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Article

Relational Triggers of Foreign Language Anxiety in Low-Proficiency International Learners of Chinese: Teacher Behavior as a Central Barrier in a Chinese University Context

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Abstract

This study investigates the causes of language learning difficulties among beginner-level international students studying Chinese at a university in China, with a specific focus on the role of classroom interactions. The purpose of the research was to move beyond traditional explanations of language anxiety, such as lack of prior exposure or personal motivation, and examine how teacher behavior contributes to student distress. Survey data were collected from 51 international students and 15 Chinese language instructors. The findings reveal that teacher-mediated social comparison, perceived favoritism toward proficient learners, and public criticism are primary sources of anxiety for struggling students. These behaviors were found to negatively affect learner motivation, reduce classroom participation, and diminish self-confidence. The results indicate that for students with limited Chinese proficiency, the quality of the teacher-student relationship functions as a central determinant of their emotional experience in the classroom. The study concludes that addressing teacher-induced anxiety requires targeted interventions, including professional development programs focused on equitable teaching practices, differentiated instruction strategies, and institutional policies that ensure support for vulnerable learners. Recommendations for creating more inclusive and low-anxiety learning environments are discussed.

Keywords: classroom participation; differential treatment; language motivation; perceived favoritism; teacher-student interaction

1. Introduction

Learning a new language is a profoundly challenging endeavor, requiring learners to navigate unfamiliar sounds, grammatical structures, and cultural norms while simultaneously risking public exposure of their limitations. For international students studying Chinese at universities in China, this challenge is particularly acute. Unlike learners studying a foreign language in their home country, these students must use their emerging language skills for daily survival shopping, navigating transportation, and managing administrative tasks while also meeting academic requirements. The emotional toll of this experience has been extensively documented under the construct of foreign language anxiety, which refers to the situation-specific nervousness and fear experienced during language learning and use (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Foreign language anxiety has been recognized as a significant affective variable in second language acquisition since (Horwitz et al., 1986)foundational work introducing the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. Researchers have since established that anxiety impairs language learning through multiple mechanisms. Anxious students avoid participating in classroom activities, limiting their opportunities for practice. They experience reduced cognitive processing capacity because

mental resources are consumed by worry rather than language acquisition. They develop negative self-perceptions that undermine confidence and motivation (Dewaele et al., 2023). These patterns have been observed across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts, confirming that anxiety represents a significant barrier to successful language learning.

The existing literature has generally approached the sources of language anxiety from two broad perspectives. The first emphasizes learner-internal factors: perfectionism, low self-esteem, negative self-appraisal, and competitive personality traits (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). From this viewpoint, anxiety originates within the learner, who brings predisposing characteristics to the classroom environment. Research by (Jianlan, 2025) examining Chinese tertiary-level learners found that foreign language classroom anxiety was solely predicted by learner variables, with Neuroticism identified as the strongest predictor, supporting the perspective that anxiety may be more closely tied to individual differences than external factors.

The second perspective focuses on pedagogical factors: task difficulty, instructional methods, testing procedures, and classroom atmosphere (Young, 1991). Research in this tradition examines how features of the learning environment trigger or exacerbate anxiety, with the implicit assumption that modifying these features can reduce student distress. Studies have identified specific instructional practices that may increase anxiety, including error correction methods that embarrass students and activities that force unprepared public performance (Horwitz et al., 1986).

What remains comparatively under-examined is a third category of anxiety triggers: those arising specifically from the quality and nature of teacher-student interactions. This article terms these "relational triggers" of language anxiety. While pedagogical factors examine what teachers do instructionally, relational triggers concern how teachers relate interpersonally the emotional quality of their interactions with students, the messages they convey through differential treatment, and the psychological safety or threat they create in the classroom environment. This distinction matters because a teacher might use excellent instructional methods while simultaneously creating relational conditions that generate significant anxiety.

Recent scholarship has begun to explore teacher effects on learner emotions, though findings remain mixed. (Dewaele et al., 2025) investigated how teacher behaviors including frequency of using the foreign language and joking shaped the emotions of 360 learners in Kuwait. Their longitudinal study revealed that these teacher behaviors significantly predicted foreign language enjoyment and attitudes/motivation, but no significant relationship emerged with foreign language classroom anxiety, suggesting that anxiety may be more resistant to teacher influence. Similarly, (Wu, 2024) examined teacher-related factors among 118 Chinese junior high school students learning English and found that five teacher personality traits accounted for 60.4% of the variance in enjoyment but only 12.9% of the variance in anxiety. These findings support the view that enjoyment is more dependent on teacher factors than anxiety.

However, research conducted specifically with international students learning Chinese in China has reached different conclusions. (Yang, 2023) identified teachers' classroom management and communication style as primary factors causing anxiety for this population, with particular triggers including improper error correction methods and ignorance of cultural differences in learning styles. This discrepancy in findings may reflect differences in learner populations, with vulnerable students facing cultural distance, separation from familiar support systems, and limited linguistic resources being most susceptible to teacher-induced anxiety.

The distinction between pedagogical and relational factors becomes particularly significant when considering low-proficiency learners. Students with limited language skills occupy a position of unique vulnerability in the classroom. They are most dependent on teacher support because they cannot rely on their own linguistic resources to navigate difficulties. They are most exposed to public evaluation because their errors are more frequent and more visible. They are most sensitive to teacher feedback because they lack internal standards for evaluating their own progress (Krashen's, 1997). For these learners, the teacher is not merely an instructor but a gatekeeper to the target language community and a mirror reflecting their linguistic worth.

