A Practical Study on Foreign Language Anxiety of College Students in Online Classes

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Abstract—**In the spring of 2020, due to the outbreak of COVID-19, college students in China had to take online classes at home. The present paper aims to explore whether college students suffer more anxiety in online classes and what factors may affect students' anxiety. The study finds that in addition to demographic variables like age and gender, factors such as grade, English test scores, self-concept, and network stability can lead to students' anxiety. Constructive suggestions are given to alleviate students' anxiety and improve learning effect.**

Index Terms—**online classes, language anxiety, English learning, college students**

I. INTRODUCTION

The past two years have witnessed the prevalence of the pandemic COVID-19 throughout the world. While threatening the health of people, COVID-19 has also profoundly changed people's way of life and learning style. Under the government's call of "classes suspended but learning continues", millions of learners, from primary school students to college students, by applying such platforms as Tencent Classroom, Dingding, Chaoxing, and Cloud Class, had online classes during the spring season in 2020 and 2022.

Foreign language anxiety has long been a concern of researchers and foreign language experts, who believe that anxiety is one of the key factors that may affect the effect of language learning. It is acknowledged that English learning anxiety is popular among Chinese English learners. Do college students also have anxiety in online classes? If so, what are the causing elements and how to reasonably alleviate learners' anxiety and stimulate their learning interest? These are the questions to be probed into in the present paper.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

A. Foreign Language Anxiety

Anxiety is one of the common emotions of human beings, which is usually manifested by a person in face of a threat or a situation beyond his control. Anxiety plays a dual role in dealing with threat or danger, one being positive and the other being negative. For the former, people in anxiety will take effective measures to tackle the problem till it is successfully solved; for the latter, people in anxiety may spoil the whole thing and lead it to failure.

Foreign language anxiety is a specific type of anxiety closely related to foreign language performance, which is defined as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" by Horwitz (1986, p.125), the first scholar to have put forward this concept. Horwitz holds that foreign language anxiety contains three components, namely, communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. The first component refers to the fear and the inability of using a foreign language in communication; the second, fear of negative evaluation, refers to the learner's fear of negative comments on his language performance from his teachers and peers; the third, test anxiety, signifies the fear of taking language examinations, the result of which may freak them out. The three components are interrelated, which demonstrates that foreign language anxiety is a threat to a learner's self-esteem. The foreign language classroom anxiety scale formulated by Horwitz and his colleagues is widely used and has become a standard to measure foreign language learning anxiety.

In their research, MacIntyre and Gardner (1993) find that learners are more likely to suffer from negative emotions, like being nervous and uneasy, when they are engaged in foreign language learning. MacIntyre (2007) divides anxiety into three types: trait anxiety, a stable general behavior pattern; sate anxiety, a temporary experience; situation specific anxiety, a recurring feature in a specific situation. Among these three types, the third one, situation specific anxiety, has been the most widely studied in the field of second language acquisition. Research on foreign language anxiety is of great significance, because it will help learners enhance their understanding of language learning and their emotional state, thus making adjustment to ensure good learning efficacy.

B. Factors Associated With Foreign Language Anxiety

Various factors, internal or external, may have associations with foreign language anxiety. The factors related to learners include gender, age, personality, self-concept, language ability, motivation and self-evaluation. The factors related to teachers' teaching practice include teachers' classroom facial expressions, attitudes when correcting students' mistakes, classroom teaching rules and the like. Other external factors that might affect foreign language learning anxiety include classroom teaching environment and peer response to language errors (Cheng & Erben, 2012). In the present study, the following factors will be taken into consideration.

Gender is believed to have certain relations with foreign language anxiety. It is believed that female learners tend to have higher level of anxiety in their foreign language study. The research conducted by MacIntyre (2007) has also proved this. It is widely accepted that females are more vulnerable and susceptible to anxiety while males are tougher and have more self-control. However, whether it is always the truth remain inconclusive and debatable.

Grade is also considered as an influential factor that may have an effect on foreign language anxiety. It is found that as the proficiency level of undergraduates gets higher, the learners tend to be less anxious (Liu, 2006). Aydin et al. (2017) assert that lower-grade students suffer more anxiety than higher-grade students in foreign language learning, as they are less confident and inexperienced.

Self-concept is another factor that cannot be neglected. Bailey (1983) contends that competitiveness can lead to anxiety when language learners compare themselves with others. It is found that students with high self-esteem are more likely to be able to deal with anxiety-producing situations. These findings help to explain why students with high-level of language anxiety tend to be more fearful of negative evaluation than their less-anxious counterparts.

