Foreign Language Anxiety among Chinese Graduate Students in the United States: A Qualitative Multi-Case Study

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While foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been explored by researchers, little is known about such anxiety in the context of graduate education beyond courses or programs specifically for language acquisition. The current study addressed this gap by exploring FLA experienced by Chinese graduate students for whom English is a second language. The focus of this study was to understand FLA beyond the general diagnostic approach but as more self-defined and identified by the study participants. Qualitative data were gathered using a background questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The findings showed that cultural forces played a key role in shaping the participants' willingness and intensity of English utilization and their FLA experiences. Other contributors included personal, social, and academic circumstances. Further, the participants in the study were aware of their FLA and tended to self-adjust it using various strategies such as making friends with native speakers and keeping a positive mindset. The findings of the current study have implications for helping direct researchers and educators' attention to students' emotional aspects of learning. Suggestions for tailoring the academic program curricular and pedagogies for students' affective needs are provided.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety, foreign language learners, international graduate students, English language

You started learning English since you were kids, so did I.
You received didactic teaching for more than 20 years, so did I.
You paid attention to grades and scores, so did I.
You studied hard, you made to "good students" in your home country, so did I.

You passed TOFEL and GRE with high scores, so did I.
You came to study in an English-speaking country, so did I.
You were once curious, confident, and well-prepared, so did I.
You now felt shocked, nervous, disappointed, and helpless, so did I.

You didn't understand their humor, neither did I.
You didn't follow their topic, neither did I.
You knew the answer, but you didn't say it out loud, neither did I.
You joined a conversation, but didn't say a single word, neither did I.

Why? Why?
I keep asking you why.
Not because I don't know.
Not because I don't understand.

I felt distance, I felt confused.
I felt invisible and cold, also.
But still, we are different people.
Every person is different.

You know what I mean? Do you know what I mean?
Yes, I know, I know all of it.
And don't worry, I am here with you now.

This poem was re-created from the interview transcripts of the participants in our study to present our collective subjectivity in relation to the study. As Chinese internationals currently studying and working in the United States, we both at some point in our respective lives experienced Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), which is a type of anxiety specifically associated with second language learning (Horwitz, 2010). As such, in this study, we see ourselves as cultural insiders for we share a similar cultural background, educational background, and FLA experiences with our participants.

FLA is a common issue among international graduate students, and it significantly affects their experiences socially and academically. According to a report from the National Foundation for American Policy (2018), in 2017, there were approximately 810,000 international students enrolled in U.S. universities, of which nearly 45% were graduate students. Understanding this issue is extremely important to this large group of students' ultimate academic success and new life adjustment. However, there is a dearth of empirical research regarding international graduate students' navigations of FLA experiences and the challenges or support they have in doing so. To address this gap, our study explored the FLA experienced by Chinese international graduate students, and more specifically, how they described their experiences of FLA while learning and using English both within and outside academic settings. The following two research questions guided the study:

1. What are the participants' experiences of learning and using English during their studying abroad at a Midwestern university?

2. How do the participants describe their self-defined FLA in the context of learning and using English?

Literature Review

International graduate students may face various challenges related to acculturation, academics, and language when they first come to the United States (Andrade, 2006; Lin & Scherz, 2014; Lowinger et al., 2014). In other words, for international graduate students whose first language is not English, studying abroad for the first time in the United States may lead to a hard time in their adapting into the American life, engaging in the classroom, and effectively using English due to the many language and cultural disparities. Challenges for international

graduate students may be greater than those for international undergraduate students because of the unique characteristics of being a graduate student, including: (a) a need to have a close academic relationship with one's advisor, leading to a demand of high-level academic communication skills (Zhou et al., 2011); (b) greater pressure to perform high-level academic research and heavy academic/scholarly engagement (Bang & Montgomery, 2013), which tend to limit time and activities outside the graduate work that could help one's adjustment to the life of the hosting country more quickly (Ranta & Meckelborg, 2013); and (c) limited language support available, due to the misperception that, as adults, once they pass English proficiency tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), they no longer need such assistance (Liu, 2011).

Researchers have suggested a variety of strategies for such transition and adjustment to the American life and being academically successful, such as becoming autonomous language learners and actively practicing the new language in all different situations (Liu, 2011), making friends with native speakers (Lin & Scherz, 2014), and asking for teachers' assistance and accommodations (Ravichandran et al., 2017). However, these strategies may fall short for students with FLA because these students tend to encounter fear, nervousness, and panic when they are learning or using a foreign/second language (Hashemi, 2011). In other words, if one feels uncomfortable when learning or using English as a foreign language, they may not attempt to use those strategies – all require them to engage in activities or situations that involve using English much more when their psychological status is more amicable to limiting or avoiding such engagements.

The Foreign Language Anxiety Framework for Language Learning

FLA is a specific anxiety related to foreign language learning. The existing literature suggests various FLA definitions with subtle differences (Çağatay, 2015; Chen, 2018; Yan & Horwitz, 2008). For the current study, we used Horwitz's (2010) definition, where FLA was defined as "a unique form of anxiety that some people experience in response to learning and/or using an L2, [and]… is categorized as a situation-specific anxiety" (p. 154). It is found that FLA is common among foreign language learners and more often than not, it negatively influences foreign language performance (Horwitz, 2010; MacIntyre, 1995; Yassin & Razak, 2017). Furthermore, a high level of FLA has a negative impact on language learning (Gregersen, 2003; Krashen, 1981; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). However, when FLA is managed within an appropriate range and paired with a student's interests in learning the target language, it may facilitate foreign language acquisition and motivate learning (Bailey, 1983; Rahman, 2017).

