Anxiety and Enjoyment in English Classes for Non-English Major College Students: Degree, Causes and Correlations

Chenyan Wan

School of Foreign Languages, Leshan Normal University, Leshan, Sichuan, 614000, China

763293084@qq.com

Abstract. Because of globalization and the internationalization of higher education, English ability has become an important dimension of the core literacy of non-English major college students. However, most existing studies focused on the negative impacts of anxiety, neglecting the synergistic effects of positive emotions, especially lacking localized exploration of the two emotional states of anxiety and enjoyment. This study adopted the literature review method, aiming to explore the degree, causes and correlation between anxiety and enjoyment in English classes among non-English major college students. Research has found that students generally have moderately high levels of anxiety and also experience a certain degree of enjoyment. The two showed a significant negative correlation, but their interaction exhibited complex dynamics. The causes covered multiple dimensions such as individuals, interpersonal relationships and the environment. This study explored the degree, causes and correlations of anxiety and enjoyment in English classes among non-English major college students, demonstrating the complexity of emotions in English learning. By revealing the interaction mechanism between anxiety and enjoyment in the English classroom of non-English major college students, this study broadened the theoretical perspective of foreign language learning emotion research and provided implications for emotional regulation and the construction of a positive classroom atmosphere in college English teaching.

Keywords: Anxiety in English Classes; Enjoyment in English Classes; Non-English Major College Students.

1. Introduction

In today's globalized world with internationalized higher education, English oral communication has become an essential skill for university students worldwide. For Chinese non-English majors, fluent and accurate English expression matters both for academics and future careers. Yet their learning is often held back by psychological hurdles, especially foreign language anxiety.

Traditionally, second language acquisition research focused on negative emotions like FLCAS, shown to harm oral performance. But positive psychology has shifted focus, highlighting Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) – a beneficial feeling from supportive teachers, good peer interactions, and engaging tasks that boosts learning involvement. However, research gaps remain. Most studies examine anxiety and enjoyment separately, oversimplifying their relationship beyond just being opposites. Also, there's little research on these emotions in oral English classes for China's non-English majors, who form most university students.

This study uses literature review to fill these gaps, exploring anxiety and enjoyment levels, causes, and correlations among these students. The literature for this study was primarily retrieved from academic databases such as CNKI (Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure) and Google Scholar. The search utilized a combination of key words, including “anxiety in English classes”, “enjoyment in English classes”, “non-English major college students”, in both Chinese and English. The selected publications are predominantly from the last five years to ensure the review reflects recent developments, although seminal earlier works are also included to provide essential theoretical background. It aims to clarify their emotional experiences to create better learning environments. This study addresses these gaps through a literature review, investigating anxiety and enjoyment levels, causes, and correlations among Chinese non-English majors. It aims to provide nuanced insights into their emotional experiences to foster effective learning environments.

The purpose of the current study is to examine the following questions: What are the respective levels of anxiety and enjoyment among non-English major college students in English class? Is there a significant correlation between the levels of anxiety and enjoyment among non-English major college students in English class? What are the causes of anxiety and enjoyment among non-English major college students in English class?

2. Anxiety in English Class

2.1 Theoretical Foundation

In recent years, against the backdrop of the integration of positive psychology perspectives into foreign language(FL) learning research, scholars have paid attention to the English classroom anxiety of non-English major college students.

Around 1985, foreign language anxiety became a key focus of research, with the most significant influence coming from the Affective Filter Hypothesis [1]. This hypothesis points out that negative emotional factors such as anxiety and lack of self-confidence have adverse effects on second language acquisition. To some extent, it broke through the traditional cognitive-oriented approach, but it did not include positive emotions in its scope of consideration, nor did it describe the specific mechanism of how emotions function. A crucial cornerstone of research in this field is the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) pioneered by Horwitz et al. [2]. This tool laid the foundation for quantifying foreign language learning anxiety and has driven a large number of subsequent studies.

2.2 Prevalence and Manifestations

In terms of prevalence, existing studies indicate that non-English major students generally experience anxiety in English classrooms, although the intensity varies across different studies. Moreover, multiple studies have found that students' anxiety is particularly prominent in oral expression situations. The research by Liu, W. et al. has further expanded our understanding of anxiety-related issues[3]. They explored the association between anxiety, depressive symptoms, and academic burnout among Chinese students. Although not directly targeting English classroom anxiety, the analysis of how anxiety affects students' learning status in their study provides a reference for understanding the possible chain reactions triggered by English classroom anxiety. For example, English classroom anxiety may, to a certain extent, exacerbate students' academic burnout, thereby affecting their English learning outcomes.

2.3 Causes

In terms of causes, scholars have analyzed from multiple dimensions. At the individual level, students' English proficiency, learning motivation, and personality traits are closely related to anxiety[4]. Students with weak English foundations are more likely to experience anxiety.

At the learning environment level, teachers' teaching styles, classroom atmosphere, and peer interactions play a key role. Overly strict teachers, a tense classroom atmosphere, or peer pressure can easily exacerbate anxiety[3,5]. The research by Jamshed et al. on Saudi learners corroborates this, showing that a teacher-centered approach and fear of negative evaluation from both the instructor and peers are significant environmental stressors that elevate anxiety levels [5].

