

Foreign Language Anxiety and Chinese Students

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Abstract: This study attempts to demonstrate that Chinese students studying in the UK have foreign language classroom anxiety and tries to identify the causes of this anxiety. Although there have been many studies on language anxiety, there are no studies specifically on the international student population. This study aims to make a contribution in this regard. It used an online, anonymously completed questionnaire to collect data from 31 students.

Keywords: Foreign language anxiety, international students.

1. Introduction

Two years ago, when I was studying in my foundation year at Durham ISC, I noticed that while other students were actively interacting with the teacher, my friends and I were just sitting, silently taking notes. Sometimes the teacher deliberately asked us to answer questions to get us to participate more in class discussions. Each time, the student whose name was called would turn red and answer the question in a very soft, quiet voice. After the teacher asked them to speak louder, their voice would start to tremble, and their pronunciation would become very strange. I always thought it was because their English was not up to speed with the teacher's teaching, but I later learnt that there is a scientific term for this phenomenon: foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA).

I think this is an interesting and important topic, especially for international students. By studying and understanding FLCA, we can gain a clearer idea of what causes anxiety, the effects and consequences of having anxiety in the classroom, and what can be done to manage it. There are two research aims in this paper. The first is to prove that Chinese students studying in the UK do have FLCA. The second aim is to find out the reasons that lead to FLCA. This research will be conducted at Durham University and all the participants will be Chinese students studying in Durham. In the following essay, I will firstly define the term foreign language anxiety (FLA). I will then review some of the relevant literature, before detailing the methodology of the research. I will then present the findings from the research.

2. Literature Review

The issue of anxiety in language learning has been discussed for over 50 years[1]. In this essay, FLA is defined as “[t]he unique and complex constructs of self perception associated with language learning in the classroom that arise from the uniqueness of the language learning process” [1,2]. Horwitz believed that FLA caused students to be uncomfortable in language classes and further influenced their level of achievement. Another paper by Horwitz [2] developed the idea that language

anxiety “is a specific anxiety rather than a trait anxiety”. In addition to this, this paper also demonstrated that anxiety was a cause rather than a consequence of poor language learning.

Another study [3] also showed a similar result through a survey of 149 undergraduates who participated in a study and completed the abbreviated Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) form. The results showed that language anxiety and accomplishment were negatively correlated with each other and that the most influential causes of anxiety were, from highest to lowest, ‘speaking in front of others’, ‘worries about grammatical mistakes’, ‘pronunciation’ and ‘being unable to talk spontaneously’. The article also concludes with some suggestions about how to mitigate the anxiety, such as the need to pay special attention to the classroom atmosphere and the situations that may provoke anxiety.

In China, He [4] undertook a study mainly focusing on Chinese students’ foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA). This study collected data from 302 students and 30 teachers from two universities. All the participants took the questionnaire survey but only 30 students and 3 teachers were interviewed. The results suggested that the overemphasis on correctness may be deeply rooted in Chinese teaching traditions and that the idea of being perfect could cause a significant amount of anxiety. Besides this, teachers’ lack of awareness in this area may lead to misunderstanding of students’ behaviour: for example, teachers may see students’ reluctance to participate in activities as a lack of motivation.

Another research by He [5] is also interesting. This research was similar to the one mentioned above, with the same number of people and components, and even the same number of males and females. What is different is that those involved in the study filled in different questionnaires and came up with different conclusions. Additionally, a second stage was added to the experiment. The aim of the first stage was to collect data and find strategies that were thought to be useful in reducing anxiety. The second stage was to test the effectiveness of these strategies. In the end, 32 strategies were found that proved to be effective.

Liu. M and Huang. W [6] focused more on the relationship between language anxiety, motivation to learn English and students’ learning outcomes. This study collected data from 980 undergraduate students from 3 universities in China. The students completed a 36-item Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and a 40-item English Learning Motivation Scale (ELMS). The results of the study showed a significant negative relationship between foreign language anxiety and motivation to learn English.

3. Methodology

However, based on my view of the literature, there is no research on the international student community, and I would like to fill this gap. Therefore, the research questions for this paper are:

- 1) Prove that Chinese students studying in the UK have FLCA.
- 2) What are the reasons leading to FLCA for Chinese students studying in the UK?