The literature on anxiety and second language learning has revealed that other than language learning, FLA also has negative effects on a student's academic achievement, social interactions, and future development (Cheng et al., 1999; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999). Nevertheless, the causes of FLA are not fully understood. Some researchers found that FLA tended to be associated with specific language skills, such as listening (Bekleyen, 2009; Kimura, 2017; Zhang, 2013), speaking (Çağatay, 2015; Cheng et al., 1999; Effiong, 2016), reading(Isler & Yildirim, 2017; Zhao et al., 2013), and writing (Cheng et al., 1999; Liu & Ni, 2015; Saghafi et al,, 2017). Others found that FLA tended to occur within certain environments or under certain circumstances, such as in the classroom or other educational settings (Effiong, 2016; Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu, 2011; Ranta

& Meckelborg, 2013), taking a test (Horwitz, 2010), giving a presentation on stage (Horwitz, 2010), or receiving negative feedback (Çağatay, 2015; Horwitz, 2010). Other factors that could lead to FLA include gender (Kao et al., 2017; Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2013; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2013), age, program, years of foreign language learning (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999), motivation (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991), and culture background (Chen, 2018; Drakulić, 2015).

FLA and Cultural Considerations

According to Brown (2007), when recognizing and addressing FLA, cultural factors cannot be ignored or taken lightly because people with different cultural backgrounds have distinct ideas, beliefs, habits, customs, skills, characteristics, and ways of having social interactions. FLA varies across cultural groups (Horwitz, 2010). For instance, in the context of English language learning, FLA experienced by students from countries like China, Japan, and Korea is more prominent than those from Vietnam or European countries, due to the influences of cultural heritage background (Chen, 2018).

According to Woodrow (2011), Chinese students' FLA experiences were strongly shaped by their Confucian heritage background. Under Confucius' influence, Chinese students tend to shy away from communicating in a foreign language for self-image reservation, known as saving "face" (Woodrow, 2011). Also, being quiet in the classroom is an expected gesture of respect to the teacher in China (Woodrow, 2011). Further, as Confucianism values humbleness, self-image, and modesty, under its influence, Chinese students are reluctant to challenge teachers, ask questions, and/or share their opinions in class (Cai et al., 2011; Jones, 1999). When Chinese students are studying abroad and subjected to considerable cultural disparities, such orientations and dispositions to class dynamics and learning can be barriers, subsequently

increasing their overall FLA levels which can be unproductive to learning and well-being (Mukminin & McMahon, 2013).

How FLA Has Been Examined in the Existing Literature

The extant literature on FLA, while varied in regards to the general methodological categories (i.e., qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods), has heavily relied on the utilization of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) – a Likert scale questionnaire, for measuring and understanding foreign language learners' FLA (Horwitz, 2010; Lin, 2013; Liu & Ni, 2015; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Zhao et al., 2013). Much remains unexplored in terms of how the learners self-identify, assess, and reflect on their anxiety experiences, which can shed further light on the contextualized understanding of FLA. More in-depth exploration of the learners' sense-making in relation to FLA experience is needed.

Furthermore, the existing FLA literature mostly focuses on K-12 settings (Bekleyen, 2009; Effiong, 2016; Saghafi et al., 2017) and, to a lesser degree, undergraduate education (Awan et al., 2010; Lowinger et al., 2014). The limited FLA research available on graduate education tends to focus on the courses related to language acquisition or informal language learning outside the classroom (Lee, 2016; Liu, 2011). As such, our study differs from the dominant FLA diagnostic approach and anchors on the emic; it contributes to the understudied area in the FLA research by attending to the graduate students' FLA experiences and their understanding of such experiences during their normal academic pursuits in various disciplinary programs.

Methodology

A multi-case study approach was used. Case study approach is commonly used in qualitative research to provide an in-depth interpretation and understanding of people or situations in a specific context and setting (Yin, 2014). Multi-case study is appropriate for the focus of this study since it allows researchers to gain rich perspectives and insights among different participants that would not emerge in a single case (Yin, 2014). The present study involved four Chinese graduate students from different programs who differed in age and other personal and academic-lingual aspects. The multiple case study design of the current study was instrumental in generating an in-depth understanding of the FLA issue among international graduate students. The commonalities and differences among participants' FLA experiences were explored.

According to Chen (2018), cultural influences are closely related to students' FLA experiences. As such, focusing on one particular cultural group, that is, the Chinese students, allowed us to gain more focused insights into the FLA experiences influenced by Confucianism (Woodrow, 2011). Further, considering that Chinese students take up the largest portion of the international student populations in the United States (The PIE News, 2017), it is important for educators and higher education institutions to better understand their FLA experiences; such knowledge gained could also be used to benefit international students from other East Asian countries. Potential participants were recruited from the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) at the Suunyn University (pseudonym) in a Midwestern state of the United States and were purposively selected based on the following criteria: he or she (a) self-identifies as Chinese; (b) is a graduate student; (c) currently studies in a graduate program other than

second language learning in the Suunyn University; and (d) self-identifies as having experienced FLA. In the end, four Chinese graduate students participated in this study. Table 1 shows the general profile of the four participants.