Besides, although the research by Dewaele and Li mainly focuses on the predictive effect of English scores on foreign language enjoyment and anxiety, it also reflects from the side that English learning achievements may affect students' anxiety levels[6]. When students' comprehensive English scores and sub-item scores are unsatisfactory, it may increase their anxiety in English classrooms. This creates a potential feedback loop: anxiety can impair performance, and poor performance in turn heightens future anxiety, as noted in the longitudinal work of Pan & Zhang[4].

3. Enjoyment in English Class

3.1 Theoretical Foundation

With the broadening of the research perspective on foreign language learning, foreign language enjoyment has received increasing attention. The Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (FLE) developed by Li et al. is a key progress in this field[7]. It has promoted the in-depth development of relevant research and enabled us to have a more comprehensive understanding of the English learning emotions of non-English major college students.

3.2 Prevalence and Manifestations

In terms of prevalence, non-English major students generally experience enjoyment in English classrooms, and studies have shown that interesting and interactive classroom activities can effectively enhance students' enjoyment[8,9]. The research by Dewaele and Li pointed out that comprehensive English scores and sub-item scores have a predictive effect on foreign language enjoyment, which means that when students achieve good results in English learning, they may feel more enjoyment in the classroom, and there is a certain correlation between the two[6].

3.3 Causes

Regarding the causes, at the individual level, students with strong learning motivation and an outgoing personality are more likely to experience enjoyment[4]. Learners who invested more time and effort in foreign language study showed bigger swings in enjoyment. One reason may be that greater effort—like preparing diligently for class—brought more satisfaction when rewarded, boosting class joy. Conversely, unmet expectations from hard work led to greater disappointment, lowering enjoyment. This aligns with the findings of Li and Han, who observed that enjoyment is strongly tied to a sense of achievement and perceived progress, making invested effort a key contributor to positive emotions [9]. Furthermore, a learner's personality, particularly a high level of trait curiosity and openness to experience, can predispose them to find novelty and intellectual stimulation in language learning itself, which is a potent source of enduring enjoyment beyond mere rewards. Beyond common individual factors like language proficiency and motivation, emotional intelligence (EI) is a crucial and deeper personality trait that influences emotions in foreign language learning. EI refers to the ability to perceive, understand, use, and manage one's own and others' emotions [10]. Research indicates that students with high EI possess stronger emotion regulation abilities and are better equipped to cope with challenges and setbacks in learning. Consequently, they tend to report higher levels of FLE and lower levels of FLA and burnout [11]. This implies that differences in students' emotional responses are partly rooted in their inherent capacity for emotional perception and regulation.

At the learning environment level, teachers' adoption of encouraging strategies, creation of a relaxed and active classroom atmosphere, and promotion of positive peer relationships usually help to enhance enjoyment [3,4]. The study by Dewaele et al. further emphasizes the teacher's role as a crucial agent of enjoyment, noting that a teacher's enthusiasm and ability to create a supportive, light-hearted environment are often more impactful for fostering enjoyment than specific teaching methods alone [12]. Moreover, Li et al. identified positive peer interactions—such as collaborative tasks and a strong sense of group cohesion—as a fundamental pillar of Foreign Language Enjoyment, separate from the teacher's contribution [7]. This social dimension is critical; enjoyment is rarely a solitary experience but is co-constructed through shared challenges and triumphs with classmates, fostering a sense of belonging that significantly enhances the overall emotional experience of the language classroom.

4. Correlation between Anxiety and Enjoyment

4.1 From Separation to Coexistence

Dewaele and MacIntyre conducted a large study on 1,746 global students, using the FLE scale and a shortened FLCAS to examine FLE and FLA links[13]. They found FLE and FLA are distinct, coexisting emotional dimensions in language learning. The study noted FLE is influenced by self-perceived proficiency, culture, education, age, and gender. Notably, learners can experience high FLE and high FLA together, called "affective ambivalence" [13]. This foundational work challenged the simplistic view of these emotions as opposites. The research by Li and Han within the Chinese context supports this complexity, demonstrating that during online learning, students could simultaneously report enjoyment from the flexibility and anxiety about their performance, indicating that the learning context itself can trigger this ambivalence [9].This coexistence suggests that the human emotional system is capable of hosting conflicting responses to a complex stimulus like language learning, where the intrinsic rewards and social benefits are constantly weighed against the risks of failure and social judgment.

