# AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE FACTORS INFLUENCING CHINESE UNDERGRADUATES' ENGLISH ANXIETY

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## ABSTRACT

The factors influencing FLA are found to be different across various cultural and language learning contexts. Therefore, this study was conducted with 553 Chinese non-English major undergraduates from four levels of universities that provide different language learning contexts in China. Participants' FLA were measured by a modified version of the Foreign Language Classroom Scale (FLCAS). Statistical analyses revealed that participants generally experienced a moderate level of FLA. The second-year students tended to be more anxious in English learning than the first-year from the overall perspective and in terms of communication apprehension. Students from the provincial top university experienced lower level of FLA from tests than those from the vocational university. And in terms of gender and major, no differences were found in FLA from any dimension. The results have shown some light on the overall situation of Chinese foreign language learners' FLA situation.

**Contribution/ Originality:** Due to fewer studies focused on Chinese students' FLA and the influencial factor differences across various cultural and language learning contexts, this study investigated the overall situation and influential factors of Chinese undergraduates' English anxiety in different levels of universities in China with 553 non-English major undergraduates as samples.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is the tension and apprehension people would experience specifically under second language contexts (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). It has been identified as one of the major obstacles in foreign language learning (Dewaele, Petrides, & Furnham, 2008) and an interest of study for second language researchers (Teimouri, Goetze, & Plonsky, 2019). Numerous studies have been conducted to explore the FLA levels and the factor structures of FLA (Aida, 1994; Hismanoglu & Murat, 2013; Horwitz, 2016; Liu, 2006). However, among these studies, a large body of the research participants were students from Europe, Korea and Japan. Fewer studies focused on Chinese students. And the studies seldom compared the different constructs of FLA across different cultural and language learning contexts. According to Horwitz (2016) influential factors of learners' FLA may differ under different cultural and language learning contexts. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the overall situation and influential factors of Chinese undergraduates' English anxiety in different levels of universities in China.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies have been conducted to explore the nature of FLA. Early research on FLA were not able to define FLA properly as the lack of appropriate instruments to measure this specific type of anxiety (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1999). To solve this problem, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) established the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which is later widely used as a reliable instrument to measure FLA. According to Horwitz et al. (1986) FLA consists of three components: communication apprehension (CA), test anxiety (TA), and fear of negative evaluation (FNE). Communication apprehension refers to the anxiety arising from the foreign language communication. Horwitz et al. (1986) stated that the construct of communication apprehension is rather relevant to that of FLA. People who have a hard time speaking in public are more likely to have trouble in foreign language communication. Under foreign language contexts, speakers have even less control over the communication situation than they do under mother-tongue contexts (Horwitz et al., 1986).

The second construct of FLA, test anxiety, is a kind of performance anxiety caused by foreign language tests. It arises from individual's fear of failing objective evaluation methods (Horwitz et al., 1986). As exams and quizzes are often frequent in foreign language classroom, students who are test-anxious would experience higher performance anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986).

The last construct of performance anxiety is fear of negative evaluation, which involves students' fear of academic and personal evaluations of their performance in the target language. While test anxiety arises from individual's fear of failing objective evaluations, fear of negative evaluation emphasizes students' feelings about negative evaluations from more general and subjective situations such as oral presentations and interviews (Horwitz et al., 1986). People who are sensitive to others' (e.g., teachers, peers etc) views are often found to have a strong fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Studies have been carried out to explore the factors influencing FLA such as gender, age and grade (Williams & Andrade, 2008) and inconsistent results were found. For instance, Arnaiz and Guillén (2012) found that female students from a Spanish university experienced higher FLA than males while Ma, Guo, and Wang (2018) reported an opposite result with Chinese participants. In terms of grade related anxiety differences, some studies demonstrated that learners' anxiety increases with the increase of grade level (Bernaus, Moore, & Azevedo, 2007) while others showed that lower grade students tended to have higher anxiety levels (Arnaiz & Guillén, 2012; Ma et al., 2018). In addition, there were also studies that found no grade difference in FLA (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2003). Therefore, different influential factors of FLA may be found under various learning contexts and with different cultural populations (Horwitz, 2016).

However, few wide-scale studies have examined Chinese English learners to tell the situations of FLA in China. There is evidence showing that FLA is highly influenced by learning contexts experienced by Chinese college students (Zhang, Dai, & Ardasheva, 2020). Specific cultural and learning contexts need to be examined to explore the different factor structures of FLA (Horwitz, 2016). Therefore, this research focused on the Chinese English learners across four levels of universities in China with different English learning contexts. The research were conducted to explore non-English major Chinese undergraduates' overall FLA situation and how the three constructs of FLA proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986) are related to Chinese foreign language learners. Individual factors (e.g., gender, age, level of university, grade, major) were taken into consideration to explore their influences on Chinese non-English major undergraduates' English anxiety.

