Foreign language anxiety among Chinese senior middle school students

A case study

Språkängslan inför främmande språk bland kinesiska högstadieelever
En fallstudie

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Anyone who has been learning a new language knows the feeling of anxiety when faced with the task to use it in the classroom and in real life. Foreign Language Anxiety is a concept developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) to describe and measure this specific form of anxiety. In this study, the anxiety levels of a class of Chinese senior middle school students taking an English class have been measured. The levels were measured according to the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale, developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). 59 informants participated in the study. The data were analysed to find which factors invoke the most anxiety. To gather qualitative data and gain further insight, two sets of group interviews were performed. The results show that a majority of the students suffer from anxiety in class. Teacher-generated anxiety seems to be the most provoking factor according to the analysis.

Keywords: Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), Chinese learners of English
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1. Introduction and aims

Students around the world all share a common trait. They are learning new skills, and when doing so, it is natural that they may be shy about using them. Anxiety is not unheard of in most areas of learning. Learners do not want to make mistakes in front of their peers. When learning a new language, this normal anxiety can be heightened.

Speaking in front of others is, for most people, a very anxiety-creating situation. Add the anxiety of speaking a foreign language with the fear of being judged on your performance. In the field of language learning, the term used is “foreign language anxiety” (FLA) which has been defined as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope 1986: 128). Foreign language anxiety is thought by many to be more common in China than in other countries, for a number of reasons such as “teachers’ low proficiency of language skills/…/, lack of communicative activities/…/, limited English input outside the classroom/”, according to Xiaoqing (1996: 3-4) in an analysis of what Xiaoqing calls the “Chinese learners’ communicative incompetence.” China today, as compared to in 1996 when Xiaoqing tried to explain and put forth a solution to this incompetence, is part of a far more globalized world, a world in which English is used for communication not only in business but also in daily life activities. Today senior middle school students in China, i.e., students in years 10-12, are able to download and listen to music with English lyrics, they play video-games in English and they meet English speakers on the streets of their cities. They need to be able to understand and to speak English to be more connected to the western world.

This study aims to examine the prevalence of foreign language anxiety in a Chinese senior middle school EFL (English as a Foreign Language) class to gain further insight into today’s English education in China. Furthermore, the study aims to explore some of the perceptions that students have about anxiety and its causes. The data was gathered during my semester as an exchange student at a Chinese university, and the study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. To what degree do the senior middle school Chinese EFL students in this case study experience FLA in class?
2. What attitudes do the Chinese ESL students participating in this survey have toward learning and speaking English and what is their view on anxiety?
The first research question will be measured by the standardized Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and compared to previous studies of Chinese ESL students’ anxiety. The second research question will be examined through group interviews with some of the informants after their anxiety has been measured. This is done to acquire additional qualitative data which can be used to explain the results.

2. Background

Foreign language anxiety is well researched and most of the research done stems from Horwitz et al.’s study from 1986. This has allowed for a homogenous research climate where it is easy to compare results from different informants. Horwitz et al.’s method is not undisputed; however, consensus is that while not perfect, it is the most accurate, adaptable and comparable method available (Trang 2012: 71). This section aims to give an overview of foreign language anxiety and the criticism of Horwitz et al.’s definition of it, followed by a brief history of English teaching in modern China. It also accounts for some of the previous research done on foreign language anxiety.

2.1 Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)

The theory of FLA was first presented by Horwitz et al. in 1986 and describes FLA as a distinct form of anxiety, separate from other forms of anxiety. Previous studies of anxiety had tried to relate to three forms of anxiety separately. These are communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al. 1986: 125). The first one of these, communication apprehension, is when a speaker feels uncomfortable speaking with others. It may be greatly enhanced when learning a second language, as speaking in front of others is often required as a part of such a class. The second, test anxiety, is when students put unrealistic demands on themselves out of fear of failure on a test. Language classes are notorious for their high frequency of tests and quizzes, causing even the most well-prepared students to fail at times. Finally, fear of negative evaluation is fear of peers’ and teachers’ evaluation of the learners’ effort, which may harm the learners’ self-image. Fear of negative evolution is broader than test anxiety, since this form includes any social situation. Horwitz et al. proposed FLA as not simply a mix of these, but something complex that encompasses “self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz et al. 1986: 128). This anxiety is experienced in any language-learning situation, no matter which language skill is used. Horwitz et al. mention many psycho-physiological symptoms of anxiety such as
difficulty to concentrate, forgetfulness, avoidance behaviour and procrastination. It is obvious that this may affect students’ performance; hence, lessening factors that cause anxiety may be valuable from an educational point of view (Horwitz et al. 1986: 126).

