



Chinese Undergraduate EFL Learners' Perceptions of and Anxiety in a Flipped English Classroom

Wenxia Zhang, Xingzhe Pan

Tsinghua University, Beijing 100084, China

DOI: 10.32629/jher.v5i4.2661

Abstract: The study explored 104 Chinese undergraduate students' perceptions of and anxiety in a flipped English classroom (FC). The results indicated that most participants showed favorable attitudes towards the FC, but higher levels of anxiety in the FC. The negative correlations between Flexibility and speech anxiety and Instructor and low self-confidence were statistically significant. In students' responses, better prior-to-class preparation and teacher support were two advantages of the FC, while fear of speaking and lack of confidence were their concerns, which were correlated with anxiety, including speech anxiety and low self-confidence.

Keywords: The flipped classroom, Learner perceptions, Foreign language classroom anxiety

1. Introduction

New content was delivered before the FC class through technologies, while the class time applied for arranging activities [3]. The FC was widely accepted by English as a foreign language (EFL) learners [2, 8, 11]. Nevertheless, concerns mentioned by students may connect with anxious emotions in the FC [4-5, 21]. Then, higher levels of anxiety among foreign language learners in traditional classroom (e.g., [1, 10, 12]). More recently, researchers focused on online courses and further indicated that online environments reduced learners' anxiety [16-17]. Although previous research revealed ELF learners' perceptions and anxiety of the FC, little research directly focused on the Chinese context and correlations between the perception and the anxiety. Thus, the study attempted to investigate Chinese EFL learners' attitudes towards and anxiety in the FC and also the relationship between the two.

2. Literature review

2.1 The FC model and learners' perceptions

In a FC, "direct instruction (course content) moves from the group learning space (class time) to the individual learning space (prior to class)" [9]. The FC was originally proposed by Baker (2000) [3] and four pillars of F-L-I-P, including flexible environment, learning culture, intentional content, and professional educator, further explained pedagogical design [9]. Particularly in the EFL context, most researchers applied questionnaire to claim learners' widely FC acceptance [4,11]. Learners' worries, including workload, video quality, and monotonous activities, were also summarized in previous studies through qualitative data [2, 4, 8]. This study collected both quantitative and qualitative data with a relatively larger sample size to describe both learners' positive and negative attitudes towards the FC.

2.2 Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety

Horwitz et.al. (1986) [10] put forward Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) as "distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning" (p.128). FLCA Scale (FLCAS) was also proposed for measuring learners' anxiety through 33 5-point Likert scale items [10]. Most previous studies represented higher FLCA in traditional classrooms among foreign language learners of different languages [1, 12-13]. More recently, the online environment aroused researchers' attentions and results showed that the anxiety decreased through the familiarity of the new learning method, which was one benefit of online courses [16-18]. Although nearly no research directly discussed FLCA in the FC, some studies described anxious emotions in a FC through qualitative data [4-5, 21]. Little research focused on Chinese undergraduate EFL learners, which could be worthy of investigation.

3. The present study

The study explored Chinese undergraduate EFL learners' perceptions and FLCA in a FC. The research questions were: 1) How do learners perceive FC? 2) How are learners' anxiety in a FC? 3) How are learners' perceptions and anxiety

correlated with each other?

3.1 Participants and instructional design

104 Chinese undergraduate participants were from four English Listening and Speaking classes taught by the same instructor during the fall 2020 in a prestigious university in Beijing. 12 course units were based on different TED talks, which were main prior-to-class learning lectures in the FC. An e-learning platform was used as supplementary resource to for individual online prior-to-class learning. Classroom activities induced review, discussion, and presentation.

3.2 Instruments

The data was collected via two questionnaires, including Perception questionnaire (PQ) and English Language Flipped Classroom Anxiety Scale (ELFCAS). PQ included 11 5-point Likert scale items (FC acceptance) and 3 open-ended questions (satisfactions, concerns, and suggestion), which was borrowed and adapted from Chen-Hsieh et.al. (2017) [4] and Suranakkharin's (2017) [19] studies. ELFCAS was based on 33-item FLCAS [10]. The statement reminded participants to fully consider both online and classroom learning situations and evaluate the FC as a whole.

