

# A Correlation Study on EFL Learning Anxiety and Oral Performance

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The present study focuses on the correlation between English learning anxiety and students' oral English performance, and collects data through a questionnaire which is adapted from Horwitz et al's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). Students' oral test grades in TEM 4 (Test for English Majors-Band 4) are used as a measurement of their oral proficiency. It is found that English-major students commonly have a moderate level of anxiety in their learning of English. Of the four dimensions in FLCAS, communication anxiety is the most intensive among most students, and test anxiety correlates most negatively with students' oral performance. The possible sources of English learning anxiety are explored and some suggestions are made accordingly after statistical analysis.

*Keywords:* English learning anxiety, oral performance, affective variables, English-major students

## Introduction

Since the 1970s, foreign language anxiety (FLA) has become a focus in EFL studies. It is thought to be closely related to language performance, and is even regarded as one of the predictors of learners' language achievements. Many researchers have been devoted to the study of foreign language anxiety (Brown, 1973; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989) from the perspectives of categorization of language anxiety, identification of its symptoms, and its effects on foreign language learning. Echoing this trend in the field of Second Language Acquisition studies (SLA), a lot of empirical researches have been carried out (Young, 1991; MacIntyre, Noles, & Clement, 1997; Saito, Horwitz, & Garza, 1999; Elkhafaifi, 2005). As for the correlation study on FLA and students' oral performance, there seems to be none widely accepted agreement.

The present study aims to explore the anxiety level of English major students and its effects on their oral performance. In order to help more students overcome anxiety and become fluent EFL learners, causes of FLA and possible solutions should also be discussed.

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### Previous Studies on Language Learning Anxiety

With the rising of humanistic psychology, SLA studies have been focusing on the effects of affective factors on foreign/second language learning. However, FLA has not been separated from other types of anxieties until Horwitz (1986, p. 125) made a definition of it: “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system”. She held that foreign language anxiety was “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of language learning process”. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986, p. 129) argued for three dimensions of anxiety: “communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation” and each of them is closely correlated with foreign language learning anxiety. Horwitz et al. (1986, p. 130) developed Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) in the studies of anxiety. Wang Caikang (2003, p. 282) translated FLCAS into Chinese version and identified its great reliability and validity. He also defined four aspects of the scale: overall anxiety, communication anxiety, classroom anxiety, and test anxiety.

Oral performance has always been regarded as the most susceptible aspect in foreign language learning. There are studies on the correlation between FLA and students’ oral performance, but with varying conclusions. Most studies showed a constant negative correlation, but still a few presented contradictory and perplexing results. Young (1990, p. 409) studied 60 university-level students majoring in French, German, and Spanish and the results showed that there were significant negative correlations between anxiety level and oral proficiency. Her findings suggest foreign language learning anxiety does not simply correlate with speaking activities, but specifically with students’ speaking out in front of their classmates and teachers. The same conclusions were drawn in Horwitz’s studies. Cheng Yanping (2004, p. 99) found that anxiety negatively correlated with students’ oral proficiency. While, Li Yuan (2010) drew the conclusion that foreign language learning anxiety had a positive correlation with oral test grades.

Above all, although studies on the relationship between anxiety and language proficiency failed to reach a consensus, most of them have recognized the negative correlation between the two. It is still undefined and worth studying.

### Research Methodology

Anxiety is estimated to have more debilitating effects than facilitating ones in learning a foreign language. The present study mainly intends to make an inquiry into the correlation between foreign language learning anxiety and students’ oral performance. Specifically, the present study has three research questions:

- (1) What is the overall anxiety level of English-major students? Of the four dimensions proposed by Wang Caikang, which one ranks the highest?
- (2) Is there a correlation between language learning anxiety and students’ oral performance? If there is, is it a positive or negative correlation?
- (3) Which dimension correlates most with students’ oral performance in tests?

The present study took 55 English-major students in the Northeastern University as participants, including 25 students from Grade 3, and 30 students from Grade 4, all aged from 19 to 22 (21.3 on average). Most of them have been learning English since the fifth or sixth grade in primary school, and they have been learning English for around 10 years (10.33 years on average). All the participants filled in the questionnaire on their free will.

