

# Research on the Phenomenon of “Foreign Language Anxiety” Based on Individual Differences of Learners

Jiazhi Pan\*, Lingling Lou

School of English Language, Zhejiang Yuexiu University, Shaoxing, China

Email: \*2768022944@qq.com

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## Abstract

Nowadays, the emotional factor of foreign language anxiety plays a crucial role in second language acquisition, which has attracted the attention of many researchers. Given this, based on the theory of foreign language anxiety and individual differences in second language acquisition, this paper uses the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, self-made foreign language anxiety questionnaire and interview tools to explore the phenomenon of foreign language anxiety among Chinese college students and the individual differences affecting foreign language anxiety by conducting a questionnaire survey of some students of Zhejiang Yuexiu University as research subjects. The study results mainly manifest in two aspects: the existence of foreign language anxiety and the impact of individual differences in second language acquisition on foreign language anxiety. At the end of the article, the author puts forward targeted suggestions to alleviate foreign language learning anxiety based on the survey results.

## Keywords

Foreign Language Anxiety, Second Language Acquisition, Individual Differences, Teaching Strategies

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Content

This study focuses on the influence of individual differences of learners on the emotional factor of “foreign language anxiety”. It presents students of Zhejiang Yuexiu University in an all-round and empirical manner. This article consists of seven parts. The first chapter introduces the research content and significance of this paper. The second chapter provides an overview of “Foreign language an-

xiety” and individual differences in second language acquisition. The third chapter describes the foreign language learning anxiety scale. The fourth part analyzes the research tools and research process. Chapters five and six are the main parts of the paper. Chapter five explains the questionnaire results, provides some questionnaire data, and analyzes the overall situation of foreign language anxiety and the impact of different factors on “foreign language anxiety” according to the research results. Chapter six concludes this paper from three different perspectives: teachers, students and schools, and proposes methods that are conducive to alleviating anxiety about foreign language learning. Chapter seven is the conclusion of the thesis.

## **1.2. Research Significance**

### **1.2.1. Foreign Language Anxiety**

Since the 70s of the 20th century, anxiety research has become one of the hot spots in second language acquisition and language teaching at home and abroad. Anxiety can be one of the biggest emotional barriers in language learning in the process of learning a foreign language, a foreign language Learning has an impact that cannot be ignored. Most research on anxiety has shown that anxiety plays an important role in second language acquisition either directly or indirectly. High levels of foreign language anxiety can inhibit learning. In other words, high degree of anxiety may lead to poor linguistic performance while the learners’ awareness of their poor language competence may bring about certain degree of anxiety which further impedes their language cognition.

With the development of humanistic psychology, emotional factors in education have received more and more attention, especially in foreign language learning. The intervention and adjustment of emotional factors are critical. Emotions affect students’ learning and performance in the field of educational psychology. Language learning has always emphasized that learning emotions are important factors affecting the quality and outcome of education. Due to the test pressure and study burden caused by the exam-oriented education system, learners’ anxiety has become increasingly severe, and foreign languages (especially English) have become the most anxious subjects among many subjects. Reducing the anxiety of foreign language learning and cultivating positive emotions in language learning is a topic worth studying. The core part of this paper is to conduct an in-depth analysis and investigation based on questionnaires, aiming to study the relationship between individual differences in second language acquisition and foreign language anxiety, alleviate students’ foreign language anxiety, and propose corresponding mitigation measures from the three dimensions of students, teachers and schools so that students can master the second language more solidly and confidently.

### **1.2.2. Individual Differences**

There are many factors affecting foreign language learning anxiety, among which individual differences play a key role. More and more studies have shown that the study of individual differences of learners plays a vital role in the process

of second language acquisition. It is an integral part of research and model building, and individual difference research. This paper mainly conducts research from four aspects: learning motivation, personality, language ability tendency and emotional factors, and draws out the influence of individual differences on foreign language anxiety.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Related Studies Abroad

