

# English Learning Anxiety and Motivation in an Online Learning Environment among Chinese Higher Vocational Students

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## Abstract

**Amidst the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic, self-distancing measures have proven effective in reducing infection rates. However, the need for uninterrupted learning has necessitated the utilization of technology. Educators and students have successfully adapted to this unprecedented situation, overcoming numerous obstacles to ensure the continuation of classes. This research seeks to investigate the occurrence of anxiety in online English learning and the level of motivation for learning English in online settings among higher vocational students in the northeastern region of China. The research involved 356 participants who were enrolled in a virtual English course amidst the global pandemic and actively engaged in a comprehensive questionnaire assessment serving as the primary research instrument. The findings revealed that (1) the respondents generally experienced anxiety in online English learning while displaying moderate motivation in acquiring English in an online environment, and (2) an evident and noteworthy positive correlation emerged between anxiety in online English learning as well as the level of motivation for English learning in virtual settings. These results are anticipated to lay a solid groundwork for subsequent investigations in the realm of learning online.**

## Keywords

**English Learning Anxiety; English Learning Motivation; Higher Vocational Students; Online Learning Environment.**

## 1. Introduction

In recent times, there has been a significant upsurge in the enrollment of learners at the tertiary level who are studying English as a foreign language (EFL), particularly among Chinese university learners. This trend is accompanied by the growing popularity of online English courses. As education continues to be influenced by advancements in technology, learners are becoming more accustomed to learning environments supported by new technologies. Online learning environments, viewed as alternatives to traditional classrooms, represent one such reflection of these technological advancements in education. The integration of technology-infused learning experiences in foreign language courses represents an emerging paradigm shift.

Numerous previous studies have explored the linguistic acquisition factors that possibly impact student performance in conventional classroom environments. Motivation and anxiety, for instance, have been identified as significant factors affecting the results of language acquisition (Keskin and Yurdugul, 2019; Desta, 2019). Wang and Zhan (2020) further emphasized the influential role of these variables on students' performance in language learning. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of research on online learning, particularly within the Chinese higher

vocational college context. It is crucial to understand the levels of motivation and anxiety among students and examine the relationship between these variables in the realm of virtual learning. Therefore, this study aims to investigate English language inquietude and learning drive among Chinese higher vocational students in an online learning environment. The findings will not only contribute to enhancing students' English performance and their interest in online English learning but also hold practical and theoretical significance for the realm of online English instruction and acquisition.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Online Learning Environment

Online learning encompasses the process of acquiring knowledge through the internet, leveraging technological advancements. Bates (2016) defines it as any form of internet-based learning, while Moubayed et al. (2020) describe it as learning that occurs via the Internet, promoting interaction among teachers, students, and peers. The Internet facilitates the exchange of ideas and engagement with teachers and peers, thereby enhancing students' learning experiences.

Online education offers several advantages. Firstly, it provides accessibility to students anytime and anywhere. Secondly, it supports learner-centeredness, allowing teachers to assume a facilitator role. Thirdly, online learning stimulates students' perception and engagement. Fourthly, it encourages interaction and cooperative learning. Fifthly, the online learning environment serves as a potent platform for self-regulation, exploration of various topics, and meaningful learning. Finally, online learning promotes independent study.

Despite its benefits, there are also disadvantages associated with online learning. Firstly, it can weaken social connections among friends due to the lack of physical interaction. Secondly, some students struggle to maintain focus and may become fatigued and disinterested in this mode of study. Moreover, students and teachers who are unfamiliar with technological tools may face challenges that hinder the teaching and learning process. Additionally, the costs of internet access, technological devices, computers, and laptops can pose financial burdens during the educational process of instruction and acquisition. (Mohammadi et al., 2011).

In conclusion, online learning offers significant advantages such as accessibility, learner-centeredness, enhanced perception, interaction, and independent study. However, it also presents challenges related to social connections, concentration, technological proficiency, and financial costs. Understanding these advantages and disadvantages is crucial for designing effective online learning environments and addressing potential obstacles in the educational process of instruction and acquisition of the language.

