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Foreign Language Anxiety and Classroom Silence: Manifestations and Intervention Strategies in EFL Classrooms and Target Language Environments

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Abstract: Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is a common psychological barrier experienced by language learners during foreign language acquisition, often leading to classroom silence. This paper reviews FLA's different manifestations and sources in Chinese-speaking learners within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms and target language environments. It analyzes how FLA impacts learners' silent behaviors. Research indicates that FLA primarily stems from exam pressure, classroom atmosphere, and teacher evaluation methods in EFL classrooms. At the same time, in the target language environment, FLA is more associated with social anxiety and cultural adaptation issues. Teachers should adopt strategies such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), group collaboration, peer cooperation, and positive emotional support to alleviate FLA and the resulting silent behaviors. This study offers theoretical support for understanding FLA's dynamic and adaptive nature and provides practical guidance for emotional intervention in foreign language teaching. Finally, the research suggests that future studies should empirically explore individuals' emotional changes and behavioral shifts in the language learning process.

Keywords: Foreign Language Anxiety, Classroom Silence, Task-Based Language Teaching, Emotional Support, Target Language Environment

1. Introduction

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is widely recognized as one of the key psychological factors affecting language learners' performance and classroom participation. While this view has gained broad acceptance in the field of language learning, there remains some academic debate regarding the definition and measurement dimensions of FLA [1]. For instance, different studies emphasize different components of FLA, with some focusing on communication anxiety, while others concentrate more on exam anxiety or classroom anxiety. Therefore, when introducing the concept of FLA, it is necessary to maintain a critical perspective, recognizing that its definition is not fully unified, and its effects may vary due to individual differences or situational changes. As a specific type of anxiety in certain contexts, FLA typically manifests as negative emotional experiences during the language learning process, such as nervousness, worry, and self-doubt. This anxiety not only affects learners' language input and output abilities but may also interfere with cognitive processing,

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including attention, working memory, and information processing, thereby diminishing learning outcomes.

In recent years, the impact of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) on speaking performance has gradually become a research hotspot. This reflects the continued academic focus on the mechanisms of language anxiety and highlights the long-standing issue of communication barriers in foreign language teaching practice. As communicative competence increasingly becomes a key goal in language learning, the issue of students' difficulties in spoken expression in real-world contexts has become more prominent, prompting researchers to focus more on the relationship between FLA and speaking performance. Due to the FLA phenomenon, learners tend to reduce or even altogether avoid using the target language in the classroom, a behavior referred to as "classroom silence" [2,3].

Although learners in the target language environment face more authentic language communication situations and typically have higher motivation to use the target language, they may still experience high levels of FLA. Studies have shown that FLA manifests more diversely in the target language environment, such as social anxiety, cultural adaptation difficulties, and unclear language self-identity [4]. Taking international students as an example, they often engage in social avoidance behavior due to concerns that their language skills may not meet the "local standard" when communicating with native speakers. This anxiety affects classroom performance and hinders their social integration process. Furthermore, recent research indicates that the "language self-gap" formed in the target language environment may further exacerbate FLA, causing learners to feel anxious when interacting with native speakers, thus intensifying their silence behavior [5].

From the perspective of language education, the classroom silence behavior caused by FLA affects individual learning outcomes. It weakens the potential for classroom interaction and cooperative learning, ultimately impacting the overall teaching quality. Therefore, a deep understanding of the causes and manifestations of FLA in different contexts is of great practical significance for developing more contextually adaptive teaching strategies and creating a supportive language learning environment. Especially in the context of increasing globalization and frequent cross-cultural communication, promoting learners to overcome language anxiety, boost their language confidence, and enhance their willingness to express themselves has become one of the key issues that must be addressed in current foreign language teaching research and practice.

This review aims to systematically examine the different manifestations and sources of FLA in EFL classrooms and target language environments for Chinese-speaking learners, explore how FLA affects learners' silence behavior, and further analyze the teaching intervention strategies proposed in existing research, to provide theoretical support and practical insights for alleviating FLA, reducing classroom silence, and improving the effectiveness of language teaching.

