A Qualitative Study of Chinese College Students' Online Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety under the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract—Under the background of the COVID-19 pandemic and the prevalence of foreign language learning anxiety, this study is carried out from the following two aspects. Firstly, this study tries to investigate students' foreign language anxiety level. Secondly, this study tries to identify the sources of Chinese college students' anxiety in online foreign language classes. To answer the above research questions, qualitative data are collected by semi-structured interviews. A total of 9 participants participated in the interviews, and each interview lasts about 30–40 minutes. The study found: Chinese college students' overall online English anxiety is at a medium level. There are five main sources of online English learning anxiety for Chinese college students, including environmental factors, course traits, teacher influence, peer influence, and personal perception.

Keywords—Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), online English learning, COVID-19

I. INTRODUCTION

Since Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) inevitably exists within the traditional offline classroom language learning, whether FLCA exists under the setting of online learning with unique shortcomings and increasing popularity during the pandemic era is also worth exploring. Though quite many studies have dug into FLCA, few concentrate their focus on what are the possible reasons for this phenomenon under the setting of online learning [1]. With previous studies as references, this study steps further and aims to be carried out among Chinese college students with various backgrounds, measure the level of their online FLCA, and find out the possible sources of FLCA under the setting of online learning.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. FLCA

Anxiety in language learning is viewed as a psychological issue on the part of learners [2]. Foreign language learners face many challenges that can be anxiety-arousing. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope [3] conceptualized such anxiety as FLCA. They thought that the FLCA is a unique complex of self-awareness, belief, emotion, and behavior. This kind of anxiety is different from the anxiety studied in other areas. The reason for this is that it involves socio-cultural and linguistic requirements on learners.

Other researchers in the world also started to conduct research in this field. MacIntyre and Gardner [4] regarded FLCA as a feeling of tension and fear, which is connected to a feeling of anxiety in second language contexts. Aida [5] said that FLCA is a particular anxiety, which has a close relationship with overflowing self-awareness, negative feelings, weak beliefs, and obvious worry which occurs in the language learning process. Later studies showed that FLCA encompasses "a suite of anxieties", which is related to classroom-based learning and specific language skills such as speaking and reading [6].

In order to measure anxiety under the context of social and educational environment, Horwitz [7] gave three external performances of FLCA as communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation.

B. Affecting Factors of FLCA

Some researchers have studied the factors affecting FLCA. Young [8] believes that there are six factors that affect students' FLCA, namely competition, students' attitudes towards language learning, teachers' attitudes towards language teaching, communication between teachers and students, the form of classroom interaction, and the form of examinations. Among these factors, competition is the most important. MacIntyre [9] believes that the personal characteristics of learners are important reasons. Arnold [10] believes that learners will have anxiety if they lack cultural identity of the target language or have a low tolerance for ambiguity.

As for more studies, Yalçın and İnceçay [11] believe that there are two main reasons for students' anxiety. One is because of face problems. Students fear of being recognized by others and being ridiculed, which could endanger their self-esteem and frustrate their self-confidence. Second, because the goals they set for themselves are so high that they cannot meet their own

requirements or the learning outcome does not match their learning prospect, students will have anxiety. Jiang and Dewaele pointed out that the causes of anxiety are mainly threefold, which involve learners' personal traits, peers' reactions, and teacher instructional practices. Students' own negative perceptions about themselves could lead to FLCA. Teachers' negative attitudes toward students can affect students' anxiety levels. If the teachers are too strict with their students, their anxiety level in the classroom may surge. Students can also be anxious during English classes when they find it difficult to keep pace with their English teachers. If students around one respond negative toward one's performance in English classes, one may also experience a rise in FLCA [1].

Based on previous studies, this paper tries to answer the following two questions:

1. How much FLCA do Chinese college students have in online English courses during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. What are the possible affecting factors of Chinese college students' FLCA in online English courses during the COVID-19 pandemic?

III. METHODS

The qualitative data is collected for this study. The semi-structured interviews are used for the qualitative data collection. The interview guide is composed of 24 questions. The questions are centered around early English learning experience, personal online English learning experience during the COVID-19 lockdown from different anxiety perspectives, and suggestions for bettering the online English learning experience. During the pilot stage, 3 students are invited to do the interviews and are asked for suggestions for the interview questions. With pilot feedback, the interview guide is carefully reworded and then used for the formal interviews. Through snowball sampling strategy, participants are recruited in a university in South China and hopefully meet the criteria of evenly distribution in variables of gender and major.

9 students showed their willingness to join the semi-structured interviews. Before the interview, the interviewees are made fully aware of the research purpose and their personal information and responses during the process are confidential for the sole use of the study. They are labeled as P1 to P9. The interviewees' demographic information is presented in Table I.