In addition, students' living environment, physical condition, emotional state and other factors will also have effects on foreign language anxiety. However, as these are relatively personalized factors, it is not involved in our study.

III. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ONLINE TEACHING AND TRADITIONAL TEACHING

Being a new product of modern technology, online teaching differs a lot from traditional teaching with respect to teaching mode, teaching methods and teaching effect. In online teaching, teachers need to transfer what they plan to teach by virtue of an online platform, while in the traditional classroom, teachers can interact with students on a face-to-face basis. For online teaching, the stability of the network and the proficiency of the teacher's operation of the platform will also affect the learning effect to a large degree.

With regard to teaching methods, for online teaching, teachers need to take such things as the number of students, the duration of the activity and the conditions of the network into consideration. By contrast, in the traditional classroom, teachers are not constrained by the network and platform, which means they can carry out the teaching process more freely.

Thirdly, the traditional evaluation methods usually include attendance, performance in class, completion of homework, and the results of the examination. In online teaching, although students' attendance and the submission of homework can be well recorded by the platform, the supervision of students' online learning effect is relatively poor. The teacher cannot guarantee that the student is listening to him/her attentively, nor can he/she make sure students are not just perfunctorily parroting what they see on-line while taking up their questions orally. For online learning, self-discipline really matters.

IV. RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Research Aims

This study aims to explore whether taking online English classes will bring college students more anxiety and why they are anxious, and to find out effective measures to ease the anxiety. The research is intended to find out the answers to the following major questions.

(1) Compared with traditional classes, are students more anxious in online classes?

(2) In what situations are students more anxious?

(3) Does the anxiety have something to do with gender, grade, self-concept and language proficiency?

(4) What are the effective measures to deal with anxiety?

B. Research Methods

The subjects of our research are college students, mainly from School of Management and School of International Studies in Zhejiang University. The research methods involve quantitative study and qualitative study. The questionnaire of this study is designed according to Horwitz's foreign language classroom anxiety scale, which consists of two parts. The first is about the basic information of the participants, including gender, grade, major, and score of College English Test Band 4. The second part contains 24 specific questions, mainly about the participant's anxiety degree before and during the online classes, the situations in which the participant feels anxious, and the participant's attitude towards self-evaluation after the class. The design of the questionnaire can be completed through a platform called "Wenjuanxing" ("Questionnaire Star" in English), and then it is distributed to different WeChat groups of the students. The answered questionnaires were collected and analyzed automatically by the software.

Another method, interview, is also employed in our study. We interviewed 6 English teachers who teach college English, asking them how they felt about online lessons, whether they noticed the anxiety of students, and what measures they took to alleviate the anxiety of students.

C. Data Collection & Data Analysis

A total of 80 valid questionnaires are collected through "Wenjuanxing", among which 52 are done by female students and 28 are by male students. In terms of grade, 18 are freshmen, 22 are sophomores, 24 are juniors and 16 are seniors. Among these students, all of them have taken the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4), but 18 of them failed. The following figure presents the number of male and female students in different grades.

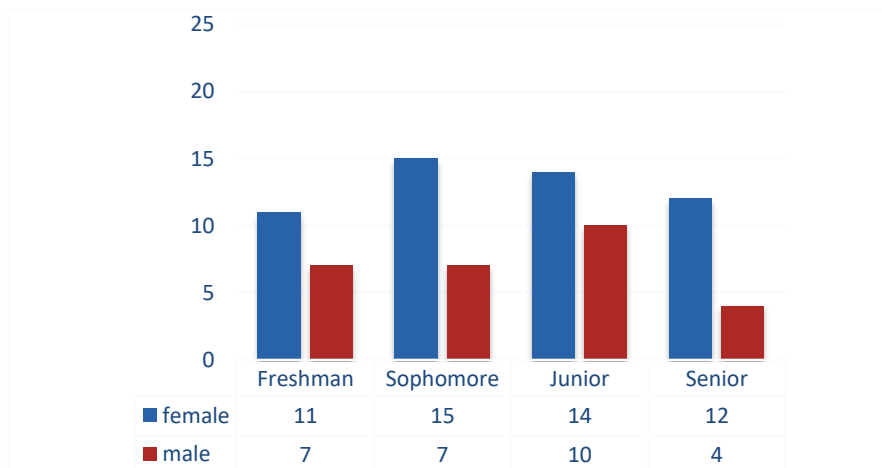|	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior
female	11	15	14	12
male	7	7	10	4

Figure 1 The Number of Students in Different Grades

The data having been collected, the possible correlations of language anxiety with gender, grade, self-concept and other elements are easy to find. The following line chart indicates the percentage of male and female students in different grades who feel anxious in online English classes. From the chart we can see that as grades rise, the percentage of students who feel anxious declines. Also, it can be found that females are comparatively more anxious than male students.

