

# International Journal of Research in English

**ISSN Print:** 2664-8717  
**ISSN Online:** 2664-8725  
**Impact Factor (RJIF):** 8.36  
**IJRE 2025; 7(2):** 879-886  
[www.englishjournal.net](http://www.englishjournal.net)  
Received: 07-11-2025  
Accepted: 09-12-2025

**Itayi Artwell Mareya**  
Department of Foreign  
Languages, Hanjiang Normal  
University, Hubei, Shiyan  
China

**Feng Xiaohua**  
Asia-Africa Teacher Education  
Research Center, Hanjiang  
Normal University, China

**Liberty Artwell Mareya**  
Department of Science and  
Technology, Changchun  
University of Science & Tech,  
China

**Amanita R Mareya**  
Department of International  
Education, Hebei University,  
Baoding, China

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Itayi Artwell Mareya**  
Department of Foreign  
Languages, Hanjiang Normal  
University, Hubei, Shiyan  
China

## Identifying Key Linguistic and Affective Barriers to English Language Proficiency among Chinese Undergraduates English Classroom

**Itayi Artwell Mareya, Feng Xiaohua, Liberty Artwell Mareya and Amanita R Mareya**

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2025.v7.i2m.568>

### Abstract

Despite extensive English education, many Chinese undergraduates struggle to achieve advanced proficiency. This study examines the intertwined linguistic and affective barriers in tertiary English classrooms, guided by Second Language Acquisition theory and the Affective Filter Hypothesis. Using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, the research surveyed 171 undergraduates and conducted follow-up interviews and classroom observations. Results identify productive skills—speaking and academic writing—as the primary linguistic challenges, characterized by fossilized errors and L1 interference. These are compounded by significant affective barriers, including pervasive Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (particularly fear of negative evaluation) and predominantly instrumental motivation focused on exam success. Teacher-centered pedagogy further limits authentic practice, creating a cyclical barrier to proficiency development. The study concludes that the proficiency plateau is a socio-affective phenomenon rooted in traditional teaching and assessment systems. It recommends pedagogical shifts toward task-based, student-centered approaches to lower the affective filter and enhance communicative competence.

**Keywords:** English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Chinese Undergraduates, Linguistic Barriers, Affective Barriers, Language Anxiety, Communicative Proficiency, Classroom Dynamics

### Introduction

Ortega L. (2009)<sup>[13]</sup>. Asserts that the field of Second language acquisition is to examine the human capacity to learn additional languages in late childhood, adolescence, or adulthood, after the first language. It is assumed by Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014)<sup>[15]</sup> that about sixty percent of the world population is multilingual. The acquisition of English as a foreign language represents a significant and sustained educational investment in China, where it is a compulsory subject from the third grade. Consequently, most, if not all, first-year college students embark on their higher education having undergone approximately twelve years of formal English instruction. Despite this extended period of rigorous study, a persistent and widely acknowledged concern remains regarding the actual English language proficiency of many undergraduates. While students often achieve commendable scores on high-stakes secondary school and university entrance examinations, their practical communicative competence and comprehensive language skills frequently fall short of expectations. In contrast to Cao, Y., & Philp, J. (2006)<sup>[2]</sup> pg. 1 who emphasizes the creation of a model of Willingness To Communication (WTC) author (1) observed a Chinese class of English major that most of the Chinese students are willing to communicate with other students in English, however they avoid to do so because of fear to be negatively evaluated and fear of making mistakes and be laughed at. Liu, M., & Jackson, J. (2008)<sup>[10]</sup> also agrees with the author's observation. This observation is supported by Dörnyei, Z. (2005)<sup>[3]</sup>. pg.1 as alluded by Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000)<sup>[16]</sup> who asserts the reason being because of individual differences in students' behaviour due to language aptitude, motivation, and 'self-motivation' and second language acquisition Learning styles. Ellis, R. (2008)<sup>[4]</sup>. pg.191-193 attribute the challenges of second language acquisition to external factors and social factors which author (1) observed from his class when students suggested that they spend more time in a Chinese environment after English classes when they do shopping talking to friends and

when communicating with their parents all is done in Chinese language. Peng, J. (2012)<sup>[14]</sup> is of the view that classroom interaction in English as Foreign Language (EFL) in China is successful through the degree of students' willingness to speak the target language.