2. Theoretical Framework of Foreign Language Anxiety and Classroom Silence

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), as a context-specific type of anxiety, has long been considered one of the most disruptive emotional variables in foreign language learning. In the study of FLA, scholars have proposed three main types of anxiety by exploring its constituent dimensions: (1) communication apprehension, which refers to the anxiety or fear felt when one cannot effectively express thoughts during foreign language communication; (2) fear of negative evaluation, which is the fear of being criticized, ridiculed, or receiving negative feedback from teachers or peers in the classroom; and (3) test anxiety, which is excessive worry about performance in tests, oral exams, assignments, and other evaluative situations. These three types of anxiety are interwoven and influence each other, showing a high level of contextual dependence. For example, students may refrain from speaking in class due to communication apprehension, which increases the likelihood of experiencing fear of negative evaluation. This avoidance behavior can further exacerbate test anxiety, as students, while worried about their classroom performance, also experience heightened anxiety

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about exam results. This classic theory has laid the foundation for subsequent FLA research and has been widely supported in multiple empirical studies [6,7].

As research has deepened, scholars have begun understanding FLA from more complex and dynamic perspectives in recent years. FLA is not a static, unchanging emotional state; rather, it is a dynamic emotional experience that continuously adjusts with changes in context, and its formation and manifestation are influenced by the interaction of multiple factors [8]. At the individual level, learners' personality traits (such as introversion or extraversion), their self-efficacy in language use, and their self-perception of language abilities all affect the intensity and frequency of their anxiety experience. At the social interaction level, the supportive nature of teacher-student relationships, the competitive or cooperative atmosphere among peers, and the classroom environment significantly influence the manifestation of FLA. At the environmental level, external variables such as the language expectations within the cultural context, the openness and challenge of instructional tasks, and the interactivity of teaching methods can either amplify or alleviate learners' anxiety.

This multidimensional understanding has led researchers to move beyond the traditional view of FLA as a mere "emotional disorder" and instead focus on its "adaptive function" within the complex learning ecosystem. In other words, FLA in certain contexts can also be seen as a self-protective mechanism, an adaptive behavior exhibited by learners when faced with cognitive overload and social expectation pressures. This shift provides a more inclusive theoretical framework for understanding the diverse manifestations of FLA in real teaching environments and offers more practically valuable insights for designing instructional intervention strategies.

Classroom silence, closely related to FLA, refers to learners deliberately or unintentionally choosing not to engage in language output, particularly in speaking activities, during foreign language classes. "Intentional silence" is often a strategic avoidance behavior, where learners may stay silent to avoid pragmatic errors or fear negative evaluation. On the other hand, "unintentional silence" could stem from limited language proficiency, distractions, or excessive emotional pressure, which prevent learners from responding promptly. This silence is not only an observable classroom behavior but also reflects the internal struggles of learners in their emotional states and social interactions. Behind it, there may be multiple factors such as inadequate language skills, lack of self-confidence, cultural norm differences, or anxiety over language evaluation.

Silent behavior subtly reduces learners' opportunities for language input and output. A prolonged lack of interaction means that learners cannot test, adjust, and internalize language knowledge in real contexts, hindering the language feedback mechanism. Communication strategies are not practiced or developed, weakening the natural language acquisition process [9].

Moreover, classroom silence also negatively impacts teachers' classroom judgment and teaching strategies. Research on Chinese EFL learners has found that teachers often assess students' language proficiency based on the amount of classroom participation, but silent learners do not necessarily have lower language abilities; they may be inhibited by anxiety [9]. Teachers' lack of sensitivity to this can further lead to a disconnect between the teaching content and students' needs, intensifying ineffective silence.

More importantly, silent behavior may create a vicious cycle with FLA. Learners accumulate negative self-perceptions of "not speaking well" through repeated silence, gradually forming a "silence-anxiety-silence" chain mechanism [3], where the more silent they are, the more anxious they become, and the anxious and worried they are, the less willing they are to speak. This process gradually erodes learners' language confidence and communication motivation, further strengthening FLA, even generalizing it to other language-use situations.

Existing research has pointed out that the key to breaking this cycle is changing learners' perceptions of language errors, providing emotional support, and creating a low-threat interactive environment. For example, studies have found that when teachers adopt a tolerant attitude toward

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errors and provide positive feedback, it can effectively alleviate students' fear of negative evaluation [6]. At the same time, setting up supportive activities such as group discussions and peer collaboration helps to reduce interaction pressure and enhance students' willingness to express themselves, thereby interrupting the reinforcement of the "anxiety-silence" chain.