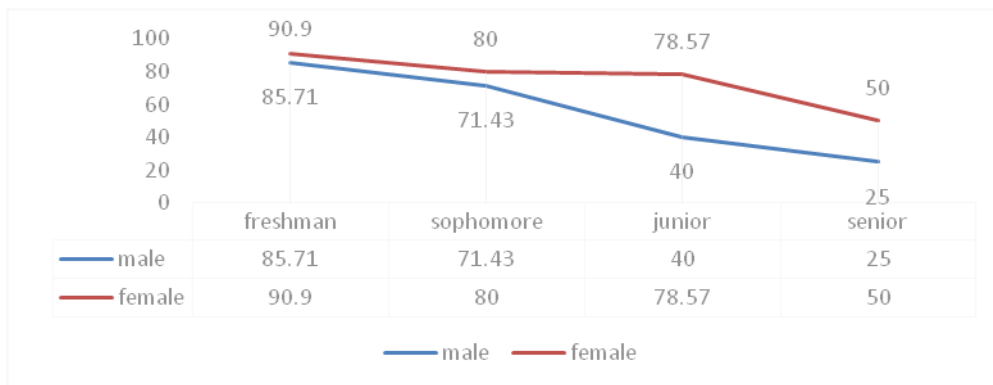|	freshman	sophomore	junior	senior
male	85.71	71.43	40	25
female	90.9	80	78.57	50

Figure 2 The Percentage of Male and Female Students Who Feel Anxious in Online Classes

As to whether students feel more anxious in online classes than in traditional classrooms, the answer is surprising. 28% of the participants strongly agree and 63% agree that even if they are well prepared for online English classes, they still feel anxious. With regard to the statement "I feel very sure and relaxed before the online English class", 55% of the participants choose to strongly disagree. Those who strongly disagree with the statement "It wouldn't bother me at all to take more online English classes" also take up a large percentage.

Among the 80 participants, when asked whether they have passed the College English Band 4 Test, 62 of them have given a positive answer while 18 have failed the test. For those who have passed CET-4, 41 claim that they feel more anxious while taking online classes. On the other hand, 14 out of 18 who have failed the test admit they suffer more anxiety in online classes. It seems that students who have lower language proficiency suffer more anxiety in online English classes. The following chart demonstrates this situation.
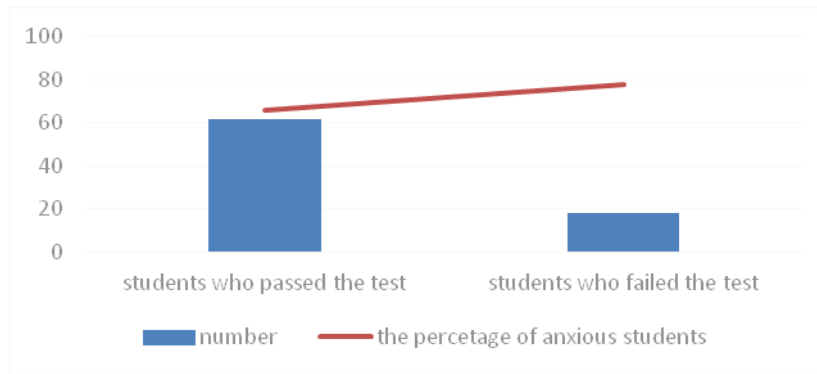
Figure 3 The Correlation Between CET-4 Passers and Language Anxiety

Situations that might lead to students' anxiety in online classes have been provided in the questionnaire. When asked in which situation they feel more anxious, the participants have made different choices. Among them, "speaking without preparation" ranks the first, "being asked to answer questions by the teacher" comes the second, "missing/having doubts about what the teacher said" ranks the third, and such situations as "peers' unfriendly feedback", "the teacher's correction/criticism", and "unexpected in-class quiz" are also on the list, as indicated in Figure 4.

Another influential factor cannot be neglected, which is the stability of the Internet. When asked whether they feel more anxious when they know the condition of the Internet is not good, over seventy-eight percent of the participants expressed their agreement. Zhejiang University is one of top universities in China, with students from all over the country, including those underprivileged from poverty-stricken areas and remote areas. Comparatively speaking, those from poverty-stricken regions have a less solid foundation in English and their English proficiency is lagging behind that of the students from urban cities. Even worse, a small number of students even have no access to the Internet at home and they have to go to some public places to "borrow" the use of the Wi-Fi. Therefore, the more unstable the network situation is, the more anxious they will be.

