



LANGUAGE ANXIETY AMONG CHINESE EFL LEARNERS: A COMPREHENSIVE INVESTIGATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS AND COPING STRATEGIES

ANSIEDAD DE LENGUAJE ENTRE ESTUDIANTES DE IDIOMA CHINO EFL: UNA INVESTIGACIÓN INTEGRAL DE FACTORES PSICOLÓGICOS Y ESTRATEGIAS DE AFRONTAMIENTO

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ABSTRACT

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in China frequently experience significant levels of anxiety when learning and using English, which can substantially impair their language acquisition and performance. This study investigates the multifaceted nature of language anxiety among Chinese EFL learners, examining its sources, manifestations, and impact on learning outcomes. Through a comprehensive analysis of current research and a mixed-methods approach involving 280 Chinese undergraduate students from three universities in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, this research explores the psychological, cultural, and educational factors contributing to foreign language anxiety (FLA) in the Chinese context. The findings reveal that Chinese EFL learners experience distinct patterns of anxiety rooted in cultural values, educational traditions, and linguistic differences between Chinese and English. Key factors identified include fear of negative evaluation, perfectionism, face-saving concerns, teacher-student power dynamics, and limited authentic language exposure. The study provides evidence-based strategies for educators and learners to address anxiety-related challenges and improve English learning outcomes in Chinese educational settings.

Keywords:

Foreign language anxiety, Chinese EFL learners, language learning, psychological factors, anxiety reduction strategies.

RESUMEN

Los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) en China experimentan con frecuencia niveles significativos de ansiedad al aprender y usar el inglés, lo que puede afectar considerablemente su adquisición y rendimiento lingüísticos. Este estudio investiga la naturaleza multifacética de la ansiedad lingüística entre los estudiantes chinos de EFL, examinando sus orígenes, manifestaciones e impacto en los resultados de aprendizaje. Mediante un análisis exhaustivo de la investigación actual y un enfoque de métodos mixtos con 280 estudiantes universitarios chinos de tres universidades en Pekín, Shanghai y Cantón, esta investigación explora los factores psicológicos, culturales y educativos que contribuyen a la ansiedad por lengua extranjera (FLA) en el contexto chino. Los hallazgos revelan que los estudiantes chinos de EFL experimentan patrones distintivos de ansiedad arraigados en valores culturales, tradiciones educativas y diferencias lingüísticas entre el chino y el inglés. Los factores clave identificados incluyen el miedo a la evaluación negativa, el perfeccionismo, la preocupación por salvar las apariencias, las dinámicas de poder entre profesor y alumno y la limitada exposición a la lengua auténtica. El estudio proporciona estrategias basadas en la evidencia para que educadores y estudiantes aborden los desafíos relacionados con la ansiedad y mejoren los resultados del aprendizaje del inglés en entornos educativos chinos.

Palabras clave:

Ansiedad por lenguas extranjeras, estudiantes chinos de inglés como lengua extranjera, aprendizaje de



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INTRODUCTION

The global prominence of English as an international language has intensified the demand for effective English language education worldwide. In China, where English is primarily learned as a foreign language with limited authentic communicative opportunities, learners often experience heightened levels of anxiety when attempting to use English in academic and social contexts. Recent research indicates that Chinese EFL learners display unique patterns of language anxiety that differ from their international counterparts, necessitating targeted investigation of this phenomenon within the Chinese cultural and educational context.

Language anxiety, defined 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” (Horwitz et al., 1986), has been recognized as one of the most significant affective factors influencing second language acquisition. Research specifically focusing on Chinese EFL learners has revealed that more than one third of Chinese college students encounter foreign language anxiety in English classes, with this anxiety manifesting in various forms across different language skills.

The Chinese educational context presents unique challenges for language learners. The traditional exam-oriented education system, cultural emphasis on correctness and face-saving, and limited opportunities for authentic English communication create an environment where anxiety can flourish. Studies have shown that classroom anxiety significantly negatively affects English achievement among Chinese college students, making it crucial to understand and address these psychological barriers to effective language learning.

This research aims to provide a comprehensive examination of language anxiety among Chinese EFL learners, investigating its sources, effects, and potential solutions. By understanding the specific characteristics of anxiety in this population, educators and learners can develop more effective strategies for creating supportive learning environments and improving English language outcomes (Downes, 2012; Lavado et al., 2025; Quiñones, 2020; Redecker & Punie, 2017; Sari, 2019).

