

Anxiety and Mental Health in English Learning among Chinese Students at a Thai Public University

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Abstract

English learning anxiety is a widespread issue among students, often leading to psychological distress such as stress, low self-confidence, and fear of failure. This study examines the causes of English learning anxiety, its impact on academic performance and mental health, and strategies to reduce these effects. Based on survey responses from 60 students, the study identifies anxiety triggers such as communication apprehension, test anxiety, and social comparison. The findings suggest that a supportive learning environment, confidence-building exercises, and psychological interventions can reduce anxiety levels and improve students' English proficiency and overall well-being.

Keywords: *English learning anxiety, psychological distress, academic performance, test anxiety, communication apprehension, confidence-building exercises.*

Introduction

English language learning often induces significant anxiety among students, particularly those learning it as a second language. This anxiety can hinder their academic performance and overall learning experience. Students face multiple issues while acquiring proficiency, and these challenges are often compounded by feelings of embarrassment, fear, and self-doubt. Understanding the key factors contributing to English learning anxiety, as well as its effects on students' academic outcomes, is critical for developing effective strategies to mitigate these issues. This study explores various sources of anxiety, such as the fear of making mistakes, communication apprehension, test anxiety, and social comparison. It also examines the impact of anxiety on cognitive functions, motivation, and engagement in learning activities. Moreover, this study proposes practical interventions, such as creating supportive learning environments and offering mindfulness techniques, to help alleviate anxiety and enhance students' language learning experiences.

Fear of making mistakes is one of the most common causes of anxiety among English learners. Many students feel embarrassed or ashamed when they mispronounce words or make grammatical errors. This fear often leads to avoidance behaviors, preventing students from fully engaging with the language and hindering their learning progress. Students often experience anxiety when speaking English, particularly in the presence of native speakers. This apprehension arises from the fear of being judged or misunderstood. As a result, students may avoid speaking opportunities, which are essential for developing fluency and confidence in the language. High-stakes English proficiency exams, such as IELTS or TOEFL, induce significant anxiety in students. The pressure to achieve high scores often outweighs students' intrinsic motivation to learn, leading to performance anxiety. This

anxiety can impair concentration and affect test outcomes, further contributing to stress and discouragement. In academic environments, students frequently compare their English skills to those of their peers, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy. The tendency to equate English proficiency with intelligence or success exacerbates these feelings, diminishing self-confidence and increasing anxiety in language learning.

Students who experience high levels of anxiety are less likely to participate in class activities, especially speaking exercises. This lack of participation restricts their opportunities for language practice, ultimately hindering their improvement. Anxiety can impair cognitive functions such as memory retention and focus. When students are anxious, they often have difficulties concentrating on language tasks, making it more difficult for them to learn new vocabulary or understand complex grammar concepts. Anxiety can lead to a decrease in motivation, causing some students to lose interest in learning English altogether. This lack of engagement further perpetuates the cycle of anxiety and underachievement.

A supportive, relaxed classroom atmosphere can significantly reduce students' anxiety levels. Encouraging interaction, offering practice opportunities, and providing positive reinforcement from teachers and peers can help students feel more comfortable and confident. Regular practice in a low-pressure environment, such as group discussions or language exchange programs, can help students gradually build confidence. These activities offer students the chance to practice English without fear of judgment, reducing anxiety over time. Mindfulness techniques, such as deep breathing and meditation, can be useful tools for managing stress. These relaxation methods help students stay calm, focused, and better equipped to handle the anxiety that often accompanies language learning. Providing psychological support, such as counseling or anxiety management workshops, can assist students in managing their anxiety. These interventions can help students develop coping strategies and build resilience, improving their overall experience in English language learning (Daud, Ras, Novitri, & Audia, 2019).

