A Review of Chinese Scholarship on Foreign Language Learning Anxiety in China

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Abstract

In an era of China being the country with the largest number of EFL learners, foreign language learning anxiety (FLLA) has remained a heated research field in China. However, most of the FLLA studies in China have been published in Chinese. This comprehensive review article serves to provide some access to these studies for researchers knowing no Chinese. The article reviews 103 journal papers and doctoral dissertations published in China on FLLA between 1998 and 2014. The publications are analysed in terms of nine tentative categories and the analysis is followed with a brief summary.

Overview of FLLA Research in China

This article is a critical review of previous research on foreign language learning anxiety (FLLA) by Chinese scholars in China. Being an important aspect of language acquisition, FLLA mainly studies the fear or apprehension occurring when a learner is using a foreign or second language. FLLA has been a widely and heatedly discussed topic for more than 50 years around the world (e.g., Alpert & Haber, 1960; He, 2011, 2013, 2017a; Horwitz et al., 1986). Ever since late 1990s, it has also become a key issue for English language teaching in China and drawn considerable attention from Chinese scholars and researchers. A myriad of studies on FLLA have been conducted and research articles been published. However, most of the academic studies in China have been published in Mandarin, which constitutes a language barrier for researchers outside of China who do not understand the language. This review article serves to provide some access to FLLA studies published in China for such researchers. This article may be of great significance to the FLLA field worldwide, especially in an era when English has become the world lingua franca and China has the largest number of English as a foreign language learners and users in the world (Graddol, 2010; He, 2017b; He & Miller, 2011). Against this background, one phenomenon catching ever-increasing attention is that these learners’ overall learning effectiveness (especially their spoken English) is hardly satisfactory although they have spent a great amount of time, money, and efforts on their EFL learning. Many factors may have led to this unsatisfactory learning effectiveness, and FLLA is one of them.

Considering the large amount of published studies available, the current overview is highly selective, and is restricted in the following ways: Firstly, it is limited to journal articles and doctoral dissertations that have been published in mainland China on the topic of foreign language (i.e., English) learning anxiety between 1998 and 2014. Secondly, the publications have been retrieved exclusively from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the most inclusive and widely used Web resource for researchers in China. Thirdly, these publications were further reduced to those that have been cited 15 times or more. Table 1 below lists all the 103 articles/dissertations reviewed in this article.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Major publications (times cited)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Rong, T. (27)</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>Yu, X. (268)</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>Chen, Y. (25); Lu, Q. (15); Wang, Y., &amp; Wan, Y. (1,243); Wang, Q., &amp; Ding, X. (72)</td>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>Cheng, D. (33); Hu, H. (18); Li, W. (33); Zhang, Y. (67)</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>Bai, Y. (76); Chen, J., &amp; Deng X. (55); Huang, Q. (56); Lian et al. (15); Wang, C. (332); Wang, Q. (153); Xiang, M. (812); Yang, W., &amp; Zhang, M. (19); Yuan, X. (26); Zhou, D. (340)</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>Chen, X. (230); Chen, X., &amp; Zhang, M. (45); Cheng, L. (37); Deng, Y. (28); Feng, M. (50); Guo, H., &amp; Wang, R. (23); Lei, X. (165); Li, C. (15); Li, J. (121); Li, J., &amp; Fan, W. (15); Li, Y., &amp; Wu, G. (41); Liu, M., &amp; Shen, M. (39); Ma, Y. (30); Wang, Q. (32); Xin, L. (30); Zhang, Q. (29); Zhang, R., &amp; Yuan, L. (252); Zhang, Z. (47)</td>
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<td>2005</td>
<td>Chen, S. (78); Da, H. (41); Fan, L., &amp; Gao, D. (58); He, Y. (32); Kang, Q. (16); Li, B. (22); Xue, L. (57); Yang, L. (92); Zheng, D. (46)</td>
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<td>2006</td>
<td>Chen, J., &amp; Xu, J. (16); Chen, L., &amp; Li, J. (18); Qin, C. (24); Shi, Y., &amp; Liu, Z. (311); Tao, Y. (15); Xu, S. (18); Zhang, L. (18); Zhang, S., &amp; Wang, G. (77)</td>
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<td>2007</td>
<td>Chen, J., &amp; Li, J. (25); Chen, W. (23); Chen, Y., &amp; Li, C. (47); Cheng et al. (133); Da, H. (36); Du, L., &amp; Tang, X. (22); Li, J., &amp; Lin, S. (139); Peng, J. (26); Qiu, M., &amp; Liao, F. (65); Wang et al. (23); Wang, H., &amp; Yang, X. (19); Wang, J. (19); Xie, S. (16); Xiong, S., &amp; Tan, H. (15); Zhang, S. (17)</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>Chen, S. (24); Guo, W., &amp; Wu, W. (16); Liao, S. (22); Shao, X., &amp; Zhang, F. (51); Shi, Y. (55); Wang, Y., &amp; Fang, L. (26); Zhang, H. (17)</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>Gong, J., &amp; Gao, X. (15); Guo, Y., &amp; Fan, W. (43); Ren, X. (16); Zhou, X. (20);</td>
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<td>2010</td>
<td>Chen, Y., &amp; Liu, D. (42); Guo, Y., &amp; Qin, X. (104); Li et al. (20); Lü, H. (52); Pu, Y., &amp; Shi, H. (22); Zhou, B., &amp; Tang, J. (64)</td>
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<td>2011</td>
<td>Guo, Y. (54); Kang, Z. (42); Liu, M. (22); Wu, Y., &amp; Gu, W. (49); Zhang, X., &amp; Zhao, G. (38)</td>
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<td>2012</td>
<td>Kang, Z. (18); Liu et al. (31); Sui, X. (16); Wang, X. (31); Xiong, S. (33); Yuan, P. (28); Zeng, X., &amp; Liu, Q. (21)</td>
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<td>2013</td>
<td>Gao, J. (28); Li, H., &amp; Liu, R. (31); Shi, Y., &amp; Xu, J. (29)</td>
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<td>2014</td>
<td>Guo, Y., &amp; Xu, J. (26)</td>
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**Table 1.** References of the 103 articles/dissertations reviewed