Thirty participants took part in the research. All the participants are Chinese students studying in Durham. To start with, they will complete the FLCAS form Horwitz, Horwitz, [1-3]. However, since the original form mainly focuses on students’ anxiety in language class, the context has been changed to all classes instead of language classes. This can help understand what causes the most anxiety for international students. All replies are anonymous. I distributed the questionnaire via social media and the sample was mostly my close classmates and friends of classmates. The sample was mostly Chinese people aged 20 to 21 years old. The gender of the respondents was not known as the responses were completely anonymously. The questionnaire does not contain any questions about personal information so there are no ethical issues. As there were only 30 participants, all of whom were also students at Durham University, most of whom were close to me and my friends, and the

participants were studying roughly the same subjects, this could have had an impact on the questionnaire results.

4. Findings

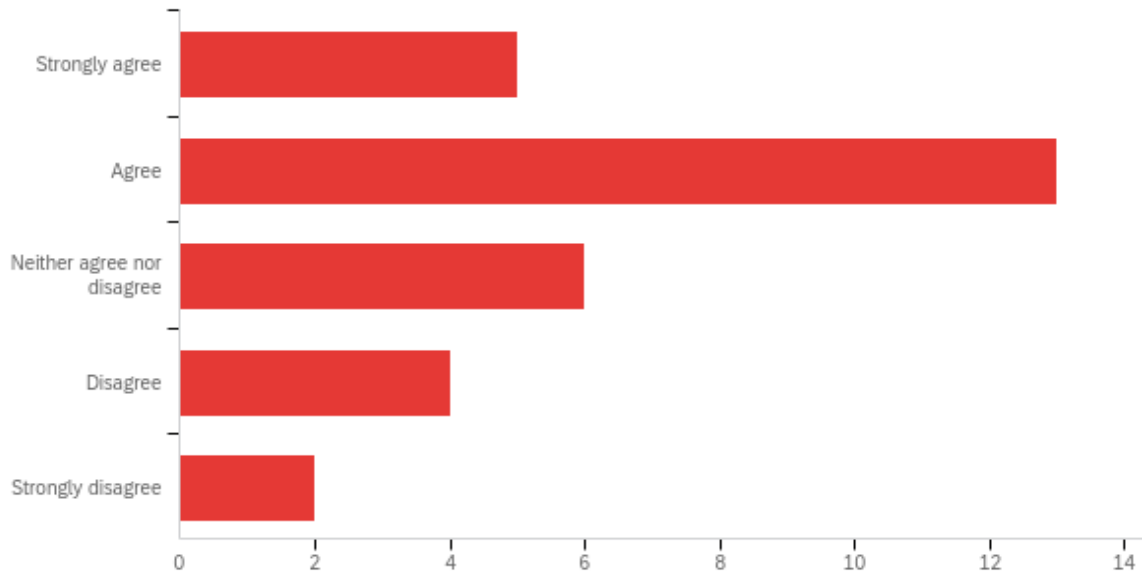


Figure 1: Q1: I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my class.

As shown in figure 1, The percentage of students who “strongly agree” and “agree” is about 60%. Of these, 5 people chose to strongly agree and 13 chose to agree.

