronbach’s $\alpha$ coefficient is 0.89, which showed high internal consistency. Besides, based on current college English teaching situation and features, Da Minghui (2007) successfully revised the scale to a new one, English Learning Anxiety Scale (ELAS), in order to measure non-English major students’ anxiety level. Furthermore, in the ensuing year, a research was conducted by Guo Wei and Wu Wen Sheng (2008) to test FLCAS’s reliability and validity among 547 Chinese primary school students. The result confirmed the scale with the alpha coefficient 0.821. Moreover, Liu Ni (2011) found that seniors are the most anxious group because they are under the pressure of graduation. And Yuan Luyao (2012) pointed out that anxiety level of English majors is slightly lower than that of non-English majors. Detailed relationship was discovered according to Sun Erping and Zhao Xiaoyun (2013) that foreign language classroom anxiety presents a negative correlation with the efforts put into English learning.

In recent years, an extensive respondents’ trend could be observed through the researches. Numbers of researches on non-English majors, art and music majors as well as vocational school students and remote area students are adding up.

In conclusion, there are several shortcomings within current researches. Firstly, the definition of foreign language learning anxiety varies from scholars to scholars though Horwitz’s definition is the most widely accepted one at present. Secondly, most domestic researches used FLCAS and repeated the survey with a few innovations which made them less significant. Thirdly, both domestic and foreign researches rarely studied the relationship between anxiety and grades to make sure if anxiety level would increase with years passing by. Also, the relationship of anxiety level between English majors and non-English majors is not investigated either. Moreover, the influence that the learner’s academic performance may exert to their anxiety level is still up in the air before more solid supports are provided. In essence, this also relates to learner’s characters: On the one hand, good academic performance may increase one’s confidence and decrease the anxiety level; on the other hand, poor academic performance could write oneself off as hopeless and act recklessly so that his/her anxiety level may be low as well. In brief, more researches on the aspects mentioned above need to be carried out in the years to come.

Research Design

In this part, research questions, participants, and instruments will be introduced respectively.

Research Questions

The research attempts to answer the following questions:

(1) Does gender lead to different foreign language classroom anxiety level?
(2) Do students in different grades share a similar foreign language classroom anxiety level?
(3) Is there any difference between English majors and non-English majors on foreign language classroom anxiety level?

Participants
In total, 353 students, chosen randomly from eight departments in China Youth University of Political Studies (CYUPS), took part in the on-line questionnaire survey. And all of them are taking or have taken the English reading, listening, speaking, and writing courses in the university. To be specific, for all 353 valid participants, 147 are male and 206 are female, accounting for 41.64% and 58.36% respectively. In addition, participants of each grade take up 28.05%, 26.35%, 22.66%, and 22.95% respectively. Totally, it is an advantage for further analyses because the distribution of participants reaches an equilibrium.

Table 1
Distribution of the Participants in the Research

| Gender | Grade    | Freshman | Sophomore | Junior | Senior | Total   |
|--------|----------|----------|-----------|--------|--------|---------|
| Male   | 23       | 48       | 38        | 38     |        | 147 (41.64%) |
| Female | 76       | 45       | 42        | 43     |        | 206 (58.36%) |
| Total  | 99 (28.04%) | 93 (26.35%) | 80 (22.66%) | 81 (22.94%) |       | 353     |

Instrument
It is worth mentioning that the article, written by E. K. Horwitz et al. (1986), “Foreign language classroom anxiety”, is the most influential one in this field. Horwitz and her team members created a scale, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), in their research to measure participants’ anxiety level. The scale contains 33 items related to three main types of causes of foreign language classroom anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The model is presented as follows:

![Figure 1. Three perspectives of foreign language classroom anxiety.](#)

Basically, the questionnaire can be divided into two parts: personal information and the FLCAS. In the first part, to investigate the relationship between foreign language classroom anxiety and a series of factors, the questionnaire includes gender, grade, and majors. In the second part, a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1
(always or almost always) to 5 (never or almost never) is applied to record participants’ data. FLCAS focuses on three anxiety aspects: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Among all the 33 items, No. 1, 4, 9, 14, 15, 18, 24, 27, 29, 30, and 32 are set to measure the communication apprehension level; No. 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26, and 28 are set to measure test anxiety; and No. 2, 7, 13, 19, 23, 31, and 33 are set to measure fear of negative evaluation.

In general, Statistical Package for Social Science 19.0 (SPSS 19.0) was applied to do the calculation and analysis including reliability analysis, validity analysis, descriptive statistics, independent-samples \( t \)-test analysis, and Pearson correlation analysis.

