

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

Guangrui Liu and Yang Chen*

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Harbin Institute of Technology (Shenzhen), Shenzhen, China
Email: 21s05900@stu.hit.edu.cn (G.L.); drchenyang@hit.edu.cn (Y.C.)

*Corresponding author

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 explore the level of foreign language anxiety level. Secondly, this study tries to explore the level of 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 minutes. The results show that the level of 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 sociocultural 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 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, <D O o Ö Q D Q 13] <D O F H o D \ 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

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

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

Last is V W X 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, student's 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)
	Acquaintance's disruption (P4)
	Equipment failure (P4, P3)
	Bad network quality (P4)
	Urgent housework (P4, P8)
Course trait	Electronic device's distraction (P2, P5, P7)
	Unfamiliarity with tools (P4, P6)
	Curriculum difficulty (P2, P4, P7, P9)
	Indistinct key points of classes (P2)
	Too much dependence on PPT (P9)
Teacher influence	Susceptibility to interruption of thoughts (P2, P6)
	Unsatisfactory effect of class (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9)
	Online form's temporariness nature (P4)
	Teachers' maladjustment (P2)
	Teachers' strictness (P1, P2, P3, P5, P7)
Peer influence	Lack of instant help (P3, P6, P7)
	Lack of nonverbal feedback (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9)
	Fear of teachers' negative responses (P1, P2, P4, P7, P8)
	Respect for teachers' work (P6)
	Lack of teachers' supervision (P1, P2, P7, P8)
Personal perception	Lack of interaction (P1, P2, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9)
	Fear of classmates' negative responses (P6)
	Few opportunities for group discussion (P2, P3, P6, P7, P8, P9)
	Representation for group work (P3, P7)
	Unfamiliarity with classmates (P2)
	Others' high level of initiative (P3, P4, P7)
	Failure to achieve personal standards (P1, P2, 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, P9)
	Previous negative experiences (P3, P8)
Lack of clear strategy for betterment (P3)	
Personal perception	Fear of low course marks (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, 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, 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, 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].

6 W X G Positive and negative 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.

6 W X G In Quality Levels may be closely related to V W X G Attitude 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 L Q G L Y Negative psychological reactions, such as, anxiety and depression [5]. 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. Since 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].

During online English classes, the convenience of limitless temporal and spatial features is also a burden for 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. Learners' 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 limitation. 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 tools connected to biometric features for authenticity.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Guangrui Liu conducted the research and finished the draft, Yang Chen provided thorough advice on revision and corresponded with the editors to offer instant feedback, all authors had approved the final version.

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