In 1986 when Horwitz et al. proposed their theory that FLA is a distinct form of anxiety, they realized that there was a lack of reliable instruments to evaluate anxiety among students. To create an instrument of their own, they held group meetings with two student groups from the University of Texas, each group consisting of 15 students. In these group-meetings, they discussed language learning and its difficulties, didactic presentations and anxiety management, among other things. The students reported many of the psycho-physiological symptoms previously mentioned when discussing language anxiety. With the experience gained from these groups as well as their experience as teachers at the University of Texas, Horwitz et al. developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). It is measured by a questionnaire with 33 questions, which are answered on a 1-5 Likert scale. The total score is added together and a value of anxiety can be calculated. The questions are linked to communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, but measure them as one unit, FLA, rather than the three of them individually. The scale was originally used on 75 learners of Spanish in four different beginner courses (Horwitz et al. 1986: 129). Even though the scale was based mostly on anecdotal evidence, it has since then been used in a multitude of studies and gained enough evidence to validate the theory. It now plays a vital role in any research on language learning that encompasses anxiety (Trang 2012: 69).

Horwitz et al.’s FLCAS and theory of FLA do not stand without criticism; in a review of the theory, Trang (2012: 73) concluded that it has “played a vital role in language anxiety research”; however, this does “not necessarily mean that the theory is perfect.” Trang highlights four objections: “(i) the direction of the causal relationship between FLA and language learning difficulties; (ii) the important role ascribed to FLA in research (iii) the components of FLA; and (iv) the validity of the FLCAS” (Trang 2012: 71).

The first objection voiced by researchers is whether anxiety stems from language learning difficulties or if anxiety is caused by poor language skills. Studies have shown that as proficiency increases, anxiety decreases (Mak 2011: 206). This does not mean that proficient foreign language speakers are not anxious. Even successful students will forget knowledge which they ordinarily would know, when taking tests. It is reasonable to assume that there is a give and receive relationship between FLA and learning difficulties. In some situations anxiety might be the causing agents and in other situations it might be caused by a lack of proficiency (Trang 2012: 72).
The second objection, the important role that has been given FLA in language learning, comes from researchers who have voiced the opinion that anxiety is unlikely to be the primary cause of problems with language learning. According to Trang (2012: 72), however, the vast amount of research done on the effects of anxiety has given “strong evidence” of the negative effects of FLA on language learning. Trang (2012: 72) claims the cause of this challenge to be mostly due to researchers belonging to different disciplines and thus seeing the issue from their field’s point of view. Trang (2012: 72) also cites Elaine Horwitz who has voiced her opinion on the issue, stating that anxiety is a major factor contributing to students’ expectations of their foreign language studies and their continued studying. Assuming that her position is correct, anxiety is undeniably an important area of investigation to understand the processes of language learning (Trang 2012: 72).

The main problem raised in the third objection is what components FLA should be said to contain. Communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation have a close connection to FLA according to Trang (2012: 72). Test anxiety, on the other hand, is a more general kind of anxiety that is not specific to foreign languages. Researchers have therefore proposed that test anxiety should not be included as a part of FLA. Trang (2012: 72) cites Elaine Horwitz who in 2010 expressed the view that FLA is related to communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety but not composed of them. According to her, this is something that has been “misinterpreted by many researchers” (Trang 2012: 72).

The final objection raised in Trang, (2012: 73) has to do with the validity of the FLCAS, questioning if rather than measuring anxiety, as intended, it actually measures language skills. Some criticism has also been raised against the lack of inclusion of native language skills, not allowing for a comparison to that of the foreign language. Trang (2012: 73) acknowledges all of these objections, but states that the data that is supplied by the FLCAS is subject to the interpretation of the individual researcher. There are many ways to understand it, without any clear right or wrong way. The great advantage of the FLCAS is that it has allowed language learning researchers to measure anxiety on a common scale; “the problem of inconsistent research findings has been considerably solved, which has strengthened its reliability” (Trang 2012: 72-73). For the purpose of this study, it has been reasoned that the FLCAS is suitable and that the bias towards spoken language is an asset rather than an issue. Using an already established scale is both convenient and effective, allowing for quick and reliable comparison to previous studies. By using FLCAS as the standard instrument, the material can be evaluated on a common scale. It is clear that FLA is an issue in language learning (and teaching) that needs to be explored further.
2.2 English as a foreign language in China

Adamson’s historical overview of English teaching in China, aims to cover the history of English education in China from its Soviet-influenced 50’s to the globalization of the 90’s and further into our days. Most of his book is based on study of official textbooks and curricula and how these were changed according to political directives. Adamson marks five periods, each with its own direction and curriculum. These are 1949-1960, 1961-1966, 1966-1976, 1977-1993 and 1993-onwards. Each period has its own dedicated chapter. Below follows a summary of the situation of English teaching in China in each of these periods (Adamson 2004).¹

English had been studied in China since the Chinese were defeated in the Opium war of 1839-42 as a part of China’s early modernization. In the early 50’s it was decided that Russian would be the main foreign language studied. In the 1950’s English teaching was allowed to continue but it was severely hampered by anti-American and anti-English sentiment as well as a ban on the import of foreign textbooks. In 1954 all foreign language teaching but Russian was banned in secondary schools. The priority was to teach Chinese and solve the problems of illiteracy. In 1956, however, the party declared that junior secondary schools were to teach either English or Russian as their foreign language, at a 1:1 ratio. That meant that the same number of students were to study both languages. As a result the number of English teachers skyrocketed, from only 74 in 1957 to 1,859 in 1959 (Adamson 2004: 37).