This discrepancy between test performance and applicable proficiency suggests a complex underlying issue. The reasons for this gap are varied and often tied to individual students' exposure to, and engagement with, authentic English-language environments outside the formal classroom. A prevalent interpretation is that the prevailing assessment-driven culture of pre-tertiary education has fostered a strategic approach where many students learn primarily to pass examinations rather than to achieve functional fluency. This has cultivated a myth that high school English results may not be a reliable indicator of genuine language capability, pointing instead to a potential disconnect between pedagogical aims, learning strategies, and ultimate linguistic outcomes. While Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986)<sup>[6]</sup> pg.1 citing Guiora A.Z (1994) who argues that language learning is profoundly unsettling psychological proposition because it threatens an individual's self-concept and the world view, Brown, H. D. (2007)<sup>[11]</sup>. pg.6 describes language as a complex specialized skill that is systematic and a set of arbitrary symbol. Krashen, S. D. (1982)<sup>[7]</sup>, describes language acquisition as including implicit learning, informal learning, and natural learning. Many Chinese students learning English blame the Chinese strategies of learning English in Chinese schools with which teachers and students concentrate on making sure that students learn how to pass an examination and not to improve language proficiency as against the strategies used in Britain for example where teachers and students emphasize language proficiency, Gao, X. (2006)<sup>[5]</sup>. This however does not mean that all Chinese students of English major only study English just to pass examination because during class observation author (1) acknowledges Krashen, S. D. (1985)<sup>[8]</sup> 's view of natural language acquisition. Some few Chinese students have proven to be naturally capable to acquire second language skills without much hurdle. Regardless of all Li, J. (2013) puts motivation as one of the major positive influences in Chinese English classes. Young, D. J. (1991) and Zheng, Y. (2008)<sup>[19, 21]</sup>. assumes that Language anxiety significantly affects language learning, impacting motivation and self-esteem while Zhang, X., & Head, K. (2010)<sup>[20]</sup>. suggests that Chinese students of English major 's confidence and ability to speak English would improve through more personal engagement with the course.

To investigate this phenomenon, this study was conducted at XXX University, focusing on students in their first to third years of undergraduate study. By examining this cohort, the research seeks to move beyond the speculative narrative and ground the discussion in empirical observation. It aims to explore the correlation between prior test-oriented learning experiences and current proficiency levels, while also considering the role of post-secondary academic and environmental factors in either mitigating or perpetuating the proficiency gap. This investigation not only contributes to a clearer understanding of the challenges in China's English education trajectory but also aims to inform more effective pedagogical interventions at the tertiary level.

## Materials and Methods

## A Sequential Explanatory Investigation

This study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, grounded in theories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and the Affective Filter Hypothesis. The purpose was to first quantify the prevalence and correlation of key linguistic and affective factors among Chinese undergraduates, and then to use qualitative inquiry to explain, contextualize, and deepen the understanding of these statistical patterns. The research was conducted in three phases.

### Phase 1: Quantitative Survey

The initial quantitative phase aimed to map the landscape of perceived challenges among a broad participant pool.

### Participants

**Number & Selection:** 171 undergraduate students were recruited via stratified random sampling.

### Rationale

This sample size provided robust data for statistical analysis, while the institutional focus ensured the findings reflected contexts with significant English education investment.

### Instrument

A structured questionnaire was developed, combining validated scales and tailored items.

**Linguistic Barriers Section:** Assessed perceived difficulty across core skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing) using Likert scales. Items specifically probed challenges in vocabulary range, grammatical accuracy, fluency, and academic writing conventions.

**Affective Barriers Section:** Incorporated standardized instruments, including the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to measure overall anxiety and sub-factors like *fear of negative evaluation*. Additional modules assessed motivation type (instrumental vs. integrative) and perceptions of classroom dynamics (teacher-centered vs. student-centered). Mac Intyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1994) as alluded by Tsui, A. B. M. (1996)<sup>[11]</sup>. asserts language anxiety as another significant factor affecting students of second language Acquisition students (SLA).

**Pilot Testing:** The questionnaire was piloted with 171 students from a similar institution to ensure clarity, reliability, and validity. Based on the provided survey data from 171 Chinese undergraduate students, the following analysis examines perceived difficulties in English skills, affective barriers, and learning experiences.

### Data Collection & Analysis

Surveys were administered electronically during scheduled class periods to ensure a high response rate. Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical software (SPSS). Analysis included: Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies) to identify the most salient linguistic and affective barriers. Correlation analyses to explore relationships between affective factors (such as anxiety scores) and self-reported linguistic proficiency.

### Classroom Observations

Conducted in the participants' regular English classes (approximately 20 sessions total across the institution). This was done through using a task based method as alluded by Nunan, D. (2004) and Skehan, P. (1998)<sup>[12, 17]</sup>. Eight

English classes involving three classes from first year students, three classes of sophomore students and two classes of third year students with a total of 320 students in the course of 6 months of observation.

