

Are ESOL Students Really Experiencing High Levels of Academic Anxiety at North American Universities? – Reports by Chinese Graduate Students

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Abstract

This purpose of this qualitative study was to examine whether or not four Chinese Ph.D. students were experiencing high levels of academic anxiety at two North American universities and if so, their perceptions of the factors contributing to their academic anxiety, the impact of academic anxiety on their learning, and their strategies for coping with academic anxiety. The results show that two participants were experiencing high levels of academic anxiety. Majors that involve more language usage, such as education, political studies, and religious studies, seem to cause greater levels of academic anxiety than those majors that rely more on graphs, tables, numbers and symbols, such as mathematics, biology, and chemistry. The major sources of high levels of academic anxiety, as reported by these two participants, are financial difficulties, language barriers, cultural differences, being away from family and friends, and difficulty in finding an employment. Academic anxiety decreases their self-confidence and also has a negative impact on their academic learning, social life, and personal feelings. Important implications are discussed.

Key Words: Chinese graduate students, North American universities, Academic anxiety , Academic learning

INTRODUCTION

The number of English-to-speakers-of-other-languages (ESOL) students has more than doubled since 1980s and has recently grown significantly at North American universities; Chinese students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) represent the single largest group of ESOL students (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2009; Institute of International Education, 2010). Further, Chinese graduate students make up approximately eighty percent of Chinese students currently studying at North American universities. These Chinese graduate students have generally received their undergraduate education in PRC. The academic learning experience of this group of Chinese graduate students has important educational implications for university administrators and educators (Huang & Klinger, 2006). Chinese graduate students are from a very different educational system and cultural background. Previous research has indicated that there are considerable challenges faced by Chinese graduate students in their academic studies at North American universities, e.g., their unfamiliarity with North American culture, their inadequate English proficiency, their social and emotional challenges, their financial difficulties, etc. (Chen, 1999; Huang & Brown, 2009; Huang, 2004, 2005, 2009; Huang & Klinger, 2006; Lin, 2002; Liu, 1994; Myles, Qian & Cheng, 2002; Wan, 2001; Zhong, 1996).

For example, Chinese culture is very different from the culture of North America and the cultural differences have a negative impact on their academic studies (Huang & Brown, 2009; Huang & Rinaldo, 2009). This is because students from different cultures learn in different ways, and may differ in their learning styles, self-expressions and communication styles (Bennett, 1999). Potentially, all these challenges may contribute to anxiety for Chinese graduate students; and consequently anxiety negatively affects their academic learning at North American universities (Feng, 1991; Huang, 1998; Sun & Chen, 1997; Upton, 1989). The questions of whether or not Chinese graduate students are really experiencing high levels of anxiety in their academic studies and if so, what factors cause their anxiety and how anxiety affects their academic learning at North American universities merit closer examination, on which limited research has been conducted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chinese graduate students face both challenges and anxiety when studying at North American universities. However, these two concepts are not completely separated in the literature. For example, major challenges faced by Chinese graduate students include financial burdens, changes in culture, legal frustrations, leaving their families, differences in classroom instruction, and anxiety (Huang & Rinaldo, 2009; Huang & Klinger, 2006). Anxiety has then become a major challenge for Chinese graduate students (Huang & Klinger, 2006).

Furthermore, not only is anxiety a challenge itself, but it is argued that anxiety can be caused by the plethora of other challenges that Chinese graduate students face on a day to day basis. For this reason, the challenges and causes contributing to anxiety merit closer examination.

Cultural context

Academic learning differs depending on the cultural context, as argued by Tweed and Lehman (2002). They proposed a Confucian-Socratic framework to analyze the impact different cultural contexts have on academic learning. Confucius (551-479 BC), an Eastern exemplar, valued behavioral reform, effortful and respectful learning, and pragmatic attainment of necessary knowledge (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). “Effort-focused conceptions of learning, pragmatic orientations to learning, and acceptance of behavioral reform as an academic goal” (p. 93) are the trademarks of Confucian-oriented learning. On the other hand, Socrates (469-399 BC), a Western exemplar, valued the evaluation of others’ knowledge, the questioning of both his own and others’ beliefs, self-generated knowledge, and teaching by establishing doubt. Socratic-oriented learning can be described as “overt and private questioning, expression of personal hypotheses, and a desire for self-directed tasks” (p. 93).

