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## **Analyzing the Relationship of English Language Learning Anxiety and English Language Learning Strategy Use Among English Major Undergraduates in Shi Jiazhuang, China**

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### **Abstract**

The study investigated the general state of foreign language learning anxiety and the relationship between foreign language learning anxiety and foreign language learning strategy among English major college students in Shi Jiazhuang, China. The quantitative research method was adopted in this study. The instruments were Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale and Strategy Inventory Language Learning. The subjects were 400 English major students from Shi Jiazhuang College. The results showed that there exists a negative relationship between foreign language learning anxiety and the use of foreign language learning strategy. According to the findings of this study, it is necessary to reduce learners' foreign language learning anxiety so as to apply more types of foreign language learning strategies efficiently, especially for those foreign language learners with high-level learning anxiety. Some suggestions were put forward for pedagogical implications, which will make Chinese learners be more successful during the process for foreign language acquisition.

**Keywords:** Foreign Language Learning, Anxiety, Strategy, Learning Achievement, English Major Students, Teachers.

### **Introduction**

English is a widely spoken international language worldwide. In China, the Education Ministry admitted the importance of English education since the 1990s. Many linguistic theorists begin to attach importance to research on individual language learners (Chen and Hu, 2012). Liu (2014) emphasizes that language learners differ extremely in both the methods they use to acquire a foreign language and also in whether they can be successful English language learners. Therefore, as learners are of an essential role in second language acquisition theory, English teachers need to act as directors and focus more on individual learners' factors.

Among these individual factors which influenced the foreign language acquisition, foreign language learning anxiety (FLLA) and foreign language learning strategies (FLLS) are two components. Ellis (1994) indicated that differences of individual learner (beliefs, affective states, etc.), determine their choice of FLLS, no matter setting is formal or informal. For example, some learners have grasped on the language learning strategy adequately, but due to the effect of affective factors, these learners may not use those strategies in the process of foreign language acquisition.

Foreign Language learning anxiety acts as one of the affective factors for foreign language learning effectively (Horwitz and Young, 1991). FLLA, as an effective factor during the second language acquisition process, may also impact the use and selection of foreign language learning strategy (Ellis, 1994). According to studies by Noormohamadi (2009), high-level anxiety learners have a poor ability to use FLLS. While, currently, there is still

no authoritative conclusion of this point of view. So far, few researches seem to have studied the correlation between the use of FLLS and the state of foreign language learning anxiety, although some scholars have suggested studying the field (Li, 2015).

The present research was conducted to explore the correlation between the use of FLLS and the state of foreign language learning anxiety, which is one of the effective factors, by applying two questionnaires. One is adapted from Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory Language Learning (SILL) Version 7.0. The other is adapted from Horwitz's (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS).

### **Literature Review**

FLLA, as an active factor during the second language acquisition process, may also influence the use and selection of foreign language learning strategy (FLLS). According to studies by Nishatini and Matsuda (2011), learners with high anxiety are less able to use LLS and more likely to attribute failure to anxiety. Li (2012) stated that English language learning anxiety and learning strategy are negatively relate.

Li (2012) investigated learners about the effect of language learning strategy training on computer anxiety and achievement. Results reveal that it exists remarkable differences among learners with different levels of anxiety concerning the frequency of using meta-cognitive strategy. The meta-cognitive strategy turns out to be more notably related to foreign language learning anxiety. Despite the very detailed analysis of students' use of every learning strategy, there is, however, at least one big problem with the author's conclusion. It seems rash to make such an assertion that "Students' English learning anxiety results from that the frequency of using foreign language learning strategies is low." (Han, 2010).

Some researches surveyed to examine the correlation between FLLA, the use of FLLS, and foreign language achievement. The findings state that for college students, the use of FLLS is negatively related to FLLA. It found that it was a common phenomenon for Chinese English majors to experience foreign language learning anxiety during the process of foreign language acquisition. Anxiety is associated with the frequency and types of using foreign language learning strategies negatively, and the learners exhibiting different levels and embodying different subcategories of anxiety preferred to choose different strategies.

