

# Chinese Students' Learning Anxieties and Fears: Personal Stories of Learning Strategies in the Semi-functional English Language Environment

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## Abstract

I addressed the problem of English majors in a private college with a semi-functional English speaking environment (the big number of foreign teachers of English). Students have to speak English in the class. However, they still feel that they are short of proficiency in oral English. I contribute to finding out the anxieties that cause the students' un-proficiency. I analyze students' English learning strategies, class performance, on the basis of interviews, open-ended and Likert scale questionnaires. The cause of students' study anxiety is related to the students' learning strategy, such as repetition and memory-based strategy, and unclear needs of their study. Students felt they had learnt "nothing", their expectation isn't fulfilled, they can't adapt to foreign teachers' teaching approach, and the discrepancy of culture is a problem. My suggestions for students are that students should ensure their need of learning English, communicate with teachers and dare to express their requirements and opinions, and try to learn English by application and practice. My suggestions for teachers are that teachers should communicate with students about what they want to improve and take the textbook and syllabus into consideration, and try to comfort the students' anxiety.

**Key words:** Chinese students' learning anxiety, learning strategy, foreign teachers

## 1.1 Chinese college classrooms as the semi-functional language environment.

Guangxi University's Xingjian College is a 3-tier

college which is one of a private college in China. In this college, students got low scores in the GaoKao (university entrance examination). They lack the competence in oral English compared with the students at public universities. Students pay a high tuition fee to afford teachers' salary while the teachers in public universities are paid by the government. Therefore, there 23 foreign teachers (more than 50 %) of English are foreigners (there are only below 10 foreign teachers in public colleges). The Reading, Writing, Comprehensive English, Communication courses are taught by foreign teachers. Grammars, Translation are taught by Chinese native teachers. Students have to use English in the foreign teachers' classes, but in their spare time, after class, in dormitories they speak Chinese. So the English speaking environment here can be called semi-functional.

## 1.2 Research questions

1. Why are students not making good progress in English?
2. What should they do to learn better in a Chinese college environment?

## 2.1 Literature review

Anxiety is defined as a state of uneasiness and apprehension or fear caused by the anticipation of something threatening (Oxford, 1993). Oxford notes that speaking in front of others is often the most anxiety-provoking of all, that many teachers have observed students who exhibit extreme anxiety when they are required to use the new language in activities such as oral reports,

role-plays, or speaking tests. Gardner and MacIntyre, (1991) confirmed that speaking is by far the most anxiety provoking activity of all for L2 learners.

Shams (2006) noted that foreign language learners attach great importance to their own pronunciation, often resulting in anxiety. In her study, the learners were able to reduce their anxiety through the use of computerized pronunciation practice. Daubney (2002) found that academic and social evaluations contribute to anxiety. Daubney asserts that anxiety is quite possibly the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process, noting that anxiety is associated with negative feelings such as uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension and tension.

Teachers in traditional Chinese schools are considered authorities and superior. Students are taught to respect, obey, listen, and follow their instruction. Students are only allowed to talk when they are asked questions by the teachers. Students are taught not to speak in class unless they are asked. Students have to listen to the teachers and are generally not brave enough to speak out in the class. They are shy and afraid of embarrassment in front of their classmates. Usually, they wait until someone else speaks first. This leads to students' lack of confidence. (Wang, 2011: 15)

Students' learning anxiety has already raised the public attention. Anxiety plays a part in students' "deficiency" in using English. The current paper contributes to finding out which anxieties exert impacts on Chinese private college students. Student's anxiety is not only come from students, but also from teachers. These anxieties will form a vicious circle that blocks students' English studying road.

## 2.2 Research method

Ten English juniors are chosen to be the participants at Xingjian College. They are at the low-proficiency level to high-proficiency level (as measured by the credits of Chinese national English exam (TEM4, Test for English majors, Band 4). Some of them are in the outstanding level. Some of them are in the qualified level and the others are in the unqualified

level. They were asked to fill the Likert scale questionnaires (including the self-evaluation form, class performance form and learning strategy form); they also gave comments and assessed the instructors.

The instructors the students have evaluated are the foreign teachers (from the English-speaking countries) who teach them in Xingjian College. The evaluation includes their class performance, interaction with students and homework correction.

## 3 Data analysis

### 3.1 Typical students' fears are: Students "fear themselves"

- ◆ The fear of indeterminacy for shortage of English proficiency and confidence.
- ◆ The fear of not have enough opportunity to practice oral English in Chinese environment.
- ◆ The fear of losing face
- ◆ The fear of not being persistence with repetition and memory-based strategies
- ◆ The fear of lacking motivation.

