

Addressing Multi-Dimensional Perspective of Language Anxiety in the Chinese EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has long been considered a debilitating factor that hinders second language acquisition. Despite many coping strategies, FLA continues to plague Chinese foreign language learners. Hence, this study examined multi-dimensional FLA among learners of Chinese EFL tertiary students. This study was set in a public university in China and involved 190 second-year tertiary students. It employed an explanatory sequential research design wherein data were collected via a survey questionnaire and face-to-face interviews. The findings indicated that the students experienced medium-level multi-dimensional FLA, with listening anxiety recording the highest anxiety level. There were no significant differences in multi-dimensional FLA based on gender, but significant differences were recorded in multi-dimensional FLA among students possessing low, intermediate, and high English language proficiency levels. The findings imply the dynamic nature of multi-dimensional FLA and showed that skill-specific anxieties were interrelated. A low FLA could result from low motivation and interest in learning English, negatively affecting their language performance. These findings suggest that universities should enhance differentiated instruction to sustain quality EFL instruction in China among EFL tertiary learners.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety, multidimensional FLA, EFL students, quality EFL instruction

Introduction

As globalization dawns upon the 21st century, English Language has become a lingua franca in most countries around the globe. According to Statista (2023), as of 2022, 1.45 billion people are currently speaking English as a native or second language. Countries and regions are now attaching increasing importance to learning English as a second (ESL) or foreign (EFL) language to survive and thrive in the competitive international community, and China is no exception. China is now adopting the “bring-in” and “go global” strategy and lays great importance on introducing China to the whole world. Thus, possessing a good command of the English language for people in all industries has become the

premise for internationalization (The National Foreign Language Teaching Administer Board under the Ministry of Education, 2020), which inevitably strengthens the development and flourishing of English Language education in China.

Today, China has embraced English as a foreign language (EFL) at all educational levels, including colleges and universities, and has become a compulsory foreign language for Chinese tertiary students (Cao, 2019). However, the English language proficiency among Chinese EFL learners has become an issue of grave concern not only among scholars but also the country’s Ministry of Education. Cai (2020) pointed out that the seventy-year English Language education program has

yet to achieve the expected success in China. It focused on acquiring basic English knowledge, neglecting the application and utilization of the language in meaningful situations. Scholars such as Cai (2020) and Li et al. (2019) have further highlighted that most Chinese EFL learners were also reported to possess a low English language proficiency upon graduation.

Hence, raising national English language proficiency among tertiary EFL students has become a significant national concern. Researchers such as Sidhu, et al (2022), Ellis (2008) and Brown (1973) have reiterated that external and internal factors play an important role in second and foreign language acquisition. Among the many internal factors, language anxiety has often received much attention. According to MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012), anxiety refers to the “feelings of worry and negative, fear-related emotions” (p. 103). A study in China shows that foreign language anxiety (FLA) among Chinese EFL learners contributes to 30.6% of their English language achievement (Li et al., 2019). Thus, it is not surprising “that language anxiety has been the most widely studied emotion in second language acquisition (SLA)” (MacIntyre, 2017, p. 11). This study addresses a multidimensional perspective of FLA among Chinese EFL tertiary learners in China.

Problem Statement

Worldwide studies have been conducted on FLA in general and skill-specific FLA, such as listening, reading, writing, and speaking anxiety (Li, 2022; Nastiti, 2023). Findings have generally shown the negative influence of FLA and skill-specific FLA on language performance (Ran et al., 2022). A few studies have examined all four skill-specific anxieties in one holistic study (Abbaszadeh & Vizayaletchumi, 2020; Guo & Xu, 2014; Jee, 2018; Pae, 2013). For example, while Abbaszadeh and Vizayaletchumi (2020) explored the relationship between skill-based anxieties and language learners’ aptitudes, Pae (2013) investigated the relationship between the four skill-based anxieties and their relationship to general foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA).

Though anxiety has often been a much-explored factor in foreign language acquisition, gaps in the literature are still visible and require attention. Although most related studies have focused on general FLA or single skill-based anxieties, only a few are conducted with a comprehensive view with inconsistent findings. Secondly, qualitative research is missing in most skill-specific anxiety studies to triangulate the quantitative results. Lastly, only a

few comprehensive studies on FLA were conducted in the Chinese context, with tertiary students from local universities and colleges as the subjects.