The 1960’s saw a further increase in the status of English as the foreign language of choice and a sharp decline for Russian. This was mostly due to political reasons relating to the Sino-Soviet break. In the curriculum of 1963, it is stated that:

> English is commonly used throughout the world. A good grasp of English enables us to absorb the aspects of science and technology which will help socialist construction. (PEP, 1963: 1, in translation as quoted by Adamson (2004: 79))

The English syllabus required, among other things, junior secondary students to master between 1,500 and 2,000 words and some set phrases. They were also required to learn to partake in simple conversation. Most of the words and phrases were to be related to daily life as well as customs and habits of English-speaking countries. The goal was to learn about 600 words and some phrases each year. The years 1960-1966 meant a considerable advancement of English education in China. The curriculum was modern and took heed of pedagogical ideas. It did not last long, however (Adamson 2004: 95).

¹The periods are cited from the table of contents.
The tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) were a disaster for English education in China. Adamson (2004: 108) mentions slogans such as “I am Chinese. Why do I need foreign languages?” and “Don’t learn ABC. Make revolution!” English teachers were, due to their natural connection to the western world, persecuted as enemies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Students no longer had any incentive to learn English as it would not increase their chances in life. The interest in English was slightly revived during the later years of the revolution, but strong political influence over school and curricula hindered proper education (Adamson 2004: 110).

After Mao’s death and the end of the Cultural Revolution, English teaching was brought back to its former heights of the 1960’s. Through a large recruitment campaign in the late 70’s as many as 113,866 full-time English teachers were employed, compared to 19,751 before 1966, and almost none during the revolution (Adamson 2004: 132). This is a number that clearly illustrates the vitalization of the subject. By the 1990’s, China had opened its doors to the outer world and its citizens dealt with English speakers to a much larger extent through international trade and travel. English became a sought-after skill amongst employees, and students gained monetary-related motivation to study. In 1993 a new curriculum was decreed to solve the problems of previous years of English education. Its goal was to work in conjunction with the newly adapted nine-year compulsory schooling. Linguistically, it focused on realistic, real-life oriented, oral skills and it contained very little political propaganda. The number of full-time English teachers rose to 374,454 by 1994, from almost none during the Cultural Revolution (Adamson 2004: 170).

In 1993, China set out to reform the English language learning and increase proficiency levels among students. Only a few years after that, Xiaoqing writes about “teachers’ low proficiency of language skills/.../, lack of communicative activities/.../, limited English input outside the classroom/” (Xiaoqing, 1996: 3-4). Chinese students still suffered from an inability to communicate. Present-day studies suggest that Chinese students’ English skills have improved, but they are still hindered by anxiety in their communication (Liu, 2006; Mak, 2011).

When Adamson’s book was published in 2004, English had reached a level of great importance in China. The main reason for the changing importance had to do with the economy. The leaders of the Chinese Communist Party consider English to be an important tool in modernizing China and being able to partake in international organizations such as the World Trade Organization. But English also has an important cultural aspect. Movies,
pop music and the internet have made English a fashionable language (Adamson, 2004: 195-196). Perhaps this cultural importance has changed how English is used among Chinese students. Instead of being just a tool for economics and politics, it has also become a way for the younger population to get closer to the western lifestyle.

2.3 Previous studies

The review of studies in this section suggests that Chinese students are clearly affected by anxiety, with numbers as high as 60% of the target population. It also sheds some light on the causes of anxiety and what previous researchers have proposed in order to lessen it.

2.3.1 von Wörde (2003)

In 2003, von Wörde performed a qualitative study on anxiety among 15 American students studying three different foreign languages; French, German and Spanish. The goal of the study was to gain insight into the students’ perception of FLA and its causes. To allow for this, von Wörde used phenomenological interviews focusing on “beliefs, experiences, and feelings in order to generate an enlightening narration” (von Wörde, 2003: 1). A FLCAS questionnaire with the original 33 questions was employed to work as a validity check.

The results showed that students had a bad understanding of anxiety and tended to relate it to difficulty. Out of her 15 informants, 11 reported that they were anxious according to the results of the FLCAS. In the interviews, they described both physical manifestations of anxiety and psychological reactions. The sources of their anxiety was closely intertwined and they had problems deciding exactly what the cause was. However, according to von Wörde (2003: 9), it seemed as if the activities that caused the most anxiety were speaking and listening, a finding supported by a number of previous studies. Another factor that was mentioned as responsible for creating anxiousness was the teacher. Classroom management was highly important in creating a low-anxiety environment. The students wanted their teachers to speak more slowly, clarify key points, adapt to individual learning styles and give assignments that the students could relate to their real life goals. By doing so, the teacher could make the students feel more secure and lessen their anxiety. von Wörde (2003: 9) discovered a significant negative correlation between the students’ level of anxiety and their grades. It indicates that further studies in the area of FLA might bring forth pedagogical improvements.
2.3.2 Liu (2006)

Liu (2006) did a study aimed to discover the extent of FLA among Chinese college students who were not English majors and any correlation to the proficiency of the students. In his study, 547 undergraduate students from three proficiency levels participated in a survey. As a measurement of the students’ proficiency, Liu relied on what ‘band’ each student had been assigned to when starting their university studies. When Chinese students apply to college they take an English test and based on their results they are assigned into a specific band. These bands range from one to three. Band-one is the least skilled and three is the most skilled.

