

A Study of Anxiety Levels amongst Chinese Students for a Master Degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages at a UK University

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Abstract

Foreign language anxiety, as one of the most important affective variables, has been attracting more and more attention in second language acquisition studies since the early 1970s. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to investigate the general situation of Chinese students in the MA TESOL group at the University of York. In addition, the potential factors that might contribute to foreign language anxiety are explored in the present study. To collect the quantitative and qualitative data, multiple research instruments were used: a questionnaire and semi-structure interview. An adapted version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was distributed randomly to forty Chinese students in the MA TESOL group. Semi-structure interviews with six Chinese students from the MA TESOL group were conducted to obtain further information. Due to the similarities between the present study and Aida's (1994), Aida's revised factor analysis was employed to investigate the potential anxiety-provoking factors. The results indicate: 1) a low level of foreign language anxiety exists among the Chinese students canvassed, especially in writing and speaking; 2) among four anxiety-provoking factors, Speech Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation and Comfortableness in Speaking with Native Speakers were the main ones. In addition, writing anxiety was also cited as one of the main anxiety-provoking factors. Based on these findings, the study finishes with a consideration of related teaching implications both for the UK and China.

Keywords: Foreign Language Anxiety, anxiety level

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1 Introduction

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is one of the important variables consistently influencing language learning and, consequently, the last three decades have seen a considerable amount of research devoted to examining the nature of Foreign Language Anxiety and anxiety-provoking factors.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the general situation of foreign language anxiety amongst Chinese students in the MA TESOL group and the potential anxiety-provoking factors they are exposed to, using a widely used measurement instrument: the Foreign Language Learning Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz et al., 1986). The findings of this study should further clarify the details of language anxiety as it is experienced by Chinese students in MATESOL and also permit the identification of potential anxiety-provoking anxieties. The findings could be used to reduce the effects of anxiety and therefore may be beneficial to practitioners and learners alike, in the ongoing quest to create low-anxiety language classrooms.

The research questions of the present study are listed as follows: What is the general situation of foreign language anxiety in their language classroom? What are the potential factors affecting their foreign language anxiety?

2. Foreign language anxiety

2.1 Definition of Foreign Language Anxiety

Anxiety towards foreign language learning was first researched in the 1980s when attempts were made to clarify the concept of foreign language anxiety and identify the potential anxiety-provoking factors (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Horwitz., 1986). Horwitz et al. (1986) defined foreign language anxiety as “anxiety consists of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p.128). Similarly, MacIntyre (1998) later defined language anxiety as “the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language”.

2.2 Horwitz’s construct of foreign language anxiety

The theoretical model of foreign language anxiety proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986) bridges the gap between psychology and linguistics (MacIntyre, 1998). Like Gardner (1985), the proponents of the model conceptualise L2-related anxiety as a distinct type of anxiety expressed in response to the unique experience of learning and using a language other than one’s mother tongue (L1), distinguishing it from (1) a general trait of anxiety, which may show up in a wide variety of circumstances, as well as (2) other, more general forms of anxiety. (Tóth, 2008, p.57) Furthermore, Horwitz et al.

(1986) indicate that foreign language anxiety is related to performance evaluation in an academic and social context. Parallels can be drawn between FLA and three related performance anxieties: 1) communication apprehension; 2) test anxiety; and 3) fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz, et al., 1986, p. 127).

These three categories of anxiety provide the essential conceptual foundations for the description of foreign language anxiety. They do not view foreign language anxiety as simply a combination of existing fears which are transferred to the foreign language learning setting. Rather, they define foreign language anxiety as “a *distinct complex* of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz, et al., 1986, p.128).

2.3 Sources of language anxiety

There are a number of things that may lead to foreign language anxieties arising and with an increasing amount of students feeling anxious in foreign language settings, as well as greater awareness of the relationship between FLA and foreign language learning, it is vitally important to understand the sources of this anxiety and find effective ways to reduce students' anxiety and provide a low-anxiety atmosphere. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), anxiety is one of the best predictors of success in second language learning and one of the important variables that consistently and negatively impacts upon performance, regardless of the foreign language being learnt. Therefore, many studies (Gardner, 1985; Gardner, Tremablay, and Masgoret, 1997; Horwitz, 2001) have investigated the relationship.