### 2.1. Research Questions

The research addressed the following two questions:

1. What are the overall situations of Chinese undergraduates' English anxiety?
2. How do the individual factors influence Chinese undergraduates' English anxiety?

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Participants

Participants in this research were 553 non-English major Chinese undergraduates from four levels of universities in China. Of the universities, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen (CUHKSZ), a sino-foreign university, offers full English-medium instructions (EMI) in almost 95% of the courses while the national top universities and the provincial top university adopt partial EMI mainly in English related courses. The vocational university does not offer EMI in any courses. Furthermore, national top universities and the provincial top university require students to pass the College English Test (CET) to graduate. Further descriptive statistics of the participants is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Participants' descriptive statistics.

| Variable | | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 317 | 57.3 |
| | Female | 236 | 42.7 |
| Grade | First Year | 209 | 37.8 |
| | Second Year | 319 | 57.7 |
| | Third Year | 14 | 2.5 |
| | Fourth Year | 11 | 2.0 |
| Major | Science and Engineering | 360 | 65.1 |
| | Human Science | 54 | 9.8 |
| | Business | 93 | 16.8 |
| | Others | 46 | 8.3 |
| Level of university | National Top | 117 | 21.2 |
| | Provincial Top | 218 | 39.4 |
| | Vocational | 135 | 24.4 |
| | Sino-foreign Cooperation | 83 | 15 |

### 3.2. Data Collection

The data was collected through an online questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: (1) questions regarding participants' personal information including age, gender, major, grade and level of university; and (2) a revised Chinese version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz et al. (1986). The current FLCAS is a 26-item, 5-point Likert-scale instrument that assesses the degree of students' English anxiety from the three dimensions: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. The 5-point Likert-scale ranges from 1(strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). It quantifies individual's level of FLA by adding up the ratings of each item. Higher score indicates higher anxiety. Some minor changes were made to the statements for the convenience of participants. The modified scale was still reliable and valid with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, close to the alpha of the original scale (a=0.94; Aida (1994)).

### 3.3. Data Analysis

SPSS 20.0 was used to analyze the data. Some items are negatively worded. Responses to these items were scored in a reverse manner, so that, a higher score represented higher anxiety. Descriptive statistics were calculated on individuals' FLA scores from the overall perspective and in terms of the three dimensions (CA, TA and FNE) to explore the overall situation of participants' English anxiety. Independent T-test was carried out to detect the possible influence gender may have on the level of English anxiety. One-way ANOVA and Post hoc tests were conducted to explore the underlying relationships between individual variables like grade, major, level of university, and participants' English anxiety.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. The Overall Situations of Chinese Undergraduates' FLA

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the Chinese undergraduates' FLA. Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995) classified the criteria of Likert 5 sub scales into high-frequency (a value≧3.5), moderate (a value from 2.5-3.4) and low-frequency (a value≦2.4). The result shows that Chinese learners generally experienced a moderate level of English anxiety (M=3.0761). And the proportion of students with high anxiety (19.7%, N=109) was higher than those with low anxiety (16.1%, N=89). In total, 83.9% (N=464) of the students experienced moderate to high anxiety. This indicates that anxiety in English learning is common among Chinese undergraduates.

Results also show that Chinese undergraduates experienced highest levels of anxiety in terms of test (M=3.1284), then fear of negative evaluation (M=3.0951) and communication apprehension (M=3.0865).

**Table 2.** The descriptive statistics of the Chinese undergraduates' FLA.

| Variable | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|----------|-----|---------|---------|--------|----------------|
| FLA | 553 | 1.115 | 5.000 | 3.0761 | 0.6625 |
| CA | 553 | 1.000 | 5.000 | 3.0865 | 0.6910 |
| FNE | 553 | 1.033 | 5.000 | 3.0951 | 0.8203 |
| TA | 553 | 1.000 | 5.000 | 3.1284 | 1.1244 |

### 4.2. Factors Influencing Chinese Undergraduates' FLA

Table 3 is the descriptive statistics of Chinese undergraduates' FLA by gender, which shows that males generally experienced higher anxiety than females from the overall perspective and in terms of communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. Females were only more anxious than males in terms of test anxiety. Nevertheless, the differences did not reach the significant level as shown in Table 4 (p=0.529>0.05; p=0.867>0.05; p=0.513>0.05; p=894>0.05).