As part of the survey, the participants answered a questionnaire based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. to measure anxiety levels. After the survey, one class from each proficiency level, in total 100 students, were selected for a longitudinal study stretching for the full 14-week term. These students wrote reflective journals on a weekly basis on focused topics. The teachers of these students kept a weekly record of the most and least anxious students. In order to double-check these records, Liu also observed in-class activities on three occasions for each class. For further in-depth understanding of the reasons behind their anxiety, 20 students partook in semi-structured interviews. The three teachers also participated in similar interviews to complement the student interviews (Liu, 2006: 304-305).

The FLCAS questionnaire was scored on a scale of a minimum of 36 and a maximum of 180. A score of 144 or higher indicates very high levels of anxiety, a score between 108 and 144 implies moderate anxiety and a score below 108 little or no anxiety. The mean score among the students was 101, and the results suggested that approximately one third of the participants felt moderate to high anxiety. The lowest score was 39, meaning that some students felt almost no anxiety at all. The highest score was 162, showing that there were some highly anxious students. In their reflective journals, 70 % of the students reported that they felt anxious when speaking English in class. Most of them cited poor skills and fear of losing face as the reason for their feelings. The non-anxious students relied on their good self-confidence and felt at ease even when asked to speak unprepared. Comparison between the proficiency levels showed that the band-one students scored a mean of 103 and the band-three students a mean of 98, supporting the theory that as skill level increases, anxiety decreases (Liu, 2006: 310).
2.3.3 Mak (2011)

In a similarly structured study, Mak (2011) researched the factors causing speaking-in-class anxiety. His informants consisted of 313 first-year university students taking a compulsory English course at a university in Hong Kong. For ESL students in Hong Kong, in which English is spoken as a second language, English should be more natural than to the students in Liu’s study, who lived in Beijing. This could lead to lower levels of anxiety. Just like Liu, Mak used the FLCAS questionnaire to measure anxiety on a scale. It was split in three sections, part one containing the original 33 questions and part two containing an extra six, related to wait-time, i.e., the time needed for the students to think of an answer, error correction, and use of Chinese in class. Mak used a four-point Likert scale, removing the neutral 3, “unsure”. In part three the students answered, on a range from 1% to 100% with jumps of 20%, how much anxiety they felt when “asked to speak in the English class, when insufficient wait-time occurred and when the use of L1 was prohibited” (Mak, 2011: 205).

In part one the maximum score was 132, the minimum 33, and the mean score was 80. To compare the score with other studies it can be calculated into a percentage. The mean score as a percentage is 60% (80/132), which is close to Liu’s study’s mean score as a percentage 56% (101/162). This shows that the anxiety measured is at similar levels. When analysing the data, five factors contributing to anxiety were found, the main one being “speech anxiety and fear of negative evaluation” (Mak 2011: 206, italics orig.). The four lesser factors were, in descending order, “uncomfortableness when speaking with native speakers”, “negative attitudes towards the English class”, “negative self-evaluation” and “fear of failing the class/ consequences of personal failure” (Mak, 2011: 206).

Parts two and three in Mak’s study revealed four additional lesser factors that contribute to student anxiety, most of them related to the teacher’s classroom management. They were, in descending order of magnitude, “speaking in front of the class without preparation”, “being corrected when speaking”, “inadequate wait-time” and “not being allowed to use the first language in a second/foreign language class” (Mak, 2011: 210). Mak (2011: 211) also mentions that these factors might be extra prominent among Chinese learners of English because of their need for longer wait-time before responding due to the cultural elements of “group unity” and “face”. When they feel unsure about themselves or unable to reply, they fear losing their face in front of their class, putting more on the stake than their European counterparts do.
2.3.4 Grant et al. (2013)

Grant, Huang and Pasfield-Neo fitou (2013) studied FLA among students of Chinese in a virtual world exercise in 2013. The purpose of this was to explore whether anxiety is lessened or heightened when the communication is done online rather than face-to-face. 55 students of Chinese at Monash University, Australia, participated in the study. As a part of the students’ course, they were to visit a Chinese restaurant and a Chinese farmers’ market virtually. Chatting with Non-Player-Characters (NPC), the students used conversational language in free form, that is, there was no script to follow. The NPCs were programmed to respond according to their input. If the input was not correct, there would be communication breakdown and the students had to rephrase themselves. The students’ objective was to attain certain information and digital artefacts from the NPCs through communication. (Grant et al., 2013: 4).

