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Anxiety and Affective Control among Distance Language Learners in China

and the UK

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Abstract

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been the focus of many studies into affect in classroom settings. However, the growing numbers of distance language learners worldwide in recent years calls for greater attention to be paid to this increasingly important constituency of language learners. Following on from Hurd's investigation into FLA with distance learners of French at the Open University, UK (Hurd 2007b), this article turns its attention to an eastern context, reporting on a study into affect in the distance learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in China. Both studies examined anxiety from the learner's perspective. Findings from the Chinese study showed that some anxiety-provoking factors were associated with an inability to apply even basic knowledge of grammar and acquired vocabulary to actual language use. In terms of affective control, there was little evidence in either study of the use of affective strategies considered to be conducive to reducing anxiety. It was also noted that students' anxiety-reducing measures were characterized by a preference for self-help over help-seeking strategies, although the majority considered the tutor's role to be of paramount importance. Results and pedagogical implications from the two studies are compared where applicable.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety, affect, EFL, strategies, distance language learning

Anxiety and Affective Control among Distance Language Learners in China and the UK

A number of research studies over the last three decades have demonstrated that affective variables have a profound impact on second language learning and performance (Gardner & Lambert 1972; Scovel 1978, 2001; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope 1986; Williams & Burden 1999; Ehrman, Leaver, & Oxford 2003; Dörnyei 2003; Bown 2006; Hurd 2007a, 2007b). Language learning is a discipline that is particularly vulnerable to anxiety (Arnold & Brown 1999; Horwitz 2001; Yan & Horwitz 2008), in the sense that it involves issues to do with identity and self-concept. For this reason, Oxford contends that anxiety ‘ranks high among factors influencing language learning, regardless of whether the setting is informal or formal’ (Oxford 1999: 59). Given its powerful influence on second language acquisition (SLA), efforts need to be made to address and manage anxiety, in other words, to reduce the affective filter (Krashen 1982) in order to prevent anxiety interfering with the process of language acquisition.

Foreign language anxiety is a multidimensional phenomenon (Young 1991; White 2003), described by Horwitz et al. (1986: 128) as ‘a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process’. Research in the field has covered a wide range of issues relating to classroom settings, including the interrelationship between anxiety and students’ self-efficacy (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley 1999; Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels 1994); anxiety and specific language skills (Saito, Horwitz, & Garza 1999; Gardner, Tremblay & Masgoret 1997); anxiety and

willingness to communicate (Liu & Jackson 2008; Jackson 2002); anxiety and its interaction with personal and instructional factors (Yan & Horwitz 2008); and anxiety and the teacher's role (Horwitz, et al. 1986; Aida 1994; Ewald 2007). These studies have, however, been confined to face-to-face learning settings and, as Hurd states: 'there is little that focuses on the distance language learning context' (Hurd 2007b: 244). The massive explosion in distance language learning provision (Xiao 2008) calls for more studies dedicated to affect in the distance context. The Open University, UK (OUUK), for example, has the largest number of students enrolled on language courses in the whole of the UK. In China, in addition to around 60,000 English majors, there are now close to two million students taking English courses as part of their programme of study at the Chinese Radio and Television Universities (RTVU) Network alone, China's mainstream distance education network (CCRTVUEIMC, 2008). Yan and Horwitz (2008: 175) make another important point: '... it is clear that the interactions between and among individual variables take different forms in different contextual settings'. They also call for 'future studies of language anxiety which 'direct clear attention to the personal and sociocultural factors associated with language learning' (Yan & Horwitz 2008: 178). The studies reported in this paper are, we believe, a step forward in that direction.

Given the paucity of research into the affective domain of distance language learning, a study was set up with Chinese distance learners of EFL ($n = 550$) to complement, compare and extend the findings of Hurd's (2006, 2007a, 2007b) longitudinal study of affect among distance French learners at the OUUK ($n = 500$). Both studies covered anxiety, motivation and beliefs, and produced extensive findings, too wide-ranging to include in one article. This article reports, therefore, on the foreign language anxiety strand only of the wider project into affect. The Chinese

study attempted to build on the findings on anxiety from the OUUK study (Hurd 2007b), which showed that, despite similarities shared by distance language learners and their conventional counterparts, the distance factor had a major impact on language anxiety, both facilitating and debilitating. It also sought to relate some of the issues covered in Hurd to distance EFL learning, such as anxiety-provoking aspects of the learning setting, and the measures reported by students for dealing with anxiety. It was hoped that research findings concerning a different distance language learning context would allow useful comparisons to be made, which would further our understanding of distance language learning environments in different parts of the world.