### 2.2. Online English Learning Anxiety

Anxiety within the foreign language instructional environment can arise from the dynamic between educators and students or from students' concerns about their educational success or failure. Horwitz (1986) conducted research on Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), which encompasses a range of intricate emotions associated with self-perception, personal beliefs, and performance in acquiring a second language. Anxiety can be elicited by the dread of negative evaluation, apprehension in communication, and test-related concerns, particularly during language learning evaluations. Thus, FLA refers to an unwanted emotional response characterized by stress during the foreign language learning experience. Hence, anxiety plays a critical role throughout the entire language acquisition process.

From personal experience, FLA can impact students both positively and negatively. Shahi (2016) found that an online learning environment can reduce FLA and create a less stressful atmosphere for learning. Similarly, Huang and Hwang (2013) revealed that online learning

environments can decrease FLA and foster a less anxiety-provoking classroom setting. Additionally, Cakir and Solak (2014) demonstrated that online-based learning can effectively reduce FLA and increase students' willingness to learn a foreign language. However, if students experience anxiety, they may encounter difficulties in the online learning environment. The more challenging their learning experience, especially in studying a language online, the greater their anxiety. Russell (2020) supported this notion, noting that most students experience a considerable degree of FLA in e-learning classes, with some even experiencing debilitating levels of anxiety. Cakir and Solak (2014) further suggested a negative association between FLA and academic performance, highlighting the need for teachers to design lessons that reduce FLA among online English language learners. In other words, language instructors must be cognizant of FLA and acknowledge that language classes can pose challenges for some students. As previously mentioned, there exists a correlation between second language apprehension and online acquisition, both positively and negatively. Therefore, language teachers should find ways to facilitate student engagement while keeping FLA at an appropriate level. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) offers a straightforward approach for assessing FLA within the realm of online foreign language learning.

### **2.3. Online English Learning Motivation**

Motivation, which can be broadly defined as the psychological impetus that drives action (Barak et al., 2016), plays a fundamental part in the language learning process. Specifically, within the realm of language acquisition, motivation refers to learners' inclination toward the objective of acquiring a target foreign language. As articulated by Ellis (2008), motivation represents learners' endeavors, fueled by their aspirations or necessities, to engage in foreign language learning. It encompasses various facets, including cognition, emotions, feelings, and external factors. In the study conducted by Lightbrown and Spada (1993), foreign language learning motivation is described as a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by two primary factors: learners' communicative needs and their attitudes towards the foreign language learning community. This notion aligns with the concepts of integrative motivation and instrumental motivation introduced by Gardner and Lambert (1978). Integrative motivation pertains to the willingness to partake in activities within the target foreign language community and develop language proficiency (Gardner, 2001). Conversely, instrumental motivation involves the aspiration to master a foreign language for purposes such as employment, self-improvement, or social advancement (Lamb, 2017). Additionally, Deci and Ryan (1989) introduced two supplementary types of motivation: intrinsic motivation, characterized by personal enthusiasm and enjoyment in acquiring a foreign language for its intrinsic value, and extrinsic motivation, originating from the pursuit of specific learning objectives, such as fulfilling language prerequisites, earning a degree or certification, or improving professional proficiency.

Moreover, the substantial acknowledgment of the influential role of motivating factors in online learning environments has emerged in recent years. While these studies do not specifically concentrate on second language (L2) courses, their outcomes remain relevant to individuals learning foreign languages within a virtual classroom milieu. Besides, the study by Hartnett et al. (2011) characterizes online learning motivation as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, influenced by individual traits and specific contextual elements. Investigating motivation in online courses is essential due to the observed decline in student engagement and the elevated rates of attrition that raise significant motivational considerations in distance education and instructional design.

Despite the crucial roles of anxiety and motivation in determining language learning outcomes and their interconnected nature, there exists a relative scarcity of studies that concurrently explore both language anxiety and motivation within the language learning domain.

Consequently, further investigation is necessary in gaining a comprehensive understanding of the interaction between online English anxiety and motivation, as well as their combined influence on language learning outcomes. In line with this objective, the current study is situated in the realm of Chinese higher vocational English as a Foreign Language (EFL), aiming to investigate the correlation between online English anxiety and motivation and explore their mutual impact on English performance.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Participants

The research encompassed a cohort of 356 individuals, comprising 201 males and 155 females. These participants were students in their first and second years, pursuing majors in disciplines other than English, specifically in liberal arts and science, at a higher vocational college situated in the northeastern region of China. It is crucial to emphasize that all the participants were enrolled in mandatory English courses offered by their college, which carried academic credit.

