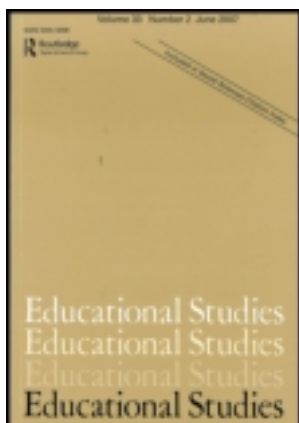


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### What makes learners anxious while speaking English: a comparative study of the perceptions held by university students and teachers in China

Deyuan He <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of English , City University of Hong Kong , Hong  
Kong , China

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## **What makes learners anxious while speaking English: a comparative study of the perceptions held by university students and teachers in China**

Deyuan He\*

*Department of English, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China*

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This study investigates the reasons leading to Chinese students' foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA). China is a nation with the largest number of English as a foreign language learners in the world, but most of them have learnt "mute English" when it comes to expressing themselves orally in English. FLSA may be an important factor leading to their unsatisfactory learning achievements. However, it has not been adequately addressed in the educational settings of China. This study endeavours to make a contribution in this aspect. With two cross-validated methods (questionnaire survey and focused interview), this study drew comprehensive data from 332 participants at two universities in China and found 14 major reasons of Chinese students' FLSA. It also compared students' and teachers' views about these reasons and reported the significant differences emerged. It further argued that understanding the reasons is an important step in reducing FLSA and hence enhancing learning effectiveness.

**Keywords:** speaking anxiety; reason; EFL learners; view differences

### **Introduction**

With the world-wide spread of English and China's expanding involvement in the global community, the importance of English has become increasingly prominent for the country, especially after China joining the World Trade Organisation in 2001 and hosting international events such as the 2008 Olympic Games and the 2010 World Expo. Accordingly, the demand for Chinese professionals who can speak decent English is higher than ever. University students, tomorrow's professionals, are therefore expected to have a good command of communication skills in English so as to prepare for future challenges. However, most university students in China who are given at least six years of English instruction and can pass English examinations with high grades are actually weak at speaking the language in real life situations, some may even lack enough courage to say anything or stumble and stammer when they speak (e.g. Tsang 2001). There are many reasons for the gap between effort and result, but among them, foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) may be an important one since it not only inhibits students' learning and using English but also affects the learning process (Yang 2003). In effect, communication in English with others is a challenge for many university students in China, which is also the main reason why they are chosen as the participants of this research. In

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\*Email: [deyuanhe2@alumni.cityu.edu.hk](mailto:deyuanhe2@alumni.cityu.edu.hk)

short, helping Chinese university students to overcome FLSA and thus to develop oral English proficiency is becoming a concern of great importance. It is believed that knowing why students are anxious when learning a foreign language (FL) is the first step in reducing their anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope 1986). Therefore, this study focuses on the reasons leading to FLSA of university students in China.

### **The reasons of foreign language anxiety**

Many studies have explored the reasons resulting in adult learners' foreign language anxiety (FLA) in general. Among them, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) suggest that adult FL learners are mature in thoughts and ideas but immature in the FL linguistic system through which to voice them. These learners tend to worry about negative evaluation because of their uncertainty over what they need to say in the FL. In addition, the unavoidability of assessment in language classes also leads to learners' anxiety since they will be tested on the proficiency of a language that they are still learning.

Some other sources of FLA include competitiveness from peer students (Bailey 1983), fear of speaking in public (Young 1990), instructors' aggressive way of teaching (Young 1991), the belief that others are better language learners (Price 1991), and teachers' unsuitable methods of error correction (Koch and Terrell 1991). On the basis of the above-mentioned literature review on anxiety in language learning, Young (1991) identified the following six potential sources of language anxiety: (a) personal and interpersonal anxieties, (b) learner beliefs about language learning, (c) instructor beliefs about language teaching, (d) instructor-learner interactions, (e) classroom procedures, and (f) language testing. In interviews with FL specialists, Young (1992) further reported some other factors playing a role in learner anxiety which include motivation, cultural factors, students' own coping skills, attention, self-concept, and the specific teaching methodology student experiences. In addition to Young's work in this field, other researchers (e.g. Cheng 2002; Dewaele, Petrides, and Furnham 2008; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, and Daley 2000) also discussed additional sources like frequency of language use, and context of language acquisition.