Table 1

Profile of Participants

Participant (Pseudonym)	Program	Age	Gender	Years of Study in the program
Mary	Professional School	25	F	>2 yrs
Keith	Science	29	M	>2 yrs
Mark	Science	27	M	<2 yrs
Jane	Social Science	24	F	>2 yrs

Note. F=female; M=male; yrs=years.

The four participants in this study shared similar cultural backgrounds and educational experiences. They were all born and raised in China and started to learn English as a foreign language since the 3rd grade. They all passed the TOEFL and GRE tests and three of them received the scholarship from the Suunyn University and the Chinese government. After they came to the United States, all of them lived on rental properties outside of the campus with their Chinese peers. They remain in frequent contact with Chinese native speakers and their families back home in China. Among the four participants, only two had studied in or visited another English-speaking country before they came to the United States.

Data were collected, using a background questionnaire (Appendix A) and in-depth semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B for the Interview Protocol). Participants first completed the demographic background questionnaire which was revised based on Zhao et al.'s (2013) instrument. Participants' responses to the questionnaire allowed us to have a glimpse into their personal and academic circumstances – the ones indicated in the literature as

related to one's FLA experience. Then, two in-depth semi-structured interviews (Yin, 2014) were conducted with each participant, and each interview lasted for about one hour. As Kim (2016) recommended, conducting a second or subsequent interview helped build trust and close relationships with the participants and provided an opportunity for us to ask follow-up questions for further clarification or information missed during the first interview. The locations and times for interviews were established per the participants' choices. Two participants chose Mandarin Chinese as their preferred language during the interviews for they felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts in their native language. The remaining two chose to communicate in English when interviewed. All interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. For those interviews that were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, the English translations were performed. After disidentification procedure was applied, a peer who was bilingual in Chinese and English was asked to review the translated transcripts to check for accuracy against meaning loss in representation (Van Nes et al., 2010).

For data analysis, we used Taylor-Powell and Renner's (2003) five-step content analysis procedure. Step 1 is to read and re-read the text so that one gets familiarized with the data collected. The interview transcripts were read multiple times; reflective notes and preliminary analyses were recorded and were later revisited and incorporated into our coding process. Step 2 focuses on generating initial codes. The overarching research questions were reviewed and specified into smaller sub-questions to help us decide how to start the analysis. Interview data were organized by questions first and then re-organized by case. In Vivo coding (Saldaña, 2009) was used to "provide imagery, symbols and metaphors for rich category, theme

and concept development" (p. 76). Keywords, phrases, and sentences that related to the research questions were highlighted and patterns started to appear.

Step 3 is categorizing information. Descriptive coding, which "summarizes in a word or short phrase—most often as a noun—the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 70), was used to develop categories. Descriptive coding allowed us to generate "a categorized inventory, tabular account, summary, or index of the data's contents" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 72). It helped us summarize the transcribed paragraphs and identify the categories and themes. Through the cycle of listing pre-assumed categories, re-reading and matching data into the categories, and discovering new patterns, we came up with several main categories and subcategories which could best answer the research questions.

Step 4 is making connections with and between categories to bring more meaning to the text by answering questions like "How do things relate?" and "What can we summarize from these categories?" The process started with the collection of potential themes and was followed by refining, reworking, and rephrasing these themes. Data were reviewed multiple times to check for additional meanings that could be missed. Using the research purpose and questions as the guide and focal point, we remained reflective throughout the process to determine if the themes were authentic to the data. After this step, the candidate themes were created. We continued this reviewing-and-refining process between data and these themes until the themes were adequately vetted. According to Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003), at the end of the fourth step, the researchers would have a solid understanding of the different themes, how they relate to or contradict each other, and an overall phenomenon to present. Finally, in Step 5, findings are elaborated based on themes and connections. This is where the researchers

revisit the research purpose and questions, telling each participant's experience through the themes discovered, and discuss the similarities and differences among cases.

To further address the trustworthiness and rigor of this study, member check was conducted where both the preliminary and final findings were shared with our study participants to prevent misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the information or narratives shared and meanings attached (Stake, 1995; Tracy, 2010). Also shared with our participants were interview transcripts to ensure accuracy of the data. Triangulation of multiple sources of data and investigators (we as researchers) also strengthened the credibility of the current study (Yin, 2014). Furthermore, the use of thick descriptions (Ponterotto, 2006) in our reporting of the findings helped provide richer and more contextualized understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Findings and Discussions

Our study focused on how the Chinese graduate student participants described their FLA experiences while pursuing a graduate education at a U.S. university. Six themes emerged from the data (nonhierarchical). The first theme speaks to the participants' descriptions of FLA moments. The second theme relates to a sense of loss that our participants experienced from "used to be always prepared" to a current state of "feeling constant underprepared or unprepared." The third theme was about the external triggers of FLA and their negative effects on our participants psychologically and academically. The fourth theme, while closely related to theme three, describes a specific challenge related to subtle and, at times, overt discriminations because of our participants' language ability – a phenomenon described by our participants as "being silenced." The fifth theme discusses the general views that our

participants held regarding higher education and its role in their learning and overcoming FLA.

