

Article

# **Affective Responses to Difficulty English Learning in the Chinese Cultural Context: A Qualitative Case Analysis of College Students**

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## **Abstract**

Affective responses to English learning are deeply influenced by cultural and educational contexts. However, academic research on Chinese college students' affective responses to difficulties in English learning is often limited to specific perspectives and lacks a systematic approach. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the manifestations and underlying causes of these responses, this study conducted an 18-month longitudinal investigation of five college students. Using classroom observations, in-depth interviews with students, teachers, and parents, and the collection of multidimensional data, the study aimed to uncover the mechanisms driving these emotional responses. The findings indicate that students' affective responses to learning difficulties are multidimensional and vary in intensity. Key influencing factors include an exam-oriented education system focused on career development, classroom teaching methods, negative teacher evaluations, and superficial course design. These emotional responses are closely linked to China's sociocultural and educational framework and exhibit a pattern of dynamic stability throughout their development. By positively guiding these emotions, their beneficial role in the educational process can be harnessed. Furthermore, the study underscores the necessity of deep understanding and effective intervention in students' affective responses to learning difficulties. This is not only crucial for enhancing academic performance but also provides valuable insights for educational practice.

## **1 Introduction**

Learning emotions encompass the range of affective experiences and emotional responses individuals encounter throughout their educational journey. These responses are closely linked to the activities undertaken, the outcomes achieved, the learning environment, and learners' unique personality traits and psychological conditions. Interdisciplinary research highlights the crucial role of emotional states on both psychological and biological levels, profoundly influencing learning by shaping attention, memory, and cognitive skills. Emotions not only regulate learners' focus but also enhance memory, affecting how information is encoded and retrieved. However, contemporary educational practices often exhibit a cognitive bias, prioritizing cognitive skill development while overlooking the integral role of emotions in learning. This tendency is particularly evident in college English instruction in China, where the potential of emotions as facilitators of knowledge transfer and catalysts for academic achievement remains undervalued. Yet, emotions can serve as both a bridge and a driving force in intellectual advancement, fostering deeper engagement and academic excellence.

The role of emotions in university students' acquisition of a second language has only recently gained widespread recognition in academic circles. Current research in this field primarily focuses on three key areas. Firstly, from a micro-level perspective, scholars have examined the anxieties and apprehensions university students experience during second language learning. By applying the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, researchers have conducted extensive quantitative assessments of students' emotional distress. Advances in this area have not only reinforced the anxiety dimensions identified by Horwitz and Cope but have also expanded them to include three primary aspects: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Studies on communication apprehension, such as those by Wang Songlin<sup>[1]</sup>, highlight the tension and fear students experience in real-world language use and how these emotions hinder linguistic fluency and accuracy. Research on fear of negative evaluation, exemplified by Liu Hong<sup>[2]</sup>, explores learners' concerns about receiving negative feedback from peers and instructors and its impact on motivation and classroom participation. Investigations into test anxiety, including studies by Wei Xiaodong<sup>[3]</sup>, analyze learners' anxious responses in standardized testing contexts, the effects of anxiety on performance, and potential strategies for alleviating these emotional states. Collectively, these studies focus on categorizing learning emotions and identifying common factors contributing to their development. Secondly, from a macro-level perspective, broader research examines the overall emotional landscape of university students learning English. Although relatively limited in scope, these predominantly quantitative studies reveal significant trends and correlations. Findings indicate that students' emotional experiences are strongly linked to factors such as gender, academic year, access to learning resources, geographic location, and cultural background. Gender differences may influence learning motivation and self-efficacy, while academic progression may shape emotional attitudes at different stages of learning. The availability of learning resources, such as libraries and online courses, directly affects emotional experiences, while geographic and cultural factors contribute to variations in emotional responses among students from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, the relationship between emotional attitudes and academic achievement suggests that positive learning emotions may predict higher language proficiency and better academic performance. Educational interventions, including affective education and counseling, as well as the integration of technological tools like mobile learning and virtual reality, have demonstrated their potential in enhancing the emotional well-being of university students learning English. Lastly, academic investigations into the emotional dimensions of second language learning have adopted a multifaceted approach, incorporating learning motivation and self-concept to explore how affective factors influence language acquisition. These studies examine elements such as the educational environment, personality traits, and family background, all of which shape university students' second language learning experiences. For example, exploring the intrinsic motivations driving students to learn a second language, their attitudes toward learning, and their self-perception as language learners is essential for understanding the emotional dynamics involved. While existing literature provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding the emotional aspects of second language learning among European university students, in-depth research on Chinese university students remains relatively limited.