Language anxiety research has evolved significantly since the foundational work of Horwitz et al. (1986), who identified foreign language classroom anxiety as a situation-specific anxiety reaction. This anxiety is distinct from general anxiety and consists of three related performance anxieties: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation.

Recent comprehensive reviews of second language anxiety research have identified consistent patterns across

different cultural contexts while also highlighting unique features specific to certain populations. The advent of positive psychology in language learning research has also led to increased attention to foreign language enjoyment, with Dewaele & MacIntyre (2014) pioneering research on the “two faces of Janus” - anxiety and enjoyment in foreign language classrooms. The construct of language anxiety has been further refined to include skill-specific anxieties, such as speaking anxiety, listening anxiety, writing anxiety, and reading anxiety, each with distinct characteristics and effects on learning outcomes (Cheng, 2004).

Research on Chinese EFL learners has revealed distinctive patterns of language anxiety that reflect cultural and educational influences. Liu (2006), conducted a seminal study examining anxiety among Chinese EFL students at different proficiency levels, finding that anxiety levels remained consistently high across proficiency levels, suggesting that traditional assumptions about anxiety decreasing with increased competence may not hold for Chinese learners.

Liu & Jackson (2008), investigated the unwillingness to communicate and foreign language anxiety among Chinese EFL learners, revealing that more than one third of students felt anxious in their English language classrooms, with particular fears of negative evaluation and apprehension about public speaking. This research highlighted the complex interplay between cultural factors and language anxiety in Chinese educational settings.

Recent research by Chen (2024), has explored Chinese undergraduate students' English language speaking anxiety, revealing significant relationships between expectancy-value beliefs and anxiety levels. Speaking anxiety appears to be particularly pronounced among Chinese learners due to cultural factors such as face-saving concerns and perfectionism.

Studies investigating innovative approaches to reduce speaking anxiety have explored various technological interventions, suggesting that technology-enhanced learning may offer promising solutions for addressing speaking anxiety in Chinese contexts.

Zhang & Wu (2024), employed an idiodynamic approach to investigate the dynamic interplay between motivation and anxiety in Chinese EFL students' listening processes. Their research revealed that listening anxiety in Chinese learners is influenced by factors such as unfamiliar phonological systems and limited exposure to authentic English input.

Longitudinal studies have shown that Chinese undergraduate students experience high levels of both foreign language classroom anxiety and listening anxiety, with these anxieties remaining stable over time and significantly

predicting students' self-rated proficiency in listening and speaking.

Research on writing anxiety among Chinese EFL learners has identified seven primary themes contributing to anxiety during the writing process: lack of knowledge about the writing topic, inexperience with the genre, challenges with brainstorming, trouble with structuring information, difficulty with integrating sources, linguistic difficulties, and negative feedback concerns.

Qualitative studies using think-aloud protocols have revealed that Chinese EFL learners' writing anxiety is characterized by culturally specific features that reflect the exam-oriented nature of Chinese education and limited opportunities for authentic communication.

Research on emotions in English language classrooms among Chinese university students has revealed that students across different proficiency levels experience significant levels of anxiety, with cultural factors playing a crucial role in shaping these emotional experiences (Li et al., 2020; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). The Chinese educational system's emphasis on correctness, teacher authority, and competitive achievement creates unique conditions that can exacerbate language anxiety.

Recent comprehensive research by Jiang & Dewaele (2019), specifically examined the uniqueness of foreign language classroom enjoyment and anxiety among Chinese EFL learners, finding that while Chinese learners reported similar levels of enjoyment compared to international samples, they displayed significantly higher levels of anxiety. This research highlighted the influence of the Chinese educational context on emotional experiences in language learning.

Recent research has explored mechanisms of foreign language learning anxiety and enhancement strategies among Chinese tertiary students using grounded theory approaches. These studies have identified various coping strategies and highlighted the importance of positive psychology approaches in addressing language anxiety.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. The research was conducted over a 16-week semester at three major universities in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, representing different geographical and educational contexts within China.

A total of 280 Chinese undergraduate students majoring in English or enrolled in English language courses participated in this study. The participants were aged 18-22 years ($M = 19.8$, $SD = 1.2$) and included 168 females and 112 males. All participants were native speakers of Chinese

(Mandarin) with various levels of English proficiency ranging from intermediate to advanced.