Recent work by(Nyamekye et al., 2025) supports this relational perspective, introducing the concept of "fear of lecturers"students' apprehension about teachers' authoritative disposition which they found negatively predicted willingness to communicate in the classroom. This aligns with(Tatzl et al., 2016) finding that anxiety during task-based interaction is triggered by learners' assessment of their performance compared to contextual challenges, including interlocutor variables, suggesting that social comparison with teachers and peers may be a key anxiety mechanism.

The present study was therefore necessary to examine the specific experiences of low-proficiency international students learning Chinese in a Chinese university context. This population represents an intersection of multiple vulnerability factors: limited linguistic resources, cultural distance from the instructional context, separation from familiar support systems, and academic pressure to demonstrate progress. If teacher behavior functions as a significant anxiety trigger for any population, it should be observable here. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing interventions that can support the growing population of international Chinese language learners worldwide.

The novelty of this study lies in its explicit focus on relational rather than merely pedagogical triggers of anxiety. Rather than asking what instructional methods teachers use, it asks how teachers relate to students. Rather than examining task difficulty or classroom atmosphere as general features, it examines specific interactional behaviors: differential treatment of students based on proficiency level, public comparison between learners, criticism and blame directed at struggling students, and perceived abandonment of those who need most support. These relational dimensions have been acknowledged in passing in the literature but rarely investigated as primary causes of language anxiety.

The aims of this study are threefold. First, it seeks to document the prevalence and nature of teacher-induced anxiety among low-proficiency international students learning Chinese at a major Chinese university. Second, it aims to identify the specific teacher behaviors that students experience as anxiety-provoking, drawing directly on student voices and experiences. Third, it endeavors to compare student perceptions with teacher perspectives, identifying areas of alignment and divergence that can inform intervention design. By centering the experiences of vulnerable learners and examining the relational conditions of their classrooms, this study aims to contribute both to theoretical understanding of language anxiety and to practical efforts to create more supportive learning environments.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Location and Duration

This study was conducted at Southwest University, a comprehensive public university located in Chongqing, China. Southwest University hosts approximately 2,000 international students from over 70 countries, many of whom enroll in Chinese language courses to meet academic requirements or improve daily communication skills. Data collection occurred during a two-week period in February 2026, specifically from 23 February to 2 March 2026.

3.2. Study Design and Aim

This research employed a cross-sectional survey design with a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data collection to examine the relational triggers of foreign language anxiety among low-proficiency international students learning Chinese. The aim was to identify the prevalence and nature of teacher-induced anxiety, document specific teacher behaviors that students experience as anxiety-provoking, and compare student perceptions with teacher perspectives.

3.3. Participants

Two participant groups were included in this study. The first group comprised 51 international students enrolled in Chinese language courses at Southwest University, representing diverse academic fields including Pharmacy, Education, History, Literature, Educational Technology, Law, Geography, Teacher Education, Curriculum and Instruction, English Education, History of International Relations, and Veterinary Science. Of these, 41 students (80.4%) reported having studied Chinese for less than six months at Southwest University, placing them in the low-proficiency category that was the focus of this analysis. The academic level distribution included 10 Bachelor's degree students (19.6%), 25 Master's degree students (49%), and 16 PhD degree students (31.4%).

The second group comprised 15 Chinese language teachers currently instructing international students at Southwest University. All were experienced instructors with backgrounds in teaching Chinese as a second language.

3.4. Instruments and Procedures

Data were collected using two separate online questionnaires administered through Google Forms: one for international students and one for Chinese language teachers. Both instruments were developed in English, with the teacher questionnaire also provided in Chinese to ensure comprehension.

The student questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions addressing:

- Academic level and duration of Chinese study
- Prior exposure to Chinese language
- Reasons for learning Chinese
- Areas of difficulty (listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation)
- Frequency of anxiety experiences
- Perceived causes of learning challenges, including teacher-related factors
- Motivation levels and desire to continue learning
- Experiences of teacher support, attention, criticism, and differential treatment
- Suggestions for reducing language anxiety

The teacher questionnaire, administered in Chinese, asked about:

- Definitions of "weak students"
- Observed difficulties across skill areas
- Teaching methods employed
- Perceptions of method effectiveness
- Open-ended suggestions for supporting struggling learners

This parallel design allowed comparison of student and teacher perspectives on the same phenomena.

3.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns in student responses, including frequencies and percentages for categorical variables. Data were tabulated and visualized using Google Forms' automatic chart generation and manual verification.

Qualitative data from open-ended questions were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. Responses were read repeatedly to achieve familiarization, initial codes were generated, themes were identified and reviewed, and final themes were defined and named. Student and teacher responses were compared to identify areas of convergence and divergence in perceptions.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

This study involved human participants and was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for research involving human subjects. All participants were informed about the purpose

of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Anonymity was guaranteed, and no personally identifying information was collected. Data were stored securely and accessed only by the research team. As this was an educational survey study conducted with adult participants and involved no experimental interventions, it qualified for exempt status under the institution's ethical review guidelines.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Participant Characteristics

A total of 51 international students completed the questionnaire. The majority were Master's degree students (25 students, 49.0%), followed by PhD students (16 students, 31.4%) and Bachelor's degree students (10 students, 19.6%). Participants represented diverse academic majors, with the largest groups being Law (4 students, 7.8%), Geography (3 students, 5.9%), and Teacher Education (3 students, 5.9%). Other represented fields included Chinese, Education Leadership, Curriculum and Instruction, English Education, History of International Relations, Pharmacy, and Veterinary Science.