A 'Distance' Perspective on Foreign Language Anxiety

Distance education is characterized by potentially anxiety-provoking elements such as 'isolation, competing commitments, absence of the structure provided by face-to-face classes, and difficulty in adjusting to the new context' (Bown 2006: 642). Distance learners, therefore, have to take more responsibility for their own learning than conventional students. While for some students, learning at a distance can be helpful in reducing anxiety (Hurd 2007b), because of the absence of exposure to public criticism, the lack of competition and the chance to make mistakes and try things out in private, for many, separated from each other and from their teachers in space and/or time, 'the demands of self-instruction, together with the shift of control from teacher to learner can be overwhelming' (Hurd 2005: 9). Moreover, as they are adult part-time learners often with multiple commitments, such as work and families, their studies sometimes have to give way to other priorities (Xiao 2007). This in turn

may make it more difficult for them to cope with their course workload. In addition, the lack of face-to-face interaction creates an instant mismatch between the inherently social nature of language learning and the distance learning mode (Hurd 2006). Finally, distance learning may be new to many students, and give rise to fears about 'the unknown methodology and its demands' (Zembylas 2008: 79).

From the outset, distance learners need to undergo a change in thinking with regard to roles, beliefs, values, and assumptions in order to be academically successful in a distance learning environment (Knowles 1975; Holec 1981; Hurd 2006; Wenden 1988). Failure to do this is likely to adversely affect their learning. Coping with a self-regulated mode of learning imposes considerable affective demands (White 2003), which may, in turn, lead to a feeling of helplessness. Left largely to their own devices, and, in some cases, unable or unwilling to make use of the support available, some students may 'feel they cannot possibly achieve their goals, no matter what they do' (Arnold & Brown 1999: 16). These are the students we need to reach.

Learner support to alleviate FLA (Aida 1994; Horwitz 2000, 2001) should, therefore, be an underpinning feature of the course materials and an integral part of tutor feedback on assignments (Hurd 2007b) and tutorials. This is no easy task for the following reasons: (1) support integrated into course materials may not always cater for individuals' needs, as it has to be designed for a mass distance audience; (2) feedback on assignments, although a critical component of support and crucial to promoting further learning, involves a time lag, and, for some students, this may have a significant impact on anxiety levels; (3) tutorials both at the OUUK and at RTVUs are optional and are not, therefore, relevant to those students who choose not to attend them. In other words, they cannot be relied upon to reach all students.

The Study

The Chinese study was set up to examine the nature of anxiety among distance learners of EFL, and the strategies they use to control and manage their affective states. It further sought to build on the findings of the OUUK study on anxiety in distance language learning in the UK, and make comparisons where appropriate.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed:

- 1) Which aspects of distance EFL learning are associated with anxiety among Chinese distance learners?
- 2) What measures do Chinese distance learners take to deal with anxiety in learning English at a distance?
- 3) How do findings from the Chinese study compare with those of the UK study if applicable?

Methods

Background and participants

The participants were English majors at the undergraduate and junior college levels at Shantou Radio and Television University (SRTVU) in South China, a metropolitan wing of China Central Radio and Television University (CCRTVU) (See Table 1). They were all part-time learners with work commitments and/or family obligations, as were the OUUK learners who were studying French at lower-intermediate level.

< Insert Table 1 >

CCRTVU students must have completed their secondary education before registering for a junior college diploma programme, which is the prerequisite for an undergraduate programme, unless they can demonstrate equivalent proficiency by passing an entrance examination. Both undergraduate and junior college diploma programmes are three-year courses of study. At enrolment, students are given a full package of multiple media learning materials which are specially designed to function as ‘the teaching voice’, that is, take over all the functions of a teacher (Hurd 2001: 136), as the ‘tutorial in print’ (Rowntree 1990: 82). Students also have the option of face-to-face and/or online tutorials. At SRTVU they can make appointments to meet or stay in touch with their tutors for personal counselling, and like their OUUK counterparts, can contact their tutor by phone or email at designated times or post messages on a student forum. Study groups are encouraged in both countries in order to promote cooperation and mutual support. At the OUUK, by the end of 2009, all language courses will have moved to a blended tuition model, which means that the purely face-to-face option will no longer be offered.