### **Research questions**

From the studies mentioned above, it can be concluded that most of the FLA studies were carried out in the western contexts and much fewer in non-western and English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts like China. To the best of my knowledge, there are only five empirical studies written or published in English (Liu 2007; Liu and Jackson 2008; Yan 1998; Yan and Horwitz 2008; Yang 1993) that investigated EFL learners in China. However, none of them focused on students' speaking anxiety except Liu (2007), and it was a small case study with only 27 participants. Given the paucity of empirical research into FLSA of EFL learners in China, it is of great significance to make such an attempt. Specifically, the research questions this article endeavours to address are:

- (1) What are the reasons leading to FLSA of EFL learners according to students and their English teachers in China's universities?

- (2) Are there any differences between these students' and their teachers' views regarding the reasons? If yes, what are the implications for EFL teaching in China's universities?

## Method

### *Participants*

Altogether 332 participants from two universities (302 students and 30 teachers) took part in the questionnaire survey and about one-tenth of them (30 students and three teachers) were interviewed. The two universities (one key university and one second-tier university) were located in south-central and eastern China respectively. Teachers and students of college English were selected as the participants because they are the people who are most deeply involved in the daily teaching and learning of college English and thus are most closely related to the issues addressed in this research.

Various factors were taken into consideration in order to make the participants maximally representative of their respective groups:

- Student participants: age, gender, and disciplines.
- Teacher participants: age, gender, academic qualifications and ranks.

Such variation is acknowledged as an advantage that increases the validity of empirical research (Maxwell 2005).

All 302 student participants were native Chinese, ranging in age from 17 to 23 ( $\bar{x}=19.9$ ). Among them, 44.4% (134) were female and 55.6% (168) were male. They were students of four disciplines: Science (33, 10.9%), Arts (36, 11.9%), Business (77, 25.5%), and Engineering (156, 51.7%). More than 71% (216) of the student participants ( $N=302$ ) were drawn from six different classes of the second-tier university, and the rest 28.5% (86) from three classes of the key university.

Teachers are included in this study as participants because they can provide another independent perspective in addition to students' subjective data source. Most of the teachers ( $N=30$ ) were from the second-tier university (23, 76.7%), while the rest (7, 23.3%) came from the key university. Among the teachers, 11 (36.7%) were male and 19 (63.3%) were female. Their age ranged from 23 to 50 ( $\bar{x}=36.4$ ), and they had two months to 27 years of English teaching experience ( $\bar{x}=12.6$ ). In terms of highest academic qualifications, two (6.7%) of them held a doctorate, 24 (80.0%) a master's degree, and four (13.3%) a bachelor's degree. As for the academic rank, two (6.7%) of them were professors, eight (26.7%) associate professors, 16 (53.3%) lecturers, and four (13.3%) teaching assistants.

### *Instruments and analyses*

Two instruments (questionnaire survey and focused interviews) were employed in this research to achieve the effect of cross-validation in terms of data sources. The focused interviews were also utilised to seek new possible reasons of FLSA in addition to the data yielded from the questionnaire survey.

*Questionnaire survey*

A 5-point Likert scale, the FLSA scale (the FLSAS), was developed specifically to investigate the reasons of students' FLSA for the present study. This new affective instrument was developed in line with the guidelines of Gable and Wolf (1993) and DeVellis (1991). First of all, a comprehensive review of the literature on FLA was undertaken. Then pilot interviews were conducted with three university students who had similar backgrounds to the student participants of this study, and they provided vivid descriptions of their speaking anxieties and difficulties. After getting a pool of statements for possible inclusion in the questionnaire, the third step was to refine these items according to the principles suggested by Brown and Rodgers (2002). In order to enable the teachers to judge their students' anxiety levels and feelings as an independent stakeholder, a teacher's version of the questionnaire was provided. It should be noted that the student's and teacher's versions are almost the same except for some wording,

Table 1. Students' response frequencies and means of the FLSAS items ( $N=302$ ).