In our country, research on the emotional experiences of college students in second language learning remains insufficient. Existing studies are fragmented in identifying the diversity and influencing factors of emotions, lacking systematic integration and in-depth analysis of these emotional characteristics. Emotional experiences in second language learning are multidimensional, shaped by biological factors, cognitive processes, and sociocultural contexts. However, most studies regard these emotions as static, individual psychological traits, without fully considering their constructive role in cognitive development and sociocultural adaptation. In particular, research on challenges in second language learning, such as anxiety, often remains at the surface level, failing to explore the

complexity of these emotions and the fluctuations in arousal levels across different emotional states. This study seeks to conduct an in-depth analysis of college students' emotional experiences in English learning, examining their specific manifestations and underlying causes. The research aims to address the following two core questions:

1. Investigating Challenging Emotions in English Learning: The study aims to identify the various types of apprehensions and difficulties that college students experience during the process of learning English.

2. Analyzing the Causes of Apprehensions: This research further explores the multitude of factors that contribute to the emergence and experience of these challenging emotions among college students.

## 2 Methodology

This exploration adopts a qualitative research approach, focusing on the emotional experiences of English language acquisition among college students at a normal university in Anhui Province. Collaborative relationships were established with two English teaching staff members from the second and third-year classes who expressed interest in participating. After clearly communicating the intent of the research and the rights of the participants, five college students were identified as research participants through voluntary selection. The researcher adopted an interactive approach that integrated regular interviews with academic guidance to enhance the authenticity and depth of the information obtained. Systematic classroom observations were conducted in the school environment, and in-depth interviews were carried out with teachers and academic advisors. The teacher interviews were usually conducted before and after the observations, while the academic advisor interviews were scheduled based on the progress of the student interviews. The interview methods were diverse, including direct dialogue, telephone communication, and online platform interviews. The study lasted for 18 months, and the researcher strictly adhered to ethical standards applicable to adult participants throughout the process. All classroom observations and interviews were approved in advance by participants, academic advisors, teachers, and educational institutions, ensuring the voluntary participation and the freedom to withdraw at any time. The data collected in the study, including the frequency of interviews, records of observations, and specific methods of interviews, are detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Frequency of interviews, records of observations, and specific methods of interviews.

Research Subject	Gender	Tracking Duration	Classroom Participation and Observation	Individual Interview	Advisor Interview
Zhang Wei	Male	18 months	50 times / 35 hours	30 times / 40 hours	20 times / 25 hours
Li Na	Female	9 months	35 times / 22 hours	20 times / 30 hours	12 times / 12 hours
Wang Qiang	Male	18 months	30 times / 25 hours	15 times / 20 hours	10 times / 10 hours
Zhao Min	Female	18 months	35 times / 21 hours	30 times / 35 hours	14 times / 14 hours
Qian Gang	Male	15 months	40 times / 20 hours	20 times / 24 hours	11 times / 11 hours

Note: The names above are pseudonyms, m = month, t = time, h = hour.