The present research adopted Wang Caikang's translated version of FLCAS (Wang, 2003), which consists of two sections. Section 1 is about students' background information including their age and grade, the years of their learning English, and their TEM 4 (Test for English Majors-Band 4) Oral Test scores. TEM 4 Oral Test is a nation-wide criterion-related norm-referenced test, designed for second-year English major students in China to evaluate their oral ability in spoken English. The assessment of candidates' oral proficiency is based on a four-scale criterion ranging from "excellent", "fairly good", "pass", and "fail". It remains the most-widely taken test for English majors. So in terms of validity and reliability, it remains one of the best choices.

Section 2 of the questionnaire consists of 33 items to measure students' anxiety level. Each item was scored on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" with the middle option being neutral. Among these questions, Questions 4, 7, 8, 10, 11, 15, 16, 19, 25, 29 were connected with overall English anxiety, measuring students' overall anxiety towards foreign language learning. Questions 5, 6, 17, 18, 21, 22, 26, 28, 30 were related to classroom anxiety, like feeling nervous and anxious when taking classes or on the way to English classes. Questions 1, 2, 14, 23, 24, 31, 32 were designed to get information about students' level of communication anxiety, namely, to know whether they feel nervous when speaking English or communicating with others in English. Questions 3, 9, 12, 13, 20, 27, 33 were connected with test anxiety to measure students' level of anxiety in taking English tests.

SPSS 24.0 statistical package was used to analyze and figure out the average anxiety level among the students and the correlation between students' oral English performance and their level of anxiety.

## Research Findings

### Students' Anxiety Level

Through statistical analysis, it was found that the average level of students' anxiety is 87.56 and standard deviation is 17.6, which was lower than what Zhou and Wang's study (2010) has found (Mean = 94.36; SD = 18.45). The discrepancy may result from the differences in the sample size, participants' language proficiency, and their educational background.

Table 1

*Average Level of Students' Anxiety*

Number	Mean	Standard deviation
55	87.5636	17.6

Based on their scores in the questionnaires, the author divided all the participants into three groups: students with high-level anxiety, moderate-level anxiety, and low-level anxiety. Participants whose scores were higher than mean plus one standard deviation were included into high-level anxiety group (critical value = 106). Participants whose scores are lower than mean minus one standard deviation were included in low-level anxiety group (critical value = 70). Participants whose scores were between 70 and 106 were in the moderate group. The statistical result is shown in the table below.

Table 2

*Proportion of Students With Different Levels of Anxiety*

	Number	Proportion
High-level anxiety	7	12.7%
Moderate-level anxiety	40	72.7%
Low-level anxiety	8	14.5%
Total	55	100%

As is shown in the table, students with moderate level of anxiety make up the most, accounting for 72.7 percent. This result verifies the conclusion made by Horwitz (1986, p. 561). Besides, of the four dimensions proposed by Wang Caikang (2003, p. 282), namely, overall English anxiety, classroom anxiety, communication anxiety, and test anxiety, the communication anxiety is of the highest level.

Table 3

*Mean Scores on the Four Dimensions*

	Mean	Standard deviation
Overall English anxiety	2.69	0.54
Classroom anxiety	2.43	0.65
Communication anxiety	2.82	0.70
Test anxiety	2.72	0.68

Participants' mean scores on the four dimensions range from 2.4 to 2.8, which indicates that students' level of anxiety in each dimension is moderate, with communication anxiety ranking the highest. Students with high-level anxiety are often lacking in confidence when speaking English. They always think that others will do better than them and they dare not speak in English or answer teacher's questions initiatively. They tend to fear that they would be laughed at due to their poor pronunciation or some mistakes in the use of vocabulary or grammar. Besides, they are fearful about being nominated to answer teachers' questions. When teachers try to correct their mistakes, they would feel nervous and agitated. In addition, they always feel anxious about preparation for the tests. It is stressful for them to prepare for the classes and frequent tests. Even if they are fully prepared, they are still afraid of failing the tests.

**Correlation Between Anxiety and Oral Grades**

The present research confirms the negative correlation between level of anxiety and oral performance.