Above all, although there are abundant studies on both FLLA and FLLS, some limits should be warned when Chinese scholars do their research. Firstly, most of the research focuses on the quantitative method, neglecting qualitative method, experimental research, and case research. The author thinks quantitative research, including questionnaire and experimental method should be combined with qualitative research consisting of the case and observation methods, which will make research results more scientific and reliable. Furthermore, in the process of quantitative research, instruments should be modified according to the current Chinese situation and the different subjects and environment even if the previous questionnaires have high reliability and validity. Thirdly, it is instructive for college students to learn how to reduce language anxiety utilizing learning strategies. Therefore, the research on language anxiety of postgraduates needs to be concerned. Lastly, it is revealed that researches concerning the correlation between foreign language learning anxiety and learning strategy is relatively inadequate. The researchers must strengthen the relevant research, which will help the teaching reform progress successfully. In the present study, the correlation between students' FLLA and their use of FLLS was explored.

## Methodology

The respondents of this study contained 400 English major students in Shi Jiazhuang College. According to the data in Shi Jia Zhuang College official website, up to July 2018, there were 1256 English major students in Shi Jiazhuang College. In the present quantitative study, a stratified sampling technique was adopted. To guarantee equal representation for each grade, the sample size was apportioned according to that total sample size (400) divided by the total population (1256) multiplied by the number of populations for each grade. The questionnaire will be used to collect data from subjects in the quantitative research. There are two surveys adopted for the quantitative aspect of the study. Accordingly, two kinds of questionnaires were applied as the instruments in order to determine the English major students' general state of FLLA and the frequency of using English learning strategy. These two questionnaires are Horwitz's (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and Oxford's (1989) Strategy Inventory Language Learning (SILL) version 7.0. There are three aspects which are composed in FLCAS. Firstly, it focuses on communication apprehension. Secondly, it aims to analyze the fear of negative evaluation. Lastly, investment of test anxiety is also included in this scale. SILL questionnaire consists 50 items in six categories. Memory strategy, cognitive strategy, and compensation strategy are three direct foreign language learning strategies. Meta-cognitive strategy, affective strategy, and social strategy are three indirect foreign language learning strategies.

Questionnaires for the present research were translated into Chinese version before testing the validity of instruments. To ascertain the content validity for the instrument and avoid ambiguity and for the subjects to precisely understand the statement and finish the questions conveniently, five experts were invited to correct the translation. They were chosen from the English department to guarantee the grammatical, lexical, and grammatical correctness. Based on their responses in the questionnaire, choice of words, orders, and layout of some items were changed or erased from the questionnaire.

The researcher keyed in and coded the data gathered from the questionnaires into the computer by applying Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 25.0. Statistical analysis was conducted by analyzing, generating, and summarizing survey results. It adopted descriptive analysis, correlation analysis, standard multiple regression analysis to investigate the relationship between English LLA and LLS among English significant students.

## Results and Discussion

**Table 4.1: Overview of English learning anxiety level**

Anxiety Level	Number	Percentage	Mean	Std. Deviation
High anxiety	126	31.6%	108.30	6.02
Moderate anxiety	183	45.7%	96.59	3.72
Low anxiety	91	22.7%	81.65	7.72

The results of the present survey show that the students' final anxiety score ranged between 108.30 and 81.65, with a mean score being 96.59. As shown in Table4.1, the majority of the students belong to moderate anxiety, taking up 45.7 percent of the whole population. 31.6% of subjects have an anxious feeling at high level. And a small number of subjects, 22.7%, scarcely feel anxious. The finding shows that foreign language learning anxiety

commonly exists among Chinese learners during the process of English acquisition. This could be explained from linguistic perspective. According to Wei (2016), English and Chinese belong to two different language families, which causes specific difficulties of English acquisition for Chinese international students.

First of all, comparing with the alphabetic writing of English, Chinese is hieroglyphic. Chinese words are not made up of letters like English, and it has a logographic system (Cheng, 2012). So, reading and spelling English words accurately may be difficult for Chinese international students.

Secondly, the pronunciation of English, especially the intonation and stress, also cause challenges for Chinese international students (Gui, 2007). Chinese is a tone language, which concludes four tones. Different tones mean different meanings. While in English, people use different tones to emphasize or express different emotions. English has some intonation and stress which even alter words' part of speech. For example, record (/ rɪ'kɔ:d /) and record (/ 'rekɔ:d /). The former one is a verb, while the other one is a noun.