![](image_url) **Figure 1.** Number of widely cited publications on FLLA in China (by year)
Table 1 and Figure 1 demonstrate that the research on FLLA published in China can be divided into four periods according to the number of widely cited publications: 1998-2002, 2003-2008, 2009-2014, and from 2015 onwards. The comparatively small number of publications since 2014 as shown in Figure 1 does not mean there was a remarkable drop of research from then, but mainly due to the fact that newly published studies usually do not have a high citation rate because of the time factor. For the same reason, no articles published since 2015 have been selected for review in this section. This is one of the areas for future research concerning FLLA in China.

The first period (1998-2002) is the introductory period with Rong (1998) as the first article introducing FLLA to Chinese readers. However, Wang and Wan (2001) is the highlight of this period with 1,243 citation times. The second period (2003-2008) sees the booming of FLLA research in China with 2004 and 2007 as the two peak years. Xiang (2003) deserves special attention with its 812 citations. The third period (2009-2014) is the continued and steady development phase with Guo and Qin (2010) as the highlight since it has been cited 104 times seven years after its publication. The last period (from 2015 onwards) signifies the future of FLLA research in China, which is also an undertaking for future research in this area. The following sections will review all the 103 studies in detail.

Reasons Leading to and Strategies Coping With FLLA

Reasons leading to and strategies coping with FLLA are important aspects of anxiety studies, the research efforts in these areas in China are of great significance too. Chen and Deng (2003) surveyed and interviewed 78 non-English majors and found that the main reasons resulting in students’ FLLA included: teachers’ classroom word selection; way of error correction; and questioning strategies. Consequently, the recommended methods to cope with such anxiety were: to create a supportive and encouraging classroom; to provide examples for communicative tasks; to allow students enough time to prepare their answers to a question; and to avoid extremely anxiety-provoking activities (e.g., unexpected tests, opinionated error corrections).

Via questionnaire survey and interview, Zhang Q. (2004) investigated 367 non-English majors and reported some reasons leading to and strategies coping with students’ FLLA. The reasons included: lack of confidence; worry about making mistakes; and teacher’s inappropriate way of error correction. The strategies proposed were: building a good teacher-student relationship; creating a relaxed classroom atmosphere; promoting cooperative learning; and organizing teaching activities reasonably.

Yang (2005) investigated 30 Year-1 undergraduates and reported that their FLLA was negatively correlated with their oral performance and their foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) could be reduced through the following strategies: raising questions in less anxiety-provoking ways; adopting appropriate error-correction methods; carrying out more group/pair activities; and building a more relaxed and friendly foreign language (FL) classroom atmosphere.

On the basis of questionnaire data from 301 non-English major sophomores, Qin (2006) reported that these participants showed a comparatively high level of FLLA and the anxiety was negatively correlated with language learning grades. Qin (2006) recommended that FLLA could be reduced in two ways: one was through learners’ positive self-evaluation and appropriate learning motivation; and the other was to provide a better learning environment such as cooperative learning, and computer- and web-assisted FL learning.

