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A Survey on Second Language Acquisition Anxiety of Non-English Major Students

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Abstract

Second language acquisition (SLA) anxiety is a critical issue affecting learners' academic performance and classroom participation. Non-English major students in China, who typically have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, often experience high levels of anxiety when learning a foreign language. This study has investigated these non-English major students' anxiety levels and causes. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) is used and a total of 50 valid responses are collected and analyzed. The findings show that communicative anxiety ranks highest, followed by negative social evaluation, and test anxiety ranks last. The main reasons for non-English major students' anxiety are Chinese exam-oriented systems and influence of high context communication styles.

Key Words: Communicative Anxiety; Negative Social Evaluation; Test Anxiety; Non-English Major Students.

1. Introduction

The acquisition of a second language (L2) constitutes a multidimensional process where cognitive, affective, and sociocultural factors dynamically interact. While traditional pedagogy emphasized structural mastery and linguistic competence, contemporary research increasingly recognizes emotional variables—particularly foreign language anxiety (FLA)—as pivotal determinants of learning outcomes (Dewaele, 2005). This paradoxical phenomenon simultaneously reflects learners' cognitive engagement in language acquisition while functioning as a psychological barrier that undermines proficiency. The pervasiveness of FLA across global educational contexts necessitates systematic investigation, particularly given its culturally mediated manifestations and skill-specific variations that remain underexplored.

The conceptual foundations of FLA were established through seminal theoretical frameworks. Horwitz (1986) revolutionized understanding by defining FLA as "a distinct

complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors arising from the uniqueness of language learning," distinguishing it from general anxiety through its classroom-specific etiology. This systemic conceptualization was further refined by MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), who introduced the critical dichotomy between debilitative anxiety that disrupts cognitive processing and facilitative anxiety that enhances vigilance—a distinction that continues to inform contemporary pedagogical interventions. Theoretical depth was augmented by Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, which posited anxiety as a neurological gatekeeper regulating input assimilation. Neurocognitive evidence from Zheng (2018) substantiates this model, demonstrating suppressed activation in Broca's area among highly anxious learners during speaking tasks, effectively illustrating how emotional barriers can negate even optimally structured input (i+1). Complementing these models, Spielberger's (1983) interactionist paradigm reconciled Dulay's (1982) trait-state dichotomy, demonstrating how stable predispositions interact with situational triggers to shape anxiety responses (Woodrow, 2006). These theoretical advances collectively established FLA as a multidimensional construct requiring context-sensitive analysis.

Western research paradigms have dominated methodological approaches to FLA quantification and intervention. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by Horwitz (1986), has always been the predominant instrument with its tripartite focus on communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Cross-cultural validation studies reveal intriguing divergences: while Western learners exhibit heightened test anxiety linked to individualistic achievement norms (Young, 1991), Asian cohorts demonstrate amplified communication apprehension attributable to collectivist face-saving practices (Liu, 2006). However, critiques increasingly question the FLCAS's applicability to non-Western contexts. As Dewaele (2014) notes, the scale's Western-centric design overlooks contextualized stressors prevalent in exam-oriented systems—a limitation particularly salient in China, where standardized testing and teacher-centered pedagogy reconfigure anxiety manifestations. These critiques underscore the necessity of contextualizing FLA research within specific educational ecologies.

China's unique sociocultural and institutional landscape generates distinct FLA patterns, particularly among its annual cohort of 30 million non-English majors subjected to compulsory English requirements. Unlike their English-major counterparts receiving systematic training, these learners face compounded challenges: limited exposure hours (2-4 lessons per week), exam-driven curricula prioritizing test-taking strategies over communicative competence, and an error-avoidant classroom culture where 68% cite "losing face" as their primary anxiety trigger (Liu, 2012). This environment fosters "ability anxiety"—a vicious cycle wherein perceived linguistic deficiencies inhibit practice engagement, further widening skill gaps (Liu, 2008). Empirical studies identify listening anxiety as particularly acute, with abrupt teacher corrections and challenging materials causing 42% of learners to report physiological stress symptoms (Deng, 2021). Yet critical gaps persist: comparative analyses of anxiety across language skills remain scarce, and Western-derived models inadequately address China's unique stressors, including the CET-4/6's gatekeeper role in degree conferment and employment prospects. These oversights are compounded by research paradigms that marginalize non-English majors—a population for whom English functions not as an integrative pursuit but as an institutional imposition. Therefore, based on Horwitz's FLCAS questionnaire, this study attempts to examine Chinese non-English major students'

foreign language anxiety (FLA) levels and the causes.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Questions

The research aims of exploring the level and cause of English learning anxiety among non-English major students in this study will be addressed by the following research questions:

1. What are the main types of English learning anxiety? What is the ranking of these anxieties in this study?
2. What are the causes of English learning anxieties faced by the non-English major students?