**Table 3.** The descriptive statistics of Chinese undergraduates' FLA by gender.

| Variable | Gender | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|----------|--------|-----|--------|----------------|
| FLA | Male | 317 | 3.0915 | 0.6764 |
|  | Female | 236 | 3.0556 | 0.6443 |
| CA | Male | 317 | 3.0908 | 0.7040 |
|  | Female | 236 | 3.0808 | 0.6745 |
| FNE | Male | 317 | 3.1148 | 0.8334 |
|  | Female | 236 | 3.0686 | 0.8033 |
| TA | Male | 317 | 3.1230 | 1.1989 |
|  | Female | 236 | 3.1356 | 1.0183 |

**Table 4.** Independent sample t-test of Chinese undergraduates' FLA by gender.

| Variable | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference |
|----------|-------|-------|--------|-----|-----------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| FLA | 0.038 | 0.845 | 0.630 | 551 | 0.529 | 0.0360 | 0.0570 |
| CA | 0.046 | 0.830 | 0.168 | 551 | 0.867 | 0.0100 | 0.0595 |
| FNE | 0.139 | 0.710 | 0.654 | 551 | 0.513 | 0.0462 | 0.0706 |
| TA | 8.886 | 0.003 | -0.130 | 551 | 0.897 | -0.0126 | 0.0968 |

One-way ANOVA was used to determine the impact of grade, major and level of university on participants' FLA. According to Table 5, significant difference was found in the total FLA scores among different grades (p=0.007<0.05), but not among levels of university (p=0.356>0.05) and majors (p=0.241>0.05). Furthermore, the significant difference found in general FLA among different grades could also be found in the level of FLA aroused by communication apprehension (p=0.016<0.05). And a significant difference in test anxiety was found to be caused by level of university (p=0.038<0.05).

**Table 5.** ANOVA test by individual variables on the Chinese undergraduates' FLA.

| Variable | Between Groups | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|----------|----------------|----------------|----|--------------|----|------|
| FLA | Grade | 5.240 | 3 | 1.747 | 4.045 | 0.007 |
|  | Major | 1.424 | 3 | 0.475 | 1.082 | 0.356 |
| CA | Level of University | 1.842 | 3 | 0.614 | 1.402 | 0.241 |
|  | Grade | 4.916 | 3 | 1.639 | 3.478 | 0.016 |
|  | Major | 0.968 | 3 | 0.323 | 0.675 | 0.568 |
|  | Level of University | 1.969 | 3 | 0.656 | 1.377 | 0.249 |
| FNE | Grade | 3.116 | 3 | 1.039 | 1.548 | 0.201 |
|  | Major | 1.524 | 3 | 0.508 | 0.754 | 0.521 |
| TA | Level of University | 2.013 | 3 | 0.671 | 0.997 | 0.394 |
|  | Grade | 0.688 | 3 | 0.229 | 0.181 | 0.910 |
|  | Major | 1.279 | 3 | 0.426 | 0.336 | 0.799 |
|  | Level of University | 10.652 | 3 | 3.551 | 2.836 | 0.038 |

To investigate further into where the differences lie within each group, Post hoc LSD tests were used. According to Table 6, the second-year students experienced a significantly higher level of anxiety than the first-year from both the overall perspective (p=0.001<0.05) and in terms of CA (p=0.0002<0.05). The results also demonstrate (See Table 7) that students from the provincial top university experienced more anxiety from tests than students from the vocational university (p=0.005<0.05).

**Table 6.** Multiple comparisons LSD (Grade).

| Dependent Variable | (I) Grade | (J) Grade | Mean Difference (I-J) | Std. Error | Sig. |
|--------------------|-----------|-----------|------------------------|------------|------|
| FLA | First Year | Second Year | -0.1941(*) | 0.0585 | 0.001 |
|  |  | Third Year | -0.1083 | 0.1814 | 0.551 |
|  |  | Fourth Year | -0.3283 | 0.2033 | 0.107 |
|  | Second Year | Third Year | 0.0858 | 0.1794 | 0.633 |
|  |  | Fourth Year | -0.1342 | 0.2015 | 0.506 |
|  | Third Year | Fourth Year | -0.2200 | 0.2648 | 0.406 |
| CA | First Year | Second Year | -0.1907(*) | 0.0611 | 0.002 |
|  |  | Third Year | -0.1815 | 0.1874 | 0.339 |
|  |  | Fourth Year | -0.2738 | 0.2123 | 0.198 |
|  | Second Year | Third Year | 0.0092 | 0.1874 | 0.961 |
|  |  | Fourth Year | -0.0831 | 0.2105 | 0.693 |
|  | Third Year | Fourth Year | -0.0923 | 0.2765 | 0.739 |