All audio data from the interviews have been transcribed, serialized, and meticulously categorized. Focused on the research goals, the researchers have distilled the fragmented information into three principal analytical categories: classroom engagement, final assessment, and live presentations. Utilizing a grounded theory approach, they have conducted an inductive analysis of the classroom notes observed, delving into the emotional reactions of college students across a range of academic tasks and activities. This endeavor aims to lay the groundwork for a profound comprehension of the emotional landscape experienced by college students.

This research endeavors to deeply comprehend the categories and characteristics of the emotions associated with the fear of difficulty that college students encounter in the domain of English language learning. It initiates with Russell’s circumplex model of affect, which employs two dimensions—pleasure and arousal—to map emotional states within an affective circle. The study further incorporates Dweck’s theory of mindsets, which differentiates between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset, pertinent to Pekrun and Schutz’s control dimension as it pertains to an individual’s evaluation of their capacity for change. Additionally, the research draws upon Thayer’s model of activation and affect, which introduces a third dimension—tension—to the established focus on pleasure and arousal, crafting a multidimensional emotional model. These theoretical frameworks have been meticulously adapted and merged to suit the research objectives. Through an exhaustive examination and analysis of interview transcripts and observational notes, the research team has developed a specialized taxonomy and characteristic model that addresses the specific emotional challenges college students face in learning English. In Thayer’s model, two axes are defined, each equipped with a scale to measure the level of internal activation, ranging from activation to deactivation. Emotions are categorized into activated and deactivated types; activated emotions are typically linked to intense, be it positive or negative, experiences, whereas deactivated emotions are more subdued. For further details, refer to Table 2.

**Table 2:** Types of Affective Responses to Difficulty in English Learning Among College Students

Primary Emotion	Secondary Emotion	
Activated	Activated	Depressed
Fear	Worried, Uncomfortable, Alert	Uneasy, Hesitant, Calm
Doubt	Deep Doubt, Distrust, Questioning	Indecisive, Cautious, Reserved Opinion
Tension	Panic, Anxiety, Irritability	Slight Anxiety, Unrest, Composed

Researchers have meticulously integrated extensive data resources and, guided by the core research inquiry, have meticulously applied a stratified coding analysis strategy to delve deeply into the data. In their examination of the adverse emotions that college students might experience while learning

English, they have categorized these emotions into secondary codes such as aversion, sadness, and fear. Concurrently, the factors influencing these emotions have been meticulously parsed into secondary codes including classroom interaction, end-of-semester examinations, and oral presentations. Table 3 illustrates an exhaustive example of a multi-tiered coding classification of the apprehensions and affective responses to difficulty that college students manifest in their English learning endeavors.

**Table 3:** Analysis and Coding Presentation of Types of Affective Responses to Difficulty in College Students' English Learning

Tertiary Coding	Secondary Coding	Primary Coding	Interview Content
Types of Affective Responses to Difficulty in College Students' English Learning	Fear	Worry (High)	Worry about failing the exam or not achieving the desired grade. Concern about not having sufficient listening, speaking, reading, or writing skills. Anxiety about making mistakes when answering questions in class or not expressing oneself clearly in group discussions. Fear of not keeping up with the average learning pace of the class.
		Alertness (High)	During English class, avoid making eye contact with the teacher or classmates to prevent being called upon to answer questions.
		Hesitation (Low)	When it comes to expressing opinions or participating in discussions in English, one may hesitate due to concerns about

			<p>insufficient language skills or fear of making mistakes. Hesitation can occur when attempting to verbally express oneself in English, due to uncertainty about the correct way to phrase something or worry about inaccurate pronunciation. When faced with English writing tasks, especially formal papers or essays, one might hesitate because of worries about grammatical errors or improper word choice.</p>
	Doubt	Deep Doubt (High)	<p>Expresses skepticism towards the effectiveness of certain teaching methods, such as believing that the traditional grammar-translation approach does not effectively enhance language proficiency. Questions the practicality or cultural relevance of textbooks, feeling that the content is outdated or does not align with real-world usage scenarios. Holds deep doubts about the grading criteria and fairness of exams or assignments, thinking that they</p>