Therefore, this study aimed to investigate FLA among Chinese tertiary students from a multidimensional perspective, namely, the general classroom FLA and FLA in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The following research questions guided the study:

- What are the Chinese tertiary students’ overall multidimensional FLA and FLA in the general classroom, listening, speaking, reading, and writing?
- Is there any significant difference in Chinese tertiary students’ FLA levels based on the five dimensions?
- Is there any significant difference in overall multidimensional FLA based on gender?
- Is there any significant difference in overall multidimensional FLA based on self-perceived English language proficiency?

Literature Review

Language anxiety, a significant factor affecting foreign language learning, has been paid increasing attention to by researchers (Naser et al., 2019). Foreign language anxiety (FLA) research started in the early 1970s. Brown (1973) put forward the relationship between affective factors and successful learning of a second language and pointed out that anxiety was one of the main affective factors affecting second language learners. Krashen (1981) agreed that anxiety was like an emotional filter that limited second language acquisition.

Horwitz et al. (1986) first proposed the theoretical framework of foreign language anxiety. They presented the concept of foreign language anxiety as a “learner’s unique and complex self-awareness, belief, emotions, and behaviors related to classroom foreign language learning arising from the uniqueness of foreign language learning process” (p.128). These researchers went on to develop the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) according to practical experience. They concluded three performance anxieties: test anxiety, communication anxiety, and negative assessment anxiety. Since the emergence of the FLCAS, many people have begun to monitor foreign language learning anxiety (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019).

Earlier, it was thought that listening and speaking were the significant sources of language anxiety compared to reading and writing (Horwitz et al., 1986). However,

with the development of research on language anxiety, scholars gradually turned their eyes to skill-specific anxiety (Cheng, 2004; Saito et al., 1999). Research on foreign language reading anxiety appeared in the late 1990s when Saito et al. (1999) first constructed the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS). Cheng (2004) then put forward the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) involving both quantitative and qualitative research instruments. Next, Elkhafaifi (2005) began to investigate the effect of overall foreign language learning anxiety and listening anxiety on listening comprehension. In his study, he concluded that English proficiency and listening performance were negatively correlated. In another recent study by Wang, Sidhu and Wang (2023) they noted that Chinese EFL students often view speaking as a difficult skill and experience high anxiety when called upon to speak. Their study also revealed that a majority of Chinese EFL students recorded anxiety in speaking mainly because of the fear of negative evaluation, followed by comprehension apprehension with test anxiety recording the lowest mean score. Recently, studies have now moved from investigating single language skill anxiety to the exploration of the inter-and-intra relationship between skill-specific anxieties, as mentioned above in the problem statement.

Although FLA has been found to be related to other factors, such as gender and self-perceived language proficiency (Dewaele, 2013; Dewaele et al., 2016; Iqbal & Liu, 2018; Santos et al., 2015;), there have been inconsistent findings regarding the influence of gender difference and self-perceived language proficiency on FLA. Some studies found no significant difference in FLA between male and female language learners (Isa et al., 2023) while other studies have reported a higher level of FLA among female language learners (Piniel & Zólyomi, 2022). In addition, it was believed that a lower level of FLA was often connected with a higher level of self-rated language proficiency (Iqbal & Liu, 2018; MacIntyre et al., 1997). In contrast, Ewald (2007) in his study found that even advanced language learners experienced FLA.

Studies in FLA in China began in the late-1980s and steadily increased since the beginning of the 21st century. It followed the research trend in the international field, mainly focusing on research on ontology connotation, the correlation between anxiety and achievements, causes of foreign language learning anxiety, measures to alleviate anxiety, and the correlation between learning anxiety and other individual learner differences (Jiang & Dewaele, 2020; Li, 2018; Li & Li, 2016). A few studies in China examined the four skill-specific anxieties at once.

