

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety in Chinese EFL Learners: A Review of Its Influencing Factors

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Abstract. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), as a critical affective variable in second language acquisition, has long been a focal point of research. This paper aims to review the current state of research on FLCA among Chinese English Foreign Language learners. By synthesizing and analyzing multiple empirical studies in this field, this review systematically outlines the prevalence of FLCA, its core influencing factors, its dynamic relationship with Foreign Language Enjoyment, and its pedagogical implications. Existing research consistently indicates that Chinese EFL learners generally experience moderate levels of classroom anxiety, and FLCA shows a stable, moderate negative correlation with language achievement. Studies further reveal the multidimensional factors influencing FLCA: concerning learner-internal factors, while learners' self-efficacy, perceived language proficiency, and academic stage are all closely related to anxiety levels; concerning external factors, peer pressure, classroom activity types, and immediate teacher feedback can trigger micro-fluctuations in anxiety, whereas teacher behaviours (such as humor and predictability), although significantly enhancing Foreign Language Enjoyment, have limited direct effects on reducing FLCA. Furthermore, with the integration of Positive Psychology into applied linguistics, research has found that FLCA and FLE are two independent yet related dimensions, collectively constituting learners' complex emotional experiences, with both emotional states and their influencing factors exhibiting dynamic changes across learning stages and over time. Studies focusing on specific groups, such as ethnic minority students and postgraduate students, have revealed the unique impact of sociocultural factors and academic publication pressure on anxiety. The review suggests that future research should increasingly adopt longitudinal and dynamic methodologies to delve deeper into the interplay between anxiety and enjoyment, and to design more targeted emotional interventions and teaching strategies for Chinese EFL learners at different educational levels, thereby optimizing the foreign language learning environment.

Keywords: Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety, Chinese EFL learners, influencing factors

1. Introduction

Emotion has long been recognized as one of the most influential factors in second and foreign language acquisition. Among various affective variables, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) has garnered sustained scholarly attention since Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope first

conceptualized 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" [1]. In the Chinese context, where English is learned as a foreign language under the influence of examination-oriented education and high-stakes tests such as CET-4 and CET-6, understanding learners' classroom anxiety is particularly crucial for optimizing language teaching and learning outcomes.

Research on FLCA has evolved considerably over the past decades. Dewaele and MacIntyre pioneered the integration of positive psychology into language learning research, demonstrating that Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) and FLCA are two independent yet related dimensions of learners' emotional experiences rather than opposite ends of a single continuum [1]. Subsequent studies have identified a wide range of factors influencing FLCA among Chinese learners. Jiang and Dewaele found that Chinese EFL learners report higher levels of FLCA compared to international samples, and that learner-internal variables such as language proficiency and relative standing among peers play a more significant role in predicting anxiety than teacher-related variables [2]. More recently, longitudinal and dynamic studies have revealed that FLCA fluctuates over time and responds to specific classroom triggers such as task difficulty, teacher feedback, and peer interactions, highlighting the complex and dynamic nature of language learning emotions [3,4].

The present review synthesizes existing literature on FLCA among Chinese EFL learners through a systematic analysis of empirical studies published over recent decades. By examining the roles of learner-internal variables (such as gender, personality traits, language proficiency, and self-efficacy) and learner-external variables (including teacher behaviors, classroom environment, peer pressure, and testing systems), this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the antecedents and correlates of FLCA within the unique Chinese educational context.

This review contributes to the field of language learner psychology by offering a holistic picture of the current state of FLCA research on Chinese EFL learners, identifying both established findings and remaining gaps. The synthesized insights may inform EFL teachers, curriculum designers, and educational policymakers in developing more supportive and low-anxiety learning environments, ultimately facilitating more effective language acquisition among China's vast population of English learners.

2. Current research status

A substantial body of research has explored the factors contributing to Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) among Chinese EFL learners, with studies consistently demonstrating that FLCA negatively correlates with language achievement and overall learning outcomes [2]. Meta-analytic evidence has confirmed a moderate negative correlation between FLCA and academic performance ($r=-.39$), underscoring the debilitating role of anxiety in the foreign language classroom. Beyond this general pattern, however, researchers have increasingly recognized that FLCA is a multidimensional construct shaped by the complex interplay of learner-internal variables, learner-external factors, and the dynamic classroom context.