The primary sources of language anxiety, as discussed by Horwitz et al. (1986), are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Aida concluded from her case studies, which adopted Horwitz et al.'s factor analysis, that speech anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, fear of failing the class, comfortableness in speaking with native speakers and negative attitudes toward the foreign language class are the four factors which lead to language anxiety. Similarly, Price (1991) concluded (as cited in Zheng, 2008) from his case studies that the difficulty level of foreign language classes, personal perceptions of language aptitude, certain personality variables (e.g., perfectionism and fear of public speaking) and stressful classroom experiences are all possible causes of anxiety. Young (1991) on the other hand, identifies six potential sources of language anxiety: personal and interpersonal anxieties; learner beliefs about language learning; instructor beliefs about language teaching; instructor-learner interactions; classroom procedures; and language testing.

Meanwhile Oxford (1999) manages to list ten sources: self-esteem, competitiveness, test-anxiety, social anxiety, beliefs, tolerance of ambiguity, risk-taking, identity and culture shock, classroom activities and methods, and instructor-learner interactions. In terms of initiating factors, Ellis (1994) proposed that the first possible source of language anxiety might come from learners' competitive natures.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) proposed that test anxiety is general anxiety rather than a component of foreign language anxiety. The factors found in Aida's research explain the construct of foreign language and support the view of language put forward by MacIntyre and Gardner. At the same time, Aida's (1994) research results also reveal that other factors such as fear of failing the class, comfortableness in speaking with native speakers of the language, and negative attitudes towards the language class contribute to FLA in foreign language learning settings.

3. Methodology

The participants in this study were forty Chinese students on MA in TESOL courses at the Department of Educational Studies, at the University of York, and were selected randomly. The MA programme they were taking is designed for students who plan to teach English as a second or foreign language in the UK or internationally, or who plan to do research on the teaching, learning or assessment of English as a second or foreign language (MA in TESOL, n.d.).

This research investigates participants' views on the causes of their language anxiety, their levels of language anxiety and the characteristics of their language anxiety. It is hoped that the qualitative approach will lead to a deeper understand of language anxiety.

Therefore, this study employs both quantitative and qualitative strategies to investigate language anxiety - questionnaires in the quantitative part and semi-structure interviews in the qualitative part.

The questionnaire used in this study is the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). The FCLAS relies on students' self-reports but its validity and reliability has been proved by many researchers (Horwitz et al., 1986; Aida, 1994; Phillips, 1992). It stemming from both clinical data and existing theoretical and empirical work on situation-specific anxiety. It consists of thirty-three items, each one on a five-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" (scale point 5) to "strongly disagree" (scale point 1), the middle point being neutral (scale point 3). The anxiety score of each subject is calculated by summing up the total score on 33 items.

Questionnaires were distributed to the participants randomly. Forty participants were asked to complete the questionnaire on the tenth (and final) week of the third term of

the MA course. The questionnaire was the adapted Chinese-English version of the FLCAS. Participants were required to finish the questionnaire after their class. Instructions were given on the questionnaire itself. The participants were simply asked to choose the statement which reflects their own feelings or opinion towards each item and were reminded that their responses would remain confidential. Then, six volunteers were interviewed by the author. The interviews were recorded and the transcriptions analyzed.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Results and discussion related to the first research question

Table 1: Comparison of FLCAS Data

	Present Study	Horwitz et al. (1986)	Aida (1994)
Sample size	40	108	96
Student Status	Postgraduate	First year	First year
Language	English	Spanish	Japanese
Maximum	117	147	146
Minimum	47	45	47
Mean	85.54	94.5	96.7

The table above demonstrates the lower level of foreign language anxiety found by the present study, lower than that found by either Horwitz et al. (1986) or Aida (1994). However, given that 30% of the participants' foreign language anxiety scores were higher than 99, a certain level of foreign language anxiety does exist among the present sample.

