

# A Research Study on Foreign Language Anxiety and Self-efficacy among EFL Learners in Chinese University Students

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**Abstract.** Emotion and self-efficacy are both essential elements in learning the English language. It is critical to examine the function of anxiety and self-efficacy in English as a foreign language learning, as well as the interaction between these two elements. This study evaluated the correlation between foreign language anxiety and self-efficacy across Chinese university students and explored whether these factors differed according to different majors. 162 Chinese university students were involved in a questionnaire survey, and four of them were interviewed. The main findings were: (1) the majority of university students had moderate levels of self-efficacy and anxiety; (2) there was no significant relationship between participants' self-efficacy and anxiety; and (3) there were significant disparities between participants' self-efficacy and foreign language anxiety across different majors. These findings not only further confirm the significance of anxiety and self-efficacy in EFL learning but may also provide implications for Chinese university students to relieve anxiety and increase self-efficacy so that appropriate coping strategies can be adopted.

**Keywords:** English as a foreign language; foreign language anxiety; self-efficacy; Chinese university students.

## 1. Introduction

With globalization, English has become a worldwide universal language extensively utilized throughout the modern world, and it can enhance international communication and cooperation, hence many countries and regions where English is a foreign language have realized the importance of English learning [1]. It is commonly recognized that foreign language learning outcomes of learners are not only related to students' own cognition, but also influenced by the emotions that learners develop during the learning process [2]. Anxiety is a significant emotional element in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning. Horwitz et al. defined foreign language anxiety (FLA) as a particular anxiety reaction when confined to a language learning context [3]. One study found that participants with a high self-efficacy and English proficiency were considerably less likely to be afflicted by FLA [4]. One study discovered that participants with strong self-efficacy and English competence were considerably less likely to be afflicted by FLA [4]. Furthermore, Yang and Wu observed that students with stronger self-efficacy in learning English performed better in reading comprehension [5]. Existing research has primarily concentrated on the impact of anxiety on students' foreign language performance and the association between anxiety and other factors (such as age, gender, motivation, and learning methodologies). However, there are currently limited investigations on the association between learning anxiety and self-efficacy in acquiring English in the context of EFL in China. Therefore, the primary objective of this research is to investigate the general profile of FLA and self-efficacy and the correlation between self-efficacy and anxiety in EFL among Chinese university students. This study can provide an approximate profile of college students' anxiety level and self-efficacy in EFL, with the intent of providing Chinese EFL learners with strategies for reducing anxiety and increasing self-efficacy in learning English.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Foreign Language Anxiety**

In the domain of EFL, most of the emotion research focuses on the negative emotions produced by learners in the process of learning, and anxiety is one of the most investigated factors [6]. FLA is a specific anxiety response when constrained to a language learning scenario [3]. Horwitz et al. categorized learning anxiety into foreign language learning anxiety and generalized anxiety and developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) [3].

Horwitz et al. identified three dimensions of FLA: test anxiety, fear of negative evaluations and communication apprehension [3]. Test anxiety is defined as the dread of failure, particularly in academics and examinations. Fear of negative evaluation may be more common because it occurs in many conversations and evaluations. Communication apprehension is defined as being frightened about interacting with others out of dread.

Young argued that language learning anxiety may be triggered by classroom instructional modes [7]. Xu found that FLA had a significant effect on college students' academic performance [8]. Nonetheless, this study's participants were few and confined to sophomores, and the researchers did not consider grade differences and other influences. Other research has identified that the level of FLA among college students is related to grade differences [9]. In addition to English learning performance, FLA may be correlated with other factors such as age, gender, self-regulatory strategy, self-efficacy, learning adaptability, and performance-based assessment in EFL learning [1,10,11,12,13].

### **2.2. Self-Efficacy**

Bandura first introduced the concept of "self-efficacy", which refers to "people's judgment of their capacity to organize and implement the action processes required for accomplishing a particular sort of performance" [14]. That is to say, self-efficacy is an individual's belief about the capabilities they possess in a given situation, which may be diverse, i.e., self-efficacy may fluctuate in different situations and domains.