**Table 1.** Percentage Distribution of the Respondents' Profile

Sex	Frequency	Percentage %
Male	201	56.5
Female	155	43.5
<b>Grade</b>		
Freshman	220	61.8
Sophomore	136	38.2
<b>Major</b>		
Liberal arts	162	45.5
Science	194	54.5

#### 3.2. Instrument

In this investigation, the participants were requested to complete two distinct questionnaires: the Online English Learning Anxiety Questionnaire (OELAQ) and the Online English Learning Motivation Questionnaire (OELMQ). The OELAQ encompassed 33 items and was developed based on the theoretical framework of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA). On the other hand, the OELMQ comprised 25 items and drew inspiration from the Chinese EFL Learners' Motivational Self-System Questionnaire (CELMSQ).

Both questionnaires utilized a 4-point Likert scale which ranges from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," for all statements except the background questionnaire items. This scale provided participants with the opportunity to present their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement related to online English learning anxiety and motivation. By using these questionnaires, the study aimed to gather valuable data on the participants' perceptions and experiences in relation to online English learning anxiety and motivation.

#### 3.3. Procedure

After the completion of the questionnaire design, a preliminary study was performed to assess the accuracy and validity of the questionnaires. Subsequently, the survey was administered to a subset of first- and second-year non-English major students enrolled in higher vocational education. The survey was distributed to 9 intact classes, and the participants were asked to complete it within approximately 20 minutes. Out of the 372 questionnaires collected, a total of 356 questionnaires were considered complete and suitable for further statistical analyses. These complete questionnaires were selected for data analysis and interpretation in order to draw meaningful conclusions from the study.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

For each measure, descriptive statistics were evaluated to gauge the extent of anxiety and motivation among students in online English language classrooms. This analysis provided valuable insights into the student's overall experience and the prevalence of motivation and anxiety within the online learning environment.

Additionally, correlational analysis was conducted to explore the correlation between online English learning anxiety and online English learning motivation. This analysis aimed to uncover the interplay and influence of these variables within the online English learning setting. By exploring the association between anxiety and motivation, valuable insights were obtained into their potential interconnections and their implications for students' learning experiences. This analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of how anxiety and motivation interact and shape students' experiences in online English learning.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Quantitative Findings

Descriptive statistics were employed to analyze and characterize the levels of anxiety and motivation among students in online English learning.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for Online English Learning Anxiety

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. Communication Apprehension	2.72	Agree	2
2. Test Anxiety	2.73	Agree	1
3. Fear of Negative Evaluation	2.56	Agree	4
4. General Anxiety	2.64	Agree	3
<b>Composite Mean</b>	<b>2.66</b>	<b>Agree</b>	

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 - 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

The findings presented in Table 2 indicate an overall assessment of anxiety related to online English studies. The cumulative Mean score of 2.66 ( $M = 2.66$ ) suggests that the survey participants generally agreed with the mentioned indicators. Among these indicators, test anxiety was in the first rank obtaining a mean score of 2.73, followed by communication apprehension garnering a mean of 2.72. General anxiety was the third highest, with a mean of 2.64, while fear of negative evaluation had the lowest mean of 2.56. When comparing these four means, it is evident that there is only a slight distinction among them. Therefore, it is clear that students experience anxiety while engaging in an online English learning environment.

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistics for Online English Learning Motivation

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. Online English Learning Experience	2.91	Agree	3
2. Cultural Interest	2.81	Agree	4
3. Integrative Motivation	2.92	Agree	2
4. Instrumental Motivation	2.93	Agree	1
5. External Expectations	2.80	Agree	5
<b>Composite Mean</b>	<b>2.87</b>	<b>Agree</b>	

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 - 1.49 = Strongly Disagree.

The results in Table 3 indicate the overall evaluation of motivation for online English learning. With a cumulative mean of 2.87 ( $M = 2.87$ ), participants in the survey expressed agreement with the mentioned indicators. Instrumental motivation ranked first and obtained a mean rating of 2.93, followed by integrative motivation garnering a mean of 2.92. The online English learning experience was ranked third with a mean of 2.91, while culture interest followed closely with a mean of 2.81. The lowest mean was observed for external expectations, of 2.80. These findings suggest that the higher vocational English learners in this study hold positive expectations and exhibit strong motivation toward language learning.