The students were mostly undergraduates aged 18-20 and 79% of them spent more than 2 hours using computers per day. When using the computer they were usually online. The most common activities included social networking and emailing. Less than one third of them played online virtual games such as World of Warcraft. In a survey prior to the virtual experiment, 88% of the students reported that they felt confident using computers. When speaking in class, 29% of the students were worried that their peers would laugh at them. 37% of them were afraid of making mistakes and 34% did not feel worried about mistakes. In the virtual reality, only 13% were anxious about not understanding the NPCs. 15% experienced feelings of panic when they had to communicate with the NPCs without preparation. Only 9% forgot previously mastered knowledge (Grant et al., 2013). This study clearly indicates that a virtual environment is less stressful when using a foreign language.

2.3.5 Baran-Lucarz (2014)

In yet another study, Baran-Lucarz (2014) examined the relationship between pronunciation anxiety and willingness to communicate in formal learning situations. Baran-Lucarz did not just look for the connection between these two, but also at a number of other variables that could affect the learners’ anxiety. These variables include “level of familiarity with the interlocutor, size of group, and type of task – as well as the proficiency level of the learners (Baran-Lucarz, 2014: 447). The study was done at the University of Wroclaw in Poland and the subject group consisted of 151 students from different fields, all of them taking English classes. The levels of willingness to communicate and pronunciation anxiety were measured with one questionnaire each. The questionnaire on willingness to communicate consisted of 12 items answered on a 6-point Likert scale. Its goal was to determine to what degree the students were eager to participate in oral communication. The questionnaire made to
measure pronunciation anxiety was based on the FLCAS. It consisted of 40 questions answered on a 6-point Likert scale. To gather qualitative data, two open-ended questions were administered to the informants after they had completed both questionnaires. These questions were “What might be the causes of your reluctance to speak during English class? What remedies can you suggest for your reluctance to speak?” (Baran-Lucarz, 2014: 462).

Baran-Lucarz’s quantitative data suggest that a low pronunciation anxiety indicates a higher degree of willingness to communicate. This stayed true regardless of the proficiency level of the informants in the study. The intermediate proficiency level students were the least willing to communicate. Baran-Lucarz suspects that this is due to the fact that they have the broadest gap between students’ expectation and their actual skill level. The qualitative data gathered showed that the most frequent reason for not participating in communicative activities was fear of negative evaluation, most often by classmates. The second most frequent reason was low self-efficacy. Some of the students regarded their language skills below par and felt ashamed to show it. Their suggested remedies to lessen these feelings of shame include working in smaller groups where they feel more comfortable and are forced to practice more (Baran-Lucarz, 2014: 466-468).

3. Methods

Most previous studies of FLA in China have used university students as their informants. The current study focuses on somewhat younger learners: a class of 59 senior middle school students in a private school in a large city in north-western China were examined for anxiety with the help of the FLCAS. Younger students may perceive anxiety differently than their older counterparts and therefore group interviews were used to gain some insight into their thoughts on anxiety and their English subject.

As stated in 1.1, the first research question aimed to measure the Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) levels among the informants. This was done with an adapted version of the standardized Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire developed by Horwitz et al. (see Appendix 1). The second research question aimed to examine the informants’ own perception of their anxiety and their attitude towards the English subject. This was done through two sets of unstructured group interviews (see Appendix 2).

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2 Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s own capability to reach goals and complete tasks.
3.1 Informants

The informants in this study were 59 senior students in a single English class in a Chinese senior middle school. In total, the class consisted of 59 students who were all present on the day of the survey and completed it. Their ages ranged from 14 to 16 and the group consisted of both female and male students. They were selected purely by convenience. The sample is probably not representative of a larger population of senior middle school students in that part of China. The school they attend is a highly sought-after school in the region and it is regarded as one of the more prominent senior middle schools in the city. China is a very populous country with substantial regional differences and the present sample is only taken from one city in one province. However, as a full class was used, rather than handpicked students or volunteers, the sample includes both low and high performing students. The students were of mixed gender. Because of the schools high popularity, its students’ families are often more affluent than the average Chinese family.

3.2 Questionnaire

The prevalence of FLA in the class was measured by a questionnaire based on Horwitz et al.’s FLCAS (see Appendix 1). The same questionnaire was used by Liu (2006) in the study presented in section 2.3. It consists of 36 questions, rather than the original 33. The three extra questions were added by Liu to better suit the Chinese classroom situation. The questions as a whole regard the students’ feelings about the English language and English class. They were answered on a five-point Likert-scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). The questionnaire was translated into Chinese and students were given both a Chinese and an English version in order to make sure that they understood the questions correctly.3 When computing the numbers, the values on questions 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 18, 22, 28 and 32 were reversed. That means that an answer of “strongly disagree” got a value of 1 instead of 5 and “strongly agree” got a value of 5 instead of 1 and so forth. This was done because these questions expressed confidence in speaking English, and by reversing them the final score will indicate the students’ anxiety level. The higher the score, the more anxious the student was considered to be.4

3 I am grateful to Wei Yakun, a student majoring in English at Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi’an, China, for doing the translation for me.
4 An example would be question 14, “I would not be nervous speaking English with native speakers”. If a participant strongly agrees with this statement, they will get 5 points according to the original scale. As a higher score indicates higher anxiety, and this is not wanted. The score is therefore reversed.