Thirdly, the difference of syntax of English and Chinese is also a hurdle that Chinese students face in learning English. The rule in English is that the core structure (subject + verb + object) should be close, the other parts should stand before or after it. While, in Chinese, most modifiers stand before the words which they modify. Therefore, a kind of mistakes of Chinese international students' writing and speaking is using English words in Chinese sentence order.

Last but not least, the morphology of English and Chinese are different. Especially in oral English, the morphology system of a noun and the morphology system of a verb are hindering. As Fu (2014) points, there is no verb inflection in Chinese. For example, adverbial words are used to indicate the time, tomorrow, next week, last night. Moreover, the inflection of verbs for the third person singular does not exist in Chinese. Therefore, the verb inflection in English, which is related to both time and subject, is an obstacle for Chinese students.

To sum up, the significant differences between Chinese and English are challenges for Chinese students to develop their English proficiency. It may be a reason that foreign language learning anxiety commonly exists among Chinese learners during the process of English acquisition, since learning English is a challenge for Chinese students.

**Table 4.2: Descriptive statistic for overall SILL and its subcategories**

Category	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank Order
Memory	20.96	5.89	6
Cognitive	34.12	3.64	2
Compensation	29.07	5.32	3
Metacognitive	40.01	8.49	1
Affective	21.93	4.52	5
Social	25.64	6.45	4

Among all six strategy categories, meta-cognitive strategy ranks the first, both cognitive strategy and compensation strategy are of relatively higher frequency of use, followed by social strategy, affective strategy. Memory strategy is the lowest frequency of use.

**Table 4.3 Pearson Correlation between over anxiety and overall strategies**

		Anxiety	Strategies
Anxiety	Pearson Correlation	1	-.279*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	400	400
Strategies	Pearson Correlation	-.279*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	400	400

The relationship between overall anxiety and overall strategies was first investigated to present a general picture. Table 4.3 demonstrated the relationship by using Pearson product-moment correlation. A strong negative correlation ( $p=0.00<.05$ ) was produced, which indicated that the higher the levels of anxiety, the more likely the students used fewer strategies. Thus, a conclusion can be reached that there exists a causal relationship between these two variables, with anxiety being independent and learning strategies dependent. As a result, there is a negative significance between them. This can be explained from a cognitive psychological perspective.

Firstly, in foreign language context, anxious students tend to have exaggerated self-awareness and cannot concentrate fully on the task itself. What's more, because of their constant fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation from peers and teachers in the classroom, they are always thinking over their poor language performance and therefore can't complete the required task, not to mention employing memory or cognitive strategies. Secondly, meta-cognitive strategies can help learners regulate their cognition. When a learner is anxious, he tends to pay more attention to his helplessness and expects more negative consequences. He doesn't believe that he can use the skills efficiently to cope with potential difficulties. Therefore, he has too much concern over his inadequacies as well as shortcomings, which prevents him from using meta-cognitive strategies in his language learning. Most of anxious students can't plan, monitor and evaluate their learning process or have no control in the process of learning.

Thirdly, affective strategies allow the learners to control their emotions (Oxford,1990). In the process of foreign language learning, if affective strategies aren't used, they won't keep in good mood. As a result, the more anxious learners will be, the less frequently they use affective strategies.

Finally, social strategies can help learners to learn through interaction with others. (Oxford,1990). Horwitz (1986) pointed out that language anxiety seemed to be strongly based on the fear of poor communication and negative social evaluation. An anxious learner is unwilling to cooperate with peers or take an active part in classroom

activities, for he is too concerned with others' evaluation and troubled by self-deprecating thoughts. The more anxious a learner is, the less often he will employ social strategies. Statistical analyses revealed that there existed both similarities and differences in learning strategies employed by different anxiety groups.

## Conclusion

According to the findings of this study, it is necessary to reduce learners' foreign language learning anxiety so as to apply more types of foreign language learning strategies efficiently, especially for those foreign language learners with high-level learning anxiety. The significance of the study lies in providing more practical evidence for the related theory. It may be beneficial for English education researchers in China, and English teachers pay more attention to the debilitating effect of anxiety for English learning. By identifying the students' anxiety level and then better understanding learners' use of LLS, the instructors can adjust their teaching so as to narrow the gap between learning and teaching and build a harmonious and supportive learning atmosphere; as for the learners, they ought to broaden foreign language learning strategy use so as to improve learning efficiency by using appropriate strategies properly, which will make Chinese learners be more successful during the process for foreign language acquisition.

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