For example, using five questionnaires, Guo and Xu (2014) conducted empirical research on FLA among 457 non-English major college students in China. It found that the subjects experienced a medium level of anxiety in each dimension and overall. Among the four skill-specific anxieties, reading anxiety is the lowest. Ran et al. (2022) compared FLA based on four language scales, pointing out that listening anxiety was the highest and reading anxiety the lowest among Chinese college students.

Material and Methods

This study was a pilot study of a larger Ph.D. research project. This pilot study employed an explanatory-sequential research design. The quantitative results from the survey questionnaire were further triangulated using qualitative data collected through interviews.

Setting and Population Sample

This study was conducted in a public university in central China where the English language is a compulsory course for all first and second year EFL tertiary students. The target population comprised one hundred and ninety (190) randomly selected fourth-semester undergraduate students from the Faculty of Food Science, Chemistry and Education. They had attended the College English course for three semesters, and all had at least eight-year experience in English language learning since their primary and secondary school levels. They attended English classes two (2) times a week, with two 45-minute classes each time. All the subjects completed the questionnaires voluntarily.

Instrumentation

Data for the study were collected from responses to questionnaire questions sent to one hundred and ninety (190) second-year Chinese tertiary students and semi-structured interviews with six (6) purposively selected students.

In this study, *The Multidimensional FLA Questionnaire* (MFLAQ) with five subscales was distributed to the subjects to measure their five-dimensional FLA: general classroom foreign language anxiety, listening anxiety, speaking anxiety, reading anxiety, and writing anxiety. The five sections of MFLAQ were based on the following sources:

- General classroom FLA was measured with Zhang and Guo's (2018) adapted version of FLCAS and comprised 28 items.
- Listening anxiety was measured employing Zhang and Zhao's (2010) adapted version of FLLAS and consisted of 11 items.
- Speaking anxiety was measured using Wu's (2009) intact version of the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Self-Schema Questionnaire (FLSASQ) with 30 items.
- Reading anxiety was based on Saito et al.'s (1999) version of FLRAS with 20 items; and
- Writing anxiety was measured using Guo and Qin's (2010) adapted version of SLWAI, comprising 20 items.

All these five subscales have been widely used in several international and Chinese context studies for their validity and reliability. Each questionnaire was attached with one open-ended question to further explore the subjects' FLA. For this study, the term foreign language or other terms referring to languages were replaced with "English." The respondents were required to respond to the items in all the questionnaires based on a 5-point Likert scale. A score of "1" indicated a strong disagreement with the item, while a "5" demonstrated strong agreement. The questionnaire also included a section for demographic information such as gender and self-perceived English language proficiency (SELP). The students' SELP was graded into three grades, with "1" for "Low," "2" for "Intermediate," and "3" for "High."

Validity and Reliability

A panel of two experts validated the adapted versions of MFLAQ and the interview protocols. One expert was a university professor with more than 30 years of experience in TESL, while the second was another university professor with more than 25 years of experience teaching EFL in China. Feedback from the panel was considered, and the necessary amendments were made before the study.

The reliability of the MFLAQ was tested and the results based on Cronbach's alpha reliability are shown in Table 1 below. The results were above 0.7 for the overall MFLAQ and each subscale, indicating that the questionnaires were reliable and could be used for the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The survey instruments were presented in both English and Mandarin to avoid any misunderstanding or misinterpretation that may occur due to the limited English language proficiency among some Chinese EFL students. The English subscales were translated using the back-translation procedure, giving the process higher validity and reliability.

The qualitative data from semi-structured interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed verbatim before being sent for member checking. Peer debriefing was also conducted to ensure the validity and reliability of the interviews. The semi-structured interviews were carried out in the Mandarin language and were transcribed and translated into English by two experienced translators. Both translators reconciled any differences between the two versions and came to a mutual understanding. The back-to-back translation yielded a 91.5% level of agreement.

Data Collection and Analyses

A total of two hundred (200) copies of the questionnaire were distributed, but only one hundred and ninety (190) tertiary students responded to the questionnaires and were tested valid. The response rate was 95%. The demographic information of the 190 respondents based on gender and self-reported English language proficiency is presented in Table 2.