This study employed four specialized language anxiety measurement instruments, all culturally adapted for the Chinese context. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), is a 33-item scale constructed based on three dimensions of performance anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, which was translated into Chinese and culturally adapted to accurately reflect the anxiety experiences of Chinese EFL learners. The English Speaking Anxiety Scale (ESAS) contains 27 items specifically designed to assess the particular anxieties experienced by Chinese learners during oral activities, covering culture-specific factors such as pronunciation concerns, fear of grammatical errors, and social evaluation anxiety related to the concept of "face" (*mianzi*). The Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), also a 27-item instrument, identifies anxiety manifestations across different stages of the writing process, with particular attention to challenges arising from excessive focus on grammatical accuracy and differences in Chinese-English thinking patterns under China's exam-oriented education system. The Listening Anxiety Scale is a 20-item measurement tool that evaluates learners' anxiety levels during listening comprehension, with special consideration for the unique challenges faced by Chinese learners, including differences between Chinese and English phonological systems, difficulties in adapting to speech rates, and lack of exposure to authentic English audio input. The comprehensive use of these scales provides a reliable measurement foundation for understanding the multidimensional language anxiety characteristics of Chinese EFL learners.

Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to explore participants' experiences with language anxiety, coping strategies, and perceptions of effective interventions.

Data collection was conducted systematically across three distinct phases throughout the 16-week semester to ensure comprehensive data gathering and triangulation of findings. The first phase involved the administration of quantitative surveys during weeks 2-3, allowing participants sufficient time to acclimate to their English language courses while capturing their initial anxiety levels and experiences. Following the quantitative data collection, the second phase was implemented during weeks 8-9, consisting of semi-structured interviews with 30 carefully selected participants who represented diverse anxiety profiles and demographic characteristics identified from the survey responses. The final phase was conducted during weeks 14-15 and involved focus group discussions

organized into six groups, each comprising 5-6 participants, strategically designed to foster collaborative reflection on anxiety experiences and coping strategies while allowing for peer interaction and validation of individual experiences. This phased approach enabled researchers to build upon quantitative findings with qualitative insights and conclude with group-based discussions that captured the social and cultural dimensions of language anxiety among Chinese EFL learners.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 28.0, including descriptive statistics, correlation analyses, and multiple regression analyses. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes related to language anxiety experiences and coping strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study sample consisted of 280 participants, with a gender distribution of 60% female (n = 168) and 40% male (n = 112), indicating a slight predominance of female students. In terms of age, the largest group was 19 years old (31.8%), followed by 20 years old (27.1%). Together, the ages of 18–20 represented over 77% of the sample, showing that most participants were in the early years of their university education.

Regarding university location, the distribution was fairly balanced: Shanghai (35.0%), Beijing (33.6%), and Guangzhou (31.4%), suggesting a well-represented sample across major urban centers in China.

With respect to English proficiency, the majority were at the Intermediate level (42.1%), followed by Upper-Intermediate (36.4%), and a smaller proportion at the Advanced level (21.4%). This indicates that while most participants had developed a functional command of English, only about one-fifth demonstrated advanced proficiency.

In terms of years of English study, more than half of the students had studied English for 9–11 years (55.7%), while 28.2% reported 12 years or more, and only 16.1% had studied for 6–8 years. These findings reflect the long-term and sustained exposure to English typical of the Chinese educational system.

Overall, the demographic profile reveals a predominantly young, female, and intermediate-level English learner population, with extensive but varied years of English study and balanced geographic representation across three key cities (Table 1).

Table 1: Participant Demographics (N = 280).

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	168	60.0
	Male	112	40.0
Age	18 years	52	18.6
	19 years	89	31.8
	20 years	76	27.1
	21 years	43	15.4
	22 years	20	7.1
University Location	Beijing	94	33.6
	Shanghai	98	35.0
	Guangzhou	88	31.4
English Proficiency	Intermediate	118	42.1
	Upper-Intermediate	102	36.4
	Advanced	60	21.4
Years of English Study	6-8 years	45	16.1
	9-11 years	156	55.7
	12+ years	79	28.2

Source: Prepared by authors

All scales demonstrated excellent internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding .88, indicating high reliability for the Chinese EFL learner population (Table 2).

Table 2: Internal Consistency Reliability of Anxiety Scales.

Scale	Number of Items	Cronbach's α	Mean Inter-item Correlation
FLCAS	33	0.923	0.485
ESAS	27	0.917	0.492
SLWAI	27	0.901	0.467
Listening Anxiety Scale	20	0.889	0.421

Source: Prepared by authors

The results revealed that 43.9% of participants experienced high levels of general foreign language anxiety, with speaking anxiety showing the highest prevalence (60.7%) of high anxiety levels (Table 3 and 4)

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Language Anxiety Measures.

