

Perception of Chinese Junior High School Students on Factors and Activities Causing Anxiety in English Language Learning

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were 1) to investigate the factors causing the Chinese English language learner anxiety, and 2) to explore the activities that may cause anxiety in learning English. A mixed-methods approach was used in this study. 124 high school students from Yunnan Province, China, were selected with stratified population sampling techniques calculated by Yamane's formula as the questionnaire respondents from a study population of 180. The quantitative data results showed high scores for all factors and activities, with an overall mean of 3.80 (S.D.=1.67). The 'English Language' factor received the highest score, while 'Environment' and 'Myself' factors scored the lowest. The activities that triggered anxiety most were especially the English grammar tasks ($\bar{x}=4.06/S.D.=1.05$). In addition, tension from the use of the English language ($\bar{x}=3.63/S.D.=1.13$) was found to induce anxiety. The findings from the interviewed data of nine volunteers revealed the challenges of the English language they faced, brought by low motivation, lack of achievement,

fear of failure, low confidence, the sense of inadequacy due to poor language skills as the key causes of anxiety. Recommendation for the teachers to best support their students are to give significance to the affective factors while teaching.

Keywords: anxiety, Chinese junior high school students, English learning, perception

Introduction

The importance of English as a global language and its role in communication and information dissemination in the 21st century, the period when the whole world is interconnected and globalized, cannot be understated (Crystal, 2003; Covacovich & Champaud, 2021). With the advent of globalization and advancements in technology, English has become the most widely studied foreign language worldwide (Yan, 2020). In 2022, it was reported by Statista that approximately 1.5 billion people spoke English as a native or second language, surpassing Mandarin's 1.1 billion speakers (Statista, 2022).

China recognizes the significance of English in its international interactions and has emphasized its importance in the country's opening-up policies (Xiao, 2017). As economic globalization and cultural exchanges continue to deepen, English plays a crucial role in political, economic, and cultural interactions (Yan, 2020). Consequently, there has been increased investment in English language learning and teaching, and the efficient acquisition of English skills has become a focus of attention for educators and learners alike (Yan, 2020).

Within the field of second language learning, researchers have increasingly focused on learners as the subject of study, examining their cognitive and psychological processes. Studies have consistently shown that learners' affective

states, such as anxiety, play a significant role in second language learning success (Wang, 2022). Building upon this, Krashen's comprehensive framework for second language acquisition, proposed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, introduced the affective filter hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, the learner's affective factors act as filters that can facilitate or hinder language acquisition. Language anxiety is a complex emotion that affects language learning and can impact the success of acquiring a second language.

Anxiety in language learning can hinder learners' mindset and potential, leading to difficulties. Understanding the impact of anxiety on English learning among junior high school students is crucial due to the significance of English in China's international engagements and the increasing attention to students' mental health (Fu, 2021). It is commonly accepted that junior high school students have gone through a critical period of cognitive and emotional development, making their classroom experiences important.

Learning anxiety is influenced by several psychological aspects, including cognitive preferences, self-efficacy, self-evaluation, and social comparison. Students can manage their learning anxiety by appropriately addressing these issues. One among them, anxiety surrounding the senior high school admission tests can be blamed for the loss in students' enthusiasm in learning English during junior high school (Wang, 2021). Learning anxiety is on the rise in China for students at this level because of the current vocational education system reform causing worry among students that many students may not be admitted to ordinary high schools (State Council, 2019). Thus, the study aimed to investigate the factors and identify the activities that may contribute to English learning anxiety among Chinese junior high school students. With its findings, various parties involved in the field of

English language teaching and learning can direct their attention to how learning anxiety among students can be reduced and more appropriate learning activities can be better designed to support students in their English language learning.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the factors causing the Chinese English learner anxiety
2. To identify the activities that may cause anxiety in learning English

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to collect both quantitative and qualitative data for the research objectives. The research instruments were the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview. A total of 180 students from the same grade in the same school were the population of the study. The sample size of each class was calculated by Yamane's formula and a total of 124 students were selected through stratified population sampling technique. These 124 students were questionnaire respondents. Subsequently, nine volunteers were selected from the sample of 124 for semi-structured interviews. Finally, the findings from both the questionnaires and the interviews were analyzed for the discussion.

Research Instruments

The English Learning Anxiety Scale called the English Learning Anxiety Factor Scale was adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) proposed by Horwitz in 1986 to collect quantitative data. A pilot test was

also conducted for its reliability with a Cronbach Alpha score of 0.961.