The last theme speaks to our participants' coping mechanisms for dealing with FLA.

Theme One: FLA Defined by Moments

In our participants' descriptions about their FLA, certain words were frequently referred

to when defining those moments. All four participants felt "awkward" when experiencing FLA.

Keith mentioned he "felt super awkward sitting there" during class breaks when his classmates

were chatting and laughing, and he had "no clue about what's going on." Likewise, Mary noted,

> In group works, everyone in the group would wait for me to say something; and I would be hassling in my head trying to find the correct words, the correct sentence structures, …. There it is, silence, because everyone is waiting for me. The silence is *so* awkward.

Similarly, Mark found trying to have a conversation with a native speaker always turned to be

awkward. "I don't know what to say to them to continue the conversation. I mean, in Chinese

that is *ga-liao* [尬聊ⁱ]; in English, it's just like awkward talking." Jane also shared that she felt

awkward in social occasions such as running into her American classmates in the restroom and

tried to engage in a casual chat: "I just don't know what to say. Or can I just be quiet? That

kind of awkwardness, all the time."

The other descriptive words frequently noted by our participants were "anxious," "bad,"

"helpless," "frustrated," and "upset," when describing their feelings of FLA. For instance,

Keith shared, "When I cannot express myself well, or find a proper word or sentence, then

others cannot understand what I said. Then I don't feel confident and competent to say

something. And, I am frustrated." Mary had similar experiences: "I can't follow their topic, so

I am always anxious when I am chatting with a group of native speakers." A vivid example of

how our participants felt about FLA came from Mark:

It was my turn to answer the question. Once I got the microphone, I only said a few words. Very nervous, spatting. As I was saying it [my answer] out loud, my heartbeat was just shooting the sky, it was so loud, I mean, I could feel it pumping in my chest cavity. A bit sweating, maybe not real sweat, but the feeling of sweating.

Overall, our participants tended to describe FLA and their feelings of FLA negatively, confirming what Horwitz (2010) and MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) found in their studies. However, FLA was also found to have some positive effects, such as acting as a motivator for students to end FLA sooner (Tran & Moni, 2015), this was not supported by our findings. It is possible that, for our participants, their awareness of FLA collided with their past experiences as "a well-prepared student," – the second theme to be addressed next, and thus was connoted with negativity rather than a compelling reason to overcome FLA. Further, while there are some overlaps between the words our participants used to describe their FLA experiences and those in Horwitz et al.'s (1986) study, "awkward" is a distinctive descriptor only noted by our participants. As Chen (2018) argued in her study, Chinese students were influenced by Confucianism which places a high priority on self-image. This could explain the unique type of awkwardness the Chinese students in the current study had felt as they were struggling with "saving face" on one side and wanting to have social and academic engagement with their peers or others on the other side.

Theme Two: "Falling" from Being "Well-Prepared" to "Under-/Un-prepared"

According to Aida (1994), influenced by the Confucius culture, Chinese international students tend to hold a fear of failing and/or receiving negative evaluations because they want to present "perfect" self-images in front of others. As such, it is paramount to prepare everything well before action. Our participants' experiences of FLA support such a tendency. All four were regarded as high performing and/or students of excellence back home, and a

pressing need to keep that image by preparing themselves well, if not overly well, was evident

in their responses throughout the interviews. Yet, the considerable gaps between Chinese and

American classroom dynamics and expectations, as our participants noted, worked against

them. As Mark shared, he "often just stayed quiet" while his classmates asked or answered

questions, discussed with one another, and shared views among themselves. Unless he had "a

super convincing opinion," he said nothing in class. Jane also noted,

> Every time the professor asks, "Who has some ideas?", I never volunteer to answer first
> or right away. Maybe I just don't feel confident. But it's so hard for me to say something
> unprepared. I mean, maybe I could say something, but I just never wanted to give a try.

Keith also mentioned his struggles with group work. It was more often than not that when he

finally came up with "a perfect point" to share and organized the words in his mind, his

classmates had already moved on to the next topic. That was "always super frustrating" for

him.

For some of our participants, to give a presentation in class meant that they needed to

prepare a word-by-word script. For instance, Mary said, "I am afraid of making mistakes, so I

prepared a lot for it and tried to memorize every single word, even the conjunction words." It

was made clear by our participants to us that they always wanted to show the best of themselves

in front of people, especially in front of their peers and professors. However, subjected to the

apprehension of negative feedback, our participants showed a lack of confidence and reliance

on withdrawal and risk control to avoid "losing face" or possibly being viewed as "not well-

prepared" (Liu, 2011). As Mary further explained her reluctance to speak up,

> Even when I got some ideas, I just whispered. I am not confident enough to speak loudly.
> I will never raise my hand. In China, it's not a big deal. But here – I'm just not confident.
> [If I speak up], everyone will look at me and only me.