These two philosophies can be looked to when studying the differences between the Chinese culture and the North American culture. While Confucian philosophy has had a strong impact on Chinese people’s viewpoints, ways of thinking, behaviors, and experiences; North American students and professors are more influenced by Socratic beliefs. Confucius believed that hard work, rather than ability, contributed most to success. He also asserted that “behavior reform is a central goal of education because virtuous behavior can ensure individual success and societal harmony” (Tweed & Lehman, 2002, p. 92). By obeying and respecting authorities, one exhibits “the highest expression of the sense of justice” (Confucius, 1947, p. 332). The primary goal of pragmatic learning of essential knowledge was to provide individuals with the ability to perform civil service jobs competently. Chinese students who come to North American universities often bring a Confucian-oriented perspective to their learning, while their professors and peers tend to demonstrate a Socratic orientation. Western cultures and beliefs are not familiar to Chinese students; and this unfamiliarity, not surprisingly, causes them to be uncomfortable with North American culture and the North American learning environment. These feelings of unease are especially prevalent for those students whose studies focus on the humanities and social sciences (Huang & Rinaldo, 2009; Huang & Klinger, 2006). Financial difficulties and insufficient English proficiency magnify these difficulties and further reduces these students’ ability to participate in academic and social activities (Feng, 1991; Huang & Klinger, 2006).

Language barriers

Language is an obvious challenge to Chinese graduate students. They have difficulties in understanding academic lectures, American idioms and jokes, and in taking notes (Feng, 1991; Huang, 2004, 2005, 2006; Huang & Rinaldo, 2009). The English language problem was identified as the biggest obstacle in the process of Chinese graduate students’ intercultural adjustment although they came to the United States with high TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and GRE (Graduate Record Examination) scores (Sun & Chen, 1997). Poor English proficiency hinders their understanding and has a strong negative impact on their communication with North American professors and peers (Huang & Klinger, 2006). Further, poor English proficiency was cited as the major reason that Chinese students, in North America, rated their first-year academic learning as “not enjoyable” (Huang, 1998).

Instructional differences

North American teachers’ different instructional styles, as discussed by Huang and Rinaldo (2009), affect Chinese graduate students’ classroom learning. For example, in North American classrooms, student participation is encouraged; teachers usually regard themselves as students’ facilitators of learning but not their authorities of knowledge. They can admit their ignorance on a topic and give students’ freedom to express their different ideas. However, Chinese graduate students are used to teachers’ point-by-point lectures and therefore, expect their North American teachers to give detailed explanations of every topic and to put the key points or outlines on the blackboard in order for them to take detailed notes. When their expectations are not met, they tend to think that their North American teachers are not as resourceful and responsible as their teachers back in China. But actually it is also a cultural difference. Instruction is primarily lecture format in Chinese classroom, whereas North American teachers tend to implement critical thinking and discussion into their classrooms (Huang & Klinger, 2006). Chinese classrooms and instruction are often formatted in a formal, step-by-step manner, while the North American classroom is often casual and informal. The teacher is the driving force behind Chinese classroom instruction, whereas in North America the student tends to also play a major role in the learning process. Further, North American teachers expect their students to do extensive reading and look for related information on their own outside of class (Upton, 1989).

Financial burden

Huang & Klinger (2006) found financial burdens to be one of the top three negative factors impacting Chinese graduate students' academic studies. Financial support in the form of scholarships, fellowships, teaching and research assistantships from the North American universities and the tuition fees as well as other expenses have become the most important criteria for Chinese students from PRC when choosing North American graduate schools (Huang & Rinaldo, 2009). Students who do not receive full scholarship face the burden of paying tuition, while also supporting themselves and possibly their family financially. Even when students do receive full scholarships, the financial burden is still unavoidable as students are required to maintain minimum grade levels in order to secure their scholarships and funding (Huang & Klinger, 2006). Feng (1991) further indicated that Chinese students' financial situations have a negative impact on their academic achievement, English language skill improvement, as well as their participation in social activities.