4. Results

4.1 Levels of the acceptance and the anxiety

The study examined students' acceptance and anxiety in the FC, as measured by the PQ and the ELFCAS. The total scores of the PQ and the ELFCAS yielded internal consistency of 0.92 and 0.85 using Cronbach's alpha. The mean score of the PQ (Mean=41.06, SD=7.60) and the ELFCAS (Mean=104.36, SD=15.27) indicated that students expressed the widely FC acceptance and higher levels of anxiety in the FC.

4.2 Five constructs of the acceptance

Descriptive analysis methods were conducted and all five constructs' mean scores were above the scale midpoint of 3 (Range: 3.44 – 4.04). Instructor (Mean=4.04, SD=0.64) had the highest average mean score, while Learning culture (Mean=3.44, SD=0.93) received the lowest mean score among five constructs.

4.3 Four factors of the anxiety

Principal components analysis with varimax rotation was performed to detect the ELFCAS's underlying structure. According to the scree plot of the eigenvalues, the plot turned right following Factor 4 and only two items (6, 13) were deleted due to the low factor loadings and communalities. The cumulative percentage of four factors' total variance was 58.26% and all 31 items loaded on at least one factor with a loading of 0.35 or greater. Referring to Aida (1994) [1] and Liu (2018) [14], four factors were yielded, including speech anxiety (Factor 1), low self-confidence (Factor 2), negative attitudes towards the English course (Factor 3), comfortableness in speaking with native speakers (Factor 4). Mean scores of Factor 1 and 2 were above the scale midpoint of 3, which indicated that students were suffered from speech anxiety (Factor 1, Mean=3.24, SD=0.71) and were lack of confidence (Factor 2, Mean=3.06, SD=0.34). However, last two factors (Factor 3, Mean=2.95, SD=0.50 and Factor 4, Mean=2.67, SD=0.63) were scored lower than midpoint of 3, which implied that students were not anxious about the English course and communicating with native speakers.

4.4 The relationship between acceptance and anxiety

The correlation coefficient between students' acceptance and anxiety was calculated with a Pearson product-moment correlation. The PQ and the ELFCAS presented a negative correlation and showed that students with positive attitudes towards the FC produced less anxiety, but the result was not significant. Through comparing five constructs of the PQ and four factors of the ELFCAS, the negative correlation between speech anxiety (Factor 1) and Flexibility was statistically significant, with the median effect size of the coefficient ($r=-0.18$), while the negative correlation between Instructor and low self-confidence (Factor 2) was statistically significant, with the small effect size of the coefficient ($r=-0.09$) [6].

4.5 Responses to open-ended questions

Among valid answers, nearly 30% of students explained that the online learning platform provided chances for better prior-to-class preparation. Several students praised the teacher support and the efficient, active, and enjoyable atmosphere in the FC. Additionally, participants believed that FC not only encouraged but also forced them to express or communicate in English. Some considered that the FC made them become more active and 3 students appreciated the effectiveness of the FC. As for participants' concerns, two frequently mentioned problems were fear of speaking and lack of confidence, discussed by more than 50% of participants. Workload and less of direct instruction were also described by more than 20 % of students.

More than 30% of students suggested that the FC should have less homework (prior-to-course self-learning). 17 students asked for various activities in the FC and 16 longed for extra supports from the instructor, including outside classroom assistances and personalized teacher feedback.

5. Discussion

5.1 Perceptions of the FC

Aligning with previous studies, results revealed students' widely acceptance of the FC, which supported the application of FC among the Chinese university [4, 8, 19]. Participants claimed that that prior-to-class preparation and teacher support were two effective advantages of the FC. Echoing previous research, good preparation work could lead to effective learning during the class time [2, 11] and instructor's facilitation were appreciated by participants [19].