As a hot topic in second language acquisition, foreign language anxiety has been valued by many researchers. Foreign research started earlier in the 70s of the 20th century from many foreign studies. [Arnold & Brown \(1999\)](#) innovatively proposed the relationship between emotional factors and second language learning, pointing out that Foreign Language Anxiety is one of the essential emotional factors affecting learners. [Horwitz et al. \(1986\)](#) pioneered the concept of foreign language anxiety, defining it as “a psychological complex of self-perception, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors that arise from a unique foreign language learning process. They are closely related to foreign language learning in the classroom.” The causes of anxiety about foreign language learning are complex and consist of various factors. According to [Oxford \(1999\)](#), the factors that cause anxiety may be caused by individual learner factors or by the way school learning activities are organized and the teacher’s teaching methods. [Subatira et al. \(2020\)](#) used the Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to study the correlation between foreign language anxiety and grades, and the results showed a significant negative correlation between the two.

### 2.2. Related Studies at Home

Nevertheless, domestic linguists studied relatively late, and it was not taken seriously until the beginning of the 21st century. The paper published by [Weng Deshou \(1988\)](#) marked the beginning of the study of foreign language anxiety in China. Chinese scholars [Wang Chunjuan and Zhang Rui \(2008\)](#) believed that there are two main reasons for students’ anxiety. First, because of the face problem, they are afraid that others will not affirm them, they will be ridiculed, they are afraid that their self-esteem will be hit, and their self-confidence will be frustrated. Second, because their goals are too high, they cannot meet the requirements, and students will have anxiety. [Feng Wenjing \(2015\)](#) pointed out that the causes of anxiety include cultural factors, individual learner factors, peer factors, and teacher factors. [Li Jiongying and Li Qing \(2016\)](#) reckoned that learners’ motivation, learning ability, language level, teacher characteristics, and classroom environment all affect the occurrence of anxiety. [Dong Lianqi \(2021\)](#) conducted a study of 276 college students and found that most students were in a moderate state of anxiety, with communication anxiety being the most severe.

With the deepening of research, people gradually pay attention to the overall distribution of foreign language anxiety and begin to attach great importance to

the classification of foreign language anxiety. This shows that foreign language anxiety research content is constantly enriched, and the perspective is constantly innovative. Early foreign language anxiety research focused on the nature and ontology of anxiety and the relationship between anxiety and other factors. After that, with the continuous updating of research perspectives, the research content and scope of anxiety research continued to expand, and the results were fruitful. China's socio-economic culture has undergone tremendous changes with the continuous advancement of reform and opening up. The language learning environment of contemporary college students is also different from the past. There are few studies on foreign language anxiety based on individual differences from the perspective of second language acquisition, so this article will discuss foreign language anxiety based on individual differences in second language acquisition and propose corresponding measures.

### **3. Foreign Language Learning Anxiety Scale**

With continuous in-depth research in foreign language anxiety, researchers have invented many test forms related to foreign language anxiety. In order to develop a reliable and effective measurement method for foreign language learning, Horwitz et al. (1986) designed the "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale" (FLCAS). It is aimed at measuring foreign language classroom anxiety. The table consists of 33 questions, including three aspects of foreign language classroom learning anxiety, namely, communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, evaluation, in which 29 questions (87%) dealt with typical difficulties related to listening, speaking, reading, writing, verbal memory, and speed of language processing. After conducting many experiments with this table, Horwitz et al. (1986) concluded that the vague concept of foreign language anxiety can be effectively and reliably measured and that this table also plays a role in foreign language learning. It has played an important role and has gradually become a highly reliable foreign language anxiety scale. It was the most widely used and had the highest acceptance. As the understanding of anxiety continues to deepen, scales for measuring anxiety in various foreign language skills have also emerged, specifically the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale, the Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale, the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale, and the Foreign Language Writing Anxiety Scale. It is beneficial to better help us understand the current anxiety distribution of students.

## **4. Research Design**

### **4.1. Research Questions**

Through this study, the following three questions are mainly solved:

- 1) Whether students in school have anxiety in the process of foreign language learning? If so, how anxious is it?
- 2) How are different kinds of anxiety distributed among students? Which situation has the highest level of anxiety?

3) How about the relationship between students foreign language anxiety and individual differences?