A structured observation rubric focused on documenting: teacher talk vs. student talk time, the nature of questioning techniques (display vs. referential questions), opportunities for authentic communicative practice, and visible student affective responses (such as reluctance to participate).

### Qualitative Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated where necessary for analysis.

### Observation notes were systematized

Thematic Analysis was employed, using a hybrid inductive-deductive approach. Codes were initially derived from the theoretical framework such as "affective filter," "fossilization" and survey findings, but remained open to emergent themes.

Data triangulation between interview transcripts and observation notes was crucial for verifying themes, particularly regarding classroom dynamics and the cycle of anxiety and practice avoidance.

### Integration of Methods

The explanatory power of the design lay in the sequential connection. Quantitative results identified the widespread prevalence of high FLCA and specific productive skill deficits. The qualitative phase then explicitly explored how these phenomena intertwined—for example, by using interview data to explain *how* fear of negative evaluation directly inhibits speaking attempts, or using observation data to illustrate *how* teacher-centered dynamics restrict output opportunities, leading to fossilized errors. This integration confirmed that the proficiency plateau is not merely a cognitive linguistic issue, but a socio-affective phenomenon embedded in specific pedagogical and assessment contexts.

### Research Questions

1. How do students' high school English learning strategies (focused on exams) relate to their current English proficiency in university?
2. What do university students believe are the main reasons for the gap between their test scores and their actual communication skills?
3. In which specific language skills (such as speaking, academic writing, listening comprehension) do students feel the biggest gap between their test performance and real-world ability?
4. How confident are university students in using English for practical, non-academic tasks compared to taking exams?

### Research Ethics Statement

#### Ethical Approval and Oversight

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the University of Exemplary Research Institutional Review Board (IRB).

### Informed Consent Process

Prior to participation, all individuals were provided with a comprehensive information sheet detailing the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, potential risks and benefits, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or consequence.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. For the online survey component, consent was obtained digitally through a mandatory checkbox, which participants had to select to proceed, confirming they had read and understood the information and agreed to participate.

### Anonymity and Confidentiality

To protect participant privacy, all data were collected and stored in an anonymized format. Personally identifiable information (PII) such as names, email addresses, and IP addresses was neither collected nor stored.

All electronic data are stored on a secure, password-protected server owned by the University, accessible only to the principal investigator and named co-investigators. Physical documents, such as signed consent forms, are stored in a locked filing cabinet in a secure university office. All data will be retained for a period of five years post-publication, after which it will be securely destroyed.

### Minimization of Risk

The study was classified as presenting no more than minimal risk to participants. The primary risks identified were potential psychological discomfort when answering questions about stress and mental well-being. To mitigate this, participants were provided with a list of mental health support resources such as (university counselling services) at the beginning and end of the study. The researchers monitored for any signs of distress during the intervention phase and were prepared to pause or stop the session if necessary.

### Beneficence and Justice

The research design aimed to maximize potential benefits, such as providing participants with insights into their own stress levels and coping mechanisms, while minimizing risks. Participants were recruited from a diverse pool of remote workers to ensure equitable distribution of the research burdens and benefits, without unjustly excluding any group.

### Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no financial or personal relationships with any organizations or individuals that could inappropriately influence or bias the work presented.

### Results

#### Educational Background

First-year students constitute the largest group (36.3%), followed by third-year (29.8%), second-year (24.6%), and fourth-year students (9.4%). The sample skews toward earlier academic years, which may influence self-reported perceptions of language use and anxiety.

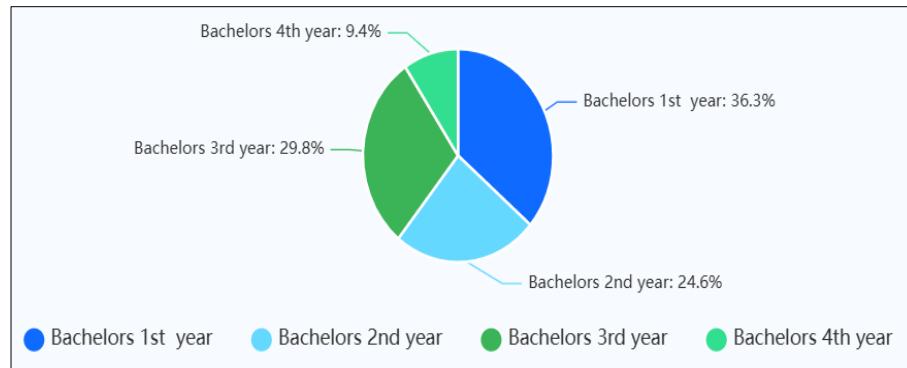


Fig 1: Educational background

Data were collected via questionnaires distributed to first- through fourth-year English major students at XXX Normal University (see Appendix 1)

Perceived Difficulty of English Skills in Real-World Use  
Students consistently reported that speaking and academic writing are more challenging in real use than in exams:  
Speaking: 48% found it “somewhat” or “much more difficult” than exams.