Legal issues

Chinese graduate students face residency issues and the need for visas (Huang & Rinaldo, 2009). For example, "maintaining a legal status in America is a very important rule for international students, especially after September 11, 2001. Because many Chinese graduate students in social sciences choose research topics that have a Chinese context, they need to go back to China regularly to attend conferences and collect data. However, because of the strict immigration laws, these students have to re-apply for a U.S. visa each time in order to re-enter America and many Chinese graduate students have been declined re-admittance. This has a profoundly negative influence on them as well as others seeking to complete American degrees" (pp. 6-7). Further, obtaining the visas needed to visit home also proves difficult and contributes to emotional challenges as Chinese graduate students are separated from friends and family at home in China.

Social and emotional challenges

Often times, Chinese graduate students find it hard to make friends and communicate effectively with professors and peers in North America (Huang & Rinaldo, 2009; Huang & Klinger, 2006). Language barriers and financial difficulties only increase the problem, making it difficult for Chinese students to participate in social activities and campus functions. Loneliness and anxiety are the two major emotional challenges that Chinese graduate students face (Huang & Rinaldo, 2009; Huang & Klinger, 2006). Loneliness comes from substantial distance between the Chinese students and their loved ones. Their parents, families and friends often remain in China while the students study in North America. They have to experience a "long affective torment" (Huang & Rinaldo, 2009, p. 10). Further, they are experiencing a high level of academic anxiety which negatively affected their academic study, as commented by one participant in Huang and Rinaldo (2009) study: "When I first started my graduate program, I was very anxious about finishing my assignments on time. I also worried about writing course papers. In class I was anxious about participating class discussions, and sometimes, being asked to answer questions. In the following years I worried about writing my thesis and defending my thesis. Currently I worry about finding a job. Anxiety, as a factor, has negative impact on my graduate study here." (p. 10)

Anxiety and academic anxiety

Spielberger (1983) defined "anxiety" as "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system." It can refer to not only a person's stable personality but also his transitory emotional state. Accordingly, two anxiety constructs have been developed: trait anxiety and state anxiety. Because they are more likely to interpret a wider range of situations as threatening; people with high trait anxiety tend to produce state anxiety more frequently than those with low trait anxiety (Head & Knight, 1988). Anxiety is a common phenomenon in people's learning process. It prevents learners from completing academic tasks successfully, and so it interrupts learning. Academic anxiety then refers to the anxiety that occurs during the learning process (Garcia, 1998). High levels of academic anxiety have a debilitating effect on concept learning, academic performance, and environmental adaptation, and so leading lower learning efficiency (Clark & Schwartz, 1989). Thus, high levels of academic anxiety impede academic learning and achievement.

Chinese graduate students' inadequate English proficiency, their financial difficulties, their lack of North American educational and academic cultural understanding, together with their social and emotional challenges and some other possible factors may increase their anxiety levels, which could adversely affect their academic learning at North American universities. However, little research has examined the questions of whether or not Chinese graduate students are really experiencing high levels of academic anxiety and if so, what factors cause their academic anxiety and how it affects their learning at North American universities. Considering the large number of Chinese graduate students studying in North America and the limited research conducted in the area, it is of great importance to examine these questions.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to hear the voices of four Chinese graduate students about their North American academic learning experiences, focusing on academic anxiety and its causes and impact on their learning. Specifically, it was to examine whether or not they experience high levels of academic anxiety and if so, their perceptions of 1) the factors contributing to their academic anxiety, 2) the impact of academic anxiety on their learning, and 3) their strategies for dealing with academic anxiety. Random purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants due to the fact that it adds credibility to the study (Gay & Airasian, 2003). A pool of 10 participants from two North American universities was selected. After determining that four interviews could reasonably be dealt with for the purpose of this study, four participants from the original pool were randomly selected to participate. Four Ph.D. students from PRC, currently studying at two North American universities, were invited to participate in this study. At the time of the interview, Participant A (female) was a fifth year Ph.D. student majoring in cognitive studies; Participant B (female) was in her third year working towards a Ph.D. in biology and chemistry; Participant C (male) was a fifth year mathematics Ph.D. student; and Participant D (female) was in her second year of study for a Ph.D. in organic chemistry.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via telephone between the principal researcher and the participants. These interviews allowed the participants to describe their academic learning experience, identifying their perceptions of their level of academic anxiety, the factors contributing to their academic anxiety and how, if at all, it affects their academic learning at these two North American universities. To avoid any miscommunications, interviews were conducted in the participants' native language, Chinese, and then transcribed and translated into English. The translated transcriptions were further checked through back-translation. The participants' responses were then sorted, categorized, and analyzed, to determine if they faced high levels of academic anxiety, and if so, what factors contributed to academic anxiety, how it affected their learning, and the strategies they have developed to cope with academic anxiety. Responses relevant to these questions were grouped together and then categorized and analyzed according to the recurring themes.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The results of the interviews are summarized below. As described above, the following three questions were investigated: 1) Whether or not the participants are experiencing high levels of academic anxiety? 2) If so, what are the causes of their academic anxiety? And 3) what impact does academic anxiety have on their learning. Further, the strategies they have developed to cope with academic anxiety were examined.