## 4.2. Research Objects

This study takes the students of Zhejiang Yuexiu University as the research object. It is a comprehensive university that focuses on foreign language learning. The school offers a number of foreign language subjects, Most of the students in this university major in foreign languages, including English, Japanese, French, Italian, and Russian. They all take English as a compulsory subject in their courses. They will face a certain degree of anxiety about second language acquisition, and there is little difference in English proficiency (except for students in the English Faculty). In this study, students from the first to the third year were randomly distributed online questionnaires through questionnaire stars, and the questionnaire results were collected. Therefore, the survey results of such students are representative. Through the comparison of the individual differences of such students, the impact of individual differences on foreign language anxiety can be found.

## 4.3. Research Tools

In this study, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Form compiled by Horwitz and a self-made questionnaire were used as research tools. The FLCAS table includes a total of 33 questions, using the form of a Richter five-level scale, each question from “very disagreed” (1 point) to “very agreed” (5 points) five options, self-made questionnaire mainly involves foreign language anxiety level, foreign language anxiety distribution and individual differences three parts a total of 10 options, in order to maintain the reliability of the paper, the author conducted two days of question distribution, and finally screened out 100 questionnaires.

## 4.4. Research Methods

### 4.4.1. Questionnaire Survey

This study mainly adopted an online questionnaire survey. In order to maintain the reliability of the paper, the author distributed the questionnaires for three days and finally screened out 100 questionnaire data, collected questionnaire data and processed the data. Obtained the impact of individual differences on foreign language anxiety through comparative analysis and provided more information the author needs to compose this paper.

### 4.4.2. Comparative Analysis

The survey materials are mainly designed employing comparative analysis to explore the impact of individual differences from multiple perspectives. At the same time, when processing the questionnaire data, the authors also used a comparative analysis method to analyze the relationship between foreign language anxiety and individual differences by comparing which type of foreign language anxiety is higher.

## 5. Research Results and Discussion

This chapter mainly analyzes the distribution of anxiety in foreign language schools and the influence of individual differences in second language acquisition on “Foreign Language Anxiety” through questionnaire survey results and data. The results of the survey will be presented in tabular and pie chart format.

### 5.1. Results of Questionnaire Survey

Before the study, the author sent a questionnaire about foreign language anxiety to all students at Zhejiang Yuexiu University. A total of 100 questionnaires were received, and the number of questionnaires reached the requirements of the study. This part will first analyze the overall situation of foreign language anxiety of college students and different classifications of foreign language anxiety, and then analyze the relationship between individual differences in second language acquisition and foreign language anxiety from the four aspects of learners’ learning motivation, personality, language ability tendency and emotion.

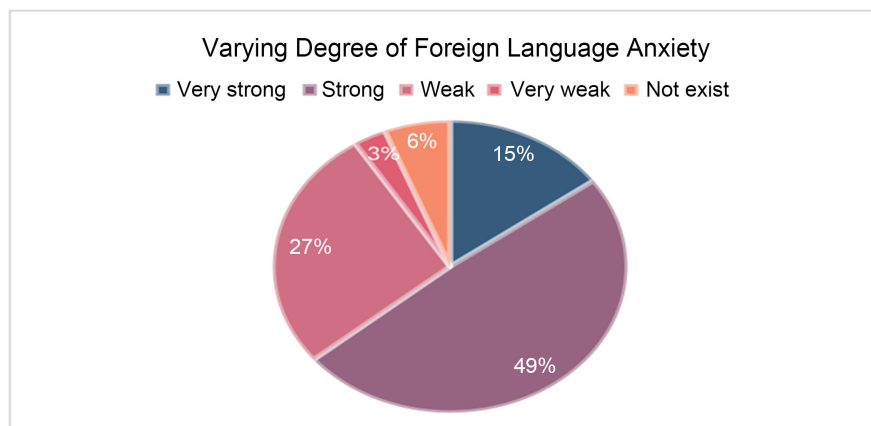
#### 5.1.1. General Picture of Anxiety about Foreign Language Learning

According to the data and analysis of the questionnaire, most of the students in our school have foreign language anxiety, and the foreign language anxiety index is strong, especially for our English majors. Very few students do not have foreign language anxiety (Table 1 & Figure 1).