In essence, foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS) is the most popular and reliable instrument to conduct the research since its reliability and validity has been verified over the years. By referring to the former papers, the original 33 items are still fit in with the situation nowadays except for one, No. 27: “speaking at foreign language classes stresses myself”. This item could be covered by item No. 1: “having no confidence speaking at foreign language classes”. To improve the simplicity of the scale, item No. 27 is deleted.

Firstly, to test the validity of the modified scale, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett’s Test with SPSS is made. As is shown in the Table 2, the coefficient is 0.935 (≥ 0.9), meaning that the scale has a high validity to meet the research objects.

| KMO and Bartlett’s Test |
|-------------------------|
| Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy | 0.935 |
| Bartlett’s test of sphericity | Approx. Chi-Square 5117.849, df 496, Sig. 0.000 |

Secondly, according to reliability analysis, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation are 0.794, 0.77, and 0.755 respectively (≥ 0.7). These data listed as follows all present that the scale is reliable for further study.

| Reliability Statistics |
|------------------------|
| Items | Cronbach’s alpha | No. of items |
| Communication apprehension | 0.794 | 10 |
| Test anxiety | 0.77 | 15 |
| Fear of negative evaluation | 0.755 | 7 |

Thirdly, the correlation among three anxiety perspectives is tested through Pearson correlation analysis. Considering the statistics in Table 4, the correlation coefficient between communication apprehension and test anxiety is 0.765 (≥ 0.7), which presents a rather significant correlation. The same correlation coefficient between communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation is 0.79. Still the same coefficient between test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation rated 0.791. Generally, the results re-approve the conclusion drawn by Wang Caikang (2003) that all the coefficients show that the three anxiety perspectives share a quite high correlation, and their internal consistence and coherence are efficient to describe the foreign language classroom anxiety level as a whole.
Table 4

|                      | Communication apprehension | Test anxiety | Fear of negative evaluation |
|----------------------|----------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|
| Communication        | Pearson correlation 1      | 0.765        | 0.790                       |
|                      | Sig.                       | 0.000        | 0.000                       |
|                      | N                          | 353          | 353                         |
| Test anxiety         | Pearson correlation 0.765  | 1            | 0.791                       |
|                      | Sig.                       | 0.000        | 0.000                       |
|                      | N                          | 353          | 353                         |
| Fear of negative     | Pearson correlation 0.790  | 0.791        | 1                           |
| evaluation           | Sig.                       | 0.000        | 0.000                       |
|                      | N                          | 353          | 353                         |

Data Collection and Analysis

All the data are collected through a widely-used online questionnaire website called Sojump. Known to participants, the questionnaire is anonymous and used for research only to reinforce its reliability. And participants shall choose the most proper description item according to their own situation rather than what they think they should do. After data gathering, information of 353 participants is imported into SPSS 19.0. Moreover, question directions are adjusted before further analysis. For instance, question item No. 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 18, and 28 are describing the anti-anxiety level, while the rest of the items are describing the anxiety level. To make the questions’ direction internally consistent, the mentioned questions’ Likert scale is changed: “1 → 5”, “2 → 4”, “4 → 2”, and “5 → 1”. Thus, the data are well prepared for analysis.

Results and Discussion

In this part, survey results and discussions will be reported in three perspectives: gender differences of foreign language classroom anxiety; anxiety among grade groups; and differences between English majors and non-English majors on foreign language classroom anxiety.

Gender Differences of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety

As is demonstrated in the table of Independent Samples T-Test below, there is no significant differences between male and female students with respect to communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation ($p = 0.715, 0.425, \text{and} 0.969$ respectively, $\geq 0.05$).

There are divergences on the issue of foreign language classroom anxiety level caused by gender differences. On the one hand, some researchers, such as Liu Ni (2011) found that there is no significant difference between gender and anxiety level. On the other hand, Wang Caikang (2003) and Shang Jianguo (2007) claimed that female college students share a distinct lower anxiety level compared with their male peers because English learning strategies are more frequently used by female learners.

Referring to Sun Erping and Zhao Xiaoyun (2013), though female students are usually superior in diligence, learning methods, and learning motives, enabling them less anxious in tests, they are too sensitive to their mistakes at classes. Male students are less self-important and more tolerant to their mistakes or shortcomings, making male students less anxious even with poorer academic performances.