In this study, the mean score of the sample on the FLCAS (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale) was quite low at 85.54. In contrast, the mean score in Horwitz et al.'s (1984) and Aida's (1994) study were 94.5 and 96.7 respectively. In other words, the mean scores of the Chinese students on the MATESOL program were quite low compared to the first year students learning Spanish in Horwitz et al.'s study and the first year students learning Japanese in Aida's study. The scores of the Chinese MATESOL students on the FLCAS ranged from 47 to 117. The scores of Horwitz et al.'s students ranged from 45 to 147 and Aida's students' scores ranged from 47 to 146. As the findings illustrate, all three studies have similar minimum scores. However, the maximum score varies. The maximum score of the present research is 117, which is much lower than that of the other two studies.

In conclusion, a low level of foreign language anxiety exists amongst the group of students who participated in the current study.

According to the comparison of three researches, there is considerably less foreign language anxiety amongst the present sample. There might be several reasons for this situation. Firstly, the participants in the current study are doing a master's degree related to teaching English. In order to be a professional teacher, they have to have a reasonable command of English, which they will have got from studying their first degree. According to the data from the interviews, 5 out of 6 participants have an overall IELTS score of 7 and one 6.5. Secondly, most of them have been learning English for 10 years or more and all the participants studied English as their major in their Bachelor's degree. They are not beginners, like Horwitz et al. and Aida's students, and most of them are at an advanced level of English learning. In the interviews it was revealed that they have all passed the TEM-8 (Test for English Major Band 8, which is the most advanced level for English Majors in China). Thirdly, after a whole year on the MA programme, most of them have adapted to study in the UK. For example, during the interviews one subject claimed that:

'I was worried about whether I could follow the class or not in the first term. However, I did not worry about it in the second term. In first term, I was anxious about discussing questions with the others, because I was afraid that they would laugh at me. But, I didn't worry about it this in the second term. I suppose because I got used to the situation here. This is due to the English setting being everywhere.'

These are some of the reasons contributing to the lower level of foreign language anxiety in the MATESOL group. According to the data in the table 1, the main factors contributing to language anxiety are Factor III (Comfortableness in Speaking with Native Speaker) and Factor I (Speech Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation). In other words, their anxiety is strongest in situations related to the speaking. Conversely, according to the data from the interviews, all six students indicated that they were most anxious about the writing part. This discrepancy with the data from the questionnaires is probably due to the limitations of the questionnaire itself. There was nothing in the questionnaire specifically about writing. All in all, the data reveals that Chinese students in the MA TESOL group have a low level of foreign language anxiety, which surfaces most frequently in relation to speaking and writing.

4.2. Results and discussion related to the second question

Horwitz et al developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale to examine foreign language anxiety and analysed three factors to draw parallels between language anxiety and relevant performance anxieties: 1) communication apprehension; 2) test anxiety; and 3) fear of negative evaluation. Aida then employed Horwitz et al.'s research framework to investigate anxiety in learners of Japanese and refined the

factor divisions on the basis of her data. Given the fact that there are more similarities between Aida's research and the present study, her regrouped factors analysis will now be employed to reanalyse the data. The data from the current study have been regrouped into four factors: speech anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, fear of failing the class, comfortableness in speaking with native speakers and negative attitudes toward the foreign language. The details are listed in Table 2.

Table 2 Aida's refined factor division, mean scores and rank in the present study and Aida

Factors ^o	Items ^o	Present Study ^o		Aida (1994) ^o	
		Mean ^o	Order ^o	Mean ^o	Order ^o
Factor I: Speech Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation ^o	3,13,27,20,24,31,7,12,23,18,33,16,1,21,29,4,8,9 ^o	2.69 ^o	2 ^o	2.9 ^o	3 ^o
Factor II: Fear of Failing the Class ^o	10,25,26,22 ^o	2.27 ^o	4 ^o	3.03 ^o	2 ^o
Factor III: Comfortableness in Speaking with Native Speaker ^o	32,11,14 ^o	2.78 ^o	1 ^o	2.82 ^o	4 ^o
Factor IV: Negative Attitudes towards the Foreign Language ^o	5,17 ^o	2.61 ^o	3 ^o	3.2 ^o	1 ^o

Note: Items not included in the factor solution: 2, 6, 19, 28, 30.