Gong and Gao (2009) studied 197 Year-1 and 2 Tibetan non-English majors and found that they showed a much higher level of FLLA than those participants in other studies that they compared with (i.e., Horwitz et al., 1986; Lei, 2004; Wang, 2004). The authors also proposed six reasons for FLLA, which were similar to those mentioned in this section.
FLLA and Web-Based Computer-Assisted Language Learning

Modern technology is frequently and efficiently used in today’s language learning, so there are also studies on the relationship between FLLA and technology-enhanced language learning. For example, Xin (2004) investigated 87 university students learning EFL in the computer-assisted language learning lab and found that technology-enhanced language learning could help reduce students’ FLLA level since they had their own independent learning space in the lab when compared to common classroom learning. On the other hand, students felt more anxious having to select materials and manage learning themselves when it came to web-based learning. Faced with the abundance of knowledge and information online, some students felt confused and simply gave up their web-based learning.

By applying an experimental web-based spoken English teaching model to 122 students for one year, Zhang (2006) found that the teaching model not only reduced students’ FLSA but also enhanced their English speaking skills.

Shao and Zhang (2008) studied 138 non-English major sophomores via a questionnaire and interview and reported that network and multi-media teaching environments can help enhance their English learning interest, reduce their FLLA, and improve learning efficiency as well.

Sui (2012) surveyed 186 Year-1 non-English majors and interviewed 15 of them. The questionnaire results showed that most of the participants experienced a moderate to high level of FLLA learning EFL in the internet-based environment. Her interview findings indicated that students’ anxiety mainly resulted from three factors: technical issues (e.g., internet disconnections); poor foundation of English learning; and lack of person to person communication.

With questionnaire and interview data from 232 Year-1 non-English majors, Xiong (2012) revealed that most of the students experienced a moderate level of FLLA and that anxiety was negatively correlated with learning strategy use. Xiong’s study also provided implications for college English teaching in China such as reinterpreting the key role FL teachers play in web-based learning, encouraging cooperative online learning to increase students’ learning motivation, and training students how to make use of learning strategies while teaching.

By comparing 526 non-English majors learning EFL through traditional (N = 261) and web-based computer-assisted (N = 265) classroom teaching, Zeng and Liu (2012) investigated FLLA in the two different teaching environments with a questionnaire survey and interview. The findings indicated that students enhanced their English learning interest, reduced their anxiety level, and improved their learning proficiency in the new teaching environment on the whole. Nevertheless, students still had a comparatively high level of FLLA, and the freshers in the new environment (N = 139) even showed a significantly higher level of anxiety than that of their counterparts in the traditional environment (N = 148). In addition, the results showed that students’ anxiety level was negatively correlated with their English grades.

FLLA: Self-Efficacy, and Language Achievement

Self-efficacy and language achievement are closely related to the study of FLLA. For instance, Yu (1999) studied 49 adult students with the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and reported that FLLA was not related to English listening proficiency. Although this is the first widely-cited empirical study on FLLA published in China, it should be pointed out that its conclusion may not be reliable since it is contrary to the correlation between the two as shown in many other similar studies (e.g., Chen, 2004), and one reason might be its small number of participants.

Zhang and Yuan (2004) investigated the relationship among FLLA, self-efficacy and
English performance of 315 Year-2 non-English majors. Their results showed: 1) the anxiety level of students with good English performance was remarkably lower than that of students with poor performance; 2) females’ performance and self-efficacy were higher than males’ but no significant gender difference was identified concerning their FLLA; 3) students’ English performance and anxiety level were significantly negatively correlated and so were their anxiety level and self-efficacy, whereas their performance was significantly positively correlated with self-efficacy; and 4) gender, FLLA, and self-efficacy were all indicators of English performance.

With questionnaire data from 225 undergraduates of different backgrounds, Li and Wu (2004) concluded that students’ FLLA level was negatively correlated with their FL achievement and non-English majors’ anxiety level was significantly higher than English majors.

On the basis of the FLCAS questionnaire data from 54 first-year non-English majors, Chen and Zhang (2004) found that these students’ FLLA was markedly negatively correlated with both of their overall English grades and their listening grades. The anxiety decreased their interest in English learning as well. Further interview data revealed four factors leading to students’ FLLA, namely, students’ inappropriate perceptions (e.g., the belief that they should speak English like a native speaker of English), teacher-related factors (e.g., the way of error correction), curriculum factors (e.g., too much pressure from exams), and lack of chances to use English in their daily lives. Ma (2004) is another study concerning FLLA and learning achievements based on the questionnaire data from a small number of participants (N = 47). Her results showed that most of the participants experienced a high level of anxiety which led to their inactivity in classroom conversation. One more study with a small number of non-English majors (N = 67) as participants was carried out by Lei (2004) who found that FLLA was prevalent among the participants and the anxiety was negatively correlated with their FL performance.