A semi-structured interview with six open-ended prompt questions were used to get more information to supplement the collected quantitative data to collect qualitative data.

Data Collection

The data was collected in April 2023. The number of questionnaire respondents in each class was calculated, and a group was created using WeChat to send the URL of the online questionnaire to the participants in the group.

The second step, nine volunteering participants were interviewed. During the interviews, the researcher carefully recorded the useful information provided by the interviewees. At the same time, with the consent of the participants, the researcher audio-recorded the conversations to check and add the missing information in the interviews to ensure the completeness of the interviews.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics such as percentage, mean and standard deviation were calculated to identify the factors and activities the respondents said they created anxiety in learning English and the meanings of the numbers were interpreted.

The qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically with the method of identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes in a data set. It is an inductive method of analysis that transforms large amounts of data that are not organized into themes into central

concepts that can be used to explain how the factors fit together (Braun & Clarke, 2006). With this concept of data analysis, Litchman's three C's (codes-categories-concepts) process was adopted as the data analysis technique for this study.

Results

The results of the study are presented into sections: Quantitative Data Analysis and Quantitative Data Analysis.

1. Qualitative Data Analysis

A descriptive statistical analysis was conducted on a 32-item questionnaire completed by 124 respondents. The factor results are shown below:

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Research Participate

Gender	Number	Percentage (%)
Male	57	45.97%
Female	67	54.03%
Fear of failure	124	100%

Based on Table 1, it can be concluded that there were slightly more male than female students as the questionnaire respondents. Table 2 below reveals what anxiety factors affected the students in the study in their language learning most or least of all.

Table 2*Quantitative Results Showing Factors Causing Anxiety*

Factors	Mean	S.D.
The English language	3.89	1.19
Teachers	3.86	1.12
Fear of failure	3.85	1.10
Classmates	3.79	1.14
Environment	3.78	1.32
Myself	3.78	1.12

It can be seen from the data in the table that although the six factors got slightly different mean scores, "The English language" ranked the highest with a mean score of 3.89, showing its importance in triggering anxiety. Secondly, "Teachers", with an average score of 3.86, emphasizes the need for teaching to adapt their teaching methods to reduce students' anxiety.

Another major factor is "fear of failure", which stems from the importance of the Chinese test and its direct impact on students' future learning in high school. Fear of failure ranked third with a score of 3.79. Similarly, students also identified "classmates" as a contributing factor to anxiety, with a slightly higher than average score of 3.79, indicating that classmates also play an important role in contributing to academic anxiety.

Finally, "Myself" and "Environment," both with a mean score of 3.78, show that students regarded self-doubt and environmental factors as important factors contributing to their anxiety in learning English. The high self-doubt scores reflect

students' uncertainty about their ability and performance in English language learning and their concern about whether they will be successful. Besides, students believed that they could feel less anxious or worried in their English language learning if they were appropriately supported with the learning environment such as resources and class atmosphere. The following table presents the next part of the questionnaire that reveals what activities may cause anxiety for students.

Table 3

Activities of the Questionnaire

No	Statement	Mean	S.D.
1	English grammar is different from my mother tongue, Chinese.	4.06	1.05
2	I don't like teachers who punish students	3.96	1.23
3	I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.	3.92	1.16
4	It frightens me when the teacher is angry with the class	3.92	1.15
5	I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am	3.69	1.06

Table 3 (Continue)

No	Statement	Mean	S.D.
6	I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.	3.69	1.22
7	I feel more tense in my language class than in my other classes.	3.63	1.13

There were 32 questionnaire items in this study, and only the three activities that caused the highest and the three lowest levels of English Language learning anxiety are listed here. Item 31 had the highest mean score, indicating that many students do not feel comfortable when studying a different language. Item 23 and Item 27 indicated that the students did not like it when their teachers were angry and punished students. It damaged the class atmosphere. For them, the teacher's way of being was the most significant factor to help them learn in a caring atmosphere. Item 20 points out that their learning anxiety came also from their fear of failure. Their anxiety level would rise if they, could not perform well in class. In addition, when students competed with their peers, their learning anxiety would rise. If they could not do something in class, that means they failed, an obvious cause of anxiety.

2. Qualitative Data Analysis

Table 4 shows that the data was collected through semi-structured interviews. with six prompt questions as listed below

1. How do you feel when you study English?

2. What do you think makes you want to learn English?
3. Are there any factors/causes that make you want to give up learning/trying?
4. Can you rate your English ability?
5. Which English skills (Listening, speaking, Reading, and Writing) do you feel comfortable with?
6. What are generally causes of your anxiety in English language learning?