#### 4.2. Correlational Analysis

Correlational analysis was conducted to examine the correlation between online English learning anxiety and online English learning motivation. This analysis aimed to determine the extent to which these two variables were associated with each other and whether any significant correlations existed between them.

**Table 4.** Correlation Between Online English Learning Anxiety and Online English Learning Motivation

Communication Apprehension	$\chi^2_c / U$	p-value	Interpretation
Online English Learning Experience	.205**	<.001	Highly Significant
Cultural Interest	.220**	<.001	Highly Significant
Integrative Motivation	.211*	<.001	Highly Significant
Instrumental Motivation	.212**	<.001	Highly Significant
External Expectations	.258**	<.001	Highly Significant
<b>Test Anxiety</b>			
Online English Learning Experience	.303**	<.001	Highly Significant
Cultural Interest	.373**	<.001	Highly Significant
Integrative Motivation	.221**	<.001	Highly Significant
Instrumental Motivation	.257**	<.001	Highly Significant
External Expectations	.345**	<.001	Highly Significant
<b>Fear of Negative Evaluation</b>			
Online English Learning Experience	.231**	<.001	Highly Significant
Cultural Interest	.242**	<.001	Highly Significant
Integrative Motivation	.141**	0.008	Significant
Instrumental Motivation	.201**	<.001	Highly Significant
External Expectations	.323**	<.001	Highly Significant
<b>General Anxiety</b>			
Online English Learning Experience	.371**	<.001	Highly Significant
Cultural Interest	.400**	<.001	Highly Significant
Integrative Motivation	.172**	0.001	Highly Significant

Legend: Significant at p-value < 0.01.

Table 4 presents the relationship between learning anxiety and motivation in relation to online English learning. The estimated rho-values present a moderate positive association, and all of the corresponding p-values were statistically significant. These findings suggest a substantial

relationship, indicating that as higher vocational students experienced anxiety more frequently, their motivation to learn English online also increased.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The present study yields several noteworthy conclusions concerning the relationship between students' anxiety and motivation in online English learning, and their influence on English language performance.

First and foremost, the analysis unveiled that participants commonly encounter anxiety within the context of online English classes, specifically in terms of dread of negative evaluation and communication apprehension. Nonetheless, a significant portion of the respondents indicated a moderate to strong level of motivation for learning English online. They expressed a moderate to strong degree of motivation, encompassing both instrumental and integrative aspects of language learning.

Secondly, a crucial positive correlation was found between online English anxiety and online English motivation. While previous studies have commonly presented a negative association between apprehension and motivation, some researchers suggest that anxiety can serve as a source of energy that motivates students. Nevertheless, it is important to note that elevated levels of anxiety adversely affect academic performance, underscoring the necessity for teachers to attentively monitor the psychological state of students experiencing heightened anxiety.

Moreover, learners' performance in English was substantially associated with both foreign language apprehension and English learning drive. In order to improve outcomes in online English classes, it is imperative for language teachers and learners to address and mitigate elevated levels of anxiety. Implementing effective strategies such as establishing attainable goals, fostering a supportive and relaxed learning environment, encouraging the exchange of language learning experiences and emotions, providing ample opportunities for language practice, and offering regular encouragement and recognition can contribute to anxiety reduction and enhance students' overall drive in acquiring the target language.

Additionally, enhancing learners' understanding of the significance of English, cultivating their enthusiasm for the language, bolstering their self-assurance, fostering favorable attitudes towards English, offering commendation and constructive feedback, analyzing factors behind both weak and strong English performance, and promoting activities such as reading books, listening to English music, watching English movies, and engaging with international students can play a vital role in augmenting students' enthusiasm to learn English. With increased motivation, learners may become more driven and proactive in using the language, leading to reduced anxiety in learning English.

Finally, further examination of the causes of foreign language anxiety that influence student anxiety is recommended to deepen teachers' and researchers' understanding of students' mental states. Conducting interviews and observations related to foreign language anxiety can provide valuable insights for future research. Additionally, considering the study's focus on a representative higher vocational college EFL setting, the findings and implications have broader applicability to comparable EFL contexts across the country. However, further investigations in diverse settings with students from different backgrounds are needed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship.

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