

# A Study on Anxiety in Chinese EFL University Students

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## Abstract

Anxiety experienced in the course of learning a foreign language is specific and unique (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). This paper reports a study on anxiety in Chinese undergraduate non-English majors at three different proficiency levels in a three-week immersion summer camp. By way of survey, interviews, reflective journals and observations, this research seeks to investigate the relationship between anxiety and native-speaking teacher's teaching and extracurricular activities in an immersion summer camp. Specifically, it tries to explore that (1) whether a considerable number of students at each level felt anxious when speaking to native-speaking teachers and volunteers in and out of classroom in the summer camp setting, (2) whether the more proficient students tend to be less anxious in the summer camp setting, (3) whether the students felt less anxious when they learn English and western cultures not for any examination. Based on the findings, some suggestions for future teaching and research are proposed.

**Keywords:** anxiety, three different proficiency levels, an immersion summer camp

## 1. Introduction

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has attracted the attention of researchers since the late 1960's. Research has shown that foreign language learning is more than just an intellectual process. In fact, it is a very stressful and emotional process that is likely to evoke anxiety in foreign language learners. Their performance is constantly under evaluation whether by teachers, peers or even themselves, which, in turn, affects their self-esteem and perception of foreign language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986). Fifty years of research has yielded significant and valuable results. However, the majority of these researches have focused upon examining classroom anxiety in Western communities. Very few experiments have been conducted upon an EFL immersion learning context in mainland China. Against this backdrop, there is a need to further explore the issue.

In order to provide a range of opportunities to raise students' interests and passion for oral English learning, the Teaching Affairs of the university and the School of Foreign Languages of the university will co-host English Immersion Summer Camps with the financial support of Tsinghua University. At the end of the first academic year, all undergraduate students (except English majors) entering school in the autumn semester of the former year attend the Camp (nearly 3,200 persons) voluntarily.

The Camp takes examples from activities of Cambridge University, Harvard University, and Stanford University, with the aim to provide students with an opportunity to make up for the limitations of the conventional classroom teaching in the Chinese EFL context, so that students will be highly activated and motivated to learn on their own initiative with no examination pressure, and their English application capability will be improved at a faster pace. The three-week camp is carried out in face-to-face classes, project activities, and extracurricular learning. All of these teaching activities are designed to provide a positive and exciting learning environment that motivates students to learn English and western cultures.

In light of these considerations, this research aims to identify whether there is a difference or not in foreign language anxiety level before and after a summer camp setting. More precisely, it seeks to find whether the summer camp teaching and learning environment can reduce students' anxiety level. Through survey such as semi-structured interviews, reflective journals and classroom observation, this research seeks to investigate the relationship between anxiety and native-speaking teacher's teaching and extracurricular activities in an immersion summer camp. Therefore, the research findings will contribute to the overall literature of research in this field. Meanwhile, the study will have practical implications for the teaching and learning in and out of the

immersion setting.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Foreign Language and Anxiety

One of the main preoccupations of language acquisition is without a doubt the study of the underlying mechanisms and processes through which a learner acquires a foreign language successfully. In the early 1970's, Smart et al. (1970) stated that language "researchers have exhibited a somewhat single-minded obsession with intelligence and aptitude as the predictor variables" (p. 416 cited in MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Hence, researchers such as Spielberg (1976), Schwartz (1972) and Brown (1973) studied other possible variables that could affect language learning/acquisition, for instance "affective factors" (including anxiety), "those that deal with the emotional reactions and motivations of the learners" (Scovel, 1978, p. 131). However, little research on anxiety and language acquisition was available at that time. Later on, Chastain (1975), Kleinmann (1977), Scovel (1978) and other researchers set the direction towards which anxiety and language learning should be examined. In fact, they directed future works into studying anxiety "not as a simple, unitary construct, but as a cluster of affective states, influenced by factors which are intrinsic and extrinsic to the foreign language learner" (Scovel, 1978, p. 134). Their results helped set the ground for following researches.

### 2.2 Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety

Horwitz et al.'s article "Foreign language classroom anxiety" (1986) is a major reference in the field of foreign language classroom anxiety research. The research paper, working with American first year university students learning Spanish as a foreign language as subjects, paved the way for future researches in many ways.

First, as the authors noted, no one had "adequately defined foreign language anxiety nor described its specific effects on foreign language learning" (p. 125). Therefore, they provided a definition of foreign language learning anxiety in a classroom context by observing and describing the psychological symptoms of the phenomenon from a general to a more specific perspective. They defined Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128).

