

# Positive Psychology towards English Learning Anxiety Among Students of Secondary School at Sichuan China

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## Abstract

Positive psychology is an emerging field of research in psychology initiated in the United States at the end of the 20th century. Positive psychology is committed to the study of human development potential and virtues, and focuses on the positive factors of human. In China, the "Full-time Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards" proposed that English learning particularly emphasizes paying attention to each student's emotion, stimulating their interest in learning English, helping them to establish a sense of achievement and self-confidence in learning, enhancing practical ability, and cultivating a spirit of innovation. Positive psychology provides theoretical guidance for secondary school English teaching, and the application of positive psychology has a positive impact on helping students cultivate a positive personality, establishing a harmonious teacher-student relationship, stimulating the motivation and interest in learning English, and forming an active cognitive learning process. Five students and one English teacher in one class of the second grade of secondary school in Sichuan Province participated in this research. On the basis of drawing on relevant research results at home and abroad, the interview method and observation method are used to investigate the current situation of secondary school English teaching, analyze the existing problems, and propose strategies of positive psychology in English teaching from three aspects: teachers, students, and English teaching environment, and prove that the application of positive psychology can promote the development of secondary school English teaching and effectively alleviate students' anxiety about English learning.

**Keywords:** Positive Psychology, English Learning Anxiety, Secondary School Students, English Classroom

## Introduction

With the comprehensive restoration of Chinese exam-oriented education since the 1980s, a systematic education system has gradually been established, and the use of score

performance to measure learning ability has become a teaching goal pursued by many educators. In recent years, the research focus on foreign language teaching has shifted from how teachers teach to how students learn. In this process, the researchers have paid more and more attention to the role and influence of students' emotional factors in teaching. For Chinese secondary school students, the study of a second language is mainly based on learning English, and it is included as a compulsory course and included in the scope of major examinations. At present, Chinese secondary school students are affected by factors such as huge pressure of study, examination, high expectations of parents, and improper teaching methods of teachers, resulting in a certain degree of learning anxiety in this group in English learning.

Considered to be an important affective variable, anxiety was found to correlate with English-learning achievement among different groups of people in various contexts. It has been observed that some students in English classrooms experience anxiety that results in stuttering and fast heart-beating. All of these phenomena are attributed to psychological anxiety, which has been the research focus of many linguists and psychologists in recent years. Anxiety has been regarded as one of the most important affective factors that influence second language acquisition. Much research, especially in Western countries, has been conducted to find the relationship between anxiety and achievement in the learning of different foreign languages. Most studies (Horwitz, 1986; Macintyre & Gardner, 1994) concluded that anxiety and achievement are negatively correlated. In China, similar research has also been conducted with different groups of people. Most of them, however, were college students. Secondary school students, who are still at a comparatively low level of English proficiency and thus more susceptible to feeling uneasy suspense (Rachman, 1998), are overlooked by most researchers.

At present, Chinese scholars' research on secondary school students' English learning mainly focuses on the study of a certain aspect of students' learning ability or the research of a certain learning method and does not look at the problem of secondary school students' English learning anxiety from an overall level. There are also very few articles using qualitative research methods to explore from the perspective of positive psychology. Starting from the anxiety of students' English language learning, it analyzes the effects of positive psychology in secondary school English teaching effect. Therefore, how to use the positive psychology among students toward English learning anxiety in secondary school has become a research topic. This research will try to conduct a case study of a class and apply positive psychology to actual English teaching to explore the effect of positive psychology on secondary school students' English learning anxiety.

The general research objective of this study is to explore the roles of positive psychology towards English learning anxiety among students of Chinese secondary school in Sichuan, China. The specific research objectives as follows :

- 1) To explore the meaning of positive psychology towards English learning anxiety among Chinese secondary school students.
- 2) To understand the way of positive psychology facilitates the reduction of English learning anxiety among Chinese secondary school students.
- 3) To explore the challenges in implementing positive psychology to reduce student anxiety in English learning.