Xue (2005) surveyed 94 Year-1 non-English majors and concluded that FLLA was negatively correlated with FL achievements and that FL writing and reading anxieties were two distinct anxieties related to FL writing and reading performance respectively.

With questionnaire data from 529 non-English major sophomores, Chen and Li’s (2006) study revealed that students with differing English proficiency showed a significant difference in FL learning motivation, self-esteem, and anxiety, but no gender difference was reported concerning these aspects.

Wang et al. (2007) investigated 192 Year-1 non-English majors with five questionnaires and reported that English pronunciation self-efficacy was a significant part of students’ English learning self-efficacy. It was also reported that students who had high anxiety and tended to attribute their failure to low ability suffered from low self-efficacy. By applying the FLCAS to 90 non-English majors, Xie (2007) also examined the relationship between FLLA and English speaking proficiency and concluded that FLLA was negatively correlated with students’ oral scores and their self-perceived English speaking ability.

Via the FLCAS questionnaire survey and group interview of 48 science and engineering university students, Chen (2008) studied low-achieving students’ FLLA and found that their anxiety level was higher than that of the average students but it was not significantly negatively correlated with their language proficiency. The findings also revealed six reasons for FLLA (e.g., trait anxiety, an lack of interaction with teachers and other students in EFL learning), based on which some suggestions were provided for EFL teachers, such as exploring the low-achievers’ potential in learning, finding them effective learning strategies, and providing them with tailored guidance and help.

Liu (2011) surveyed 934 non-English majors from three universities and concluded that: 1) FLLA was significantly negatively correlated with English learning achievement; 2) low
self-confidence could negatively predict achievement; and 3) these two correlations differed from university to university.

**FLLA: Motivation and Self-Esteem**

According to Krashen (1982), comprehensible input undergoes an affective filter in the human mind and hence leads to different learning outputs. As three important components of emotional factors of foreign language learning, motivation, self-esteem, and anxiety are closely related to one another and hence influence the learning process and efficiency. By employing the FLCAS and Dörnyei’s (1998) seven motivational dimensions underlying L2 learning to 112 non-English major sophomores, Deng (2004) found that situational motivation led to the increase of FLLA, that too much emphasis on motivation for good grades would only increase students’ FLLA, while multi-dimensional motivations benefited language learning and helped reduce FLLA.

Wang (2012) probed into a small number of Year-1 non-English majors (N = 30) and argued that these students’ FLLA, learning motivation, and self-confidence were all negatively correlated with their overall English grades and English listening and speaking grades as well. Liu, Yao, and Hu (2012) also published a study on language learners’ motivational self-systems, anxiety, and motivated learning behavior. Their questionnaire participants were 706 non-English majors including both undergraduates (N = 473) from Years 1 to 3 and postgraduates (N = 233). Their results indicated that positive FL learning experience helped reduce language learners’ FLLA, and that their ideal L2 self and ought-to-L2 self remarkably interacted with each other and made them more anxious. The ideal L2 self is based on “the individual’s aspirations and goals as a language learner” and ought-to-L2 self is “a product of the individual’s perceived obligations and responsibilities as a language learner” (Ryan, 2008, p. 112). With questionnaire data from 370 non-English major sophomores, Yuan (2012) reported that content-based instruction helped improve FL learners’ learning motivation and efficiency while decreasing their anxiety level.

**FLLA in Different Language Skills**

A new tendency in FLLA studies is that researchers are investigating the anxiety in specific language skills.

**FL Listening Anxiety**

Both Zhou (2003) and Chen (2004) studied the relationship between anxiety and listening proficiency among English major sophomores. Zhou (2003) investigated 96 such students and found that the participants’ FL listening anxiety was negatively correlated with their listening grades and the use of listening strategies helped improve their listening performance. Chen (2004) also obtained questionnaire data from 120 English major sophomores and concluded that the participants’ FLLA was negatively correlated with their listening grades.

There are more studies measuring non-English majors’ listening anxiety. Du and Tang (2007) surveyed 218 non-English major juniors and concluded that most of the participants showed a low level of listening anxiety, but their listening anxiety level was still significantly negatively correlated with their listening grades. Zhou (2009) investigated 105 Year-2 non-English majors with a self-developed questionnaire and found that listening anxiety was common among the participants and it had negative effects on their listening scores. She also proposed some anxiety coping strategies in line with the results, such as choosing appropriate listening materials, increasing students’ self-confidence in listening class, doing relaxation drills, and training students to use FL listening strategies. On the basis of questionnaire data
from 147 non-English major sophomores, Chen and Liu (2010) reported that students’ listening anxiety was negatively correlated with their listening proficiency, and that the reasons leading to their listening anxiety included a lack of listening skills, unfamiliarity with the background knowledge, and poor overall English proficiency, among others.