Nine volunteers were randomly selected from the 124 students to participate in the interviews individually. One-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted online with the nine students. Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes and the interviews were audio recorded throughout, the results of which are shown below in the three C's (Codes - Categories - Concepts) findings. Table 4 and Figure 5 below show how the quantitative data were analyzed.

Table 4

The Number of Codes, Categories and Concepts

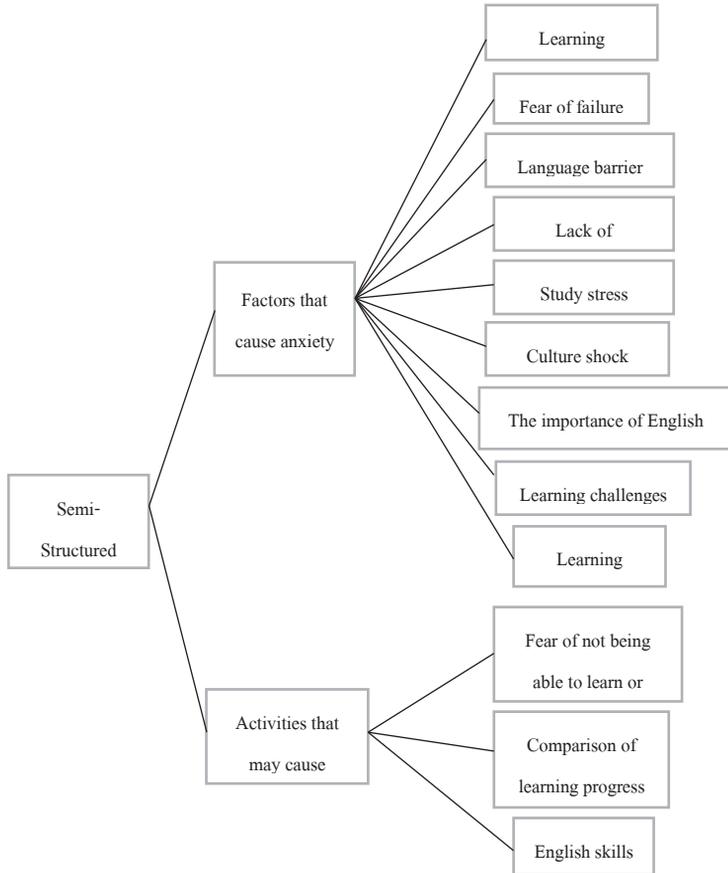
Student A-I	Number of Codes	Number of Categories	Number of Concepts
Student A	9	4	2
Student B	7	6	2
Student C	13	7	2
Student D	9	6	2
Student E	8	3	2

Table 4 (Continue)

Student A-I	Number of Codes	Number of Categories	Number of Concepts
Student F	12	5	2
Student G	13	8	2
Student H	11	6	2
Student I	12	5	2
Total	94	50	18

Figure 5

Semi-structured interview for analysis of factor and activities that cause anxiety



Discussion

Language learners often feel anxious and nervous when learning a new language because they lack confidence in their performance. Having to learn a new language, which is not the mother tongue, requires them to put in greater efforts to

overcome the difficulties of the phonetic, linguistic, and semantic system that the new language poses. Besides, losing face is something to avoid as making mistakes symbolizes inability or failure which many students cannot accept (Chayanuvat, 2009; Hashemi, 2011). Based on the findings from the questionnaire, of the six causes of anxiety in English language learning, 'the English language' topped the list, to be followed by 'Teachers', 'Fear of failure', 'Classmates' and 'Environment'. Along the same line but not the same, the interviewed data indicate several factors that cause anxiety, namely "learning motivation, fear of failure, language barrier, lack of achievement, study stress, culture shock, the importance of English, learning challenges and learning methods." For activities that may cause stress, the interviewed data point to "fear of not being able to learn or apply, comparison of learning progress and English skills." The emerging issues are presented below.

1. The factors that cause English learning anxiety

The table below shows a synthesis of the factors that cause anxiety in English language learning among students.