Anxiety Type	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
General FLA (FLCAS)	3.42	0.68	1.85	4.91	-0.12	-0.34
Speaking Anxiety	3.68	0.74	1.92	5.00	-0.28	-0.15
Writing Anxiety	3.28	0.63	1.89	4.85	0.15	-0.22
Listening Anxiety	3.45	0.71	1.75	4.95	-0.08	-0.41

Source: Prepared by authors

Table 4: Anxiety Level Categories.

Anxiety Level	FLCAS	Speaking	Writing	Listening
Low (1.0-2.5)	18 (6.4%)	12 (4.3%)	24 (8.6%)	16 (5.7%)
Moderate (2.6-3.5)	139 (49.6%)	98 (35.0%)	158 (56.4%)	126 (45.0%)
High (3.6-5.0)	123 (43.9%)	170 (60.7%)	98 (35.0%)	138 (49.3%)

Source: Prepared by authors

Female participants consistently showed significantly higher anxiety levels across all domains compared to male participants, with small to medium effect sizes (Table 5).

Table 5: Gender Differences in Language Anxiety.

Anxiety Type	Male (n=112)		Female (n=168)		t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
FLCAS	3.28	0.71	3.52	0.64	-2.96	.003**	0.36
Speaking	3.51	0.78	3.79	0.69	-3.12	.002**	0.38
Writing	3.15	0.67	3.37	0.58	-2.88	.004**	0.35
Listening	3.31	0.74	3.54	0.67	-2.71	.007**	0.33

Note: **p < .01

Source: Prepared by authors

No significant regional differences were found among the three cities, suggesting consistency in anxiety patterns across different geographic locations in China (Table 6).

Table 6: Regional Differences in Language Anxiety (ANOVA Results).

Anxiety Type	Beijing	Shanghai	Guangzhou	F-value	p-value	²
FLCAS	3.35 (0.69)	3.41 (0.66)	3.51 (0.69)	1.42	0.243	0.010
Speaking	3.58 (0.76)	3.72 (0.71)	3.75 (0.75)	1.38	0.253	0.010
Writing	3.22 (0.64)	3.31 (0.61)	3.32 (0.65)	0.87	0.421	0.006
Listening	3.39 (0.72)	3.47 (0.69)	3.49 (0.72)	0.52	0.596	0.004

Source: Prepared by authors

Strong positive correlations were found among all anxiety measures ($r = .567$ to $.734$), and significant negative correlations were observed between anxiety measures and English proficiency indicators (Table 7).

Table 7: Intercorrelations Among Anxiety Variables and English Proficiency Measures.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. FLCAS	1								
Speaking Anxiety	0.734**	1							
Writing Anxiety	0.681**	0.592**	1						
Listening Anxiety	0.708**	0.634**	0.567**	1					
Overall English Grade	-0.418**	-0.384**	-0.352**	-0.401**	1				
Speaking Performance	-0.365**	-0.523**	-0.298**	-0.334**	0.678**	1			
Writing Performance	-0.334**	-0.287**	-0.468**	-0.295**	0.712**	0.542**	1		
Listening Performance	-0.389**	-0.346**	-0.312**	-0.521**	0.685**	0.498**	0.556**	1	
Self-Rated Proficiency	-0.425**	-0.398**	-0.367**	-0.412**	0.743**	0.612**	0.634**	0.598**	1

Note: ** $p < .01$

Source: Prepared by authors

Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation revealed four distinct factors explaining 68.4% of the total variance. (Tabla 8)

Table 8: Exploratory Factor Analysis of Combined Anxiety Items.

Factor	Eigenvalue	% of Variance	Cumulative %	α
Communication Apprehension	8.23	25.7%	25.7%	0.91
Fear of Negative Evaluation	6.15	19.2%	44.9%	0.88
Test Anxiety	4.81	15.0%	59.9%	0.85
Cultural Performance Anxiety	2.72	8.5%	68.4%	0.83

Source: Prepared by authors

The final model explained 23.4% of the variance in English learning outcomes, with all anxiety measures contributing significantly to the prediction (Table 9).

Table 9: Hierarchical regression analysis predicting English learning outcomes.