Methodology and Instruments

Most studies into affect to date have been targeted at campus-based students in classroom settings, and the questionnaires used (for example, Gardner 1985; Horwitz et al. 1986; Mills et al. 2006; Ewald 2007; Liu & Jackson 2008) have been devised to suit classroom-based learning. Hurd’s (2007b) study with distance language learners took place over 14 months and used mixed methods and multi-elicitation instruments at four intervention points: two questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and think-aloud protocols. In contrast, the Chinese EFL study was relatively short in duration

with two intervention points, but also used both quantitative and qualitative methods. The research methodology was determined by the contextual factors of SRTVU: pre-paid envelopes were not available and past experience indicated that students would be reluctant to take part, as in the case of email correspondence, without the presence of researchers.

In order to replicate Hurd's study and make comparisons with the UK distance learning context, her two questionnaires were adopted for the Chinese study, but amalgamated to form one set of questions. Some adaptations were also made to fit the specific aspects of the distance EFL learning context in China. Writing skills, for example, which were not covered in Hurd's questionnaires, were included, because they are frequently used language skills in an EFL context. Also added to the Chinese questionnaire were potentially anxiety-provoking aspects of the distance learning process (such as course workload and materials, assignments and examination) and specific aspects of learning English (i.e. grammar and pronunciation). As in the original, the adapted questionnaire was composed of three sections: Motivation, Beliefs, and Anxiety. Both studies involved follow-up interviews to allow 'the researcher and learners to pursue topics of interest which may not have been foreseen' (Cohen 2000: 28) and to ensure 'both method and data triangulation' (Stracke 2007: 60). Three of the four interview questions in the Chinese study focused on anxiety: 'What types of tasks, activities, and skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) made you feel anxious?'; 'Which aspects of the course did you find frustrating?'; 'What would you expect from the tutor to help alleviate your anxiety?' The OUUK study covered these and additional questions concerning anxiety-reducing measures and facilitating aspects of distance language learning. Think-aloud protocols from the OUUK study were not used because they were not considered appropriate for the

Chinese cohorts, on the grounds of unfamiliarity of the instrument and the amount of time and effort needed to take part.

Procedure

Students were asked to tick from a list of choices in each section of the questionnaire, and in some cases to explain their choice. The questionnaire was piloted with 31 students - 10 undergraduates and 21 junior college students - and revisions were made according to their feedback, in order to make the survey more relevant. For example, an item in the Anxiety section: 'Please list any types of tasks, activities, skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) or aspects of the course that make you feel anxious' was dropped because less than 10% of the pilot survey participants responded to it. Post-pilot survey interviews indicated that the participants were reluctant to respond to this item because it was too time-consuming. It was therefore moved to the post-survey interview. The questionnaire was administered over a period of two months, from October to November, 2008, at the face-to-face tutorials. The response rates were 84.4% (undergraduate) and 70.8% (junior college) respectively, with a total of 408 completions.

The questionnaire was followed one week later by the semi-structured interviews with nine undergraduates and 24 junior college students. The selection of interviewees was based on 'criterion sampling' in order to 'meet some predetermined criterion of importance' (Patton 2001: 238). In this case, the criterion was balanced, in terms of programme levels, year groups, gender, and overall examination results. The interviews were conducted in various ways (see Figure 1) due to the fact that not all students were available for face-to-face discussion. Both the face-to-face and internet-based instant messaging interviews were conducted in a relatively relaxed

atmosphere, in which students could ask for clarification and rephrasing in order to make sure they had understood the question. In contrast, the email interviews were more structured in that they were in the form of question and answer, and the time delay made it possible for interviewees to reflect before giving responses.

< Insert Figure 1 >

The results from the questionnaires in both studies were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Participants' explanations for their choices and their responses to the interview questions were coded by the researchers and associates to identify common themes.

Findings

Anxiety items

In order to investigate students' level of anxiety relating to specific aspects of the distance EFL learning process, the questionnaire included a list of statements with a choice of five Likert-scale responses for each, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

< Insert Table 2 >

Table 2 reveals that the overall level of anxiety was slightly above the mean score at 2.93 on the five-point Likert scale. As in Hurd's study where the highest levels of anxiety were associated with output, in particular oral performance, students