			do not accurately reflect students' language abilities.
		Distrust (High)	Due to the teacher's performance or style of interaction, there is a high level of distrust towards the teacher's professional competence or motivation to teach. In peer evaluation activities, there is a high level of distrust regarding the accuracy and objectivity of peers' assessments. There is a high level of distrust in the effectiveness and security of language learning software or applications.
		Prudence (Low)	When attempting to use new vocabulary or phrases, one would carefully select words to ensure their correct usage. When practicing pronunciation, especially with easily confused phonemes, one would listen carefully and imitate standard pronunciation to avoid mistakes. When using complex grammatical

			structures in writing or speech, one would prudently check the grammar rules to prevent errors.
	Anxiety	Irritability (High)	Feeling irritable when studying for extended periods without sensing noticeable improvement. Experiencing impatience when engaging in repetitive exercises, such as memorizing a large number of vocabulary words or grammatical rules. Feeling anxious if the teacher's pace of instruction does not synchronize with the student's learning pace.
		Irritability (High)	In high-stress or high-competition classroom environments, one is more prone to anger. Comparisons with peers who perform better can trigger feelings of frustration and irritability. Failing to achieve expected outcomes in consecutive tests or exercises can lead to feelings of anger and depression.



		Discomfort (Low)	Feeling uneasy when expressing oneself in English or giving presentations, especially in front of an audience. Experiencing discomfort when trying to understand complex English materials or communicating with native English speakers.

### 3 Results and Discussion

Within higher education, the development of English language skills among college students extends beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills; it constitutes a profound and complex emotional journey. Table 4 summarizes the various affective responses to difficulty, along with their specific contributing factors, experienced by five college students across three key academic scenarios: classroom interaction, end-of-semester examinations, and oral presentations.

**Table 4:** Primary Types and Specific Sources of Affective Responses to Difficulty in English Learning Among Five College Students

		Zhang Wei	Li Na	Wang Qiang	Zhao Min	Qian Gang
Classroom Interaction	Inquiry	Fear (of being called on by the teacher during class)	Doubt (regarding it as a classroom management technique rather than genuine academic exchange)	Anxiety (about giving a wrong answer in front of classmates, worried that it will affect one's image in the eyes of classmates or teachers)	Doubt (lacking confidence in one's own knowledge and understanding, worried that the answers provided may not be accurate or complete)	Fear (of giving an incorrect answer, especially when not feeling confident about the course material)
	Respon	Fear (of not knowing	Doubt (about the content	Doubt (English is	Doubt (feeling	Doubt (the modes of

	se	how to answer the teacher's questions)	and manner of one's own responses)	not my native language, so I am not confident in my language abilities when expressing myself)	pressure to answer questions in front of classmates, worried that one's responses may not be as good as those of other students)	expression in English may differ from my native language's cultural context, leading to uncertainty whether my responses align with the cultural norms of English-speaking countries)
End-of-Semester Exam		<p>Fear (of the end-of-semester exam)</p> <p>Doubt (about one's ability to achieve the desired grade in the final exam)</p>	Doubt (about whether one can achieve the desired results in the final exam)	Fear (often facing high expectations from family, teachers, or oneself)	Fear (that exam results will affect one's future opportunities, such as further education, scholarships, or career prospects)	Anxiety (about possibly having to review a large amount of content within a limited time frame)
Oral Presentation		Fear (of the task-based oral presentation s assigned by the teacher in every class)	Anxiety (that one's English pronunciation , grammar, or vocabulary is insufficient to clearly express ideas)	Anxiety (about not being able to meet the expectations of teachers or classmates, especially in competitive or high-standard environments )	Fear (that past negative experiences with oral presentations may have an impact on new ones)	Anxiety (due to a lack of public speaking experience, feeling unsure about how to effectively control the situation or handle unexpected circumstances )

### 3.1 Primary Types of Affective Responses to Difficulty in College Students' English Learning

Observations of the English learning processes of five college students (see Table 4) clearly indicate that the three primary affective responses to difficulty—fear, doubt, and anxiety—are present in all of them. However, each student exhibits distinct patterns and varying intensities in experiencing and expressing these emotions, highlighting the individualized nature of emotional responses.