2.2 Instruments

Horwitz (1986) believes that foreign language learning anxiety plays a crucial role in foreign language learning, and such anxiety can be effectively measured with high reliability. The Chinese-adapted version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was employed in this study. The options mainly include: 1-Atrongly agree, 2-Agree, 3-Neither agree nor disagree, 4-Disagree, 5-Strongly disagree.

The questionnaire contains 36 questions. The first part is about their information, including the gender of the non-English major students, their major, and their last English score. The second part is the English classroom anxiety scale. The anxiety scale used in this study is based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) designed by Horwitz in 1986, which consists of 33 items measuring learners' anxiety levels, focusing on three aspects: communicative anxiety, test anxiety and negative social evaluation in language learning contexts.

2.3 Procedure

The questionnaire was issued on January 4, 2025 and ended on January 18, 2025. A total of 53 questionnaires were given out and 50 valid questionnaires were received. Meanwhile, the data is collected scientifically and the credibility of the collected data are ensured. The data analysis is based on SPSS 25. The mean value, standard deviation and independent sample T-test are used to investigate the learning anxiety of non-English major students.

3. Data Analysis

A total of 50 valid questionnaires were collected. By using SPSS 25 statistical software to analyze all the questionnaire questions, it is concluded that the coefficient of classroom anxiety scale for non-English major students is Cronbachα =0.841.

Table 1: coefficient of classroom anxiety scale

Reliability Statistics	
Measure	Value
Cronbach's Alpha	0.83
Cronbach's Alpha (Standardized Items)	0.841
Number of Items	33

It indicates that the scale has high reliability and can be used to investigate language anxiety in second language learners.

Table 2: Overview of language anxiety of non-English major students

Descriptive Statistics for FLCAS Scores	
Statistic	**Value**
Valid N (listwise)	50
Range	86
Minimum	72
Maximum	158
Mean	107.86
Standard Deviation	18.35

The FLCAS containing thirty-three questions was used to investigate the subjects' anxiety level. The scores of anxiety should be between 33 to 165 (Horwitz, 1986). But in the present study, the minimum of the subjects' scores is 72, which is 39 higher than the minimum of the scores. And the mean score of this study is 107.86, which proves that most of

the participants experienced higher anxiety. In this study, the scores revealed anxiety ranging from 2.74 to 3.76. The mean scores for the three anxiety dimensions were calculated as follows: Communicative Anxiety: 3.35, Test Anxiety: 3.23 and Negative Social Evaluation: 3.22.

3.1 Communicative Anxiety

Communicative anxiety suggests that students' fears are disproportionately tied to interactive language use rather than formal assessments or social judgment. This dimension (items 1, 4, 9, 14, 15, 18, 24, 27, 29, 30, 32) reflects anxiety linked to oral communication and real-time language processing, which are contextually activated during classroom communication and interaction.

Table 3: Ranking of Items in Communicative Anxiety

Items		Score
1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English class.	3.74
9	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class.	3.56
15	I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	3.52
30	I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak English.	3.48
24	I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.	3.42
27	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.	3.3
4	It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the English class.	3.28
32	I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of English.	3.16
18	I feel confident when I speak in English class.	3.14
29	I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says.	3.12
14	I would not be nervous speaking English with native speakers.	2.92

The analysis of communicative anxiety among Chinese non-English majors reveals a complex interplay between classroom dynamics, cultural values, and pedagogical practices. At the core of students' anxiety lies a heightened fear of spontaneous, unplanned speaking tasks, which consistently generated the highest stress levels. Items such as "I never feel quite sure of myself when speaking in class" (3.74) and "I panic when speaking without preparation" (3.56) highlight a critical gap in China's English education system. While students are often trained to excel in structured tasks like recitations or grammar drills, they lack the cognitive flexibility for real-time language processing. It stems from an overemphasis on memorization and error avoidance, leaving learners unprepared to handle the unpredictability of authentic communication. The pressure to perform in front of teachers—evident in high anxiety scores around teacher corrections (e.g., "I get upset when I don't understand the teacher's corrections," 3.52)—further amplifies this fear, turning classrooms into spaces of vigilance rather than experimentation.

