

## LANGUAGE ANXIETY IN CHINESE UNIVERSITY EFL LEARNERS IN VARYING LEARNING CONTEXTS

Meihua Liu

*Department of Foreign Languages  
Tsinghua University, Beijing*

### Abstract

The present study examined Chinese university EFL learners' anxiety in English classrooms in varying learning contexts, and causes for and impact of anxiety on their performance in English. Analyses of 215 journals and 1203 questionnaires revealed the following conclusions: (1) around a third of the whole participant sample and each university sample experienced anxiety in English class, (2) various reasons such as low proficiency in the target language, lack of vocabulary, lack of practice, lack of preparation, and poor pronunciation were responsible for anxiety in the participants, and (3) anxiety mainly debilitated the students' performance in English and the majority of the participants felt helpless about feeling anxious when using the language in English class.

**Keywords:** language anxiety; learning context; cause; impact; performance

### INTRODUCTION

Anxiety experienced in the course of learning a foreign language is specific and unique (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). It is "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994b, p. 284). Since "the essence of second/foreign language learning is the communication of personally meaningful and conversationally appropriate messages through unfamiliar syntactic, semantic, and phonological systems" (Horwitz, 1995, p. 573), many second/foreign language (SL/FL) learners find the basic requirements of SL/FL learning inherently stressful (Horwitz, 1995). Gardner and his

---

Direct all correspondence to:

Meihua Liu, Department of Foreign Languages Tsinghua University, Beijing 100084, China, Phone: 86-10-62772459, E-mail: [ellenmh@yahoo.com](mailto:ellenmh@yahoo.com), [liumeihua@mail.tsinghua.edu.cn](mailto:liumeihua@mail.tsinghua.edu.cn)

associates hold a similar idea. To them, language anxiety is the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a SL with which the individual is not fully proficient (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, 1991, 1994b). They postulate that language anxiety is characterized by derogatory self-related cognitions, feelings of apprehension, and physiological responses such as increased heart rate.

Since the ground-breaking study by Horwitz et al. (1986) that proposed an instrument to measure foreign language anxiety—the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), numerous research has been done in this area using the scale as the leading data-collection instrument, agreeing on the existence of anxiety in SL/FL classrooms (Ewald, 2007; Kessler, 2010; Tallon, 2009; Yan & Horwitz, 2008). Though a number of studies report the effects of facilitative anxiety which motivate students to learn more about a FL/SL (Bailey, 1983; Frantzen & Magnan, 2005; Gregersen, 2003; Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001), findings of majority studies concerning anxiety and language achievement have been relatively uniform, indicating a consistent moderate negative relationship between anxiety and SL/FL proficiency/performance (Abu-Rabia, 2004; Ewald, 2007; Horwitz, 2001; Liu, 2006b; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Pichette, 2009; Tallon, 2009; Tsui, 1996).

Gardner (1985) designed the Classroom Anxiety Scale, which was utilized in a number of subsequent studies (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994a, 1994b; MacIntyre & Thivierge, 1995; Saito & Samimy, 1996). The majority of these studies also reveal that a considerable number of students experience anxiety in FL classrooms and that FL classroom anxiety mainly inhibits students' learning of the target language though a few studies uncover that anxiety yields no or little effect on course achievement (Marcos-Llinás & Garau, 2009). For example, Marcos-Llinás and Garau (2009) investigated the effects of language anxiety on course achievement in three foreign language proficiency levels of Spanish. Analyses of 134 questionnaires showed that language anxiety actually differed across proficiency levels. Advanced learners showed higher levels of anxiety than beginning and intermediate learners. However, students with high levels of anxiety did not necessarily exhibit lower course achievement in comparison to students with low levels of language anxiety, different from previous studies. Furthermore, there was a medium level of language anxiety among most participants, as found in Liu's studies (2006a; Liu, Liu & Su, 2010).

Meanwhile, most studies show that communication apprehension and social evaluation are part of the elements of foreign language classroom anxiety, and that anxiety interacts with many other linguistic, affective and psychological variables such as motivation, proficiency, and self-esteem, and the learning environment (Ewald, 2007; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Liu & Jackson,

2008; Mak, 2011; Yan & Horwitz, 2008). For example, Elkhafaifi' (2005) study of 233 graduate and undergraduate students revealed that advanced students had lower language anxiety than beginning or intermediate students and that older students who spent more years learning English in school had lower anxiety than younger students. Even so, few studies have focused on the role of context in anxiety (Kim, 2009, 2010), though Kim's (2009, 2010) studies showed that anxiety levels varied from context to context.

Meanwhile, researchers who are dissatisfied with quantitative studies have adopted more qualitative methods such as interviews, dairies and observations to explore the nature, characteristics, sources, and consequences of foreign language anxiety (Bailey, 1983; Liu, 2006a; Liu & Jackson, 2011; Yan & Horwitz, 2008; Young, 1999). Their studies lend further support to quantitative studies that anxiety could largely lead to a deficit in the learning of a SL/FL. They also identify various factors such as personality, self-confidence, learning context, proficiency in the target language and past experiences as sources for students' anxiety in SL/FL classrooms.