Items	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Means
3. I feel that not knowing enough vocabulary is the biggest problem preventing me from speaking a FL easily	2.3	12.4	12.3	50.0	23.0	4.07
8. I am nervous if I have to speak a FL when I am not familiar with the topic	2.3	11.3	15.2	66.6	4.6	3.60
12. I get anxious when I find I cannot speak in the FL fluently	1.7	10.9	23.8	56.6	7.0	3.56
10. I feel nervous when having to be tested orally in a FL	2.6	16.6	17.5	54.3	8.9	3.50
11. I get worried when I have little time to think about what I have to speak in a FL	2.0	15.9	22.2	53.6	6.3	3.46
13. Others will look down on me if I make mistakes in speaking a FL	4.3	26.0	22.8	41.3	5.7	3.43
4. I become anxious when I get stuck on one or two words in speaking an FL	2.0	21.5	20.5	51.3	4.6	3.35
2. I am often worried that if I cannot speak English well I will not get a decent job in future	4.6	22.5	22.8	41.7	8.3	3.26
5. I feel more nervous when having to give important information orally in a FL	3.6	27.5	22.5	41.1	5.3	3.17
9. When speaking a FL, I often know all the words I need but still fail to express myself easily due to anxiety	2.0	34.1	20.9	39.4	3.6	3.09
6. I would not be so anxious just to learn to read and write in a FL rather than having to learn to speak as well	8.6	26.2	21.5	37.4	6.3	3.07
7. I do not mind thinking aloud in a FL, but I feel very uncomfortable when I have to speak to others in it	4.0	23.4	27.5	41.8	3.3	2.97
1. I feel embarrassed to speak English because I think I have poor pronunciation and intonation	4.9	23.4	20.2	40.5	11.0	2.89

Notes: SD: strongly disagree; D: disagree; N: neither disagree nor agree; A: agree; SA: strongly agree. The percentages have been rounded to one digit after the decimal point; the means have been rounded to two digits after the decimal point.

since teaching and learning are two aspects of the research questions. For example, the item “I feel nervous when having to be tested orally in a FL” in student’s version is worded as “I think students feel nervous when having to be tested orally in a FL” in teacher’s version.

To ensure the best comprehensibility, the FLSAS was translated into Chinese. Then back-translation was used to check the item-compatibility between the Chinese and English versions. The questionnaire was then piloted on 30 year-1 students and three of their English teachers at a university in China. The pilot participants were intentionally chosen from a different university other than the two where the formal data for the main study were collected, hoping that the target participants would not be polluted. The pilot data yielded a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .87 for the FLSAS, which indicated that the instrument was reliable and robust. The final version of the questionnaire contains 13 structured items.

Table 2. Teachers’ response frequencies and means of the FLSAS items ( $N=30$ ).