Bandura proposed four sources to enhance the self-efficacy of an individual: mastery experiences (an individual's previous successes), vicarious experiences (observation of others' success), social persuasion (positive evaluations from others), and physiological and psychological state (positive emotional states) [15]. Mastery experience and physiological and psychological state help people to gain self-efficacy by engaging in activities or regulating their positive emotions. Vicarious experience and social persuasion mean that people increase their self-efficacy through the external world or others.

Some studies have shown that self-efficacy exerts a beneficial moderating function in EFL learning by increasing learners' confidence in achieving their English learning goals, acquiring the required competencies for the target EFL level, and completing English learning assignments [16,17].

Furthermore, a study has suggested that there is an interaction between self-efficacy and English learning behavior, and learners with higher self-efficacy may have an intense motivation to learn [18]. Liu and Zhen also indicated that the higher self-efficacy students possess, the more energy learners devote to English learning [16]. Learners exhibiting high self-efficacy are more confident in their abilities to learn English, which pushes them to seek out and apply effective learning techniques to improve their understanding of English. Nonetheless, learners who have low self-efficacy lack confidence in themselves and tend to question their capacity to master a foreign language, which leads to the possibility of adopting a negative attitude towards English learning [4].

### **2.3. The Relationship between Self-efficacy and Foreign Language Anxiety**

Recognizing self-efficacy and learning anxiety as important psychological factors affecting students' learning effectiveness, a growing number of research have investigated the relationship between FLA and self-efficacy, and these two factors have been proved to be negatively correlated [4, 10, 19, 20]. Nevertheless, this correlation is not constant, and varies according to different cultural backgrounds and different circumstances [10]. Bensalem revealed that participants with high self-efficacy and English proficiency was considerably more unlikely to succumb to FLA [4]. Lin also indicated that third language anxiety was negatively associated with self-efficacy, but this study focused more on studying French as a supplementary foreign language rather than English. Besides, the research demonstrated that self-efficacy in English writing was negatively related to writing anxiety through Pearson's correlation analysis [10, 20].

FLA and self-efficacy interact with each other. Emotions can affect self-efficacy. When people are not suffering from negative emotions, they have more confidence to succeed. Self-efficacy also influences FLA. Learners possessing high self-efficacy are confident in their capacity to learn, so they are willing to face and challenge learning difficulties and actively seek solutions. Besides, some studies have analyzed the results to show that learners who possess high self-efficacy are less worried about language learning, and they have more confidence and motivation [21]. Simultaneously, these two variables jointly play a mediating role in EFL learning. Wang et al. discovered that FLA and self-efficacy affect the English academic engagement of secondary school students through a chain mediation [1]. However, in the EFL context in China, there is limited research on FLA and self-efficacy for both secondary school and university students.

### **3. Research Questions**

As mentioned above, several factors associated with FLA in EFL learning have been identified in the research literature. Despite this, due to the diversity of the learner population and the complexity of the EFL learning process, there is still a significant demand for more research on the contribution that FLA and self-efficacy play in EFL learning. The current study aims to evaluate the profile and relationship of two factors, FLA and self-efficacy, among Chinese university students. Therefore, the following research questions (RQ) will ultimately be resolved.

RQ1: What is the profile of self-efficacy and anxiety among EFL learners in Chinese universities?

RQ2: What is the relationship between self-efficacy and anxiety among EFL learners in Chinese universities?

RQ3: Are there any differences in self-efficacy and anxiety in EFL learners between English majors and non-English majors in Chinese universities?

### **4. Methodology**

#### **4.1. Participant**

The participants in this research consisted of 162 students with different genders, majors, grades, and English proficiency from different universities in China. Female ( $n = 126, 77.8\%$ ) and non-English major students ( $n = 146, 90.1\%$ ) are the dominant groups. Most of the participants are sophomores ( $n = 44, 27.2\%$ ) and juniors ( $n = 42, 25.9\%$ ).