As reviewed, numerous studies attest to the existence of anxiety reactions with respect to language learning in many individuals. As such, it is indispensable to continue research on anxiety in different SL/FL learning contexts to better understand its pattern, causes, impact, and interaction with other learner/learning characteristics. For this purpose, the present research aimed to examine anxiety in three different learning contexts in China in terms of its degree, sources and impact on students' performance in English at the tertiary level. And the following research questions were of particular interest:

- (1) What is the general pattern of foreign language anxiety in Chinese university EFL learners in varying learning contexts?
- (2) What are the causes for foreign language anxiety in Chinese university EFL learners?
- (3) What is the impact of foreign language anxiety on the students' performance in English?

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The present research utilized a mixed method to investigate foreign language classroom anxiety in EFL learning contexts in Mainland China and its impact on students' performance in English at the tertiary level.

## **CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

Targeting first-year undergraduate non-English majors, the present research was situated in three EFL teaching and learning contexts in Beijing:

Tsinghua University (TU), Beijing Forestry University (BFU), and China University of Petroleum (CUP). The first two lie in the center of Beijing while the last is located in the suburb. Though all being good and comprehensive universities in China, TU is top 1 university in the country and recruits only top middle school graduates of each province across the country, both BFU and CUP are of second-rank universities and are much less competitive in recruiting good middle school graduates, with BFU ranked higher than CUP. Consequently, students from these three universities usually enjoy different English-learning environments. As the most prestigious university in China, TU has the best students from the country, far more qualified teaching faculty (e.g., more English teachers with a Ph.D degree, some of whom obtained their Ph.D in English-speaking countries, and more native English-speaking teachers, etc.) and better teaching and learning facilities (e.g., a wide variety of English selective courses covering many topics such as literature, translation, sociology, and skill development, various English activities such as Tsinghua FM English Radio, a 3-week long summer English camp, and a series of English lectures throughout each term, etc.) of the three. Because of its rank and the strong support from the government, TU has a lot more to invest in promoting its education quality. One example is that it has many more partner universities around the world and much more communication and exchange with the world. Hence, its students have many more opportunities to access and use English with native and non-native speakers in various situations such as conferences and study abroad programs. Being in the center of Beijing, BFU students can easily go to different places to practice their English (especially, listening and speaking) thanks to convenient transportation. Located in the far suburb of Beijing, the majority CUP students have much difficulty going to the city and thus have much less access to or chance to use English.

Another difference is that, as stipulated by China Ministry of Education, the undergraduate non-English majors at TU are exempt from the College English Test band 4 (CET-4) (a nation-wide English proficiency and exit test which is a must for undergraduate non-English majors to be granted the degree certificate in time), whereas those at the other two universities must take the test in order to be granted the B.A/B.S degree on time. As a result, the mode of English teaching and learning in these universities was quite different when the present study was conducted: it was competence-oriented and student-centered in TU while it was more exam-oriented and teacher-centered in the other two universities. English education at TU focused more on how to use the language (more) effectively, such as speaking (speaking and listening were taught by native speakers) and writing, though listening and reading were also considered important, while that in BFU and CUP more stressed reading and grammar, with less commitment to

speaking and writing. What was common when the present study was conducted was that all first-year non-English majors at these three universities had to take the same Beijing English placement test upon entering the university. The test, consisting of listening comprehension, reading comprehension and cloze (writing and oral test were excluded maybe due to their complex nature), aimed to measure students' English proficiency and place them into different band groups. Nevertheless, only TU and CUP students were actually divided into different band groups (the higher the band level, the more proficient in English a student was) according to their scores in the test when the present study was conducted. And most students were placed in the band 2 group (intermediate level), with fewer in the band 1 or 3 group respectively.

## **THE STUDY**

### **Participants**

The data for the study were collected in two phases. In phase 1, one intact class from each band group at each university were required to write three reflective journals. In phrase 2, a large-scale survey was conducted at the three universities. Thus, the participants in these two phases were different. Since the majority of the participants had studied English for at least six years prior to becoming university students, they were generally lower-intermediate learners of English. Taking into various factors into consideration, the TU students were at the highest level of English of the three university samples, followed by their BFU and CUP peers respectively.

### **Journal Respondents**

Altogether, six intact classes at the three universities, with one class from each band group, participated in journal writing: 3 TU classes, 1 BFU class and 2 CUP classes. Among 95 TU journal participants, 34 were band 1 students, 33 band 2 and 28 band 3 learners. Of 83 CUP journal correspondents, 41 were band 2 learners and 42 band 3 students. It should be noted that since BFU did not adopt any bench system in English teaching, only one class was randomly selected for journal writing. It was also worth noting that these students, in addition to writing reflective journals, answered the battery of questionnaires. However, since not all of them completed the survey or finished the three journals, the numbers of journal and survey participants and the actual numbers of these classes might be different. As such, Table 1 only records the real number of journal writers from each band group at each university.

**TABLE 1**  
**Journal Respondents** (Source: journals)

	Band 1		Band 2		Band 3		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
TU	28	6	28	5	24	4	95
BFU	18 male and 19 female						37
CUP	0	0	35	6	32	10	83
Total	165 male and 50 female						215

With an average age of 18.3, these journal participants studied in various disciplines such as Chinese Literature, Chemistry, Civil Engineering, Business Management, International Politics, and Medicine.