Items	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Means
11. I think students get worried when they have little time to think about what they have to speak in a FL	0.0	3.3	6.7	66.7	23.3	4.10
10. I think students feel nervous when having to be tested orally in a FL	0.0	0.0	10.0	73.3	16.7	4.07
8. Students seem to be nervous if they have to speak a FL when they are not familiar with the topic	0.0	6.7	3.3	70.0	20.0	4.03
12. Students seem to get anxious when they find they cannot speak in the FL fluently	0.0	0.0	13.3	70.0	16.7	4.03
9. When speaking a FL, students often seem to know all the words they need but still fail to express themselves easily due to anxiety	0.0	6.7	10.0	66.7	16.7	3.93
5. Students seem to be more nervous when having to give important information orally in a FL	0.0	6.7	10.0	70.0	13.3	3.90
1. Students seem to be embarrassed to open their mouth because they think they have poor pronunciation and intonation	0.0	6.7	13.3	70.0	10.0	3.83
3. Students feel that not knowing enough vocabulary is the biggest problem preventing them from speaking a FL easily	0.0	10.0	16.7	60.0	13.3	3.77
6. Students would not be so anxious just to learn to read and write in a FL rather than having to learn to speak as well	0.0	6.7	10.0	83.3	0.0	3.77
7. Students do not mind thinking aloud in a FL, but they feel very uncomfortable when they have to speak to others in it	0.0	6.7	23.3	63.3	6.7	3.70
4. Students seem to become anxious when they get stuck on one or two words in speaking a FL	0.0	13.3	10.0	73.3	3.3	3.67
13. Students think others will look down on them if they make mistakes in speaking a FL	0.0	13.3	36.7	50.0	0.0	3.07
2. Students often appear to be worried that if they cannot speak English well they will not get a decent job in future	0.0	43.3	23.3	26.7	6.7	2.97

After the main questionnaire data were collected, the response frequencies and the means of all the items were tabulated. Rank-orders of the means for both student and teacher groups were obtained to examine the importance of the reasons to each group. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was also conducted to find specific differences in the emphasis of the reasons between student and teacher groups. This method compared the two groups in terms of their means on each of the 13 items.

### *Focused interview*

Thirty of the student questionnaire participants (15 females and 15 males) and three of the teachers were also interviewed, either individually (for teachers) or in groups of six (for students). To ensure that all interviewees would voice their opinions, they were interviewed in Putonghua, their everyday language. The interview data were transcribed verbatim into Chinese before being translated into English. Both the transcriptions and translations were proofread and checked independently by the author and a separate rater (a Chinese PhD majoring in "English Education"). Then the interview data were input into MAXQDA 2007, a software product designed to analyse and code qualitative textual data.

Table 3. Means and difference of item scores on which students and teachers showed significant differences.

Items	Means	
	Ss/Ts	Difference
1. I feel embarrassed to speak English because I think I have poor pronunciation and intonation	2.89/3.83	-.94**
2. I am often worried that if I cannot speak English well I will not get a decent job in future	3.26/2.97	.29*
3. I feel that not knowing enough vocabulary is the biggest problem preventing me from speaking a FL easily	4.07/3.77	.30*
5. I feel more nervous when having to give important information orally in a FL	3.17/3.90	-.73**
6. I would not be so anxious just to learn to read and write in a FL rather than having to learn to speak as well	3.07/3.77	-.70**
7. I do not mind thinking aloud in a FL, but I feel very uncomfortable when I have to speak to others in it	2.97/3.70	-.73**
8. I am nervous if I have to speak a FL when I am not familiar with the topic	3.60/4.03	-.43*
9. When speaking a FL, I often know all the words I need but still fail to express myself easily due to anxiety	3.09/3.93	-.84**
10. I feel nervous when having to be tested orally in a FL	3.50/4.07	-.57**
11. I get worried when I have little time to think about what I have to speak in a FL	3.46/4.10	-.64**
12. I get anxious when I find I cannot speak in the FL fluently	3.56/4.03	-.47**
13. Others will look down on me if I make mistakes in speaking a FL	3.43/3.07	.36*

Notes: \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ . Ss: students; Ts: teachers. The items used in this table are from student's version of the FLSAS. For teacher's version, please refer to Table 2.

## Results and findings

### *Questionnaire survey*

Both students and their English teachers supported most of the FLSAS items, and Tables 1 and 2 display the 13 items in terms of response frequencies from students and teachers respectively. The tables also show the rank-orders of the items in line with decreasing order of means.

