Research on Classroom Anxiety in Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract
Affective variables like anxiety play a more important role in foreign language learning (FLL) nowadays. The study and research of affective factors help foreign language learners to explore more effective ways to alleviate debilitating effects of anxiety and improve those facilitating effects of anxiety through detailed analysis of the anxious shows in the four main aspects of skills like reading, listening, speaking and writing, and also analyze the reasons for anxiety—learners' personal factors like self-esteem, tolerance of ambiguity, risk taking and competitiveness as well as procedural factors mainly involving classroom atmosphere and teaching approaches used in class. By contrasting the two kinds of teaching methods used in classroom instruction, i.e. traditional approach versus the improved methods, suggestions for instructor and learners are respectively offered to reduce anxiety in classroom setting.

Key words: Anxiety; Affective factors; Foreign language learning; China

INTRODUCTION
Now we are in an era of giving values to individual development. Such tendency can also be found in the field of linguistic studies, and the study of affective variables is a case in point. Among all the affective factors related to foreign language learning (FLL), anxiety is the one that tends to be ignored, and this is especially true in China.

Though some of the teachers conducting studies in this field are clearly aware of the important role of this affective variable, there are still many learners and teachers who have not paid enough attention to it. So the paper aims at drawing much attention from foreign language (FL) learners and instructors to the affective domain like anxiety that affects the process and result of learning. Adopting proper ways to handle it can surely achieve more in a short time in FLL.

First, a brief introduction is given to some of the basic terms and relevant reviews of recent researches in this field, including two pairs of anxieties, i.e. state anxiety versus trait anxiety, and debilitating anxiety versus facilitating anxiety. The distinctions between each pair of anxieties are not very clear, that is to say, the amount of one’s certain anxiety does effectively determine the nature of anxiety, and each pair of them can change into the other under certain circumstances. So it is proposed to control the anxious orientation to a degree suitable for FLL. Otherwise learners with strong trait anxiety and debilitating anxiety will surely fail in their language learning.

As we know, classroom anxiety exists in many ways. So the evidence and reasons of foreign language anxiety (FLA) in classroom are explored. As far as the reasons are concerned, learners’ personal factors and procedural factors in learning are the two inevitable aspects to be discussed. For the personal factors, some basic correlates such as self-esteem, tolerance of ambiguity, risk-taking and competitiveness are respectively discussed and explored. Though the inner personal factors play key parts in learning, how they have been taught and their ways of involvement in class and class atmosphere contributing to the learning must be mentioned. Bearing all the above-mentioned information in mind, it is necessary to have
some instrumentation to help assert what is found here. So the following part of data-based analysis of anxiety totally comes from teaching practices, a detailed description of classroom instructions in two different groups of class is given and following it comes the questionnaire prepared by observing the classroom anxiety among students. Based on all these data, conclusions are drawn that the uncontrolled anxiety in class will surely play a negative part in classroom achievement, and that anxiety cannot be totally denied in that it has facilitating effects on FLL if it is controlled within a reasonable range of amount and intensity.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW
Many studies have been done to investigate the relationship between affective variables and FLL. Anxiety, one of the affective variables in FLL, has also drawn much attention from language learners and researchers, because every language learner has had the experience of being anxious in the process of language learning.

It was in mid-1960s that studies about anxiety in FLL got started. But what people concerned the most was the correlation of anxiety and performance, and no clear-cut conclusion had been obtained about the effects of anxiety in FLL. Among all these studies about affects, the most influential one can be that of Stephen Krashen, who has put forward a hypothesis called the Affective-filter Hypothesis. It embodies Krashen’s view that a number of “affective variables” play a facilitative, but non-causal role in second language acquisition. Krashen (1982) claims that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. Low motivation, low self-esteem, and debilitating anxiety can combine to “raise” the affective filter and form a “mental block” that prevents students from receiving comprehensible input. In other words, when the filter is “up”, it impedes language acquisition. The anxiety to be discussed below is in the classroom setting.

The reason why the anxiety to be discussed below is in the classroom setting is that now many researchers have turned their attention from general anxiety to more specific anxiety related closely with different skills, like listening, speaking, reading and writing. Before we go further, a detailed and clear differentiation is to be considered about the categories of anxiety.

1.1 Basic Terms and Notions of Anxiety
It is essential to have a clear idea about the definitions of two pairs of anxieties, i.e. state anxiety versus trait anxiety and debilitating anxiety versus facilitating anxiety.

1.1.1 State VS Trait Anxiety
Learning a foreign language can be an exciting experience for some students, while it can also be dreaded for others. Horwitz and Young (1991, p. 27) defines the kind of anxiety that affects FLL as “a feeling of tension, apprehension and nervousness associated with the situation of learning a foreign language”. Such foreign language anxiety may have different sources of reasons, it can be a state or a trait.