Similar with previous studies, two frequently mentioned concerns were workload and less direct instruction [4-5, 20]. Learners still preferred direct instruction from the teacher could relate to previous teacher-centered English learning experience in high schools [4]. Preference on direct instruction could also explain the relatively lower mean score of Learning culture, which indicated the student-centered environment in the FC. Statistics from the PQ showed that students' complaints about workload had no obvious impact on their positive attitudes towards FC, and that they may actually benefit from extra hard work [11, 22].

5.2 Anxiety levels in the FC

Corresponding to previous studies which were also focused on Chinese EFL learners [12-13], the results presented a higher total mean score on the ELFCAS, which showed that higher level of anxious emotions could be common among Chinese undergraduate EFL learners in the target FC course. Similar with previous study, higher mean scores illustrated that speech anxiety (Factor 1) and low self-confidence (Factor 2) were two important influential factors when analyzing Chinese EFL learners' anxious emotions in the FC [1]. Consistent with the data of the ELFCAS, fear of speaking and lack of confidence were also two frequently mentioned concerns described by participants in their responses.

5.3 Positive attitudes in the FC

Two surprising findings were that participants showed relatively relaxed attitudes toward the English course (Factor 3) and the communication with native speakers (Factor 4). For Factor 3, one possible reason could be that students felt more comfortable as the course continued [16]. However, linking with students' responses and Choe and Seong's (2016) [5] findings, "monotones" activities or homework could also make students feel bored and harm the engagement and motivation. For Factor 4, students showed open-mindedness towards communicating with native speakers. In the current FC, native speakers were students who took the course online through the meeting software. Participants were provided the opportunity to interact with native speakers online during the class time and also the group discussion time. According to Chen-Hsieh, Wu, and Marek's (2017) [4] findings, the online communication could reduce EFL learners' anxiety, when compared with face-to-face interaction, which could explain participants' positive attitudes towards the interactions with native speakers.

5.4 Correlations between the acceptance and anxiety

The negative correlation between the PQ and the ELFCAS were not significant. A significantly negative correlation was found between students' speech anxiety (Factor 1) and Flexibility, which represented that students' approval of the flexible environment facilitated by technology was correlated with lower levels of speech anxiety. According to previous studies, preparation work could contribute to alleviate learners' anxiety in classroom activities [10, 15]. In the current FC, learners praised the flexible prior-to-class preparation work with the help of technology as the primary advantage of the FC. Thus, students' satisfaction with their own before-class preparation work may correspond to lower level of speech anxiety, which could explain the negative correlation between Factor 1 and Flexibility.

Another significantly negative correlation was found between Instructor and low self-confidence (Factor 2). Results showed that the higher level of satisfaction with teachers was associated with students' higher self-confidence, which showed similar results with previous studies. Encouragement from the instructor could make students more believe in themselves in the classroom [8, 19]. However, although participants supported the teachers' beneficial role, students also expected more supports from the instructor.

6. Conclusion

The findings were that 1) students widely accepted the FC, but they also illustrated concerns, 2) participants represented the higher level of anxiety in the FC, especially the speech anxiety and lack of confidence, and 3) the correlation between

students' acceptance and anxiety was generally negative. Pedagogical implications could include solving EFL learners' worries or difficulties and alleviating anxious emotions in the FC. Firstly, teachers should ensure the video quality and consider the time load carefully for students in the FC [5]. Implementing online discussion forum, which discussed by participants, could encourage teacher-student and student-student online interactions. The instructor could attempt to conduct a less radical inverted classroom through combining more explanations or practices during the class time [22].

Furthermore, creating enjoyable classroom could also facilitate to decrease learners' anxiety. Extra specialized help outside class, as “regular small group meeting with the teacher” mentioned by participants, could create chances for more students to speak. Unpredictable surprising and challenging classroom activities should be avoided or be given enough preparation time in the FC [7,10]. Discussing the issue of anxiety could be also an effective method [15]. For instance, lowering anxiety was discussed as a topic in the current FC (U4 how I beat stage fright).