#### **4.2. Instruments**

The current research is experimental research utilizing both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. The quantitative approach collects the participants' basic information and self-recognition about FLA and self-efficacy through one questionnaire with the combination of foreign

language Anxiety Scale (FLAS) and Self-efficacy Scale (SES). The qualitative approach collects some open-ended information through interviews.

#### 4.2.1. Questionnaire.

The questionnaire consists of three parts and all scales are on a 5-point Likert scale to measure the self-efficacy and anxiety of learners in learning English (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = mostly disagree, 3 = not sure, 4 = mostly agree, and 5 = strongly agree). The first section is the personal information of the participants (items 1-3), which includes gender, major, and year of college. The second part is an Anxiety Scale (4 items), which adopted the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) originated by Horwitz et al [4]. However, since the study population is EFL learners and there are fewer English language classes in universities, only nine questions from the FLCAS are selected and modified to fit the context of this research. The higher the score, the higher the anxiety of college students in EFL learning. The third section is the Self-Efficacy Scale, consisting of seven questions. The first three questions are extracted from the questionnaire designed by Wu et al [21]. The remaining four questions are revised to questions about self-efficacy through questions 4 to 6 of the Anxiety Scale. Higher scores on the scale indicate higher self-efficacy of university students in learning English. Furthermore, to ensure the validity of this questionnaire, reliability analysis and factor analysis were conducted (Cronbach alpha = 0.759, KMO = 0.843).

#### 4.2.2. Interview.

To explore participants' FLA and self-efficacy in depth, four participants were selected to attend the interview. All participants were female and non-English majors. The interview questions included anxiety level and performance, causes of anxiety, self-efficacy level and performance, and self-efficacy strategies. The interviews were conducted via WeChat. All participants answered the questions in Chinese, and then the interview transcripts were translated from Chinese to English.

### 4.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was presented in Chinese and delivered to participants via Wenjuanxing. 162 questionnaires were collected in total. 34 questionnaires were deemed invalid because of the same value for all answers or an excessive number of "not sure" answers. The 128 valid questionnaires were then analyzed via SPSS. The data in this research was analyzed using the following methods: reliability and factor analysis, descriptive analysis, correlation analysis and independent sample t-test.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Profile of English Learning Anxiety and Self-efficacy

In this research, anxiety and self-efficacy levels were categorized into three levels. The vast majority of the participants (94.6%) had moderate and above FLA level, and only 5.5% of the students had moderate anxiety (see Table 1). As for self-efficacy, the predominant level of participants (66.4%) was moderate, and only 4.7% of the students had low self-efficacy (see Table 2).

**Table 1.** FLA level for participants

Score	Level of FLA	Frequency	Percent (%)
9-18	Low	7	5.5
19-35	Moderate	81	63.3
36 - 45	High	40	31.3

**Table 2.** Self-efficacy level for participants

Score	Level of FLA	Frequency	Percent (%)
7-14	Low	6	4.7
15-27	Moderate	85	66.4
28-35	High	37	28.9

To explore the level of FLA and self-efficacy of participants, the mean and standard deviation of answers to all questionnaire items were calculated (see Tables 3 and 4). The average anxiety score for all participants was 31.20 out of 45 (SD = 7.386) whereas the average self-efficacy score was 24.27 out of 45 (SD = 5.511). The results indicated that participants generally had moderate levels of anxiety and self-efficacy. Regarding the standard deviation (SD), the SD of FLA was higher than that of self-efficacy, suggesting that participants' levels of FLA were more dispersed.