2.1. Learner-internal variables

Among learner-internal factors, personality traits have emerged as significant predictors of FLCA, whereas extraversion was associated with lower anxiety and higher enjoyment. Similarly, Wu reported that neuroticism consistently predicted FLCA across different academic levels, from undergraduates to doctoral students, suggesting that this personality trait exerts a stable influence on

learners' susceptibility to anxiety [5]. Chen and Zhang further demonstrated that trait emotional intelligence (EI) plays a crucial role, with students possessing higher well-being and emotionality being more optimistic, confident, and adept at perceiving and regulating emotions, thereby experiencing lower FLCA [6].

Demographic variables have also received considerable attention, though findings remain mixed. Regarding gender, Dewaele et al. found that female students reported significantly higher levels of both FLCA and FLE than their male counterparts, indicating deeper emotional engagement and greater emotional fluctuation [7]. However, Jiang and Dewaele found no significant gender differences in either emotion among Chinese university students, while Wu similarly reported non-significant gender effects across undergraduate, master's, and doctoral groups [2,8]. These inconsistencies suggest that gender effects may be moderated by contextual and cultural factors.

Age and academic stage significantly influence FLCA patterns. Liu and Hong, in their study of Chinese young learners from grades 4 to 9, observed that as grade levels increased, students' anxiety intensified while enjoyment declined—a phenomenon largely attributed to mounting pressure from high-stakes examinations such as the high school entrance exam [9]. Wu extended this finding to higher education, revealing that master's students reported the highest FLCA levels compared to undergraduates and doctoral candidates, likely due to the pressure of publishing English-medium papers in international journals [5]. This suggests that academic stage-specific stressors, rather than age alone, shape learners' emotional experiences.

Self-perceived language proficiency and relative standing among peers consistently predict FLCA. Jiang and Dewaele found that Chinese learners with higher self-rated proficiency and those who perceived themselves as above-average in their class reported significantly lower FLCA [9]. Wei and Yodkamlue similarly identified "fear of negative evaluation" and "lack of confidence" as major anxiety sources among Bouyei minority students, highlighting the role of social comparison in shaping classroom emotions [10].

2.2. Teacher-related variables and the limits of instructional influence

Research on teacher-related variables has revealed an intriguing asymmetry: while teacher behaviors significantly enhance Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE), their direct effect on reducing FLCA appears limited. Dewaele, Saito, and Halimi, in their longitudinal study of Kuwaiti FL learners, found that teacher behaviors—including frequency of target language use, predictability, and joking—positively predicted FLE but showed no significant relationship with FLCA. The authors concluded that teachers have greater power to "fuel" positive emotions than to directly "extinguish" negative ones [11].

This pattern holds in Chinese contexts as well. Jiang and Dewaele reported that FLE was primarily predicted by teacher-related variables (attitudes toward the teacher, teacher's joking, and friendliness), whereas FLCA was predominantly explained by learner-internal variables such as proficiency and relative standing [2]. Similarly, across an international sample, teacher-centered variables explained substantial variance in FLE but contributed minimally to FLCA prediction [2].

However, certain teacher practices can indeed exacerbate anxiety. Wei and Yodkamlue identified "teacher's problems in teaching"—including unequal treatment, excessive teacher talk, monotonous teaching styles, and inappropriate emotional expression—as significant anxiety sources among Bouyei college students [10]. He, Zhou, and Zhang, using idiodynamic methods, demonstrated that teacher feedback triggered immediate FLCA fluctuations, with negative feedback causing sharp anxiety spikes while encouragement produced rapid declines [3]. These findings suggest that while

teachers may not eliminate chronic anxiety, their moment-to-moment classroom behaviors can significantly modulate its intensity.