**Academic Writing:** Nearly 60% rated it as more difficult—the highest among all skills.

**Listening and Vocabulary:** Use were perceived as closer to exam difficulty, with around 45-55% considering them “about the same” or “easier.”

**Grammar in Production:** 49.2% reported greater difficulty in real-use contexts.

### Interpretation

Productive skills (speaking and writing) emerge as the primary barriers, while receptive skills (listening, vocabulary recognition) are more adaptable to real-world use. The high difficulty of academic writing may reflect limited genre exposure, lack of process-oriented writing instruction, and challenges in adapting to Western rhetorical conventions. Speaking difficulties likely stem from limited interactive practice, communicative anxiety, and insufficient authentic speaking opportunities.

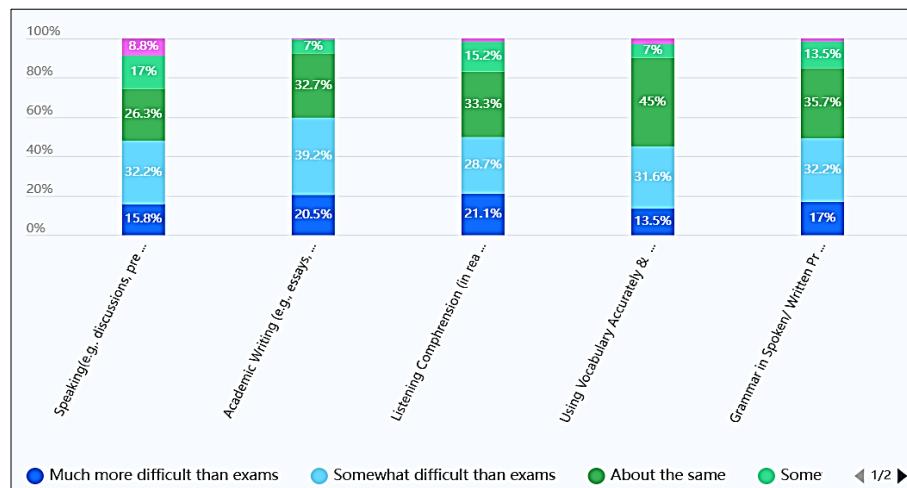


Fig 2: Perceived Difficulty of English Skills in Real-World Use

Results in this figure were collected via questionnaires. (See Appendix 1)

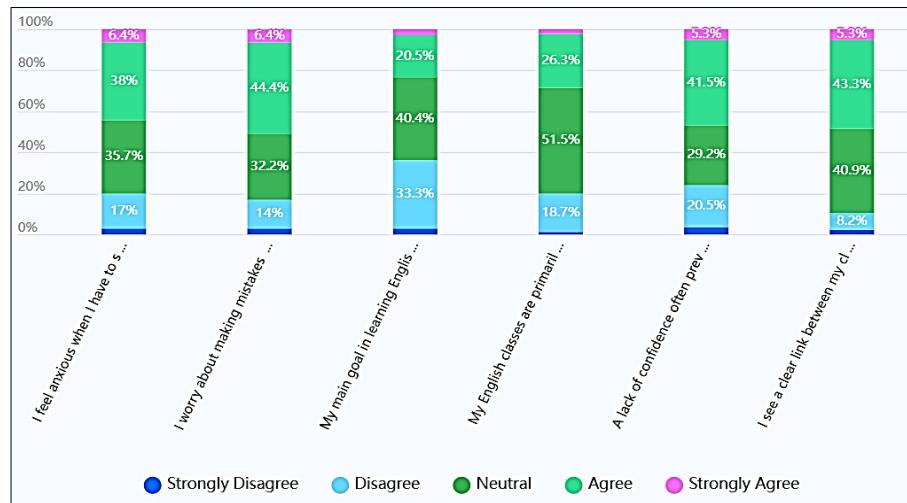
### Affective and Cognitive Factors in English Learning