Generally when anxiety arises in response to a specific situation or event, it is called “state anxiety” or “situational anxiety”. No matter how it is named, it features as a short-term, not a lasting state of mind. So ideally anxiety of this kind is just a passing state that can diminish over time for some students, as proven by Desrochers and Gardner (1981) in their studies of students learning French. But language anxiety does not decrease over time for all students. Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) concluded that if repeated occurrences cause students to associate anxiety with language performance, anxiety becomes a trait rather than a state.

1.1.2 Debilitating VS Facilitating Anxiety
In the process of studying the correlation between anxiety and performance, many researchers have formed their own ideas about anxiety. Alpert and Haber (1960) made a distinction between debilitating anxiety and facilitating anxiety. They mentioned that facilitating anxiety helps a learner to be more alert to a task, pushes students on to make greater efforts, and is considered to be a positive factor in order to accomplish a task. Debilitating anxiety on the contrary is negative, where a learner becomes too anxious and may not perform a task to the optimum level, even may frighten the learner off task. In other words, debilitating anxiety is “bad” because it harms learners’ performance in many ways, both indirectly through worry and self-doubt and directly by reducing participation and creating overt avoidance of the language (Oxford, 1990). But of course, it may be more a matter of the intensity of the feeling, than of its quality.

In daily life, there are many examples of language anxiety. Some people show their anxiety by giving up the task, because they feel unbearable for the stress they suffer, while there are also some others who can recognize their anxiety and choose a positive way to reduce anxiety and finally become successful. Anxiety, no matter how debilitating or facilitating it may be, will surely do pervasive effects on language learning, especially foreign language learning.

1.2 Effects of anxiety on FLL
Effects of anxiety are described as pervasive and subtle (MacInty & Gardner, 1994, p. 283) and also associated with the lack of competence in listening comprehension, vocabulary learning and word production, hence scores low on standardized tests and in language courses.

When people are anxious, a barrier goes up and impedes the flow into and out of the part of the brain responsible for language learning, so they may even fail to recall the words they know. As one linguist put it, “Their anxiety brings on the very failure that so concerns them”.

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1.2.1 Effects of Debilitating Anxiety
The term “anxiety” usually has the negative connotation and is often associated with negative feelings such as uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension and tension. When anxiety does harm to learners’ performance, it is destructive and counterproductive to foreign language learning. It is characterized with a fear of failure and lack of confidence to succeed.

Usually learners who compare themselves with other learners in class and find themselves incompetent tend to become anxious, their anxiety decreases as they become more proficient. Some of the learners find teachers’ questions threatening and feel frozen up and dumb when interrogated.

No matter how anxiety in class produces, it does great effects on FLL. First, anxiety blocks the normal processes of thinking. Anxiety and panic seriously interfere with memory, attention and concentration. Energy is drained away rather than concentrated onto the discussions and instructions in class. Such blocks can lead to poor understanding, poor results and a loss of self-confidence. Second, anxiety discourages learners’ interaction with learning materials. Anxious students prefer to wait for the material to be fed rather than to actively engage it or attempt to use it. Third, anxiety is usually linked with a sense of being incompetent. Because of their sense of incompetence, anxious learners tend to prefer more passive approaches in the process of learning. They lack confidence and fail to engage actively with the material, thus fail to internalize ideas presented in the material and do poorly on their assignments, thereby the feeling of incompetence is strengthened and leads the student eventually to give up. Finally, anxious students show little interest in attending the class. For some learners, attendance means only to learn the minimum to get a passing score.

But not all the anxiety is negative in terms of language learning. The facilitating aspect of anxiety cannot be ignored either.

1.2.2 Effects of Facilitating Anxiety
Everything has two sides, mostly we consider anxiety as a negative affective variable, but it does not demonstrate to be necessarily negative in its effect on learning. It has been discovered that sometimes learners who are anxious do better than those who are not. Higher levels of anxiety may be associated with higher levels of risk-taking, so that those who actually attempt to produce more difficult structures may report more anxiety than those who are content to remain at a lower level of attainment (Kleinnmann, 1997). Therefore it seems that anxiety sometimes is somewhat helpful to some people.

On the other hand, anxiety can be helpful or facilitating in a sense that it can prepare learners to be more concerned over a task. For example, the anxiety one feels before a speech delivery may help him to well prepare the speech by learning it by heart, or presenting it to others in advance. A repeated effort like this will add confidence and chances to success, and motivate them to work to their full potentials. In this sense, certain amount of anxiety can really make learners more alert to what they are doing. Just as what Scovel comments “facilitating anxiety motivates the learner to ‘fight’ the new learning task; it gears the learner emotionally for approval of behavior”.

Therefore, it is obvious that stress only becomes our enemy when it becomes an end in itself. Only when the focus of our energy turns to anxiety rather than the task at hand, it becomes detrimental to our efforts, but you can manage the anxiety to work for you, instead of against you.