### Survey Respondents

In the second phase, a survey was distributed to approximately 1500 first-year students at different band levels at the three universities from various disciplines such as Computer Science, Architecture, Management and Chinese. Of 1431 collected questionnaires, 1203 were found valid (the others were discarded because of incompleteness) with general information presented in Table 2.

**TABLE 2**  
**General Information about Survey Respondents**

TU (451)		BFU (327)		CUP (425)		Whole sample (1203)		Average age
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
336	115	116	211	312	113	764	439	18.7

Among 1203 respondents, 764 (63.5%) were male and 439 (36.5%) were female. 451 respondents came from Tsinghua University (TU), among whom 113 were band 1 students, 205 band 2 students and 133 band 3 students. 327 participants were from Beijing Forestry University (BFU); and 425 respondents came from China University of Petroleum (CUP), among whom 289 were band 2 students and 136 band 3 students. More students from the band 2 group at both TU and CUP were selected for the study because they represented the first-year student population at both universities in terms of number, population diversity, English proficiency, major diversity, and gender difference. With an age range from 16 to 25 and an average age of 18.7, the majority of these students started to learn English formally from junior high school.

## Instrument

In this study, data were collected by way of reflective journals and survey, as detailed below. Self-reports in the journals served to explore whether the students were anxious, what caused them to become anxious, and how anxiety impacted their learning of English. The survey reports functioned to answer research questions 1 and 3.

**Reflective journal.** According to Bailey (1983), diaries and journals can add an element of triangulation by providing additional data about personal and affective variables in language learning. Thus, diaries, logs and journals have been employed in many research studies and constitute a useful source of information about the participants' feelings and experiences in language learning (Bailey, 1983; Liu, 2006a; Liu & Jackson, 2011). Following this tradition, one intact class representing each band level from the three universities in the present study were asked to write three journal entries to reflect and comment on their English learning experiences. For each journal entry, focus of writing in both Chinese and English was provided beforehand, which covered the following aspects: feelings (e.g., feeling confident or anxious) when using the language, causes, coping strategies, and the impact of anxiety. In addition to the topics suggested, the learner could write about other aspects related to his/her language learning experiences.

**Classroom Anxiety Scale (CAS).** This 8-item Classroom Anxiety Scale developed by Gardner (1985) was to measure to what degree students would feel anxious, especially when speaking, in English class. To suit the foreign language learning situation in Mainland China, some modifications were made. The words "language" and "foreign language" used in the original CAS were consistently replaced with "English" (see Appendix). For example, the original CAS item "I don't usually get anxious when I have to respond to a question in foreign language class" was modified to be "I don't usually get anxious when I have to respond to a question in English class". All the items were placed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly Agree" with values of 1 to 5 assigned to each descriptor respectively. It achieved a reliability of .853 in the present study.

**Performance in English.** Students' final course grades were obtained at the end of the term as a global measure of their performance in English (Liu, 2006b; Saito & Samimy, 1996).

## Procedure

The study was conducted during the first term of an academic year which lasted from 14 to 18 weeks for freshmen depending on which

university they were from. One intact class from each band group at TU and CUP, and one intact class from BFU were randomly selected for writing journals. Considering the fact that the majority freshmen needed time to become accustomed to the new teaching and learning mode at university and university life, their ideas and attitudes about English learning might change as well. They were thus asked to write the journals from the eleventh to thirteenth weeks. Each time, the course teachers would describe the requirements of journal writing and distribute to the students the topics for each entry in both Chinese and English a week beforehand. By the end of the thirteenth week, all the journal entries had been collected. After that, all the journal entries were read and commented on by the researcher. Then, they were photocopied and returned to the students in early December. Nevertheless, to avoid anxiety and increase reliability, only the last two journals were analyzed in the present study.

The survey was distributed to 13, 8 and 8 intact classes (altogether about 1500 students), including the classes required to write reflective journals, at the three universities during a normal teaching class in the fifteenth week. The students were asked to complete the survey in five minutes. 1431 questionnaires were collected, of which 1203 were valid for statistical analysis. Finally, all the participants' final course grades were collected as their global performance in English.

## Data Analysis

To have a broad profile of students' level of anxiety in different learning contexts, the CAS was computed in terms of mean, standard deviation, median, mode, and score range. Then one-way ANOVA (Duncan's) was conducted to explore the difference in anxiety among students from varying learning contexts. Finally, correlational analyses were run to explore the correlation between anxiety and students' performance in English.

The reflective journals were subjected to thematic content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980), with recurring themes identified, which was then integrated into the discussion of the survey results. The primary purpose in the present study was to identify whether the students felt anxious in English class, what caused them to be anxious, and its impact on their performance in English.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### General Pattern of the CAS in Various Learning Contexts

In order to know the general tendency of students' anxiety in English class, the total score, mean, standard deviation, median, mode, and score range of the CAS were computed. When computing these scores, the researcher adjusted the values assigned to different alternatives from 'Strongly Disagree' (1) to 'Strongly Agree' (5) of some items. Namely, for items 1, 4, 6 and 7 which expressed confidence in speaking English, the response 'Strongly Disagree' got a value of 5 instead of 1, the response 'Strongly Agree' got a value of 1 instead of 5, and so on. Thus, the total score of the CAS revealed a respondent's anxiety in English classrooms. The higher the score, the more anxious the respondent felt.