Mary was not alone in feeling this way; other participants in the study also expressed that they did not feel safe enough to show their "weaknesses" and it was always in their mind how they would be judged if they did so. As Hashemi (2011) found in his study on the relationship between classroom environment and the learners' FLA level, for our participants, the more the classroom environment introduced anxiety, the less confident they became (Hashemi, 2011). They were concerned about making mistakes, being laughed at by peers, and being looked down on publicly. As Mary shared, she would never ask questions in class, and if she had one, she would "wait until the lecture is ended and ask the professor privately." When Jane was asked to share some tips on managing FLA, she responded with an apparent surprise on her face, "You asking me? Me helping others? No, I am not good enough."

Our participants in general, as the literature (Cai et al., 2011; Woodrow, 2011) has indicated, emphasized greatly on being well-prepared before action and minimizing face losing situations as ways to maintain a positive self-image. Similar to what Mukminin and McMahon (2013) observed in their study of Chinese international students, our participants also experienced anxiety, discomfort, and lack of confidence under the circumstances such as in-class Q&As and group discussions that were more spontaneous and allowed limited time for the type of exhaustive preparation they preferred and/or were used to. In contrast to their American peers who are used to the interactive learning environment and share out their opinions, the participants in the current study, in the midst of trying to adapt to the new pedagogical and learning norms, found that they struggled with intensified FLA and a sense of isolation.

Theme Three: The Predominance of Communication Related FLA

For our participants, communication as in dialogues posed the biggest challenge, echoing the extant literature highlighting the difficulties of developing listening and speaking skills in English as a Second Language/English as a Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) learning (Bekleyen, 2009; Çağatay, 2015; Cheng et al., 1999; Effiong, 2016; Kimura, 2017; Zhang, 2013). Nevertheless, issues related to writing and reading anxiety noted by other studies (Cheng et al., 1999; Isler & Yildirim, 2017; Liu & Ni, 2015; Zhao et al., 2013) had limited mentioning by our participants.

According to our participants, one of the reasons behind the so-called communication problems was that their classmates and professors "spoke too fast." For instance, Keith shared, "I cannot follow their talking. They speak too fast when they are chatting. I only understand… like broken pieces." He rated his English performance a "2" in this situation, and in contrast, he rated himself a "4" in a non-anxiety situation on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest. While our participants recognized that it was possible that their peers or professors were just speaking at their normal pace as a native speaker, they found it difficult as a non-native English speaker to first comprehend and then respond because they needed extra time to make the English to Chinese back-and-forth conversions cognitively and linguistically. Such struggles also manifested in academic work. "We have a lot of Latin or some super weird terms. I do not know how to pronounce or translate them into Chinese." Mary continued, "Except the super long and complicate descriptions – they drive me crazy; some tricky terms are so hard for me to remember and pronounce." Mary felt stressed and disadvantaged unfairly because of such language.

> They [native classmates] can understand (teachers' lectures and instructions) and express themselves easily; they can read fast, but I can't. They came up with opinions fast. That doesn't mean their academic knowledge level is higher than me since English is their native language.

As revealed in other studies on FLA (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991), our participants also experienced a negative cycle: they suffered from FLA because of their poor English communication with native speakers, but FLA also affected their language performance, leading to more communication barriers that have further intensified their FLA level.

Further, the cultural differences also played a role in creating communication difficulties. Both Jane and Keith recalled struggling to have conversations with native speakers, not so much due to the language barriers, but more because of the disconnection to the topics being conversed. For example, Jane considered herself an outgoing person who would like to participate in conversations. However, most of the time she ended up being just a "listener" because she could not follow the topics and jokes: "When they all start laughing or suddenly get excited about something, I have no idea about what happened. Couldn't be more obvious, I was not on the same page with them." To illustrate how "badly" that could be, Jane went on and shared an example:

> There was one time I wanted to join their conversations – the group was all excited about something and everyone was chiming in something. But then I said something not quite relate to their topic. The whole group went quiet and everyone was looking at me, like waiting for me to say more or explain more like they did not get it. That made me very anxious and embarrassed.

Likewise, Keith also shared his experience,

> I am a social person; I like to hang out with friends and meet new people, but not here (in the U.S.). I think because we have fun in different ways. Here, they like to have some drinks and chat to socialize. But since we don't have many common topics, I don't know what to socialize with them.

Overall, as Woodrow (2011) noted in her study, our participants' communication

difficulties related to both language and the cultural gap between China and the United States.

It is possible that while Chinese international graduate students passed several English

proficiency tests before studying abroad (Liu, 2011), they had limited exposure to authentic

culture immersion and oral or daily English language to reach sufficiency or mastery. Also, like

the Chinese international students in Young's (1990) and Aida's (1994) studies, our

participants tended to be shy and felt uncomfortable to initiate a conversation or engage with

native speakers. Building cultural bridges for them seemed necessary and helpful for reducing

their FLA.

Theme Four: "Being Silenced" as a Foreign Language Learner

> "WHAT? WHAT?" In the lab, when I tried to explain what we should do for the next
> steps, one of my groupmates just could not understand what I was talking about. I don't
> know if she was intentional or not, but she just kept asking me "what?" in an
> exaggerative tone, looking confused and impatient. That made me feel so-o-o badly.
> Did I say something wrong or…? I just felt really terrible at that time! I stopped talking
> and I sweated uncontrollably because I was not feeling well.