With the rapid development of globalization, English has gradually become a vital tool course, and the curriculum in universities has paid more and more attention to the education and cultivation of English ability. For this reason, foreign language anxiety is becoming increasingly common, and both students and teachers should pay attention to the negative effects of foreign language anxiety.

**Table 1.** Results of questionnaire on foreign language anxiety.

Question	Answer	
Do you have foreign language anxiety?	Exist 80.2%	Does not exist 18.8%

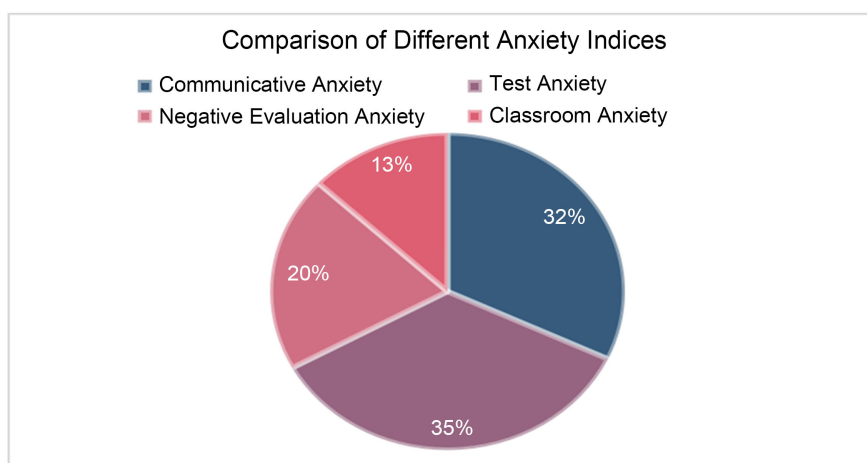


**Figure 1.** Varying degrees of foreign language anxiety.

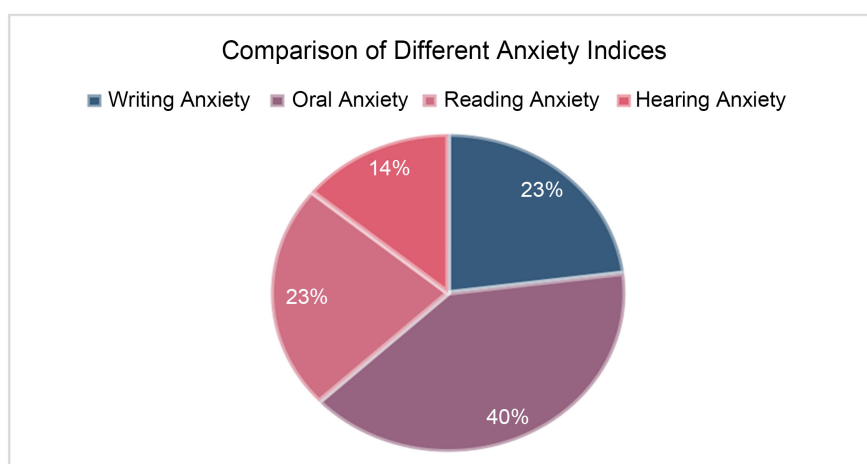
### 5.1.2. Comparison of Different Types of Anxiety Indexes

According to **Figure 2** and **Figure 3**, college students have a relatively high proportion of test anxiety and communication anxiety, and students are more likely to have anxiety in exams and communicating with others. The proportion of negative evaluation anxiety and classroom anxiety was lower. At the same time, in learning different modules, oral anxiety accounted for the highest proportion, followed by writing anxiety and listening anxiety, and reading anxiety was relatively low.

From the above two figures, it can be seen that the most anxious fields are communication anxiety and test anxiety. This is because China's current way of testing English proficiency is still biased towards test-oriented education, mainly written examinations, and examinations are the only way to test students' achievements, so in the face of various language skills tests, students face various tremendous pressures. For English students, language tests are also necessary for them to make a living, which also increases their anxiety. In terms of spoken English, due to the lack of a language environment, most students rarely use



**Figure 2.** Comparison of different anxiety indices.



**Figure 3.** Comparison of different anxiety indices.

English in their lives, which makes them feel more anxious about using English to talk to others and accept feedback and evaluation of their English ability. At present, the English level of Chinese students varies greatly, even university English majors, their English level is uneven, let alone non-English majors. Most students have relatively weak basic language skills, and their limited vocabulary and knowledge reserve make it challenging to improve the output skill of sputtering due to anxiety. In addition, most students' English learning is mainly based on skills training such as listening, reading, grammar, and writing, and teachers neglect to cultivate students' oral communication skills, resulting in "dumb English" in a particular range and a specific school section.