Since there are 8 items on the CAS, a total score of more than 32 on the scale implies that the respondent is very anxious in English classrooms. A total score of 24 to 32 signifies moderate anxiety and a total score of less than 24 indicates no/little anxiety in English class. The results are shown in Table 3.

**TABLE 3**  
**Statistical Analyses of the CAS in Varying Learning Contexts**

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median	Mode	Range
Total (1203)	21.29	5.12	21.00	20.00	8.00-37.00
TU (451)	21.57	5.40	22.00	20.00	8.00-37.00
BFU (327)	21.50	4.91	22.00	22.00	9.00-36.00
CUP (425)	20.82	4.93	21.00	20.00	8.00-36.00

As noted from Table 3, though some students (with a score of 37.00) felt extremely nervous, a mean of 21.29, 21.57, 21.50 and 20.82 on the CAS for the whole sample, the TU, BFU, and CUP samples respectively, all below the scale midpoint 24.00, indicates that the majority of each respective sample reported feeling relaxed and that only around a third indicated that they had experienced anxiety in English class. This might be because almost 100% of the participants had had at least six years of exposure to English teaching and learning in schools, which enabled them to be used to English teaching and learning in class to varying degrees. However, English was after all a foreign language and seldom used in the participants' daily life. This, coupled with the fact that competition always existed and other factors such as low English proficiency, lack of practice, lack of vocabulary and introversion (Bailey, 1983; Liu, 2006a; Tsui, 1996), unavoidably drove many of them anxious, especially when speaking the target language in class.

These findings are consistent with the results of item analysis of the CAS shown in the Appendix, which reveal that most students (strongly) disagreed with statements reflective of speech anxiety such as “whenever I have to answer a question, out loud, I get nervous and confused in English class” (item 8) (63.8%, 60.8%, 60.9%, and 69.2% for the whole sample, the TU, BFU, and CUP samples respectively); “I am always afraid that other students would laugh at me if I speak up in English class” (item 2) (70.7%, 67.4%, 75.2%, and 70.8% for the whole sample, the TU, BFU, and CUP samples respectively); and “I am generally tense whenever participating in English class” (item 5) (77.1%, 72.5%, 82%, and 78.4% for the whole sample, the TU, BFU, and CUP samples respectively). Even so, they rejected the CAS items indicative of confidence when speaking in English class such as “I usually feel relaxed and confident when active participation takes place in English class” (item 7) (32.6%, 29%, 38.8%, and 31.5% for the whole sample, the TU, BFU, and CUP samples respectively); “I don’t usually get anxious when I have to respond to a question in English class” (item 1) (34.4%, 34.6%, 39.1%, and 30.6% for the whole sample, the TU, BFU, and CUP samples respectively); “I am never embarrassed to volunteer answers in English class” (item 4) (42.4%, 39.5%, 49.9%, and 39.8% for the whole sample, the TU, BFU, and CUP samples respectively); and “I never understand why other students are so nervous in English class” (item 6) (42.5%, 46.6%, 42.5%, and 38.1% for the whole sample, the TU, BFU, and CUP samples respectively). This indicates that significant anxiety was experienced by at least a third of the students in English language classrooms, like that reported in existing studies (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1992; Horwitz et al., 1986; Horwitz, 2001; Liu, 2006a, 2006b; Liu & Jackson, 2008, 2011).

**TABLE 4**  
**Student Anxiety Reported in Journals**

	Total No.	(Very) N N/%	A little N N/%	Sometimes N/%	Not N N/%	Not mentioned N%
TU	95	52/54.7%	22/23.2%	3/3.2%	18/18.9%	0
BFU	37	31/83.8%	0	0	5/16.1%	1/2.7%
CUP	83	30/36.1%	15/18.1%	13/15.7%	20/24.1%	5/6%
Total	215	113/52.6%	37/17.2%	16/7.4%	43/20%	6/2.8%

**Note:** N = nervous

These findings are generally supported by the result of the journal data. Of 215 journal participants, 166 (77.2%) reported that they were (very/a little/sometimes) anxious in English classrooms, especially when speaking/using the language publicly in class, as reported in Table 4.