Apparently, there are no conclusive answers to the question, and more researches are desired to clarify the issue.
Table 5

**Independent Samples T-Test of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Between Males and Females**

| Items                          | Gender | N   | Mean | Std. deviation | Sig. (two sided-test) |
|--------------------------------|--------|-----|------|----------------|-----------------------|
| Communication apprehension     | Male   | 147 | 30.53| 6.355          | 0.715                 |
|                                | Female | 206 | 30.27| 6.807          |                       |
| Test anxiety                   | Male   | 147 | 46.72| 8.214          | 0.425                 |
|                                | Female | 206 | 47.43| 8.233          |                       |
| Fear of negative evaluation    | Male   | 147 | 21.25| 4.671          | 0.969                 |
|                                | Female | 206 | 21.23| 5.111          |                       |

Foreign language classroom anxiety conditions among grades

The conditions of foreign language classroom anxiety among freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior are complex. As is illustrated in the table of one-way ANOVA analysis below, the significance coefficient of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation are 0.938, 0.82, and 0.493 respectively ($\geq 0.05$). The message hidden behind the numbers is that there is no obvious divergence among grades on the three anxiety perspectives. However, students of four grades show the minimum difference ($p = 0.938$) on communication apprehension and the maximum difference ($p = 0.493$) on fear of negative evaluation. Test anxiety difference among grades is between the former two perspectives.

Table 6

**One Factor Variance Analysis**

|                      | Sum of squares | df. | Mean square | F    | Sig.  |
|----------------------|----------------|-----|-------------|------|-------|
| Communication apprehension |                |     |             |      |       |
| Between groups       | 18.138         | 3   | 6.046       | 0.137| 0.938 |
| Within groups        | 15,384         | 349 | 44.083      |      |       |
| N                    | 15,403         | 352 |             |      |       |
| Test anxiety         |                |     |             |      |       |
| Between groups       | 62.613         | 3   | 20.871      | 0.307| 0.820 |
| Within groups        | 23,730         | 349 | 67.995      |      |       |
| N                    | 23,792         | 352 |             |      |       |
| Fear of negative evaluation |            |     |             |      |       |
| Between groups       | 58.581         | 3   | 19.527      | 0.803| 0.493 |
| Within groups        | 8,482          | 349 | 24.307      |      |       |
| N                    | 8,541          | 352 |             |      |       |

Table 7

**Mean Value of Three Anxiety Perspectives**

| Grades     | N   | Communication apprehension | Test anxiety | Fear of negative evaluation |
|------------|-----|----------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|
| Freshman   | 99  | 30.3434                    | 46.6263      | 21.1515                     |
| Sophomore | 93  | 30.0968                    | 46.9247      | 20.9140                     |
| Junior     | 80  | 30.3875                    | 47.6375      | 21.0125                     |
| Senior     | 81  | 30.7407                    | 47.5309      | 21.9753                     |

Specifically, the seniors are the most distinct group. By comparing every two grades on the three anxiety dimensions, it can be observed that except for seniors divergent obviously from other three grades on fear of negative evaluation item, others show almost no significant differences among grades on communication apprehension or test anxiety. This result confirms the finding of Liu Ni (2011) that seniors are the most anxious group because they are under the pressure of graduation.
Table 8
Multiple Comparisons Among Four Grades

| Grade (I) | Grade (J) | Communication apprehension | Test anxiety | Fear of negative evaluation |
|-----------|-----------|----------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|
|           |           | SE  Sig.                   | SE  Sig.     | SE  Sig.                    |
| Senior    | Freshman  | 0.99475 0.984             | 1.23542 0.911 | 0.73865 0.743              |
|           | Sophomore | 1.00908 0.939             | 1.25323 0.972 | 0.74929 0.572              |
|           | Junior    | 1.04655 0.990             | 1.29976 1.000 | 0.77712 0.674              |
| Junior    | Freshman  | 0.99816 1.000             | 1.23966 0.881 | 0.74118 0.998              |
|           | Sophomore | 1.01245 0.994             | 1.25741 0.956 | 0.75179 0.999              |
| Sophomore | Freshman  | 0.95880 0.996             | 1.19078 0.996 | 0.71196 0.990              |

Possibly, the seniors generally have courses to take as students of other grades, so their classroom communication apprehension and test anxiety level are in accordance with the freshman, sophomore, and juniors. As for fear of negative evaluation item, freshmen are the green hands who withstand the least pressure. Sophomores and juniors are in the middle of their academic journeys, and there is still ample room for their improvement. Consequently, they are unlikely to be upset by temporary negative evaluations.

Nevertheless, a multitude of seniors are on the pre-stage of entering the society. Any slight evaluation, positive or negative, could weight heavy to them. In other word, seniors are the most susceptible to evaluations regarding to other grades. Besides, after four years of studying, it could be rather embarrassing to receive negative evaluations and even make seniors to question their learning abilities, which is a great strike to their self-confidence. Given all the factors reasoned above, there is no doubt that, not like other grades, seniors are extremely sensitive to negative evaluations, which account for their high anxiety level.

Generally speaking, there is no significant difference among grades on the three classroom anxiety perspectives.

Differences Between English Majors and Non-English Majors on Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety

By applying Independent Samples T-Test, the Sig. (two sided-test) coefficients of three anxiety perspectives are 0.475, 0.046, and 0.155 respectively, as is listed in Table 9. Obviously, the coefficient of test anxiety is 0.045 (≤ 0.05), which implies that there is a significant divergence between English majors and non-English majors on this item. These two groups present no apparent differences on other two items.