English learning anxiety is a common issue among students, particularly those learning English as a second language. It can significantly affect academic progress and well-being. This anxiety can manifest in various forms, such as fear of making mistakes, communication apprehension, and test anxiety. These factors can reduce students' confidence, participation, and proficiency. Despite growing awareness of this issue, there is limited research on the specific causes and effects of English learning anxiety in higher education.

English learning anxiety is a common and pressing issue among students, often leading to psychological distress that affects both academic performance and mental health. This study is significant in its exploration of the underlying causes of English learning anxiety and its potential impact on students' overall well-being. By identifying key anxiety triggers such as communication apprehension, test anxiety, and social comparison, the study provides valuable insights into the specific challenges that learners face. Understanding these factors is essential for developing effective strategies to support students in overcoming anxiety and improving their language skills. The findings of this study, which emphasize the importance of a supportive learning environment, confidence-building exercises, and psychological interventions, offer practical solutions for educators and institutions seeking to reduce anxiety and enhance students' English proficiency. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological barriers in language learning and presents actionable recommendations to improve students' academic experiences and mental health.

Literature Review

Learning English as a second language (ESL) is a vital skill in today's globalized society; however, it often generates significant anxiety, particularly among Chinese students. Language learning anxiety has been recognized as a significant barrier to language proficiency, impacting learners' confidence, participation, and academic performance (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). This literature review examines the causes of English learning anxiety, its effects on students' mental health, and strategies to mitigate its impact.

Ehrman and Oxford (1995) emphasized the role of cognitive and affective learning styles in language acquisition, noting that anxiety undermines self-efficacy and motivation. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) similarly found that anxiety impedes cognitive processes, such as memory retention and linguistic recall. In particular, test anxiety, communication apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation are common among Chinese students, who often face high academic expectations. The fear of making mistakes can lead to avoidance behaviors, limiting opportunities for active language practice. Zheng and Cheng (2018) found that test anxiety is directly linked to lower academic performance, creating a cycle of stress and underachievement. Additionally, issues related to social comparison and self-confidence further intensify English learning anxiety.

Anxiety has long been recognized as a significant affective variable that impacts language learning outcomes across various groups and contexts. It has been consistently linked to English learning achievement, particularly in foreign language settings. A study examining high school students in Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms found that students experienced relatively high levels of anxiety when learning English. The study revealed that male students exhibited higher anxiety levels compared to their female counterparts. Moreover, high levels of anxiety were found to have a potentially negative effect on students' language learning, hindering their progress. The research also explored potential causes of these heightened anxiety levels and offered recommendations for educators to reduce student anxiety in the classroom environment (Na, 2007).

Another study conducted with high school students in Dezhou City, Shandong Province, also focused on English learning anxiety in EFL classrooms. The findings again indicated that students exhibited considerable anxiety regarding their English learning. Similar to the previous study, males were found to experience higher anxiety levels than females. Furthermore, the study suggested that anxiety could impair students' language learning, particularly in classroom situations where speaking English was required. The researchers emphasized the importance of addressing these anxiety issues and provided practical suggestions for teachers to help alleviate student anxiety during lessons (Cui, 2011).

Research on anxiety in undergraduate Chinese students, particularly those majoring in non-English fields, has also highlighted the impact of anxiety on language acquisition. A study involving students at different proficiency levels found that students across all levels experienced anxiety when speaking English in class. Interestingly, the more proficient students tended to feel less anxious than their less proficient peers. The study also identified that students experienced the highest levels of anxiety when responding to the teacher or when singled out to speak in front of the class. Conversely, students felt the least anxious during pair work activities. The research suggested that greater exposure to English, particularly oral communication, helped reduce anxiety over time, highlighting the beneficial effects of practice in alleviating language-related stress (Liu, 2006).