Whether or not participants are experiencing high levels of academic anxiety?

The answer to this question could be both yes and no. Participants A and C reported that they were experiencing high levels of academic anxiety. Participant A, who was a female Ph.D. student studying cognition in her fifth year, reported that "I am always under huge pressure during study for my Ph.D. and my pressure come from multiple sources." For example, although participant A had worked as a college English teacher for seven years in China before she started her Ph.D., she still had language problems in her doctoral study. Sometimes she could not express herself very well in both writing and classroom discussions. Due to language barriers and cultural differences, she also felt very anxious to communicate with her professors in and outside classrooms. Similarly, participant C, who was a male Ph.D. student studying mathematics in his fifth year, experienced high levels of academic anxiety at the beginning of his doctoral program. He commented that "Of course I experienced a lot of pressure and anxiety. I think [that] the biggest problem [was] is English. [As a teaching assistant,] I had to teach in English. [Further,] I had problem about my study too. Sometimes I could not meet my professors' expectations at the beginning of my program." He further stated that "during the first year of my [doctoral] study, I felt very nervous about my English abilities and doing presentations; but with time, these anxieties faded."

Unlike participants A and C, participants B and D reported that they were not experiencing high levels of anxiety in their academic study. Participant B, who was a female Ph.D. student studying biology and chemistry, reported that "I do not have much difficulty in my [doctoral] study. I think that it is easier to do a Ph.D. here in America than in China. ... I feel more comfortable and relaxed here [in America]." Similarly, participant D, who was a female Ph.D. student studying organic chemistry, reported that "I do not feel anxious about communicating with professors and classmates. I do not feel anxious about giving presentations either because I had prior teaching experience in China. However, due to the complexity of the content, I do have some nervousness and anxiety about my school work. ... But the anxiety makes me stronger and pushes me to get improvement."

What factors contribute to participants A and D's high levels of academic anxiety?

Apparently, both participants A and C experienced high levels of anxiety in their academic learning.

Participant A had experienced high level of academic anxiety during her entire doctoral program, whereas participant C had experienced high level of academic anxiety in his first year of Ph.D. program. Although participant C experienced challenges such as unfamiliarity with North American culture and being far away from family and friends like other Chinese students at North American universities, these challenges did not create high level of academic anxiety in his entire doctoral program because he was holding a full-scholarship and did not have any financial burdens. As mentioned above, the major source of his high level of academic anxiety in his first year was inadequate English proficiency. Due to his limited English proficiency, he experienced great anxiety in both his study as a student and teaching as a teaching assistant. But with time and more practice in using English and exposure to English-speaking environment, his high level of academic anxiety was reduced.

However, participant A's situation was very different. As mentioned previously, her high level of academic anxiety comes from multiple sources. First, she was not as lucky as other participants who had received full scholarships to cover both tuition fees and living expenses for their entire Ph.D. programs. Participant A just received partial scholarships which covered tuition fees for up to four years. She experienced considerable financial difficulties and reported that "the financial burden and the pressure of keeping my scholarship became a major factor that caused my high level of academic anxiety." Second, language barriers increased her level of academic anxiety. She felt anxious about communicating with professors and peers. She also felt anxious about giving oral presentations and participating in oral discussions, which are generally practiced and encouraged in North American classrooms. Third, cultural differences also added to her academic anxiety. Cultural differences between China and North America created challenges for her to understand academic lectures, meet academic expectations, and interact with North Americans. Fourth, being away from family members and friends caused her loneliness and anxiety, which ultimately negatively affect her study. Last but not least, pressure of finding a job directly increased her level of academic anxiety. As an education major Ph.D. student, participant A realized the difficulty in finding an employment. She commented that "most education major Ph.D. student find jobs at colleges and universities; however, there are usually dozens of applicants compete for one position. Being a non-English speaker, I am not confident in competing with North Americans."