### *Importance of the reasons*

A further examination of Tables 1 and 2 revealed that four of the top five reasons supported by both the students and teachers are the same (i.e. Items 8, 10, 11, and 12). This suggests that these four reasons may be the most important sources of FLSA for the student participants in this study. The four reasons address students' FLSA from different respects, namely, "speaking a FL on an unfamiliar topic" (Item 8), "fear of being tested orally in a FL" (Item 10), "having little time to think before speaking in a FL" (Item 11), and "worry about the fluency of speaking a FL" (Item 12). Among the five least supported reasons by both the students and teachers, two of them are the same, which address "fear of speaking a FL relative to reading and writing in it" (Item 6) and "fear of speaking a FL with others" (Item 7). In addition to the similarities identified above, some differences in the rank-orders between the two groups were found. Remarkable differences emerged on Items 1 and 3. Students considered "worry about pronunciation and intonation" (Item 1) as the least important among the 13 reasons while teachers ranked it seventh. In contrast, students' top reason ("lack of vocabulary", i.e. Item 3) was ranked eighth by teachers.

### *Group differences regarding the reasons*

MANOVA at item level revealed significant differences on 12 out of the 13 items between student and teacher participants as shown in Table 3, and Item 4 was the only exception. It can be seen that teachers scored significantly higher than students on nine items (reasons). Among them, five reasons (Items 5, 7, 8, 10, and 11) are related to situations in which a FL speaker is somewhat put on the spot thus having to rely on his/her ability of quick and independent thinking and improvisation in processing the language. It is worthy of noticing that teachers' greater emphasis on such anxiety-provoking situations does not mean that students tended to consider them unimportant since three (Items 8, 10, and 11) of these five reasons are among the top five in students' rank-order of the reasons. In addition, teachers placed significantly more emphasis than students on Items 1 and 12 which were focused on FL proficiency: pronunciation and intonation (Item 1) and fluency (Item 12). Although students did not consider "worry about pronunciation and intonation" as an important contributing factor to their FLSA (they ranked it last as show in Table 1) they did show much concern about "fluency" (they ranked it third). Item 9 was designed to investigate whether trait anxiety is a reason of students' FLSA in this study, yet the construct "trait anxiety" was not used in the item given that it may be an unfamiliar term to the participants. Teachers' significantly higher mean score on this item indicates that they were more likely to regard trait anxiety as an important reason of students' FLSA.



The MANOVA results also showed that students exhibited significant differences from their teachers by attaching more importance to three reasons (Items 2, 3, and 13). Item 2 expresses EFL learners' worry about failing to get a decent job in future as a result of their poor oral English proficiency, and students obviously showed more concern about this reason than their teachers. Item 3 is about lack of vocabulary, which is also the reason students ranked first as shown in Table 1. The difference on Item 13 indicates that students tended to worry much about being looked down on due to making mistakes when speaking a FL, whereas their teachers seemed to consider this an unimportant reason of FLSA.

### *Focused interview*

On the whole, the findings of the interviews are generally consistent with those of the questionnaire data. When asked to comment on what caused them to become anxious when speaking a FL, student interviewees reported the following six reasons (arranged in decreasing order of mentions as shown in the brackets):

- Lack of vocabulary (18 mentions).
- Lack of confidence (15).
- Trait anxieties (11).
- Fear of making mistakes (10).
- Fear of speaking a FL with others, especially the native speakers (5).
- Test anxiety (3).

Among the six reasons, five were more or less the same as found in the questionnaire data, and only one (i.e. lack of confidence) was not covered thus being regarded as the 14th reason. Some of the typical interview responses are cited below:

I am afraid of making mistakes when speaking English, which may embarrass me. Other reasons include poor English proficiency, especially the lack of vocabulary. (Example 1)

The inherent anxiety, since we are used to speaking Chinese, we may naturally feel anxious when we need to speak in English. (Example 2)

To me, the reasons include lack of vocabulary and confidence, so I often fail to express what I want to say; all these may make me feel very anxious. (Example 3)

Test is the most important reason to me. I am also afraid of making mistakes in front of native speakers of English. (Example 4)

People might feel nervous because of their anxious personality, so they may be afraid of speaking English in whichever situation. (Example 5)