The process of acquiring English as a second language is shaped by a complex interplay of psychological, motivational, and pedagogical factors. Recent survey data reveals a revealing portrait of the modern learner’s experience, highlighting significant challenges in affective domains alongside a strong recognition of the language’s practical value. This synthesis examines four critical dimensions: prevalent anxiety, exam-oriented motivation, teacher-centered instruction, and the interplay between confidence and perceived relevance. A predominant finding is the high level of prevalent anxiety among learners. Nearly half (44.4%) report feeling anxious when speaking English, and a majority of 50.8% express worry about making mistakes and facing judgment. This affective barrier suggests that the social and performative aspects of

language use generate substantial stress, potentially inhibiting communicative practice and oral fluency development. The fear of negative evaluation appears to be a central component of the learning experience for many. Regarding motivation, the data presents a nuanced picture of exam-oriented motivation. While only 23.4% of respondents explicitly agreed that passing exams is their primary goal, a substantial 40.4% adopted a neutral stance. This significant neutral bloc suggests that for a large portion of students, instrumental motivation related to assessment remains a considerable, if not always overtly acknowledged, driver of their engagement. Exam performance, therefore, continues to underpin the learning journey for many, even if it is not their sole or passionately stated objective. The instructional environment itself appears largely traditional, as indicated by perceptions of teacher-centered instruction. Almost half (46.8%) of students view their English classes as primarily teacher-led, with an additional 51.5%

responding neutrally. The minimal disagreement with this statement strongly indicates that a conventional pedagogical model, where the teacher directs most classroom activities and discourse, remains the dominant mode of instruction. This approach may limit opportunities for student-led, communicative practice. Finally, the survey uncovers a crucial relationship between confidence and perceived relevance. On one hand, 46.8% acknowledge that a lack of confidence actively hinders their use of English, aligning

with the anxiety metrics. On the other hand, an overwhelming 83.5% agree or strongly agree that the English taught in their classrooms has clear links to real-world applications. This is a strikingly positive perception, demonstrating that students largely do not question the practical utility of their studies. The central challenge, therefore, is not a perceived irrelevance but a gap between recognizing value and possessing the self-assurance to apply skills.



**Fig 3:** Affective and Cognitive Factors in English Learning

### Results from the figure above are found in (Appendix 1)

The persistent challenge of achieving functional English proficiency among university students in East Asian contexts often stems from a complex interplay of pedagogical, psychological, and motivational factors. Moving beyond mere identification of low test scores, a nuanced analysis reveals specific, interconnected bottlenecks that hinder communicative competence. A strategic reform of teaching practices, informed by these insights, is essential to align academic preparation with real-world linguistic demands. A primary bottleneck is the underdevelopment of productive skills—speaking and writing. The pronounced difficulty students exhibit in these areas suggests a frequent misalignment between exam-focused preparation and the requirements of authentic communication. To bridge this gap, pedagogy must increasingly incorporate task-based learning, project work, and simulated real-life interactions. Such methods shift focus from passive knowledge reception to active language use, thereby systematically enhancing fluency, coherence, and strategic competence in production.

Compounding this skill-based challenge are significant affective barriers. Anxiety and fear of mistakes can paralyze students, creating a debilitating cycle of avoidance and stagnation. To break this cycle, it is imperative to cultivate low-anxiety, supportive classroom environments that explicitly normalize errors as a natural part of the learning process. Encouraging gradual, scaffolded participation can build confidence, allowing students to take the linguistic risks necessary for improvement. Underpinning both skill and affective issues is the prevailing pedagogical approach. While students may perceive classroom content as relevant, traditional teacher-centered methods can inadvertently limit engagement and agency. A shift toward student-centered pedagogy—through techniques like flipped classrooms, peer discussions, student

presentations, and collaborative projects—can redistribute classroom dynamics. This shift empowers learners, actively involving them in the construction of knowledge and increasing both participation and investment. Furthermore, student motivation requires careful balancing. While instrumental motivation for exam success is a powerful and legitimate driver, an overemphasis on it can be unsustainable. Curriculum and instruction should therefore also nurture integrative motivation by fostering an appreciation for English as a vital tool for global communication, academic exchange, and intercultural understanding. This broader perspective can enhance intrinsic motivation, transforming language learning from a mere hurdle into a gateway to wider opportunities and connections. The possible underrepresentation of fourth-year students in such analyses indicates a need for further investigation. Targeted research is required to understand how escalating academic pressure, career preparation needs, or specialized English demands uniquely affect proficiency barriers in later years, ensuring that support mechanisms evolve alongside student priorities. Overcoming barriers to English proficiency demands a holistic and responsive strategy. By simultaneously targeting the productive skill bottleneck through active methodologies, mitigating affective filters via supportive environments, empowering students through pedagogical shifts, and broadening motivational foundations, educators can foster more robust and functional communicative abilities. Acknowledging and investigating contextual differences across year levels will further refine these efforts, paving the way for more effective and relevant English language education in higher learning institutions.