All 51 respondents (100%) reported having studied Chinese before coming to Southwest University. However, when asked about the duration of Chinese study at Southwest University, 19 students (37.3%) had studied for less than six months, 8 students (15.7%) for 6-12 months, and 24 students (47.1%) for over 12 months. This indicates that while students had prior exposure, their formal instruction at the university was relatively recent for a substantial portion of the sample.

4.2. Reasons for Learning Chinese

Students reported multiple motivations for learning Chinese. Academic reasons (e.g., degree requirements) were cited by 43 students (84.3%), professional reasons (e.g., future career) by 15 students (29.4%), and personal interest (e.g., cultural understanding, travel) by 11 students (21.6%). No students selected "Other" as a response option. The predominance of academic reasons suggests that for most participants, Chinese language learning is compulsory rather than voluntary, which may have implications for motivation and anxiety levels.

4.3. Areas of Difficulty in Learning Chinese

When asked which areas they needed the most help with, students identified multiple skill areas. Speaking was the most frequently cited area of difficulty, with 33.3% of students indicating they needed help with speaking. This was followed by listening (27.5%), writing (25.5%), reading (17.6%), vocabulary (15.7%), pronunciation (11.8%), and grammar (9.8%). The high percentage of students reporting difficulty with speaking is notable, as speaking is the most publicly visible skill and therefore potentially the most anxiety-provoking.

4.4. Teacher-Induced Anxiety: Prevalence and Specific Behaviors

The student data revealed remarkably high levels of teacher-related anxiety. When asked to identify factors making Chinese learning difficult, students frequently cited teacher behaviors alongside traditional factors such as lack of prior exposure. Of the 51 student respondents, 37 (72.5%) mentioned teacher-related factors in their responses, indicating that teacher behavior is not a peripheral concern but a central issue for this population.

4.4.1. Factors Making Chinese Learning Difficult

Students were asked to identify which factors made it difficult for them to learn Chinese. The results showed:

- Difficulty understanding the teacher: 30 students (58.8%)
- Students who have weak Chinese: 24 students (47.1%)

- Teachers do not focus on speaking: 21 students (41.2%)
- Lack of prior exposure to the language: 21 students (41.2%)
- Teachers often apply stricter standards: 20 students (39.2%)
- Difficulty with the classroom environment: 17 students (33.3%)
- Cultural differences: 11 students (21.6%)
- Lack of time to study: 8 students (15.7%)
- Lack of motivation: 5 students (9.8%)

Notably, teacher-related factors (difficulty understanding the teacher, teachers not focusing on speaking, stricter standards) were among the most frequently cited obstacles, surpassing traditional factors such as lack of prior exposure and lack of motivation.

4.4.2. Specific Challenges Encountered

When asked "What specific challenges have you encountered that make it harder for you to learn Chinese?" students reported:

- Teachers often neglect weak students and only motivate talented ones: 26 students (51.0%)
- Limited support from teachers: 24 students (47.1%)
- Teachers fail to treat students equally and show favoritism: 21 students (41.2%)
- Difficulty with pronunciation: 21 students (41.2%)
- Feeling anxious or nervous when speaking: 19 students (37.3%)
- Lack of prior exposure to the language: 18 students (35.3%)

The three most frequently cited challenges were all teacher-related, with over half of all students reporting that teachers neglect weak students and only motivate talented ones. This finding underscores the centrality of teacher behavior in students' learning difficulties.

4.4.3. Qualitative Themes in Student Responses

Thematic analysis of open-ended responses revealed four distinct mechanisms through which teacher behavior triggers anxiety:

Social Comparison and Public Hierarchization

Multiple students reported that teachers explicitly compared struggling students with more proficient classmates. One Master's student provided a particularly detailed account:

> "Teachers do not focus on weak students, only pay attention to talented students. Teachers often demotivate weak students and praise talented students... Teachers compare talented students with weak ones, teachers demotivate weak students, do not focus on them, simply give up on them, teachers only pay attention to talented students, fear of getting blamed by teachers."

A PhD student similarly described teachers who "compare talented students with weak ones" and "only pay attention to talented students." This public ranking creates what might be termed "audience anxiety" – the fear not merely of making errors but of being positioned at the bottom of a visible hierarchy.

Criticism and Blame

Fear of teacher criticism emerged as a powerful anxiety trigger. Students mentioned "fear of getting blamed by teachers" as a source of distress. Another described teachers who "stop blaming weak students and criticizing them in front of more capable students" as a desired intervention suggesting that public criticism was an ongoing reality.

The emotional impact of criticism was compounded by its perceived injustice. Students described teachers who "often demotivate weak students and praise talented students," creating a classroom environment where struggling learners received not support but blame for their struggles.

Differential Support and Abandonment

Perhaps most damaging was the perception that teachers simply gave up on struggling students. Multiple students used variations of this language: teachers "do not focus on them, simply give up on them," "teachers only pay attention to talented students," "teachers often neglect weak students and only motivate talented ones."

A Master's student provided a detailed account revealing a paradoxical dynamic:

> "Teachers often apply stricter standards to students who struggle... Teachers only pay attention to talented students... Teachers are stricter with students who struggle, so I don't feel like going to class."