The reasons provided by the teacher interviewees were very similar to those by the students except that they expressed these opinions from a teacher's perspective. The following are two representative quotations from the teachers:

Students may become more anxious when they are talking with native speakers than with non-native speakers, since they may have problems in following what the native speakers say. Another reason for them to be nervous is their worry about making mistakes in English. (Example 6)

Too many reasons. For example, worry about the oral test, cannot find the right words or phrases while speaking, and, yes, some of them may be anxious because of their anxious personality. (Example 7)

## Discussions

### *Major reasons of FLSA*

With the two cross-validated research methods, the present study identified 14 reasons leading to students' FLSA. Among them, 13 were derived from the questionnaire survey, one from interviews (i.e. lack of confidence).

As shown in the results and findings of this study, "speaking a FL on an unfamiliar topic", "fear of being tested orally in a FL", and "having little time to think before speaking in a FL" are very prominent reasons of FLSA strongly emphasised by both students and teachers. All these situations call for instantaneous responses and improvisation of speech.

Speaking a FL has already made students who are not proficient at it feel rather out of control, and speaking it on an unfamiliar topic often makes the situation even worse. Therefore, it will be helpful, if possible, for teachers to initially focus more on topics that are familiar and known to students, such as foods, sports, music, family, and school. Starting with these familiar topics, students will feel more at ease in speaking a FL, and so develop more confidence before moving on to more challenging topics.

Fear of tests, especially oral tests, may result in anxiety since students who are vulnerable to test anxiety usually perceive the FL learning process, particularly oral production, as a test situation instead of an opportunity for communication and language improvement (Tsiplakides and Keramida 2009). Test anxiety may affect concentration and performance in a FL in a negative way, inhibit students from studying efficiently, and decrease their interest in a FL. For the purpose of helping students overcome their test anxiety and hence their FLSA, teachers should try not to put students in the test-like situations (e.g. including students' classroom performance into their semester assessment). On the other hand, students should remind themselves to treat speaking a FL as a learning process rather than a test situation.

Chinese students are not used to speaking a FL, and they usually feel uncomfortable when being the focus of attention in class. Having to speak a FL in class before getting fully prepared multiplies the effect. Hence, teachers should try not to put students on the spot before they get ready for an oral task. Studies (e.g. Du 2009) prove that there is little use in pushing students to say something when they are not ready to speak; on the contrary, it can only make them more anxious.

As the second most frequently mentioned reason in the interview responses, "lack of confidence" was another important factor. Lack of confidence is likely caused by many factors, among them, learners' limitation in the FL mastery and use is a very important one (Pappamihel 2002). To help the students who lack self-confidence in speaking a FL, two strategies might be considered. One is to strengthen the students' self-confidence by asking them to practice the following tactics, among others, listing some of their positive qualities, spending time with

positive people, trying not to think about failure, and being kind to themselves. The other is to help them improve their overall English proficiency. All these aspects of language skills are meant to be intertwined. When they have enhanced their skills in the aspects such as vocabulary, listening, and reading, they will naturally gain more confidence in speaking.

### *Student/teacher differences regarding the reasons*

Significant differences emerged from the comparison of the item (reason) means between student and teacher groups. One of the major differences was associated with their views about “lack of vocabulary of the FL” as a reason of students’ FLSA. Both questionnaire and interview data indicate that lack of vocabulary is the most important reason according to students, whereas teachers attached significantly less importance to this reason. This is understandable since FL learners in China often regard vocabulary as a big obstacle for their learning (Cortazzi and Jin 1996). EFL teachers thus need to be more aware of students’ concern over vocabulary and help them to develop a system to pick up new words and expressions in daily life.