2. ANALYSIS OF ANXIETY IN FLL

2.1 Evidence of Anxiety in Classroom
Classroom is usually the place where the foreign language learning is conducted. The discussion of anxiety in classroom shall inevitably begin with the four main language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing, because classroom activities and instructor-learners’ communication require the integration of all these factors. These four specific skills have received lots of attention from recent researches in the field. They cover most of the aspects possibly responsible for the producing of anxiety.

First, the anxiety in listening. Listening is a significant and essential area of language development. As defined, “Listening is the process of receiving, attending to, and assigning meaning to aural stimuli” (Wolvin & Coakley, 1985, p. 74). From the definition, it is easy to know that listening is “a complex, problem-solving skill” (Wipf, 1984, p. 345). In this complex process of listening, when learners believe they must understand every word they hear and when they fail to understand every word spoken, anxiety arises. Being anxious makes them become frightened, thus preventing “their transferring even the most basic first-language coping skills to the second language” (Meyer, 1984, p. 343).

Most of the participants in Vogely’s (1998) study claimed to have listening comprehension anxiety, resulting either from the speed or lack of clarity of the speech, or simply from the fact that there is no visual aid or prompt, or from their very unrealistic goal of comprehending every word they hear.

Second, the anxiety in speaking. Among the four main language skills, listening and speaking tend to be regarded as anxiety-prone activities. But to be exact, speaking has been mostly centered and highlighted in recent studies because it needs the learners to show directly what they have learned to the public, and such presentation will of course receive the most straightforward evaluation from both the instructor and their peers. Horwitz has reached the conclusion
that anxiety in FLL is negatively related to speaking performance.

We have noted in our classroom that when they are required to use the target language in activities like role-plays or oral presentations, students with poor oral skills may seek security by choosing to cooperate with partners with better command of the language, or taking the trouble to write down briefly what they want to say in class well in advance, or showing helplessness by excusing him or her out of the activities.

Third, the anxiety in reading. Reading anxiety is most likely to be ignored for the fact that reading is an activity in which learners always have “a permanent, written stimulus to turn to repeatedly” (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). But can it be felt at ease when holding reading materials in hands and being unable to fully understand them? Anxiety in reading arises either from the unfamiliar writing system and cultural material, or from their poor grammatical and discourse competence and the failure of combining what in hand with what in mind, or from the lack of appropriate reading strategies. Such kind of anxiety is well presented when students are assigned to do reading comprehension.

Usually, anxious learners in reading class show their reluctance to follow the instruction. They often refer themselves to some kinds of reference books and read them along with the textbooks. When they are called on to answer questions, they will quickly consult the reference book to prepare their answers ahead of time so they will not get it wrong in front of the rest of the class. Learners with anxiety in reading cannot concentrate themselves on the material, and their mind usually wander away or just read the lines but cannot read between the lines. The repeated failures of understanding the reading material may result in their lack of confidence in themselves. Reading anxiety cannot be neglected because reading is closely associated with the other three language skills and is considered a useful input for the improvement of language skill.

Fourth, the anxiety in writing. Writing faces the similar awkward situation to reading. FL Learners, especially non-English major college students lay less emphasis on writing. So when writing is demanded in writing class, anxiety arises. Gumble and Taylor (1989) remind us that the writers’ anxiety can directly interfere with the development of their writing skills. Students with a high level of writing apprehension “avoid writing when possible and when forced to write, do so with great anxiety . . . They often fail to attend class when writing is required and seldom voluntarily enroll in classes where writing will be required”.

Researchers have argued that integrating the four language skills, reading, writing, speaking and listening can lead to improved language writing ability. Among the four skills, the connections between speaking and writing are particularly important. Krashen (1982) considered reading (written at an appropriate English proficiency level) a key source for the acquisition of writing proficiency. But being a good reader does not necessarily make one a good writer. Reading can offer the writer ideas, data, model sentence patterns, and structures, but a student can become a good writer only by writing. Realizing writing is so complicated will certainly frighten learners who are still weak in the four components of writing proficiency outlined by Canale and Swain (1980) (i.e. grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence).

2.2 Reasons for Anxiety Production

From the symptoms listed above, it is very obvious to notice that no matter what way the learners show their anxiety, the reasons for such anxiety can only fall into two categories, namely learners’ personal factors and the procedural factors in learning. Both categories of factors play important roles in learners’ language learning process.