After data cleaning, the data were analyzed with SPSS version 25.0 and employed both descriptive and inferential statistics such as one-way ANOVA.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six (6) respondents from the first sample to triangulate the quantitative findings. These participants were purposively

Table 1. Reliability Index of Five Questionnaires

| Dimensions | Reliability Cronbach's alpha | N of Items |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------|
| General classroom FLA | .866 | 28 |
| Listening Anxiety | .793 | 11 |
| Speaking Anxiety | .876 | 30 |
| Reading Anxiety | .809 | 20 |
| Writing Anxiety | .851 | 20 |
| Overall Multidimensional FLA | .944 | 109 |

Source: Author

Table 2. Participants' Demographic Information.

| Variable | Category | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|--------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender | Male | 59 | 31.1% |
| | Female | 131 | 68.9% |
| Self-perceived English language proficiency | Low | 70 | 36.8% |
| | Intermediate | 102 | 53.7% |
| | High | 18 | 9.5% |

Source: Author

Table 3. Tertiary Students' Multidimensional Foreign Language Anxiety.

| Dimensions | M | SD |
|------------------------------|-------|------|
| General classroom FLA | 3.002 | .531 |
| Listening Anxiety | 3.471 | .621 |
| Speaking Anxiety | 3.158 | .485 |
| Reading Anxiety | 3.067 | .486 |
| Writing Anxiety | 3.104 | .549 |
| Overall Multidimensional FLA | 3.123 | .406 |

Source: Author

Scale: 1.00-1.80 = low, 1.81-2.60 = low to moderate, 2.61-3.40 = moderate, 3.41-4.20 = moderate to high, 4.21-5.00 = high

selected based on their overall multi-dimensional FLA levels. The respondents with the lowest levels of multidimensional FLA (bottom 20%) were referred to as LR1 to LR2 (L=Low anxiety level, R=Respondent, 1=respondents' number). The respondents with medium levels of multidimensional FLA were referred to as MR1 to MR2 (M=Medium anxiety level, R=Respondent, 1=respondents' number). In comparison, the highest levels of multidimensional FLA (top 20%) were referred to as HR1 to HR2 (H=High anxiety level, R=Respondent, 1=respondents' number).

The qualitative data obtained from the interviews were then analyzed thematically according to Braun et al.'s (2019) thematic framework to obtain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of multidimensional FLA and strategies used by Chinese tertiary students.

Results

The following section provides the main findings of the pilot study based on the three research questions that guided this study.

Multidimensional FLA Levels

Research Question One in this study examined the FLA levels of Chinese EFL tertiary students based on the

five dimensions. The data were analyzed employing descriptive statistics, and the results are shown in Table 3 below. From the findings, the mean rating for overall multidimensional FLA was 3.123 ($SD = .406$), which showed that the respondents possessed a medium level of FLA in five dimensions when learning English. The mean value for general classroom FLA was 3.002 ($SD = .531$), which showed that the respondents had a medium level of general classroom FLA when learning English. Listening anxiety reported a mean rating of 3.471 ($SD = .621$), which ranked the highest in all the five dimensions, showing a medium to high level of anxiety. Speaking anxiety showed a mean rating of 3.158 ($SD = .485$), followed by the mean scores for writing anxiety ($M = 3.104$, $SD = .549$) and reading anxiety ($M = 3.067$, $SD = .486$). These mean scores showed the respondents experienced medium anxiety levels in all five dimensions, with listening anxiety being the highest and general FLA the lowest.

Each subscale was attached with one open-ended question to triangulate the findings from the questionnaire. In terms of general classroom FLA, 75 (39.5%) respondents in the open-ended question reported "no interest in English" or "My English is bad," explaining why they were not anxious in class. As for listening anxiety, most respondents said they were nervous when they failed to understand what they were listening to, showing the shared experience of listening anxiety in English tests and communication. Furthermore, poor listening proficiency could lead to poor performance in speaking, which in turn causes speaking anxiety. As for speaking anxiety, findings from the open-ended items revealed a high proportion of reluctance (61.5%) to speak English in English class and in daily life. This reluctance indicated low self-efficacy and motivation among students and a lack of exposure to English for EFL learners in China. For reading anxiety, most respondents (75.8%) did not like reading in English because "I am not used to reading in English." This response indicated the isolation of English learning and practical use in Chinese EFL teaching and learning. For writing anxiety, the open-ended question revealed that 153 respondents (80.5%)

did not write English articles or journals if they are not asked to because of no interest or inadequate writing proficiency.