The above depressing experience was shared by Keith with tears in his eyes. It happened a lot

during his work with his assigned study group to the point that Keith expressed that he no

longer considered a career plan of working in the United States after graduation. More than

that, Keith shared that he constantly self-doubted about himself whenever he tried to

communicate something, "I am worrying all the time. Did they understand me? Did they know

what I am talking about?" To compensate the unsureness, Keith would always provide

examples to what he had said and that often made him feel overwhelmed. Mary had similar

experiences. When she worked as a teacher intern in a high school, students would challenge

her authority because of her language. For instance, one time, Mary asked a student in her

senior class to repeat an instruction and was yielded back by the student that "I told you twice!"

It was a very frustrating time for Mary and she had remained extremely cautious about "showing her weaknesses" during that internship. All these illustrated the negative influences FLA could have on student development (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999).

Further, according to Lee (2016), expressions like "what?", "sorry?", or "pardon?" are annoying to most second language learners, let alone saying them in rude, mean or exaggerated tones. EFL students may feel nervous and embarrassed when receiving these clarification requests (Lee, 2016), which was noted by our participants. Lee (2016) recommended native English speakers use "friendly and sensitive clarification requests and gestures" (p. 87) to help reduce EFL students' FLA levels. Our participants agreed with such a recommendation, as noted by Jane, when her "polite classmates" asked her to repeat something "in a nice way," that was "a good learning experience" for her. The participants recognized that some of their negative encounters and/or isolation were unintentional or accidental. Mark was the only Chinese person in one of his classes, which consisted of eight students.

> I didn't feel safe. No one talked to me. Before each class, the Americans chatted with each other. They didn't even look at me. They were all friends, and I was the stranger. It was so awkward; I felt very isolated when I sat there alone, awkwardly.

Similarly, Mary remembered,

> Once there was a class discussion, the white girl sat next to me just turned to the black girl, who already had a partner. She should discuss with me since the professor asked us to turn to our neighbors. I know she discriminated me because I cannot speak English fluently. I felt sad, angry and wronged.

Theme Five: "I Am Not Their Focus." – Views on the Roles of Higher Education Institutions on FLA

All four participants in the study, in one way or another, did not find the fact that their educational needs were not addressed by higher education institutions problematic. Rather,

they tended to reason it out as "understandable" or "justifiable." Take Jane for example. While

she acknowledged the lack of opportunity to practice speaking English under the more didactic

approach to education in China, it has contributed to the challenges she has experienced now.

She explained:

> I don't think there is a problem in the Chinese ways [of teaching English]. If you want to practice, you need to practice by yourself, like going to the English Corner[ii]. It works as far as grades or scores are concerned. In China, mostly we learn English for getting good grades and passing exams as graduation requirements. Not everyone needs more than that and/or has the opportunity to go abroad and interacts with a foreigner. So, what we have in China – they have done what they should; that's enough.

Similarly, when asked what suggestions she would have for universities in the United States

regarding supporting international students with FLA, based on her own experiences, Mary

seemed surprised and said,

> I guess I just never expected that from the university. International students only account for 1.5% of the total student population; why would they [the university]? They have an English language program for international students here, but what I have heard – some of my undergraduate friends and some are now in graduate programs but had gone through the program – it was not helpful; they were pretty much taught with the same things as what they had already learned in China. So, for many of them, it felt time wasted. In my case, the program I am in is almost exclusively for domestic applicants. That means they have not expected students like me, speaking English as a foreign language, and as such have not done anything for us. This is not to say they should stay the same; they could do better, but I am not expecting more from them because of that context.

In Mary's case, she is the first international student admitted into her program whose existing

curriculum and polices are to a great extent only targeting domestic candidates. Mary once tried

to ask permission from the department to allow extra test time for international students and

was denied unequivocally. That experience had remained vividly for Mary; "Of course, I was

very, very disappointed." Mary said, "It took me a while – a lot, to have enough courage to

even ask." Mary felt hurt because the rejection was from "the very people who [were] in a

position and expected to help" students including international students. Yet, later, she went on

noting that her department probably did so for the consideration of "being fair."

Such rationalization also manifested in our participants' expectations and interactions

with faculty. In general, they found faculty were helpful to their academic learning and did not

consider that language considerations and support were part of faculty responsibilities. For

instance, Keith commented,

> I don't expect my professors to give me any language support. It is not part of their job
> to teach me English or help me with that. They are very busy; they don't have that time
> to take care of me. I am not the only student in their class.

Overall, our participants were not necessarily critical of the higher education institutions'

failure in assisting and serving them, as they encountered and struggled with FLA. The students'

turning to various justifications for resolving such dilemma could be a mechanism that they

relied on to avoid feeling stuck and devalued by the system. By framing the lack of institutional

intention and effort as a matter of outside "the expected responsibilities" and a common sense

of prioritizing the interests of the numeric majority over the numeric minority, it allowed our

participants to exert some agency in dealing with FLA. That is, when such struggles and

challenges are normalized as issues at the individual, not systemic level, it gave these students

a sense of self-control that they, personally, could do something to mitigate that.

Theme Six: Coping with FLA

This last theme speaks to the two types of coping strategies that our participants had

used to manage FLA, namely, actively addressing the FLA or negatively circumventing it,

which both were indicated in the literature as the typical reactions when confronted with

anxiety (Abbott, 2018).