Although the study contributed to further understanding of Chinese undergraduate EFL learners' attitudes towards and anxiety in the FC, three limitations existed. Firstly, participants were at similar proficiency levels and taught by the same teacher. In order to generalize the results, a larger sample size need to be involved in future research. Secondly, due to the disproportionate ratio of male to female (Male: 69 & Female: 35), gender difference was not examined. Finally, data was only collected for one time near the end of the semester. Pre- and post-surveys may lead to an understanding of changes in learners' perceptions of and anxiety in the FC.

References

- [1] Aida, Y. 1994. Examination of Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's construct of foreign language anxiety: The case of students of Japanese. *The Modern Language Journal*, 78: 155–168.
- [2] Amiryousefi, M. 2017. The incorporation of flipped learning into conventional classes to enhance EFL learners' L2 speaking, L2 listening, and engagement. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 13 (25): 1–15.
- [3] Baker, J. W. 2000. The “classroom flip”: Using web course management tools to become the guide by the side. In J. A. Chambers (Ed.), *Selected papers from the 11th International Conference on College Teaching and Learning* (pp. 9–17). Jacksonville, FL: Florida Community College at Jacksonville.
- [4] Chen-Hsieh, J. S., Wu, W. C. V., & Marek, M. 2017. Using the flipped classroom to enhance EFL learning. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 30(1–2): 1–21.
- [5] Choe, E. & Seong, M.H. 2016. A case study of the flipped classroom in a Korean university general English course. *Journal of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*, 20(2):71-93.
- [6] Cohen, J. 1988. *Statistical Power Analysis for the Behavioral Sciences* (2nd ed). Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- [7] Dewaele, J., Witney, J., Saito, K. & Dewaele, L. 2017. Foreign language enjoyment and anxiety: the effect of teacher and learner variables, *Language Teaching Research*, 22 (6): 676-697.
- [8] Doman, E., & Webb, M. 2017. The flipped experience for Chinese university students studying English as a foreign language. *TESOL Journal*, 8(1): 102–141.
- [9] Flipped Learning Network. 2014. What is flipped learning? Retrieved from <http://www.flippedlearning.org/definition>
- [10] Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. 1986. Foreign language classroom anxiety. *Modern Language Journal*, 70: 125–132.
- [11] Hung, H.T. 2015. Flipping the classroom for English language learners to foster active learning. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 28(1): 81–96.
- [12] Jiang, Y., & Dewaele, J. M. 2020. The predictive power of sociobiographical and language variables on foreign language anxiety of Chinese university students. *System*, 89: 1-12.
- [13] Liu, M. 2006. Anxiety in Chinese EFL students at different proficiency levels. *System*, 34(3), 301-316.
- [14] Liu, M. 2018. Bilingual/multilingual learners' willingness to communicate in and anxiety on speaking Chinese and their associations with self-rated proficiency in Chinese. *International Journal of Bilingual Education & Bilingualism*, 21(1): 54-69.
- [15] Phillips, E. M. 1992. The effects of language anxiety on students' oral test performance and attitudes. *Modern Language Journal*, 76: 14–26.
- [16] Pichette, F. 2009. Second language anxiety and distance language learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 42(1): 77–93.
- [17] Russell, V. 2018. Assessing the effect of pedagogical interventions on success rates and on students' perceptions of connectedness online. In S. Link & J. Li (Eds.), *Assessment across online language education* (pp. 49–70). Sheffield, UK: Equinox. CALICO Series: Advances in CALL Research and Practice.
- [18] Russell, V. 2020. Language anxiety and the online learner. *Foreign Language Annals*, 53(2): 338-352.

- [19] Suranakkharin, T. 2017. Using the flipped model to foster Thai learners' second language collocation knowledge. *3L The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 23(3): 1–20.
- [20] Turan, Z., & Akdag-Cimen, B. 2020. Flipped classroom in English language teaching: a systematic review, *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 33 (5-6): 590-606.
- [21] Webb, M., & Doman, E. 2020. Impacts of flipped classrooms on learner attitudes towards technology-enhanced language learning. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 33(3): 240-274.
- [22] Yu, Z. & Wang, G. (2016). Academic Achievements and Satisfaction of the Clicker-Aided Flipped Business English Writing Class. *Educational Technology & Society*, 19(2): 298–312.