TABLE I.   INTERVIEWEES' DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Label	Gender	Major
P1	Male	Engineering
P2	Male	Medicine
P3	Female	Engineering
P4	Male	Philosophy
P5	Male	Literature
P6	Female	History
P7	Female	Art
P8	Female	Art
P9	Male	Physical education

The qualitative data collected are processed through content analysis to extract the interviewees' responses about their online FLCA level.

IV. RESULTS

The results elaborate on college students' online FLCA level and sources of their online FLCA.

A. Students' Online FLCA Level

Based on their reports, 6 interviewees (P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P9) perceived themselves in a medium level of online FLCA. P2 commented, "I do feel anxious about online English classes, but not that much". P3 said, "The online English classes make me kind of anxious". "Personally, I don't fancy the online English classes, because I have to try to stay focus all the time which makes my nerve tense". P4 added, "Not in a very high level though". P6 mentioned, "I am anxious indeed". "I am anxious to some extent but it's limited to a level I can handle", said P7. P9 stated that sometimes he is anxious about online English classes.

2 interviewees reported that are in a high level of FLCA. P5 said "I am very anxious during the whole online English courses". P8 expressed a high level of FLCA by using words like "quite anxious", "much more anxious than usual" when asked about the feelings during online English courses.

One respondent describes his FLCA level as low. P1 said that though he does not prefer this mode of English courses, he did not experience such strong feelings as anxiety or frustration. He ranks his FLCA level as low.

B. Affecting Factors of Students' Online FLCA

After being asked about the reasons for their anxiety, the interviewees' reports are classified and organized in Table II.

The affecting factors of college students' online FLCA are extracted based on 6 factors in the constructed model. The sources can be further classified based on their similarities.

After sorting through all the possible affecting factors reported by the interviewees, five categories can be extracted, including environmental factors, course traits, teacher influence, peer influence, and personal perception.

Environmental factors include noisy environment, acquaintances' disruption, equipment failure, bad network, urgent housework for students who stayed at home during COVID-19, electronic devices' distraction, and students' unfamiliarity with tools needed for online English classes.

Course trait refers to the characteristics or intrinsic nature of online English classes, which involves the difficulty of the course, classes' indistinct key points, too many slide shows used, loose logic associations among class contents, unsatisfactory class outcomes, and the temporariness nature of online classes.

The next sources can be classified as teacher influence, including teachers' own maladjustment to online classes, teachers' strictness, lack of teachers' instant help, lack of teachers' instant nonverbal feedback, fear for teachers'

negative responses, respect for teachers' work, lack of teachers' supervision, and lack of teacher-student interaction.

Peer influence is also mentioned by the interviewees, including fear for classmates' negative responses, few opportunities for group discussion, representation for group work, unfamiliarity with classmates, and peer students' high level of initiative.

Last is students' own perception of themselves, such as, failure to achieve personal standards, failure to stay focused, fear for making mistakes, previous negative experiences concerning English learning, lack of clear strategy for improvement, fear for getting rather low course marks, students' personal weakness in this subject, lack of experience, certainty of underachievement, and unsatisfactory personal behaviour during online English classes.

TABLE II.   INTERVIEW REPORTS OF ONLINE FLCA SOURCES

Classification	Key Information
Environmental factor	Noisy Environment (P4)
	Acquaintances' disruption (P4)
	Equipment failure (P4, P3)
	Bad network quality (P4)
	Urgent housework (P4, P8)
	Electronic devices' distraction (P2, P5, P7)
	Unfamiliarity with tools (P4, P6)
Course trait	Curriculum difficulty (P2, P4, P7, P9)
	Indistinct key points of classes (P2)
	Too much dependence on PPT (P9)
	Susceptibility to interruption of thoughts (P2, P6)
	Unsatisfactory effect of class (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9)
	Online form's temporariness nature (P4)
Teacher influence	Teachers' maladjustment (P2)
	Teachers' strictness (P1, P2, P3, P5, P7)
	Lack of instant help (P3, P6, P7)
	Lack of nonverbal feedback (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9)
	Fear of teachers' negative responses (P1, P2, P4, P6, P7, P8)
	Respect for teachers' work (P6)
	Lack of teachers' supervision (P1, P2, P7, P8)
	Lack of interaction (P1, P2, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9)
Peer influence	Fear of classmates' negative responses (P6)
	Few opportunities for group discussion (P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9)
	Representation for group work (P3, P7)
	Unfamiliarity with classmates (P2)
	Others' high level of initiative (P3, P4, P7)
Personal perception	Failure to achieve personal standards (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9)
	Failure to stay focus (P1, P2, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9)
	Fear of making mistakes (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9)
	Previous negative experiences (P3, P8)
	Lack of clear strategy for betterment (P3)
	Fear of low course marks (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9)
	Personal weakness (P1, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8)
	Strong interest for English (P6)
	High course marks (P2, P3, P6, P9)
	Lack of self-discipline (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9)
	Lack of initiative (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9)
	Personal weakness (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9)
	Lack of experience (P4, P6, P9)
	Certainty of underachievement (P2, P4, P6)
	Unsatisfactory personal behavior (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9)