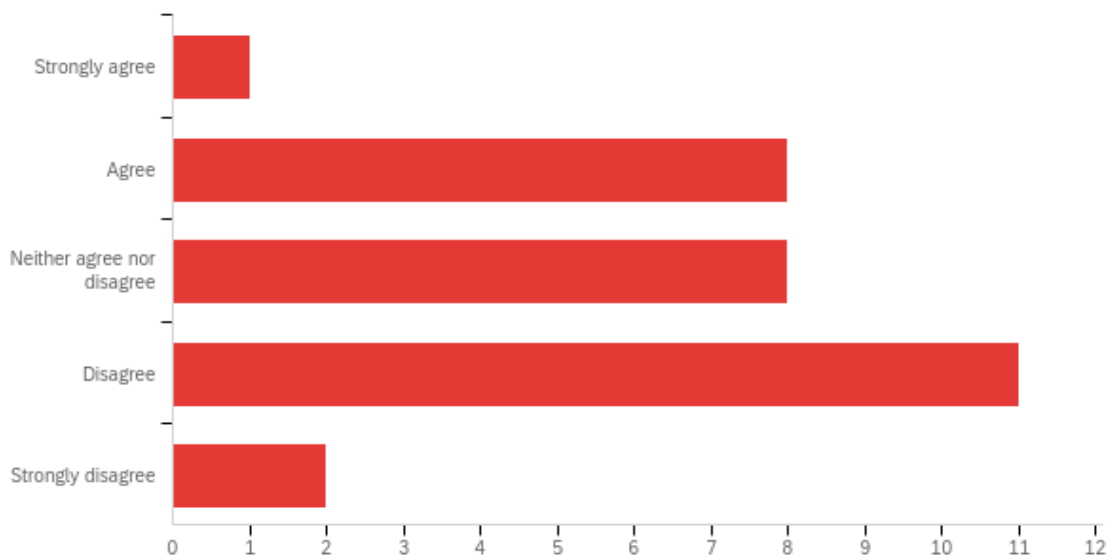


Figure 2: Q2: I don't worry about making mistakes when I speak in class.

As can be seen from the figure 2, out of 30 people, 8 did not mind making mistakes in the classroom and another 11 minded making mistakes in the classroom.

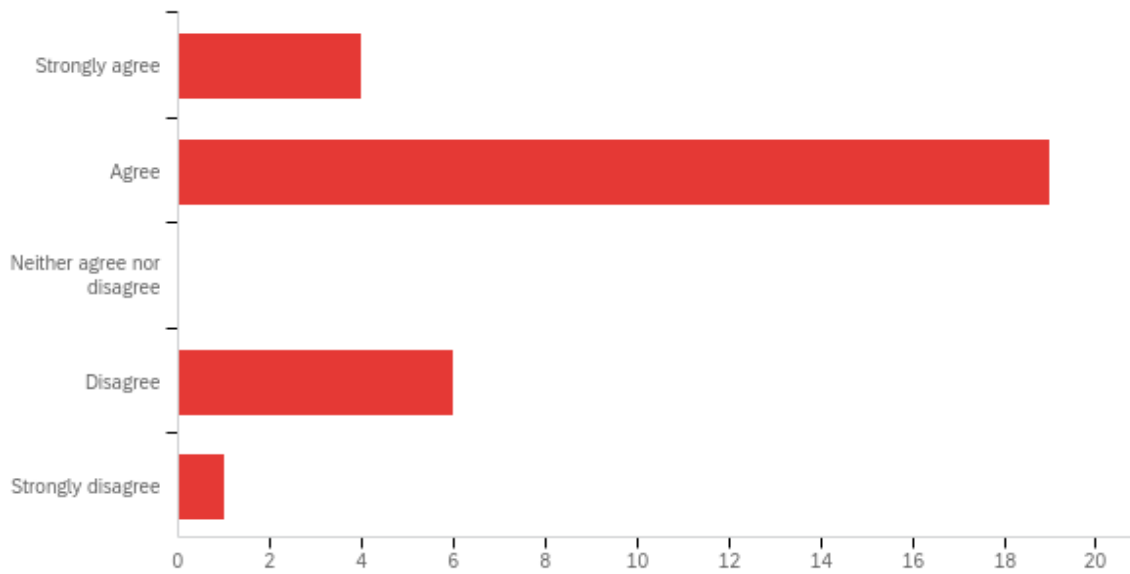


Figure 3: Q3: I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in class.

Figure 3 shows that out of the 30 participants, 23 agreed and strongly agreed on the statement, which is about 76%.