**Methodology**

This study employed qualitative methods for data collection. For this study, qualitative methods provide the most adequate tools to address this need for the understanding of individual perceptions and experiences, in this case by obtaining data through the recording and documentation of the experiences of teachers and school students. Semi-structured interview questions are formed by the researcher as a guide during the interview session. It is difficult to observe what is in the minds of students and teachers. We can only observe things that can be seen, such as characters (subjects of behavior), frequency (degree of behavior), nature (the performance of the behavior), duration (length of time the behavior lasts), reaction time (the time between the student receiving instructions and making the requested behavior), intensity (intensity and intensity of behavior), location (where the behavior occurs), etc. Therefore, the observation points determined must be a series of sensible teacher-student activities and phenomena, such as questions and responses between teachers and students, interpretation and discrimination, tutoring and practice, teacher movement, and the use of teaching methods. The following is the observations points:

- i. Describe the content and the nature of the lesson or classroom activities including the method of teaching, how/if students are grouped/interacting.
- ii. Describe what the students are doing e.g., listening and taking notes, writing answers to questions.
- iii. Describe how the teacher is interacting with the students, and how the students are interacting with one another.

In this study, observation was conducted twice. After the first interview and observation, the teacher uses the relevant applicational strategies of positive psychology in the classroom (4 weeks), conduct classroom observations again, and record relevant information about the difference between the two observations. After the interview, through discussion with the English teacher, positive psychology applicational strategies were carried out in the English teaching classroom from the following four aspects: using active language of instruction, carrying out positive teaching evaluation, creating a positive teaching atmosphere, adopting an incentive approach.

**Participant And Sampling Method**

The study involved six participants: one school English teacher, and five students. Students' ages ranged from fourteen to fifteen. Three were female and two were male students. Table 1 shows the demographics of the participants.

Table 1

*Participant Demographic*

Participant	Demography				
	Gender	Age	Type of school	School level	
Teacher					
A	Female	28	Government	Middle	
Student					
S1	Male	15	Government	Middle	
S2	Female	14	Government	Middle	
S3	Female	14	Government	Middle	
S4	Female	15	Government	Middle	
S5	Male	13	Government	Middle	

All of the participants originated from Sichuan province in China and had been studying in the school for three semesters. Purposive sampling was employed to obtain access to information that helped in answering the research questions. In this vein, purposive and convenience sampling were the methods utilized in selecting participants for this study. Purposive sampling techniques were selected because they allowed the researcher to select participants who had the potential to provide information regarding the research question to be addressed.

#### Data Collection Procedures

Each participant was interviewed for a single session lasting between 20 and 35 min. All interviews took place over several working days at the schools in question and were recorded using audio devices. Field notes were taken during the classroom observations. Researchers used an embedded, single-case study design to answer the research questions for this study. This design was able to incorporate a variety of evidence, including open-ended questions with in-depth semi-structured interviews, and observations, to deeply explore the multifaceted social phenomenon faced by participants.

All interactions were recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed, using a systematic thematic approach employed by the researchers. This study explored the perspective of participants; hence, the interpretative phenomenological analysis was used. A qualitative research design was employed, combined with phenomenological and case studies. The method of phenomenology contains the study of the whole lived experience. Thematic analysis was applied. Qualitative coding, which is a process of systematically categorizing excerpts in qualitative data to find themes and patterns, was undertaken to develop a wider abstraction that could tell a story related to the phenomenon.

#### Results And Discussion

In this research, the main exploration is to conduct a case study of a class and apply positive psychology to actual English teaching to explore the effect of positive psychology on secondary school students' English learning anxiety. Both teachers and students are very important parts of the English classroom. To meet the purpose of the research, three main interview research themes and two observation research themes emerged. The three interview's themes are: Students' English Learning Anxiety, Positive Psychology and English Teaching, and Challenges of Positive Psychology Interventions. In the English teaching classroom before and after the positive psychology intervention, the performance of the

teacher and students, the interactive phenomenon between the teacher and students were observed and recorded, which are the two themes highlighted during observation. The application of positive psychology in the teaching of English in junior high schools is permeated with the concept of positive psychology from teaching preparation to teaching implementation and teaching evaluation. In the classroom observation, a lesson in eighth grade is used as an example to demonstrate the secondary school's application of positive psychology in English teaching. The total number of students in the class is 42. Comparative observations before and after the implementation of positive psychology classroom intervention strategies. English learning under compulsory education in China is very important, but students lack positive emotional factors in learning and show a certain degree of anxiety. Under the teacher's English teaching and the positive psychology intervention strategy in the classroom, the impact of positive psychology on students' anxiety is obvious.