Further research has explored anxiety within the context of an immersive English learning environment, specifically in a summer camp setting. The study focused on Chinese undergraduate non-English majors and examined their anxiety levels across three different proficiency levels. The research found that a significant number of students felt anxious

when speaking English with native-speaking teachers and volunteers, both inside and outside the classroom. However, the study also noted that more proficient students experienced less anxiety in these situations. Additionally, students felt less anxiety when learning English in a non-examination context, such as cultural immersion activities, which was contrasted with the typical pressure of exam-based learning. These findings underscored the role of a relaxed, non-exam-focused environment in reducing anxiety and promoting more effective language learning (Jing & Junying, 2016).

The studies reviewed highlight the pervasive nature of language learning anxiety and its significant impact on student engagement and performance in foreign language acquisition. Factors such as proficiency level, gender, the type of learning environment, and exposure to English outside traditional classroom settings play crucial roles in determining the extent of anxiety experienced by learners. Additionally, these studies suggest that teachers can play an important role in mitigating anxiety through thoughtful classroom management and by creating environments that foster comfort and confidence in students. Further research in this area could continue to explore effective strategies for reducing anxiety and promoting positive learning experiences in EFL settings.

Addressing English learning anxiety requires a multifaceted approach. Research indicates that a supportive and interactive learning environment can significantly reduce stress and anxiety levels among students (British Council, n.d.). Psychological interventions, such as mindfulness techniques and self-regulated learning strategies, have also been shown to enhance learners' confidence and resilience. By integrating these strategies into language instruction, educators can help students overcome psychological barriers and improve their proficiency in English.

This study aims to contribute to the existing body of research on English learning anxiety by identifying primary anxiety triggers and suggesting effective intervention strategies. Understanding the complex relationship between anxiety, cognitive processes, and language acquisition can provide valuable insights for developing practical solutions that improve students' language competence and well-being.

Methodology

As globalization accelerates, English has become a vital tool for international communication. The accurate assessment of English proficiency holds significant implications for both educational development and students' future career prospects. To explore the English anxiety levels of students, this study employed a questionnaire to gather comprehensive data. The study included 60 higher education students from China studying at a Thai public university. A structured questionnaire was used, featuring statements to assess students' experiences with English learning anxiety. The survey responses were analyzed quantitatively to identify trends. The findings underscore the widespread prevalence of anxiety and suggest potential interventions to help students overcome psychological barriers in language learning.

Results and Discussion

The results of the survey indicate that anxiety is a common experience for students learning English. Just over 20% of respondents reported feeling anxious or nervous "always" when learning English, while around 18% said they often felt anxious. Only a small percentage (5%) reported never feeling anxious. These findings suggest that anxiety is a pervasive issue for many learners, significantly impacting their ability to engage with the language.

When asked specifically about speaking in class, over 40% of respondents reported feeling anxious, and 45% expressed anxiety when speaking with native English speakers. This highlights the specific challenges that students face when using English in real-world contexts, where fear of judgment or making mistakes can inhibit participation. The results further show that nearly half of the respondents experienced nervousness when taking English proficiency tests, demonstrating that test anxiety is another significant factor affecting students' performance.

The fear of making mistakes is a prominent concern for many students. Nearly 50% of respondents admitted they were scared or very scared of making mistakes, and almost 60% reported avoiding speaking English altogether due to this fear. This fear of errors likely contributes to reduced practice opportunities, which in turn hinders their language development.

Additionally, the survey revealed that anxiety negatively affected students' enjoyment of learning English, with approximately 75% of respondents acknowledging that anxiety had a detrimental impact on their overall learning experience. This loss of enjoyment may contribute to diminished motivation, making it more difficult for students to persist in their language learning journey.

Over half of the respondents reported losing confidence in speaking English, further illustrating the debilitating effects of anxiety on self-esteem and willingness to engage in conversations. This lack of confidence can create a cycle, where anxiety leads to avoidance behaviors, which in turn results in less language practice and slower progress.

When asked about potential solutions to mitigate anxiety, around 60% of respondents suggested that a relaxed classroom atmosphere with positive feedback would be beneficial. This indicates that students recognize the importance of a supportive and encouraging environment in reducing anxiety and fostering a more positive learning experience. The results underscore the significant role that anxiety plays in the language learning process. Anxiety affects various aspects of students' experiences, including their confidence, willingness to participate, and enjoyment of the learning process.