2.2.1 Learners’ Personal Factors

In terms of personal factors related to the existence of anxiety, the following cannot be avoided, such as self-esteem, tolerance of ambiguity, risk-taking ability and competitiveness. Just as Bailey has concluded:

A risk-taker, it seems, should be more willing to open his or her mouth and try to communicate, even when the road to the end of the sentence is not clear. A person with high tolerance for ambiguity will not insist on identifying and understanding every last detail of a sentence she hears in the new language before being willing to guess at the meaning of the whole sentence. Negatively, a perfectionist might be inhibited from using a language because of the awareness that his or her speech is far from perfect. An anxious person or a competitive person may suffer debilitating effects. Bailey (1983)

Self-esteem

Learners’ self-esteem is very important in the classroom. It is defined as a self-judgment of worth or value, based on feelings of efficacy—a sense of interacting effectively with one’s own environment (White, 1959).

Self-esteem, however, like anxiety, can also be a state (situation-specific) or a trait (a global personality characteristic) (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Learners with a high global self-esteem tend to have positive evaluation of themselves, even if the judgment may not be true. A situational self-esteem, as it is named, depends much on the specific situation or event. A learner who generally feel good about himself may at the same time suffer from the hurt of low situational self-esteem in a language class, and such low self-esteem could do no harm to his global self-esteem if he does not rate language learning as personally important.

Not surprisingly, unsuccessful language learners—those who have particular problems in the language learning situation—have lower self-esteem than successful language learners (Price, 1991).
Classroom activities like speaking and writing sometimes make one feel to be revealing one’s inner self—his feelings or ideas and values towards things and persons around them—in a language of which he has less command. This experience seems to be rather inhibiting and ego-threatening, failure in such activity will surely be detrimental to one’s self-esteem.

Tolerance of ambiguity

Scarcella and Oxford (1992) note that tolerance of ambiguity, the acceptance of confusing situation is closely associated with self-esteem. A student with low self-esteem might be intolerant of ambiguity in the language learning classroom. The self-esteem problem might fuel the student’s intolerance of ambiguity, or the intolerance of ambiguity might make the learner feel insecure and therefore lower the situational self-esteem.

For language learners, it is better to be tolerant of some of the confusions encountered in the FLL, like the grammatical differences between your native language and the target language you are learning. The confusions you tolerate in learning may save you time and energy, and facilitate your process of learning and save you from the experience of feeling frightened.

Risk-taking

Students who fear the frequent ambiguities of language learning often suffer reduced risk-taking ability. In language classes, it is essential to take moderate and intelligent risks, such as guessing meanings and speaking up despite the possibility of making occasional mistakes (Oxford, 1990).

As Barley (1983) puts it, a risk-taker should be more willing to open his or her mouth and try to communicate, even when the road to the end of the sentence is not clear. Learners with less tolerance of ambiguity tend to become “emotionally paralyzed” and reluctant to take the minimal risk in the language class, they are afraid to be criticized and choose to hide behind the textbook and avoid any possibly vulnerable situations in class.

Competitiveness

Human beings live in a world full of competitions. It is said that no competitions will end up with no progress in human civilization. Although competitive activities, on one hand, may well facilitate the learning process in terms of the desire to improve performance, it often results in anxiety, inadequacy, guilt, hostility, withdrawal and fear of failure (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992).

In this sense, competition is a double-edged sword. While it can promote progress in some circumstances, it can easily retard it by causing intimidation. Academic competition may mostly “pits learners against each other, vying for approval, grades and advancement in the educational system” (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). When one learner wins, another loses.

Bailey (1983) in her analysis of competitiveness in different language learners suggests that the comparison of the learner’s self-image with other learners be closely associated with their learning competence. When the comparison results in an unsuccessful self-image, there may be debilitating anxiety which can cause the learner to temporarily or permanently avoids contact with sources of failure they may perceived and FLL is impaired or abandoned. So competitiveness in language learning class is better to be replaced by sincere cooperation among peers.

To sum up the above, ideally speaking FL learners in a language classroom should be those “with high self-esteem (both global and situational), moderate tolerance of ambiguity, and moderate but not extreme risk-taking ability” (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992) and certain degree of competitiveness.

2.2.2 Procedural Factors in Learning

In addition to the above personal factors related to anxiety, this part will present you with some procedural factors closely related to FLA. They are briefly listed as classroom atmosphere, including the instructor-learner’s interactions, instructors and learners’ beliefs about FLL, and the teaching approaches used in class.

Classroom Atmosphere

In the process of classroom FLL, though learners’ personalities attribute much to the success they have achieved, the environment around them is also vital to their final language competence. Here we consider the climate in which the learners carry out their learning as the number one key point to be focused on among the procedural factors.

Language classroom is a place where communication is expected to take place. Even the arrangement of classroom furniture may create threatening situations for some students. The rigid row of desks seems to be a kind of limit laid upon them, and they felt to be restricted and scared. In such a psychologically unsafe environment, learners will choose to retreat rather than participate actively.

The instructor-learner interactions are found to be directly related to language anxiety by researchers like Horwitz et al. (1986), Price (1991) and Scarcella and Oxford (1992). Here the interaction mainly refers to the error correction in classroom. Krashen (1982) argues that corrective feedback can intimidate some learners and discourage them from making further attempts to communicate, especially those “harsh error correction, ridicule and the uncomfortable handling of mistakes in front of a class” (Oxford, 1992).