### **Themes Emerged from Interview**

#### ***Students' English Learning Anxiety***

Horwitz et.al.(1986) hypothesized that second language anxiety parallels three related performance anxieties: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. According to Horwitz (1986), anxiety more or less may emerge in class when students communicate with partners in a foreign language, worry about their exams, or face others' evaluations. Through the analysis of the semi-structured interview results of teachers and students, it can be seen that the main embodiment of students' anxiety is consistent with Horwitz and Cope's Theory of Foreign Language Learning Anxiety:

- i. Communication apprehension
- ii. Fear of negative evaluation
- iii. Test anxiety

A certain level of anxiety can stimulate language learners' motivation to learn and improve their academic performance, but why do some students have a poor focus in class, forget what they have learned, skip class, and raise their hands to speak and perform on stage despite being nervous or showing symptoms of anxiety? All of this shows that the sense of anxiety has a certain negative impact on the language learning experience and academic performance of most students. Here, the results of the interviews and observations are consistent.

According to Krashen (1985), the emotional state which indicates anxiety and relaxation could be affected by motives, attitudes, needs, personality, and emotional factors. The input of language becomes the "intake" of language by way of the emotions necessarily. The affective filter value refers to a hypothetical device that prevents learners from taking in comprehensible input. If the learner suffers anger, stress, and anxiety severely, this emotional input device will prevent the attainment of comprehensible input. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) generally defined Foreign Language Learning (FLL) anxiety as a situational anxiety on account that it is associated with FLL situations. Specifically, anxiety is considered to be students' anxiety and worry about some specific situations such as negative social evaluation, communication, and poor academic performance, which will discourage language acquisition and output. In the investigation of students, the results found that the intrinsic motivation of junior high school students to learn English was weak, the interest in English learning was average, and there is rarely a high interest in English learning; in the English classroom, some students do not feel the joy of learning English. They lack pleasant emotional experiences,

think that English classes are not interesting, lack fun, and they cannot maintain their focus when learning. Nearly half of the students think that it is difficult to speak English and that the class participation is not enough. The motivation to learn is mainly affected by external factors, such as entrance examinations, schools, and teacher requirements.

Li et al. (2018) and Li (2020) found that internal factors (gender, age, level of second language, class ranking, emotional intelligence, etc.) and external factors (classroom environment, predictability of teachers, strictness and frequency of second language use, etc.) can affect the level of pleasure and anxiety. Pleasure shows greater sociability, more influenced by external factors (especially teacher factors), while anxiety is more influenced by its factors (Jiang & Dewaele 2019; Li et al. 2021). In addition, the collective-level classroom environment has a significant predictive effect on both pleasure and anxiety, and in a positive, healthy second-language classroom environment, students are more likely to enjoy foreign language learning and stay away from anxiety (Li et al. 2021). The results of the study showed that there is difficulty communicating in English. Among secondary school students, English learning fails to produce effective thinking and language conversion, while excessive negative transfer makes learning English very difficult, causing great difficulties for junior high school students. In the long run, students do not feel the joy of learning English, which will naturally lead to fear of difficulties, thinking that learning English is difficult, reducing the willingness to learn English. Li et al. (2019) found that foreign language pleasure and anxiety positively and negatively predicted overall academic performance, respectively, and Saito et al. (2018) found that foreign language pleasure and anxiety had positive and negative predictive effects on spoken language, consistent with the findings.

### ***Positive Psychology and English Teaching***

Teacher is a very important group in the teaching of foreign languages. Numerous studies have shown that the positive psychology of foreign language teachers directly affects the quality of foreign language classroom teaching and the effectiveness of students' foreign language learning (Mercer et. al., 2018). Jing (2020) found that five main types of teacher factors affect the pleasant mood of college students in foreign languages: teacher classroom activity organization, teacher personality characteristics, teacher teaching skills, teaching content, and teacher support. This can be seen in interviews and classroom observations from this study.