### Discussion

This study elucidates the persistent gap between examination performance and practical English proficiency

among Chinese undergraduates, framing it as a socio-affective phenomenon. The research identifies productive skills—speaking and academic writing—as the primary linguistic barriers, characterized by fossilized errors and L1 interference. These challenges are severely exacerbated by pervasive Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety, particularly fear of negative evaluation. Motivation is largely instrumental, prioritizing exam success over genuine communication, within teacher-centered classrooms that limit authentic practice. This creates a debilitating cycle where anxiety inhibits language use, which in turn prevents skill improvement and reinforces anxiety. Consequently, the common proficiency plateau is deeply rooted in traditional pedagogy and assessment systems. To break this cycle, the study advocates for pedagogical shifts to lower the affective filter. Recommendations include implementing task-based learning, fostering collaborative projects, and moving toward student-centered interaction. Furthermore, curriculum reform should bridge test-taking skills with communicative competence, while universities must provide immersive extracurricular opportunities. Ultimately, addressing these intertwined barriers is essential for developing genuine English communicative ability.

### Conclusion

This study identifies and elucidates the complex, interdependent nature of the linguistic and affective barriers that hinder the development of advanced English proficiency among Chinese undergraduates. Despite years of formal instruction, students frequently reach a proficiency plateau characterized by a significant disconnect between receptive skills and productive competencies, particularly in speaking and academic writing. Linguistically, this is manifested through fossilized errors, limited lexical range, and L1 interference.

Crucially, these linguistic challenges are not isolated; they are profoundly exacerbated and sustained by a powerful affective filter. The research confirms the pervasiveness of high Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), predominantly driven by a fear of negative evaluation. Coupled with a predominantly instrumental motivation focused on examination success rather than communicative competence, and reinforced by teacher-centered classroom dynamics, a detrimental cycle is established. Anxiety inhibits practice, limited practice prevents skill improvement, and poor skills further heighten anxiety.

Therefore, the commonly observed stagnation in English language learning is fundamentally a socio-affective phenomenon, deeply embedded within the traditional pedagogical approaches and assessment-oriented culture prevalent in the educational trajectory. Moving beyond a purely cognitive or instructional framework, this study underscores that sustainable improvement in communicative proficiency requires a holistic approach that directly addresses these affective dimensions.

To break this cycle, deliberate pedagogical shifts are necessary to lower the affective filter and create authentic language-use environments. The integration of task-based learning, collaborative projects, and a greater focus on student-centered interaction are not merely methodological choices but essential strategies for fostering both the confidence and the competence required for genuine English language proficiency. Ultimately, addressing the intertwined linguistic and affective barriers is key to bridging the

persistent gap between examination performance and real-world communicative ability.

### Recommendations for Practice

The global prominence of English as a lingua franca necessitates a shift in language education beyond rote grammar and vocabulary acquisition. To cultivate genuinely proficient and confident users of the language, a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach is required. This essay outlines a cohesive framework built upon four interdependent pillars: innovative curriculum design, specialized teacher training, dynamic assessment reform, and robust psychological support. Together, these components aim to create an educational ecosystem that is responsive, supportive, and effective.

The first pillar involves a transformative redesign of the curriculum to prioritize active, practical application. Moving beyond traditional textbook-centric models, this redesign would introduce three key elements. First, speaking workshops would provide dedicated, low-stakes environments for conversational practice, dialogue, and debate, focusing on fluency and spontaneous communication. Second, academic writing clinics would offer targeted support for structuring arguments, citing sources, and mastering the formal conventions of written English. Third, scenario-based simulations—such as mock interviews, customer service interactions, or conference presentations—would bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world usage, allowing students to apply their skills in contextualized, meaningful tasks. This curriculum shift ensures that learning is not merely theoretical but experiential and directly relevant.

The success of this redesigned curriculum hinges on the second pillar: comprehensive teacher training. Educators must be equipped with pedagogies that align with student-centered, interactive learning. Training programs should promote facilitative techniques where teachers guide rather than lecture, fostering collaborative projects, peer feedback, and problem-solving activities. Crucially, this training must also encompass affective support strategies. Teachers need tools to recognize and address language anxiety, cultivate a growth mindset, and create an inclusive classroom atmosphere where risk-taking and mistakes are viewed as essential to the learning process. A teacher who is both a pedagogical expert and an empathetic coach is fundamental to student engagement and success.