**FL Speaking Anxiety**
Lü (2010) investigated 109 Year-1 non-English majors and revealed that they demonstrated a comparatively high level of FL speaking anxiety, which was negatively correlated with their use of English speaking learning strategies.

Through analyzing 83 university students’ spoken English test performance and their responses to a ten-item foreign language speaking anxiety scale, Chen and Li (2007) found that most of them showed a high level of speaking anxiety with distinct individual differences, and their speaking anxiety was negatively correlated with their grades in the speaking test. The reasons leading to students’ speaking anxiety included: inappropriate teaching methods (e.g., putting students on the spot unexpectedly); peer competition; fear of making errors and hence being laughed at; and teachers’ harsh error correction and low tolerance of errors. Four implications for EFL teaching were also provided in line with these reasons, such as creating a conducive linguistic environment so as to decrease the effects of ‘the affective filter’ (Krashen, 1985) in the process of FL learning, organizing group/pair work, and adopting appropriate techniques in questioning and error correction.

In the same year, another study on 76 Year-2 medical students reported that their FLLA was negatively correlated with their oral performance and communicative teaching helped reduce their anxiety (Cheng, He, & Han, 2007).

**FL Reading Anxiety**
Chen (2005) investigated FL reading anxiety among 46 Year-1 non-English majors and concluded that these participants demonstrated a high level of reading anxiety which was negatively correlated with an indicator of their English achievement, especially for the females.

With questionnaire data from 211 Year-2 non-English majors, Shi and Liu (2006) found that Chinese university students’ FL reading anxiety was negatively correlated with both their College English Test Band-4 (CET-4) overall grades and their reading comprehension grades and that males demonstrated remarkably higher reading anxiety but lower English achievements than females. Such a gender difference was further confirmed by Shi (2008).

Qiu and Liao (2007) studied 153 non-English major sophomores’ FL reading anxiety with the FLCAS and FLRAS (Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale, Saito et al., 1999) and reported that: 1) FL reading anxiety was mainly caused by the exam-oriented reading practice and a lack of culture awareness; 2) reading anxiety was negatively correlated with FL proficiency; 3) reading anxiety could be separated from but was related to general FLLA; 4) there was no significant gender difference concerning both types of anxiety; and 5) reading anxiety could predict male students’ English proficiency much better than it did that of females.

Wang and Fang (2008) carried out another study on reading anxiety on the basis of questionnaire data from 127 Year-2 non-English majors with the help of the FLRAS and the English Reading Strategy Scale (Liu, 2002). Their results indicated that reading anxiety was significantly negatively correlated with both reading performance and reading strategy use while the latter two were significantly positively correlated with each other.

Liao (2008) studied 202 Year-3 non-English majors’ FL reading anxiety with a questionnaire survey and reported that the anxiety was significantly negatively correlated with
reading achievements and also to students’ self-perceived reading ability. Her interview data yielded four sources of reading anxiety: new vocabulary; unfamiliar topics; a slow reading speed; and a lack of efficient reading strategies.

The above studies on FL reading anxiety were all carried out among non-English majors. There has been an evident lack of studies of English majors in this regard. Pu and Shi (2010) undertook an investigation among 68 Year-1 English majors and found that these participants had high FL reading anxiety, which had a remarkably negative correlation with their reading grades.

**FL Writing Anxiety**

After analyzing 60 Year-2 non-English majors’ questionnaire data on writing anxiety, Zheng (2005) arrived at the conclusions that these participants experienced a high level of writing anxiety and the students with higher anxiety had significantly lower writing grades and fluency than those with lower anxiety.

Guo and Fan (2009) studied FL writing anxiety with questionnaire data from 293 non-English majors at three levels as specified in the College English Curriculum Requirements: 109 at the basic requirement level, 100 at intermediate, and 84 at advanced requirement level. The authors concluded that FL writing anxiety, which consisted of avoidance behavior, cognitive anxiety, and somatic anxiety, was prevalent among the participants and that the participants showed a medium level of writing anxiety with the avoidance behavior demonstrating a high frequency. It was also found that cognitive anxiety was significantly negatively correlated with writing performance among undergraduates at the basic requirement level, but not among those at intermediate and advanced requirement levels.

Guo and Qin (2010) involved even more non-English majors (N = 453) in their study on FL writing anxiety and reported that: 1) FL writing anxiety included four factors, namely, classroom teaching anxiety, conceiving anxiety, avoidance behavior, and lack of confidence; 2) the participants experienced a medium level of writing anxiety and their avoidance behavior was of high frequency; 3) all four anxiety factors were significantly negatively correlated with writing performance; and 4) participants’ self-perceptions of FL writing ability and overall FL proficiency had significant effects on their writing anxiety.

