

The Relationship Between Learner Beliefs and Foreign Language Anxiety of Chinese EFL International Students

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Abstract: The research purpose of this study is to measure Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) international students' learner beliefs and foreign language anxiety and explore the underlying relationship between their beliefs and foreign language anxiety. The study found that learners' beliefs about the difficulty of language learning are positively related to confidence about their English proficiency, and the more learners pay attention to linguistic accuracy, the higher their foreign language anxiety. When learners believe they can learn English well, their anxiety level could be low, and if they are anxious about English learning, they will adopt practicing methods to deal with their anxiety.

Keywords: Learner beliefs; Foreign language anxiety; Study abroad; Chinese EFL students

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1. Introduction

There are many terms used to describe education taking place outside a student's home country or region such as "study abroad," "student mobility," and so on. The term "study abroad" is defined as "a temporary sojourn of pre-defined duration, undertaken for educational purposes"^[1]. The main modality of cross-border education for students from the Asia-Pacific region including China is the acquisition of a full degree on a fee-paying basis. This means they go abroad for one year or several years and aim to gain degrees that are recognized and valued in their home country. These degrees may be important as part of capacity building or to join the workforce^[1]. The number of Chinese international students in English-speaking countries such as the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and Australia has increased. Recently, the UK has become the second most popular country for overseas students. In the year 2014, there were 437,000 international students studying in the UK^[2].

Due to this large group of international students, research into studying abroad has drawn attention to the field of language learning. For researchers who are concerned with language learning, studying abroad is important because the experience is regarded as a crucial step in the development of the ability to communicate in the target language^[1]. Students studying abroad may unconsciously acquire the foreign language through

observation and communication in classrooms and dormitories, and social and commercial interactions. Although such students may or may not regard themselves wholly or partially as language learners, language education and applied linguistics researchers have demonstrated considerable interest in studying abroad ^[1].

Scholars have analyzed the effect of individual differences on foreign language learning since the 1960s. A lot of evidence has been provided for the influence of individual differences on instructing adult language learning, with most studies focusing on cognitive and affective factors such as aptitude and motivation ^[3]. However, foreign language anxiety and learner beliefs have recently received increasing attention from scholars. Scholars not only link these two factors to language achievement or performance but also claim that they are related to each other ^[4,5]. Indeed, a research gap can be identified by directly examining their relationship ^[6], especially in the context of Chinese students studying in English-speaking countries who are considered to be the largest group of overseas students in the world ^[2].

Therefore, considering the background and research gap stated, the purpose of this study is to measure Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) international students' learner beliefs and foreign language anxiety (FLA) and to explore the underlying relationship between their learner beliefs and FLA.

2. Literature review

The literature review provides a brief introduction to the previous research on the relationship between learner beliefs in language learning and foreign language anxiety in the foreign language education field. The literature ranges from the last century when the basic theories were published to recent research in order to ensure the reliability of this review.

Horwitz *et al.* ^[7] pointed out that there is a relationship between language anxiety and learner beliefs. The authors explained that learners' beliefs lean towards perfectionism, and setting high personal performance standards may cause their FLA. Recently, several studies have been conducted in different contexts to investigate learner beliefs and language anxiety ^[5,6].

From the perspective of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Zhang ^[5] and Aslan and Thompson ^[6] analyzed the relationship between language anxiety and learner beliefs respectively in Chinese, Turkish, and Indonesian contexts. Aslan and Thompson ^[6] adopted a quantitative approach through a modified version of BALLI and FLCAS questionnaires to find answers to the research question "What is the relationship between the underlying factors in the language learning beliefs and foreign language anxiety of Turkish EFL learners?" Based on the research data of 153 university-level EFL learners, the authors concluded that both learners' beliefs and foreign language anxiety consist of several constructs that interact with one another. Positive learner beliefs can reduce foreign language anxiety and increase learners' confidence in language learning. Specifically, fear of ambiguity is positively linked to language anxiety, while the more confident learners are, the more likely they are to communicate with native speakers. However, the findings of this study do not establish causal claims about the relationships. For example, the existence of a relationship between fear of ambiguity and FLA in this study could not be demonstrated as the former causes the latter.

In the Chinese EFL context, Zhang ^[5] conducted research to investigate what beliefs and anxiety levels Chinese university English major students have, and whether there is a relationship between their beliefs and language anxiety. The author adopted a quantitative approach using two questionnaires FLACS and Tanaka's Learner Beliefs Questionnaire, with 151 first-year undergraduate students majoring in English. The result indicated that respondents held a strong belief in the importance of vocabulary learning, while their anxiety level was lower than those in the previous research. More importantly, this study found that there was no

significant relationship between participants' beliefs and their language anxiety; only two factors of learner beliefs were weakly correlated with anxiety. This result is opposed to the findings of Aslan and Thompson ^[6] who found that learner beliefs and language anxiety interact with one another. Given that different contexts may lead to a mismatch in findings, research in the missing context of Chinese international students is necessary.