Table 4

*Oral Test Grades Among Students With Different Levels of Anxiety*

Rate	Level of anxiety		
	High-level anxiety	Moderate-level anxiety	Low-level anxiety
Excellent	0	3	2
Good	1	9	3
Qualified	5	24	3
Unqualified	1	4	0
Pass rate	85.7%	80.0%	100%
Excellent rate	0	15.0%	25.0%

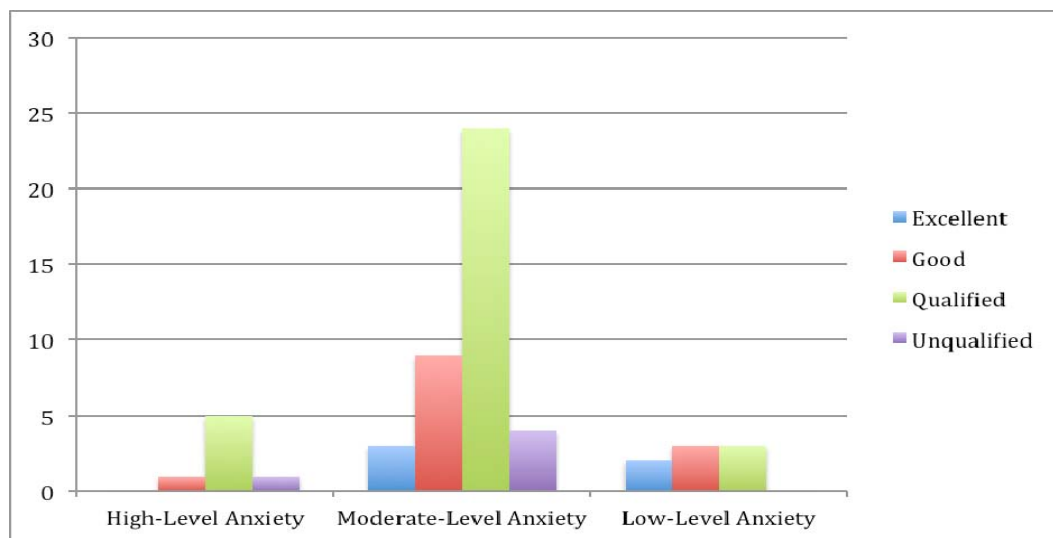


Figure 1. Grade distributions among students with different levels of anxiety.

As is shown in Table 4 and Figure 1 above, no one scores “unqualified” among low-level anxiety students; thus the pass rate is the highest, 100%. However, among high-level anxiety students, none of them scores “excellent”, and therefore the excellent rate is the lowest. It means that low-level anxiety students perform better in oral test than those with higher-level anxiety, which verifies a negative correlation between English learning anxiety and students’ oral grade.

Table 5

*The Correlation Between Anxiety and Oral Grades*

Grade		Total scores of anxiety
	Pearson Correlation Index	-0.440**
	1	
Grade	N	55
	55	
	Pearson Correlation Index	1
	-0.440**	
Total scores of anxiety	N	55
	55	

As is shown by statistics, the correlation coefficient between students’ oral grades and their level of anxiety is -0.44, which indicates that English learning anxiety in class correlates negatively with students’ oral grades. According to the previous studies, the correlation coefficient is between 0.3 and 0.5, which shows that the intensity of correlation is moderate. Results show that the more anxious a student is in learning English, the more likely he will do worse in oral performance than people with lower level of anxiety. The above findings agree with what Horwitz and Young argue for. Eysenck (1979) suggested the reasons why anxiety interfered with language performance by suggesting that “Anxious people tend to have their attention divided between task-related cognition and self-related cognition”. What he suggested at least partially revealed the reason why students with higher level of anxiety could not concentrate well on the tasks. As they learn and speak in English,

their minds would be preoccupied with the fear and anxiety of making mistakes or being mocked at. In oral English performance, the high-level anxiety would hinder students' initiatives to communicate with others or to speak in front of the teacher and other students. The less they speak, the less confident they would be in speaking English and the more anxious they would be in expressing themselves in English. A vicious cycle comes into being. In contrast, a virtuous cycle is formed among learners with lower level of anxiety. They are not afraid of making mistakes and when there is uncertainty in understanding other's speeches, they will resort to some communication strategies to solve the problem. The success in conveying information gives them a sense of achievement and that, in return, alleviates their level of anxiety.