### 5.1.3. Effect of Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition on "Foreign Language Anxiety"

This **Table 2** shows the influence of individual differences in four different dimensions: motivation, personality, language ability tendencies, and emotions. Firstly, from the motivation perspective, instrumental motivators have higher foreign language anxiety than fusion motivators. Secondly, in terms of personality, the outgoing and cautious personality has a higher degree of foreign language anxiety. At the same time, the field-dependent type has a higher anxiety index than the field-independent type. From the perspective of language ability tendency, the anxiety index with lower language ability tendency was higher. From the perspective of emotional factors, positive emotional factors are conducive to alleviating foreign language anxiety, while negative emotional attitudes will deepen foreign language anxiety.

**Table 2.** The relationship between individual differences and foreign language anxiety.

Factors	Foreign Language Anxiety Index	
Motivation	fusion motivation	30%
	instrumental motivation	70%
Personality	introversion	67%
	extroversion	33%
	prudence	56%
	impulsivity	44%
	field independence	63%
Language proficiency tendencies	field dependence	37%
	Higher level	35%
Emotional	Lower level	65%
	Positive emotion	20%
	Negative emotion	80%



## 5.2. Analysis of Research Results

### 5.2.1. Effects of Learning Motivation

This study mainly analyzes the motivation of “fusion motivation” and “instrumental motivation”. Motivation is an oft-mentioned term, like a ship’s sails, which determines the direction of learning. Studies have shown that most students learn English out of instrumental motivation, learning English to obtain financial benefits or other benefits. This type of student has a high foreign language anxiety index. This anxiety is inhibitory mainly anxiety, hindering them from learning foreign languages better. They are more likely to earn a living by learning foreign languages and are more purposeful, resulting in anxiety. Most students with integrated motivation are genuinely interested in the language, and although most students also have corresponding foreign language anxiety, the degree of anxiety is low. Through interviews, we learned that such students want to master the language of foreign languages better and have a solid motivation to learn, so a particular phenomenon of promoting anxiety and anxiety makes them better learn to master this foreign language. Their love of language allows them to turn anxiety into motivation. Learners need to combine integrative and instrumental motivation so that second language learning will be more successful with half the effort. Motivation can affect the speed and efficiency of language learning. Positive motivation effectively explores potential and facilitates the choice of learning strategies.

### 5.2.2. Effects of Different Personalities

This study analyzes three aspects of personality, introversion and extroversion, prudence and impulsivity, and field independence and field dependence. Studies have shown that introverted and cautious students are more likely to have higher levels of foreign language anxiety. In contrast, extroverted and impulsive students have relatively low levels of foreign language anxiety. Introverted students are more delicate, self-aware, and have self-esteem. They are more concerned about test results and the evaluation of others, more worried and fearful about test assessments and negative evaluations. They have relatively high levels of classroom anxiety and oral anxiety. Introverted learners are often in a passive state in the process of foreign language communication; they lack communication skills because introverted learners can be keenly aware of the interference of anxiety, they often try to overcome emotional interference by strengthening efforts, but they are more unable to focus on the learning task itself, falling into a vicious circle. They are more likely to worry about the mistakes they make in foreign language classes and the evaluations they give others, which leads to more anxiety and worry. Extroverted students are more lively and cheerful and more willing to communicate in the process of language learning. They like to express themselves in foreign language classes, and the corresponding oral communication anxiety is relatively low. They tend to pay less attention to detail and are more receptive to the evaluation of others, so they have a lower degree of negative evaluation anxiety and classroom anxiety. Field-independent

students had lower levels of foreign language anxiety than field dependence. Field-independent students tend to study and analyze independently, have a relatively high level of foreign language, and the corresponding anxiety level is relatively low. Field-dependent students like cooperative learning and are more susceptible to others, so the corresponding anxiety level is relatively high. Nevertheless, in either personality, there are pros and cons.