### 3.2 Students' claims are that foreign teachers

- ◆ fail to meet the students' needs.
- ◆ use inconsistent and unsystematic teaching approach
- ◆ do not care about discrepancy of culture between foreign teachers and Chinese students.
- ◆ The class atmosphere is tense

### 3.3 Fears from students' themselves

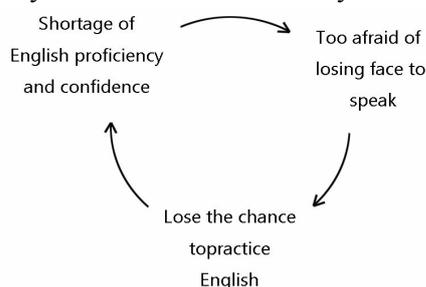
3.3.1 Most of students consider themselves to be short of English proficiency. The shortages are reflected on grammar and vocabulary. "*I always cannot organize a correct sentence. I cannot master grammar*" "*sometimes I want to speak English, but I just can't figure out which word I should use to express my opinion, so I give up.*" When they speak a foreign language, students always feel indeterminacy about their accuracy. The anxiety makes them lack confidence to speak out. "*My English is poor; I won't stand up and answer teachers' questions. I'm afraid that the teacher won't understand what I'm saying*"

In Chinese students' opinion, being laughed at

will lead to “losing face”. If they cannot speak English correctly, they feel that the classmate or others will mock at them. To save their own face, students did not venture a reply. *“My classmates are focusing on my pronunciation when I reply in classes. I’m afraid that they will laugh at me if I make mistakes.”* What’s more, influenced by the Confucian values of modesty, the students hesitated to contribute. Instead they waited for another student to set a precedent by speaking up first, allowing them to avoid being seen as the ‘show off’ (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996).

As a result, students lost chances to practice English in the semi-functional language environment. Students always complain that they don’t have opportunity to speak English.

The three fears becomes a **vicious circle** similar “the vicious circle of the weak reader” (Nakanishi, 2011: 3). Students who are short of English proficiency and confidence are afraid to speak in the class. In this case, they lose the chance to practice and become shortage of English proficiency and confidence circularly.

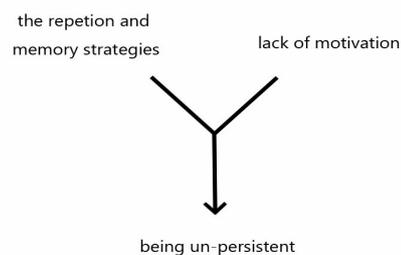


3.3.2 Because of the high value placed on effort and perseverance in Confucianism Chinese, repetition and memory-based strategies are important in facilitating understanding (Biggs, 1996). Students consider the repetition and memory-based strategies as the best strategy in learning English. Students keep repeating hundreds times the same word in order to keep this word in memory. A few days later, when they forget the word, they do the same things to recall the vocabulary. In this case, they only remember how to write the word, but fail to understand the usage or pattern.

Most students are interested in English, but not because English brings joy to them. Instead, they view English in instrumental terms: as something they have to learn to pass examinations, such as

CET4/CET6, TEM4/TEM8 and others, or because English is important for them to find a job (Wang, 2011). They are told to learn English, but never been told to use it in real life. *“I study hard in my freshmen year, but till I passed TEM-4, I don’t want to study any more.” “I hope I find a job easily”* Having great desires for learning the language is considered to be one of the main components of language learning motivation (Gardner, 2006). Most of students have a long-term goal. But the goal needs a long time to be fulfilled. Some students who don’t have strong motivation to achieve their goal will stop their pursuit of the goal.

Students will soon lose their patience using the repetition and memory-based strategies. In addition, students lack motivation to learn. These two elements will lead students to be un-persistent in learning English, which means they surrender.



3.4.1 Students’ claims to teachers: Failure to meet the students’ needs.

Students’ opinion to their foreign teachers is related to teachers’ irresponsibility, under-estimating student’s English language ability and rigid teaching approach which make them fail to meet student’s need.

Students complained that they did not learn anything in writing classes because the foreign teacher gave a topic for them to write without giving any guidance. They did write a lot, but they didn’t feel progress, because the teacher give them a score and simple comment, such as “you did a good job, but too many grammar mistakes, and too short”, in the feedback, without telling the writing criteria and what the student should do to improve.

Students pointed out that some foreign teachers might underestimate students’ level and teach some simple English, such as: where are you from, what’s your name. It could be only suitable

for children, not for an English major college student who wanted to reach a “high level of proficiency”.

Students complained that their reading teacher read the textbook from the beginning to the end of the class, without any interpretations, without taking students' interest into consideration. After a few classes, students were reluctant to attend the class, because students suppose that they can read the textbook by themselves. They wanted to learn some reading comprehensive skill in the reading course.

**Summary:** One of the difficulties for expatriate teachers is to precisely identify the students' learning needs and expectations (Wu, 1983). Sun (1990) asserts that expatriate teachers' teaching practices are "interesting, vivid and varied in form" but are not suitable to the needs of the students who often complain that "We learned nothing [and it is] but a waste of time" (Sun, 1990: 79)

#### 3.4.2 Teachers' inconsistent and unsystematic teaching approach

Students complained that a foreign teacher who taught the Communication course, not having a system to teach, talked to the students about his life, such as what he did, and what he met, and sometimes solicited students' opinions. Foreign teachers' approach was wandering aimlessly without any plan. Students do not know what the teacher is doing. They feel that they learn nothing.