in the Chinese study felt more anxious about productive skills (average rating 3.14) than receptive skills (average rating 2.83) or learning English at a distance (average rating 2.80). Six of the top ten anxiety items were related to productive skills with regard to active use of vocabulary: 'I feel troubled when I cannot easily use the English vocabulary that I know in conversation'; 'I feel troubled when I cannot easily use the English vocabulary that I know in writing in English'; grammar: 'I am always worried about making mistakes in grammar when I am writing in English'; 'I am always worried about making mistakes in grammar when I am speaking English'; and appropriate style/generic structure: 'I am not sure that I can speak English appropriately'; 'I am not sure that I can follow established generic structure in writing in English'. Using vocabulary did not, however, seem to be as anxiety-provoking in Hurd's study, a finding reinforced by another study, which cited 'language origins' as an explanation. English and French have similar roots and many words in common, 'in contrast to English and Chinese, whose roots are entirely different' (Hurd & Xiao 2006: 211). Similar language roots might also explain why the learning of grammar was not considered as anxiety-arousing in the OUUK study as in the Chinese study. Moreover, the Chinese students' anxiety about vocabulary and grammar may also be the result of their preference for mechanical memory strategies (Xiao & Hurd 2007).

Interestingly, SRTVU students were not particularly anxious about speaking in general, with only 30.54% strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statement: 'I feel nervous when I am speaking English', whereas 68.5% of the OUUK cohort claimed to feel tense when they had to speak French. This could be related to SRTVU students' instrumental motivation. Results from this study showed that the main reasons for enrolling on the distance-taught English programmes for SRTVU students were 'for work' (78.92%), followed by 'to gain the diploma' (75.94%), with 70.59%

claiming one of these as their most important reason. The majority of OUUK students (85.9%), in contrast, cited pleasure or interest as a reason for learning French, with 21.3% claiming this as their most important reason. Only 8.8% were learning in order to gain credits towards a qualification and even fewer (7.4%) considered that it would help them in their work. Findings concerning receptive skills showed that the Chinese students were more anxious about listening than reading in relation to vocabulary and grammar. Their levels of anxiety about language skills in general were in the following order of priority: listening - 33.81% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: 'I am not confident that I can understand what I hear' (mean score: 2.93); speaking - 30.54% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: 'I feel nervous when I am speaking English' (mean score: 2.77); reading - 23.94% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: 'I get upset when I am reading English because I have to read things again and again' (mean score: 2.57); and writing - 21.12% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: 'I feel nervous when I am writing in English' (mean score: 2.45). The OU cohort were nervous and tense about speaking French, as shown above, but listening and reading caused fewer problems: 77.5% enjoyed just listening to someone speaking French and 78.8% were confident about reading in French and understanding what they were reading (65%).

In addition to workload and course materials, developing knowledge of English such as grammar and vocabulary was found to be more anxiety-provoking for the SRTVU students than other aspects, such as assessments, pronunciation and practice opportunities, both at tutorials and in group discussions. Overall, while Hurd (2007b) had a different focus, emphasizing the impact of age, competence in another language, privacy, etc., both studies revealed that the learning process itself did not cause undue anxiety.

To triangulate the questionnaire data, as in Hurd's study, students were asked in the interviews to talk in detail about any types of tasks, activities, skills or aspects of the course that made them feel anxious. Several issues were highlighted in their responses. Overall, interview data supported the questionnaire findings. Findings from the OUUK study revealed lack of direction, the need for self-discipline, isolation and oral performance as elements particularly associated with anxiety. Many students in the Chinese study reported that they became flustered very easily in speaking, writing, and listening if they came across new or unfamiliar words, or if they did not know how to express themselves clearly. This echoes the findings of the questionnaire survey where having to understand and use new vocabulary and grammatical structures ranked high on the anxiety scale. With regard to specific tasks or activities, students were most anxious when engaging in online audio conferencing and synchronous text-based discussion, due to the mismatch between the requirement for spontaneity and the failure to use words and grammatical rules confidently. They were also under a lot of pressure during peer review of oral activities and written assignments. This mirrors the finding of another study (Xiao, Zhang, Peng & Xiao 2008) which found that many students were not confident about their English proficiency and often felt stressed in peer review activities. Vocabulary and grammar caused them particular problems because of memory failure. They also claimed to perform poorly in content-oriented courses such as English literature which place a heavy burden on memory. Moreover, the unfamiliarity of distance learning materials in terms of content and design caused frustration from time to time for those who had worked only with conventional course books. Many students, more used to playing a passive role in their learning, found self-instruction very demanding and difficult to manage.

Ways of dealing with anxiety in learning English at a distance

Participants were asked to identify from a given list *all* the strategies they used for dealing with anxiety in learning English at a distance as well as the most important one. They were also given the opportunity to add other strategies they used that did not appear in the list, but none chose to do so.