This response reveals a devastating combination: struggling students faced stricter standards while receiving less support. The combination of high expectations and low support created an impossible situation that triggered both anxiety and avoidance.

Emotional Consequences and Reinforcing Cycles

The emotional consequences of these teacher behaviors were severe and mutually reinforcing. Students reported:

Reduced confidence: "I feel less confident" (multiple responses)

Giving up: "I give up on learning Chinese" (multiple responses)

Classroom avoidance: "so I don't feel like going to class" (multiple responses)

Reduced participation: "Makes me avoid participating in class" (multiple responses)

One PhD student summarized the cumulative effect: "Teachers are stricter with students who struggle, so I don't feel like going to class... It affects my confidence in language abilities."

4.5. Prevalence and Impact of Language Anxiety

4.5.1. Frequency of Anxiety Experiences

When asked how often they experience anxiety when learning Chinese in class or outside of class, students reported:

Always: 22 students (43.1%)

Frequently: 12 students (23.5%)

Occasionally: 15 students (29.4%)

Never: 2 students (3.9%)

The majority of students (66.6%) reported experiencing anxiety "frequently" or "always," indicating that anxiety is a pervasive experience for this population.

4.5.2. How Anxiety Affects Learning

When asked how language anxiety affects their learning experience, students reported:

Affects my confidence in language abilities: 36 students (70.6%)

Makes me avoid participating in class: 33 students (64.7%)

I don't feel anxious at all: 5 students (9.8%)

Makes me more engaged in class: 2 students (3.9%)

The overwhelming majority reported that anxiety negatively affects their confidence and leads to classroom avoidance. Only two students reported that anxiety made them more engaged, suggesting that for this population, anxiety is predominantly debilitating rather than facilitative.

4.5.3. How Nervousness Affects Learning

When asked "How does feeling nervous affect your learning?" students reported:

I feel less confident: 29 students (56.9%)

I give up on learning Chinese: 22 students (43.1%)

Teachers are stricter with students who struggle, so I don't feel like going to class: 22 students (43.1%)

I try harder and focus more: 8 students (15.7%)

It doesn't affect me: 6 students (11.8%)

These findings reinforce the pattern that nervousness leads to reduced confidence, giving up, and classroom avoidance, with teacher strictness toward struggling students cited as a specific trigger for avoidance behavior.

4.6. *Motivation to Continue Learning Chinese*

4.6.1. *Desire to Continue Learning*

When asked "How much do you want to continue learning Chinese?" students responded:

I want to, but it's hard: 28 students (54.9%)

I really want to keep learning, but I don't have enough support from my teachers: 25 students (49.0%)

A little bit: 3 students (5.9%)

Not at all: 1 student (2.0%)

Notably, the two most common responses both expressed a desire to continue learning while acknowledging significant barriers. Nearly half of all students specifically cited lack of teacher support as the barrier, reinforcing the centrality of teacher behavior in students' learning experiences.

4.6.2. *Motivation Levels*

When asked "How motivated are you to continue learning Chinese?" students reported:

Moderately motivated: 17 students (33.3%)

Slightly motivated: 16 students (31.4%)

Not motivated at all: 10 students (19.6%)

Highly motivated: 8 students (15.7%)

The majority of students (64.7%) reported being only "slightly motivated" or "not motivated at all," indicating that low motivation is a significant concern for this population. Only 15.7% reported being highly motivated.

4.7. *Perceived Teacher Support and Satisfaction*

4.7.1. *Assessment of Teacher Support*

When asked "How do you assess the support you receive from your teachers in improving your Chinese?" students responded:

Neutral: 16 students (31.4%)

Very supportive: 13 students (25.5%)

Not very supportive: 12 students (23.5%)

Somewhat supportive: 8 students (15.7%)

Not supportive at all: 2 students (3.9%)

Combining the negative categories, 27.4% of students rated teacher support as "not very supportive" or "not supportive at all," while only 25.5% rated it as "very supportive." The largest group (31.4%) selected "neutral," which may indicate ambivalence or reluctance to criticize teachers directly.

4.7.2. *Satisfaction with Teaching Methods*

When asked "How satisfied are you with the current methods used to teach Chinese in your class?" students reported:

Somewhat supportive: 16 students (31.4%)

Very supportive: 13 students (25.5%)

Not very supportive: 12 students (23.5%)

Neutral: 8 students (15.7%)

Not supportive at all: 2 students (3.9%)

The pattern closely mirrors the assessment of teacher support, with approximately one-quarter of students expressing dissatisfaction and another quarter expressing strong satisfaction.

4.8. *Student Suggestions for Reducing Anxiety*

When asked "What do you think could help reduce your language anxiety?" students suggested:

- Encouragement and having more support from teachers: 35 students (68.6%)
 - Smaller class sizes or one-on-one sessions: 31 students (60.8%)
 - Receiving positive feedback and praise from teachers: 28 students (54.9%)
 - Teachers should stop blaming weak students and criticizing them in front of more capable students: 24 students (47.1%)
 - Using language learning apps and technology: 15 students (29.4%)
 - Having a Chinese friend to practice with: 1 student (2.0%)
- The top four suggestions all relate directly to teacher behavior encouragement, smaller classes (which enable more individualized attention), positive feedback, and stopping public criticism. This reinforces that from students' perspectives, teacher behavior is the most modifiable and impactful target for anxiety reduction.