Of the four dimensions in Wang Caikang's questionnaire, the correlation indexes of the four are all negative, indicating that they all correlate negatively with students' oral grades, but test anxiety, with the absolute value of -0.413, correlates most significantly with oral performance. It means that the more one is anxious about the tests, the lower his oral grades will be. The significances of the four are all less than 0.05, which means it does have statistical significance. This result is different from the previous studies' results, which assert that communication anxiety has the strongest correlation with students' oral grades among the four dimensions.

Table 6

*Correlation Indexes Between Four Dimensions and Oral Grades*

	Overall English anxiety	Classroom anxiety	Communication anxiety	Test anxiety
Correlation Index	-0.39	-0.34	-0.36	-0.413
Significance	0.003	0.013	0.008	0.002

## Discussions

### Sources of Anxiety

Over a close review of literature on foreign language learning anxiety, a large number of potential sources of anxiety have been identified by researchers. Horwitz and Young (1991, p. 233) found that it stemmed from learners' difficulties in presenting themselves in a foreign language. Sparks and Ganschow (1993, p. 14) argued that poor foreign language learning ability was the only cause for anxiety. Han Luo (2012, p. 55) claimed that sources of anxiety could be categorized into four aspects, i.e., "the classroom environment, learner characteristics, the target language and the foreign language learning process itself". As indicated from the questionnaires, the present study finds that foreign language anxiety stems from learners' lack of confidence in presenting themselves and low self-esteem, fear in speaking a foreign language, teacher's negative evaluation, and stressful learning environment. This observation is in conformity with Young's assertion, which categorizes sources of anxiety into those stemming from the learners, the teacher, and the instructional practice.

Second language learners may be characterized by lack of experience or confidence in face of challenge, competitiveness, perfection-orientation, fear of negative feedback, low self-esteem, low self-evaluation of ability, and learners' biased beliefs about language learning (Young, 1991, p. 87), which would result in language learning anxiety. Learners' competitiveness refers to one's desire to do better than others. Such competitiveness would raise his/her level of anxiety in learning. Besides, pursuing perfectionism is one of the most typical characteristics among anxious learners. According to Gregersen and Horwitz's research (2002, p. 70), anxious

learners tend to be perfectionists. They fear that they would make mistakes and they would always be preoccupied with the choice of words and the structures of the sentences. They would feel uneasy when having difficulties in understanding every detail of the other's speeches, even if they could grasp the main idea of the speech. Low self-esteem and self-evaluation of one's language proficiency are common among anxious learners. They might be constantly haunted by previous experiences of failure in conveying information or clearly expressing themselves. In order to avoid negative evaluation or embarrassment in speaking in a foreign language, they may choose to remain silent to conceal their anxiety.

From teachers' perspective, teachers' role in raising or alleviating foreign language anxiety has been focused in many researches. In Allemand and Aida's study (1994, p. 135), they found that highly authoritarian teachers would provoke and raise students' level of anxiety. Whereas, facilitative teachers tend to make a warm and comfortable learning environment, in which students were more likely to perform better in language learning. A teacher's tolerance of mistakes also plays an important role in relieving students' anxiety. If a teacher always severely criticizes a student's poor accent, grammatical mistakes in front of other students, the student would lose confidence in learning English and would not speak out to avoid being criticized. In contrast, teachers' tolerance of students' mistakes will be facilitative for setting up a relaxing atmosphere and that will be crucial for alleviating students' uneasiness.

As for instructional practice, language-learning anxiety may arise from classroom procedures, instructor-learner interactions, and language testing. In Palacios' (1998, p. 98) study, some classroom practices can be seen as anxiety-provoking, such as demands of oral production, the fast pace of lectures, and the evaluation of students' performance. In some classes, students are always nominated to speak spontaneously or to answer questions without preparation in advance. Students may feel nervous in that situation and fail to give a good presentation. Besides, among students with high-level of anxiety, 85% of them chose "strongly agree" or "agree" with Statement No. 25 (The pace of English courses are rather fast, and I worry that I might be left behind). What's more, negative evaluation of students' mistakes in classroom would raise students' level of anxiety and demotivate them in speaking English. According to Young (1991, p. 19), activities in front of the class like oral presentation, role-play, and writing on the blackboard would lead to anxiety. However, if the class focuses on communication and group work, students would not be that stressful. In addition, language tests can be one of the most major sources that may contribute to great anxiety. In the questionnaire, Questions 8, 10, and 21 focus on the fear of tests in learning English. High frequency of tests and certain unfamiliarity with test format and items may raise students' uneasiness and anxiety. According to Daly, if the test is novel, ambiguous or highly evaluative, it would greatly raise students' level of apprehension.