Second, they set a theoretical framework for FLCA in which they associated language anxiety with "performance evaluation" also known as "performance anxiety". It includes three aspects: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (p. 127). The first aspect concerns the learner's discomfort that might be felt when engaging in a communicative interaction because he or she may not be able to understand and control what is happening whether as a listener or a speaker. The second aspect arises from a fear of failure, as learners are afraid to fail to meet their own expectations. The third aspect comes from the fear of negative evaluation by peers and teachers. These aspects are all inter-related and may even crossover. Finally, it is important here to note that Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety is not only a mere manifestation of the three types of performance anxiety previously mentioned, but is also a distinct type of anxiety different from any other type that might be experienced in another context, (e.g. math class) because of the nature of language learning.

Third, they designed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), the first instrument to specifically measure the anxiety level in foreign language classrooms. It was proven to be statistically reliable and directly correlated with grades. Many following researchers have used this scale and obtained results that support its reliability (Aida, 1994; Rodriguez & Abreu, 2003). FLCAS is also an important instrument for current research.

Finally, their results and conclusions showed that almost half of their subjects did feel anxious at some point during their learning process, especially when speaking skill was involved. Hence, they concluded that the communicative classroom model could potentially induce anxiety, which in turn could affect the learning and acquisition process. That type of anxiety proved to be a debilitating anxiety, which interferes negatively with the learning process of a language, as opposed to facilitating anxiety, which helps the learning process. As mentioned by Liu (2003): "The overview of the empirical studies illustrates that anxiety, though sometimes facilitating (Kleinmann, 1977, cited in Hilleson, 1996; Scovel, 1978), predominantly has a debilitating impact on the learning of a second language in the classroom (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, 1991b; Hilleson, 1996; Tsui, 1996; Kitano, 2001)".

In summary, Horwitz et al. picked up where others left off and established important and solid standards for the foreign language learning anxiety research field. They defined the notion of FLLA, set a theoretical framework, and provided a reliable instrument. An overview of some related studies illustrates what Horwitz and her colleagues found in 1986 (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre, 1995; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; 1991a; Rodriguez & Abreu, 2003).

### 3. Research Questions

Targeting Chinese EFL learners, the present research aims to examine anxiety in undergraduate non-English majors at different proficiency levels in an immersion summer camp. To achieve this, a triangulated method was adopted and three research questions are proposed: (1) whether a considerable number of students at each level felt anxious when speaking to native-speaking teachers and volunteers in and out of classroom in the summer camp setting, (2) whether the more proficient students tend to be less anxious in the summer camp setting, (3) whether the students felt less anxious when they learn English and western cultures not for any examination.

### 4. Research Design

The study was carried out in two phases: large scale survey and case study involving three English language classes from three different proficiency levels.

#### 4.1 Research Context

From 27<sup>th</sup> June to 15<sup>th</sup> July of 2015 (3 weeks), in the summer vacation of 2014-2015 academic year, the English Immersion Summer Camp was organized on the campus of China West Normal University. All undergraduate students (except English majors, most of whom are working as volunteers for the Camp) entering school in the year of 2014 (3223 persons) participated the camp and 55 foreign teachers and 95 foreign volunteers from UK and the United States were recruited for managing the camp's daily teaching and extracurricular activities. For the purpose of easy administration and organization of competition and activities, the students were organized according to performance in the English placement Test they took in August 26, 2014. So there are altogether 1237 students in Level A, 1440 in Level B and 652 in Level C. For the sake of easy administration, all the participants of the Summer Camp are addressed as a NATION. The NATION is divided into 6 PROVINCES and each PROVINCE is named after a one-to-one combination of the 8 letters of N-O-R-M-A-L, e.g. "N PROVINCE" and so on. Each PROVINCE is sub-divided into 5 CITIES. As the sub-group of a PROVINCE, each CITY is named after the one-to-one combination of the 6 PROVINCE letters and the 5 different colored T-shirts students wore—red, green, yellow and white, and then the names of the 5 sub-groups of N PROVINCE are "N Red", "N Yellow", "N Green", "N Blue" and "N Purple". In the sequence, there are totally 30 CITIES ( $6 * 5 = 30$ ), in each of which there are about 120 students. In addition, one foreign volunteer and two Chinese volunteers formed a team to take care of the theme activities (mainly all kinds of contests) of a CITY. Each CITY (About 120 students) is then further divided into 3 small "teaching classes" (about 40 students in a small class) according to the small-class rule (they are named by Arabic numbers). Therefore there are totally 90 "teaching classes" in the Summer Camp. The 386 subjects of this empirical study are from M PROVINCE.

#### 4.2 Participants

The investigation of this study involved a total of 386 subjects who are respectively from the three different proficiency levels of *M Province* at the summer camp. They are all university freshmen aged from 17 to 20 years old.