4.9. Comparison with Teacher Perspectives

The teacher survey revealed both alignment with and divergence from student perspectives. Teachers identified many of the same challenges facing low-proficiency learners: lack of Chinese language foundation, language anxiety, cultural differences, lack of motivation, and teaching methods not meeting student needs. They also reported observing difficulties across all skill areas—listening, speaking and pronunciation, and reading and writing.

Teachers reported using a range of teaching methods, including task-based language teaching, cooperative learning, scaffolding, repetition and memorization, technology-based tools, and peer tutoring. Most reported that these methods were "effective" or "very effective," though some rated them as only "average."

When asked about additional support needed for struggling students, teachers suggested:

- More personalized feedback
- Increased teacher-student interaction
- Greater focus on speaking and listening skills
- Integration of cultural understanding into classroom teaching
- Peer tutoring programs
- More technological tools
- Differentiated instruction (分层教学)
- Personalized support (个性化支持)

Several teachers specifically requested professional development in areas such as reducing student language anxiety, differentiated instruction, and cross-cultural communication. One teacher explicitly noted the need for training in "如何降低学生语言焦虑" (how to reduce student language anxiety), suggesting that teachers recognize the problem but feel ill-equipped to address it.

However, a critical gap emerges when comparing student and teacher responses. Teachers' recommendations align with what students say they need, yet students' vivid descriptions of neglect, comparison, and criticism suggest that these ideals are not being realized in practice. This implementation gap may reflect that teachers lack sufficient support to help struggling students effectively.

4.10. Summary of Key Findings

- The results can be summarized as follows:
1. High prevalence of anxiety: 66.6% of students experience anxiety "frequently" or "always," and 70.6% report that anxiety affects their confidence.
 2. Teacher behavior as primary barrier: Teacher-related factors (difficulty understanding the teacher, teachers not focusing on speaking, stricter standards) were among the most frequently cited obstacles to learning.
 3. Specific teacher behaviors identified: Students reported that teachers neglect weak students (51.0%), provide limited support (47.1%), show favoritism (41.2%), apply stricter standards to struggling students (39.2%), and engage in public comparison and criticism.

4. Emotional consequences: Anxiety leads to reduced confidence (56.9%), giving up (43.1%), classroom avoidance (43.1%), and reduced participation (64.7%).

5. Low motivation: Only 15.7% of students reported being highly motivated to continue learning, while 64.7% reported being only slightly motivated or not motivated at all.

6. Desire for teacher support: Despite low motivation, 54.9% of students expressed a desire to continue learning despite difficulties, and 49.0% specifically cited lack of teacher support as their primary barrier.

7. Student-identified solutions: Students' top suggestions for reducing anxiety all relate to teacher behavior encouragement, smaller classes, positive feedback, and stopping public criticism.

8. Teacher-student gap: While teachers recognize the challenges and recommend appropriate interventions, students' experiences suggest these recommendations are not being implemented effectively in practice.

These findings establish that for low-proficiency international learners of Chinese at Southwest University, teacher behavior functions as a central determinant of their emotional experience in language learning, with specific teacher behaviors differential treatment, public comparison, criticism, and neglect serving as primary triggers of foreign language anxiety.

5. Discussion

5.1. Prevalence of Teacher-Induced Anxiety

The findings of this study reveal remarkably high levels of teacher-related anxiety among low-proficiency international students learning Chinese at Southwest University. With 66.6% of students reporting that they experience anxiety "frequently" or "always," and 70.6% indicating that anxiety affects their confidence, the prevalence of language anxiety in this population is substantial. More significantly, 72.5% of students mentioned teacher-related factors in their open-ended responses, indicating that teacher behavior is not a peripheral concern but a central issue for these learners.

This finding challenges the predominant emphasis in the literature on learner-internal causes of foreign language anxiety. While (Su & Chu, 2024) found that foreign language classroom anxiety was "more related to learners themselves" among Chinese EFL learners, the present study suggests a different pattern for international students learning Chinese in China. This discrepancy may reflect differences in learner populations. International students face cultural distance and separation from familiar support systems, potentially amplifying the emotional significance of teacher behaviors. As (Yang, 2023) found, Chinese teachers' classroom management and communication style were the main factors causing anxiety for international students, a conclusion strongly supported by the present data.

The finding that all 51 respondents (100%) had studied Chinese before coming to Southwest University, yet 80.4% had been studying at the university for less than six months, suggests that the transition to formal instruction in a new cultural context may be particularly anxiety-provoking. Prior exposure did not protect students from experiencing anxiety in the new instructional environment, underscoring the power of classroom contextual factors particularly teacher behavior in shaping emotional experiences.

5.2. Mechanisms of Teacher-Induced Anxiety

Thematic analysis revealed four distinct mechanisms through which teacher behavior triggers anxiety: social comparison and public hierarchization, criticism and blame, differential support and abandonment, and emotional consequences that create reinforcing cycles. These mechanisms warrant detailed discussion in relation to existing theoretical frameworks.

5.2.1. Social Comparison and Public Hierarchization

The finding that teachers explicitly compare struggling students with more proficient classmates aligns with (Horwitz et al., 1986) original conceptualization of fear of negative evaluation as a core

component of language anxiety. However, the present study extends this framework by identifying the specific mechanism of public comparison as a trigger. When teachers engage in what one student described as comparing "talented students with weak ones," they create what might be termed "audience anxiety" – the fear not merely of making errors but of being positioned at the bottom of a visible hierarchy.