### **Implications to Foreign Language Learning and Teaching**

The findings of the present study indicate that a moderate level of English learning anxiety is common among English major students, and such anxiety has a negative correlation with students' oral performance. Thus, alleviating students' level of anxiety and uneasiness in the classroom is necessary and urgent in order to improve their oral proficiency. According to previous studies, students' English learning anxiety can be seen as stemming from the learners, the teacher, and instructional practice. Therefore, English learning anxiety could be reduced in the following three aspects.

Firstly, awareness of English learning anxiety is needed on the part of both the teachers and the learners. Most of students have little awareness of the negative effects of English learning anxiety. Not only students, but some teachers do not notice students' anxiety in classes. Foss and Reitzel (1988, p. 67) argued that "students should be aware of the fears, interpret anxiety-provoking situations and eventually approach it rather than avoid the situation". Thus, teachers (not just English teachers) can hold some group discussions on the topic of anxiety to make students know the existence of anxiety in their learning of English. Then students will have a better understanding of their learning process, identify the anxiety, and try to work it out. Foss and Reitzel also suggested that students could speak out their anxieties and write them down on the blackboard. Students would realize that they were not alone in their anxieties. In addition, writing English learning diaries might be an effective solution, in which students can monitor their level of anxiety, realize the feeling of inadequacy, and have more realistic expectations. Besides, FLCAS can be introduced into classes, which can not only make students learn about themselves but also give teachers a great opportunity to notice students' level of anxiety and think of effective solutions.

Secondly, teachers should play the appropriate role as facilitators, not authoritarians. Psychologist Carl Ransom Rogers has theorized that deep learning takes place in the context of a relationship, and he believes that teachers should value genuineness, empathy, spontaneity, caring about other and being more process- than content-oriented (Rogers, Lyon, & Tausch, 2013, p. 30). He has asserted that teachers should be facilitators, creating a positive learning environment, using various strategies to motivate learners and guide them in planning and assessing their own way of learning. Facilitative teachers would strategically correct students' mistakes in appropriate situations, which protects students' self-esteem. Mistakes can be pointed out but teachers should not make a big fuss about them and scold the students in front of others. Besides, teachers can adjust the criterion of being "good" appropriately in the evaluation especially in pronunciation practices to establish students' confidence in speaking English.

As for instructional practice, group work or pair work has been greatly suggested to alleviate students' anxiety in learning English. Students can not only speak in English more freely in small groups but also have more accesses to comprehensible language input and output. Besides, playing games in English can also be a good option for practicing students' oral performance with the consideration of students' affective needs. The design of the games should aim at solving a problem or working out a visible product through cooperation in groups. Furthermore, some activities like oral presentation in front of all the students, spontaneous role-play, which are always seen as anxiety-provoking, can be modified to be less stressful ones. For example, before doing a role-play, students can adequately prepare in groups for it. Teachers can also give a certain amount of assistance and guidance for groups with difficulties in role-play. In addition, testing is one of the most prominent sources of students' anxiety. To alleviate students' test anxiety, there is a sound principle: "Test what you teach in the context of how you teach". Students will be less anxious if the given test types and items have been experienced in classes before. Besides, decreasing the frequency of tests and transforming the formal types of tests will be better for alleviating students' anxiety in learning English.

## Conclusion

Foreign language anxiety is common and complex, and usually plays obstructive effects. It is found that English major students generally have a moderate level of anxiety, and that English learning anxiety correlates negatively with students' oral performance. Among the four dimensions in the FLCAS, communication anxiety ranks the highest and test anxiety has the highest relevancy with oral performance. Based on the findings of the study, some suggestions are given in the aspects of language learning, teaching, and instructional practices.

The present study has limited number of participants, so it may not present a whole picture about the general level of language learning anxiety of English majors. Also as a result of the extreme imbalance between the two genders, the statistical result may not adequately reflect male students' general level of anxiety and the correlation between anxiety and their oral performance. Further studies can include more participants to make the results more representative for both genders.

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