One of the questions posed during the interview session was to get the respondents to share their experiences with FLA in learning English. Overall, the findings displayed that the students who recorded high anxiety in learning English experienced the following symptoms: nervousness, worry, sweaty palms, heart palpitations, and difficulty concentrating on the day's lesson. For instance, Respondent HR1, a female student, said:

"My heart beats fast, and I tend to speak fast when asked to answer questions in class. I am also anxious when the English teacher asks students to read aloud in class. . .guess we are all anxious having to speak or read in English."

Respondent MR2, a male student, expressed his anxiety over English tests:

"... I am fine with learning English and do not get very anxious...but I often get anxious when I must sit for an English Language test, and I am worried about my CET-4 test. . .this test will affect us in our future when we go out to look for work, so most of us get very anxious sitting for English tests"

From the above excerpts it can be concluded that speaking anxiety prevails over other dimensions among Chinese EFL tertiary students, and test anxiety is also high adding to the list of worries about learning English. Reading and writing anxiety levels were lower compared to both listening and speaking. This is probably because Chinese EFL students in China live among a homogenous population where most of the Chinese population speak Chinese and thus, they have little exposure to listening and speaking in English. Besides that, a majority of the EFL classroom teachers often focus on reading and writing and this are often main language skills examined in almost all English tests ranging from Middle and High Schools to tertiary colleges.

Differences in Anxiety Levels Based on Five Dimensions

Research Question Two in this study explored if there was any significant difference among Chinese EFL tertiary students' anxiety levels based on the five dimensions.

The data were analyzed utilizing inferential statistics. A one-way ANOVA was employed to examine the

differences in anxiety levels among the five dimensions (general classroom FLA, listening anxiety, speaking anxiety, reading anxiety, and writing anxiety). The data analysis showed that Mauchly's Test of Sphericity results were significant ($p = .000 < .05$). Therefore, the degree of freedom was adjusted for the averaged tests of significance. The results of Greenhouse-Geisser and Huynh-Feldt in the Tests of Within-Subjects Effects showed that anxiety levels of five dimensions significantly differed ($F = 43.96, p = .000 < .05$) as shown in Table 4.

Thus, the following conclusions can be made:

- The highest level of anxiety faced by EFL students is in listening. It is also significantly higher than general FLA anxiety, speaking, reading, and writing anxiety.
- General FLA is the lowest and is significantly lower than the anxiety of speaking and listening.

However, there is no significant difference between general classroom FLA, reading anxiety, and writing anxiety. These findings were also corroborated by students during the interview sessions. For instance, Respondent HR2 highlighted his anxiety over listening and speaking by saying, *"What is worse is that when I fail to understand the listening part, I cannot do the speaking."* This illustrated the relationship between listening and speaking. It also pointed out the situation-specific nature of FLA.

Besides that, other respondents felt that listening is difficult as they often found it difficult to follow the speakers in the listening scripts as a majority felt they *'speak too fast we cannot understand and even if we listen very carefully, sometimes we do not understand some words and then we cannot understand the whole speech'* (MR1). As mentioned above anxiety levels in both listening and speaking are probably high due to limited exposure to both these skills both in their immediate environment and their EFL classrooms.

Gender Differences in Overall Multidimensional FLA

Research Question Three in this study explored if there was any significant difference in overall multidimensional FLA based on gender. The independent sample t-test was conducted to answer this question, and the results are presented in Table 5.