Therefore, an ideal language-learning environment may go in the way that students and teachers, and students among themselves, are at a stage of being comfortable with each other, interested in each other, and respectful of each other’s personal temperament-imposed limits. In order to achieve this, teachers must feel comfortable with what they are doing, just as students must be comfortable with what they are expected to do. Teachers need to develop a realistic understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses as instructors and as individuals, selecting approaches and techniques that play to their
strengths. They must also know how far they can go in interpersonal relations and how they best relate to others, allowing themselves time to get to know their students’ individual ways of reacting. Both teachers and students have to be willing to take risks and overcome difficulties together when things go wrong. Together they must fight off the fear of failure (which is as real for teachers as for students).

**Teaching Methods Used in Class**

Traditional classroom is teacher-centered, the teacher serves as the only authority. Littlewood provided us with a very realistic description of a teaching situation in a traditional classroom:

The learners remain constantly aware of their own state of ignorance before a teacher who possesses all relevant knowledge. They are expected to speak or act only in response to immediate stimuli or instructions from the teacher (or tape, etc.); whatever they say or do is scrutinized in detail, with every shortcoming being made a focus for comment. In such circumstances, the learners occupy a permanent position of inferiority before a critical audience, with little opportunity for asserting their own individuality. They are unlikely to feel drawn out to communicate with those around them or to develop positive attitudes toward the learning environment. On the contrary, many learners will prefer to keep a “low profile” in the hope that they will not be called upon to participate openly. 

Littlewood (1981, p. 93)

In fact, the traditional role of a teacher in classroom derives students of the rights to actively involve themselves in the activities for their development as whole persons. They may feel bored and sleepy when they have no active access to the learning materials, they expect new and exciting methods can change it.

In addition, because of the instructor-learner’s learning style conflicts, the teaching methods employed are hard to satisfy the needs of students.

Arnold and Brown (1992) deem it advisable for teachers to increase their awareness of the need to take individual learner variations into consideration and to diversify classroom activities in order to reach a wider variety of learners. Realizing each learner has his or her own way of learning, teachers shall adjust themselves to meeting as much as possible the needs of individual student, even in the sacrifice of their favorite learning and teaching styles. Any efforts of trying to impose something on students can only lead to direct failure.

Thus it is supposed to be more advisable to adopt not only one method in FLL class. Methods shall be chosen with the consideration of the contents, the material, the individual students and even the relationship among students. Take Grammar-Translation method as an example. It is still one of the methods mainly employed in FLL class in China. It is regarded as a better way in that it can provoke less anxiety for students. It usually requires little oral participation of students in class, namely, the target language is less required to be used in class while other methods, like Audio-lingual, Suggestopedia, CLL and TPR, all have their own unique benefits and can be referred to for some specific activities in class.

### 2.3 Data-based Analysis of Anxiety

In order to discover the specific situations that cause students’ FLA in the classroom setting and the strategies that teachers use to alleviate the debilitating effects and exert the facilitating effects of anxiety, the following procedure is observed.

#### 2.3.1 Investigation of Data

The students taken as subjects in this part are sophomores in college majoring in business. The method used in this part is mainly to divide sixty students of equally similar competence in English into two groups. For one group, the normally traditional way of teaching is conducted while the other class is arranged and instructed in a very humanistic way during classroom instruction.

First, in the group using traditional teaching approaches—a hybrid of grammar-translation method, audiolingual method and situational method, teacher is the center of the class. What is instructed in class are the contents in the textbook that have already been well prepared and fed to students. The teacher offers explanations in great detail. Every day the same procedure is followed, which includes reading new words to students, detailing the usage of new words, introducing background information related to the text and finally analyzing text. Once in a while a few students will be asked to read paragraphs and after the teacher’s explanations, students are usually asked to translate paragraphs into Chinese. In the whole process of the lecture, only a few students have been interrogated for some simple questions. Most of the time students in the class just focus on their textbook, taking notes occasionally. Students are completely inactive. Even when they are given five to ten minutes to go through the whole text to see if they have any questions, no one raise their hands to ask questions. In the class, teacher can seldom get eye contacts with students. Whenever I, the teacher, want to raise questions, I usually found the whole class become extremely quiet and no one dare to raise their head to look at me. If I call someone to answer, the reply I get is usually “Sorry, I don’t know.” Sometimes I feel doubted because I don’t think the questions I ask are too difficult for them to answer. Day after day, the class continues for two months, and I found that the students in this class become much more silent than before, even during breaks, they seldom go out of the classroom, but rest their head on the desk to have a nap.