Interestingly, the data challenges common assumptions about social judgment as a primary anxiety source. While students reported self-consciousness about peer evaluations ("I feel nervous speaking in front of other students," 3.42), their anxiety was more acutely tied to teacher interactions. This reflects the enduring influence of Confucian educational values in China, where teachers hold authoritative roles as knowledge guardians. Mistakes during teacher-led activities are perceived not merely as errors but as failures to meet hierarchical expectations, triggering a unique face-loss anxiety. And grammar knowledge that often viewed as a confidence booster is seen as a hidden stressor. The high score for "feeling overwhelmed by English rules" (3.48) suggests that intensive grammar instruction, while improving test performance, may inadvertently hinder speaking fluency.

These findings emphasize the influence of Chinese culture and background on education. Lower anxiety about interacting with native speakers ("I would not be nervous speaking with natives," 2.92) compared to classroom scenarios hints at untapped potential for anxiety reduction through experiential learning. By redesigning classrooms to simulate real-world interactions, teachers could shift students' focus from perfection to meaningful expression. Additionally, decoupling grammar instruction from speaking activities during initial fluency development might alleviate cognitive overload. Ultimately, addressing communicative anxiety requires redefining success in language learning: moving from error-free performance to resilient, adaptive communication. Although it's challenging, this cultural shift could transform anxiety from a barrier into a growth, empowering students to embrace the real language use.

From the analysis above, it can be seen that students' anxiety about impromptu speech, teacher authority, and grammar rules is mainly due to specific patterns in the Chinese educational environment, such as the influence of teacher authority exceeding peer evaluation, and the phenomenon of grammar knowledge increasing anxiety instead.

3.2 Test Anxiety

The Test Anxiety dimension (items 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26, 28) examines fears tied to evaluations, preparation, and classroom pacing. Test Anxiety involves the stress and nervousness associated with examinations.

Table 4: Ranking of Items in Test Anxiety

Items		**Score**
6	During English class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	3.64
20	I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on in my English class.	3.6
10	I worry about the consequences of failing my English class.	3.4
5	It wouldn't bother me at all to take more English class.	3.3
17	I often feel like not going to my English class.	3.28
25	English class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.	3.26
26	I feel more tense and confused in my English class than in my other class.	3.26
16	Even if I am well prepared for English class, I feel anxious about it.	3.2

21	The more I study for an English test, the more confused I get.	3.2
8	I am usually at ease during tests in my English class.	3.18
12	In English class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	3.14
3	I tremble when I know I am going to be called on in English class.	3.04
11	I don't understand why some people get so upset over English classes.	2.94
28	When I am on way to English class, I feel very sure and relaxed.	2.94
22	I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for English class.	2.74

The test anxiety dimension reveals a multifaceted crisis extending far beyond fear of exams. At its core, students' anxiety about future evaluations contaminates daily learning processes. The highest anxiety scores—item 6 (mind-wandering during class, 3.64) and item 20 (physical panic when called on, 3.60)—demonstrate how test pressure hijacks cognitive engagement. Rather than focusing on exams alone, learners disengage mentally (item 6) while simultaneously dreading spontaneous participation (item 20). This suggests that China's exam-oriented culture has blurred the line between learning and assessment, transforming every classroom moment into a mini-test. The consequence is a self-defeating loop, that is anxiety about future tests (item 10: 3.40) undermines present-moment focus, which in turn fuels more anxiety about falling behind (item 25: 3.26).

A finding shows the disconnect between preparation and confidence. Despite reporting consistent study efforts (implied by item 21's score of 3.20: "the more I study, the more confused I get"), students feel unprepared anxiety even when ready (item 16: 3.20). The data suggests the emphasis on rote memorization and repetitive drills creates counterproductive competence. Students master test-taking formulas but lack adaptive skills for unexpected questions or rapid classroom pacing (item 25: 3.26). Notably, the physical manifestations of anxiety—trembling (item 3: 3.04), heart pounding (item 20)—are more severe than cognitive symptoms like forgetfulness (item 12: 3.14).

What's more, avoidance behaviors score moderate. For instance, item 17 ("I often feel like not attending class," 3.28) and item 5 ("bothered by taking more English classes," 3.30), which shows lazy tendencies. While students recognize the high risks (item 10's fear of failing), they downplay preparation urgency (item 22: 2.74).