With the first type, that is, actively addressing the FLA, the orientation was proactive as some participants in the study used the common strategies such as spending more time and making friends with native speakers, maintaining a positive mindset, challenging themselves to respond to questions, and self-learning and practicing (Lin & Scherz, 2014; Liu, 2011). Among all these strategies, making friends with native speakers was noted by our participants as the most effective way of overcoming the FLA, as its benefits included improving English, gaining confidence, and reducing the cultural gap. Jane shared,

> I try to tell myself not to be anxious and I try to spend time with my American friends as much as possible. I want to hang out with them, have conversations, listen more, and speak more. The point is that when my English improves, I will no longer feel so anxious.

Keith had similar comments:

> Sometimes we need not take it too personally. We are speaking a second language, so, of course, we have the disadvantages. It would be true vice versa; when the American students go to China, they would also experience what we are experiencing.

Keith said that he often felt rewarded and gained a sense of satisfaction after he voluntarily answered a question in class and got positive feedback. As such, when asked what advice he would give to others who also experience FLA, he recommended "stepping outside of one's comfort zone" as one may find "surprising rewards."

Other participants, on the other hand, opted to avoid the anxiety-provoking situations, which may "serve to lower the anxiety until they were able to confront it at a later date" (Abbott, 2018, p. 168). One way to do so is to minimize their contact with native speakers and subsequently avoid the FLA. For example, Mary shared:

> During our class break, if I go to the restroom, I would inevitably see some of my classmates whom I am not familiar with. I don't know what to talk to them. When you are in the class, that's fine that we are not talking to each other. But now we are in the restroom, we are all waiting; it becomes awkward if we are not. So, I go to the restroom on different floors to avoid running into them.

Likewise, Mark said that he had been avoiding going to social events or activities because that would no doubt mean chatting with native speakers. Another circumventive strategy reported by some of our participants is de-publicizing as confined human interactions. For instance, instead of putting herself in a situation that could lead to open dialogues and/or multiple channels of communication, Jane would put a question mark when she had a question during the class and asked the professor later privately, if the professor looked "friendly." Otherwise, she would just listen to the recording after class and try to figure out the answer by herself.

Overall, regardless of the types of coping strategies used, all our participants were aware of and more or less able to manage their FLA, echoing the findings in Chen's (2018) study that Chinese students tended to use learning strategies without help from faculty and their institutions. A possible explanation for such self-reliance, as we argued, could be that the students had limited or no confidence in ESL services or programs currently in place, given their past experiences with and/or current knowledge about such institutional support or assistance as inadequate and/or inappropriate for international students.

Another point is worthy to note. At the end of the second interview, the participants in the study respectively all told us in one way or another that they felt somewhat relieved because there was a sense of being understood. For example, Keith shared:

> I am glad that I agreed to participate [in your study] and I was able to talk about my FLA experiences. The fact that someone is actually interested in listening to and trying to understand my thoughts, needs and struggles – I am thankful for that. I never had opportunity to talk about this.

Our participants' reactions suggest that having an opportunity to share one's experience with FLA with others, be those who have similar experiences or not, can help create a sense of

community where empathy and willingness to engage and understand generate, as reported by our participants, trust and comfort instrumental for seeking help.

Conclusions and Implications

To conclude, the findings from the current study speak to several pedagogical implications for the stakeholders involved. For Chinese international students, keeping a positive mindset is necessary to reduce FLA (Hurd & Xiao, 2010; Kondo & Yang, 2004). Influenced by the Confucian heritage culture, Chinese students are more likely to be subjected to a strong sense of shame when they are self- or other-regarded as "less" competent because of their English language skills. For all language learners, that means to think positively and be proactive, as well as understand that acquiring a foreign language while adapting to a new culture is not an easy process. Making mistakes is part of foreign language learning, and evading problems is not an effective way to reduce FLA. Seeking help (from peers and professors) is nothing to be ashamed of and standing up for oneself and speaking up for the right to be supported is necessary. Also, international students may enrich their knowledge and better adjust to other cultures when they are willing to challenge their comfort zone (Liu, 2011). With a positive mindset, using common strategies of practicing, making friends with native speakers, and establishing motivations and goals (Bekleyen, 2009; Hurd & Xiao, 2010; Liu, 2011) that are found to improve English efficiency can also be effective in reducing FLA.

For educators, it is important to recognize and attend to students' emotional needs. Sometimes it's easy to neglect international graduate students' linguistic challenges in academic courses. However, through students' facial expressions, the ways that questions are posed and/or answered, and classroom activity participation patterns, to name a few, one still

can detect if a student feels anxious, upset, and/or embarrassed. When such obstructive (to learning) reactions appear, it is the instructor's responsibility to minimize such psychological tolls by proactively cultivating relaxed, friendly and supportive classroom atmosphere (Shao et al., 2013), clearly explaining the academic expectations and requirements, and paying attention to their own communication speed and tones. Further, the instructor should always be alert to and address the overt and subtle discrimination and isolation occurring in their classroom to ensure an inclusive learning environment.