Obviously in the traditional class, students see themselves as the passive receiver of information and knowledge, the authoritative teacher leaves them no space and chances to react, let alone communicating in class. So language learning is stereotyped as dull, inactive activities with the should-be main participants as observers.

But for the experimental group of students, every time before the class is over, I would tell them about
my schedule and plan for next instruction. And kindly ask them to cooperate with me by previewing the text well before the class so that I may have time to listen to their questions, offer helps to their understanding of learning materials and do some group work. While in class, I usually divide the whole class into five groups and each group has its own specific topic related to the text. In each group students of different sex and different competence work together, they discuss, sometimes argue with each other, and finally seek the common points from the differences among them. When it is time for them to give presentations on their own topics, even students with poorer oral command have the courage to come to the front to represent their group. Because what he or she would present has well been discussed in the group, so they become more confident and risk-taking. Also in the process of group work, students in each group have the chance to speak the target language and communicate with each other. Students in a group can completely immerse themselves in the classroom activities and exert themselves in every aspect.

Through the interactive activities in class, some students change their ideas about the ways of FLL, active involvement enhances their confidence and courage to take risks, and constant communications with classmates reinforce their friendship and promote their mutual understanding. What is more, they change their attitude toward FLL. Learning in this sense can be enjoyable, the possibility of suffering anxiety is greatly reduced.

2.3.2 Questionnaire

Besides the review of classroom instruction, questions are designed to check the affective tendencies of two groups of students in FL class. Data are collected from students’ answer sheets for the following questions.

- How do you feel about yourself in English class?
  For the students in traditional teaching group, more than 45 percent of students feel uncomfortable and tired in FL class, 32 percent of them feel occasionally at ease and sometimes stressed and the rest 23 percent are relaxed and in an active mood of studying. For experimental group, about half of the students feel relaxed and comfortable with themselves in class whether when the teacher asks questions and have quiz in class. 35 percent of them say that they feel perfect and readily immerse themselves in each stage of learning. The remaining 15 percent feel bored and dull either due to their poor proficiency or reluctance for language learning.

- If you experience anxiety in class, what will happen?
  For both types of classes, students mention they feel anxious when the teacher raise questions for them to answer or when quizzes come, such anxiety can usually cause them to be more attentive, less confident, sleepy, quick heart-beat and flush of their faces.

- What do you do to avoid feeling anxious?
  To avoid being anxious in class, the most active students choose to preview the lesson by themselves, while some students choose to talk with others, or think about some other things unrelated to it, and some lower their head to avoid any eye contacts with their teachers.
  - In what way do you think the teacher can help you?
    When asking questions, the teacher should give them more time for thinking, and if they fail to reach the right answer, they hope the teacher can help them with some useful hints, thus their faces are to be saved. They hope the teacher can encourage them rather than criticize or embarrass them. It will be more helpful if the teacher can speak more Chinese than the target language and in a slow speed. About half of all the subjects think that an active classroom atmosphere depend on the approaches the teacher adopt for the class, the teacher should not focus only on the textbook, they need more extracurricular information either to broaden their view or to help reduce their stress in class.
  - Which skills of language learning make you the most anxious?
    About 60 percent of students agree that listening and speaking are the two headaches for them, and 25 percent of them also include reading in their worries. For writing, 55 percent of students show their worries because they know writing is the final output of what they have learned about the language.
  - What is your attitude toward correction in class?
    About half of the students think that correction should be made immediately and on the spot with hints being given by the teacher and the rest with less confidence in language learning prefer to be corrected either indirectly or privately.
  - Do you think the anxiety is helpful or harmful to language learning?
    Totally in two classes, about 54% of the students think that anxiety is debilitating and 20% think it is helpful and 26% think it can either be helpful and harmful depending on the amount you suffer.

2.3.3 Discussion of Data and Conclusion

It is quite evident from the above survey that anxiety exists in class and do affect the process of language learning. Most of the students experiencing anxiety in class hope that situations can be changed with the efforts both from themselves and the teachers.

From what the survey shows, it is easy to see that the overall environment in classroom controls the students’ states of mind. They need a more relaxed and comfortable setting for the difficult and boring learning of language, so they can easily immerse themselves in the whole process of learning. Group learning is a good experiment for language learning. It can help them build up their self-confidence by the accesses they have to target language. Also the students themselves can adjust their mental states right for learning by good previewing and more practice outside the classroom.
After one semester of comparative teaching and learning, test is arranged to see how the two groups have done in the whole term. The test paper employed is chosen from those CET band four papers. To our surprise, the data obtained seem not to be as much evident as we expect, in other words, the debilitating effects of anxiety are not that much stronger. But it immediately reminds me of Rardin’s words, “...a positive aspect of anxiety operates all the time, but we only notice when a negative imbalance occurs”.

Why does the result seem a complete failure? One reason may be that the period of time for experiment is too short to yield efficient data. The other may be that there does exist facilitating anxiety, which is usually ignored by us. The reason why it is obvious may be that its amount and intensity have become sufficient for it to balance the debilitating anxiety.