3.3 Interviews

Two group interviews were conducted with 10 students in each group and they lasted about 25 minutes each. The groups of students were chosen by convenience. At the end of the questionnaire session, volunteers were asked to list themselves for the interview and the first 20 to apply were invited. The interviews were semi-structured with only a few core questions based on the questionnaire (see Appendix 2 for the interview guide). The students were asked to reply freely as they felt fit and encouraged to explain their feelings. The interviews were audio-recorded but not video-recorded. The students were informed of the audio-recording and they gave their consent to it. After the interview, the recordings were first transcribed and then destroyed.

3.4 Procedure

The questionnaire was given at the start of a full 90-minute English class. The study was presented by me with the teacher present in the classroom, ready to assist with any language issues. After a brief introduction to the study, the students were instructed how to answer and they were ascertained that their answers would remain confidential and that they would have no implication for them whatsoever. All students were informed that their participation was optional. No one decided to opt out. The questionnaire itself included an introduction as well as instructions. The students were given the questionnaire in both English, for the convenience of the researcher, and in Chinese, to ensure their understanding. Only the English version was handed in. Total anonymity may lead to careless answers, and did so in this study: two questionnaires were removed from this study as all questions were answered with “unsure” (3).

One week after the questionnaire the interviews were carried out in the form of group discussions. English was used in the interviews but a translator was present in case any difficulties would arise. 20 students were split into two groups of 10 each, both groups consisting of a mix of female and male students. The interview followed a semi-structured format with only a few questions from the survey as a starting-point (see Appendix 2). The choice of questions was to gain further understanding of the students’ replies to the survey questions. The semi-structured format made it possible to follow up on interesting topics rather than sticking to one format.

3.5 Ethics

When the study was presented to the informants, they were informed that their participation was optional. They were also informed that none of the information submitted could be traced back to them nor would it affect them in any way. All participants in the study were
assured that all information given would be treated as confidential. No data could be traced back to any single student. The survey required no information such as name, age or gender. This of course limits the scope of the research as no comparison between the genders can be made. However, earning the trust of the participants and removing the risk of any and all repercussions for their answers was regarded as more important. The questionnaire used multiple-choice questions so there is no way of tracking participants’ handwriting.

In the interview part of the study, anonymity was no longer an option. The students understood this and those who wished to participate volunteered freely. However, the confidentiality of the participants remained most important. The teacher was not present in the room during the group discussions. A native Chinese English major previously known to the students was present to translate for the benefit of communication. The translator was fully aware of the importance of the students’ confidentiality and agreed fully to keep the informants’ voiced opinions secret.

4. Analysis and result

The presentation of the data is split into two sections, one for the quantitative data, which was gathered through the questionnaire, and one for the qualitative data, gathered from the interviews. The present paper contains no discussion section; instead, comments on how various kinds of anxiety can be lessened in the classroom have been included where considered relevant.

4.2 Quantitative data

The survey was scored on a scale with 36 as the minimum score and 180 as the maximum score. The mean score was 100. By recalculating the mean score as a percentage, it can be compared to other studies of FLA. The mean score as a percentage was 55% (100/180). Compared to the mean scores of Mak and Liu’s studies as percentages, 60% and 56% respectively, the prevalence of anxiety seems to be roughly the same. The highest score recorded was 141 and the lowest score was 56. The full spread, as shown in Figure 1, shows that there are noteworthy differences in the students’ levels of anxiety. Both extremely anxious students and students who feel little anxiety are represented in the class. The score is evenly spread across the whole spectrum. The neutral mean of all the questions is 90; thus students scoring above 90 are considered anxious. This method for finding a cut-off point is used in a multitude of FLA studies. 39 out of the 57 students, or 68.4%, recorded a score of 90 or above. This shows that a majority of the students in this study suffer from anxiety in their English class.
4.2.1 High anxiety-causing factors

As the questions were answered on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), they are easily calculated to find a mean answer for each question. This was done by adding together all answers for the question and then dividing the resulting number by the number of participants (57). For example, question 33 received a total score of 187, divided by 57, which gives the mean score of 3.3. Out of the 36 questions, nine had an average of three or higher, suggesting that these nine present the most anxiety-provoking situations. They can in turn be separated into categories to find the source of anxiety. The number of answers as well as the percentage is supplied below the question in the order of strongly disagree, disagree, unsure, agree and strongly agree. The number in brackets following the questions is the mean answer for that question.