What impact does academic anxiety have on their learning?

As commented by participants A and C, a high level of academic anxiety can negatively affect their learning at North American universities in the following four ways. First, it decreases their self-confidence. Participant A commented that "lack of self-confidence can be detrimental to our academic success at North American universities." Second, it lowers their academic performance. "High levels of academic anxiety directly affect our academic achievement. For example, test anxiety can lower our marks," responded by participant C. Third, it negatively their social life at the school. For example, being academically anxious can prevent them from socializing and interacting effectively with people on campus. Finally, it leads to negative personal feelings. Participant A stated that "I am not happy due to the financial burden of the school; I then become more and more anxious; and more anxiety brings me an even worse mood; and finally I become helpless and hopeless."

What strategies have they developed to cope with academic anxiety?

Participants A and C have developed effective strategies to cope with their high levels of academic anxiety. Financial burden has created participant A tremendous amount of anxiety. She tried to manage money efficiently by "cutting her budget and getting more student loans." Language as a factor has caused both participants A and C academic anxiety. Participant A's strategy to cope with language barriers was to "talk to professors more" and ask for assistance whenever she needed. Participant C believed that he improved his English skills by talking to friends and peers in English and "getting practice as much as possible." Additionally, they also commented that they tried to familiarize themselves with North American classroom culture, develop new study skills, and expand their social network by making more friends and participating in more social activities. At the same time, they made suggestions for their North American professors. Participant C suggested that professors "speak slowly class, and give more chance for students to communicate with them, preferably in person." Similarly, participant A commented that professors should "talk to their international students regularly and understand their learning difficulties and needs."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To further examine all interviews with four Chinese Ph.D. students studying at these two North American universities, the following observations or conclusions are made. First of all, not all of them are experiencing high levels of academic anxiety. Participants A, who was a social science Ph.D. student, experienced a high level of academic anxiety during her entire program. The other three participants, who are science Ph.D. students were not experiencing high levels of academic anxiety at all with the exception that participant

A had experienced a high level of academic anxiety in his first year of doctoral study. This finding seems in conformity with previous literature (Huang & Klinger, 2006; Huang & Rinaldo, 2009). This finding further indicates that the major Chinese graduate students are studying for becomes a decisive factor that causes them both challenges and academic anxiety at North American universities. Studies in social sciences (e.g., education, religion) require more language skills and cultural knowledge, whereas studies in mathematics, biology, and chemistry have less linguistic and cultural requirements (Huang, 2006, 2009; Huang & Klinger, 2006). The following comment made by participant C provides similar evidence, “math is about special symbol and signals, so there is no trouble to understand each other in class.” Therefore, majors that involve more language usage, such as education, political studies, and religious studies, seem to cause greater levels of academic anxiety than those majors that rely more on graphs, tables, numbers and symbols, such as mathematics, biology, and chemistry.

Furthermore, it is apparent that Chinese students should be prepared mentally, emotionally and physically before enrolling in a North American university for graduate studies. As suggested by all four participants, on the one hand, prospective students should be aware of these issues and problems they may face during their graduate studies and do whatever they can to prepare themselves; on the other hand, before they leave China they should understand and learn more about the differences between China and North America by taking a course or workshop, which would be a great stepping block into the North American culture. To conclude, this study has provided substantial and detailed information on the understanding of what contributes to Chinese graduate students' academic anxiety and how academic anxiety affects their learning at North American universities. The results are very useful and valuable for both North American educators and Chinese students. However, due to the limited number of interviewees (i.e., four Chinese students who are all Ph.D. level students), it is suggested that this study be replicated at more North American universities with Chinese graduate students at both master's and doctoral levels) to validate the findings. A slight variation might include interviewing some North American professors who teach and/or supervise Chinese graduate students.

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