4.2 Complexity and Dynamics

Most empirical studies support a negative correlation between the two: high anxiety tends to inhibit the generation of enjoyment, while students in a state of enjoyment have relatively low anxiety levels. However, this negative correlation is not absolute. Studies by Li and Han and Dewaele et al. pointed out that the relationship between the two may undergo complex changes under specific learning tasks or situations[9,12]. The research by Dewaele and Li, by analyzing the predictive effect of English scores on foreign language enjoyment and anxiety, also provides a new perspective for understanding the relationship between them[6]. The factor of scores may make the relationship between anxiety and enjoyment to show a more complex situation. As Pan and Zhang's longitudinal study suggests, the relationship is not static but fluctuates over time [4]. A learner's trajectory can show periods where anxiety dominates, others where enjoyment is prevalent, and moments of significant ambivalence, influenced by ongoing experiences, achievements, and setbacks in the language learning process. This dynamic nature calls for research methods that can capture these fluctuations over time rather than relying solely on one-off measurements.

5. Discussion

This study explores the degree, causes and correlation of anxiety and enjoyment in English classes for non-English major college students, revealing the complexity of emotional experiences in second language learning. Research findings confirm that students generally have moderately high levels of anxiety and also experience a certain degree of enjoyment. These two emotions are not simply opposed, but rather present a significant negative correlation yet may coexist in a dynamic relationship. The existence of the affective ambivalence phenomenon indicates that learners can experience both high anxiety and high enjoyment simultaneously in specific situations. This challenges the traditional view that regards the two as two poles of a single dimension and emphasizes the need to adopt a more detailed two-dimensional perspective to understand the emotional world of learners. This discovery echoes the pioneering work of Dewaele and MacIntyre and the research of Li and Han in the Chinese context, confirming the universality of emotional complexity in different learning environments [9,13].

These emotions arise from a complex interplay of internal and external factors. Individual differences in proficiency, motivation, and personality lay the foundational predisposition, while the learning environment—shaped by the teacher's pedagogical approach, the classroom atmosphere, and peer dynamics—acts as a critical modulator. This multi-dimensional causation reflects that emotional experiences in the language classroom are not random but are systematically influenced by a confluence of learner-internal and contextual variables. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of the

anxiety-enjoyment relationship, which fluctuates with tasks and performance feedback, underscores the importance of considering situational factors. It is not merely about whether a student is generally anxious or enjoys class, but how specific moments, activities, and outcomes trigger and shape these emotions in real-time.

Furthermore, the dynamic nature of the anxiety-enjoyment relationship, which fluctuates with tasks and performance feedback, underscores the importance of considering situational factors. It is not merely about whether a student is generally anxious or enjoys class, but how specific moments, activities, and outcomes trigger and shape these emotions in real-time. The factor of academic performance particularly reflects this complexity: Dewaele and Li found that academic performance can predict both anxiety and enjoyment, suggesting that the same results may have asymmetric effects on different emotions [6,7]. A good score may enhance enjoyment through a sense of achievement and also relieve anxiety by demonstrating ability. But it may also increase anxiety invisibly by raising expectations for subsequent performance.

These findings contribute to a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the affective domain in SLA, particularly for the vast population of non-English majors in China. Moving beyond a deficit model focused solely on reducing anxiety, this study highlights the importance of actively cultivating positive emotions like enjoyment. The implications are clear: creating effective and positive English learning environments requires instructors to be mindful of both sides of the emotional coin. Pedagogical strategies should aim not only to alleviate anxiety through supportive practices but also to deliberately design tasks and interactions that spark curiosity, foster a sense of community, and provide opportunities for success, thereby nurturing enjoyment as a powerful motivator and facilitator of learning.

6. Conclusion

This review underscores that anxiety and enjoyment are not merely opposites but are distinct, co-existing dimensions of the foreign language learning experience. The recognition of their complexity and dynamism is crucial for moving towards a more comprehensive understanding of learner psychology. It suggests that the emotional landscape of the classroom is nuanced and cannot be adequately captured by focusing on a single emotion. The concept of “affective ambivalence”, where learners experience both emotions intensely, is a particularly significant finding that challenges simplistic pedagogical approaches.

The theoretical significance of this study lies in its integration of the traditionally separate research paths of anxiety and enjoyment within the specific Chinese EFL context for non-majors. It reinforces the value of the positive psychology perspective in providing a balanced view of learner affect. Practically, these insights are invaluable for educators. They highlight the necessity of adopting a dual approach in pedagogical design and classroom management: one that consciously works to mitigate anxiety-provoking factors while simultaneously and proactively cultivating conditions that foster enjoyment. This involves teacher training focused on emotional support, the design of engaging and collaborative tasks, and the fostering of a resilient classroom community.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. As a literature review, its conclusions are inherently derived from the synthesis and interpretation of existing research rather than from primary empirical data. The absence of new quantitative or qualitative data means that the complex correlations and dynamic interactions discussed herein require further validation through direct investigation.

Future research should therefore build upon this theoretical foundation by pursuing specific empirical pathways. Longitudinal studies are needed to track the fluctuation of these emotions over time. Furthermore, experimental interventions could compare the emotional outcomes of different teaching methodologies to establish causal links. Finally, investigating the role of individual differences, such as emotional intelligence, as a moderating variable, would provide a more nuanced understanding of the emotional landscape in the EFL classroom for non-English majors. Ultimately,

the goal is to translate this nuanced understanding into more targeted and effective emotional support strategies that enhance the learning experience and outcomes for non-English major students in China.

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