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## Study on the Causes and Coping Strategies of English Learning Anxiety Among Chinese Students

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**Abstract:** *In the context of the growing prevalence of online learning environments, English learning anxiety (FLA) among Chinese college students has become increasingly prominent. The causes are complex and exhibit distinct characteristics rooted in local cultural and educational systems. This study employs an interpretive qualitative research approach to explore anxiety experiences, coping strategies, and teacher intervention roles in English learning among university students. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 English learners and 5 teachers, we systematically identified key factors influencing student anxiety and analyzed coping mechanisms using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method. The findings reveal three primary causes: exam-oriented education systems, face-saving culture-induced communication anxiety, and psychological barriers stemming from lack of feedback in online teaching environments. Regarding coping strategies, students employed diverse approaches including emotional regulation, cognitive preparation, and avoidance behaviors, while teachers actively fostered low-anxiety classroom atmospheres through delayed correction, group task design, and emotional support. The research demonstrates that teachers play an irreplaceable role in identifying student anxiety and implementing effective interventions.*

*This study enhances our understanding of Foreign Language Acquisition (FLA) in Chinese contexts by adopting dual perspectives from both learners and educators, providing empirical support for developing culturally adaptive teaching strategies. The findings emphasize that alleviating foreign language learning anxiety not only boosts academic performance but also helps rebuild students' confidence and engagement in classroom activities.*

**Keywords:** *foreign language learning anxiety; qualitative research; online learning; learning strategies; teacher intervention*

### 1. Introduction

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), a critical emotional barrier in second language acquisition (Horwitz et al., 1986), significantly hinders learners' communicative competence development. Chinese English learners face unique challenges including the high-pressure

exam-oriented education system (e.g., Gaokao and CET-4/CET-6 exams), a social-cultural mentality emphasizing "face" (Liu & Jackson, 2008), and limited oral practice due to large-class teaching (Zhang, 2019). These intertwined factors create distinct localized characteristics of anxiety among Chinese learners, warranting in-depth exploration. This study employs qualitative research methods to systematically reveal the underlying causes of anxiety among Chinese English learners. By integrating perspectives from both learners and teachers, it aims to identify effective localized coping strategies and provide empirical evidence for optimizing English teaching practices. The research focuses on three core questions: What are the primary perceived causes of anxiety among Chinese learners? What strategies do learners employ to manage anxiety? How can teachers alleviate anxiety through classroom interventions? Through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 college students and 5 teachers, this study collected qualitative data and applied thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to extract key patterns. This research deepens understanding of cultural educational motivations behind FLA in China's context, provides teachers with actionable low-anxiety classroom design strategies (such as delayed correction and collaborative tasks), and helps learners overcome the "mute English" dilemma.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Localization characteristics and causes of foreign language learning anxiety**

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), first systematically defined by Horwitz et al. (1986), is an emotional disorder that has garnered significant attention in China's educational context in recent years. Research indicates that Chinese learners' FLA manifests not only as common communication anxiety, test anxiety, and negative self-perception, but also exhibits distinct cultural adaptation characteristics (Liu & Huang, 2020).

Chinese students in exam-oriented English learning environments typically experience a "high anxiety-low productivity" cycle (Zhang & Tsung, 2021). Critical assessments like the National College Entrance Examination and CET-4/CET-6 exams have driven highly utilitarian approaches to language acquisition, intensifying academic anxiety. Li's (2022) study of 300 university students in Beijing and Wuhan revealed that over 70% exhibited avoidance behaviors during oral tasks, with anxiety levels showing a significant correlation with exam pressure ( $r = 0.68, p < .01$ ).

Furthermore, "face culture" plays a pivotal role in face-avoidance behavior (FLA). Zhou and Gao (2021) noted that Chinese students often worry about "losing face by making mistakes" during class discussions, with anxiety intensifying particularly in peer-evaluation-dominated settings. Such cultural-related anxieties cannot be effectively addressed through conventional strategies, necessitating context-sensitive instructional designs that emphasize situational awareness.