From a theoretical perspective, FLA and classroom silence are mutually connected, influencing each other through a bidirectional mechanism, and are also regulated by various factors such as social and cultural contexts, classroom atmosphere, teacher interaction methods, and the difficulty of language tasks. Understanding this complex relationship helps educators fundamentally design more emotionally supportive classroom environments, reduce silence caused by anxiety, and create more real, controllable, and low-threat language output opportunities for learners.

3. Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and Silence Behavior in EFL Classrooms and Target Language Environments

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is particularly prevalent, typically stemming from factors such as exam pressure, classroom atmosphere, and teacher evaluation methods [1]. Learners often find themselves in a "high-risk" language environment, where the fear of making mistakes may impact their grades or cause them to lose face in front of peers, leading to increased cognitive load and hindrances in language processing [10]. Research by Liu and Jackson indicates that Chinese EFL learners' heightened attention to grammatical accuracy and fluency often leads them to remain silent in speaking classes to avoid making mistakes [11]. Even when learners possess a certain level of language proficiency, many suppress their desire to speak due to anxiety, resulting in a "can speak but are afraid to speak" situation. Additionally, the teacher-centered classroom structure limits natural communication opportunities, leaving learners with fewer chances for language output in authentic contexts, thus exacerbating their anxiety [12]. Zhang and Head's research further points out that due to fear of negative evaluation and concern about "losing face," EFL learners often choose silence over speaking, especially when speaking in front of the entire class [12]. This silent behavior not only affects the development of learners' language abilities but may also lead teachers to underestimate their true level of proficiency, thereby creating a "silence-neglect" vicious cycle.

In contrast, while learners in target language environments have more opportunities to interact with the language, Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) remains significantly present, manifesting in different ways. MacIntyre and Gardner point out that learners may experience silence due to situational and communication anxiety in authentic communication scenarios [7]. When faced with unfamiliar pragmatic rules, local accents, and cultural differences, learners often feel nervous and uncertain, choosing to minimize language output to avoid making mistakes [7]. Gregersen and Horwitz also emphasize that learners with strong perfectionist tendencies are likelier to remain silent to avoid verbal expression anxiety and the social embarrassment that errors might bring [6]. These learners often link language performance with their self-worth, and when confronted with language challenges, they tend to avoid communication to protect their self-image. Additionally, culture shock and social adaptation challenges can also be reasons for learners to choose silence, especially during the initial adaptation period in the target language environment. This "cultural insecurity" further exacerbates their anxiety levels [13]. Learners may intentionally avoid interaction with others due to unfamiliarity with local politeness norms, concerns about misunderstanding others, or the fear of being misunderstood.

However, this silent behavior is not irreversible. Over time, learners' language confidence and communication abilities improve through gradual adaptation, accumulation of positive interactive experiences, and obtaining social support [14]. Research shows that immersive language environments, emotional support systems, and successful communication experiences help break the

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cycle of anxiety and silence. Allen and Herron point out that in immersive learning experiences, learners' anxiety levels often decrease as their adaptation increases, and their frequency of language output gradually rises [14]. Once learners realize that errors do not always result in negative outcomes but can be part of the learning process, their language anxiety typically decreases.

In summary, FLA in EFL classrooms mainly stems from exam pressure, teacher-dominated interaction patterns, and the high demands for language accuracy, with silence often motivated by the desire to avoid mistakes. In contrast, in target language environments, FLA is more related to social adaptation, cultural conflicts, and identity issues, and silence serves as a strategy to cope with uncertainty. The negative effects of FLA in EFL contexts primarily manifest as reduced classroom participation and learning motivation. At the same time, in target language environments, it may hinder both language development and social integration. Therefore, understanding and distinguishing between FLA and silent behavior in these two contexts can help support language learners' development more effectively, fostering their confidence and abilities in language expression.

4. Teaching Strategies

In EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms, teaching interventions to reduce Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and silent behavior can be approached from multiple dimensions. The primary goal of these interventions is to reduce students' language anxiety and silent behavior while enhancing their classroom participation and language output quality. Based on this goal, teachers can develop specific strategies focusing on teaching methods, classroom interaction, and emotional support.