The first category is teacher-generated anxiety:

Question #15 I get upset when I don’t understand what the teacher is correcting (3.3)  
9/15.7%  4/7%  10/17.5%  27/47.3%  7/12.2%

Question #33 I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven’t prepared in advance (3.3)  
5/8.7%  11/19.3%  11/19.3%  23/40.3%  7/12.2%

Question #29 I get nervous when I don’t understand every word the English teacher says (3.5)  
4/7%  10/17.5%  12/21%  16/28.1%  15/26.3%
Clearly, the teacher can be an anxiety-causing factor. Fear of negative evaluation is a part of the concept that is foreign language anxiety. It seems reasonable that this is what causes the teacher-based anxiety. Students are afraid to show their English skills in fear of receiving bad grades, which might affect them in their future life. In order to lessen anxiety the teacher should work towards creating an atmosphere in the classroom where errors are not seen as something to be ashamed of but rather as a step in the process of learning (von Wörde, 2003: 9). Furthermore, when correcting the students, the teacher has to be cautious to save the students’ face. The teacher should also strive to keep the level of spoken English as high as needed, whilst still making sure that everyone understands as much as possible. The upper tier students need to hear spoken English at a level that allows them to develop, but making it too high may cause students to suffer even more.

The second category is anxiety caused by lack of preparation:

Question #9 I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in the English class (3.1)
6/10.5%  19/33.3%  6/10.5%  17/29.8%  9/15.8%

Question #25 I get tense and nervous when I have to discuss things unfamiliar to me in English (3.2)
5/8.7%  13/22.8%  11/19.3%  23/40.3%  5/8.7%

Students who have not prepared what they are going to say experience heavy anxiety. This may be due to natural social anxiety being enhanced by a lack of proficiency in English. When speaking English, students might lack the vocabulary and the ability to improvise that they have when speaking their mother tongue. Instead of using strategies to circumvent their lack of proficiency, they panic, freeze and forget what they know. By practicing casual conversation in smaller groups, students may be able to learn to be more spontaneous when using English and overcome their need for preparation (Baran-Lucarz, 2014: 464).

The third category is broader and includes factors such as self-efficacy i.e., the learner’s belief in his or her own capability to reach goals and complete tasks. As Horwitz et al. (1986) write, FLA is “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours.”

Question #7 I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am (3.2)
3/5.3%  13/22.8%  15/26.3%  22/38.6%  4/7%

Question #10 I worry about the consequences of failing my English class (3.5)
8/14%  8/14%  6/10.5%  19/33.3%  16/28%

Question #12 In the English class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know (3.0)
10/17.5%  13/22.8%  7/12.3%  20/35.1%  7/12.3%
Being in a classroom might mean that the students are measured against their peers, causing a situation where they compare themselves to others. This comparison may lead them to devalue themselves and lower their confidence in their skills. A spiral of negative feelings connected to English may develop, causing further devaluation of the self-image. This spiral can lead to increased anxiety and further situations where anxiety causes the learner to forget things previously known.

The fourth and final category is related to test anxiety:

Question #21  The more I study for an English test, the more confused I get (3.2)
7/12.3%  10/17.5%  13/22.8%  20/35.1%  7/12.3%

Test anxiety is common amongst most students. A test may be decisive for their grade, and their future. Because of the importance of the tests, this is a very difficult factor to influence, especially when the competition for places at the high-tier colleges and universities is fierce.

**4.2.2 Factors not affecting anxiety**

Four questions had an average below 2.5 indicating that they have little or no impact on the students’ anxiety:

Question #13  It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class (2.1)
21/36.8%  18/31.6%  12/21%  4/7%  2/3.5%

Question #17  I often feel like not going to my English class (2.1)
18/31.6%  17/29.8%  9/15.6%  3/5.3%  5/8.7%

Question #24  I get tense and nervous when talking to a person whose sex is opposite to mine (2.1)
23/40.4%  18/31.6%  10/17.5%  2/3.5%  4/7%

Question #26  I feel more tense and nervous in my English class than in my other classes (2.0)
25/43.8%  17/29.8%  8/14%  4/7%  3/5.3%

The results of these four questions support the idea that the students’ anxiety is influenced by their self-efficacy and confidence in their English skills. Volunteering answers in the class seems to be a non-issue for students, as long as they feel prepared before answering. Nor does English class per se cause any more anxiety than any other class. This suggests that it is the situations that might occur during English class that cause them to feel anxious rather than English as a language.
4.3 Qualitative data

As the interviews were done with students who volunteered to participate, it seems reasonable to assume that most of them felt comfortable in their English skills as well as speaking with a foreigner. This has to be kept in mind when analysing their answers. The voices of the most anxious students or the students who dislike English are not heard.

All the students participating in the interviews regarded English as an important, and fun, subject. Their English teacher seemed to be highly influential in their opinion. One of the students said “she never said English is good subject, but she, explain a lot of countries and culture for us when we have English class and I think she is a good teacher.” Another student explained that “she has shown a lot of English songs and films.” Clearly, these students appreciate the influx of culture in their English classroom. As for their own motivation to learn English, the students replied that they like to read books in English such as Harry Potter and Sherlock Holmes. Others liked to listen to English music. Some also pointed out video games as reasons why they wanted to learn English. They need English to be able enjoy their hobbies and free time activities. Without English, they would not be able to indulge in western culture and the western life-style that appeals to them. A student put it like this: “Because I think we treat English as a language, not just for test.” When asked about what they thought were the most difficult aspects of English, the students raised pronunciation and grammar as the hardest. Because English pronunciation differs so radically from Chinese the students felt that they had a hard time with their speaking.