Pointed by Yuan Luyao (2012), anxiety level of English majors is slightly lower than that of non-English majors.

Broadly speaking, the curriculum provision as well as teaching approaches should take responsibility for the significance. According to Sun Erping and Zhao Xiaoyun (2013), foreign language classroom anxiety presents a negative correlation with the efforts put into English learning. The more efforts students make in English studying, the lower their anxiety level could be. Taking English major students as an example, they generally have two or three classes every weekday, and within every class, there are classroom quizzes, dictations, or other kinds of tests in many different forms. In the middle and the end of a term, there are tests regarding to all courses. Thus, English majors could be rather accustomed to tests when comparing them with non-English majors. Adversely, non-English major students have approximately two or three English classes every week, with less tests or quizzes. Both the test frequency and test intensity of non-English majors could not compete with their English major peers. Undoubtedly, the test anxiety level of non-English majors is higher than English majors.
Existing researches mainly discuss the anxiety conditions among non-English major students for they account for the maximum ratio of students and would thus demonstrate the whole picture. Also, English major students could present some kinds of divergent conditions because of absorbing themselves in English learning.

Table 9
Independent Samples T-Test of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Between the English Majors and Non-English Majors

| Items                        | N       | Mean  | Std. deviation | Sig. (two sided-test) |
|------------------------------|---------|-------|----------------|-----------------------|
| Communication apprehension   | 234,119 | 21.38 | 4.746          | 0.475                 |
| Test anxiety                 | 234,119 | 30.88 | 6.32           | 0.046                 |
| Fear of negative evaluation  | 234,119 | 47.58 | 7.842          | 0.155                 |

In conclusion, English major students show a significant lower anxiety level than non-English majors only in test anxiety perspective. Further studies could turn their focus to this divergence.

Conclusion

After analyzing the statistics, the relationship among foreign language classroom anxiety and gender, grades as well as majors could be figured out to a large degree. And the main findings will be included in this part.

Findings

The whole empirical research is based on three questions in the Instrument part: (1) The gender differences of different foreign language classroom anxiety conditions; (2) Foreign language classroom anxiety level referring to grades; and (3) Foreign language classroom anxiety level conditions between English majors and non-English majors.

By analyzing the questionnaire data and referring to previous papers, some results are summarized as follows:

Firstly, the foreign language classroom anxiety level is similar between male and female college students. To be specific, within three anxiety perspectives, communication apprehension ranked as the least divergent and fear of negative evaluation ranked as the most divergent perspective.

Secondly, there is no significant difference among grades on the three classroom anxiety perspectives generally. However, when comparing the statistics of every two grades, seniors are found to be the most distinct one from other three grades on fear of negative evaluation item. A high level of self-esteem and graduation anxiety could be the reasons.

Last but not least, as for the divergence between English majors and non-English majors, test anxiety is the outstanding perspective where English major students show a significant lower anxious emotion due to the high frequency and intensity of tests they take.

Limitation of the Present Research

Though great efforts have been made in every process of the research, there are still a string of limitations when looking back to connect the dots. Firstly, in the literature review part, there are not enough coherent foreign papers gathered and analyzed which makes it unsatisfactory when referring to and comparing with
foreign research results. Secondly, subject to conditions, the data of the research are exclusively collected in CYUPS, a restricted group of participants (relatively small university). The volume of sample size is only 353 and there could be individuals offering the unreal statistics due to carelessness or misunderstanding of the questions. All the factors mentioned above may affect the results of the present research. Thirdly, researcher might not take full use of the SPSS tools due to relatively poor master of it. Fourthly, no further interviews with featured students or tests are conducted to prove and enhance the authenticity of the research findings.

Suggestions for Further Research

Given the current shortcomings of existing researches, further studies are encouraged to explore the following perspectives: Firstly, more thoughts could be given to the definition of anxiety, especially its connotation and denotation, which are the fundamental elements of the research. Though Horwitz’s definition is most widely accepted, there may be changes taking place over the years and the definition should be modified as well. Secondly, most of the researches are repeating the former ones with few innovations being made. Consequently, research directions should be broadened to embrace brand new research ideas. For instance, the correlation between anxiety and academic performance or self-cognition is waiting to be explored. Thirdly, scales for empirical studies should be modified to fit present conditions in China. Referring to effective scales like FLCAS is only one aspect, adjusting it to new conditions and situations in China to unveil real meaningful questions is the superior objective. Last but not least, educational psychology could play a vital role in this researching field since anxiety belongs to the category of psychology. Without doubt, a solid background of educational psychology could study foreign language classroom anxiety from a professional perspective.

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