The findings of the study showed that the participants' institution provided limited assistance or services in addressing the FLA experienced by these international graduate students, which, as reported by the participants, had negatively affected their sense of belonging. In agreement to Abbott's (2018) call for a provision of a "welcoming environment," we stress the criticality of truly tailored language support services and programs for all international graduate students in that regard. Instead of being placed in a generic language-only and remedial-oriented program before they enter graduate studies, international students could benefit from more tailored and culturally integrated English language curricular and assistance, designed with the students' needs, learning styles, and cultural and linguistic strengths and gaps in mind. For instance, a curriculum that allows for opportunities for international students to learn and practice day-to-day communication on and off the university campus beyond for academic purposes only and promoting cross-cultural understanding and relationship formations. It takes an institutional commitment to establish procedures and allocate resources to encourage administrative units and faculty to recognize and practice English language

support beyond immediate utilitarian purposes but more as developmentally anchored and culturally situated experiences key to an international student's overall growth.

Of note, our study has limitations. First, our data collection primarily relied on semi-structured interviews; while they allowed us to engage in-depth with the participants about their views and experiences, they may be inadequate as to fully capture the participants' emotional statuses and changes during and after such FLA experiences. Future research that uses longitudinal designs and/or observations can enrich our understanding of such affective complexity and negotiations. Second, the current study interviewed four Chinese graduate students; a larger sample size may help test out the current findings. Furthermore, future studies could involve faculty since their awareness and/or misperceptions of FLA can affect pedagogies and accommodations for international students – aspects, when better understood, may shed light on meaningful change for addressing FLA. Lastly, since all participants in the study were from one Midwestern university in the U.S., the resultant themes cannot be generalizable to other higher education institutions and/or settings, though generalization was not the intended goal of this exploratory qualitative study. Nonetheless, given the complexity of FLA and second language acquisition, future research may wish to include participants from different educational institutions and countries.

The findings of the study have implications for researchers and educators who would like to gain a better understanding of the FLA and EFL students' emotional difficulties with second/foreign language learning. They shed light on areas for improvement and innovations concerning the second language curriculum design, culturally relevant pedagogies, and course or program evaluations. With the findings revealing FLA tended to have similar manifestations

across various subjects and contexts, our study reaffirms the importance of recognizing, acknowledging, and attending to both emotional and cognitive forces in shaping learning – both need to be truly actualized in integration for healthy student development and growth academically and socially.

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Appendix A

Background Information Questionnaire

1. Participant Name:
2. Gender: Male_____Female_____
3. Age_____
4. Major: _____
5. Year in college: Master_____, Doctoral_____
6. What other foreign languages have you learned?
    Foreign Language 1_____ Proficiency level: low   intermediate   advanced   near-native
    Foreign Language 2_____ Proficiency level: low   intermediate   advanced   near-native
    Foreign Language 3_____ Proficiency level: low   intermediate   advanced   near-native
7. Do you consider your other foreign language learning experiences as successful?   Y/N
8. Have you ever been classified as having foreign language anxiety in English?   Y/N
9. List all the English support you have got in KSU:

_____
10. How long have you studied English _____?
11. What is your motivation for learning English? _____

_____.
12. Have you ever been to Other foreign language countries?   Y/N
        If yes, how long (total period of time)? _____ Year(s)_____ Month(s)
        For what purpose? _____
13. Do you use English as a L2 to talk with your parents or other family members?   Y/N
14. How much time do you spend in using English each week?   _____ hours (estimated)
        For what purpose? Tests/exams_____, assignments_____, fun_____, others
        (please specify) _____
15. Rate you overall English ability on 1 to 10 continuums, 10 being excellent.
            1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10
16. Rate the general difficult level of the English using in your major on a 1 to 10 continuum,
    10 being very difficult.
            1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10
17. What English tasks are most difficult for you? Please order these tasks according to their
    difficult level.
        a. Listening   b. Speaking
        c. Reading   d. Writing
    Most difficult _____   _____   _____   _____ Least difficult
18. English is harder than I expected after higher education.   Y/N

Thank you for your participation!

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

1. Tell me your English learning experiences before you came to the U.S.

2. Tell me about your English learning experiences here at [Suunyn University]?

3. Tell me about your understanding of FLA.

4. Describe in detail:

   4a. the <u>in-class</u> situation or event that will provoke your anxiety during your studying abroad in the U.S.

   4b. the <u>off-class</u> situation or event that will provoke your anxiety during your studying abroad in the U.S.

5. What or who do you think has caused your anxiety the most? (who you feel is the most responsible for your described situation?)

6. Measure your own foreign language performance in your described anxious moment, from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).

7. Do you believe that you are good at learning English (that is, are you confident of your ability)? How so?

8. What do you usually do, when you find yourself in a stressful situation related to language?

9. In your opinion, how has your background influenced your FLA experience in the US?

10. What suggestions or recommendations do you have regarding helping international graduate students with FLA?

11. Is there anything else you want to share with me about your FLA that we have not discussed?

Thank you for your time and attention. I will get this data analyzed and get back in touch with you later. We are going to set up a time to meet to check my interpretations of your responses.

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[i] It means forced or contrived conversations that are difficult to continue.

[ii] English Corner, *ying-yu-jiao*, 英语角. It is a common phenomenon in China, particularly on higher education campuses. It refers to an informal gathering where people meet regularly in a designated area practicing English through conversing with one another.