### **5.2.3. Effects of Language Proficiency Tendencies**

Language aptitude refers to foreign language proficiency. Language ability tends to mainly include distinguishing and remembering, that is, distinguishing words, syntax, language form and meaning, and simply memorising words and grammar functions. Language aptitude is one test that measures whether language acquirers have successfully acquired a second language. Learners more inclined to language proficiency tend to learn languages faster and better. In second language learning, if the learner's linguistic ability is high, the learner can easily and quickly absorb the input and smoothly transform it into a more successful language output.

Conversely, if the learner's linguistics is low, acquiring the target language may be indefinitely prolonged. Therefore, as a comprehensive ability, linguistics can enable some foreign language learners to learn foreign languages faster than others in learning foreign languages, so that the process and effect of second language acquisition are more successful. According to the research results of many years at home and abroad, language ability tendency plays an important role in second language acquisition, which can effectively measure the success of second language learners. All else being equal, people with a higher inclination to language proficiency learn faster, easier, and with less effort.

Studies have shown that language ability tendency and foreign language anxiety level are positively correlated; foreign language anxiety will move with the change in language learner's ability level; for students with higher language ability tendency, foreign language mastery is better, learning this foreign language will be more confident, so the foreign language anxiety level is relatively low. Furthermore, learners with relatively weak foreign language ability are more likely to make mistakes, thus falling into negative learning, and their foreign language anxiety is relatively high. Therefore, improving the comprehensive learning ability of foreign languages is the fundamental way to overcome foreign language learning anxiety.

### **5.2.4. Influence of Emotional Factors**

Emotions are part of the overall attitude and are consistent with the feelings and intentions of the introverted attitude. It is a physiologically complex, stable physiological evaluation and attitude experience, and it is also people's attitude experience of whether objective things meet their needs. Emotions come in many forms, with their core context and self-confidence closely related to learning. Emotion is a relatively stable, persistent, diffuse emotional state. The affective filter hypothesis was proposed by Krashen (1985), a famous contemporary

American applied linguist, he thinks that the emotional barrier prevents language learners from fully obtaining understandable input. When the emotional barrier is strong, like a wall, the language learner may be able to understand the language input, but there will be a screening of the language material, and it is impossible to internalize all the material smoothly to the language acquisition device, in which case the language learner's ability will decline. If the emotional factor hinders less, the language input will go more smoothly, the better the learning effect of the foreign language, and the better the foreign language learning will be promoted. In this study, students who liked language had a lower level of anxiety, while those who were not interested in language had a higher level of anxiety. Because a good mood can alleviate language learning anxiety and better promote language learning, they can invest more time in learning this language, and their learning results will be better, to be more confident, promote the learning of this language, and vice versa. Emotions take many forms, and their central context and self-confidence are most closely related to learning. The mood is a relatively stable and lasting emotional state with diffusion. Experiments have shown that a good mood can enhance people's ability to withstand stress and make them calm and uplifted. Maintain a relaxed and pleasant state of mind learning, and the effect of language learning will be significantly enhanced; On the contrary, a negative and foul mood is easy to make learners feel anxious and listless, and the effect of language learning is low. At the same time, emotional factors also affect students' self-confidence; students with solid self-confidence are more likely to face difficulties in learning and have the courage to actively solve them, while students with weak self-confidence usually have a certain sense of inferiority and often adopt a negative attitude when encountering problems. Students with higher self-confidence are more willing to express themselves and communicate better in their second language, so they also perform better in their second language. Learners with weak self-confidence will lose many opportunities to use the target language to communicate with others, reinforcing learners' "anxiety" emotions.

## **6. Ways to Relieve Foreign Language Learning**

This study plays an important guiding role and reference significance in the process of foreign language learning and teachers' foreign language teaching. In order to better promote foreign language learning, the author proposes the following measures to overcome anxiety in foreign language teaching.