The large class teaching environment is also an important factor that aggravates FLA.

Guo and Wang (2023) found that the number of students in a class is significantly positively correlated with students' oral anxiety, especially in the teaching environment with scarce opportunities for oral expression and insufficient feedback, students tend to be silent and avoid.

## **2.2 Research on learners' coping strategies**

In recent years, scholars have begun exploring how learners proactively regulate and respond to FLA. Yu and Lin (2020) identified three types of strategies through a mixed-methods approach combining questionnaires and interviews: cognitive strategies (such as repeated silent reading and pre-writing planning), emotional regulation strategies (like deep breathing and self-affirmation), and avoidance strategies (including avoiding oral tasks and classroom silence).

It is noteworthy that some studies have found that while avoidance strategies can alleviate anxiety in the short term, they are highly detrimental to long-term language production (Chen, 2022). A longitudinal study at a key university in Jiangsu Province revealed that learners who adopted avoidance strategies showed significantly lower improvement in oral expression skills compared to those using positive regulation strategies.

In recent years, research has focused on the role of "strategies and combinations". Liu and Zhang (2023) found that integrating emotional regulation with collaborative learning methods (such as group exercises and peer evaluations) can significantly reduce FLA levels while enhancing classroom engagement. The study emphasized individual differences and adaptability in strategies, suggesting that strategy interventions should be tailored to learners' personalities, anxiety types, and educational backgrounds.

## **2.3 The role of teacher intervention and instructional design in anxiety relief**

The role of teachers in FLA (Foreign Language Acquisition) regulation has gained increasing attention. Li and Feng (2021) highlighted that classroom feedback methods, timing of error correction, and evaluative language significantly influence students' anxiety levels. Notably, strategies such as "delayed error correction" and "contextualized feedback" have been proven effective in reducing students' nervousness.

In a classroom intervention study conducted by Xu et al. (2022), 200 college English learners underwent a fluency assessment (FLA) using three teaching strategies: collaborative tasks, role-playing, and informal evaluations. The results showed that participants in the experimental group experienced significant anxiety reduction and marked improvement in English output performance after eight weeks ( $p < .01$ ). The research emphasizes that creating a "low-anxiety classroom environment" should be a key objective in instructional design.

Furthermore, teachers' role as "emotional supporters" is equally crucial. Tang and Hu (2023) found through teacher interviews that educators' sensitivity to students' anxiety and

their open communication style significantly enhance students' classroom trust and willingness to express themselves. The study recommends incorporating an "emotionally supportive teaching skills" module into teacher training programs to improve educators' professional competence in addressing FLA.

In recent years, FLA research in China has shown a trend of shifting from "single anxiety phenomenon description" to "cross-disciplinary exploration". The studies not only reveal the cultural and educational roots of FLA, but also gradually form coping mechanisms centered on learners' adjustment strategies and teachers' instructional interventions.

However, current research predominantly focuses on quantitative studies, lacking in-depth exploration of learners' individual experiences and internal mechanisms. Therefore, this study adopts qualitative methods by conducting semi-structured interviews to integrate perspectives from both students and teachers, thereby providing more evidence-based insights for the development of localized strategies.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Data Collection Method**

This study mainly uses semi-structured in-depth interview (Semi-structured Interview) as the data collection tool, and designs different interview outlines for students and teachers respectively to discuss around the research questions.

#### **3.2 The contents of student interviews include:**

Anxiety experience in the process of English learning (such as oral expression, listening comprehension, online exams, etc.)

Subjective interpretation of the source of anxiety (e.g., evaluation of stress, self-doubt about language ability, peer comparison, etc.)

Common coping strategies (emotional regulation, learning strategies, avoidance behaviors, etc.)