Lack of positive teaching philosophy. Dewaele & Li (2021) found that students' emotional perceptions of English teachers have an impact on their pleasure, boredom, and classroom engagement, highlighting the phenomenon of emotion transmission in foreign language classrooms. In this study, the teaching attitude of English teachers is positive, but the student view is not positive enough, which is mainly reflected by teachers' learning approach to looking at students with a traditional student view, making students improve by correcting their mistakes, impose making fewer mistakes and limit students' problems. English teachers are not very optimistic about the understanding of student initiative, that is, English teachers have insufficient trust in students. In the process of students' English learning, teachers think that students need to be under constant supervision and management to learn, and students are only passive recipients.

Passive teaching methods neglect students' positive personality development. Rogers (1969) held the view that a pleasant class style of learning could promote students to express their ideas freely, even creatively in the class of foreign language. Li et.al. (2019) conducted multidimensional training on the emotional intelligence of Chinese foreign language learners



and found that it had an indirect and significant effect on foreign language pleasure and anxiety. Although teachers recognize the importance of the teaching objectives of emotional attitude values, the cultivation of students' positive personality is lacking in teaching practice, and the implementation in teaching is not ideal. The importance of students' personality cultivation is only at the level of understanding, and it has not really been practiced and applied, but more concerned about the mastery of English knowledge. In addition, insufficient attention is paid to the construction of a good English learning environment in the teaching process, and the positive hints and positive attribution to students need to be further strengthened. Therefore, teachers are supposed to respect the identity of student's learning subject, conduct the whole developmental education, consider the needs of social reality, and give students sufficient space for self-development (Wen, 2015).

There are problems with the evaluation of English learning, partly associated with the lack of positive feedback and reviews. The evaluation mechanism is also an important factor affecting English teaching. Since the implementation of the new curriculum reform, most of the evaluation concept of English teachers has changed. Grade is no longer the only evaluation standard, but affected by test-taking education and grades as the baton of English teaching, in order to measure the student's academic level, the teaching effect of the teacher and the evaluation indicators, resulting in English teachers paying too much attention to the final evaluation, centralizing student's achievements, engaging in sea tactics, and rarely carrying out English extracurricular activities. All activities were taken to improve English scores as the main goal, hence teachers allocate time and energy to achieve good results in the exam.

The atmosphere of learning English is poor and the classroom atmosphere lacks motivation. Insufficient input of English materials is one of the main problems faced by students learning English. Modern language learning theory believes that a good language environment is one of the important prerequisites for learning language, and it should be ensured that sufficient reading materials and effective input should be ensured in the process of language learning. For the current secondary school students, the input of English materials is mainly reflected in the classroom, the input channel is too single, making the amount of English input too small, the language acquisition environment is difficult to effectively create, and the atmosphere of English learning is not strong. Fan (2005) held the view that the classroom environment can be treated as the sum of various physical, psychological and social factors, which makes a difference to the development, the effect and the quality of teaching activities, and which also exists in the process of classroom teaching. Palacios (1998) found a relationship between the degree of anxiety about students' foreign language learning and the teaching atmosphere. Among them, whether it can be recognized and supported by teachers is closely related to students' foreign language learning anxiety. Consistent with classroom observations from this study.

There are certain problems in the teacher-student relationship, which affects the atmosphere of English Learning. The communicative and interactive characteristics of emotions are recognized by the academic community (Dewaele & Li 2020). In terms of the effect of teacher-student interaction on FLL anxiety, Young (1991) found that students' FLL anxiety would be reduced if teachers could treat students' expression errors in a more friendly way. According to the research of Horwitz (2010), students' FLL anxiety is mainly caused by teachers' inappropriate ways of correcting, rather than the behavior of correcting the error. Besides, Shimbo (2008) believed that teachers' positive feedback is an effective way of improving students' emotions in FLL. English teachers recognize that a good teacher-student

relationship is conducive to the development of English teaching, most students expect teachers to give feedback and make evaluations, teachers' praise can promote English learning, and a good teacher-student relationship can enable students to learn English seriously. However, only a small number of teachers believe that the overall teacher-student relationship is very good, which may be affected by the traditional teacher-student view and the limitation of teachers' professional ability.