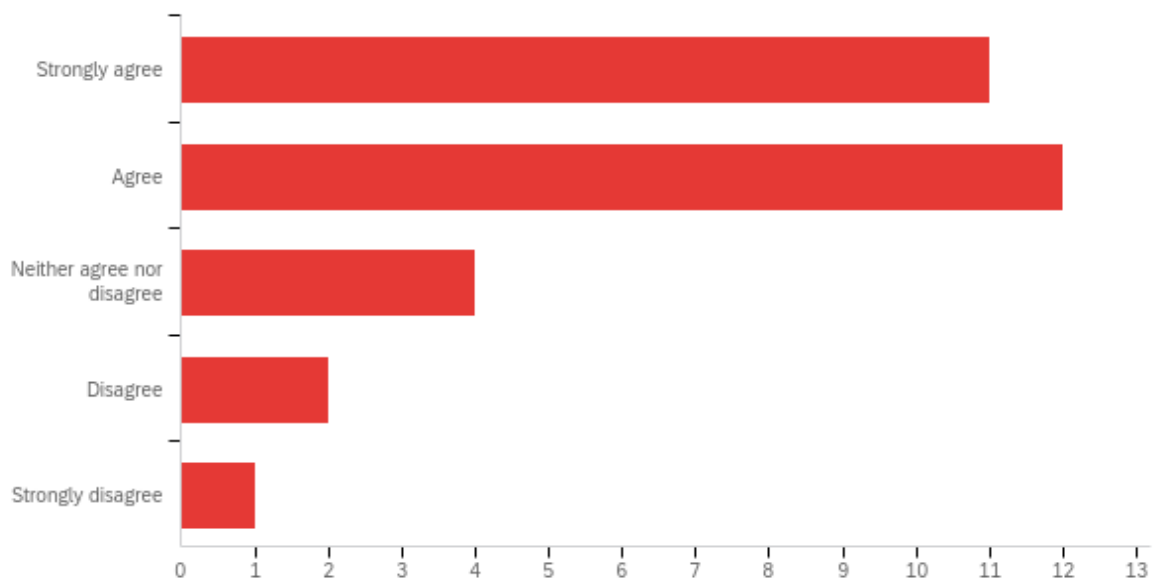


Figure 4: Q4: I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in class.

As shown in figure 4, out of the 30 participants, 23 agreed and strongly agreed that unprepared speeches can make them feel anxious.

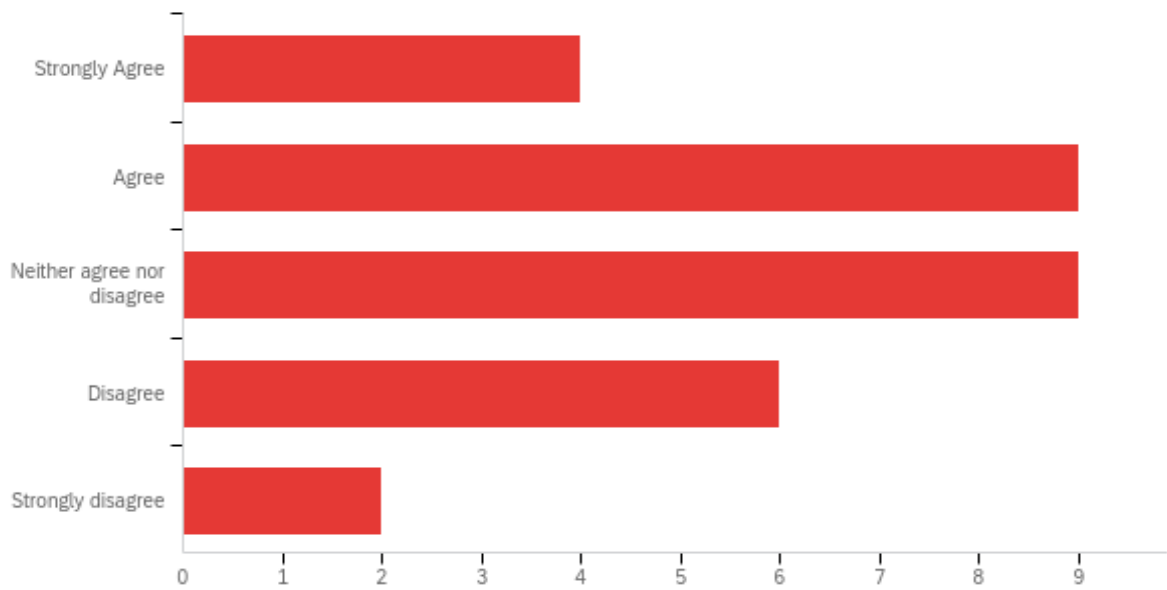


Figure 5: Q5: It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my class.

Figure 5 shows that out of 30 participants, 13 agreed and strongly agreed that volunteering to answer questions would make them feel awkward.