< Insert Table 3 >

Findings revealed that students employed a variety of anxiety-reducing strategies. As in the OUUK study, they favoured self-motivation and self-encouragement, which were also strategies used by successful learners reported in another study (Bown 2006). Of the six ways which were recognized by over 50% of the students as anxiety-reducing strategies, five belong to these categories, e.g. use of positive self-talk; self-encouragement to take risks in language learning; self-assurance about the possibility of checking writing to correct mistakes; paying more attention to weak points in routine study; and use of relaxation techniques. These ranked first, second, sixth, third, and eighth, respectively, among the most important ways to deal with anxiety. Students who attended face-to-face tutorials, where responding to learning problems was a top priority (Xiao, 2008), attached great importance to them. Talking to other students and tutors were among the help-seeking options in case of difficulty. Yet, as in Hurd (2007b), students did not seem very comfortable openly sharing their anxiety with other students or their tutor/personal supervisor, or even expressing their anxious feelings privately, i.e. in writing. Other strategies they might have used to help them cope with anxiety were also not popular,

including awareness of physical signs of stress, taking advantage of language practice opportunities, diverting attention from the anxiety-arousing process itself, and self-reward for progress. There was evidence of much similarity in the ways in which the SRTVU and OUUK students addressed anxiety. For example, in the OUUK study, taking risks and positive self-talk not only received the highest ratings overall (87.5% and 64.6%), but were also considered the two most important strategies (41.7% and 37.5%), whereas only 4.2% attributed high importance to sharing their worries with their tutor or other students, and none selected awareness of physical signs of stress or rewarding oneself for achievement as the most important strategy.

In the follow-up interviews to the Chinese study, students were asked what they would expect from their tutor to help alleviate anxiety. Several issues arose from their responses. First, the interviewees believed that effective learning strategies should be integrated into tutorials, and welcomed individualized counselling for anxiety. As one participant commented:

As an adult learner, I am very sensitive to self-esteem. I know talking to someone, especially the tutor, about my problems may make me less anxious. I know the tutor won't laugh at me even if my problems are silly. Still, I simply refuse to take the initiative though I'm ready to have a heart to heart with my tutor if he starts the talk. This interview is a case in point. I've never talked so much about my worries before. As a matter of fact, I am now feeling much better and more confident after pouring my heart to you and getting your encouragement and suggestions.

Second, they argued that collaborative learning should be integrated into the self-instructed process, adding that this might help create a relaxing environment for practising the target language, assessing learning outcomes, obtaining timely feedback, and sharing frustration. Third, they maintained that learning activities should be more diverse in order to make the learning process livelier and counter the effects of stress. 'I can learn more and better if I enjoy what I'm doing,' commented

one participant. Another felt that: 'With interest, you will never feel bored and upset.' Finally, the majority of students also acknowledged the facilitating role of well-designed course guides in reducing anxiety. Carefully-prepared course guides can serve as useful signposts for effective learning. To sum up, the emphasis was on metacognitive skills in the Chinese study, whereas OUUK students focused more on specific activity types and personal attributes. This was not the case for course guidance, which was valued by students in both countries.

Discussion

Findings from the Chinese study show that nearly 80% of EFL students encountered difficulties in their distance English learning and about 70% experienced anxiety. Similar results were found in the OUUK study with 76.1% of students encountering problems and 63.4% experiencing anxiety. The productive skills of speaking and writing aroused the highest levels of anxiety in relation to active use of vocabulary and grammar, as well as style and generic structure. These findings are in line with those of two previous studies on distance language learning (Hurd & Xiao 2006; Xiao & Hurd 2007). As noted earlier, it is likely that SRTVU English learners found it more difficult to remember the vocabulary of the target language than their OUUK counterparts, because English and French have similar language roots. In addition, as is evident from the present study and from Xiao and Hurd (2007), Chinese distance English learners are not used to taking full advantage of more intellectual memory strategies, despite the fact that, as adults, they have more maturity, a wider knowledge base and a more developed intelligence than their younger counterparts learning in the classroom; instead, as shown in this study, they relied heavily on mechanical memory strategies. To a certain extent, this can also

explain why they were frustrated by new or unfamiliar words and complicated structures when carrying out listening tasks, and by the number of rules that have to be mastered.

The lack of non-verbal communication features online, such as facial expressions, gestures and eye contact, also caused difficulties with online audio conferencing and synchronous text-based discussion, both of which also require more skilful application of knowledge of English. Students' perceived pressure from peer review activities and content-oriented courses might also be partly linked to their choice of learning strategies for dealing with their emotions.