To accurately measure progress within this dynamic learning environment, the third pillar calls for a reform of assessment practices. An over-reliance on high-stakes, standardized testing often stifles the very competencies the new curriculum seeks to build. A shift toward integrative formative assessments is essential. Portfolios, which compile a student's work over time, showcase development and reflection. Presentations and project-based evaluations assess not only linguistic accuracy but also research, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills in authentic contexts. These methods provide a richer, more nuanced picture of a student's abilities and offer continuous feedback that guides future learning, making assessment itself a pedagogical tool rather than a mere terminal judgment.

Acknowledging the profound role of emotional factors, the fourth pillar establishes systemic psychological support. Language anxiety is a significant barrier to

acquisition and performance. Proactively offering workshops focused on managing this anxiety—through techniques like mindfulness, positive self-talk, and stress reduction—can empower learners. Furthermore, establishing structured peer support groups creates a community of practice where students can share challenges and strategies in a safe space, normalizing the learning struggle and building collective confidence. This layer of support ensures that students' affective needs are met, enabling them to engage more fully with the academic challenges of the curriculum.

Elevating English language education requires a synchronized evolution across all aspects of the learning environment. By designing a curriculum rooted in practical application, training teachers to be facilitators and mentors, implementing assessments that value process and performance, and integrating direct support for learners' psychological well-being, institutions can foster a more effective and humane approach to language learning. This holistic framework does not merely aim to teach English but to develop resilient, confident, and capable communicators, prepared to navigate the demands of an interconnected world.

1. **Shift Tertiary Curriculum Focus:** Universities should design first-year English courses that explicitly bridge the gap between test-taking skills and communicative competence. This could involve integrating more project-based learning, presentations, and authentic writing tasks alongside foundational grammar and vocabulary review.
2. **Implement Diagnostic and Needs Assessments:** Upon entry, universities should use diagnostic tests focused on practical skills (speaking, academic writing) rather than just general proficiency. This would allow for targeted interventions and placement in courses that address specific weaknesses stemming from test-preparation backgrounds.
3. **Promote Extracurricular and Immersive Opportunities:** Universities should systematically create and promote accessible English-language environments (such as conversation clubs, writing centers, guest lectures, partnerships for online language exchange) to compensate for students' lack of prior exposure to authentic English use.
4. **Longitudinal Study:** Conduct a longitudinal study tracking the same cohort of students from their first to final year at university to measure how specific tertiary-level interventions impact the evolution (or persistence) of the proficiency gap over time.
5. **Comparative Analysis:** Investigate the effectiveness of different university pedagogical models (such as, English Medium Instruction programs vs. traditional College English courses) in mitigating the pre-tertiary proficiency gap.
6. **Focus on Learner Psychology:** Explore the affective factors (such as motivation, anxiety, self-efficacy, identity) that influence how students transition from a test-oriented learning mindset to one focused on genuine language acquisition and use in university.
7. **Advocate for Holistic Entrance Evaluations:** The research findings could be used to inform broader educational policy discussions, suggesting a need for more holistic university entrance evaluations that

incorporate assessments of communicative skills, not just standardized test scores.

8. **Professional Development for Instructors:** Recommend and provide training for university English instructors on strategies to "re-tool" students who are highly skilled test-takers but reluctant or unskilled communicators, fostering a classroom culture that values fluency and accuracy.

## Acknowledgement

### CRediT CRediT

CRediT to all the participants who have contributed immensely in this research survey.

## Authors' Biographies

**Itayi Artwell Mareya:** ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7677-273X>

Dr Itayi Artwell Mareya is an Associate Professor at Hanjiang Normal University in the department of Foreign Languages. Artwell holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics and a Masters in Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages from Hebei University Baoding City in China.

**Feng Xiaohua:** ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6153-090X>

Feng Xiaohua is an Associate Professor at Hanjiang Normal University in the Department of Foreign Languages where she holds the position of a vice dean. Feng Xiaohua is a PhD graduate pending graduation this year with the University of Malaysia.

**Liberty Artwell Mareya:** ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-6186-1664>

Liberty is a student of Masters degree in Computer Science Application at Changchun University of Science and Technology. He holds a BSc in Computer Science and Technology from China Jiliang University in Hangzhou China.

### Amanita Ropafadzo Mareya

Amanita R Mareya is a student of Bachelor of Arts in Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages in the College of International Education at Hebei University in Baoding China.

## Notes

This research has limitations worth mentioning. We take note of our small sample that it does not represent the views of the majority of the Chinese student population who have challenges in learning English and we recommend further studies to be carried out on the same topic for greater significance.