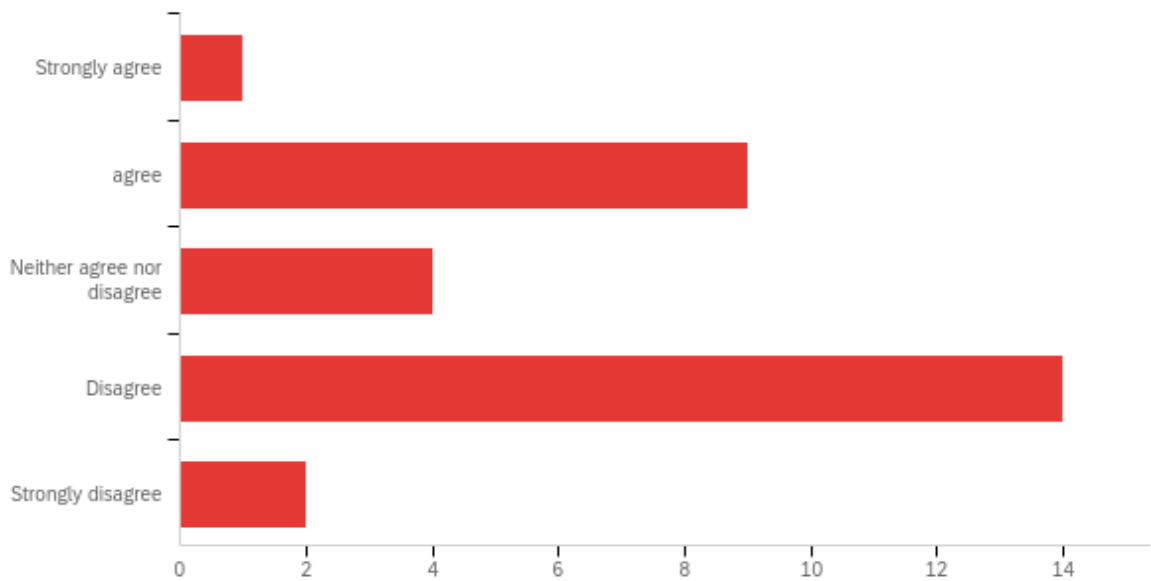


Figure 6: Q6: I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.

Figure 6 shows that 10 people agreed and 14 people disagreed with the statement. This shows that, unlike the previous two questions, not everyone feels anxious when it comes to non-academic communication.

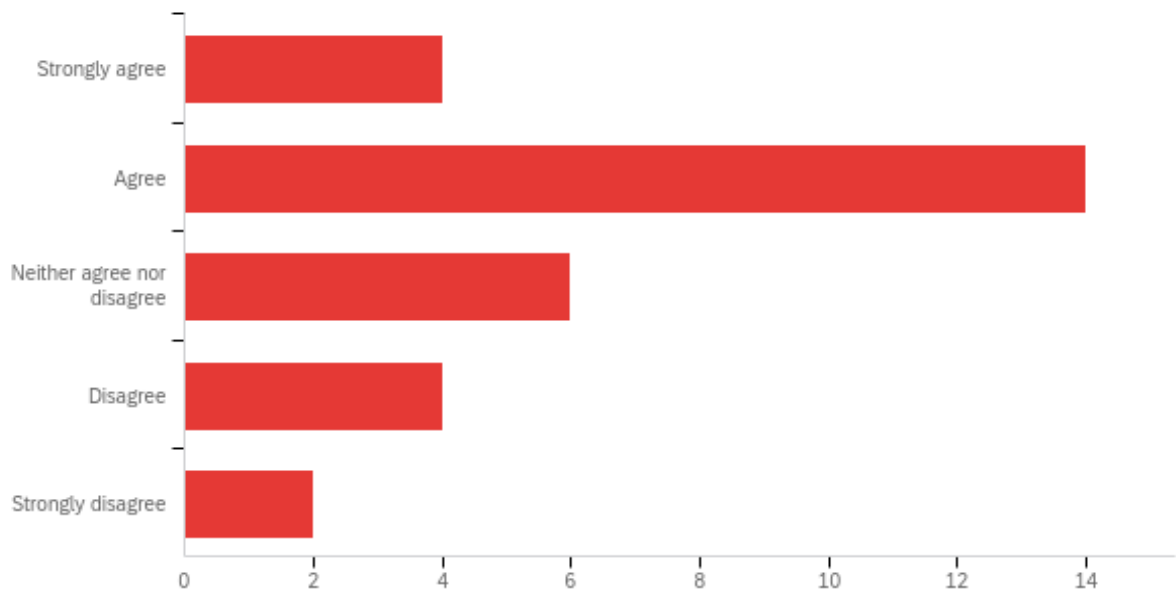


Figure 7: Q7: I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.