Zhang Wei's primary affective response to difficulty is fear, which consistently manifests throughout his academic life. He experiences intense apprehension when unexpectedly called upon by teachers in class, fearing that he might not know how to respond. This fear became particularly evident during an English lesson when the teacher suddenly asked him to solve a problem on the blackboard, causing his heart to race. Standing in front of the class, under the watchful eyes of his peers, Zhang Wei felt extreme discomfort. He worried about giving an incorrect answer, and the sudden attention and high expectations placed upon him created overwhelming pressure. The approaching end-of-semester exams further contributed to Zhang Wei's stress and unease. As the exam date drew closer, he began to doubt his ability to achieve the desired results. This uncertainty led to heightened anxiety; at night, as he lay in bed, his mind raced with potential exam questions and answers, worrying that he was inadequately prepared. Additionally, the task-based oral presentations assigned in every class made him feel nervous and fearful. Whenever it was his turn to present, he started preparing days in advance, practicing his speech repeatedly. Despite his preparation, he remained anxious about his performance in front of his classmates. During one presentation, even though he was well-prepared, standing before the class triggered such intense anxiety that his voice trembled, and his thoughts became unclear.

Li Na's primary affective response to difficulty is doubt, which consistently emerges in her perceptions of classroom interactions and self-assessments of her abilities. She views classroom questioning more as a pedagogical management strategy than an opportunity for authentic academic exchange, a belief that leaves her feeling uncertain when asked to contribute. In one particular English class discussion on the previous day's reading, Li Na had personal reflections but was overcome with doubt about the value of sharing her thoughts, prompting her to remain silent. Additionally, she experiences uncertainty about the substance and style of her responses. The fear that her expressions may lack adequacy or propriety is especially pronounced when preparing for classroom presentations. During an English speech assignment, despite thoroughly researching her topic, Li Na struggled with a lack of confidence in her linguistic choices and grammatical accuracy, leading her to rehearse extensively to avoid potential mistakes. Doubts also cloud Li Na's perspective on her final exams. The uncertainty surrounding her performance weighs heavily on her, causing significant stress. Even during study sessions with peers, she remains concerned that her revision techniques may not be effective.

Wang Qiang's experience with English learning is fraught with complex layers of negative emotions. He is deeply anxious about presenting incorrect answers in front of his peers, fearing it could diminish his standing in their eyes or that of his teachers. This anxiety is rooted in a heightened sensitivity to the judgments of others, coupled with a vigilant concern for his own reputation. Additionally, as a non-native English speaker, Wang Qiang harbors a profound doubt about his linguistic abilities, which makes him more cautious and indecisive in his language expression. The weight of high expectations—whether from family, educators, or self-imposed—induces a fear of falling short of these exacting standards. In competitive or high-pressure environments, his nervousness intensifies, overshadowed by the fear of failing to meet the aspirations of his teachers or peers. This combination of fear and tension not only affects his state of mind but also threatens to

hinder his learning effectiveness and active participation. His anxiety is particularly acute during English lessons. Li Na, likewise, worries that her pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary might fail to adequately convey her ideas. During a paired oral exercise, her well-prepared dialogue faltered as she struggled with fluency, her anxiety about her language proficiency making her interactions more hesitant and constrained.