2.3. The dynamic nature of FLCA

Recent methodological advances have revealed the dynamic, context-dependent nature of FLCA. Moving beyond traditional cross-sectional designs, researchers have adopted longitudinal and idiodynamic approaches to capture how anxiety fluctuates over time. Pan and Zhang tracked 55 Chinese English majors over 14 weeks and found that FLCA exhibited substantial within-person variability, with individual trajectories differing markedly [4]. He, Zhou, and Zhang employed idiodynamic methods to record four Chinese university students' anxiety on a per-second basis during different classroom activities, revealing that FLCA responded instantaneously to specific triggers such as task type, teacher questioning, and peer interactions [3]. Their qualitative interviews further identified external triggers (task difficulty, teacher feedback) and internal factors (gender, self-efficacy) that shaped moment-to-moment anxiety fluctuations.

These dynamic findings align with Complexity and Dynamic Systems Theory, which posits that learner emotions are constantly evolving through the interaction of multiple subsystems [12]. As MacIntyre argued, language anxiety "has both internal and social dimensions" and fluctuates across different timescales—from seconds to months to years. This perspective challenges static conceptualizations of FLCA and calls for research designs capable of capturing its inherent instability [13].

2.4. The FLCA-FLE relationship

Dewaele and MacIntyre first demonstrated that these two emotions are independent yet related dimensions rather than opposite ends of a single continuum, sharing approximately 12.9% of their variance [1]. Subsequent research has confirmed this pattern across diverse Chinese learner populations [9]. Crucially, FLE has been found to buffer against the deleterious effects of FLCA, with Dewaele and Alfawzan showing that enjoyment exerted a stronger effect than anxiety on foreign language performance [7]. This suggests that fostering positive emotions may be as important as reducing negative ones—a finding with significant pedagogical implications.

Despite these advances, several limitations warrant acknowledgment. Much existing research relies on cross-sectional designs that cannot capture causal relationships or long-term emotional trajectories. Studies examining teacher factors often adopt the researcher's rather than the learner's perspective, and few have investigated how situational factors within actual classroom interactions shape anxiety. Moreover, most research focuses on university students, leaving younger learners and postgraduate populations relatively under-explored. Addressing these gaps through longitudinal, learner-centered, and context-sensitive methodologies will be essential for advancing both theoretical understanding and pedagogical practice in supporting Chinese EFL learners' emotional well-being.

3. Discussion

Most studies employ empirical methods, targeting university students and primarily using questionnaires like the FLES and FLCAS to analyze students' emotional responses. Other scholars have used idiographic/dynamic methods, tracking students' FLCA fluctuations in real-time through video recording during different classroom tasks.

Although these studies have achieved certain theoretical and practical results, some limitations remain. Firstly, most research examines teacher factors from the researcher's perspective rather than the learner's perspective. Secondly, the teacher factors investigated are often individual difference variables (age, gender, native language background), which cannot reflect the situational factors related to teachers' actual classroom teaching.

4. Conclusion

This review paper has reviewed the current state of research on Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) among Chinese EFL learners, systematically synthesizing its primary influencing factors, dynamic characteristics, and its relationship with Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE). Through an integrative analysis of existing empirical studies, several core findings are revealed.

First, Chinese EFL learners generally experience moderate to high levels of classroom anxiety, which demonstrates a stable negative correlation with their language achievement. Second, FLCA is influenced by multiple factors: concerning learner-internal variables, self-efficacy, self-perceived language proficiency, academic stage, and personality traits (such as neuroticism) are all significantly related to anxiety levels; concerning external factors, situational elements such as peer pressure, classroom activity types, and teacher feedback can trigger immediate fluctuations in anxiety. Notably, while teacher behaviors significantly enhance learners' Foreign Language Enjoyment, their direct effect on reducing FLCA appears to be limited.

Furthermore, FLCA and FLE are not simple opposites but rather two independent yet interrelated emotional dimensions, collectively constituting learners' complex classroom emotional experiences. With the integration of Positive Psychology, research has revealed that these two emotions exhibit dynamic changes across different learning stages and contexts. Studies focusing on specific groups, such as ethnic minority students and postgraduate learners, have also uncovered the distinct impacts of sociocultural factors and academic publication pressure on FLCA.

Despite these findings, this review has certain limitations, such as its reliance on synthesizing existing cross-sectional studies, which may not capture the full complexity of FLCA's longitudinal trajectories. In the future, this line of research would benefit from employing more longitudinal and dynamic methodologies to further validate and extend the synthesized findings, as well as to develop and evaluate targeted emotional interventions for Chinese EFL learners across different educational levels.

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