**Table 3.** FLA scores on the questionnaire

Questions statements	Mean	SD
I worry that I make grammatical mistakes when I use English.	3.80	1.007
I feel anxious if I think other students speak English better than me.	3.47	1.122
I am afraid when I cannot comprehend what my teacher says in English.	3.55	1.093
I have no confidence when I speak in English.	3.54	1.086
I feel anxious when I conduct a presentation in English.	3.55	1.063
I feel nervous when I communicate with native speakers in English.	3.53	1.177
I feel uncomfortable when I speak English in the presence of other students.	3.07	1.287
I am scared that the other students will mock me when I speak English.	2.88	1.290
I feel anxious and nervous during English-related exams (CET, IELTS, TOEFL, etc.).	3.81	1.056
Total questions scores for all participants	31.20	7.386

**Table 4.** Self-efficacy scores on the questionnaire

Questions statements	Mean	SD
I believe I am competent to learn English well.	3.74	0.958
I believe I can find effective English learning strategies to enhance my English proficiency.	3.69	0.092
I believe I can possess a high level of English competence as well.	3.62	0.997
I believe I can get good grades in English related exams (CET, IELTS, TOEFL, etc.).	3.62	0.981
I believe I can communicate fluently with native English speakers.	3.14	1.033
I think I can speak English fluently if I need to present in the presence of other students in the class.	3.24	1.048
I think I can maintain a high degree of confidence when speaking English.	3.22	1.072
Total questions scores for all participants	24.27	5.511

## 5.2. Relationship between English Learning Anxiety and Self-efficacy

The result in Table 5 indicates that there is no correlation between participants' English learning anxiety and self-efficacy ( $p > 0.05$ ). Hence the reason for this result will be discussed later in this study.

**Table 5.** The correlation between English learning anxiety and self-efficacy

		Self-efficacy	Anxiety
Anxiety	Pearson Correlation	-.139	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.117	66.4

### 5.3. Differences in English Learning Anxiety and Self-efficacy between English Majors and Non-English Majors

The results of independent sample t-test are displayed in Table 6. The anxiety score of English majors ( $27.67 \pm 8.312$ ) was lower than that of non-English majors ( $31.67 \pm 7.164$ ), with a difference of -4.00. The self-efficacy score of English majors ( $28.73 \pm 4.862$ ) was higher than that of non-English majors ( $23.67 \pm 5.334$ ), with a difference of 5.06. Moreover, the anxiety ( $t = -1.997, p < 0.05$ ) and self-efficacy ( $t = 3.485, p < 0.001$ ) were significantly different among the different major samples.

**Table 6.** Differences in self-efficacy and anxiety between two majors

	English majors (n = 15)	Non-English majors (n = 113)	t	p (two-sided)
FLA	$27.67 \pm 8.312$	$31.67 \pm 7.164$	-1.997*	.048
Self-efficacy	$28.73 \pm 4.862$	$23.67 \pm 5.334$	3.485***	<.001

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

To evaluate the disparities between English majors and non-English majors, as well as the causes for these disparities, this study classified the participants into two separate groups and statistically analyzed the anxiety and self-efficacy levels of two groups respectively. The results in Table 7 show that English majors possessed a higher percentage of low anxiety (20%) than non-English majors (3.54%), while non-English majors manifested a greater percentage of moderate or high anxiety (96.46%) than English majors (80%). As for self-efficacy, English majors did not experience low self-efficacy (0%), whereas the proportion of non-English majors with moderate or high self-efficacy (94.69%) was lower than that of English majors (100%) (see Table 8).

**Table 7.** FLA levels for English majors and non-English major

Score	Level of FLA	English majors (%)	non-English majors (%)
9-18	Low	20.00	3.54
19-35	Moderate	60.00	63.72
36 - 45	High	20.00	32.74

**Table 8.** Self-efficacy levels for English majors and non-English majors

Score	Level of FLA	English majors (%)	non-English majors (%)
7-14	Low	0	5.31
15-27	Moderate	40	69.91
28-35	High	60	24.78

### 5.4. Interview Analysis

Interview data were also gathered to explore the circumstances of participants' self-efficacy and anxiety in more depth. In this interview, four respondents were invited to self-assess their self-efficacy and anxiety degree and to share their experiences about anxiety and self-efficacy. The research applied thematic analysis to categorize the interview data into four major themes, namely: (1) interviewees' self-assessment of anxiety and self-efficacy; (2) interviewees' anxiety types and

causes; (3) interviewees' self-efficacy performance; (4) interviewees' strategies of increasing self-efficacy.