As shown in figure 7, 4 strongly agreed and 14 agreed that other students spoke the foreign language better than they did. This reflects their lack of self-confidence in themselves.

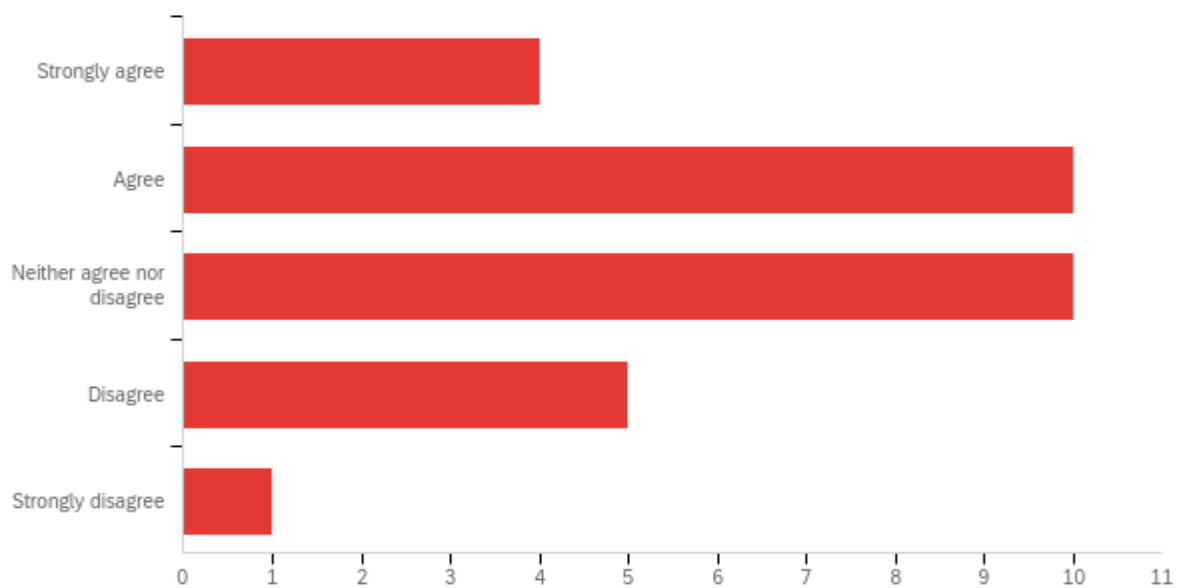


Figure 8: Q8: I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.

As can be seen from the figure 8, out of 30 participants, 4 strongly agreed and 10 agreed on the Statement, and there are also 10 participants chose neither agree nor disagree.