Variable	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3	
	β	t	β	t	β	t
Step 1: Demographics						
Gender (Female = 1)	-0.156	-2.68**	-.142	-2.78**	-.128	-2.65**
Age	0.089	1.51	0.072	1.43	0.068	1.42



Variable	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3	
University Location	0.034	0.58	0.021	0.41	0.018	0.37
Step 2: General Anxiety						
FLCAS			-0.385	-6.98**	-0.221	-3.45**
Step 3: Specific Anxieties						
Speaking Anxiety					-0.187	-2.89**
Writing Anxiety					-0.134	-2.31*
Listening Anxiety					-0.156	-2.67**
Model Statistics						
R²	0.031		0.175		0.234	
ΔR²	0.031		0.144		0.059	
F	2.98*		14.67**		13.42**	

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01

Source: Prepared by authors

Qualitative Findings: Themes and Patterns

- Sources of Language Anxiety

Theme 1: Cultural Face-Saving Concerns

The concept of “face” (面子) emerged as the most prominent theme, with 89% of interview participants mentioning concerns about losing face when making mistakes. Representative quotes include:

“I always worry about saying something wrong in front of my classmates. In Chinese culture, making mistakes in public can be very embarrassing. It’s better to stay quiet than to lose face.” (Female, 20, Beijing)

“When the teacher asks questions, I know the answer but I’m afraid my pronunciation isn’t perfect. Other students might laugh at me or think I’m not good at English.” (Male, 19, Shanghai).

Theme 2: Perfectionism and Error Avoidance

Perfectionist tendencies were reported by 82% of participants, reflecting cultural emphasis on accuracy:

“Since childhood, our teachers and parents always told us to avoid making mistakes. In English class, this pressure is even stronger because everyone can hear your errors.” (Female, 21, Guangzhou)

“I spend hours preparing for speaking activities, but I still don’t feel ready. There’s always a fear that I’ll make grammatical mistakes or use the wrong words.” (Male, 20, Beijing)

Theme 3: Teacher-Student Power Distance

Traditional hierarchical relationships between teachers and students contributed to anxiety for 76% of participants:

“In Chinese education, students should respect teachers and not question them. In English class, I want to ask questions but I’m worried the teacher will think I wasn’t paying attention.” (Female, 19, Shanghai)

Theme 4: Comparative Evaluation Concerns

Competition and comparison with peers was mentioned by 71% of participants (Table 10):

“Our education system is very competitive. Even in English class, I constantly compare myself to other students. When someone speaks better than me, I feel anxious and inadequate.” (Male, 21, Guangzhou)

- Manifestations of Language Anxiety



Table 10: Physical and Psychological Manifestations of Language Anxiety.

Category	Manifestation	Frequency (%)
Physical Symptoms	Increased heart rate	78.3
	Sweating/trembling	65.7
	Dry mouth	61.2
	Stomach discomfort	54.8
	Muscle tension	49.6
Cognitive Symptoms	Mind going blank	83.9
	Negative self-talk	76.1
	Difficulty concentrating	71.4
	Memory lapses	58.6
Behavioral Symptoms	Avoidance of participation	81.2
	Speaking very quietly	68.9
	Fidgeting/restlessness	62.4
	Seeking reassurance	57.3

Source: Prepared by authors

- Coping Strategies

Theme 1: Extensive Preparation

The most commonly reported coping strategy (mentioned by 94% of participants) was thorough preparation:

“I always prepare every possible question and practice my answers many times before speaking activities. It helps reduce my anxiety, but it takes a lot of time.” (Female, 20, Shanghai)

Theme 2: Peer Support and Study Groups

Collaborative learning was valued by 73% of participants:

“Studying with classmates in small groups feels safer than speaking in front of the whole class. We can practice together without judgment.” (Male, 19, Beijing)

Theme 3: Technology-Assisted Practice

Digital tools were used by 68% of participants to practice in low-pressure environments:

“I use language learning apps and record myself speaking. It’s less stressful than speaking in class, and I can practice as many times as I want.” (Female, 21, Guangzhou)

Theme 4: Cognitive Reframing

Some participants (45%) developed strategies (Table 11) to reframe anxiety-provoking situations:

“I try to remind myself that making mistakes is part of learning. My teacher also says that errors help us improve, so I’m slowly changing my mindset.” (Male, 20, Shanghai)

- Effectiveness of Interventions

Table 11: Participant-Reported Effectiveness of Various Interventions.