From the interview with the teachers, we find that the teachers have also noticed the anxiety of their students in online classes. When a student was randomly called to answer a question in class, he/she was often very nervous and even stammered. Some students who missed the attendance checking because of the unstable network will explain to the teacher again and again after class, for fear that the teacher would record his/her absence. In addition, the teachers have also found that junior students are more anxious than senior students, girls are more anxious than boys, students with low English proficiency are more anxious than students who are good at English, and rural students are more anxious than urban students. As a matter of fact, most of the teachers interviewed said that they had also experienced a process of adaptation to online classes: from confusion in the initial stage to the high proficiency a month later, from anxiety to calmness. They said they could understand the students well and they tried their best to help students.
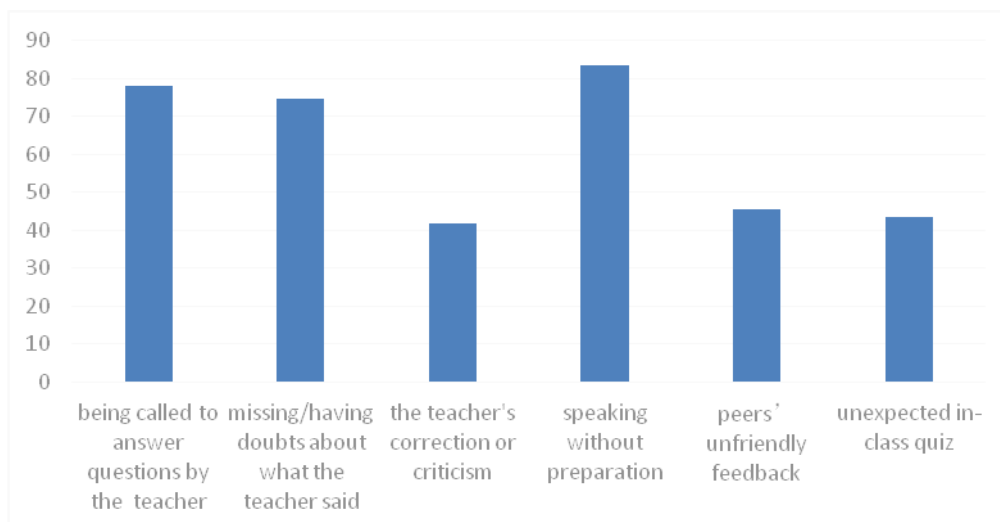

Figure 4 The Percentages of Situations That Cause Language Anxiety

V. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

From the data collected and analyzed through the questionnaire and the interview, it is not difficult to find out the answers to the questions put forward at the beginning of the third part.

Why is it that students seem to be more anxious in online classes than in traditional classrooms? There might be a couple of reasons. Firstly, online class is a new form of education, which is unfamiliar to most students. The uncertainty of this mode of teaching makes students puzzled and even anxious, as they cannot see the facial expressions of the teacher and they don't know when the teacher will ask them to answer questions. Secondly, the stability of the network is not guaranteed, which will occasionally cause certain small "accidents" and make the students embarrassed or worried. Thirdly, in online classes, by taking the advantage of the modern technological facilities, teachers tend to organize more interactive activities and require full involvement of students, which will make students feel uneasy and worried.

Why do female students feel more anxious or stressful than male students in online classes? We think it has something to do with the characteristics of each gender. It is generally believed that females have higher emotional susceptibility than males. They are afraid of losing face and they care a lot about their classroom performance. On the contrary, males are comparatively more confident and composed, which will help them deal with demanding situations skillfully. Another point is that, to a certain extent, female students are more mature in psychological state than male students, so they have a stronger desire to study well and achieve success.

It is understandable that lower-grade students and those who failed the CET-4 exam suffer more anxiety. Freshmen and sophomores, compared with juniors and seniors, are immature and inexperienced, especially when they are faced with unfamiliar and challenging situations. Therefore, they are more likely to feel anxious and panic when they are unable to answer the teacher's questions or when they have to do presentations before the whole class. Another possible reason is that higher-grade students have a better understanding of themselves and know clearly how to regulate and control their emotions. Even though they sometimes feel anxious in class, they are able to reduce the anxiety to the least degree. As for those who failed in the proficiency test, they tend to experience more anxiety because they lack confidence and feel inferior to other good performers. As they are eager to improve their English proficiency, they may become nervous while answering questions or doing presentations. The more urgent their desire is, the more anxious they are. This can easily form a vicious circle that is hard to break, which will have a negative impact on students' academic performance.