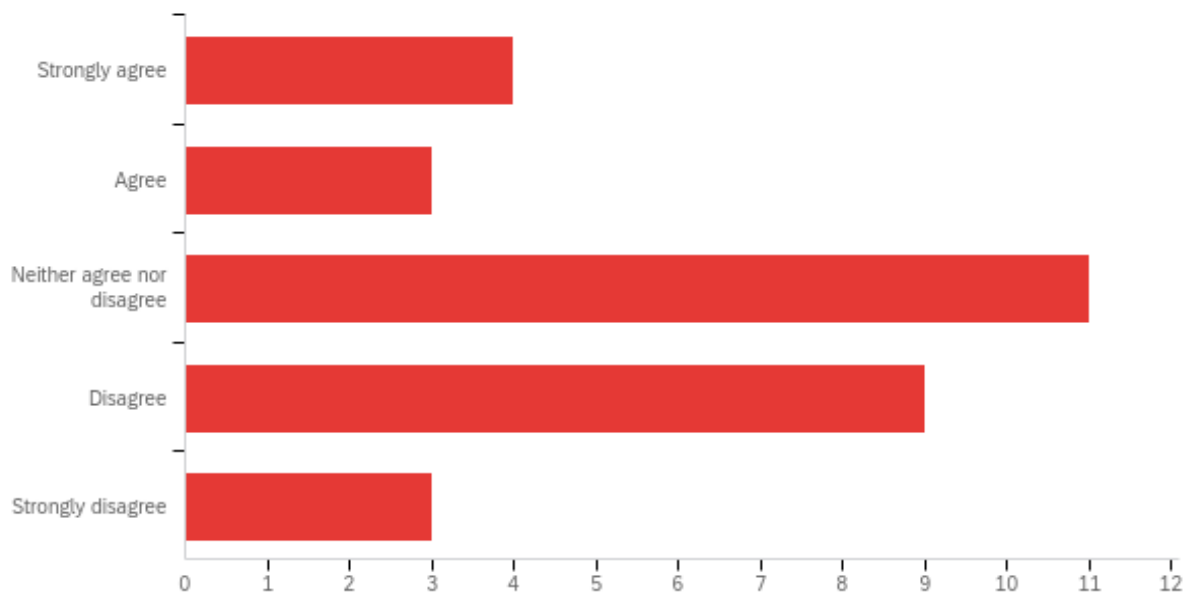


Figure 9: Q9: I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.

Figure 9 shows that 11 participants chose neither agree nor disagree, the highest number of all choices. The second most popular option was disagreed, with nine people choosing this option.

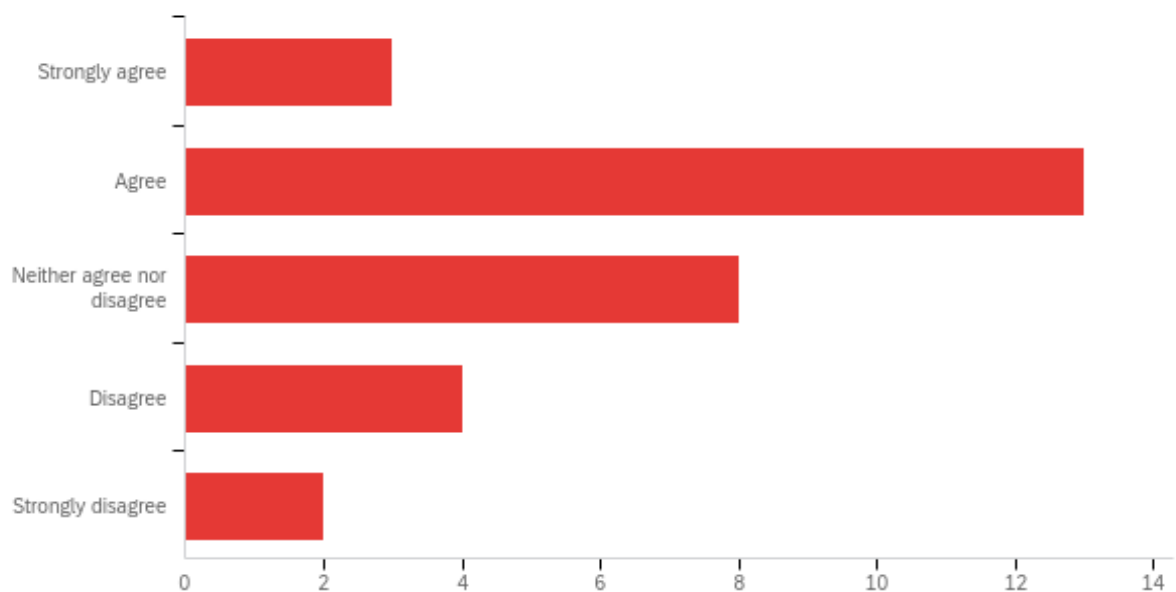


Figure 10: Q10: During class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.

As can be seen from the figure 10, of the 30 participants, 16 admitted to thinking about something unrelated to the course during the lesson.

5. Conclusion

This essay focuses on FLA among Chinese students studying in the UK. Through the available evidence, it appears that there is a high level of language anxiety among Chinese students (question 1 solved). Anxiety is mainly caused by unprepared improvised speech and a lack of trust in English language skills, including in school and life. The limitation of this research is obvious. To start with, the sample for this experiment was too small – with only 30 participants, all of whom were also concentrated at Durham University – for the findings to be generalisable. In addition, this experiment only looked at the causes of anxiety and did not discuss what could be done to reduce it. Further studies with larger samples and a focus on measures related to anxiety reduction are needed.

References

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