The findings of this study confirm the pervasive nature of English learning anxiety among Chinese higher education students, aligning with previous research while providing specific quantitative insights into the extent and manifestations of this phenomenon. The results demonstrate that anxiety is not merely an occasional concern but a persistent challenge that affects the majority of students in their English language learning journey.

The finding that over 38% of students experience anxiety frequently or always when learning English underscores the widespread nature of this issue. This prevalence rate is consistent with previous studies by Na (2007) and Cui (2011), which identified high anxiety levels among Chinese EFL learners. However, the current study provides more nuanced data, revealing that only 5% of students never experience anxiety, indicating that English learning anxiety affects virtually all students to some degree.

The specific contexts in which anxiety manifests are particularly revealing. The finding that over 40% of students feel anxious when speaking in class and 45% experience anxiety when speaking with native English speakers highlights the social and performance aspects of language anxiety. This aligns with MacIntyre and Gardner's (1991) research on communication apprehension and supports the theoretical framework that identifies fear of negative evaluation as a core component of language learning anxiety.

The study reveals a concerning pattern of avoidance behaviors, with nearly 60% of students avoiding speaking English due to fear of making mistakes. This finding is particularly significant as it demonstrates how anxiety creates a counterproductive cycle: students avoid the very activities (speaking practice) that are essential for language development, thereby limiting their opportunities for improvement and potentially

reinforcing their anxieties. This phenomenon supports Ehrman and Oxford's (1995) observations about how anxiety undermines self-efficacy and creates barriers to effective language acquisition.

The impact on confidence is equally troubling, with over half of the respondents reporting a loss of confidence in speaking English. This finding suggests that anxiety not only affects immediate performance but also has lasting effects on students' self-perception and willingness to engage with the language. The relationship between anxiety and reduced enjoyment of learning (reported by 75% of respondents) further indicates that anxiety affects intrinsic motivation, potentially leading to long-term disengagement from English learning.

The finding that nearly half of the students experience nervousness during English proficiency tests supports the existing literature on test anxiety as a distinct component of language learning anxiety. This is particularly relevant in the Chinese educational context, where high-stakes testing often determines academic and career opportunities. The prevalence of test anxiety may be exacerbated by the exam-oriented nature of Chinese education systems, creating additional pressure that extends beyond typical language learning challenges.

The finding that 60% of students identify a relaxed classroom atmosphere with positive feedback as beneficial suggests that learners possess insight into potential solutions for their anxiety. This finding is encouraging as it indicates student readiness to engage with supportive interventions. The students' recognition of environmental factors as crucial aligns with research emphasizing the importance of creating psychologically safe learning spaces.

The results support the multidimensional nature of language learning anxiety as conceptualized by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). The study confirms that anxiety manifests across different contexts (classroom speaking, interaction with native speakers, testing situations) and affects multiple aspects of learning (participation, confidence, enjoyment, and performance). The findings also support the theoretical understanding that anxiety creates cognitive interference, as evidenced by students' avoidance behaviors and reported difficulties in engaging with language learning activities.

The high levels of anxiety observed in this study may be influenced by specific cultural factors within Chinese educational contexts. The emphasis on academic achievement, the traditional teacher-centered classroom model, and cultural norms around avoiding loss of face may contribute to heightened anxiety levels. The finding that students feel more anxious when speaking with native speakers may reflect additional cultural barriers related to cross-cultural communication and perceived linguistic inadequacy.