By employing the thinking-aloud protocol and interviews with 30 students with high (N = 15) and low (N = 15) levels of writing anxiety, Zhou and Tang (2010) concluded that FL writing anxiety was negatively correlated with writing scores but positively correlated with L1 interference. Guo (2011) studied 199 non-English majors and reported that the Length Approach remarkably decreased students’ FL writing anxiety and enhanced their writing ability. Length Approach “aims to increase learners’ English proficiency through tasks that motivate learners to write increasingly long compositions” (Wang, 2005, p. 15).

Wu and Gu’s (2011) questionnaire survey of 454 Year-1 non-English majors revealed that these students demonstrated a high level of English writing anxiety and that cooperative learning could significantly reduce the anxiety. Their interview findings also indicated that the students preferred cooperative learning. Li and Liu (2013) probed into 294 non-English major freshers’ EFL writing self-efficacy and writing anxiety and found that these participants’ writing anxiety was significantly negatively correlated with both their writing self-efficacy and final exam grades and the latter two were significantly positively correlated with each other.

On the basis of questionnaire data from 53 business English majors, Gao (2013) found that the participants displayed a medium level of overall writing anxiety with avoidance behavior being of high frequency. A Flipped Class Model consisting of pre-class metacognition stage, in-class cooperative writing stage, and post-class reflection stage was
designed for distance learners’ business English writing. The model was found to be helpful in reducing such learners’ EFL writing anxiety and improving their writing performance.

**FL Interpreting Anxiety**

Through multiple research methods, Kang (2011) studied interpreting anxiety (IA) among 201 non-English majors enrolled in an English interpretation course. He classified the causations of IA into the locutionary and illocutionary factors and discovered that 79.1% of the subjects demonstrated IA at three levels (i.e., the high, the medium, and the low), which had different effects on interpreting performance. It was found that the high and low levels of IA were significantly negatively correlated with interpreting performance while the medium level positively correlated with interpreting performance. Kang’s (2012) study on IA of 90 non-English majors reported that the higher level of IA made students extremely stressful and influenced their interpreting achievements very negatively, and the lower level of anxiety delayed interpreters’ responses, while the medium level functioned as a ‘catalyst’ which facilitated consecutive interpreting.

**FLLA in Multiple Language Skills**

Feng’s (2004) study focused on communication anxiety in three language skills: listening, speaking, and reading. By analyzing questionnaire data from 88 English majors, Feng (2004) found that English achievements of the students with a medium level of communication anxiety were higher than those of the students with a high or low level of anxiety. In addition, their achievements were negatively correlated with their lack of ambiguity tolerance in speaking and reading, low self-confidence in reading long texts, fear of negative evaluation in speaking, and being not good at taking in peer input. Guo and Xu (2014) examined 457 non-English majors’ FLLA in terms of five dimensions, namely classroom anxiety and anxiety in English listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Their results showed that the participants had medium levels of overall anxiety and anxiety in each dimension as well. The level of classroom anxiety was the highest among the five and significantly higher than that of reading and writing anxiety, and the level of reading anxiety was significantly lower than that of the other four dimensions.

**FLLA: Other Correlational Studies**

This section reviews the empirical studies on FLLA and its relationship with other variables like years of study, classroom atmosphere, and willingness to communicate. Lian et al. (2003) surveyed and observed 90 non-English majors in different academic years and argued that: 1) a high level of FLLA affects learners’ pragmatic competence negatively; 2) juniors had higher anxiety levels than sophomores and sophomores higher than freshmen; and 3) males’ anxiety levels were lower than those of females. Wang Q. (2003) investigated the relationship between FLLA and classroom atmosphere on the basis of the data obtained from 80 university students. The results demonstrated that: 1) FLLA was negatively correlated with classroom atmosphere; 2) communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation were the main components of FLLA; 3) 55 percent of the participants reported lack of support from their teachers and classmates; and 4) females’ anxiety level was lower than males’. Wang Q. (2003) also proposed some strategies to help reduce FLLA based on the results, such as providing communicative activities appropriate to students’ English level, being more tolerant of students’ mistakes during communication, and building a supportive and encouraging learning environment. With questionnaire data from 182 Year-1 medical undergraduates, Peng (2007) found that FLLA was significantly negatively correlated with students’ willingness to
communicate in English and that communication apprehension could serve as a significant predictor of their willingness to communicate.