Intervention Type	Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not Effective	Mean Rating
Communicative Language Teaching	67.5%	28.9%	3.6%	4.32
Small Group Activities	72.1%	24.3%	3.6%	4.37
Error-Tolerant Environment	69.3%	26.4%	4.3%	4.28
Technology Integration	58.9%	32.1%	9.0%	4.08
Peer Feedback	54.6%	35.7%	9.7%	3.98
Cultural Sensitivity Training	61.8%	29.6%	8.6%	4.15

Intervention Type	Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not Effective	Mean Rating
Gradual Exposure	65.4%	28.2%	6.4%	4.21

Source: Prepared by authors

- Relationship Between Anxiety and Learning Strategies

Higher anxiety levels were associated with increased use of rehearsal and planning strategies but decreased use of social strategies and authentic interaction opportunities (Table 12).

Table 12: Correlation Between Anxiety Levels and Learning Strategy Use.

Learning Strategy	FLCAS	Speaking	Writing	Listening
Cognitive Strategies				
Rehearsal	0.245**	0.298**	0.187**	0.156*
Elaboration	-0.134*	-0.089	-0.201**	-0.098
Organization	-0.089	-0.067	-0.156*	-0.112
Metacognitive Strategies				
Planning	0.198**	0.234**	0.276**	0.189**
Monitoring	-0.156*	-0.134*	-0.178**	-0.145*
Evaluating	-0.112	-0.098	-0.167**	-0.123
Social Strategies				
Peer collaboration	-0.234**	-0.298**	-0.156*	-0.189**
Teacher consultation	-0.145*	-0.167**	-0.123	-0.134*
Native speaker interaction	-0.298**	-0.356**	-0.234**	-0.267**

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Source: Prepared by authors

- Longitudinal Changes in Anxiety Levels

Small but significant decreases in anxiety levels were observed across the semester, suggesting gradual adaptation to the English learning environment (Table 13 and 14).

Table 13: Changes in Anxiety Levels Over the Semester (N = 245).

Time Point	FLCAS		Speaking		Writing		Listening	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Week 2	3.48	0.71	3.74	0.78	3.35	0.66	3.52	0.74
Week 8	3.42	0.68	3.68	0.74	3.28	0.63	3.45	0.71
Week 14	3.35	0.65	3.61	0.71	3.21	0.60	3.38	0.68

Source: Prepared by authors

Table 14: Repeated Measures ANOVA Results for Anxiety Changes Over Time.

Anxiety Type	F	df	p-value	η^2	Significance
FLCAS	4.87	2, 244	0.008	0.020	**
Speaking Anxiety	5.23	2, 244	0.006	0.021	**
Writing Anxiety	6.14	2, 244	0.002	0.025	**
Listening Anxiety	4.21	2, 244	0.015	0.017	*

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Source: Prepared by authors

Unique Characteristics of Chinese EFL Learners' Anxiety

The findings confirm that Chinese EFL learners experience language anxiety in ways that reflect their cultural and educational contexts. Unlike learners from more individualistic cultures, Chinese learners showed particular sensitivity to social evaluation and face-saving concerns, consistent with collectivistic cultural values. The persistence of high anxiety levels across proficiency levels suggests that traditional approaches to language education may not adequately address the underlying psychological factors contributing to anxiety.

The factor analysis revealed a unique fourth factor - Cultural Performance Anxiety - that has not been identified in previous research with other populations. This factor encompasses items related to face-saving, group harmony maintenance, and cultural expectation fulfillment, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive approaches to understanding and addressing language anxiety.

Cultural Influences on Language Anxiety

The research highlights the crucial role of cultural factors in shaping language anxiety experiences. The concept of “face” (面子) emerged as a central theme, influencing learners’ willingness to take risks in language use. This cultural factor interacts with educational practices to create unique anxiety patterns not observed in other cultural contexts.

The strong emphasis on perfectionism and error avoidance reflects deep-rooted cultural values that prioritize accuracy and competence. These values, while potentially beneficial for academic achievement, can create psychological barriers to communicative language use when taken to extremes.

Educational System Implications

The findings suggest that the Chinese educational system’s emphasis on accuracy and test performance may inadvertently contribute to language anxiety. The focus on avoiding errors rather than promoting communication creates psychological barriers that persist even as learners’ proficiency increases.

The teacher-student power distance characteristic of Chinese educational culture contributes to anxiety by limiting opportunities for authentic interaction and question-asking. This hierarchical relationship, while culturally appropriate, may need to be carefully balanced with more egalitarian communication practices in language learning contexts.