With regard to the receptive skills of listening and reading, it was, again vocabulary and grammar that aroused anxiety. Listening activities made the Chinese students more anxious than reading activities. But it is worth noting that the four skills in general were not found to be particularly difficult to acquire and were not associated with high levels of anxiety. The high numbers of students who had enrolled on CCRTVU English programmes 'for work' and/or 'to gain a diploma/degree' (for a better-paid job) may explain this. Since many students had to use English at work and could benefit from opportunities for authentic language use, it was likely that they were not extremely anxious about speaking, writing, listening and reading in general. In contrast, the OUUK students were particularly anxious about speaking skills, as pointed out earlier.

Although the learning process itself did not entail high levels of anxiety, course workload and course materials were clearly associated with some anxiety. The interview data also indicate that the shift from passive recipient in a taught environment to active agent in self-instruction was anxiety-provoking. Results for other aspects of the course, such as assignments, examinations and language practice,

were slightly more positive in that they appeared to be less anxiety-provoking.

There seemed to be a marked preference for self-help as an anxiety-reducing strategy among the Chinese EFL students, and overall, participants favoured personal effort to deal with anxiety, as in Hurd (2007b). The reason for this could be two-fold: as noted previously, support is not as easily available in the distance context as in the classroom setting; secondly, seeking help may be regarded by some as a threat to self-esteem. Horwitz, et al. (1986) and Aida (1994) contend that adults are more vulnerable to anxiety in learning a foreign language than they are when studying other disciplines, because of the threat to their self-esteem. It is also argued that 'those with high self-esteem might handle their anxiety better than those with low self-esteem, resulting in better performance' (Oxford 1999: 62). Nevertheless, an overestimation of the threat to self-esteem may result in severe anxiety (Spielberger 1972, cited in Onwuegbuzie et al. 1999). Help from 'significant others', for example, tutor, other students, and family, may, therefore, be necessary to lower anxiety and bring about better learning outcomes (Aida 1994). Although the figures for strategies involving seeking help were low overall in both cohorts, the participants in the Chinese EFL study were even less keen to let their tutor know they were anxious than their UK counterparts (SRTVU 10.29%; OUUK 20.8%), while happier to share their worries with other students (OUUK 20.8%; SRTVU 27.7%). The majority of students were also unwilling or afraid of demonstrating their anxiety in private, i.e. writing it down for later reflection. Threat to self-esteem could again be the reason for this.

To help maintain positive attitudes and prevent or reduce anxiety, students need to be encouraged at an early stage to try out other anxiety-reducing measures, such as noticing physical signs of stress, making the best of language practice opportunities, diverting attention from the anxiety-arousing process itself, and

rewarding themselves for progress made. These measures may help decrease anxiety and thus lower the affective filter, resulting in potentially higher self-esteem and better learning outcomes. However, as can be seen from the findings, these were not frequently used strategies by either the SRTVU or OUUK students.

The importance of learner support in reducing students' anxiety is well documented in the literature (Horwitz 2001; Aida 1994; Ewald 2007; Gan 2004; Oxford 1990). It is also reinforced by the SRTVU and OUUK studies, in particular the role of the tutor in terms of contact and feedback. Learner support involves help, empathy, trust, and a straightforward approach to dealing with students (Trickett & Moos 1995, cited in Horwitz 2001). Interview findings in the Chinese study showed that students' expectations centred around effective learning, i.e. learning strategy training, incorporation of collaborative learning into course design, diversification of learning tasks/activities, and preparation of course guides tailored to facilitate learning. Students' reluctance to take the initiative to seek help and their readiness to pour out their troubles if talked to as expressed in interviews were evidence that mere availability of teacher support does not guarantee that students can benefit from it (Xiao, 2007). The main conclusion from the findings is that learner support needs to take a higher priority in the course materials and that, ideally, tutors should adopt a more proactive approach in terms of individual counselling for those who show signs of anxiety, so that anxious students do not slip through the net. Such measures have resource implications which distance teaching institutions might be unwilling to consider, particularly at a time of financial constraints world-wide. But it is nonetheless worth reiterating the crucial role of the tutor and endeavouring to find ways of enhancing this role.