#### 4.3 Instrumentation

To investigate students' anxiety in the immersion program at different proficiency levels, a triangulation of methods were adopted: survey, observations, reflective journals and interview, as detailed below:

##### *Background questionnaire*

The background questionnaire is designed to obtain demographic data about the participants such as name, gender, age, hometown, department and experience of native-speakers' contacts.

##### *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale*

Horwitz et al's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) were used to measure and compare anxiety level before and after the camp. In order to know the general tendency of the students' foreign language classroom anxiety, the total score, mean and standard deviation of the FLCAS were computed.

##### *Teacher and volunteer observation*

The foreign teachers and volunteers of the 3 focused classes were asked to keep a weekly record of the most/least anxious students in different classroom activities during the camp.

##### *Reflective journal*

In order to gather additional data about personal variables in language learning, the students of the focused classes were asked to write reflective journals on a weekly basis.

### *Classroom observation*

To compare students' self-reports with teacher/volunteer and video-recorded observations, the 3 focused classes were observed and video-recorded by the researcher three times per class during the camp.

### *Semi-structured interview*

To get a more comprehensive insider view of anxiety in English camp, 3 high-anxious, 3 average-anxious, and 3 low-anxious students from 3 focused classes (one from each proficiency level) as well as their 3 foreign teachers and 6 foreign volunteers were invited for semi-structured interviews.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

The major purpose of the present research was to explore anxiety in Chinese undergraduate non-English majors at three different proficiency levels in a three-week immersion summer camp. The following presents the response to each of the four research questions raised in part 3.

1) Did a considerable number of students at each level felt anxious when speaking to native speaking teachers and volunteers in and out of classroom in the summer camp setting?

The students were placed into different band groups from 1 (lowest proficiency level) to 3 (highest) according to their scores in the placement test upon entering China West Normal University. Thus, the participants in the present research were deemed to be at three different proficiency levels. Although most students expressed willingness to engage in oral English communication in the camp in the survey scale, reflective journals, and interviews, only a few appeared to actively respond to their teachers, according to the video-taped and teacher observations in theme lecture. The majority of the students, though active during pair work, remained quiet when their teachers asked a question to the whole class and expected a response. But in theme practice with volunteers and other extracurricular activities, they can speak free to the visiting teachers and volunteers. Among the 36 statements reflective of foreign language anxiety, 19 were supported by a third or more of the students surveyed, seven were supported by over half the student. This suggests that significant foreign language anxiety was experienced by many students in response to at least some aspects of foreign language learning before the camp. This also was confirmed in their reflective journals.

2) Did the more proficient students tend to be less anxious in the summer camp setting?

The advanced students used more effective and varied strategies in learning to reduce or overcome anxiety. According to students' interview and self-reports, if a student with a low proficiency in English didn't know how to express an idea or know what to say in class, an advanced-level peer could take over the turn or offer support. The student at a low level wouldn't feel embarrassed either because attention was shifted to someone else. According to the foreign teachers and volunteers interviewed, the A level students are much more active and confident than the other two levels. So it might be better to combine students with different levels in one class, because the active participation of advanced-level students in class, other peers could be spurred to be more active as well. Gradually, anxiety could be diminished and active participation be enhanced.

3) Did the students feel less anxious when they learn English and western cultures not for any examination?

Assessment results always means a lot of things to Chinese learners. In the camp, in order to activate the students to practice their spoken English, students can get 2 credits for mere attendance to the camp lectures and out of class activities. Based on students' self-report and interviews, a majority of them think that a complicated assessment system should be adopted. Although they don't suffer much anxiety for the easy assessment criteria, they reported that they feel is not fair or motivated enough to attend the camp activities.

## **6. Pedagogical Implications**

To help students become more active and less anxious to speak English and achieve fluency, camp teachers/volunteers, students, and curriculum designers all have a role to play. They need not only be aware of the existence of student anxiety but also identify specific coping techniques and strategies. As a visiting teacher noted as following:

*The hardest thing was getting them to have confidence to speak out loud in English which was frustrating because all of their English skills were a lot better than they gave themselves credit for, this is a cultural thing though and it takes time to change this deep set feeling within the students. More advise and pointers could be given on this for the teachers.*

The camp is a place where the students came to learn great details about the subjects native-speaking teachers and volunteers are meant to be teaching but more of an opportunity to interact, practicing their English and

giving them access to someone from a western culture.

At the university, English teaching should be more student-centered and more interesting activities should be designed for students to practice speaking English in class. All these will help students get used to speaking English in different activities, which may finally lead to increased willingness to speak and actual use of the language in classroom-learning. Likewise, anxiety may also be reduced when speaking English.

### 7. Limitations of the Present Study

Due to various constraints, however, several limitations existed in the study. First of all, students' performance in daily class was not observed to compare with their performance in the immersion summer camp setting. Secondly, a pilot study was omitted due to objective conditions.

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