Therefore it is equally important both for teachers and students to take anxiety in classroom into full consideration and find out the appropriate ways to handle and overcome them. Based on the evidence in this chapter, following suggestions for teaching and learning are proposed.

3. APPROACHES TO ALLEVIATING THE DEBILITATING EFFECTS OF ANXIETY IN FLL

3.1 Suggestions for Instructors

Instructors play a significant role in the amount of anxiety that learners experienced. Instructors are responsible for creating a natural and pleasant learning environment for students, which may help the students to be their natural selves, being creative, spontaneous, curious and free of fear. So learners may feel free from the teacher’s critical eyes, and feel at ease in a warm, understanding classroom where their vulnerable egos may stay safe and secure. The following are the suggested ways for instructors to help reduce the FLA in learners.

3.1.1 Promoting the Group Dynamics

For classroom language learning, What counts the most in class? The answer can be found in Stevick’s (1980, p. 4) words, i.e., in a language course, success depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom.

For most learners, being a member of a group of peers who are all striving toward similar ends, and who are struggling with similar difficulties and problems, can be of tremendous help in maintaining morale, and in motivation. Learners in pairs and groups may feel no anxiety but strongly feel that they belong to the learning community. In a language classroom, small group work clearly provides the great advantage of maximizing learners’ participation, learners usually function as the main participants and the instructor acts only as an counselor or guide.

As stated above, learners who feel intimidated about speaking in front of the whole class can sometimes speak to a few other classmates with less embarrassment and self-consciousness. Phillips (1992, p. 21) points out that evaluations involving partner and small-group work, interviews, problem-solving, and role-plays are usually enjoyed by students and can reduce anxiety-raising competitiveness (Bailey, 1983) and apprehension (Foss & Reitzel, 1988). Besides that, small group work fosters greater intimacy and cooperation among students and provides an opportunity for them to use their pooled knowledge to solve problems.

Although group work has the disadvantage of the impossibility of monitoring every group at every moment, it does have the benefits of good cooperation, cohesiveness. It provides opportunities to encourage student autonomy and the last but not the least is that it gives the ways to encourage positive feeling as goals are achieved and success is experienced.

3.1.2 Combining Past Experiences with Present Tasks

In a classroom setting, instructors’ tasks of delivering knowledge is supposed to combine with the inevitable responsibility of satisfying learners’ emotional needs. One way to help learners to build up self-confidence and good self-image is to arrange appropriate learning materials well related with the learners’ past experiences, like materials of sufficient readability on extensive topics that attract learners to read just as they are attracted by amusing stories and news. So the learning materials should be selected with good intention with enough consideration for the experiences of the learners. Bailey (1983) proves that familiar tasks create less anxiety.

The conjunction and overlapping of learning materials will facilitate learners’ quick acceptance of new knowledge, and help review what they’ve learnt in the past and add their confidence in learning.

3.1.3 Arranging Activities Involving both Cognition and Emotion of Learners

In a language classroom, the humanistic way of teaching is to get the students “thoroughly involved, not just cognitively but emotionally as well” (Puchta & Schratz, 1993). Damasio (1994, p. 13) affirms that certain aspects of the process of emotion and feeling are indispensable for rationality and Le Doux seems emotion and cognition as partners in the mind, he even says that minds without emotions are not really minds at all.

Therefore, a responsible teacher need to carefully prepare plans or activities to be done in small groups that will draw everyone’s attention to the contents in class, close and intimate communication in class will of course facilitate learners’ getting to know each other more.

Teachers can help students participate in any of the activities in which the body can be taken into account,
providing support for the learning processes of the “mind” (Arnold, 1999). Activities like games, body rhythms and jazz chants “help to make changes in mental processes and to strengthen connections in memory; it is as if the mind part rides piggyback on the movement” (Bell, 1997).

So the classroom activities can avail learners the opportunities not only to master cognitive knowledge but also to develop their affective maturity, “make learning experiences meaningful and relevant to the individual, with developing and growing as a whole person” (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 44).

3.1.4 Giving Proper Classroom Evaluation
According to some studies, classroom evaluations should be given in a careful way. Kitano says that people who are the likeliest candidates for foreign language anxiety fear negative evaluation. Take error as an example, sometimes errors are taken as indicators of one’s language development, and sometimes as a factor negatively affecting one’s self-confidence. Not all errors are necessarily corrected, especially in the case when students who are beginning to enjoy benefits from encouragement rather than error correction. But there are also some other students who urgently need error correction in accuracy exercises. It is therefore the teacher’s responsibility to know the students’ preferences and needs, and give the guidance accordingly, but teachers should not necessarily correct every error their students make.