It should be borne in mind, in interpreting the results and drawing conclusions,

that the studies had certain limitations. First, self-report instruments ‘may not appropriately capture the participants’ perceptions and feelings’ (Mills et al. 2006: 286; also see Sparks & Ganschow 2001; Ehrman & Oxford 1995) although the assurance of confidentiality, anonymity, opportunities for explanation and follow-up interview might minimize possible misrepresentations. Moreover, such instruments, when used qualitatively, have the potential to probe more deeply into student responses and enhance understanding in a way that purely quantitative measures cannot. In the case of the Chinese study, one limitation could be that participants came from a single institution and are not, therefore, representative of the whole distance EFL Chinese student population. Nevertheless, findings from the two studies, both involving large numbers of students, provided much valuable data and a sound basis on which to base further research.

Conclusion

White (1999) maintains that affective control is crucial for self-regulation in distance language learning. This article reports findings concerning one of the key affective variables, foreign language anxiety, in a typical EFL context in China, as compared with an FL distance setting in a very large distance learning university in the UK. The findings extend our knowledge of language anxiety in two distance language learning settings on opposite sides of the world. In terms of a comparison of the results, several findings are worth mentioning, including the interplay between the distance language learning context and language anxiety in general; language learning strategy preference and specific aspects of language anxiety; and job-related experience and language skills.

Findings from the Chinese study also have pedagogical implications for the design and delivery of distance-taught English programmes in China's learning context and possibly in other distance language learning contexts. First, institutional efforts are needed to ease course workload, adopt flexible assessment methods, and tailor course materials as far as possible to students' needs, without relaxing academic requirements. These are all factors potentially associated with anxiety according to the study. Second, learning strategies should be integrated into course design and delivery (Cohen 2000; Xiao & Hurd 2007) with a focus on metacognitive skills, memory strategies, consolidation of knowledge of the language, and an emphasis on practical applications. Third, it may make good sense to promote out-of-class opportunities for use of the target language as an integral component of distance language learning, given that students' personal experience in using the language for authentic communication can lower their anxiety about speaking, writing, listening and reading in general. For example, SRTVU students need to be encouraged to make more use of the online social space in CCRTVU's electronic learning environment, as well as various kinds of public social space such as Tencent QQ, MSN and forums at English learning websites, all of which may provide opportunities to use English for authentic purposes. Finally, as Horwitz contends: 'It is essential that teachers make the emotional needs of their students an instructional priority' (Horwitz 1995: 574). Students have high expectations of teachers as facilitators of distance language learning, and teachers can certainly play a critical role in boosting distance language learners' self-efficacy (Hurd & Xiao 2006). It can also be argued that teachers should take the initiative and intervene when signs of anxiety are identified. For instance, if a student who has been very active in online discussion suddenly becomes a lurker, this may be a sign that he or she is experiencing difficulty. If this is the case, the tutor

might consider contacting them to find out more and offer help if necessary.

Based on the findings from these studies, future research might look at a wider variety of issues, for instance, anxiety and student drop-out, and anxiety and learning strategy training. The results from these two studies could also serve as a starting point for a closer examination of the extent to which different learning cultures may affect aspirations, learning and achievement. Other areas that have been examined could be extended to provide more depth and detail, for example, anxiety and the distance language learning experience (Hurd 2006, 2007a, 2007b) and anxiety and different learning settings (Xiao 2007; Hurd & Xiao 2006). Research into these key issues might further enhance understanding of the impact of anxiety on distance language learning, and suggest a greater variety of affective control strategies for distance language learning.

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Table 1

Demographic Profile of the Participants

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Subtotal	Male	Female	Age (in year)	Age range
UD	40	48	47	135	27	108	25.95	22—49
JC	155	97	163	415	57	358	22.98	19—39
Total number (n)				550	84	466	23.83	19—49

Note: UD=undergraduate; JC=junior college; Age (in year) = average age.