**FLLA: Its Research Participants**

From what has been reviewed above, it is evident that most of the empirical studies on FLLA take non-English majors as their participants and studies focusing on English majors have been scarce. Apart from the few mentioned in previous sections, there are some other studies on English majors worth mentioning. By administering Spielberger’s (1983) state-trait anxiety inventory to 44 English major sophomores, Hu (2002) found her participants’ trait anxiety was negatively correlated with their English achievements, especially their dictation and listening scores. Chen and Xu (2006) employed 12 research scales and interviews with 25 English majors as participants to study the relationship between cooperative language learning and FLLA. Their results indicated that cooperative learning encouraged more student-student interaction and hence helped reduce students’ FLLA level, which led to better language learning efficiency according to the pre-test and post-test results. On the basis of questionnaire data from 210 English major sophomores, Zhang and Wang (2006) reported that students with verified degree of tolerance of ambiguity could be remarkably different in their FL performance and FLLA level, and that anxiety played a significant mediating part in the effect of tolerance of ambiguity on FL leaning. With the same data as Zhang and Wang (2006), Zhang (2007) further stated that students with a low level of FLLA and high tolerance of ambiguity performed better in English learning than those with a high level of anxiety and low tolerance of ambiguity. In addition, her study found significant differences between urban students and rural students in their tolerance of ambiguity, with the former displaying noticeably lower such tolerance.

Most of the FLLA studies in China take university students as their participants, but there are some exceptions. Wang and Ding (2001) collected questionnaire data from 56 Year-2 senior middle school students and reported that their FLLA level was very high and negatively correlated with their FL achievements. They also concluded that males’ anxiety level was higher than that of females. Huang (2003) also studied 350 senior middle school students and found that FLLA was negatively correlated with their English learning efficiency. Yuan (2003) investigated 117 senior middle school students’ FLLA with a modified version of the FLCAS and found that their FLLA level was basically negatively correlated with their EFL grades. Yuan also argued that such a negative correlation might vary according to differing individuals, time, and learning materials.

Wang (2004) studied 214 students’ FLLA with the FLCAS, and they were from junior middle school (N = 57), senior middle school (N = 53), and college (N = 104). The results indicated that communication apprehension was the most obvious anxiety, that middle school students’ anxiety level was higher than college students’ and males’ higher than females’. Da (2005) also studied 213 junior middle school students and found that the level of male students’ FLLA was significantly higher than that of females’, that self-efficacy and learning strategies formed a relationship of causality-feedback, and that self-efficacy was the mediator between anxiety and achievement and it had a relationship of causality-feedback with anxiety.

With a small sample (N = 43) of questionnaire data, Wang and Yang (2007) argued that these senior high school students’ FL reading anxiety was negatively correlated with their reading scores. By surveying 134 first year senior high school students, Xiong and Tan (2007) found that their participants demonstrated a high level of FLLA and their anxiety was negatively correlated with their English scores. Zhang (2008) studied 102 Year-1 senior high school students and concluded that FL writing anxiety was negatively correlated with students’ writing performance. Li et al. (2010) even investigated 399 primary school pupils and reported that their anxiety level increased along with their school years, with pupils in
Forms 5 and 6 demonstrating remarkably higher anxiety level than those in Forms 3 and 4. They also found that test anxiety and communication apprehension were the two major types of FLLA in primary schools. Moreover, there are FLLA studies with postgraduate students as the participants. For example, Zhang (2002) surveyed and interviewed 71 postgraduates and found that they had strong learning motivation and suffered less FLLA than FL beginners. The study also suggested that classroom activities such as pair and group work, presentations, role play and debates could help improve students’ oral English and the key role of the instructor was to create a relaxing classroom with low FLLA.

**FLLA: Its Research Scales**

Horwitz et al.’s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (the FLCAS) has been widely employed in the empirical studies concerning FLLA in China as can be seen from the reviews in this article so far. There have been researchers studying the Chinese version of the FLCAS and testing its validity and reliability. Wang C. (2003) conducted a study on the adaptation and verification of the scale itself by applying it to 418 sophomores. The results showed that the adapted Chinese version of the scale was valid with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .89, that students’ FLLA was negatively correlated with their CET-4 grades, that females’ anxiety level was significantly lower than males’, and that Chinese university students’ overall anxiety level was markedly lower than that of the students learning an FL in the US (e.g., Horwitz et al., 1986; Saito et al., 1999), which may be due to Chinese students spending strikingly more time learning EFL throughout their education than their foreign counterparts. Da (2007) modified and translated the FLCAS into a Chinese version of the English learning anxiety scale. After applying it to 569 Year-3 non-English majors, Da argued that it could be an effective research instrument in studying Chinese university students’ FLLA. Guo and Wu (2008) tested their modified Chinese version of FLCAS with 587 adolescents in Forms 5, 7, and 8. The results demonstrated that it was a reliable and valid scale. Moreover, they found that students’ FLLA included four factors, namely, communication apprehension, self-confidence, fear of negative evaluation, and intolerance of uncertainty.