3.3 Negative Social Evaluation

Negative Social Evaluation concerns the fear of being judged or criticized by others. This dimension (items 2, 7, 13, 19, 23, 31, 33) focuses on fears of ridicule, unfavorable comparisons, and teacher scrutiny.

Table 5: Ranking of Items in Negative Social Evaluation

Items		**Score**
7	I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am.	3.76
33	I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	3.58

23	I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.	3.48
13	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.	3.3
19	I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	3.24
2	I don't worry about making mistakes in English class.	2.88
31	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	2.86

The data on negative social evaluation anxiety uncovers that students fear invisible judgments more than actual ridicule. While the highest anxiety scores relate to perceived peer superiority (item 7: 3.76; item 23: 3.48), the lowest concern is about mockery (item 31: 2.86). This suggests learners are less worried about being laughed at than about implied inferiority in a competitive environment. Cultural factors can explain it that collectivist societies often prioritize group harmony, making public ridicule less likely. However, implicit judgment may still drive anxiety.

It is worth noting that while they dread corrections (item 19: 3.24), the low anxiety about mistakes (item 2: 2.88) implies they think avoiding participation altogether becomes safer than risking imperfect performance.

4. Results and Discussion

The research data paints a complex portrait of anxiety among non-English majors. It can be seen that Non-English majors show high anxiety in the three dimensions: the mean anxiety level of communicative anxiety is 3.31, test anxiety is 3.19, and negative social evaluation is 3.3.

This study contradicts Horwitz (1986) to a certain degree. This study reveals that communicative anxiety (3.31) ranks highest among Chinese non-English majors, followed by fear of negative evaluation (3.3) and test anxiety (3.19). But in Horwitz's (1986) findings, fear of negative evaluation dominates (mean = 4.6 vs. 3.8 in U.S. samples).

This divergence can be attributed to cultural communication norms. In Horwitz's context, Western learners prioritize direct verbal interaction, which may normalize communication-related stress. Conversely, Chinese learners, influenced by high-context communication styles, face amplified anxiety when forced into direct verbal exchanges. While Western classrooms emphasize spontaneous speaking, like debating and group discussing, Chinese exam-oriented systems prioritize written accuracy over oral fluency, leaving students unprepared for communicative tasks and thus more anxious.

The discrepancy between results and Horwitz's also raises questions about the cultural adaptability of FLCAS. For example, FLCAS Item 8 ("I feel nervous speaking with native speakers") may not resonate with Chinese learners, who interact primarily with non-native peers and teachers. But contextualized stressors like CET-4 listening speed anxiety are absent in the original scale.

Compared with other countries, the findings resonate with studies from Korea (Park, 2013) and Saudi Arabia (Alrabai, 2014), where communicative anxiety also predominates. This alignment highlights the role of cultural collectivism in shaping anxiety hierarchies. In all three contexts (China, Korea, Saudi Arabia), learners avoid public mistakes to save face. For instance, in Park's observation, 68% of your participants cited "losing face" as a key stressor, which shows that Korean students fear peer judgment during role-plays.

Like Saudi learners in Alrabai's study, the participants show listening anxiety (mean = 3.75) due to limited exposure to authentic input.

China's CET-4 exam emphasizes standardized listening forms rather than interactive exercises, which exacerbates this gap.

Unlike English majors, who often pursue language learning for cultural integration, non-English majors view English as a "graduation tool." This focus amplifies test anxiety, which is a factor overlooked in Horwitz's original design. And in this study, participants shows higher levels of listening and writing anxiety.

5. **Conclusion**

Findings show that communicative anxiety dominates, driven by unprepared speaking tasks and comprehension gaps, while test anxiety reflects systemic pressures tied to performance metrics. Negative Social Evaluation, though less overt, permeates learning through unfavorable peer comparisons and fear of correction. Critically, these dimensions interact cyclically: test-centric pedagogies inhibit communicative confidence, which in turn heightens insecurities. As exam-centric training prioritizes test-taking strategies over functional competence, learners enter communicative situations with underdeveloped skills, triggering anxiety that further discourages practice.

It is imperative to improve students' self-perception of their level of competence. Although it might be difficult to alter one's self-perception, language learners are always trying hard to gain a more positive self-image. We might encourage more capable and self-confident language learners if we give them time and emphasize pleasant experiences. A language teacher could provide students more chances to communicate in English class.

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