Perception of teachers' classroom behavior and feedback style and its emotional influence

#### **3.3 The contents of teacher interviews include:**

The anxiety manifestations and typical situations of students were observed in teaching. How can teachers identify and respond to learners' anxieties (both verbal and nonverbal).

The feasible anxiety intervention methods in classroom practice and their effectiveness are reflected.

Understanding and suggestions for creating a low-anxiety learning environment

The interview time was controlled between 45 and 60 minutes, and the location was a quiet classroom or online voice platform (such as Tencent Meeting). All interviews were recorded with the consent of respondents, and the researchers transcribed them word by word.

In addition, in order to supplement the interview data and enhance the understanding of the situation, the researchers made brief observation records of some classes (such as teachers' feedback methods and students' classroom responses) to increase the ecological validity of the data. However, this study still takes the interview data as the main data source.

### **3.4 Data analysis method**

This study used thematic analysis (Thematic Analysis) to process and interpret the interview data, based on the six-step process proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006):

Familiarize yourself with the data: read the interview text repeatedly and record your initial impressions and key words.

Generate initial code: manually open code for key statements to capture and study the emotions, behaviors, and beliefs related to the problem.

Search topic: Integrating initial coding to identify cross-interviewing patterns of repetition (e.g., "evaluation anxiety", "face culture").

Review theme: Further adjust the internal consistency and interboundary of the theme to ensure the logical classification.

Define and name topics: Create a general and descriptive name for each topic.

Report writing: Construct the final results section by combining representative quotations and analytical logic. In order to enhance the credibility and transparency of the analysis process, the researcher adopts the following strategies:

Researcher's reflective journal (Reflexive Journal): Record subjective bias and emotional response during data analysis to improve the objectivity of analysis.

Peer Debriefing: Invite another educational researcher to review the initial topic and discuss possible interpretation paths.

Member checking: Some of the analysis results will be fed back to the respondents to confirm whether their expressions are accurately understood.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

Through semi-structured interviews with 15 college English learners and 5 English teachers, this study employed thematic analysis to identify three core themes and several sub-themes that systematically address the research questions. The three themes are: (1) Multiple causes of English learning anxiety; (2) Students' coping strategies and behavioral responses; (3) Teachers' perceptions and intervention practices. This chapter will analyze and discuss these findings by presenting qualitative data alongside relevant literature.

Table 1: Summary of thematic analysis results (Summary of Thematic Analysis Results)

Themes	Sub-themes	Representative respondent number	Frequency of mention (n)	explain
1. Multiple causes of English learning anxiety	1.1 Test culture and performance pressure	S1, S3, S5, S10, T1	8	Examination-driven anxiety is the most common source, with students generally worried about failing
	Face culture and communication fear	S2, S4, S8, S12, T2	7	Social evaluation fear leads students to avoid classroom expression, especially oral communication
	1.3 The lack of feedback and estrangement brought by online learning	S6, S14, T3, T5	6	The lack of interaction exacerbates feelings of loneliness and uncertainty, affecting confidence and engagement
2. Coping strategies and behavioral responses	2.1 Emotional regulation strategies (e.g., deep breathing, listening to music, self-suggestion)	S6, S9, S11	5	Some students have self-regulation awareness and can relieve their emotions in anxious situations
	2.2 Learning strategies (e.g., preparation in advance, writing drafts, imitation practice)	S5, S11, S13	4	It is a cognitive way to control anxiety and can enhance the sense of expressive control
	2.3 Avoidance behaviors (e.g.,	S2, S8, S14	5	While avoidance strategies may reduce

Themes	Sub-themes	Representative respondent number	Frequency of mention (n)	explain
3. Teacher perspective and intervention practice	not speaking, turning off the camera, swimming)			anxiety in the short term, they have a negative impact on long-term language development
	3.1 Ways of identifying anxiety (e.g., observing silence, avoidance, nonverbal behavior)	T1, T2, T3	6	Teachers often judge whether students are anxious or not through their behavior, and non-verbal signals become an important clue
	3.2 Teaching intervention (delayed error correction, group task, situational simulation)	T2, T4, T5	7	Teachers take strategies to actively reduce students' anxiety, enhance classroom participation and express confidence

#### 4.1 Multiple causes of English learning anxiety

The students interviewed generally expressed different degrees of anxiety in English learning, especially in oral expression, listening comprehension and online test scenarios. Thematic analysis shows that the causes of learning anxiety can be divided into three levels.