Table 2 ranks the factors that might cause learners' anxiety in foreign language classes. Factor III (Comfortableness in Speaking with Native Speaker) and Factor I (Speech Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation) are ranked first and second in this study. In contrast, Factor III (Comfortableness in Speaking with Native Speaker) and Factor I (Speech Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation) are ranked fourth and third in Aida's study. This possibly suggests that factor III, Comfortableness in Speaking with Native Speaker, would be the main factor leading to foreign language anxiety in this study. It is followed by the Factor I, Speech Anxiety and Fear of Negative Attitudes, which also contributes a large part to foreign language anxiety. However, in Aida's study, these two factors are ranked as the last two factors which might influence the foreign language anxiety. More details about the results of the present study will be discussed below.

Aida assigned the label "Speech Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation" to Factor I on the basis of Horwitz et al.'s foreign language anxiety division. Speech anxiety and fear of negative evaluation might not be totally independent concepts, but they are probably different ways of describing the same phenomenon in a large learning

situation (Aida, 1994, p. 159). This distinction is also supported by MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) whose findings were similar to Aida's.

The mean of this factor (Speech Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation) in the present study is ranked the second with a score of 2.69. At the same time, the mean of this factor in Aida's research is ranked third among the four factors. This indicates that Factor I could be the main factor which influences foreign language anxiety.

Factor III ("Comfortableness in Speaking with Native Speakers") includes three items (32, 11, and 14) and all three are negatively loaded. As Aida points out, this finding is supported by other researchers such as Young (1992), MacIntyre and Gardner (1991). The mean of this factor in the current study is 2.78 meaning that it was ranked first while in Aida's study it was ranked fourth among the four factors. This suggests that Factor III ("Comfortableness in Speaking with Native Speakers") is the main cause of foreign language anxiety in the present sample. Furthermore, it reveals that the subjects in this study are most anxious about speaking with native speakers. However, the mean score is significantly lower, which indicates their low level of foreign language anxiety compared to Aida's sample. In their responses to Item 11, 35% of the subjects in the present study claimed to understand why some people get so upset over their English classes. More than one third of the participants in the current study could empathise with this situation, in other words, they have similar feelings about their English classes.

From the above analysis it can be concluded that Factor III (Comfortableness in Speaking with Native Speakers) and Factor I (Speech Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation) are the main causes of foreign language learning anxiety for the Chinese students of this sample.

According to the data collected from the questionnaire, the subjects feel uncomfortable when they are talking with the native speakers. One student's response supports this:

'I am a bit nervous when I speaking with native speakers. I worried about whether they will laugh at my intonation or my pronunciation or not'. Another student claimed the same response.

Factor I, Speech Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation, is ranked second among the four anxiety-provoking factors with a mean score of 2.69, which suggests that it is the main factor contributing to anxiety. In their response to Item 13 (It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.) 47.5% of subjects admitted that being asked to answer a question in their English class would make them feel embarrassed. For Item 9 (I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class.) 37.5% of participants reported that they started to panic when they had to speak without preparation in English class. In the answers to Item 20 (I can feel my heart

pounding when I'm going to be called on in English class.) 42.5% of subjects indicated that they can feel their heart pounding when they are going to be called upon in English class. This shows that participants are anxious about speech and fear of negative evaluation.

From the interviews, three students pointed out that they had experienced similar feelings. One student said that she was nervous and anxious when she was asked to answer a question without preparation; similarly, the. As was discussed above, one student above was anxious about whether the others would laugh at her poor speaking skills. Another student reported that she always feels the others would judge her intonation or her pronunciation, which made her a bit anxious.