Gender Differences

The consistent pattern of higher anxiety levels among female participants across all domains aligns with broader research on gender differences in anxiety. However, the

effect sizes (Cohen’s $d = .33-.38$) suggest that while statistically significant, these differences are practically moderate and should not overshadow individual variation within gender groups.

Technological and Pedagogical Solutions

The research supports the use of technology and innovative pedagogical approaches to address language anxiety. Virtual reality environments, online practice platforms, and collaborative learning approaches showed promise for creating low-anxiety learning environments while maintaining educational effectiveness.

The high effectiveness ratings for communicative language teaching and small group activities suggest that learner-centered approaches can successfully reduce anxiety while promoting language development. The key appears to be creating environments that balance cultural sensitivity with opportunities for authentic communication practice.

- Implications and recommendations

For Language Educators

Creating psychologically safe learning environments requires establishing classroom norms that prioritize communication over perfection and explicitly addressing the role of mistakes in learning. This foundational approach involves fostering an atmosphere where errors are viewed as valuable learning opportunities rather than failures, allowing students to take risks without fear of judgment or embarrassment.

Implementing culturally responsive teaching practices is essential for accommodating diverse student backgrounds and values. Educators must recognize and respect cultural considerations such as face-saving while gradually encouraging students to take risks in their language use. This delicate balance can be achieved by initially using anonymous participation methods and slowly building toward more public interaction as students develop confidence and trust in the learning environment.

The gradual exposure approach proves particularly effective in building student confidence through carefully scaffolded experiences. Rather than immediately demanding high-stakes performance, instructors should introduce speaking and communicative activities progressively, beginning with low-pressure activities in pairs or small groups before advancing to whole-class participation. This methodical progression allows students to experience success at each level, building the confidence necessary for more challenging interactions.

Providing constructive feedback plays a crucial role in maintaining this supportive environment. Effective feedback focuses on highlighting positive aspects of student

performance while offering specific, actionable guidance for improvement. By emphasizing effort and progress rather than demanding perfection, educators can motivate continued learning while reducing anxiety and fear of failure.

Technology integration offers additional opportunities to create low-anxiety practice environments. Digital tools and virtual platforms provide safe spaces where students can experiment with language and communication skills without the immediate pressure of face-to-face interaction. These online environments serve as valuable stepping stones, allowing students to build confidence before transitioning to more traditional classroom participation.

For Educational Institutions

Addressing language anxiety in Chinese learners requires a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach that encompasses curriculum reform, teacher preparation, assessment innovation, and support services. Curriculum reform should focus on balancing accuracy-focused instruction with communicative language teaching approaches, integrating authentic communication tasks that emphasize meaning over form to reduce the pressure of perfect performance. Simultaneously, teacher training programs must provide professional development opportunities that help educators understand and address language anxiety in Chinese learners, including cultural competency training and practical anxiety-reduction strategies that can be implemented in the classroom. Assessment practices also need fundamental revision to develop methods that reduce student anxiety while maintaining academic rigor, incorporating alternative approaches such as portfolio-based assessment, peer evaluation, and self-assessment alongside traditional testing methods. Finally, institutions should establish comprehensive support services for students experiencing severe language anxiety, including counseling resources, peer mentoring programs, and psychological support systems that address both the emotional and academic aspects of language learning challenges.

For Language Learners

Chinese learners can take proactive steps to overcome language anxiety by developing comprehensive anxiety management strategies that include learning and practicing relaxation techniques, positive self-talk, and visualization before and during English language tasks. A crucial mindset shift involves embracing mistakes as learning opportunities rather than viewing them as failures, understanding that errors are a natural and essential part of the language development process. This foundation of anxiety management and positive reframing enables learners to actively seek authentic communication opportunities in natural, low-stakes environments such as language

exchange programs, conversation clubs, or online communities where they can practice without the pressure of formal evaluation. Throughout this journey, building self-efficacy becomes paramount through setting realistic goals, celebrating incremental progress, and maintaining a learning journal to track improvement over time, creating a positive feedback loop that reinforces confidence in English language abilities and motivates continued growth.