The mean value of multidimensional FLA for male students was 3.130 ($SD = .414$), and for female students,

Table 4. Pairwise Comparison

| (I) FLA | (J) FLA | Mean Difference (I-J) | Std. Error | Sig. ^b | 95% Confidence Interval for Difference | |
|------------|------------|--------------------------|------------|-------------------|--|-------------|
| | | | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| 1 | 2 | -.500* | .044 | .000 | -.625 | -.375 |
| | 3 | -.156* | .034 | .000 | -.252 | -.059 |
| | 4 | -.076 | .041 | .647 | -.191 | .040 |
| | 5 | -.112 | .040 | .060 | -.226 | .003 |
| 2 | 1 | .500* | .044 | .000 | .375 | .625 |
| | 3 | .344* | .046 | .000 | .214 | .475 |
| | 4 | .424* | .047 | .000 | .290 | .559 |
| | 5 | .388* | .046 | .000 | .256 | .520 |
| 3 | 1 | .156* | .034 | .000 | .059 | .252 |
| | 2 | -.344* | .046 | .000 | -.475 | -.214 |
| | 4 | .080 | .036 | .290 | -.023 | .183 |
| | 5 | .044 | .039 | 1.000 | -.068 | .155 |
| 4 | 1 | .076 | .041 | .647 | -.040 | .191 |
| | 2 | -.424* | .047 | .000 | -.559 | -.290 |
| | 3 | -.080 | .036 | .290 | -.183 | .023 |
| | 5 | -.036 | .037 | 1.000 | -.141 | .069 |
| 5 | 1 | .112 | .040 | .060 | -.003 | .226 |
| | 2 | -.388* | .046 | .000 | -.520 | -.256 |
| | 3 | -.044 | .039 | 1.000 | -.155 | .068 |
| | 4 | .036 | .037 | 1.000 | -.069 | .141 |

Source: Author

Scale= 1=General classroom FLA, 2=Listening anxiety, 3=Speaking anxiety, 4=Reading anxiety, 5=Writing anxiety

Note: Based on estimated marginal means.

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.

Table 5. Students' Overall Multidimensional Based on Gender

| Groups | Overall multidimensional FLA (Mean±SD) | T-value | Sig.(2-tailed) |
|-----------------|---|---------|----------------|
| Males (n=59) | 3.130±.414 | .163 | .871 |
| Females (n=131) | 3.120±.404 | | |

Source: Author

3.120 ($SD = .404$), indicating that both male and female students experienced moderate levels of overall multidimensional FLA. Furthermore, the independent sample t-test revealed that the gender differences were not significant ($t = .163, p = .87$).

However, during the interview, the male students reported rather differing views compared to their female counterparts. A majority of the females during the interview session provided a more positive take on practicing speaking in English as Respondent HR2 stressed that 'I like to practice English during English class so that my teacher can help correct me if I am wrong' whilst others added that 'class time is good for practicing our English' and 'my teacher encourage me so I try hard' (MR1) to speak English in class.

On the other hand, the male students revealed that they experienced more FLA in the English classroom. For example, Respondent LR1 stated, "I am anxious in English class. I am afraid of being asked to answer questions, so I always sit in the back rows of the classroom with other boys. Thanks to the girls who are active in class."

This excerpt showed the general impression that female students were more active in language learning and probably experienced less anxiety. This sentiment was also echoed by other male respondents who stated that, the 'girls in my class talk more during English class', whilst another highlighted that 'in my opinion girls like to practice English in class but we boys do not like to speak in English.' All these excerpts indicated that the female students are more willing to communicate in English and

Table 6. Students' Overall Multidimensional Based on Self-perceived English Language Proficiency.

| Groups | Overall multidimensional FLA (Mean±SD) | F | Sig. | Multiple Comparison (Turkey HSD) |
|--------------------------|--|--------|------|----------------------------------|
| Low ELP (n=70) | 3.332±.340 | 19.823 | .000 | Low>Intermediate |
| Intermediate ELP (n=102) | 3.030±.391 | | | Low>High |
| High ELP (n=18) | 2.835±.371 | | | |

probably have less anxiety in speaking English compared to their male counterparts.

Self-perceived English Language Proficiency Differences in Overall Multidimensional FLA

Research Question Four in this study explored if there was any significant difference in overall multidimensional FLA between the three self-perceived English language proficiency (ELP) groups (high, intermediate, and low). A One-way ANOVA was conducted to answer this question, and the results are presented in Table 6.