##### 4.1.1 Test culture and high performance pressure

Most students mentioned that the test culture left by the CET-4 and CET-6 exams and the college entrance exam led them to bind English learning closely with "scoring", and they were in a long-term state of "anxiety-driven" learning:

"I'm always afraid I won't pass the exam... every time I practice listening, I feel nervous and I'm afraid I'll waste time not understanding." (S3)

This finding is consistent with Li's (2022) research on the impact of China's exam-oriented education on students' anxiety, reflecting that "high-risk assessment situation" is a key factor to stimulate learning anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986).

#### **4.1.2 Face culture and communication fear**

Almost all the interviewees mentioned the fear of "losing face by making mistakes" in oral English tasks, especially when speaking in class and facing peer evaluation:

"I was afraid that people would laugh at my accent and it would be embarrassing to make a mistake... so I would rather not say it." (S8)

This phenomenon reflects the deep social and cultural motivation, which is also consistent with the "face threat model" proposed by Zhou & Gao (2021), that is, Chinese students pay more attention to self-presentation in the group, and verbal mistakes are regarded as identity threats.

#### **4.1.3 Barriers and lack of feedback in online learning**

Some students pointed out that the online learning environment reduced the immediacy of interaction and feedback, and increased anxiety:

"No one pays attention to you online, and I don't know if the teacher has noticed you. The more I study, the less confident I am." (S14)

Teachers also pointed out that students have low willingness to interact in online teaching and often "shut down the microphone and remain silent". This shows that although the technological environment brings convenience, it also aggravates emotional alienation and psychological burden (Liu & Huang, 2020).

### **4.2 Learners' coping strategies and behavioral responses**

Students use a variety of ways to deal with English learning anxiety, and the strategies can be classified into three types:

#### **4.2.1 Emotional regulation strategies**

Most students tend to use deep breathing, self-suggestion, listening to English songs and other methods to relieve emotional fluctuations:

"I listen to English podcasts in advance to get used to the context, so I'm not so panicked in class." (S6)

This type of strategy reflects the improvement of students' anxiety cognition and control, which is in line with the framework of positive regulation strategies proposed by Yu & Lin (2020).

### **4.2.2 Learning Strategies**

Some interviewees mentioned that they reduced anxiety sources and improved the sense of control by "preparing drafts before writing" and "preparing speech content in advance".

"The teacher told us to act a play in different roles. I wrote the lines in advance and practiced them repeatedly." (S11)

This type of behavior reflects the use of active strategies at the cognitive level, which is consistent with Oxford's (2016) strategy classification model.

### **4.2.3 Avoidance behavior**

It is worth noting that some students still choose to avoid anxiety situations, such as not actively speaking in class, turning off the camera or "skimming":

"I won't turn on the camera unless I can, otherwise I'm nervous." (S2)

Although these behaviors relieve anxiety in the short term, they have long-term effects on language production and learning confidence (Chen, 2022), suggesting that teachers need to identify the emotional motivation behind such behaviors.

## **4.3 Teachers' anxiety perception and intervention practice**

Teacher interviews show that most teachers can detect students' anxiety responses and have tried to adjust and intervene in teaching.

### **4.3.1 Observation of students' anxiety**

Teachers generally reported that students' sense of participation in online teaching was weakened, and their anxiety was manifested as "silence", "no response" and "lack of eye contact".