A closer comparison of the three groups reveals that more BFU students (83.8%) self-reported to be anxious than their TU (54.7%) and CUP (36.1%) peers, whereas the fewest CUP learners were anxious in English class. This might be due to the small number of participants from BFU. Nevertheless, this finding partially confirmed the statistical result that the CUP (mean = 20.82) students were the least anxious and that their TU (mean = 21.57) peers self-reported to be the most anxious in English classrooms, as presented in Table 3. Alternatively, the students enjoying the better English learning environment and most proficient in English experienced more anxiety, similar to those in Marcos-Llinás and Garau (2009); whereas, those who had the poorest English learning facilities of the three suffered anxiety the least in English class. Though the difference was not statistically significant, as proved by the ANOVA results reported in Table 5 ( $F = 2.75$ ,  $p = .064$ ), this is still surprising. It might be attributed to several reasons. First, the sample size, especially the number of journal respondents, was different for each university. The result might be different if more CUP and BFU participants had reported their feelings and performance when using English in class in the journals. Second, the fact that a more communicative and student-centered teaching method was adopted in TU English class might have driven the TU participants more anxious, while an exam-oriented and teacher-centered teaching method adopted in CUP and BFU English class was not so intimidating to their students, since the majority of the participants had been used to exam-oriented and teacher-centered teaching in their middle school English class. Moreover, both speaking and listening were taught by English native speakers in TU, who might have demands and expectations different from those of Chinese teachers', which might also be a cause for TU students' high anxiety, as found in Mak (2011). Meanwhile, more access to English and more chance to use the language might have enabled TU and BFU students to realize that their English, especially spoken English, was not good enough or far from what they had desired. Hence, more respondents from these two universities reported to be anxious when using the language, as found in Liu (2006a). Nevertheless, probably due to CUP's geographic location, the CUP learners had much less access to and less chance to use English. They thus might be satisfied with what had achieved in the learning of the language and reported to be less anxious. Lastly, the TU students, the best in English and other

subjects, might suffer more from competition since each other strove to be a top student, as found in Liu (2006a) and discussed in Table 6. However, all these possible explanations need to be further confirmed in future studies.

**TABLE 5**  
**ANOVA Results of the CAS**

Measure	F	p	University (Mean)			Location of sig. difference (p = .05)
			TU = 451; BFU = 327; CUP = 425			
			TU	BFU	CUP	
CAS	2.75	.064	21.57	21.50	20.82	/

### Causes for language classroom anxiety

As previously discussed, around half of the journal respondents reported feeling anxious in English class. But the reasons might vary from university to university, as listed in Table 6.

**TABLE 6**  
**Causes for Language Classroom Anxiety (Source: journals)**

	TU (Total N = 95) N/%	BFU (Total N = 37) N/%	CUP (Total N = 83) N/%
Low English proficiency	19/20%	16/51.6%	14/16.9%
Lack of /limited vocabulary	13/13.7%	10/32.2%	21/25.3%
Lack of practice	3/3.2%	13/41.9%	11/13.3%
Personality	19/20%	4/12.9%	16/19.3%
Lack of confidence	9/9.5%	5/16%	10/12%
Not understanding what the teacher is saying	2/2.1%	9/29%	1/1.2%
Poor oral English	10/10.5%	4/12.9%	5/6%
Other students' wonderful performance	14/14.7%	0	3/3.6%
Lack of preparation	2/2.1%	0	10/12%
Poor/Bad pronunciation	2/2.1%	3/10%	0
Poor listening	1/1.1%	4/12.9%	0
Being unable to find appropriate words to express myself	4/4.2%	0	3/3.6%
Fear of being the center of attention	4/4.2%	0	1/1.2%
English being a foreign language	3/3.2%	0	2/2.4%
Fear of making mistakes	0	0	7/5.4%
Being afraid of being laughed at	0	5/16%	0
Not knowing how to express	0	0	5/6%

oneself in English			
English lessons being difficult	0	0	3/3.6%
Being unable to catch classmates	0	0	3/3.6%
Coming from the countryside where English teaching is poor	1/1.1%	1/3.2%	0
Fear of being unable to understand the teacher	1/1.1%	0	2/2.4%
Lack of familiarity with classmates	1/1.1%	0	1/1.2%
Inadequate grammatical knowledge	3/3.2%	0	0
Having never spoken English before so many people	3/3.2%	0	
Teachers always speaking English in the whole class	0	1/3.2%	0
Being afraid of being asked	0	1/3.2%	0
Having not finished homework	0	1/3.2%	0
English being difficult	0	0	2/2.4%
Different teaching method	2/2.1%	0	0
Teaching and learning tradition	2/2.1%	0	0
Not liking speaking English	2/2.1%	0	0
Hating English	0	0	1/1.2%
The pressure given by the teacher	0	0	1/1.2%
Fear of speaking	1/1.1%	0	0
Slow progress	1/1.1%	0	0
Taking speaking seriously	1/1.1%	0	0
Hating being required to write down a word that I can't spell	1/1.1%	0	0
Inability to organize speech when speaking	1/1.1%	0	0
Not knowing the keys to questions	1/1.1%		0

As shown in Table 6, the three main factors contributing to the students' anxiety in English class were low English proficiency (20%, 51.6% and 16.9% for TU, BFU and CUP samples respectively), lack of vocabulary (13.7%, 32.2% and 25.3% for TU, BFU and CUP samples respectively), and lack of practice (3.2%, 41.9% and 13.3% for TU, BFU and CUP samples respectively).

Low English proficiency, to many participants, especially the BFU correspondents, provoked anxiety the most, as found in Liu's (2006a; Liu & Jackson, 2011) studies. Due to poor English, they became "afraid of speaking English, and worry about being asked to answer questions. When I have to speak English, I become very nervous (Li, male, BFU)". Similarly, lack of vocabulary could produce anxiety in many of the participants in that it made them unable to express themselves. Some students felt anxious when speaking/using English because they had had little practice with the language.