**Note:** *The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

**Table 7.** Multiple comparisons LSD (Level of University).

| Dependent Variable | (I) Level of University | (J) Level of University | Mean Difference (I-J) | Std. Error | Sig. |
|--------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|------------|------|
| TA | National Top | Provincial Top | -0.0716 | 0.1282 | 0.577 |
|  |  | Vocational | 0.2735 | 0.1413 | 0.053 |
|  |  | Sino-foreign Cooperation | -0.0304 | 0.1606 | 0.85 |
|  | Provincial Top | Vocational | 0.3451(*) | 0.1225 | 0.005 |
|  |  | Sino-foreign Cooperation | 0.0412 | 0.1443 | 0.776 |
|  | Vocational | Sino-foreign Cooperation | -0.3039 | 0.1561 | 0.052 |

**Note:** * The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1. The Overall Situation of Chinese Undergraduates' FLA

The present study showed that Chinese non-English major undergraduates generally experienced a moderate level of English anxiety. This is consistent with the findings of previous studies conducted with learners of English as a foreign language in a Chinese university (Liu, 2006) and a Spanish university (Arnaiz & Guillén, 2012). However, it contradicts with that by Rodríguez and Abreu (2003) which found English learners experiencing considerably lower level of anxiety. This is probably due to the difference in participants' motivation. Research has

shown that FLA is affected by factors like motivation. According to Zhang et al. (2020) being motivated is crucial in language acquisition. In Rodríguez and Abreu's study, participants were future language teachers. English is a necessary skill in developing their future careers. They might be more motivated than non-English major participants in the current study, for whom English may be more of a skill forced to acquire to graduate than an essential skill in developing their careers.

### 5.2. Factors Influencing Chinese Undergraduates' FLA

The current study also found grade as the influential factors of participants' general FLA and FLA from communication apprehension. Second-year students experienced higher level of FLA than first-year students. This result is in line with the findings of Dewaele (2002) which found mature learners having more difficulty in accommodating to the rules of a foreign language. Mature learners also tend to place more importance on accuracy (Salthouse & Somberg, 1982). Thus, foreign language learners of older ages are often more anxious than younger groups. Moreover, students of higher grades are also more anxious about communicating in foreign language than those in lower grades. This was confirmed by Bailey, Onwuegbuzie, and Daley (2000); Aydin, Harputlu, Celik, Uştuk, and Güzel (2017) who found similar results with American students and Turkish students respectively. An explanation could be that the complexity of higher-level learning requires more sophisticated communication skills, which leads the second-year students to feel more worried when speaking English in class than the first year (Marcos‐Llinás & Garau, 2009).

As for the level of university, the results demonstrate a higher FLA in students from the provincial top university than students from the vocational. From the perspective of learning contexts, this result contradicts with that of Chou (2018) which found students receiving full EMI exhibited less English learning anxiety than those receiving partial EMI. Students who are less exposed to English environments have more difficulties in using accurate vocabulary, which results in their lack of confidence in using English and more negative attitudes towards English learning (Chou, 2018). As research has shown that learners' perceptions and attitudes towards a foreign language could influence their FLA (Oxford, 1992) higher FLA may be found with students under partial EMI contexts. In the present study, students from the provincial top university received partial EMI in some courses while students from the vocational university received no EMI in any courses. However, the provincial top students were found to be experiencing more FLA in terms of test anxiety. A potential explanation for this discrepancy may be the differences in the academic policies of the two universities. Students in the investigated provincial top university are required to pass the CET to graduate while students in the vocational do not. This graduation requirement of the provincial university placed severe consequences on the outcome of failing a foreign language exam, which could lead students to become more anxious about foreign language learning.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Overall, the present study demonstrates that FLA is common among Chinese non-English major undergraduates. Grade is the influential factor. The findings reinforce some results reported in previous studies (e.g., (Arnaiz & Guillén, 2012; Aydin et al., 2017)). More specifically, viewing FLA from its three dimensions (CA, FNE, TA), Chinese students experienced the highest level of FLA in terms of test anxiety, then communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. Grade was found to be the influential factor of FLA from communication apprehension and level of university predicted test anxiety. The results have both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, they have enriched our understandings of both the constructs and the factor structure of Chinese English learners' FLA. As Horwitz (2016) stated, understanding the underlying factors influencing FLA could help clarify the nature of FLA and enrich the theory of FLA. Hopefully the result of this study could shine some lights on the current situation of Chinese learners' FLA situation and be of a reference for further studies in setting up variables. Practically, the findings could assist foreign language educators in providing

better guidance to alleviate students' FLA. Nevertheless, this study has its limitations. In the current study, only samples from national top level were collected across different universities. Samples from the other three levels were all collected within a single university of that level, which may limit the generalization of the findings. More representative samples should be collected in future studies to improve the generality of the conclusion. Also, the current study only focused on non-English major Chinese undergraduates. English-major students were neglected. It might be interesting and thought-provoking to investigate the FLA situation of English-major undergraduates under the Chinese context and compare the FLA situations of non-English major and English-major students.

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