### **6.1. Approaches to Reducing Students' Foreign Language Learning—For College Teachers**

Teachers play an essential role in helping students overcome foreign language anxiety. First of all, the teaching of college English teachers is supposed to fully consider the individual differences of students, students' receptivity and cognitive level, formulate practical teaching goals and tasks that meet the characteris-

tics of students, and cultivate students' interest and self-confidence. Secondly, teachers are expected to correct their professional attitude, improve their quality, and create a relaxed and pleasant classroom environment for students. Besides, teachers ought to create a cooperative learning classroom teaching model conducive to reducing learners' anxiety. Moreover, teachers are expected to adopt flexible teaching strategies and flexibly arrange teaching strategies for different listening, speaking, reading and writing courses. Given the anxiety of different courses, different teaching strategies are adopted to help students alleviate foreign language anxiety. Finally, a harmonious classroom atmosphere is also crucial. It is beneficial for teachers to create a good and harmonious teaching environment for students. A harmonious teaching environment is a prerequisite for carrying out suitable teaching activities, and a harmonious classroom atmosphere helps to eliminate students' fear and anxiety caused by communication barriers so that students can face foreign language learning tasks with a correct and positive attitude, participate in classroom activities, and practice language in a relaxed and pleasant environment. Reduce anxiety and develop an interest in learning. It is conducive to improving the ability of independent learning and also benefits students to overcome the fear and frustration caused by language errors.

### **6.2. Approaches to Reducing Students' Foreign Language Learning—For College Learners**

At the same time, learners need to take corresponding measures to alleviate their learning anxiety. First, learners can understand the current situation of foreign language anxiety by understanding foreign language anxiety-related theories and changing the wrong learning methods and habits in the past through efforts to establish achievable foreign language learning goals, which is an effective way to alleviate foreign language anxiety. Secondly, learners are supposed to cultivate a sense of self-directed learning. In foreign language learning, independent learning strategies can better cope with the fear of unknown situations; through independent learning, students can comprehensively diagnose their learning ability, clarify English learning goals, plan learning progress, and actively monitor the learning process. Pay attention to self-evaluation and self-reflection in English learning. Learners have a more comprehensive understanding of their learning goals and better control the initiative of foreign language learning in their own hands, which is conducive to alleviating foreign language anxiety. Finally, learners need to learn to regulate emotions; regulating emotions is an essential lesson in life; in the face of the vast anxiety brought by academics, learners should learn to control and regulate their emotions and relieve anxiety by doing more favourite things and diverting attention.

### **6.3. Approaches to Reducing Students' Foreign Language Learning—For College**

Colleges and universities must set up English courses reasonably and reform the

foreign language curriculum system. In addition to considering universal and regular factors, they also need to set up a curriculum system suitable for different learners according to their individual differences and characteristics and teach according to aptitude. Course facilities could reflect flexibility, autonomy and practicality. The curriculum system is expected to have a solid theoretical foundation and practical application and reflect the direction of employment, giving students a greater right to elect courses. Cultivate students' cross-cultural awareness and cultural identity, reduce foreign language anxiety to a certain extent, promote second language acquisition, better stimulate college students' enthusiasm to learn foreign languages, enhance their ability to learn foreign languages, and promote the all-round development of people. At the same time, reform the evaluation system of foreign language teaching. In the teaching evaluation of students, a "teaching evaluation system based on individual differences of students" should be established, and diversified evaluation methods and evaluation subjects should be constructed. Understand students' understanding of what they have learned and their emotional attitudes from different levels. Educate and assess students in a variety of ways.

## 7. Conclusion

When students of Zhejiang Yuexiu University were empirically studied, the author successfully combined her own English learning experience to study foreign language anxiety based on individual differences of learners. Different individual differences also have different effects on the level of foreign language anxiety. Finally, the author also proposes ways to alleviate foreign language anxiety, which is conducive to better-promoting students' learning from many aspects.

Admittedly, there are some shortcomings in this study, the research subjects are mainly foreign language majors, lack of observation of larger sample size, and the research dimension can be more extensive and accurate, and it is still worth considering it from other perspectives. In the future, regarding the impact of individual differences on foreign language anxiety, it is necessary to try various research methods to quantify qualitatively, develop credible and practical research tools, and collect various data and cross-map evidence to draw comprehensive and in-depth findings and conclusions. In view of this, in language research, the author will keep the original intention and insist on making better research.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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