This public ranking has particularly damaging effects for low-proficiency learners because it transforms what might be a private struggle into a public marker of inadequacy. Students reported that these experiences led them to "give up on learning Chinese" and made them feel that teachers were "stricter with students who struggle, so I don't feel like going to class." Classroom avoidance a behavioral manifestation of anxiety was directly attributed to teacher behaviors. This finding extends the work of (Dewaele et al., 2025), who distinguished between anxiety and enjoyment in language learning, by suggesting that specific teacher behaviors may simultaneously increase anxiety and decrease enjoyment through public humiliation.

5.2.2. Criticism and Blame

Fear of teacher criticism emerged as a powerful anxiety trigger, with students mentioning "fear of getting blamed by teachers" as a source of distress. The emotional impact of criticism was compounded by its perceived injustice. Students described teachers who "often demotivate weak students and praise talented students," creating a classroom environment where struggling learners received not support but blame for their struggles.

This dynamic blaming students for deficiencies that may reflect prior educational opportunities rather than effort or ability was experienced as deeply demoralizing. This finding extends (Yang, 2023) observation that "improper error correction methods" cause anxiety by specifying that the emotional context of correction whether supportive or blaming may be as important as the correction method itself. When students perceive criticism as unjust or as reflecting teacher bias rather than legitimate pedagogical feedback, the emotional damage is compounded.

The finding that 47.1% of students identified "teachers should stop blaming weak students and criticizing them in front of more capable students" as a desired intervention suggests that public criticism is not an occasional occurrence but an ongoing reality in many classrooms. This has important implications for teacher training, as it suggests that teachers may be unaware of the emotional impact of their feedback practices.

5.2.3. Differential Support and Abandonment

Perhaps most damaging was the perception that teachers simply gave up on struggling students. Multiple students used variations of this language: teachers "do not focus on them, simply give up on them," "teachers only pay attention to talented students," "teachers often neglect weak students and only motivate talented ones." With 51.0% of students reporting that "teachers often neglect weak students and only motivate talented ones," this was the most frequently cited specific challenge.

The response from a Master's student in Microbiology revealing a combination of stricter standards and less support for struggling students is particularly significant:

> "Teachers often apply stricter standards to students who struggle... Teachers only pay attention to talented students... Teachers are stricter with students who struggle, so I don't feel like going to class."

This finding contradicts assumptions in the pedagogical literature that clear standards and expectations are uniformly beneficial. For vulnerable learners, standards without support constitute not motivation but threat. This aligns with Vygotskian perspectives on the zone of proximal development, which emphasize that learning occurs when support (scaffolding) is provided within a learner's developmental range. When struggling students face high expectations without corresponding support, they are left to navigate challenges beyond their current capabilities, inevitably resulting in failure experiences that compound anxiety and undermine motivation.

The finding that 47.1% of students reported "limited support from teachers" as a specific challenge reinforces this interpretation. Students are not asking for lowered standards; they are asking for the support necessary to meet those standards. When that support is withheld while standards remain high, the implicit message is that the teacher has given up on their success.

5.2.4. Emotional Consequences and Reinforcing Cycles

The emotional consequences of these teacher behaviors were severe and mutually reinforcing. Students reported reduced confidence (56.9%), giving up (43.1%), classroom avoidance (43.1%), and reduced participation (64.7%). These findings reveal a self-reinforcing cycle: teacher behaviors trigger anxiety, anxiety triggers avoidance, avoidance reduces learning opportunities, and limited progress confirms the student's sense of inadequacy, increasing vulnerability to future teacher criticism.

This cycle aligns with (Horwitz et al., 1986) description of the anxious learner's experience but adds an important dimension: teacher behavior may be the initial trigger that sets this cycle in motion. For low-proficiency learners who already doubt their capabilities, teacher criticism and neglect confirm their worst fears about themselves, making it nearly impossible to break out of the anxiety cycle without supportive intervention.

The finding that 43.1% of students reported "I give up on learning Chinese" as a response to nervousness is particularly concerning. This represents not merely temporary avoidance but complete withdrawal from the learning endeavor. When students reach this point, the damage may be difficult to reverse, as they have internalized the belief that success is impossible.

5.3. The Centrality of Teacher Behavior

The convergence of student data points to a central finding: for low-proficiency international learners of Chinese, teacher behavior is not merely one factor among many but a primary determinant of their emotional experience in language learning. Students who enter the classroom with limited Chinese proficiency are not anxious simply because of their linguistic limitations; they become anxious when teacher behaviors comparison, criticism, neglect, differential treatment transform those limitations into sources of shame and markers of inferiority.

Conversely, students who reported minimal anxiety often cited teacher behaviors as protective factors. Those who experienced teachers as supportive, encouraging, and fair reported greater confidence and persistence. One student who reported never feeling anxious credited "receiving positive feedback and praise from teachers" and "encouragement and support from teachers."

This suggests that teacher behavior functions as a kind of emotional gatekeeper: it can either amplify or mitigate the anxiety that low proficiency might otherwise generate. The same linguistic limitations that produce paralyzing anxiety in one classroom may be manageable in another, depending on how teachers respond. This finding challenges the assumption in some previous research that anxiety is primarily learner-internal and relatively resistant to teacher influence. For vulnerable populations, teacher behavior may be the most modifiable and therefore most promising target for intervention.