Qian Gang's journey in learning English is often beset by a range of affective challenges. Foremost among these is a pervasive sense of fear, particularly in classroom settings when teachers pose questions. He dreads the prospect of providing an incorrect answer. For instance, during an English literature class where the teacher inquired about a work by Shakespeare, Qian Gang, despite having a vague notion of the response, lacked the confidence to volunteer his answer for fear of ridicule from his peers. Doubt is another frequent intruder in Qian Gang's experience. In an English speaking exercise, as he endeavored to articulate a complex viewpoint in English, he became indecisive and second-guessed himself, concerned that his expression might clash with the cultural norms of English-speaking countries. This hesitation persisted even after he mustered the courage to speak. Anxiety, too, is a familiar emotion for Qian Gang. As final exams approach, he feels the weight of pressure to review the entire semester's curriculum within a constrained timeframe. Late-night study sessions in the library are filled with a sense of unease and worry about not performing well on the exams. Lastly, his inexperience in public speaking renders Qian Gang particularly anxious when called upon to express himself in front of an audience. During an English speech class, as his turn to present arrived, his heart raced, and his palms grew sweaty. Even after commencing his speech, his voice quivered, and his train of thought became disjointed. This overwhelming anxiety left him feeling profoundly disheartened once the speech concluded.

These observations highlight the diverse range of emotions that college students experience in their English learning journeys, as well as their profound and often subtle impact on the learning process and its outcomes. Zhang Wei is particularly prone to nervousness and public speaking anxiety. He fears being questioned in class and providing incorrect answers, a fear that intensifies as exams approach, amplifying his anxiety. His nervousness peaks during oral presentations, where, despite meticulous preparation, he struggles with stage fright. Li Na exhibits skepticism and indecision, approaching classroom inquiries and self-assessments with doubt. She fears that her contributions may not be valued and is uncertain about her performance in final exams, leading to stress that permeates her study and preparation sessions. Wang Qiang is often overwhelmed by nervousness and fear, particularly concerned that his performance could damage his reputation. Highly sensitive to the evaluations of others and burdened by high expectations, his anxiety has the potential to negatively affect his academic performance. Zhao Min frequently experiences doubt and fear in her studies, particularly regarding her knowledge and the possibility of falling short compared to her peers. She feels intense anxiety about exams and oral presentations, with previous unsatisfactory experiences further amplifying her apprehension. Qian Gang displays fear and nervousness when learning English, especially when quick responses or public speaking are required. He lacks confidence in his grasp of the course material, worries that his English expressions might conflict with cultural norms, and feels overwhelmed by the pressure during review sessions and presentations. In the absence of proper mentorship, college students often hesitate to share their emotional experiences during the learning process with educators or advisors. This reluctance challenges the research postulates by Krashen <sup>[4]</sup> and Cable *et al.* <sup>[5]</sup>, who argued that adults do not face negative emotions in second language acquisition. Consequently, adopting a multidimensional research methodology that gathers and analyzes data from various perspectives is especially suitable for studying college students' English language learning. This holistic approach provides valuable insights into accurately assessing and understanding the extent of emotional arousal among college students in their English learning

endeavors. The study corroborates the varied activation states of affective responses to difficulty in English learning among college students. Emotions such as fear and doubt, particularly concerning grades and skepticism about teaching methods, are typically in a heightened state of arousal. In contrast, emotions like hesitation and caution are associated with lower arousal, evident in the careful use of language and the deliberate selection of new vocabulary. Nervous emotions, such as irritability when learning progress is slow, also indicate a high level of arousal, often linked to specific learning activities and exhibiting situational and temporal characteristics.

This suggests that college students' emotional experiences in English learning are dynamic and multifaceted. Rather than existing in isolation, positive and negative emotions interact and influence one another. Furthermore, affective responses to challenges vary significantly, depending on the specific learning environment and context, with different emotions being more or less active in different situations.

### **3.2 Causes of Affective Responses to Difficulty in College Students' English Learning**

The data analysis reveals three primary factors that contribute to the emergence of affective responses to difficulty among college students learning English.