## References

1. Brown HD. *Principles of language learning and teaching*. 5th ed. London: Pearson Longman; 2007.
2. Cao Y, Philp J. Interactional context and willingness to communicate: a comparison of behavior in whole class, group and dyadic interaction. *System*. 2006;34(4):480-93. doi:10.1016/j.system.2006.05.002.
3. Dörnyei Z. *The psychology of the language learner: individual differences in second language acquisition*. Mahwah (NJ): Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 2005.

4. Ellis R. *The study of second language acquisition*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2008.
5. Gao X. Understanding changes in Chinese students' uses of learning strategies in China and Britain: a socio-cultural re-interpretation. *System*. 2006;34(1):55-67. doi:10.1016/j.system.2005.03.007.
6. Horwitz EK, Horwitz MB, Cope J. Foreign language classroom anxiety. *Mod Lang J*. 1986;70(2):125-32. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4781.1986.tb05256.x.
7. Krashen SD. *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon Press; 1982.
8. Krashen SD. *The input hypothesis: issues and implications*. London: Longman; 1985.
9. Li J. Chinese university students' English learning motivation and its influence on their English learning outcomes [doctoral dissertation]. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong; 2013.
10. Liu M, Jackson J. An exploration of Chinese EFL learners' unwillingness to communicate and foreign language anxiety. *Mod Lang J*. 2008;92(1):71-86. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4781.2008.00687.x.
11. MacIntyre PD, Gardner RC. The subtle effects of language anxiety on cognitive processing in the second language. *Lang Learn*. 1994;44(2):283-305. doi:10.1111/j.1467-1770.1994.tb01103.x.
12. Nunan D. *Task-based language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2004.
13. Ortega L. *Understanding second language acquisition*. London: Routledge; 2009.
14. Peng J. Towards an ecological understanding of willingness to communicate in EFL classrooms in China. *System*. 2012;40(2):203-13. doi:10.1016/j.system.2012.02.002.
15. Richards JC, Rodgers TS. *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2014.
16. Ryan RM, Deci EL. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: classic definitions and new directions. *Contemp Educ Psychol*. 2000;25(1):54-67. doi:10.1006/ceps.1999.1020.
17. Skehan P. *A cognitive approach to language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1998.
18. Tsui ABM. Reticence and anxiety in second language learning. In: Bailey KM, Nunan D, editors. *Voices from the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1996. p. 145-67.
19. Young DJ. Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment: what does language anxiety research suggest? *Mod Lang J*. 1991;75(4):426-37. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4781.1991.tb05378.x.
20. Zhang X, Head K. Dealing with learner reticence in the speaking class. *ELT J*. 2010;64(1):1-9. doi:10.1093/elt/ccp018.
21. Zheng Y. Anxiety and second/foreign language learning revisited. *Can J New Scholars Educ*. 2008;1(1):1-12.

## Appendix 1

### Research Questionnaire

**Research Topic:** Identifying Key Linguistic and Affective Barriers to English Language Proficiency among Chinese Undergraduates English Classroom.

**Researcher:** Dr Itayi Artwell Mareya, Hanjiang Normal University

Thank you for participating! Please reflect on your experiences learning and using English at the university level. For each section, indicate your response by circling or checking (✓) the most appropriate number on the scale provided. All responses are anonymous and confidential.

**By starting this survey, you confirm you are 18 or older and agree to participate.**

#### Part 1: Demographics

- Bachelors 1<sup>st</sup> year [ ]
- Bachelors 2<sup>nd</sup> year [ ]
- Bachelors 3<sup>rd</sup> year [ ]
- Bachelors 4<sup>th</sup> year [ ]

#### Section 1: Perceived Linguistic Challenges

*How difficult do you find these English skills in real use (e.g., in class, conversation, writing) compared to taking exams?*

Skill Area	Much more difficult than exams	Somewhat more difficult	About the same	Somewhat easier	Much easier than exams
Speaking (e.g., discussions, presentations)	1	2	3	4	5
Academic Writing (e.g., essays, reports)	1	2	3	4	5
Listening Comprehension (in real-time conversation)	1	2	3	4	5
Using Vocabulary Accurately & Fluently	1	2	3	4	5
Grammar in Spoken/ Written Production	1	2	3	4	5

#### Section 2: Affective and Motivational Factors

*To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your English learning experience?*

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel anxious when I have to speak English in class.	1	2	3	4	5
I worry about making mistakes and being judged negatively.	1	2	3	4	5
My main goal in learning English is to pass exams or courses.	1	2	3	4	5
My English classes are primarily teacher-centered (lecture-based).	1	2	3	4	5
A lack of confidence often prevents me from practicing English.	1	2	3	4	5
I see a clear link between my classroom English and real-world use.	1	2	3	4	5