The next three important reasons were personality (mainly introversion and shyness based on their own description) (20%, 12.9%, and 19.3% respectively), lack of confidence (9.5%, 16%, and 12% respectively), and not understanding what the teacher was saying (2.1%, 29%, and 1.2% respectively). Personality was also identified as a great contributor to their anxiety in English class by around 20% of each university sample. Because of shyness or introversion, some students would easily become nervous when using/speaking English, especially when it happened in front of others. It was the same with lack of confidence and incomprehensible input.

The other factors ranged from fear of being the focus of attentions, to inadequate grammatical knowledge, to the difficulty of English and English lessons, etc., with varying weights assigned to them by students in varying learning contexts. In general, most of the causes were similar to those in Mak (2011) and Liu (2006a) who identified several factors contributing to the speaking-in-class anxiety of a group of Chinese first-year university EFL learners: speech anxiety and fear of negative evaluation; uncomfortableness when speaking with native speakers; negative attitudes towards the English classroom; negative self-evaluation; fear of failing the class/consequences of personal failure; speaking without preparation; being corrected when speaking; inadequate wait-time; and not being allowed to use the first language in a second language class, and so on.

Finally, as summarized in Table 6, the three samples endorsed the factors leading to their anxiety in English class to varying degrees. Among the factors identified, generally many more BFU learners attributed their anxiety in English classrooms to such factors as low English proficiency (51.6%), lack of vocabulary (32.2%), and lack of practice (41.9%), while fewer than 20% of the TU/CUP correspondents did so; many BFU participants also regarded failure to understand the teacher (29%), poor pronunciation (10%), poor listening (12.9%), and fear of being laughed at (16%) as main contributors of their anxiety in English class, whereas no more than 2.1% of the other two samples believed so; 10.5% of the TU, 12.9% of the BFU, and 6% of the CUP participants considered poor oral English to be an important factor; 20% of the TU, 12.9% of the BFU, and

19.3% of the CUP learners thought of personality as a contributor; and 9.5% of the TU, 16% of the BFU, and 12% of the CUP respondents thought so of lack of confidence. Obviously, among the three university samples, proficiency in and exposure to English were of much less concern to the TU and CUP students, especially to the TU participants, when identifying causes for their anxiety in English classrooms, while they were greatest worries for their BFU peers. This not only further confirms that the TU students were virtually at the highest proficiency level, who thus reported to suffer the least from the lack of confidence, but also suggests that a more communicative and student-oriented teaching style is conducive to reducing students' foreign language anxiety. Meanwhile, peer pressure seemed to be much more serious among the TU students, as implied by the fact that a lot more TU (14.7%) participants agreed that other students' wonderful performance was a great contributor to their anxiety in English class, while few of the other two samples thought so. It might be because top students were more self-conscious and held a greater self-esteem. As revealed in Liu's (2006a, 2006b) studies, these students usually tended to pursue perfection.

### **Consequences of Language Classroom Anxiety**

In addition to identifying anxiety-provoking factors in English class, these participants also commented on the impact of anxiety on their learning of English. Of 215 journal participants, 154 (71.6%) thought that anxiety negatively affected their learning of English, 13 (6%) believed anxiety to be beneficial, 8 (3.7%) regarded anxiety as something both good and bad, 16 (7.4%) maintained that anxiety could produce no effect, and 21 (9.8%) made no comment (Table 7). This finding was further supported by the negative coefficients between anxiety and the students' performance in English:  $r = -.07$  ( $p \leq .05$ ),  $-.08$ ,  $-.20$  ( $p \leq .01$ ), and  $-.19$  ( $p \leq .01$ ) for the whole sample, the TU, BFU and CUP samples respectively, with only the coefficient between the CAS and the TU students' performance in English not statistically significant. Though the coefficients were not high, they did suggest that classroom anxiety could negatively affect the latter, as happened in many other studies (Gregersen, 2005; Liu, 2006b; Liu & Jackson, 2008, 2011; Pichette, 2009).

**TABLE 7**  
**Impact of Anxiety on Students' Learning of English** (Source: journal)

	Bad	Good	Good and bad	No effect	No comment
TU (95)	64/67.4%	7/7.4%	6/6.3%	10/10.5%	8/8.4%
BFU (37)	32/86.5%	2/5.4%	0	2/5.4%	1/2.7%
CUP (83)	58/69.9%	4/4.8%	2/2.4%	6/7.2%	13/15.7%
Total (215)	154/71.6%	13/6%	8/3.7%	16/7.4%	21/9.8%

Table 7 reveals that more than 60% of each university sample believed that anxiety exerted a negative effect on their learning of English, as happened in Liu (2006b), Liu and Jackson (2011) and Tsui (1996). These students reflected that due to anxiety, they could not perform as well as they should have, made slow progress, and studied inefficiently. Around 5% of each sample regarded anxiety as something conducive to their learning of English in that it served as a motivation and urged them to study harder, as reported in Bailey (1983). Meanwhile, 6.3% of the TU and 2.4% of the CUP participants respectively maintained that anxiety affected their learning of English both negatively and positively: anxiety motivated them to work harder but at the same time prevented them from performing better.