The mean value of multidimensional FLA for students with low self-perceived English language proficiency students was 3.332 ($SD = .340$), for intermediate self-perceived English language proficiency students 3.030 ($SD = .391$), and for high self-perceived English language proficiency students 2.835 ($SD = .371$). It indicated that the students of different self-perceived English language proficiency experienced moderate levels of overall multidimensional FLA, and students with low ELP had the highest level of multidimensional FLA. Furthermore, the one-way ANOVA revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in mean multidimensional FLA between at least two groups ($F(2, 187) = 19.823, p = .000 < 0.05$).

Turkey's HSD Test for multiple comparisons found that the mean value of multidimensional FLA was significantly different between the Low ELP and Intermediate ELP ($p = .000$), the Low SELP and High ELP ($p = .000$), but there was no statistically significant difference in multidimensional FLA between the Intermediate ELP and High ELP ($p = .102$).

The qualitative data from open-ended questions and interviews recorded mixed responses from the low proficiency students. Twenty-one (21) out of the seventy (70) or 30% of the low ELP students in the open-ended questions section admitted being anxious in English classrooms. Still, another eight (8) students (11.4%) reported being relaxed in English class with "no love for

English" or because "the English teacher is kind." These findings illustrated that although the low proficiency among students could lead to FLA among the students, other factors could help alleviate their apprehension and nervousness.

Discussion

With reference to Research Question One posed in this study, the findings for five dimensions of anxiety showed a medium level of anxiety among Chinese tertiary students, confirming findings from previous studies (Guo & Xu, 2014; Jiang & Dewaele, 2020). As mentioned in the literature review, studies of FLA in China have increased since the 21st century, and many strategies have been put forward to reduce FLA. However, research has also pointed out that the medium level of FLA and low proficiency level persist among Chinese EFL learners through the years. This finding illustrates the complex nature of FLA among Chinese EFL learners in the monolingual context, with English being compulsory since the third year of primary school. This fact further illustrates the importance of studies on multi-dimensional FLA and instructional design of EFL teaching and learning in China.

The findings for Research Question Two were based on the results of one-way ANOVA. The findings showed that listening and speaking anxiety ranked high among the five dimensions. This finding is again partly consistent with Horwitz et al.'s (1986) and Li's study (2018). A recent study by Wang, Sidhu and Wang (2023) further revealed that anxiety was often high due to Chinese EFL students fear of negative evaluation and comprehension apprehension which according to McCroskey (2001) refers to learner's anxiety associated with either 'fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons' (p.40).

The findings in this study also demonstrate that Chinese tertiary students are good at input or receptive skills like reading but need to improve their output and productive skills like speaking. The high level of listening anxiety also

pointed out the interrelations of linguistic skills: good listening skills lead to clear understanding and better speaking. Meanwhile, the qualitative data pointed out the common concern of vocabulary and grammar among the students, which directly affected their performance and confidence in language skill acquisition and application.

However, the results from this study are inconsistent with those conducted by Guo and Xu study (2014). In their study, the general FLA was the highest and significantly higher than reading anxiety and writing anxiety. There was no significant difference between general FLA, listening anxiety, and speaking anxiety. Both studies were conducted in a Chinese context with Chinese tertiary students as the subjects. The questionnaires in both studies were of good validity and reliability. Thus, a plausible reason for the difference in the results may be due to the participants' differences. In Guo and Xu's study, the participants were selected from a key university directly under the Ministry of Education (MOE) of China. In contrast, the participants in this study were selected from a provincial university under local authority. These two kinds of universities differ in funding sources, enrollment standards, facilities, and student orientation. It sheds light on the sample difference and calls for more attention to tertiary students from local universities and colleges. The qualitative data also shows that students in local universities have low ambitions for themselves and need to be more optimistic about their English language proficiency in all skill-related practices.

Research Question Three showed no significant difference in overall multidimensional FLA between the male and female participants. The same conclusion was found in studies conducted by Dewaele (2013) and Isa et al. (2023). Contrary to findings from Piniel and Zólyomi's (2022) meta-analysis, this study found that female students had slightly lower anxiety numbers than male students. This difference echoes the inconclusive findings regarding gender differences in FLA. In their study, Piniel and Zólyomi (2022) opined that gender difference was more complicated than it appeared. Therefore, gender differences in FLA should be further investigated in its social context (Dewaele et al., 2016).