### ***Challenges of Positive Psychology Interventions***

As far as domestic foreign language teachers are concerned, the continuous reform of various types of foreign language education in recent years, especially the many new features of foreign language education in the new era (such as online and offline hybrid teaching, etc.) have posed great challenges to the traditional role of foreign language teachers and brought them great pressure. In addition, low self-efficacy, anxiety, and confusion are also emotional experiences faced by many young teachers (Xu, 2020). Therefore, cultivating the positive emotions of foreign language teachers is a top priority in the field of teacher education. Unfortunately, at present, there is a shortage of foreign language teacher research from the perspective of positive psychology in China. Relevance of the application of positive psychology in the teaching of English in secondary schools:

- i. The requirements of society for the all-round development of students
- ii. Requirements for the physical and mental development of adolescents
- iii. Requirements of the English Course Standard
- iv. Requirements for English Teaching Theory

Society's requirements for the all-round development of students. The application of positive psychology in the teaching of English in secondary schools is based on the premise that each student has a personality and is different. In teaching, according to individual differences, we should give full play to the individual characteristics of students to promote the all-round development of students, so that they can experience positive emotions such as fun in the Process of English learning. The successful experience of English learning is of great significance in promoting the cultivation of positive personalities such as self-confidence and innovation of students.

The requirements for the physical and mental development of adolescents. Zhu, et al. (2012) suggested through research that teachers should have a deeper understanding of students, so as to timely detect the emotional changes of students at different stages, and appropriately give students external emotional stimuli, so as to promote the transformation of their internal emotions towards positive and optimistic aspects. Because secondary school students are in a peak period of physical and mental development - adolescence, and positive psychology studies positive personality traits, pays attention to the positive aspects of human nature, and develops a positive personality, which is conducive to the formation of good character of secondary school students. However, China's population base is huge, and it is difficult to take into account the physical and mental differences of all students in each class.

English course standard requirements. Through the application of positive psychology in the teaching of English in junior high schools, we promote the achievement of the standard objectives of the English curriculum and provide theoretical and methodological support for them. However, Secondary English education in China is still biased towards exam-oriented education, with the main purpose of obtaining scores and cultivating students' examination ability, which is contrary to the implementation of positive psychology theory.



Requirements for Theory of Teaching English. Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) argue that cognitive development in second languages involves complex, dynamic, rapidly changing, self-organizing, adaptive systems. Therefore, the introduction of multiple variables to explore the mediating or regulatory variables in foreign language teaching from the perspective of positive psychology will be of great help to researchers understand the internal practical mechanism of positive psychology. Pay attention to the student's emotional experience, and select and organize course resources according to the student's interests, so that students have a positive emotional experience in the process of learning English.

Zhang(2014) believes that the main significance of positive psychology applied to teaching is to "create a positive atmosphere conducive to English learning, tap students' English potential, pay attention to individuals, and cultivate their positive attitude of learning English." He suggested that the application of positive psychology can be carried out from four aspects: creating a positive English learning environment, tapping students' language talents with English potential, positively evaluating students' English learning activities, and focusing on cultivating positive qualities in individuals. In addition, he advocated teachers continuously improve their positive psychological quality and comprehensive ability, and give full play to the guiding role of positive psychology to the greatest extent. It consistent with the intervention strategies of positive psychology in the English classroom in this study. The dilemma of the application of positive psychology in the teaching of English in secondary schools:

- i. Imperfection of theoretical knowledge
- ii. Lack of professional guidance
- iii. The psychology of adolescent students is difficult to control
- iv. Limitations of the external environment

On the one hand, positive psychology as a professional psychology, teachers have certain problems in their understanding of the more abstract professional vocabulary of positive psychology. On the other hand, positive psychology as a theory, teachers lack of operable methods, the application of positive psychology to English teaching methods, usually teachers through theoretical learning, in the English teaching practice application groping and thus summary of the method. In addition, the application of positive psychology in English teaching will be affected by many factors, including external evaluation mechanisms, teaching policy restrictions, implementation scope restrictions, etc.

### **Themes Emerged from Observation**

#### ***Students' Behavior Before and After Application of Positive Psychology***

From the comparative observation, it can be seen that the students' interest in learning, motivation, self-confidence, will power and cooperation in the subject achieved remarkable results. It is mainly manifested in the following aspects:

- i. Students' enthusiasm for Learning English has increased, they are more interested and confident in Learning English, their concentration and participation in the classroom have increased significantly, and group discussions have become more active. The teaching of learning methods and the transformation of classroom teaching forms have stimulated students' interest in learning, enabled students to master more effective learning methods, and enhanced students' ability to resist setbacks and self-confidence.