#### **5.4.1. The Level of Anxiety and Self-efficacy.**

After the interviewees' self-assessment of anxiety and self-efficacy levels, it emerged that there were disparities among the four interviewees. Interviewee A exhibited moderate level of anxiety and a high level of self-efficacy. Interviewees B and D indicated low anxiety and high self-efficacy based on their self-assessment, while interviewee C had the opposite result (high anxiety and low self-efficacy).

#### **5.4.2. Anxiety Types and Causes.**

Regarding anxiety manifestations, all four interviewees mentioned test anxiety, especially Interviewee A and D, who were afraid that the test results would not fulfill their expectations. Besides, Interviewee A and D had other anxiety manifestations. The anxiety of Interviewee B and C appeared more in academic English. As for the causes of their anxiety, three interviewees (A, B and D) stated that it might be caused by the expectation of learning English and academic knowledge. Interviewee A and D also noted external factors, namely peer pressure and the lack of an English language environment. Interviewee C considered that English anxiety was caused by low English learning ability and low self-control.

#### **5.4.3. Self-efficacy Performance.**

The interview revealed that the self-efficacy of the interviewees varied from one respondent to another. Interviewee A, B and D had positive attitudes towards English language learning. Interviewee A had great interest in learning English and was confident in communicating with others. Interviewee B had higher self-efficacy in speaking English. Interviewee D was confident enough to learn English but had lower self-efficacy in speaking and writing. Interviewee C's self-efficacy was influenced by external motivation, as evidenced by completing assignments on time for academic requirements.

#### **5.4.4. Strategies of Increasing Self-efficacy.**

The final part of the interview was to suggest a way to increase self-efficacy in learning English. Interviewee A and C both mentioned that goals and plans could be set. It was emphasized that Interviewee A suggested that goals must be achievable. Simultaneously, Interviewee C and D believed that English movies, TV series and broadcasting could increase self-efficacy. Interviewee B emphasized on practicing oral language, believing that English is essentially a communication language, and that utilizing English in authentic scenarios would make people feel less irritated.

## **6. Discussion**

### **6.1. Profile of English Learning Anxiety and Self-efficacy among EFL Learners**

In this study, most participants had moderate to high levels of FLA and self-efficacy, which is consistent with the findings of Lin's study [10]. Data analysis indicated that participants' FLA and self-efficacy averages for each question exceeded the option mean (2.50), but neither exceeded 4.00, suggesting that participants' FLA and self-efficacy were generally at moderate levels.

The Anxiety Scale showed that the mean values of all the questions were greater than 3 except for Question 8, Question 1 and Question 9 had higher mean values of 3.80 and 3.81 respectively, which indicated that the general anxiety of the participants was the fear of making grammatical errors in English and the fear of examination. According to the three dimensions of anxiety, these two anxieties can be characterized as test anxiety by Horwitz et al [3]. From the interviews, it can also be found that two interviewees explicitly stated that they were anxious because they were afraid of failing to meet the expectations of the examination. Interviewee B mentioned that the source of anxiety was worrying about the logic and grammar of own English language.

The results of the self-efficacy scale showed that revealed that the average scores for all seven items were more than 3. The average scores of Q1, Q2, Q3 and Q4 were all above 3.6, which suggested that the participants' self-efficacy in learning English regarding their proficiency and English-related exams (e.g., CET, IELTS, and TOEFL, etc.) was in the middle-to-high degree. EFL learners with higher self-efficacy have higher confidence in their ability to learn English. They are confident in finding and applying favorable learning strategies, so they may not dread exams and have positive expectations of EFL learning outcomes.