In short, this literature review gives a brief introduction to previous research concerning the relationship between learner beliefs and foreign language anxiety. The topic has been studied in different contexts, and the findings can be conflicted. Most scholars believe that these two factors are related to each other, but others find that there is no significant relationship.

3. Discussion

This section discusses how the studying abroad experience could change learners' beliefs, their foreign language anxiety, and their relationships.

A significant change appears in the participants' attitude towards the nature of language learning after studying abroad. Before learning in the English-speaking context, participants were focused on the accuracy of the target language and avoided making mistakes, which could have caused their foreign language anxiety. However, after studying abroad, participants' attitudes towards making mistakes changed. They now are more tolerant towards mistakes, and try to find a balance between accuracy and fluency. Their FLA levels have fallen, possibly because they are less worried and embarrassed when they make mistakes in English. These changes caused by the studying abroad experience are also evident in other studies ^[8-11].

One possible explanation proposed by participants is that different methods of assessment could cause a change in learner beliefs. This view matches the findings in previous research. As discussed in the literature review, Li and Ruan ^[8] pointed out that assessment methods are found to have influenced the development of language learners' beliefs. The participants, Chinese EFL learners in an EMI (English as the Medium of Instruction) context, are similar to this present study, Chinese EFL students studying abroad. It is reported in the present study that examinations in China are mostly gap-fill or objective questions without subjective expression so at that time they were not worried about expressing their ideas and focused little on the communicative function of the foreign language. This finding is supported by previous research that language tests in China are highly focused on linguistic accuracy including grammar, vocabulary, and reading, but attach less importance to listening and speaking. Testing focuses predominantly on what can be tested reliably and accurately and with maximum objectivity ^[10].

The dominant English test is the College English Test (CET); however, this test is reported to cause worry and anxiety among Chinese university students. Also, it is considered that multiple-choice testing is overused in the CET and that accuracy is the predominant focus of the exam ^[12]. Thus, Chinese EFL learners could develop a belief that learning English is mainly about acquiring linguistic knowledge rather than developing communication skills. This kind of exam made them more focused on grammar and linguistic accuracy than on communication and expression. This idea could be in line with the findings in previous research that high-stakes examinations in China tend to significantly influence learners' beliefs about the primacy of grammar and vocabulary in English study ^[8].

However, after studying abroad, most Chinese EFL learners indicated that their assessments were essays and presentations, which require them to use the foreign language to express their ideas and ensure fluency as well as accuracy. In other words, they are required to adapt from a test system where summative assessment (end-of-course exams and tests) plays a leading role, to one where formative assessment (written coursework

assignments, oral presentations, and discussion-based tasks) and summative assessment are equally important^[10]. When the participants were studying abroad, the process-based writing tasks may have led learners to become more pragmatic and skills-based, as mentioned in the results. Other studies have also shown that after studying abroad, students' attention increasingly becomes focused on how to write an effective piece of academic writing rather than excessive attention to the correct use of grammar or vocabulary^[8].

Another explanation for the change could be the influence of extracurricular activities. It is worth noting that Chinese EFL international students not only need to use English in the classroom but also in their daily communications in English-speaking countries. According to sociocultural theory, learners' use of English is viewed both as a tool for mediating learning and as an object to be acquired^[13]. While English is an academic subject for students in China, English becomes a survival tool in everyday life for study-abroad students and relates to their overall academic achievement and social accomplishment^[14]. Participation in extracurricular activities in an English-speaking environment could mediate learners' beliefs and FLA^[8]. While studying abroad, there could be more opportunities for learners to engage in different English-speaking communications and extracurricular activities. In the English-speaking context, learners could encounter English speakers from different countries with varying accents. Thus, they need to adapt their speaking, listening, and beliefs about language learning in order to communicate. Meanwhile, it could make learners pay more attention to the communication function of language^[8,14]. The result of this study is in line with the findings of Li^[11] that English accents and grammatical mistakes have little effect on Chinese EFL international students' oral communication in extracurricular activities. As a result, they become less focused on the primacy of accuracy and native-like accent, which they used to focus on when in China. As learners' beliefs change, their FLA decreases accordingly. They could be less anxious about their accents and become more confident when they realize there are multiple accents in English. Therefore, English use outside the classroom could be one reason for Chinese international students' changed beliefs and FLA.

Additionally, the different roles of teachers as well as teaching activities could cause a change in learners' beliefs and FLA because teaching practices could make students hold particular sets of learning beliefs^[15]. Most of the participants in this research learned English in teacher-centered classrooms that predominately used grammar translation and audiolingual methods^[8]. In this kind of class, teachers are often viewed as authority figures rather than facilitators of learning^[16]. This traditional type of English class may cause learners to believe that learning English is mostly about repetition and memorization.