Proper classroom evaluation helps anxious students reduce their sense of incompetence. One of the most popular ways of making evaluation in classroom may be to ask students to evaluate themselves, and their group members, and to assess their contributions to the group. Frequent little success is the best way to begin building a sense of competence. If students succeed in following what is going on in class and participating in the class activities, then they are going to begin believing that competence is possible. Just let learners know that mistakes are an inevitable part of learning. And remember, as a teacher, to choose to give proper evaluation.

3.2 Suggestions for Learners
Learners are considered the center and main participants in language learning activities. How they manage their anxiety is beyond the control of the teachers. The following suggestions may be helpful for learners to exert themselves in a pleasant and comfortable way.

3.2.1 Creating Safe and Secure Environments for Learning
According to the studies mentioned above, it is obvious to note that some environments are anxiety-prone. But anxiety can be avoided when students working in a safe and secure setting. For example, in a class where games, music and other means are used to make students relaxed. It is also tested that young foreign language learners require a comfortable and encouraging environment to feel safe as experimenting with target language; older learners need an environment free from intimidation and feelings of inadequacy so they can link complex thinking with appropriate use of language.

In avoiding possible embarrassing situations in class, learners are proposed to well prepare the lessons in advance. As a learner, if you do not feel confident about yourself, you had better let your teachers know your situation, and help you build up your confidence and courage by urging you to practice some easier questions. With the help of teachers and your own efforts, you will surely become more competent.

3.2.2 Making Proper Expectations
We often hear people around us say something like “What you expect is what you will become”, and “nothing is unattainable unless you can think of it”. But the loftier a dream may be, the less possible it might be. To make a suitable expectation is very crucial for language learners, especially those of a low level or poor proficiency. Only when the expectation you make is well within your reach, you can make it come true with confidence, and thus anxiety becomes far away from you.

In addition, a continuity of small successes can lead you to your final destination, while each small failure may finally defeat you, i.e. reducing your self-confidence to the lowest which is ready for any anxiety to arise. Therefore the realization of each of one’s expectations will help the learner build up his self-confidence, produce a more positive self-image and make them show much competitiveness in their future tasks. So remember to make your short-term goal for a specific project be a realistic, reasonable one with comparatively less degree of difficulty in the beginning and increase the difficulty with your gradual experiences of success.

3.2.3 Exposing to the Target Language
As the proverb goes “Practice makes perfect”, it is especially true with foreign language learning. FLL is a process that needs practicing all the time. Stephen Krashen has ever mentioned, “In the real world, conversations with sympathetic native speakers who are willing to help the acquirer understand are very helpful”. If learners are given more opportunity to interact with more proficient peers and native speakers, they may gain more self-confidence and become more realistic about their targets in the learning. Because the more they engage in the natural communication with people in target language, the deeper their awareness may become of the importance of natural communication, even though there are many unavoidable mistakes in their talks. In the process of practical language learning, language meanings will be much focused than the forms of languages, and they will gradually gain the ability of producing free and smooth flow of words in target language.

Besides, with the help of their teachers, they can choose appropriate materials that are authentic, pertinent and sensitive to their needs and interests, and
culturally relevant for classroom reading, listening, speaking and writing. This will promote the processing of comprehensible input, upon which effective intake is built.

3.2.4 Adjusting Learning Strategy
Learning strategy is denoted by Scarcella and Oxford (1992, p. 63) as specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques—such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task—used by students to enhance their own learning. Even though each learner has his or her own preferred learning styles which are usually hard to change, proper learning strategies will help them attain improvement in their language proficiency and to some extent alleviate anxiety.

Successful FL learners are usually willing to experiment with different learning methods. They would like to try out different approaches to learn the language and make them work for themselves. They also may note how other people learn the language, trying out their methods to see if they are suitable for them. In a language learning class, learners can often get help from their teachers as to how to use a given strategy, how to evaluate its effectiveness and how to transfer it to other related tasks and situations. In this sense, effective learning strategies are one of the keys to successful FLL.

**CONCLUSION**

To alleviate anxiety, cooperative learning in groups may be the right kind of way for instruction in colleges. Because college students tend to be more disciplined and controlled to participate in group activities with the guidance of teachers. It implies full participation of students in planning and in making effective choices and its essence is in the attitude: it requires acceptance of each other’s differences and a willingness to share and to facilitate each other’s learning in whichever ways are most appropriate.

Then what is the best for teaching? Of course it is easy to conclude that the best methods are those that supply “comprehensible input” in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. The methods cannot force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are “ready”, recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production (Krashen, 1985).

Though much details have been presented for the purpose of finding out the best ways to reduce the debilitating effects of anxiety and to enhance the facilitating effects of anxiety on language learning. Needs are to be satisfied for more data-based researches especially those carefully designed for Chinese language learners. Hence what we really call for is those practical and effective ways to evaluate the relationships between learners’ performance and anxiety.

**REFERENCES**