Students also placed significantly more emphasis than teachers on the reason, “worry about being looked down on for making mistakes”. Such a worry is mainly associated with students’ fear of negative evaluation. Students who experience fear of negative evaluation are silent and withdrawn most of the time, and usually do not participate in FL classroom activities. They often do not regard errors as a natural part of the FL learning, but as a threat to their image and a source of negative evaluations either from the teacher or their peers. To help students with fear of negative evaluation, teachers should provide them with positive reinforcement such as positive comments. However, it should be noted that praising these students in front of their classmates for a minor accomplishment may have a negative effect, as they often consider it as an indication of the teacher’s lack of confidence in their abilities (Thompson 1997). Therefore, non-verbal praise (e.g. a smile or a positive gesture) is often more effective than direct verbal praise.

In terms of FL proficiency, both teachers and students considered “failing to speak fluently” as an important factor leading to students’ FLSA, but unlike teachers, students did not regard “having poor pronunciation and intonation” as a prominent reason. This disparity between the two groups may have important implications for classroom teaching. FL teaching and learning in the traditional Chinese way emphasise accuracy of pronunciation and intonation at the early stages of language study. Chinese students spend a lot of time practicing pronunciation of individual words before they really start speaking the language. Acquisition of good pronunciation and intonation is usually at the cost of fluency, so when students actually speak a FL they would worry about their fluency. Therefore, in order to encourage students to speak more in a FL and hence to improve their fluency, teachers are recommended to ignore students’ minor errors or flaws in pronunciation and intonation as long as they do not cause problems of intelligibility.

### **Conclusion**

As mentioned earlier, FLSA may be a very significant reason for Chinese students’ less-than-satisfactory EFL learning achievements. Being aware of the reasons resulting in their FLSA is one of the preconditions to helping them reduce such anxiety.

Some of the reasons (e.g. “fear of making mistakes”) may be deeply rooted in the EFL teaching traditions in China with its overemphasis on correctness instead of the realisation of communication. Therefore, pedagogically, it is necessary to provide the prospective and also the in-service EFL teachers with some programmes or training workshops geared towards the alleviation of students’ FLSA. Without due awareness of students’ FLSA, teachers often tend to attribute students’ reluctance to participate in speaking activities to factors like lack of motivation, while the real reason behind their reluctance, the FLSA, is usually ignored. Previous research has found that students tend to experience high level of anxiety when learning a FL as a result of the discrepancy between their cognitive ability and their linguistic skills (Krashen 1985; MacIntyre and Gardner 1989). Moreover, anxious students’ task-irrelevant thoughts compete with task-relevant ones for limited cognitive resources since anxiety can influence each of the encoding, storage, and retrieval activities of language learning process by distracting attention from these students (MacIntyre 1995; MacIntyre and Gardner 1989). Consequently, these students may perform poorly in oral tasks because of their speaking anxiety in FL, which will in turn make them more unwilling to engage in oral tasks – and so the cycle continues.

The findings of this study are likely to provide insightful implications for China’s tertiary English education. The different views about the reasons of FLSA between students and teachers call for mutual understanding and communication so that they can be better informed of each other’s viewpoints. As put by Beishuizen et al. (2001), misunderstandings about mutual views of teachers and students may harm the efficiency of teaching and learning. For example, if students and teachers hold different views about “lack of vocabulary” as an anxiety-provoking factor and its potential negative effects on students’ oral English performance, misunderstandings may occur, which may further inhibit their cooperation in teaching and learning process. As a result, development and adoption of appropriate anxiety coping strategies may become impossible. It is thus recommended that teachers pay special attention to the reasons which students considered most significant so as to better help them cope with FLSA.

The exploratory nature of the study requires the results and findings to be generalised with great caution. As we might expect, exploration of the reasons will provide an empirical basis for seeking for effective strategies to deal with FLSA in China’s universities. A further probe into the coping strategies of FLSA is a mission impossible due to the limited space of a research paper. In this regard, it will be meaningful for future research to make attempts to identify and verify effective coping strategies of FLSA in the context of China’s universities.

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### Notes on contributor

Deyuan He has recently obtained his PhD degree from City University of Hong Kong. He was once a university lecturer teaching EFL in China. His research interests include second language acquisition, World Englishes, and college English teaching. He has published his works in journals like *TESOL Quarterly* and *World Englishes*.

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