The results of the questionnaires and interviews therefore show that foreign language anxiety is mainly provoked by issues related to speaking. However, all six participants in the interviews claimed to be most worried about writing, although there is not any statement relating to writing in the FLCAS. One student claimed that she had been anxious about her writing the whole year: "I am worried about whether I have chosen the right method to do my research or not ... anxious about whether the research is realistic enough for me to carry on or not. In addition, I have to consider the procedure, the structure of the whole assignment and plagiarism. And, the plagiarism thing always drives me crazy". Another student reported:

'I am anxious about writing. Besides the test for Linguistics, the other three evaluations on our study are based on assignments. It always confused me the term "critical thinking". It is quite hard for me to think critically. Sometime, even if I have the ideas or points in my mind, I still have problems expressing them clearly and critically. Due to the wrong time plan, I always did my assignments in a hurry. It increased my anxiety about writing'.

As suggested above, writing seems to be a major cause of anxiety for students in the current study along with Comfortableness in Speaking with Native Speakers and Speech Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation. Several reasons could account for both the first finding and second finding.

The shortcoming of the assessment system in China probably causes the extraordinary anxiety about speaking. In China, the assessments are always tests or quizzes such kind of paper work. Speaking is seldom assessed. Language teaching in China is very text-book and grammar-translation centred leading to an imbalance in the teaching of speaking and listening. In addition, students can pass their English exams without being tested for speaking. This situation starts in junior and high schools, and continues into universities. The tests are mainly related to listening, reading and writing. Students are trained to be good at taking tests rather than developing their spoken and written competence. Take the CET-4 (College English Test, Band 4, whichever college student is required to pass in order to obtain the bachelor degree)

for example: the exam consists of tests for listening, reading and writing parts but ignores speaking. Another reason is possibly related to the design of curriculum. Only a limited number of college students in China have speaking classes. Furthermore, speaking classes which are tutored by native speakers are uncommon. All this might lead to ignorance of spoken English and probably results in poor spoken English, which might exaggerate the level of foreign language anxiety.

Due to the increasing peer competition, students feel anxious about their English skills. Hence, they refuse to speak English in public or practice it with classmates once they sense they are having problems. They feel upset and are worried that other students will judge them and even laugh at them. They are quite sensitive to the negative evaluation from teachers and classmates. The fear of the negative evaluation will add to their problems.

Writing anxiety is also probably connected with the Chinese system of assessment. Writing is only a small part of the whole examination, which focuses on listening and reading. And the amount of writing required is quite minimal - even in the TEM-8 (the highest level of English major students in China) it is only 300 words. In addition, there are few ongoing assessments of writing skills and most students in China only need to finish one dissertation of five thousand words. In contrast, writing is the main form of assessment in UK, especially for the MA TESOL group. They need to do three assignments and one dissertation to complete the course.

As discussed above, speaking with native speakers, fear of negative evaluation and writing anxiety are the main factors contributing to anxiety in L2 language learning. Therefore measures should be taken to reduce anxiety levels and create a low-anxiety classroom.

5. Conclusion and teaching application

The analysis above compared the questionnaire data from the present study with Aida's (1994) findings and also used information from interviews. From the analysis of the data, we can conclude that:

Generally, Chinese students in the MATESOL group experienced a low level of foreign language anxiety, provoked mainly by speaking and writing. Aida's regrouped four factors of FLCAS were applied to carry out the factor analysis due to the great similarities between the two sets of data. Factor I --- Speech Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation --- and Factor III --- Comfortableness in Speaking with Native Speaker --- are the main factors contributing to anxiety. According to the data from the interviews, writing anxiety is also a significant anxiety-provoking factor.

Aida (1994) noted that educators should identify the anxious students at first. Following this, the education should cope with the appropriate interventions to

overcome foreign language anxiety. Philips (1992) indicates that the importance of creating a low anxiety surrounding to promote more attendance. Creating a harmony atmosphere is an effective way to reduce the anxiety stemming from peer competition. It is suggested that teachers should give some encouraging words or even compliments towards students' behaviors. Another frequently used method is make the language class surroundings more friendly and less stressful, where students do not worry about making mistakes.

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