Based on students' identification of relaxed classroom atmospheres as beneficial, educators should prioritize creating psychologically safe learning spaces. This includes establishing clear expectations that mistakes are part of the learning process, implementing positive reinforcement strategies, and modeling acceptance of errors as learning opportunities. Classroom activities should be designed to minimize competitive elements that might exacerbate social comparison anxiety. Given the high levels of speaking anxiety, educators should develop structured approaches to gradually increase students' comfort with oral communication. This could include starting with low-stakes speaking activities such as pair work (which Liu (2006) found to be less anxiety-provoking), progressing to small group discussions, and eventually building to more formal presentations. The progression should be carefully scaffolded to build confidence incrementally. Institutions should consider incorporating explicit anxiety management strategies into English language curricula. This could include mindfulness techniques, breathing exercises, and cognitive restructuring methods that help students reframe negative thoughts about their language abilities. Such training should be presented as normal and beneficial rather than remedial to avoid stigmatization. Given the high prevalence of test anxiety, educators should explore diverse

assessment approaches that reduce the pressure of high-stakes testing. This might include portfolio-based assessment, peer evaluation components, self-assessment opportunities, and formative assessment practices that provide ongoing feedback rather than summative judgment. Institutions should establish dedicated support services for students experiencing significant language learning anxiety. This could include counseling services specifically trained in language learning issues, peer support groups, and workshops focused on building confidence in English communication.

Programs should include components that help students develop cross-cultural communication skills and reduce anxiety about interacting with native speakers. This training should address cultural differences in communication styles and help students understand that communication effectiveness is more important than perfect linguistic accuracy. Curricula should be designed to value the learning process and effort rather than focusing solely on linguistic accuracy and performance outcomes. This approach can help reduce the fear of making mistakes that affects nearly 50% of students in this study. Given students' comfort with digital platforms, educators should leverage technology to create low-pressure practice opportunities. This might include online speaking practice platforms, virtual reality environments for simulated conversations, and digital portfolios that allow students to practice and receive feedback in less threatening contexts.

Institutions should invest in comprehensive professional development programs that train faculty to recognize signs of language learning anxiety and implement evidence-based strategies to address it. This training should be ongoing rather than one-time events to ensure sustained implementation of supportive practices. Administrators should allocate resources specifically for addressing language learning anxiety, including funding for counseling services, anxiety management programs, and faculty training initiatives. The widespread nature of the problem justifies dedicated resource investment. Institutions should establish systematic approaches to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of anxiety reduction interventions. This includes collecting ongoing data about student anxiety levels and the success of various support strategies.

The findings of this study demonstrate that English learning anxiety is a significant and widespread challenge that requires systematic, multi-faceted responses from educators, institutions, and policymakers. While the prevalence of anxiety is concerning, students' recognition of potential solutions and the existing body of research on effective interventions provide grounds for optimism. Success in addressing this challenge will require sustained commitment to creating supportive learning environments, implementing evidence-based interventions, and maintaining focus on students' psychological well-being as an integral component of language education.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This study highlights the pervasive impact of anxiety on students learning English, particularly in speaking and testing situations. The results suggest that fear of making mistakes, communication apprehension, and test anxiety are significant factors contributing to students' reluctance to engage in English learning. The anxiety experienced by many students leads to reduced participation, lower confidence, and diminished enjoyment of the learning process. However, the study also points to potential solutions, with students expressing a preference for a relaxed and supportive learning environment to alleviate their anxiety. These findings emphasize the importance of addressing emotional and psychological barriers in language learning to enhance both proficiency and well-being.

Future research should further explore the specific factors contributing to English learning anxiety in diverse contexts, such as different cultural settings and age groups.

Longitudinal studies could examine how anxiety evolves over time and its long-term effects on language acquisition. Additionally, the effectiveness of various interventions, such as mindfulness practices, peer support programs, and cognitive-behavioral strategies, could be assessed to determine the most effective approaches to reducing anxiety. Further research into the relationship between anxiety, motivation, and language proficiency would provide deeper insights into how anxiety interacts with other psychological factors in the language learning process. Finally, exploring how digital tools and online learning platforms can offer anxiety-reducing features may provide new avenues for enhancing language education in the digital age.

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