- ii. The class learning atmosphere is strong, and the sense of cooperation, self-awareness ability, and ability to recognize events among students have been improved to a certain extent. It is conducive to students correctly understanding their relationship with others, enhancing the spirit of cooperation, and beginning to learn to look at problems rationally and control emotions and help each other, which enhances the friendship between classmates and the harmonious relationship between teachers and students.
- iii. The potential of students has been developed. Traditional classroom teaching focuses on the transfer of knowledge, ignoring the individual's own attitude and emotions.

### ***Teacher's Behavior Before and After Application of Positive Psychology***

Comparative observations show: after the application of positive psychology in English teaching, the teacher's state is more active, often in a happy state, in the teaching work and life is easier to obtain a sense of happiness; the teacher's teaching philosophy has changed, through the study of positive psychology, can better understand the requirements of English curriculum standards, realize that English teaching is not only to teach students English knowledge, the cultivation of student ability, personality is also not negligible, the junior high school stage is the basic stage of student growth and development, facing different individual students, In the face of students' problems, teachers know how to find students' shining points to encourage students and educate students, the teaching effect can be described as half the effort, good teacher-student relationship makes teachers and students in a harmonious and harmonious atmosphere, work efficiency, learning efficiency are very high.

### **Implication and Conclusion**

Positive psychology research has made it recognized that the goal of foreign language education is no longer limited to helping learners acquire language knowledge and skills, but also promote the well-being of learners and teachers. In other words, we should focus on both the results of language teaching and learning, as well as the individual well-being of teachers and students. Research that has been done provides implication towards schools, educators, parents. The first implication for school is to provide adequate teaching resources. The abundance of teaching resources greatly affects the effectiveness of English teaching. Schools should be equipped with a variety of multimedia classrooms, using multimedia to enable students to better understand English and improve their interest in English learning. Purchase English reading materials, provide sufficient resources for teachers and students, and the school buildings, slogans, and signs can be used in English to improve a good language environment for students so they can learn English in a subtle way and encourage hobbies in learning English.

The second implication to educators especially given the important impact of teachers' emotions on their teaching practice and students' academic performance, teacher education should pay attention to cultivating teachers' positive emotions. Teachers with positive emotions create a dynamic group, affinity, mutual trust, and a positive atmosphere, all of which play a key role in effective teaching and ultimately successful learning and well-being. Numerous empirical studies have shown that intimate teacher-student connections and quality peer relationships play an important role in students' academic self-perception, school integration, motivation, learning, and performance (Furrer et al., 2014). Teachers also should pay attention to cultivating positive emotions among learners, especially cultivating students' ability to maintain or even generate a sense of happiness and interest under pressure.

Furthermore, this study implicate that teachers develop a positive teaching style. The teaching style and method of teachers are a teaching style with unique personality charm and stability formed through repeated practice under the guidance of education and teaching that suits their personality characteristics, thinking style and aesthetic taste under the guidance of their own intentional or unintentional situation. Teachers' teaching style can affect the atmosphere of the entire classroom teaching, teachers teach knowledge in a humorous and funny way, flexibly choose teaching methods according to the teaching content and the characteristics of students, constantly innovate teaching methods. Teachers need to create a positive and enjoyable learning environment for students. For example, in order to create a positive and enjoyable learning environment within the classroom, teachers need to focus on the spatial layout of the classroom, and the circular seats can increase the opportunity for learners to approach the teacher, thereby enhancing the sense of trust, compassion, and belonging within the language learner community (Falout, 2014).

Emphasis is placed on the choice of active teaching content. The choice of teaching content is influenced by the teacher's teaching concept, teachers should be in the premise of a deep interpretation of the curriculum standards, according to the characteristics of the students to choose the teaching content, choose a positive, can arouse the interest of students in the English teaching content, through the teaching of positive teaching content, so that students can have a positive emotional experience, experience the fun of learning English, in a pleasant situation to accept knowledge, growth ability, cultivate students positive and optimistic qualities.

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