## **6.2. Relationship between English Learning Anxiety and Self-efficacy**

By conducting the correlation analysis between self-efficacy and anxiety, the results indicated that the p-value was larger than 0.05. It means that there was no correlation between self-efficacy and anxiety, which is in accordance with the findings of Cubukcu's research [22]. This may be attributed to the constrained sample size and the presence of other confounding variables (e.g., strategy for learning English and self-regulatory competence). As mentioned before, self-efficacy may alter in different contexts, and the association between self-efficacy and anxiety is not fixed. Therefore, participants' current state of English learning anxiety and self-efficacy might have influenced their responses, leading to inconsistencies in the results of the previous study [4, 10, 20]. Furthermore, another potential reason might be that the participants did not really express their authentic thoughts.

Nevertheless, this result revealed that both self-efficacy and anxiety of the participants in current state were at a moderate level and above. In other words, the Chinese university students experienced high levels of anxiety along with high levels of self-efficacy for EFL learning, which may explain the discrepancy with the findings of other studies. This finding might be associated with the learning background in China. In China, students are generally under high pressure to learn. In particular, many learners are now aware of the importance of English, but the language environment for English in China is lacking. Hence, EFL learners generally need to make more effort to learn English, which may cause them to have high anxiety about learning English. On the other hand, since Chinese students started learning English from elementary school, and since they may enhance their English proficiency through other avenues of English learning, they may possess high self-efficacy, despite the fact that they are under high anxiety.

## **6.3. Differences in English Learning Anxiety and Self-efficacy between English Majors and Non-English Majors**

The independent sample t-test of the data revealed significant differences in English learning anxiety and self-efficacy between English majors and non-English majors. After counting and categorizing the anxiety and self-efficacy scores of English majors and non-English majors respectively, the findings demonstrate that the English majors exhibited lower levels of anxiety in EFL learning and higher levels of self-efficacy than the non-English majors, even though none of the English majors felt low self-efficacy. This suggests that EFL learners' majors may contribute to differences in self-efficacy and anxiety. This may be because English majors have a more enriching English learning environment and more opportunities to learn English, so their English skills may be superior to those of other students. Hence, English majors experience more confidence and less anxiety in EFL learning. Nevertheless, since only 15 English majors responded to the questionnaire, more research is needed to prove the validity of the above speculation.

## **7. Conclusion**

The main findings of this research are: (1) The levels of English anxiety and self-efficacy among university students were generally moderate. (2) There was no correlation between university students' English anxiety and self-efficacy. (3) There were significant differences in the English anxiety and self-efficacy of university students from different majors. These results indicated the importance of English learning anxiety and self-efficacy in EFL learning. Furthermore, the sources of anxiety and strategies to increase self-efficacy are mentioned in this paper, which provide implications for

Chinese university students to emphasize on anxiety and self-efficacy. EFL learners should maintain a positive attitude towards learning and employ positive solutions for better learning of English.

Notwithstanding, the present study has some limitations. The first one is that the sample size is relatively small, and the data are not diversified and extensive, thus limiting the generalizability of the results. The second is the restriction of the study scope. The present study only asked the four interviewees about the factors contributing to anxiety and ways to increase self-efficacy in the interviews but did not delve deeper into the strategies of how the participants mitigated the anxiety and the sources of self-efficacy. Additionally, this study only explored the effects of different majors on the anxiety and self-efficacy of EFL learners. To address these shortcomings, future research could expand the sample size and subdivide anxiety and self-efficacy into multiple dimensions to increase the abundance and feasibility of in-depth exploration of this theme. Furthermore, more research could be conducted in the future to detect the effects of different factors (e.g., age, gender, and English learning background, etc.) on anxiety and self-efficacy in EFL learning among Chinese university students.

### Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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