



FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY AMONG CHINESE EFL LEARNERS: VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT VS TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM SETTING

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Article history:	Abstract:
<p>Received: 1st March 2022 Accepted: 4th April 2022 Published: 8th May 2022</p>	<p>This study explores and compares the foreign language anxiety (FLA) levels among Chinese tertiary EFL learners in traditional classroom setting and virtual environment. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was utilized as the instrument in a questionnaire survey conducted among 78 non-English-major sophomores from a university in southern China. All participants had sufficient experience of English classes both in the virtual environment and in the traditional classroom setting. The results displayed a considerable amount of FLA in both settings of the virtual and traditional classrooms with a significant lower level of certain types of FLA disclosed in the former. Specifically, students reported a decrease in the communication anxiety and the fear of negative evaluation in the virtual environment since they felt less worried while speaking in English in such an environment. This might be attributed to such characteristics of online language learning as being more relaxing and flexible, which provides inspiration to the instructional design of both classroom and virtual learning activities. Further study was proposed to focus on the specific types of FLA among Chinese college students with various language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing in EFL learning.</p>

Keywords: Foreign language anxiety; EFL learners; virtual environment; traditional classroom; Chinese college students

1. INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is a feeling of worry, nervousness or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome. Just as anxiety prevents some people from performing successfully in science or mathematics, many people find foreign language learning full of challenges, difficulties or even obstacles which can also lead to learners' anxiety and depression. Foreign language anxiety (FLA), therefore, has become a situational phenomenon which needs researchers to observe foreign language learners' physiological condition, mental state, behavioral mode, cognitive ability and so on.

In China, foreign language education has expanded rapidly during the last few decades with such foreign language courses as English, Japanese, and South Korean offered from primary to tertiary levels at schools, institutions and universities. Numerous language learners attend foreign language classes, especially English classes, in traditional classroom setting. While some students are observed and found to be good at acquiring foreign languages, others find them hard to learn for various reasons, for instance: lacking language environment, holding no interest in foreign languages, not understanding what teachers say in foreign languages, and failing to interact with classmates. Furthermore, foreign language learning anxiety is mainly formed during the assessment and evaluation of spoken languages and written work in academic contexts, therefore students feel anxious in such different fields as listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating.

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in and move toward learning in virtual environment across all disciplines, and foreign language learning is not exceptional. The most objective reason is that the COVID-19 pandemic makes people depend on the virtual environment to further their studies from time to time. Because all educational establishments often switch to online learning in the virtual environment, the changed learning situation

and newly-employed teaching modes have definitely influenced physiological, behavioral, psychological, cognitive condition of Chinese students, thus making the kinds and levels of FLA elusive, uncertain and variable.

Objectives of the Study

This paper attempts to make a comparative study about the difference in Chinese college students' FLA rates in the traditional classroom setting and the virtual environment. Specifically, the study longs for seeking answers to the following questions:

- 1) Is there a significant difference between the Chinese college students' FLA level of the virtual environment and that of the traditional classroom setting?
- 2) What specific types of FLA decrease or increase significantly in the virtual environment provided there is a difference in the FLA levels in both settings?
- 3) Furthermore, what factors contribute to the significant change in FLA levels in the virtual environment?
- 4) Lastly, what are the possible ways or strategies of reducing FLA levels in the virtual environment as well as the traditional classroom setting?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

FLA is an affective factor that influences foreign language learning. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) first proposed the term and defined it 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".

To measure the level of anxiety among learners, Horwitz et al. (1986) developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) with a model of three factors: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Since then, many researchers have adopted and modified the FLCAS in various language learning contexts and yielded fruitful results. Aida (1994) conducted an investigation on FLA among American students of English, and concluded that four factors accounted for the variance in FLCAS items, namely speech anxiety, fear of failing, comfortableness in speaking with Japanese people, and negative attitudes towards the Japanese class. Saito, Garza and Horwitz (1999) developed the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) to measure the anxiety level related to foreign language reading among three language groups (French, Russian, and Japanese). Elkhafaifi (2005) further adapted the FLRAS and devised the Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) to examine how listening anxiety would affect students' performance in an Arabic course. Cheng, Horwitz and Schallert (1999) investigated the relationships between the FLRAS and a modified version of Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test known as the Second Language Writing Apprehension Test (SLWAT), with Taiwanese English majors as the object of study. Altogether, these constructs have provided useful experimental tools for the study on foreign language anxiety.