Research Question Four showed that there was a significant difference in multi-dimensional FLA based on SELP. In this study, the Low SELP group demonstrated significantly higher multi-dimensional FLA than the Intermediate and High SELP groups. It means that the students who rated their English language proficiency as low experience more anxiety and apprehension in

learning English. This finding is pertinent to the idea that higher levels of FLA are often related to lower levels of SELP (Iqbal & Liu, 2018; Santos et al., 2015). However, the qualitative findings to this question showed that further study should be conducted to explore the relationship between FLA and SELP (self-perceived English language proficiency) as SELP was subject to psychological and sociocultural factors.

In summary, the combined results of both the quantitative and the qualitative analyses shed light on FLA in five dimensions among Chinese tertiary students. The quantitative findings supported previous findings on Chinese EFL learners' moderate level of FLA, no significant difference in FLA based on gender, and the negative correlation between FLA and students' self-perceived English language proficiency. Moreover, the qualitative findings displayed the complex nature of FLA in general and in five dimensions. The qualitative findings showed that skill-specific anxieties were interrelated. Low FLA could result from low motivation and interest in learning English, negatively affecting their language performance. Lastly, sociocultural factors should be included in the study of FLA to address issues concerning gender difference, self-perceived English language proficiency students, and sources of FLA.

Researchers such as Hu, Sidhu and Lu (2022a) highlight that it perhaps timely that EFL instructors in China embrace the global paradigm shift towards positive psychology and ensure their EFL classrooms provide fun and anxiety-free learning environment so that their learners develop a positive growth mindset towards learning EFL. Their study found that both foreign language enjoyment and a growth mindset toward learning EFL have positive and significant effect on learners' language performance. In another study, Hu, Sidhu and Lu (2022b) stressed that when EFL instructors are able to provide a low-anxiety, fun -loving language learning environment, learners will develop a positive attitude toward English thus lowering their anxiety level leading to them achieving higher language achievements.

Conclusion

Anxiety in EFL hinders the process of language acquisition and proficiency level. The Chinese EFL tertiary learners' achievement does not equal to the time they spend on English Language learning, and their FLA levels has remained at the medium level for years. Therefore, a comprehensive investigation into multi-dimensional FLA is perhaps required.

Though this study aims to provide a comprehensive picture of FLA, it has its share of limitations which can be viewed from three aspects. First, the convenient sampling showed homogeneity in instructional level, region, and academic background. Thus, this study only represents a small sample of Chinese EFL tertiary students, limiting the generalization of the findings. Secondly, when employing questionnaires as a data collection tool, researchers can never ascertain whether respondents have provided their honest and true responses. It is possible that some may have provided socially expected answers when answering items in the questionnaire. Hence more qualitative data could have been included to complement the study. Thirdly, a micro-developmental and dynamic perspective is needed for future studies to provide a detailed understanding of tertiary students' FLA in the five dimensions of FLA in a longitudinal study.

Despite its limitations, this study has shed some insight and provided some theoretical and pedagogical significance to the stakeholders in the country, namely the policymakers in the Ministry of Education, in China and the Chinese EFL teachers teaching English at all levels of education. The results obtained have helped to broaden the perspective of FLA research in second language acquisition by comprehensively investigating the inter-relationship between the four skill-based anxieties and general FLA with a mixed research method. Secondly, it sheds light on practical English language education in China. Multi-dimensional anxiety levels in learning English have not decreased even though much research has been done and scholars and educators have put forward various strategies to solve the problems.

Thus, it is timely for both EFL instructors and other stakeholders to examine if instruction in self-management and coping strategies can be integrated within the college English language education program. Differentiated instruction could be viewed as an alternative in Chinese EFL classrooms to cater to more individualized teaching and learning. Thirdly, this study calls for attention to students in local universities and colleges, who do not have more edge over their peers in key universities but constitute most Chinese tertiary students. Their expectation of themselves affects anxiety levels in five dimensions of FLA and their competitive force in the international market.

Attention must be paid to general FLA and skill-based anxieties, as English is fast becoming an international language. Chinese tertiary students must be equipped with the linguistic capabilities to become academically and economically productive and develop sustainable

skills with the right attitude and low anxiety in learning English.

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