Table 5

Corresponding Results of Quantitative and Qualitative Studies of Factors Causing Anxiety

Quantitative	Qualitative	Summarize
The English language	Language barriers Importance of English The English language	Language factors
Myself	Learning motivation Lack of achievement	Affective factors
Environment	Learning pressure Cultural shock	External influences

These results imply that students experienced a variety of anxiety-related difficulties while learning the English language, including significant elements such as the English language itself, the teachers, peer comparison and the learning environment. The difficulties one faces when learning a foreign language which is totally different from one's mother tongue are indeed a major cause of anxiety. Students do not learn a new language easily. They often feel afraid to talk in class and of making mistakes. The English language classes are generally large and crowded (Alsalihi, 2020). That is why fear of failure occurs and most probably results from lack of achievement. According to Dornyei (1998), the teachers and factors relating to the teachers were the most important factors of student demotivation. Similarly, Brown (2000) points out that teaching and learning are closely related. Being aware of how the learner learns will help teachers determine

their philosophy of education, their teaching style, approach, methods, and classroom techniques. About the teacher factor, Chayanuvat (2009) explains “the teacher in an English classroom is expected not only to teach but also to facilitate learning and thus, desirable general warm human qualities are necessary.” Language difficulties and poor self-confidence can both make learning English as a second language for students difficult, which can cause anxiety (Chen, 2006; Cheng, 2021; Horwitz, 1986). An external factor such as the quality of the learning environment is also directly associated to students' learning anxiety, according to recent research (Wang, 2017). Peer interactions have a substantial impact on students' learning experiences and affective states (Aida, 1994; Fu, 2021; Li, 2019). Although students may wish to cooperate with their peers, they also develop a sense of competition by comparing their learning progress.

Additionally, it has been discovered that anxiety levels are tightly tied to motivation and performance, and that unmotivated learning can cause elevated anxiety (Dörnyei, 1998; Zeidner, 2019). Finally, students can lessen their worry by knowing and adjusting to the culture of the target language (Liu & Yang, 2022; Zhang, Y. & Zhang, L., 2018; Zhao, 2007; Zhao & Wang, 2021). Culture shock is frequently a prevalent source of anxiety in intercultural learning situations. Brown (1994) claims that a second language is required to develop a second identity—a new mode of thinking, feeling, and acting - which can easily create a sense of fragility, defensiveness, and inhibitions. Together, these elements affect how students learn and how they feel, creating a complex and significant anxiety network.

2. The activities that cause English learning anxiety

Based on the study findings, there may be some activities that have been

overlooked because they may be considered unimportant to learning but they are. The following table shows the findings that confirm what the English language teacher should be aware of and pay special attention to deal with.

Table 6

Corresponding Results of Quantitative and Qualitative Studies of Activities Causing Anxiety

Quantitative	Qualitative
31) English grammar is different from my mother tongue Chinese.	Fear of not able to learn or apply.
12) I feel more tense in my language class than in my other classes.	English skills

According to the questionnaire, these two activities cause significant amounts of anxiety: Item 31. The grammar in English is different from the grammar in my native Chinese; this can make ELLs more anxious than native Chinese speakers since they may find it difficult to adapt to the grammatical variances (Jin, 2005). Punitive teaching techniques adopted by the teacher can have a detrimental impact on the learning environment and cause pupils to feel scared and stressed (Deci & Ryan, 2002). The activity with the lowest anxiety level was activity number 12. In contrast to my previous classes, English class made me feel more anxious and tighter. This might be the case because students in the study found the English language to be more difficult and unfriendly than other disciplines, leading to reduced levels of engagement and self-confidence (Cheng, 2021; Dörnyei, 1998). Teachers can adopt

successful teaching techniques and supports by having a thorough understanding of the effects of grammatical variations and self-perceptions on students' anxiety. Various designs of the grammar activities can be launched (Alsalihi, 2020). Specific grammar exercises, encouraging learning environments, and group projects can all help students feel less anxious and develop their English language abilities. For many language learners, formal language classroom setting was a major source of stress and anxiety because of its demand to be more correct and clearer in using the target language (Hashemi, 2011) To give language learners a feeling of success and satisfaction when using English, language teachers should avoid activities that enhance early frustration. They can instead start with simple step-by-step lessons so that learners can feel satisfied and relaxed when participate in language classes for the first time. To reduce the students' fear and stress that their mistakes in front of the teachers will affect their end-of-course grades, more emphasis should be given to formative assessment and feedback rather than summative assessment and feedback which means life and death to their future (Hashemi, 2011).

Recommendations

Although this area of investigation is not new, there are still specific situations to address. For example, future research can think about extending the sample size, including different groups of research participants or schools in the sample. In addition, specific cases of how students cope with their anxiety or how they overcome it are still worth studying.

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