Table 2

Anxiety items

Productive skills of speaking and writing	Likert scale					Rating	Rank
	1	2	3	4	5		
I feel nervous when I am speaking English.	10.07%	23.75%	35.77%	17.23%	13.31%	2.77	15
I feel nervous when I am writing in English.	25.55%	27.02%	26.28%	11.30%	9.82%	2.45	23
I feel troubled when I cannot easily use the English vocabulary that I know in conversation.	6.91%	10.12%	25.43%	23.20%	34.32%	3.56	1
I feel troubled when I cannot easily use the English vocabulary that I know in writing in English.	8.41%	20.04%	25.24%	19.80%	26.48%	3.31	4
I am always worried about making mistakes in grammar when I am speaking English.	13.51%	18.42%	27.76%	19.41%	20.88%	3.14	7
I am always worried about making mistakes in grammar when I am writing in English.	10.12%	18.76%	23.95%	24.44%	22.71%	3.32	3
I am not sure that I can speak English appropriately.	7.19%	12.65%	27.54%	22.08%	30.52%	3.49	2
I am not sure that I can follow established generic structure in writing in English.	7.67%	22.02%	31.68%	19.80%	18.81%	3.09	8
Average ratings						3.14	
Receptive skills of listening and reading	Likert scale					Rating	Rank
	1	2	3	4	5		
I am not confident that I can understand what I hear.	10.61%	21.23%	34.32%	20.98%	12.83%	2.96	13
I worry when I hear new or unfamiliar words.	9.09%	23.83%	31.94%	20.63%	14.49%	3.02	10
I worry when I hear complicated structures.	7.89%	18.89%	30.62%	22%	20.57%	3.20	5
I get flustered unless English is spoken very slowly and deliberately.	18.06%	24.75%	30.44%	17.82%	8.91%	2.68	16
I get upset when I am reading English because I have to read things again and again.	20.74%	25.43%	29.87%	14.32%	9.62%	2.57	19
I get upset when I come across new or unfamiliar words in my reading.	20.44%	27.83%	29.55%	14.53%	7.63%	2.56	20
I get upset when I come across complicated structures in my reading.	12.06%	27.83%	33%	16.25%	10.83%	2.80	14
Average ratings						2.83	

Learning English at a distance	Likert scale					Rating	Rank
	1	2	3	4	5		
I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to master to learn English well.	7.38%	19.21%	33.74%	20.93%	18.71%	3.17	6
Learning new English vocabulary worries me; I cannot remember new words very well.	15.23%	19.65%	27.76%	19.41%	17.93%	2.99	11
I worry about my pronunciation.	21.62%	27.02%	29.72%	11.54%	10.07%	2.46	22
I feel lots of pressure and cannot express myself freely in group discussions.	24.50%	27.97%	24.25%	12.37%	10.89%	2.53	21
The course workload is so overwhelming that I worry about getting left behind.	12.34%	20.24%	26.66%	20.49%	20.24%	3.07	9
I am never at ease when I am doing assignments or sitting examinations.	20.88%	29.23%	26.53%	12.77%	10.56%	2.62	17
I feel frustrated when I am studying the course materials on my own because I am not sure if I can understand the instructions and achieve the intended learning outcomes.	11.57%	20.68%	29.80%	21.92%	16%	2.97	12
I get upset at tutorials when I am called on to answer questions or to do language activities.	22.60%	25.30%	26.53%	13.02%	12.53%	2.60	18
Average ratings						2.80	
Overall average rating						2.93	

Note: The five choices on the Likert scale range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

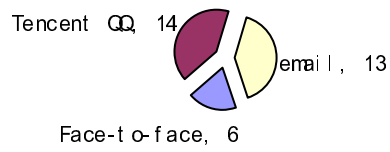
Table 3

Ways of dealing with anxiety

Ways of dealing with anxiety	All the ways		Most important way	
	Rating	Rank	Rating	Rank
Use positive self-talk (e.g. I can do it; it doesn't matter if I make mistakes; others make mistakes).	75.00%	1	22.79%	1
Attend face-to-face tutorials as often as possible.	63.97%	2	9.31%	5
Actively encourage myself to take risks in language learning, such as guessing meanings or trying to speak or write, even though I might make some mistakes.	63.48%	3	18.87%	2
Tell myself when I write that I can check my writing to correct mistakes.	63.24%	4	6.13%	6
Pay more attention to my weak points in routine study, such as working out ways of remembering English vocabulary more efficiently, going over difficult grammar points, reading after the recording, etc.	54.17%	5	11.03%	3
Use relaxation techniques e.g. deep breathing, consciously speaking more slowly, etc.	53.19%	6	5.52%	8
Note down difficult points and turn to reference materials, other students, or my tutors for solutions later.	49.75%	7	5.88%	7
Be aware of physical signs of stress that might affect my language learning.	44.36%	8	4.41%	9
Make the best of every opportunity to practice using English.	43.38%	9	9.56%	4
Share my worries with other students.	27.70%	10	0.80%	10
Tell myself when I speak that it won't take long.	24.75%	11	0.25%	13
Give myself a reward or treat when I do well.	22.30%	12	0.74%	11
Write down my feelings in a diary or notebook.	21.08%	13	0.49%	12
Let my tutor/personal supervisor know that I am anxious.	10.29%	14	0.00%	14

Figure Caption

Figure 1: Types of Interview



Note: Tencent QQ is an Internet-based Instant Messaging (IM) tool, widely used in China.