Students complained that they had difficulties to follow their teacher in the Comprehensive course, because the teacher always taught without a careful planning. The teacher told students to bring their textbook to the classroom, but always talked about something else. Students commented that teachers didn't have a plan to teach, so that students wouldn't have a plan to learn.

**Summary:** Chinese teaching methods emphasize coherence and meaningful input, while foreign methods emphasized spontaneity which, to the Chinese, was random, without any careful planning (Li, 1999: 9). The Chinese students expected to learn the language in a systematic and coherent way. Unsystematic and disorganized teaching could not facilitate their learning

#### 3.4.3 Cultural discrepancies between foreign teachers and Chinese students.

Most expatriate teachers, not knowing the culture of the county they teach in or the language very well (Zhang, 1995), so they rely on their prior experiences and beliefs about teaching and learning that they have acquired from their home culture to interpret their teaching tasks and teacher-student interactions in a foreign culture. It may cause difficulties for students. The situation was obvious in choosing discussion topics.

Students claimed they were not interested the topics that teachers gave. Actually, students meant I didn't understand the topic, or I didn't know what to say about it. Students commented that in the Comprehensive course, the teacher from America gave a topic about super-market dating to discuss. But students were silent for they didn't know what it meant. Super-market dating which is a date that people meet in the super-market has enjoyed popularity in America, but not in China, students knew nothing about it. If the teacher explained the topic and give an example, students might be willing to talk.

Chinese students may be hard to adapt to foreign teachers' method for they have different cultural background. Students who got used to the teacher-centred method might find it hard to follow foreign teachers' discussion-teaching method.

In western countries, college teachers would be set aside for small group discussion while giving lecture (*Guide for Study in the U.S*). Chinese learner got used to listen during the class. Chinese students rarely find autonomy comfortable (Gardner, 1989; Ho & Crookall, 1995). Students commented that when teachers gave a discussion assignment, they always didn't know how to discuss. They would rather keep silence or just gossiped

**Summary:** culture understanding can make a good communication between Chinese students and foreign teachers.

#### 3.4.4 The class atmosphere is tense

Chinese students' non-participation is related to the teacher-centered format that students had been accustomed to operating in since formal schooling. For example, students were required to wait to be

called on, to listen to the teacher attentively, and not to make noise. In the above mention, students are afraid of losing face if they can't pronounce correctly. (Liu and Littlewood, 1997) Students are learning through listening. (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996: 748) Students need to adapt the new student-centered, approach which focuses on the student. Decision-making, organization, and content are largely determined by the student's needs and perceptions. Even assessment may be influenced or determined by the student. The instructor acts as coach and facilitator. (Lara, 2011) In this type of teaching, students are required to show more initiative, such as asking questions, group discussing. But students felt insecure to stand up to ask and answer questions. Students did not venture an unsure reply for fear of making mistakes and being laughed at. It's a risk for students to stand up to answer teachers' question with classmates' eye on. They prefer to keep silence and wait for others to "show off". Students commented that when they were standing and answering the question, they could feel that everyone was staring at them, under the circumstance, they always were too nervous to think.

**Summary:** Chinese students in this 3-tier college got low scores in the GaoKao. They lack the competence compared with the students at the top universities like Tsinghua or Beida. Students in this kind of college need extra attention and individual teaching approach. Teachers should encourage students to get use to that "showing off" situation which is the western practice.

#### 4.1 Suggestion for students

1. Students should ensure their need of learning English.
2. Students should communicate with teachers and dare to express their requirements and opinions.
3. Students should try to find a partner to practice with them.
4. Students should try to find English in their real life such as English TV program, English magazine, and English broadcasting program.

#### 4.2 Suggestions for teachers:

1. Before the students start to talk about the topic in class, teachers have better to guide students to understand the topic better, to add more information about the topic, extend it a little bit, instead of giving students a sentence then let them talk. People take time to understand and adapt to something new. It's only as teachers continue to study, discuss, interact, and do something with information and the learning materials do the students grow from the experience.
2. Teachers should notice students' classroom behaviors such as anxiety, silence, and unwillingness. These emotions can be eliminated by encouragement and building good relationships with them. Teachers may try to use small group discussion to reduce the students' anxiety, and teach some discussion skills, such as how to show your response after others expressed their opinions.
3. Teachers should communicate with students about what they want to improve and take the textbook and syllabus into consideration, then make a plan. Teachers see job as empowering the students in language [literature, vocabulary, observation of details and organizational patterns], skills, experiences[such as speaking publicly and performing], and training for life [discussion skills, outlining, doing online research, defending a point of view with logical, clear reasons, etc]. Teachers also have responsibility to the college, with objectives that must be achieved.
4. Foreign teachers need to be aware not only of the culture that they themselves bring to the classroom (Wang, 2011), but also of the cultures of their students and their environment in order to encourage students to use English more naturally by interacting with others, sharing ideas, telling people their experiences, expressing their wishes.

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