Using different FLA scales, substantial empirical studies have consistently demonstrated the negative correlations between anxiety and foreign language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Aida, 1994; Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Liu & Huang, 2011; Sadiq, 2017). In contrast to the conventional belief that FLA hinders the process of language learning, a number of studies were in favor of a more holistic view of anxiety in which both negative and positive impacts were noted (Pong, 2010; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Tran & Moni, 2015). More recent studies have reported positive effect of anxiety on foreign language learning. For instance, Alfarwan (2022) provided evidence that many Saudi EFL students would regard some level of anxiety as motivating and inspiring for their future writing tasks. Hayasaki and Ryan (2022) proposed that anxiety-provoking events could lead to positive learning outcomes based on their research on Japanese EFL learners.

From another perspective, while the vast majority of studies on FLA have focused on the traditional form of classroom learning where the teacher and students engage with each other face-to-face and in real time, a notable change is that, because of the growing popularity of online learning for the past decade, especially in the last three years during the COVID-19 pandemic, an increasing body of literature has examined FLA in the setting of distance learning (Grant et al., 2013; Martin & Valdivia, 2017; Jiang & Feng, 2020; Russell, 2020; Hasnae & Adiba, 2021). However, up to date very few studies have explored the difference in learners' FLA levels between the traditional classroom and the virtual environment (Bollinger, 2017; Alla et al., 2020). Therefore, this study aims to provide quantitative insight into the anxiety difference between these two learning contexts.

3. METHOD

A. Participants: The participants were 78 non-English-major sophomores (35 male and 43 female) from a university in southern China. All participants were native speakers of Chinese and took English as a foreign language. They all had studied English in a classroom environment for at least 8 years, mastering the grammar and vocabulary of the language needed for basic communication. Due to the development of distance education and the impact of COVID-19, all participants had sufficient experience of English classes both in the virtual environment and in the traditional classroom setting.

B. Instruments: The foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was used in the present study to investigate participants' anxiety levels during English classes, both remotely and in the classroom. FLCAS is a widely-used instrument with high validity and internal reliability. It achieved an alpha coefficient of .93 and a test-retest reliability of $r = .83$ ($p < .001$) (Horwitz et al., 1986). In the present study, all the items in FLCAS were translated into

Chinese and items of anxiety in online learning based on the scale were added. The questionnaire consists of two parts: Classroom and virtual environment, each part including 33 items. A 5-point Likert scale, in which point 5 meant "Strongly Agree" while point 1 meant "Strongly Disagree", was adopted.

C. Procedures: The questionnaire was distributed to the participants online. Finally 78 questionnaires were collected, of which 73 (31 from male participants and 42 from female participants) were valid. A paired sample T-test was conducted to compare the anxiety levels of participants in classroom and virtual environment. Results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of FLA Scores between Classroom and virtual environment ($\alpha = .05$)

Item	Classroom (Mean)	Virtual (Mean)	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.	3.47	3.11	2.91	0.00
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in language class.	2.95	3.16	1.84	0.07
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.	3.22	2.89	2.81	0.01
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language.	3.32	3.03	2.41	0.02
5. It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes.	2.96	3.04	0.75	0.46
6. During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	3.08	3.14	0.60	0.55
7. I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.	3.51	3.14	3.33	0.00
8. I am usually at ease during tests in my language class.	2.85	3.03	1.49	0.14
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.	3.89	3.22	6.08	0.00
10. I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.	3.21	3.07	1.12	0.27
11. I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes.	2.67	3.03	3.78	0.00
12. In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	3.08	2.90	1.33	0.19
13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.	3.27	3.18	0.85	0.40
14. I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.	2.60	2.84	2.24	0.03
15. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	3.04	2.97	0.62	0.54
16. Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.	3.00	2.95	0.47	0.64
17. I often feel like not going to my language class.	2.79	2.90	1.18	0.24
18. I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class.	2.48	2.89	3.68	0.00
19. I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	2.86	2.99	1.35	0.18
20. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class.	3.47	3.32	1.39	0.17
21. The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.	2.78	2.82	0.49	0.63
22. I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.	3.08	3.10	0.11	0.91
23. I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.	3.55	3.29	2.52	0.01
24. I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.	3.49	3.11	3.96	0.00

25. Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.	3.00	2.97	0.38	0.71
26. I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.	2.89	2.88	0.15	0.88
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.	3.26	3.08	1.98	0.05
28. When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed.	2.93	3.18	-	0.02
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.	3.12	3.07	0.61	0.54
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language.	3.29	3.18	1.47	0.15
31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.	3.16	3.14	0.27	0.79
32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.	2.55	2.77	-	0.01
33. I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	3.67	3.38	2.72	0.01

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative study was conducted to explore the anxiety levels of Chinese EFL learners both in traditional classroom and virtual environment. According to the study, although the virtual environment provided a more relaxing learning environment (see item 11, $t=-3.78$; item 28, $t=-2.4$), students showed the same intention to avoid taking foreign language lessons (see items 5 and 17). Also, they feel tense and nervous in language classes compared to other classes (see item 26) and hard to concentrate on the foreign language lessons (see item 6).

The analysis has revealed that students were equally anxious in both traditional classroom setting and virtual environment in all three types of performance anxieties: 1) communication apprehension, 2) test anxiety and 3) fear of negative evaluation. In terms of communication apprehension, students' anxiety levels showed no significant difference in understanding the teachers' words or correcting (see items 29 & 15). Students in both settings shared the same worries about keeping up with the lessons (see items 25 & 30). They also showed a high level of anxiety when they were required to speak in language classes (see items 20 & 27). As for test anxiety, students were so nervous (see items 8 & 10), and their anxiety might even cause memory loss (see item 12). And students' fear of negative evaluation could be seen in their worries about making mistakes and being corrected by the teacher (see items 2 & 19). They felt embarrassed to volunteer their answers and worried about being laughed at by other classmates (see items 13 & 31).

The result has shown a significant decrease in students' anxiety in virtual foreign language classes in terms of speaking. Students were more confident (see item 1, $t=2.91$; item 18, $t=-3.68$), less embarrassed (see item 24, $t=3.96$) and less nervous and confused (see item 27, $t=1.98$) when speaking in online foreign classes. They were less afraid of expressing themselves, whether it is being called on to answer questions (see item 3, $t=2.81$), speaking without preparation (see item 9, $t=6.08$), or answering spontaneous questions (see item 33, $t=2.72$). When speaking with native speakers, they felt more at ease in virtual settings (see item 14, $t=-2.24$; item 32, $t=-2.71$).

A certain decline in fear of negative evaluation has also been noticed. Students are less worried about being outweighed by other students in the online language classes (see item 7, $t=3.33$ and item 23, $t=2.52$). Decreased peer pressure could reduce their fear of negative evaluation, which could enhance their confidence in language learning

5. CONCLUSION

With the prevalent foreign language anxiety (FLA) that most learners experience in the traditional classroom setting as well as in the virtual environment since the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic especially, this paper evaluates and compares the anxiety levels of Chinese university students as non-English-major sophomores in both settings. From the questionnaire survey with the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), a significant decrease in certain types of FLA is disclosed in the virtual environment. Specifically speaking, it is revealed that a decrease in both the communication anxiety and the fear of negative evaluation in virtual classes thanks to the fact that the physical isolation among teachers and students alleviates the worry of being "laughed at" in students. Such significant changes in FLA and confidence levels in virtual classes might be attributed to the more relaxing and flexible learning environment, facilitating students' self-regulation and participation in the online learning activities. This attribution is noteworthy to Chinese EFL learners and their instructors as well, since autonomous learning is increasingly imperative in both settings of a traditional classroom and virtual environment, which demands the improvement in the instructional design with a consideration of all the stakeholders in the language learning process. To investigate the more specific types of FLA in both traditional classroom setting and virtual environment, further

study shall be conducted in various tasks focusing on such language skills as listening, speaking, reading, and writing in EFL learning.

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