For Researchers

Future research directions should prioritize the development of culturally-specific instruments that capture the unique characteristics of Chinese EFL learners' experiences, including the Cultural Performance Anxiety factor identified in current studies, as existing measurement tools may not adequately reflect the cultural nuances and specific anxiety manifestations present in Chinese educational contexts. Building upon more accurate measurement capabilities, researchers should conduct comprehensive longitudinal studies to investigate the long-term effectiveness of anxiety-reduction interventions specifically within Chinese educational environments, examining both immediate and sustained impacts on learner outcomes over extended periods. Additionally, there is significant potential for exploring innovative technological approaches to anxiety reduction, including the integration of virtual reality environments that provide safe practice spaces, AI-powered conversation partners that offer personalized and non-judgmental interaction opportunities, and adaptive learning systems that can automatically adjust to individual anxiety levels and learning preferences, creating more responsive and supportive language learning experiences tailored to the needs of Chinese EFL learners.

- Limitations and future research

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. The geographical scope of the research, conducted in three major Chinese cities, may not adequately represent rural or less developed areas where educational resources and cultural contexts may differ significantly from urban environments. Additionally, the focus on undergraduate students limits the generalizability of results to other age groups, educational levels, or socioeconomic backgrounds, as findings may not apply to high school students, graduate students, or working professionals who may experience different types and levels of language anxiety.

The temporal scope also presents limitations, as while the study spanned one semester, longer-term longitudinal follow-up would provide more comprehensive insights into

anxiety patterns over time and the stability of intervention effects beyond the immediate study period. Furthermore, cultural generalization poses a concern since the findings may not apply to all Chinese cultural subgroups or regional variations, given that China encompasses diverse ethnic and linguistic communities with varying cultural practices and educational traditions. Finally, the reliance on self-report measures introduces potential bias, particularly social desirability bias, which may be especially pronounced given cultural tendencies among Chinese students to present themselves favorably and avoid revealing perceived weaknesses or struggles.

Future Research Directions

Future research should pursue multiple complementary directions to advance understanding and treatment of language anxiety in Chinese EFL learners. Longitudinal studies investigating changes in language anxiety over extended periods and across different educational stages, from secondary school through university and into professional contexts, would provide crucial insights into the developmental trajectory of anxiety patterns.

Building upon this foundation, controlled intervention studies with randomized controlled trial designs and long-term follow-up should examine specific anxiety-reduction strategies tailored for Chinese EFL learners to establish evidence-based treatment approaches. Cross-cultural comparative research examining anxiety patterns between Chinese learners and other Asian EFL populations would help identify culturally universal versus culture-specific factors, while neurological investigations using neuroimaging techniques could explore the biological bases of cultural differences in anxiety, providing deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying these phenomena.

Technological innovation represents another promising avenue, with researchers developing and testing virtual reality environments, artificial intelligence-powered learning systems, and adaptive technologies designed specifically for anxiety reduction in language learning contexts. Complementing these quantitative approaches, qualitative depth studies using ethnographic methods would illuminate the lived experiences of Chinese EFL learners and reveal the cultural mechanisms underlying anxiety development and persistence. Finally, investigating teachers' perceptions, experiences, and strategies for addressing language anxiety in Chinese learners would provide essential insights from the educator perspective, informing both teacher training programs and classroom intervention strategies that could be implemented at scale.

CONCLUSIONS

Language anxiety represents a significant challenge for Chinese EFL learners, influenced by a complex interplay

of cultural, educational, and linguistic factors. This research has provided evidence for the unique characteristics of anxiety in this population and identified culturally sensitive approaches to addressing these challenges.

The findings suggest that effective interventions must consider the cultural context of Chinese learners while employing evidence-based strategies for anxiety reduction. The identification of Cultural Performance Anxiety as a distinct factor specific to Chinese learners highlights the importance of developing culturally appropriate theoretical frameworks and measurement instruments.

Key findings include the persistent nature of anxiety across proficiency levels, the central role of face-saving concerns, the impact of educational system characteristics, and the effectiveness of communicative and technology-enhanced approaches to anxiety reduction. By creating psychologically safe learning environments, implementing culturally responsive teaching practices, and utilizing innovative technological tools, educators can help Chinese EFL learners overcome anxiety barriers and achieve their language learning goals.

The implications of this research extend beyond the Chinese context, offering insights for educators working with learners from collectivistic cultures and highlighting the importance of cultural sensitivity in language anxiety research and practice. As English continues to serve as a global lingua franca, understanding and addressing language anxiety in diverse cultural contexts becomes increasingly crucial for effective language education worldwide.

Future research should continue to explore the cultural dimensions of language anxiety, develop targeted interventions, and investigate the long-term effectiveness of anxiety-reduction strategies. The ultimate goal is to create learning environments that honor cultural values while promoting confident, effective communication in English.

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