As is mentioned in the previous part, anxiety occurs when students have to speak English without preparation, or when they are asked to answer questions by the teacher, or when they are unable to understand the teacher, or when their answer/performance receives their peers' unfriendly feedback. We deem that a student's reaction to any of these situations has something to do with his self-concept. From the perspective of sociology, a class/classroom is like a miniature society, in which teacher-student and student-student interactions are inevitable. The feedback or evaluation from the teacher and the other students will definitely influence the student. Those with high self-esteem are usually self-disciplined and sensitive, which may cause more anxiety while they are taking online classes. However, there is another possibility. Those who have a clear self-cognition may be more composed and sophisticated; therefore, they have better emotion management ability, which means they have less anxiety in interacting with teachers and classmates in online classes.

VI. COUNTERMEASURES TO ALLEVIATE ANXIETY

With the rapid development of science and technology and the popularization of multimedia teaching equipment, also due to the prevalence of COVID-19, online teaching has become and will continue to be a major form of education. Therefore, to alleviate students' anxiety in foreign language learning is of great necessity. Teachers and students need to make joint efforts to improve the effect of learning.

Teachers should play the role of guidance and supervision, building a practical scaffold for students. Firstly, teachers need to make good use of positive emotional factors. For example, teachers need to regularly give students positive evaluation, which can enhance their confidence and alleviate anxiety. As we all know, eye contact between the teacher and the students can effectively promote the teaching effect. However, due to the limitation of the online class, it is impossible for the teacher to have direct eye contact with his/her students. Under this circumstance, teachers should pay more attention to the integration of teaching resources. Teachers can show students multimodal courseware and create a three-dimensional teaching environment through pictures, sounds and videos to attract students. For the comprehensible input resources required by the course, including video and authenticity supplementary materials related to the theme of the text, teachers can effectively guide students to find and screen them before class, study independently and make use of them. While in class, teachers should strengthen the interaction with students and encourage them to speak more and participate in more classroom activities, thus gradually eliminating their psychological anxiety. In addition, for the school, professional psychological counseling should be provided with and mental health education should be integrated into the teaching processing, which can help release students' pressure and easy anxiety. Last but not least, teachers should give special understanding and care to the students from poverty-stricken areas or poor families, encouraging them to relax, to study hard and to improve learning efficiency.

For the part of students, it is advisable that they try their best to get accustomed to online classes and build up self-confidence through self-study. As is known to all, there are all kinds of English learning resources available on the Internet, which can be obtained easily. Students are encouraged to make full use of these materials to improve their English. If they have a strong interest in English and practice listening and speaking every day by themselves, they will

have confidence in themselves and will not be nervous or worried when they are asked to answer questions or do presentations in class. In addition, making full preparations before class is of immense importance, which is also a good learning habit. Students need to get up earlier and check the stability of the Internet, making sure that they can have online classes smoothly. If something unexpected or urgent happens, they should have a Plan B, which will greatly lessen their anxiety. Last but not the least, students should learn to understand that getting a high score in a test is not the most important thing. For a student, the purpose of learning English is to improve his language proficiency, to strengthen his cultural awareness, to develop his critical thinking, and to promote his interpersonal relationship. Only when students fully understand this point can they have a confident, positive, and relaxed attitude towards online learning.

VII. CONCLUSION

Nowadays, online classes are becoming more and more popular because they are not limited by time and space. However, as a newly emerging thing, its characteristics and efficacy have not been fully recognized. The present research has shown that college students are more likely to suffer anxiety in online classes than in traditional ones. It has been found that students' anxiety in online English classes have certain correlation with gender, grade, test score and their self-concept. Females, lower-grade students, and those with lower scores in CET-4 are suffering more anxiety than their peers in online classes. Moreover, students who lack self-confidence and who care much about their teachers' and their peers' evaluation tend to have higher degree of anxiety. In view of this, constructive suggestions are offered. For teachers, they need to make full use of the modern technology to create a relaxing and harmonious class atmosphere, which will help to ease the students' anxiety. Students are encouraged to build up confidence and face up to the new learning environment bravely, having a clear understanding of themselves and taking positive measures to reduce anxiety. Only when teachers and students work together can they overcome obstacles and improve learning efficiency.

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