"Some students never speak up, but when asked a question, they say they don't understand or have a problem with the microphone. It's actually anxiety." (T2)

This suggests that teachers are becoming more sensitive to nonverbal behavior.

### **4.3.2 Teaching intervention strategies**

The teacher introduced various instructional adaptation strategies, including delayed correction by allowing students to complete expressions before receiving feedback, thereby reducing the "pressure of immediate correction." Group collaborative tasks enhance verbal interaction and alleviate expression-related stress. Situational simulation tasks place language application in relaxed authentic contexts: "I don't directly point out students' mistakes; instead, I wait for them to finish speaking before guiding them to discover errors independently." (T4) These strategies have been proved to be effective in alleviating learning anxiety in Xu et al. (2022) empirical study, reflecting the evolution of teachers' teaching concepts.

This study reveals the complex anxiety factors faced by Chinese college students in online English learning environments, demonstrating a distinct interplay between cultural and institutional characteristics. Learners employ diverse coping strategies, while teachers' classroom interventions serve as a buffer to some extent. The findings support previous localization research on FLA (Foreign Language Acquisition), such as Zhang & Tsung (2021; Liu & Zhang, 2023), but further highlight the unique impact of interaction deficiencies and evaluation mechanisms in online learning environments on anxiety.

## 5. Conclusion

This study employs qualitative research methods to investigate English learning anxiety among Chinese college students in online learning environments, focusing on three key dimensions: underlying causes, learners' coping strategies, and potential instructional interventions. Through semi-structured interviews with 15 university students and 5 English teachers, along with thematic analysis, the research reveals three critical findings.

Chinese English learners' anxiety is deeply rooted in the intertwined dynamics of cultural and educational systems. Key triggers include exam culture (such as CET-4/CET-6 and post-exam anxiety), face-saving mentality, and the lack of interaction in online learning. These elements don't exist in isolation but interact within China's unique language learning ecosystem, collectively shaping highly localized manifestations of academic anxiety.

Secondly, learners demonstrate diverse strategies to cope with anxiety, including emotional regulation, cognitive preparation, and avoidance behaviors. Among these, emotional regulation and learning strategies can effectively enhance study confidence and classroom participation. However, while avoidance behaviors provide short-term stress relief, they ultimately hinder the development of language expression skills in the long run.

Thirdly, teachers' roles as instructional regulators and emotional supporters have become increasingly vital. By employing strategies such as delayed correction of errors, group collaborative tasks, and situational language application, educators actively cultivate a low-anxiety classroom environment. Simultaneously, their sensitive identification of students' nonverbal anxiety signals and appropriate feedback mechanisms serve as critical touchpoints for emotional regulation.

This study adopts an interpretive perspective and utilizes in-depth interviews to transcend previous quantitative descriptions of English learning anxiety. It provides a comprehensive exploration of the complex structure of foreign language acquisition (FLA) within China's educational context, revealing the multidimensional nature of students' subjective experiences. The findings not only identify local causes and behavioral patterns of anxiety but also emphasize teachers' proactive involvement in designing instructional strategies and emotional support systems.

These findings offer practical insights for reforming English education in Chinese

universities: To effectively alleviate students' anxiety about learning English, skill training alone is insufficient. More crucially, attention must be paid to cultural motivations, evaluation mechanisms, and teaching contexts underlying these anxieties. Educators should develop the ability to identify emotional cues and implement teaching interventions that balance cognitive development with emotional support, thereby facilitating classroom transformation characterized by "high engagement and low anxiety."

Alleviating academic anxiety is not merely about improving language proficiency, but more crucially, it shapes learners' self-identity, fosters expressive freedom, and builds lifelong learning commitment. In the context of globalization and educational digitalization, creating a more inclusive and supportive English learning ecosystem should be a core mission for language educators. Only by addressing emotional barriers, reforming evaluation systems, and enhancing interactive teaching methods can we truly help learners break free from the "mute English" predicament and embark on a more confident and meaningful language learning journey.

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