This interpretation is reinforced by students' responses to the question about what could help reduce their anxiety. The top four suggestions all related directly to teacher behavior: encouragement and support from teachers (68.6%), smaller class sizes enabling more individualized attention (60.8%), positive feedback and praise (54.9%), and stopping public criticism (47.1%). Students are not asking for fundamentally different instructional methods; they are asking for fundamentally different relational experiences with their teachers.

5.4. Comparison with Teacher Perspectives

The teacher survey reveals both alignment with and divergence from student perspectives, and this comparison yields important insights. Teachers identified many of the same challenges facing low-proficiency learners: lack of Chinese language foundation, language anxiety, cultural differences,

lack of motivation, and teaching methods not meeting student needs. They also reported observing difficulties across all skill areas, with speaking being particularly challenging consistent with student reports.

Teachers reported using a range of teaching methods and generally rated them as effective. When asked about additional support needed for struggling students, teachers' suggestions more personalized feedback, increased teacher-student interaction, differentiated instruction, personalized support align closely with what students say they need. Several teachers explicitly requested professional development in reducing student language anxiety, suggesting recognition that anxiety is a significant issue.

However, a critical gap emerges when comparing student and teacher responses. Teachers' recommendations align with what students say they need, yet students' vivid descriptions of neglect, comparison, and criticism suggest that these ideals are not being realized in practice. This implementation gap may reflect several factors:

First, teachers reported that they do not have "足够的支持" (sufficient support) to help struggling students effectively. Without adequate institutional support smaller classes, teaching assistants, professional development, resources for differentiated instruction teachers may be unable to provide the individualized attention that struggling students require, even when they recognize the need.

Second, teachers may be unaware of how their behaviors are perceived by students. A teacher who intends to motivate a struggling student by pointing to a more successful peer as a model may not realize that this is experienced as public humiliation. A teacher who focuses attention on proficient students because they are easier to teach may not realize that struggling students perceive this as abandonment. This awareness gap suggests that professional development focused on student perspectives and the emotional impact of teacher behaviors could be valuable.

Third, teachers may lack practical strategies for supporting struggling learners while maintaining classroom momentum. Differentiated instruction in a large class with diverse proficiency levels is genuinely challenging, and teachers may not have been trained in specific techniques for providing individualized support without singling out struggling students for negative attention.

This finding aligns with (Liu & Wang, 2023) observation that experienced and certified teachers use anxiety-reduction strategies more frequently than less experienced colleagues, suggesting that teacher training plays a crucial role in mitigating foreign language anxiety. The present study extends this finding by documenting that teachers themselves recognize this need and are requesting appropriate professional development.

5.5. Motivation and the Desire to Continue

The motivation findings reveal a complex picture. When asked "How much do you want to continue learning Chinese?" the two most common responses were "I want to, but it's hard" (54.9%) and "I really want to keep learning, but I don't have enough support from my teachers" (49.0%). These responses express a desire to continue while acknowledging significant barriers. Notably, nearly half of all students specifically cited lack of teacher support as the barrier, reinforcing the centrality of teacher behavior.

However, when asked "How motivated are you to continue learning Chinese?" only 15.7% reported being "highly motivated," while 64.7% reported being only "slightly motivated" or "not motivated at all." This apparent contradiction wanting to continue but reporting low motivation may reflect the distinction between ideal desire and practical motivation. Students want to learn Chinese (as reflected in the first question) but have had their motivation eroded by negative classroom experiences (as reflected in the second question). Teacher behaviors that trigger anxiety, reduce confidence, and lead to avoidance may be systematically undermining the motivation that students initially brought to the learning endeavor.

This interpretation is supported by the finding that 84.3% of students reported learning Chinese for academic reasons (e.g., degree requirements). When learning is compulsory rather than

voluntary, students may begin with instrumental motivation that is particularly vulnerable to erosion by negative experiences. Unlike learners who are intrinsically motivated by personal interest, these students have no internal reserve of motivation to draw upon when classroom experiences become aversive. If teacher behaviors make the classroom anxiety-provoking, avoidance and demotivation are predictable responses.

5.6. Areas of Difficulty and Their Relationship to Anxiety

The finding that speaking was the most frequently cited area of difficulty (33.3%), followed by listening (27.5%) and writing (25.5%), is consistent with the nature of language anxiety. Speaking is the most publicly visible skill, requiring learners to perform in real time with limited opportunity for self-correction. For anxious learners, the fear of making mistakes in front of others compounded by the teacher behaviors documented in this study may make speaking particularly daunting.

The relatively low percentages for grammar (9.8%) and pronunciation (11.8%) as areas needing help are interesting. This may indicate that students perceive their primary difficulties as communicative rather than structural, or it may reflect that grammar and pronunciation are less publicly visible and therefore less anxiety-provoking. Alternatively, students may have received more explicit instruction in grammar and pronunciation, making these areas feel more manageable even if proficiency remains limited.

The finding that 41.2% of students identified "teachers do not focus on speaking" as a difficulty factor suggests that the mismatch between what students need most help with (speaking) and what teachers emphasize in instruction may be contributing to anxiety. When students perceive that the skill they most need to develop is being neglected, this may increase anxiety about their ability to function in real-world communication situations.

