

A Comparative Study of Anxiety and Motivation in English Language Learning between International and Domestic Chinese Students

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Abstract: This comprehensive study investigates the complex interplay of anxiety and motivation in English language learning among international and domestic Chinese students. Through an extensive mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, this research examines how these two distinct student populations experience and manifest foreign language anxiety and learning motivation. The findings reveal significant differences in both the sources and manifestations of anxiety, with international students experiencing higher levels of communication apprehension and acculturation stress, while domestic students demonstrate greater performance anxiety related to testing and evaluation. Motivation patterns also diverge substantially, with international students showing stronger integrative motivation initially, though often shifting toward instrumental orientation over time, while domestic students primarily exhibit instrumentally-driven motivation with emerging integrative elements. The study concludes with evidence-based recommendations for differentiated pedagogical approaches that address the unique psychological needs of each student population, aiming to optimize English learning outcomes for both groups in increasingly internationalized educational contexts.

Keywords: international students, domestic students, English learning anxiety, language learning motivation, cross-cultural education, educational psychology

1. Introduction

The accelerating process of globalization has elevated English to unprecedented prominence as the world's primary lingua franca for academic, professional, and intercultural communication. Within China's educational landscape, English proficiency has become increasingly crucial for both personal development and national competitiveness. The growing number of Chinese students pursuing international education opportunities has further highlighted the importance of understanding the psychological dimensions of English language acquisition. Despite sharing Chinese cultural heritage, international and domestic students experience fundamentally different learning environments that significantly impact their affective experiences, particularly regarding anxiety and motivation in English learning.

Existing literature has established that affective factors play a decisive role in second language acquisition, often outweighing cognitive abilities in predicting learning outcomes. However, few studies have systematically compared how the same cultural group navigating different learning contexts experiences these psychological variables. This research gap is particularly noteworthy given China's substantial investment in English education and its position as the world's largest source of international students.

This study addresses this research void by conducting a nuanced comparative analysis of anxiety and motivation patterns among international and domestic Chinese students. By examining these affective variables through both quantitative and qualitative lenses, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of how learning context shapes emotional experiences and drive in language learning. The findings offer valuable insights for educators developing targeted interventions to support diverse student populations in achieving English proficiency.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework of Language Learning Anxiety

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) represents a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process. Horwitz et al. (1986) conceptualized FLA as consisting of three components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation.[1] Subsequent research has expanded this framework to include socio-cultural and cognitive dimensions, particularly relevant in cross-cultural learning contexts.

Research indicates that anxiety operates on a continuum from facilitating to debilitating effects, with optimal anxiety

levels potentially enhancing performance while excessive anxiety creates learning barriers. For international students, anxiety often manifests as communication apprehension in authentic language environments, while domestic students frequently experience evaluation anxiety in examination-oriented systems.

2.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Language Learning Motivation

Motivation in second language acquisition has been theorized through various frameworks, most notably Gardner's integrative-instrumental orientation dichotomy and Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation).[2]Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System has recently emerged as a comprehensive framework encompassing the ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and learning experience.

The dynamic nature of motivation is particularly evident in longitudinal studies showing how motivational orientations evolve in response to learning experiences and environmental factors. This fluidity is crucial for understanding how students from similar cultural backgrounds but different learning contexts develop distinct motivational profiles.

2.3 Contextual Factors in Language Learning

The learning environment significantly mediates anxiety and motivation experiences. International students navigate immersive language environments with constant linguistic challenges but abundant authentic input.[3] Domestic students typically experience structured classroom learning with limited authentic interaction but clear performance metrics. These contextual differences create distinct anxiety triggers and motivational drivers that remain underexplored in comparative literature.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to provide comprehensive insights into the research questions. The quantitative phase established patterns and relationships between variables, while the qualitative phase explored the underlying reasons and contextual factors behind these patterns.

3.2 Participants

The study involved 320 participants (160 international Chinese students and 160 domestic Chinese students) recruited from multiple universities. International students were studying in English-speaking countries (United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada), while domestic students were enrolled in Chinese universities. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 24 years ($M = 21.3$, $SD = 1.7$) and represented various academic disciplines to ensure diversity in the sample.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

Quantitative data were collected using three validated instruments: the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), the Language Learning Motivation Questionnaire, and a demographic information sheet. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 40 participants (20 from each group), exploring personal experiences, coping strategies, and contextual factors influencing their anxiety and motivation.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26, employing descriptive statistics, t-tests, correlation analysis, and multiple regression. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis using NVivo software, following Braun and Clarke's six-step approach to identify patterns and themes across interviews.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Findings

4.1.1 Anxiety Differences

International students reported significantly higher levels of overall anxiety ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.78$) compared to domestic students ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 0.82$), $t(318) = 6.34$, $p < .001$. Specifically, international students showed elevated communication apprehension ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.85$) while domestic students demonstrated higher test anxiety ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.79$).

4.1.2 Motivation Patterns

International students initially displayed stronger integrative motivation ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.69$) but showed a significant shift toward instrumental motivation over time. Domestic students maintained consistently high instrumental motivation ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.62$) with moderate integrative motivation ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.71$).

4.2 Qualitative Findings

4.2.1 International Students' Experiences

International students described anxiety as stemming from "constant pressure to perform in social and academic settings" and "fear of misunderstanding cultural nuances." [4] One participant noted: "Every conversation feels like a test—not just of language, but of whether I belong here."

Motivation patterns revealed an evolution from initial integrative desires to more pragmatic concerns: "I came wanting to make foreign friends and understand the culture, but now I'm more focused on passing exams and getting my degree."

4.2.2 Domestic Students' Perspectives

Domestic students expressed anxiety primarily related to "examination performance" and "teacher evaluation." As one participant stated: "I worry less about actually using English and more about getting high scores on tests."

Motivation remained predominantly instrumental: "I study English to get a good job, not because I enjoy it. The TOEFL and IELTS scores are what matter for my future."

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications

The findings support and extend existing theories of language learning anxiety and motivation. The differential manifestation of anxiety types aligns with Horwitz's framework while highlighting how context shapes specific anxiety experiences. The motivational evolution observed among international students supports Dörnyei's concept of motivational dynamics, demonstrating how environmental factors can reshape motivational orientations. [5]

5.2 Practical Implications

For educators, these findings suggest the need for differentiated support strategies. International students would benefit from targeted communication practice and cultural orientation programs, while domestic students require anxiety management techniques for high-stakes testing situations. [6] Both groups would profit from motivational interventions that address their distinct motivational profiles and evolutionary patterns.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study's limitations include its focus on Chinese students only and the relatively short duration of tracking motivational changes. Future research should explore longer-term motivational evolution and include more diverse cultural groups to enhance generalizability.

6. Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence that despite shared cultural backgrounds, international and domestic Chinese students experience markedly different anxiety and motivation patterns in English learning. These differences stem primarily from their distinct learning environments and contextual pressures. By recognizing these differential experiences, educators can develop more effective, targeted interventions that address the specific psychological needs of each student population, ultimately enhancing English learning outcomes for both groups.

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