After they had been studying abroad, Chinese EFL international students regarded the role of the teacher as a scaffolder and cooperator. Amuzie and Winke^[15] also found that the new environment made learners believe that learning English should be a learner-centered and self-regulated process in which their proactive participation and initiative are necessary. Participants also indicated that different teaching activities could have an effect on their foreign language anxiety. Due to the fact that participants had to use English in group discussions, the anxiety level would increase when they compared themselves with other classmates. However, most of the participants viewed this kind of anxiety and comparison as a positive factor that encouraged them to think more and make improvements. This positive effect of FLA is also found in previous research^[17,18].

In terms of the relationship between learners' beliefs and foreign language anxiety, the findings of this study could be supplemental to the previous research. In this study, a significant relationship is found to exist between learners' beliefs about linguistic accuracy and their foreign language anxiety. When the participants no longer think it is important to be accurate, they have less foreign language anxiety. This finding matches with the results of previous research by Truitt and Horwitz^[19], which found "a positive relationship between learners' beliefs about the importance of correctness and their levels of anxiety." Similarly, this relationship is also found

in the study of Aslan and Thompson ^[6] that claimed there is a set of correlations between fear of ambiguity and foreign language anxiety. It is suggested that the more learners believe that English learning involves a lot of ambiguity in different forms, the more anxious they will get ^[6]. Participants in the present study reported a high level of anxiety when they focused on accuracy, grammar, and vocabulary rather than the communication function. However, the participants in this English-speaking context believed less in the accuracy of language and were more accepting of ambiguity after they had been living in the UK, which means their anxiety level may have decreased.

Another significant relationship exists between learners' beliefs about the difficulty of language learning and foreign language anxiety. This finding is in line with the hypothesis that a negative relationship exists between learners' beliefs about the ease of learning English and their levels of anxiety ^[19]. This finding could also be consistent with the idea that learners' desire and confidence to learn English well is related to their foreign language anxiety ^[6].

4. Conclusion

This study investigated the following research questions: What English learning beliefs do Chinese EFL international students have? What is the level of Chinese EFL international students' anxiety towards English learning? What is the relationship between learner beliefs and FLA of Chinese EFL international students?

The results indicate that participants' beliefs about English learning have changed since they studied abroad; they have become less concerned about language accuracy, grammar, and vocabulary, and instead view learning language as a medium to communicate. Studying abroad could change participants' beliefs and FLA in three aspects including different assessment forms, extracurricular activities, and the different roles of teachers and teaching activities. There are two significant relationships between learner beliefs and FLA. On the one hand, learners' beliefs about the difficulty of language learning are related to their confidence about their English proficiency. This means that the more difficult learners view learning English as being, the more anxious they may be. Also, this relationship indicates that the more learners believe that they can learn English well, the less their foreign language anxiety may be. On the other hand, the more learners pay attention to linguistic accuracy, the higher their foreign language anxiety may be. Learners' beliefs about linguistic accuracy are related to four perspectives of foreign language anxiety including anxiety about speaking, English proficiency, interacting with native speakers, and public or unfamiliar environments. The existence of this relationship also suggests that when participants are anxious about language learning, they believe more in the importance of practice.

Given the relationships stated before, it is necessary for teachers and instructors to provide a relaxed and supportive learning environment for students in order to make them feel confident, relaxed, and keen to learn English, thus reducing their anxiety levels when learning English ^[20]. Plus, it is important to provide more opportunities for learners to practice including group discussion, role play, and other activities in order to prepare learners for English communication and make them less anxious when they are in an English-speaking environment ^[21]. Not only in EAP (English for Academic Purposes) courses but also in workshops, it is important for teachers to encourage students to express their ideas in English. Rather than teacher-centered classes, students should have more opportunities and feel free to interact and discuss in English. For example, there could be more group discussions and activities that make students interested in and willing to communicate. However, this application requires a high ability of teachers and teaching material. In classes with large groups of students like lectures, it is difficult and time-limited to give every student the opportunity

to speak in English. Thus, this recommendation is only suitable for small classes.

Teachers' understanding of and introduction to global English are important as well, so that their students feel confident with their accents and less anxious when they make mistakes ^[22]. Back in China, schools and government should provide courses for teachers to learn about the global English concept and make sure they treat students with different accents equally. Students should be taught to use English with confidence no matter what accents they have. However, this understanding may cause students to feel unnecessary to ensure the accuracy of language due to the existence of global English. Thus, students should be aware of the importance of keeping a balance between language accuracy and fluency, and the methods of assessment should take both aspects into consideration. For example, there could be paper tests as well as presentations as final exams so that students' English speaking, reading, writing, and listening are all tested. In conclusion, teacher education and different assessment methods are suggested to increase the awareness of global English.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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