4.1. Teaching Methods

One effective teaching approach is Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). TBLT involves setting communicative tasks closely related to real-life situations, encouraging students to use the target language in meaningful contexts. This approach effectively reduces grammar-related anxiety caused by form-focused instruction [15]. The core of TBLT is promoting actual language use through task completion, which helps to avoid the anxiety typically associated with traditional grammar-based teaching. Empirical studies have shown that task-based teaching can reduce students' language anxiety in contextualized language input and output, and improve their fluency and confidence in speaking.

4.2. Classroom Interaction

Regarding classroom interaction, incorporating group work and peer collaboration effectively alleviates students' pressure to express themselves. Group work not only helps to share the psychological burden of individual expression but also enhances students' sense of classroom participation, reducing anxiety and silent behaviors resulting from the fear of individual exposure [16]. This interaction model is grounded in sociocultural theory, where peer interactions promote learners' language development while providing a safer space for expression, helping to establish a lower-risk language environment.

4.3. Emotional Support

From an emotional support perspective, teachers should provide constructive and positive feedback to help students build a positive self-image, thereby boosting their confidence in language expression. Feedback should focus on the positive aspects of students' language output, avoiding excessive

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emphasis on errors, which could exacerbate negative self-evaluation. Teachers can also employ emotional regulation strategies, such as mindfulness exercises and self-affirmation, to help students manage anxiety and strengthen their self-motivation and emotional resilience.

4.4. Cultural Adaptation in the Target Language Environment

Focusing more on cultural adaptation and psychological support is crucial to alleviate FLA in the target language environment. Systematic cultural adaptation training can help learners understand the target culture's communication norms and behavioral logic, thereby reducing language anxiety caused by cultural shock. Additionally, by building a social support network and connecting with language partners, learners can gradually enhance their confidence and reduce social anxiety through everyday interactions. Besides emotional regulation strategies, teachers can also teach effective psychological adjustment methods, helping students handle challenges in the foreign language environment more smoothly and improving their enthusiasm and initiative in language practice.

Through multi-dimensional teaching strategies, students' foreign language anxiety can be effectively alleviated, but a more supportive and interactive learning environment can also be provided in the target language context, promoting learners' comprehensive language development.

5. Conclusion

Through the analysis and discussion in this study, it has been found that there is a close interactive relationship between Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and classroom silence, with significant differences in how they manifest in various language learning contexts. In the EFL classroom, FLA primarily arises from exam pressure, teacher-led teaching structures, and high expectations for language accuracy, leading students to remain silent out of fear of making mistakes. In contrast, in the target language environment, FLA is more often linked to social anxiety and difficulties in cultural adaptation. Learners avoid communication due to self-identity conflicts or a "language self-gap." Therefore, FLA is an individual emotional state and a comprehensive response to the multiple pressures in the foreign language learning environment. The impact mechanism of FLA is highly context-dependent and complex.

The conclusion is that to alleviate FLA and the resulting silent behaviors, interventions should address various aspects, including teaching content, interaction methods, emotional support, and cultural adaptation, to create a safe, open, and supportive language learning environment. This approach would help stimulate students' desire for language expression and enhance their communication confidence.

The main contribution of this study lies in synthesizing the similarities and differences in FLA and silence behavior among Chinese native speakers in both EFL classrooms and target language environments, filling a gap in comparative research on language anxiety across different learning contexts. It provides a multidimensional perspective for understanding FLA's dynamic and adaptive nature. Furthermore, by discussing teaching intervention strategies, this study offers practical theoretical support for language teachers, educational researchers, and curriculum designers, helping to promote more emotionally sensitive foreign language teaching reforms. Especially in the context of globalization and the increasing need for cross-cultural communication, assisting learners to cope with language anxiety and improve their communication and cultural adaptation abilities has become one of the key issues in enhancing the quality of foreign language education.

Although this study systematically discusses FLA and silence behavior from both theoretical and empirical perspectives, it still has some limitations. The current research is mainly based on a literature review and lacks firsthand empirical data support. Future studies should further combine longitudinal surveys, interviews, or classroom observations to explore different individuals'

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emotional experiences and behavioral changes in the dynamic learning process. Additionally, cross-cultural differences in FLA, gender influences, teacher attitudes, and interaction with other emotional variables (such as motivation and self-efficacy) also warrant further exploration. Future research can start from individual cases and socio-cultural contexts to develop more contextually adaptive teaching and psychological support strategies, effectively breaking the "anxiety-silence" vicious cycle and promoting the comprehensive development of foreign language learners.

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