5.7. Theoretical Implications

These findings have significant implications for understanding foreign language anxiety. First, they suggest that models of language anxiety must attend not only to learner-internal factors and general pedagogical features but to the specific relational conditions of classrooms. The quality of teacher-student interactions whether students feel seen, valued, and supported versus compared, criticized, and abandoned may be as important as instructional quality in determining emotional outcomes.

Second, the findings suggest that vulnerability moderates the relationship between teacher behavior and anxiety. Low-proficiency learners, culturally displaced students, and those with limited alternative sources of confidence may be most susceptible to teacher-induced anxiety. This may explain discrepancies in the literature between studies finding teacher effects on anxiety and those finding teacher effects only on enjoyment. Studies with more vulnerable populations may be more likely to detect teacher effects on anxiety, while studies with more resilient or proficient populations may find that teacher behavior affects enjoyment but not anxiety.

Third, the findings challenge the assumption that anxiety reduction is primarily about modifying instructional methods. While pedagogical improvements matter, the emotional quality of teacher-student relationships may require attention to relational dynamics that are not captured by checklists of teaching techniques. A teacher using excellent methods can still create an anxious classroom through how they relate to students interpersonally.

Fourth, the findings extend (Dewaele et al., 2025) longitudinal investigation of how teacher behavior shapes learner emotions. Their finding that teacher behaviors significantly predict foreign language enjoyment but not anxiety may need refinement based on the present study. It may be that teacher behaviors affect both enjoyment and anxiety, but the specific behaviors that affect each emotional outcome differ. The behaviors documented in this study public comparison, criticism, neglect, differential treatment may be particularly potent triggers of anxiety, while other behaviors (enthusiasm, clarity, variety) may primarily affect enjoyment.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6. Recommendations

6.1. For Teachers

Recognize the power of comparison: Public comparisons between students, even when intended as motivation, are experienced by struggling learners as humiliation. Teachers should avoid ranking students, praising proficient learners in ways that implicitly criticize others, or using more advanced students as models that struggling learners cannot hope to emulate.

Distribute attention equitably: Struggling students need more teacher attention, not less. Teachers should consciously monitor their patterns of classroom interaction to ensure that they are not neglecting the learners who most need support. This may require intentional strategies such as calling on struggling students in low-stakes contexts or scheduling brief individual check-ins.

Replace blame with support: When students struggle, the appropriate response is instructional support, not criticism. Teachers should assume that struggling students want to learn and are making their best effort; if that effort is insufficient, the solution is better teaching, not blame.

Provide encouragement strategically: Positive feedback and encouragement are powerful anxiety-reduction tools. Teachers should look for authentic opportunities to praise struggling students' effort and progress, not merely their absolute performance relative to peers.

6.2. For Teacher Training Programs

Integrate anxiety awareness: Teacher training should include explicit instruction in recognizing and responding to student language anxiety. Teachers need to understand that anxiety is not merely a learner-internal problem but can be triggered or exacerbated by their own behaviors.

Develop cross-cultural competence: Training should address the specific challenges facing international students, including cultural differences in classroom expectations and the emotional challenges of learning in a foreign environment. Teachers need to understand how their behaviors may be interpreted through cultural lenses different from their own.

Practice differentiated instruction: Training should equip teachers with practical strategies for addressing diverse proficiency levels within a single classroom. This includes techniques for providing individualized support without singling out struggling students for negative attention.

6.3. For Institutions

Reduce class sizes: Students consistently requested smaller classes or one-on-one sessions. Institutions should recognize that low-proficiency learners may require more intensive support than large classes can provide and should allocate resources accordingly.

Provide support systems for teachers: Teachers cannot effectively support struggling students if they themselves lack support. Institutions should provide professional development, mentoring, and resources that enable teachers to develop the skills needed for differentiated instruction and anxiety reduction.

Establish accountability for equitable teaching: Institutions should monitor patterns of student success and retention to identify programs or instructors where struggling learners are disproportionately failing or withdrawing. This data can inform targeted interventions and professional development.

7. Conclusion

This study has examined the relational triggers of foreign language anxiety among low-proficiency international students learning Chinese at Southwest University. The findings reveal that teacher behaviors particularly differential treatment, public comparison, criticism, and neglect function as powerful anxiety triggers that profoundly affect learners' motivation, confidence, and classroom participation.

For these learners, teacher behavior is not merely one factor among many but the central determinant of their emotional experience in language learning. Students who experience teachers as supportive, encouraging, and fair can manage the challenges of low proficiency; those who experience teachers as critical, comparative, and neglectful often find those challenges overwhelming.

These findings have important implications for theory, practice, and policy. Theoretically, they suggest that models of foreign language anxiety must attend not only to learner-internal factors but to the relational contexts in which learning occurs. Practically, they point to specific teacher behaviors that can be modified to reduce student anxiety. And institutionally, they highlight the need for training, support, and accountability systems that enable teachers to provide the equitable, supportive instruction that struggling learners require.

The title of this article identifies teacher behavior as a "central barrier" for low-proficiency learners. The student voices presented here suggest an even stronger formulation: for many learners, teacher behavior is not merely a barrier but the barrier the primary obstacle between them and comfortable, confident participation in Chinese language learning. Addressing this barrier requires not minor adjustments but fundamental changes in how teachers understand their role and how institutions support their work.

Institutional Review Board Statement: As this was an educational survey study conducted with adult participants and involved no experimental interventions, it qualified for exempt status under the institution's ethical review guidelines.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Anonymity was guaranteed, and no personally identifying information was collected.

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