V. DISCUSSION

Through adopting semi-structured interviews, this study explores students' online FLCA level and traces their online FLCA sources. Based on 9 interviews, it is found that, in general, 6 students are in a medium level of online FLCA, 2 students are in a high level of online FLCA, and 1 student is in a low level of online FLCA. The online FLCA sources can be classified into 5 categories, including environmental factors, course traits, teacher influence, peer influence, and personal perception. This section discusses these findings and tries to provide possible explanations.

A. Online FLCA Level

The overall online FLCA level result of this study is highly consistent with previous studies. Li and Han [12] reported that their quantitative result shows the mean of online English learners' overall anxiety level is 3.20 which can be defined as medium for measurement.

For a long time, Chinese English learners have developed the concept of test-oriented foreign language learning. They spend more time on foreign language reading and writing, and pay less attention to speaking and listening, so they are more likely to be nervous and anxious in speaking and listening [13].

Students' positivity and negativity are two poles of the attitude towards online English courses. The lack of confidence could be affecting these two factors. Low level of self-confidence could lead to a rise in the level of FLCA [1].

Competition may result in high-level test anxiety. An individual may be boosted when they are one choice among many. But when individuals are competitive with each other, there are conflicts which lead to a rise in anxiety [14]. Different from students in basic education level, college students are more evaluated not only from test results but from many aspects. Therefore, college students are driven to excel in many aspects. Students must compete with counterparts for better academic performance and a brighter future; thus, peer pressure level is relatively high.

Students' anxiety levels may be closely related to students' attitudes toward online English classes. All of the interviewees who reported their anxiety level referred to their certainty of learning less from online classes than traditional offline classes. When they have to take those online English classes which are against their willingness, their anxiety level may rise consequently.

B. Online FLCA Sources

Environmental factors can cast influence upon individuals' negative psychological reactions, such as, anxiety and depression [15]. When the perceptions of individuals and the environment are compatible, that is, when the components of the environment can meet the needs of individuals, it is conducive to the physical and mental health of individuals, and when those are not compatible, it will produce psychological tension, damaging health.

The traits of online English courses are influential to students' psychological status. If the online English course is too difficult to handle, many students can be anxious about it. When they cannot easily and clearly grasp useful information during classes, they tend to be anxious as well [16].

Teachers can exert great influence on students' anxiety. During online English classes, the convenience of limitless temporal and spacial features is also a burden of temporal and spacial separation. Teachers' unfamiliarity with students and less feedback from the students cause them to provide less targeted feedback. Students also get less in amount or less focused feedback from the teachers. When teachers who have less information about each student are being overly strict to students, students can get anxious [17].

Peer influence can lead to individuals feeling anxious. Learners' nature of competition generates anxiety. This is especially prominent for individuals rooted in a competitive culture [18]. Students like to compare themselves with others. Once they find that others are more competent than them, perform better than them, and there is still a distance between the real self and the ideal self, anxiety generates over time.

Most sources of online FLCA are pointed to personal perception. Students' own perception of their English learning outcome, personal adaptation, learning efficacy, learning engagement can exert significant influence upon their FLCA level [19]. Plus, there is no speedy improvement in English learning, and their self-efficacy level in learning English is low. All of above make students feel inferior in learning English or think that they have indestructible drawbacks in learning English. Gradually, they are prone to be affected by negative psychological factors like anxiety or depression.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this study, findings of students online FLCA level and its sources provide significant insights for researchers with the focus on foreign language acquisition and for researchers of other related fields to be aware of recent academic development upon students online FLCA. Therefore, they can make proper reactions and conduct their research with more theoretical basis. With this study, foreign language instructors and other educational practitioners can be aware of the current situation of students online FLCA. With valuable insights of students online FLCA level, they can make proper reactions and offer more targeted support for college students under the background of public crisis. This study has its limitations. The collected data of this study are mainly centered around the subjective reactions of the participants, which could be biased because of the social desirability. Studies in the future can adopt quantitative measurement or tools connected to biometric features for authenticity.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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