On the basis of questionnaire data from 465 English majors, Zhang and Zhao (2011) analyzed and validated their Chinese version of Elkhafaifi’s (2005) Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (the FLLAS) and reported that the scale was valid and consisted of three factors: listening anxiety, self-belief of listening skill, and listening skill. They argued that students’ language performance could be enhanced when any of these three factors was affected for the purpose of reducing students’ listening anxiety level.

**FLLA: Review Articles**

One very important aspect of FLLA research in China is the reviewing of previous literature and studies in the field. Among these review articles, the most influential one is Wang and Wan (2001) with 1,243 citations so far. On the basis of a review of 24 studies done by overseas researchers, Wang and Wan (2001) introduced FLLA to researchers, teachers and learners in China. They argued that FLLA influenced FL learning negatively and that teachers should try to minimise learners’ FLLA in language teaching.

Li J. (2004) reviewed the reasons leading to FLLA from the perspectives of Psychology (specifically psychoanalysis, behaviorism, humanism) and neurobiology, and he also discussed some implications of FLLA research for EFL teaching in China. Zhang Z. (2004) conducted a review of literature on FLLA and EFL teaching from the following perspectives: the FLLA theories; FLLA and its implication for EFL teaching; the reasons resulting in FLLA and strategies dealing with FLLA. Li and Lin (2007) reviewed some FLLA studies out of
China dated from 1973 to 2005 and reported the following research findings concerning FLLA: its categories and reactions; its relationship with FL grades; the reasons leading to and strategies coping with FLLA; among others.

With 129 academic articles, Shi and Xu (2013) conducted a review based on the most extensive reading so far and found that FLLA was mainly centred on four areas: its nature; its research scales; its influence on language performance; and other relevant factors. They argued that there were still aspects to be improved in the anxiety study, for example, its research methods.


A Summary of FLLA Studies Published in China

To sum up, it can be seen that 28 (27.2%) of the 103 studies mentioned above are review articles on FLLA studies, and a few of them are brief reviews with only two pages. The relatively high percentage of review studies, especially those brief ones, indicates that some of the FLLA studies in China are not rigorous and their publication may be for utilitarian purposes (e.g., for promotion) rather than for academic purposes. The progressive development of FLLA research in China calls for more rigorous empirical studies in the field.

Among the 75 empirical studies, more than half of them (N = 44, 58.7%) involved non-English majors as participants, and only 22 (29.3%) of them investigated English majors or school students, while the remaining 9 (12.0%) studies did not specify whether their participants were English majors or not. It should be noted that the number of participants in some studies (i.e., Chen, 2005; Chen, 2008; Chen & Xu, 2006; Hu, 2002; Ma, 2004; Wang, 2012; Wang & Yang, 2007; Yang, 2005; Yu, 1999) is too small (N < 50) for an empirical study. In order to obtain robust results and findings concerning Chinese learners’ FLLA, more representative samples of the FL learning population in China should be secured, hence future endeavors are needed to include larger survey samples and students of diversified backgrounds as participants in FLLA research.

Most of these 75 empirical studies reported that students’ FLLA or the anxiety in specific language skills was negatively correlated with their FL achievement or performance. However, Chen (2008) and Yu (1999) were exceptions and they argued that anxiety was not related to achievement. Their conclusion may not be reliable in light of their small number of participants (N <50). As for FLLA in specific language skills, 29 (38.7%) of the 75 studies explored the correlations between anxiety and all five aspects (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation) of EFL learning in China, which is also the new tendency in FLLA study internationally.

Only 12 (16.0%) of the 75 studies found gender difference concerning FLLA. Nine of these 12 studies reported that males demonstrated a higher level of FLLA than females while the other three arrived at the opposite conclusion. As for reasons leading to and strategies coping with students’ FLLA, it can be seen that some studies came with a few reasons and strategies, but none of the strategies reported had been verified to be effective. When it comes to research methods adopted in the empirical FLLA studies in China, a questionnaire survey was the most frequently used one and some studies cross-validated or triangulated it with
interviews, observations, and thinking-aloud.

It should be noted that it is a tentative effort to identify the underlying themes and evident trends in FLLA research in China, as presented in the preceding sections. While studies on the measurement of FLLA and examination of the validity and reliability of various scales abound in the literature, advances in theory and applied research are lacking. Nonetheless, with the various research efforts in FLLA that have been made over the past decades, it is anticipated that FLLA will embrace more research interest and advancement in China in the future.

References