Comparison of the three samples shows that more BFU participants (86.5%) believed anxiety to be a debilitator than did their TU (67.4%) and CUP (69.9%) peers, while more TU learners (7.4%) regarded it as something conducive than their BFU (5.4%) and CUP (4.8%) counterparts. Alternatively, to some participants, anxiety might be facilitating as well, motivating them to work harder and perform better, as found in other studies (Bailey, 1983; Frantzen & Magnan, 2005; Gregersen, 2003; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994a).

Although the majority of each sample held that anxiety negatively affected their learning of English, only a few had purposefully taken some measures to cope with it, such as breathing deeply, telling oneself to be brave and/or encouraging oneself by saying that "you are the best". The majority seemed to be helpless while hoping more contact with the target language could gradually reduce their anxiety, as found in Liu's (2006a) study. Nevertheless, most of them proposed some suggestions for language teachers and learners. All the three samples hoped their EFL teachers to be helpful, friendly, and encouraging. However, comparatively, the TU learners preferred their EFL teachers to be a guide and facilitator, the CUP learners suggested EFL teachers being a helper and a friend, but their BFU peers hoped their EFL teachers to be a corrector and modify their speech accordingly. As for the learners, all the three samples suggested them being

confident and brave, improving English and having more practice. Nevertheless, the TU participants' suggestions focused more on affect, while their BFU peers' were more concerned with motivation intensity when learning the language.

## Conclusions and Implications

The present study examined Chinese EFL learners' anxiety in English classrooms in varying learning contexts, causes for and impact of anxiety on students' performance in English. The following conclusions are guaranteed from the present study. First, around a third of the whole participant sample and each university sample experienced anxiety in English class. Though no statistically significant difference was observed among the three university samples, more TU students self-reported to be anxious in English class, and more of them commented that anxiety might be facilitating as well. Further analyses of the data showed that various reasons such as low proficiency in the target language, lack of vocabulary, lack of practice, lack of preparation, and poor pronunciation were responsible for anxiety in the participants. All these indicate that anxiety was most often associated with the output and processing stages of the learning process, as found in Williams and Andrade (2008).

Although acknowledging that anxiety mainly debilitated their performance in English, the majority of the participants felt helpless about feeling anxious when using the target language in English class.

As such, it is necessary for both language instructors and learners, as well as researchers, to be (more) aware of the issue of anxiety and do (more) research on it to help enhance the teaching and learning of English, though only around a third of the participants felt anxious in English class. It is also desirable for EFL teachers to be empathetic to their students, especially those who appear the most anxious in class (Oxford, 1999), which will make them more comfortable when using English in class. In addition, to help students become less anxious in English lessons, it is advisable for EFL teachers to create a relaxing and supportive classroom-learning environment (Horwitz et al., 1986; Tsui, 1996). As Phillips claimed, "low-stress language learning environment is believed to facilitate acquisition of the foreign language by allowing students to concentrate more fully on communication rather than being distracted by self-deprecating worry and fear of evaluation, encouraging a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom may be a first step in alleviating anxiety related to oral testing (1992, p. 24)". Abu-Rabia (2004) and Ewald (2007) also found that teachers' supportive attitude helped relieve students' anxiety. Lastly, though only around a third of the students reported to be anxious when using English in class, these people actually needed help

the most. Special attention should be paid to them to help overcome anxiety. At the same time, learners may benefit from being explicitly taught how to cope with these situations, as suggested by Williams and Andrade (2008).

Finally, although the present research recruited a large number of participants at varied English proficiency levels from different EFL learning situations in Beijing, the role of gender and proficiency in anxiety was not explored, which deserves further research. In addition, because of the wide existence of anxiety in language classrooms and its negative impact on students' performance in and learning of a SL/FL, it is necessary to research on various coping strategies to help language learners overcome anxiety and better their performance in the target language. Moreover, probably because of the same big Chinese culture, few students considered culture to be a cause for their anxiety in English classrooms. However, since traditional Chinese culture has been stressing modesty, authority of teachers and the elder, and harmony, the majority Chinese students, even university students, have become accustomed to being listeners and passive learners in class. When required to speak out, especially in a foreign language, they might unavoidably become anxious and worried, as reported in Liu (2006a). Further, due to the complexity of teaching and learning, what may work in one case may not work in another. Future research on the actual effectiveness of these coping strategies in diverse classroom settings would be beneficial.

## THE AUTHOR

Meihua Liu is associate profesor of English at the Department of Foreign Languages & Literatures, Tsinghua University, China. Her research interests mainly include second/foreign language teaching and learning, individual difereces, reticence and anxiety, and second language writing.

## REFERENCES

- Abu-Rabia, S. (2004). Teachers' role, learners' gender differences, and FL anxiety among seventh-grade students studying English as a FL. *Educational Psychology*, 24, 711-721.
- Bailey, K. M. (1983). Competitiveness and anxiety in adult second language learning: looking at and through the dairy studies. In H. W. Seliger and M. H. Long (Eds.), *Classroom Oriented Research in Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 67-103). Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers, Inc.
- Elkhafaifi, H. (2005). Listening comprehension and anxiety in the Arabic language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89, 206-220.