When asked about anxiety, none of the students who participated in the interviews considered themselves as anxious in class. When asked about making mistakes in front of their peers the students seemed to think of this as something normal: “I’m not afraid of mistakes. I want my teacher to correct my mistakes.” Even if their classmates laugh, the same student said, “I don’t think that it is shameful.” Another student continued on the same topic: “I’m not afraid of mistakes, I think we can learn something from mistakes and we will remember the mistakes for a long time. So it is OK to make mistakes.” Granted, these are, in their own opinion at least, high performing students who consider themselves adept at English. As such, the fear of negative evaluation is lessened and instead they see errors as a way of making progress. However, when they were asked about tests, even these students admitted to being anxious. “Sometimes I’m nervous about it, I don’t want English test ever” was one student’s reaction. The reason for their anxiety when it came to tests was the high pressure on them to get high grades. China’s schools are notorious for the high level of competition and every grade is important for the student’s future.
5. Conclusion and discussion

The data gathered in this study show that a majority of the students in the senior middle school class who participated in the survey suffer from foreign language anxiety. As many as 60% of the students are considered to be anxious according to the results of the FLCAS. This number is in line with previous studies of FLA on Chinese college students of English. Among the factors causing anxiety, four categories were discovered to be extra influential. These were firstly, teacher related anxiety; secondly, lack of preparation; thirdly, a broader factor that includes self-efficacy, feelings and behaviours; and lastly, test anxiety. Four factors were found not to affect anxiety. The students had no problems volunteering answers in class, as long as they were prepared to answer. The sex of the person they were talking to was also almost a non-factor. Their general attitude towards English class was good; they did not feel more tense in English class than other classes, nor were they less motivated to partake in their English class than other classes.

According to the results of the survey, the students seemed to feel uneasy when their teacher corrected them without giving clear information on what was being corrected. They also felt nervous when they could not understand what the teacher was saying. Speaking English without preparing beforehand was also an important factor. It appears that when the students have little or no time to prepare an answer, they feel anxious. Anxiety can have a major negative impact on students’ learning and as such, the teacher should work towards lessening these factors as much as possible.

The interviews showed that many students have a high interest in learning English. They need the language as a tool when being exposed to English culture. Western books, movies, music and videos-games are a natural part of their life. While many of these are translated into Chinese, they will still miss some of them if language restricts them. As such, their positive attitude towards English may represent a positive attitude towards the western sphere. It is possible that their attitude is affected by the fact that these students come from affluent families and cannot really be considered representative of Chinese students in general. As such, they are able to enjoy a more modern life-style.

It would be interesting to study anxiety among Swedish learners of English in years 7-9 and compare the results with those of this study. This could give a deeper understanding of FLA and how it exists cross cultures. Further, as the teacher has an important role in reducing anxiety, it would be interesting to examine different teacher-based measures to lessen anxiety and their effect on anxiety levels in the class.
References


# Appendix 1: Questionnaire

1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking English in my class  
   1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □  5 □

2. I don’t worry about making mistakes in the English class  
   1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □  5 □

3. I tremble when I know that I’m going to be called on in the English class  
   1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □  5 □

4. It frightens me when I don’t understand what the teacher is saying  
   1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □  5 □

5. It wouldn’t bother me at all to take more foreign language classes  
   1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □  5 □

6. During my English class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course  
   1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □  5 □

7. I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am  
   1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □  5 □

8. I am usually at ease during English tests in my class  
   1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □  5 □

9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in the English class  
   1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □  5 □

10. I worry about the consequences of failing my English class  
    1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □  5 □

11. I don’t understand why some people get so upset over English classes  
    1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □  5 □

12. In the English class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know  
    1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □  5 □

13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class  
    1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □  5 □

14. I would not be nervous speaking English with native speakers
15. I get upset when I don’t understand what the teacher is correcting

16. Even if I am well prepared for the English class, I feel anxious about it

17. I often feel like not going to my English class

18. I feel confident when I speak English in class

19. I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make

20. I can feel my heart pounding when I’m going to be called on in the English class

21. The more I study for an English test, the more confused I get

22. I don’t feel pressure to prepare very well for the English class

23. I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do

24. I feel very anxious about speaking English in front of other students

25. The English class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind

26. I feel more tense and nervous in my English class than in my other classes

27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking English in class

28. When I’m on my way to the English class, I feel very sure and relaxed

29. I get nervous when I don’t understand every word the English teacher says
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak English

31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English

32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of English

33. I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven’t prepared in advance

34. I get tense and nervous when talking to a person whose sex is opposite to mine

35. I get tense and nervous when I have to discuss things unfamiliar to me in English

36. I feel overwhelmed by the number of words I have to learn to speak English
Appendix 2: Interview guide

- Please describe your feelings about your English class.
- Please tell me what you like best about your English class.
- Please tell me what disturbs you the most in your English class.
- How do you think people in your classroom will react if you make mistakes?
- Have your teacher played a role in your feelings, either good or bad, about English as a language?