- Ewald, J. D. (2007). Foreign language learning anxiety in upper-level class: Involving students as researchers. *Foreign Language Annals*, 40, 122-142.
- Frantzen, D., & Magnan, S. (2005). Anxiety and the true beginner-false beginner dynamic in beginning French and Spanish classes. *Foreign Language Annals*, 38, 171-190.
- Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social psychology and second language learning*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Gardner, R. C., & MacIntyre, P. D. (1992). Integrative motivation, induced anxiety, and language learning in a controlled environment. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 14, 197-214.
- Gregersen, T. (2003). To err is human: A reminder to teachers of language-anxious students. *Foreign Language Annals*, 36, 25-32.
- Gregersen, T. (2005). Nonverbal cues: clues to the detection of foreign language anxiety. *Foreign Language Annals*, 38, 388-400.
- Horwitz, E. K. (1995). Student affective reactions and the teaching and learning of foreign languages. *Journal of Educational Research*, 23, 569-652.
- Horwitz, E. K. (2001). Language anxiety and achievement. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 21, 112-126.
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 1, 125-132.
- Kessler, G. (2010). Fluency and anxiety in self-access speaking tasks: the influence of environment. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 23, 361-375.
- Kim, S.-Y. (2009). Questioning the stability of foreign language classroom anxiety and motivation across different classroom contexts. *Foreign Language Annals*, 42, 138-157.
- Kim, S.-Y. (2010). Is foreign language classroom anxiety context free or context dependent? *Foreign Language Annals*, 43, 187-189.
- Krippendorff, K. (1980). *Content analysis: an introduction to its methodology*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications
- Liu, L., Liu, M., & Su, D. (2010). An investigation of Chinese undergraduates' foreign language anxiety: changes and differences. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 20, 47-64.

- Liu, M. (2006a). Anxiety in EFL classrooms: causes and consequences. *TESL Reporter*, 39, 13-32.
- Liu, M. (2006b). Anxiety in Chinese EFL students at different proficiency levels. *System*, 34, 301-316.
- Liu, M., & Jackson, J. (2008). An Exploration of Chinese EFL Learners' unwillingness to communicate and foreign language anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 92, 71-86.
- Liu, M., & Jackson, J. (2011). Reticence and anxiety in oral English lessons: A case study in Mainland China. In L. Jin & M. Cortazzi (Eds.). *Researching Chinese learners—skills, perceptions, and intercultural adaptation* (pp. 119-137). Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave MacMillan.
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1989). Anxiety and second-language learning: Toward a theoretical clarification. *Language Learning*, 39, 251-275.
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1991). Investigating language class anxiety using the focused essay technique. *The Modern Language Journal*, 75, 296-304.
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1994a). The effects of induced anxiety on three stages of cognitive processing in computerized vocabulary learning. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 16, 1-17.
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1994b). The subtle effects of language anxiety on cognitive processing in the second language. *Language Learning*, 44, 283-305.
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Thivierge, K. A. (1995). The effects of audience pleasantness, audience familiarity, and speaking contexts on public speaking anxiety and willingness to speak. *Communication Quarterly*, 43, 456-466.
- Mak, B. (2011). An exploration of speaking-in-class anxiety with Chinese ESL learners. *System*, 39, 202-214.
- Marcos-Llinás, M., & Garau, M. J. (2009). Effects of language anxiety on three proficiency-level courses of Spanish as a foreign language. *Foreign Language Annals*, 42, 94-111.
- Oxford, R. L. (1999). "Style wars" as a source of anxiety in language classrooms. In D. J. Young (ed.), *Affect in foreign language and second language learning: a practical guide to creating a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere* (pp. 216-237). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

- Pichette, F. (2009). Second language anxiety and distance language learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 42, 77-93.
- Phillips, E. M. (1992). The effects of language anxiety on students' oral test performance and attitudes. *The Modern Language Journal*, 76, 14-26.
- Saito, Y., & Samimy, K. K. (1996). Foreign language anxiety and language performance: A study of learner anxiety in beginning, intermediate, and advanced-level college students of Japan. *Foreign Language Annals*, 29, 239-251.
- Spielmann, G., & Radnofsky, M. (2001). Learning language under tension: New directions from a qualitative study. *Modern Language Journal*, 8, 259-278.
- Tallon, M. (2009). Foreign language anxiety and heritage students of Spanish: A quantitative study. *Foreign Language Annals*, 42, 112-137.
- Tsui, A. (1996). Reticence and anxiety in second language learning. In K. M. Bailey & D. Nunan (Eds.), *Voices from the language classroom* (pp. 145-167). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, K., & Andrade, M. (2008). Foreign language learning anxiety in Japanese EFL university classes: causes, coping, and locus of control. *Electronic Journal of Foreign language Teaching*, 5, 181-191.
- Yan, J. X., & Horwitz, E. K. (2008). Learners' perceptions of how anxiety interacts with personal and instructional factors to influence their achievement in English: a qualitative analysis of EFL learners in China. *Language Learning*, 58, 151-183.
- Young, D. J. (Ed.). (1999). *Affect in foreign language and second language learning: a practical guide to creating a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere* (pp. 13-23). Boston: McGraw-Hill College.