Firstly, the classroom interaction, particularly the questioning sessions, can provoke intense emotional reactions from students. When questioned, students often experience nervousness and anxiety, typically due to concerns about providing correct answers. The possibility of giving a wrong response or being unable to answer at all can lead to feelings of embarrassment in front of peers, accompanied by a sense of loss and sorrow. Poor classroom interaction performance can also trigger negative interpersonal dynamics, such as awkwardness and detachment between teachers and students or among classmates, further intensifying the negative learning experience. In a series of in-depth interviews, the discomfort of college student Zhang Wei with the classroom questioning sessions was repeatedly highlighted. Early in his college career, Zhang Wei confided in researchers, "Although I am eager for the diverse experiences of college life, the classroom questioning often leaves me feeling uneasy, fearing the embarrassment of not being able to provide a satisfactory answer in front of my classmates." By his sophomore year, Zhang Wei's concerns had not subsided; instead, he articulated his anxieties more clearly: "I feel particularly anxious about the impromptu questions in class, fearing that my responses will not meet the expected standards." Reflecting on her freshman year, Li Na openly shared her genuine sentiments with researchers: "How wonderful it would be if there were no questioning sessions in class!" When inquired about her potential participation in class discussions without the fear of being questioned, Li Na's response conveyed palpable enthusiasm: "Haha, if there really were no questions, I would be much more engaged in class discussions, savoring the joy of intellectual exchange." However, as her academic journey progressed, Li Na's aversion to classroom questioning sessions became increasingly apparent. By her sophomore year, this sentiment had significantly intensified: "As the complexity of the questions keeps rising, how can I not feel anxious and stressed?" By her junior year, Li Na's sense of helplessness when confronted with questions had grown even stronger: "Sometimes, I find it genuinely challenging to provide appropriate responses to these questions." These interview records indicate a trend: the negative emotions of college students towards classroom questioning sessions are not only persistent but also tend to intensify over time. College English classroom questioning, as a vital teaching interaction method, holds significant educational value for contemporary college students. It not only stimulates thought and participation, fostering personalized learning experiences, but also aids teachers in adjusting their instructional strategies through immediate feedback, thereby enhancing students' practical language skills. Nonetheless, this method is not without its drawbacks,

such as inducing stress and anxiety among students, impacting the allocation of classroom time, and potentially leading to unequal levels of participation. Moreover, the effectiveness of questioning largely relies on the teacher's skillful guidance, and there may be subjective biases when assessing student responses. Such practices can contravene the characteristics and patterns of second language acquisition in students, eroding their confidence in English usage and, consequently, their drive to learn.

Secondly, the focus on end-of-semester grades significantly contributes to the affective responses to difficulty that college students encounter in learning English. Initially, this assessment-driven approach may skew both teaching and learning towards exam-oriented instruction. Empirical studies suggest that students may rely more heavily on memorizing response templates rather than cultivating practical language skills. Secondly, when students' personal interests—such as a desire to delve into a specific culture—clash with the criteria of assessment, it can lead to a diminishment of intrinsic motivation, a concept well-documented in Self-Determination Theory. Moreover, the stress of final exams can amplify test anxiety among students, which, as psychological stress theories explain, can impair cognitive function and learning efficiency. Studies have reported that students suffer from insomnia and anxiety due to an overemphasis on exam outcomes. Regarding pedagogical feedback, a grade-centric assessment model may result in teachers providing feedback that is overly narrow and negative—a practice that educational assessment theories often deem inimical to students' holistic development. During the interviews, Wang Qiang expressed that, despite his excellent oral expression skills, he did not receive positive encouragement or support due to subpar written exam results. This singular focus on written assessments, he felt, hindered the development of his other language abilities.

Finally, while oral presentations play a pivotal role in English language education, the issues that arise in their design and implementation—such as ambiguous feedback and the subjectivity of evaluation criteria—often induce affective responses of difficulty in students. Researchers, through interviews with students, have discovered a pervasive sentiment that the feedback they receive is frustratingly vague and devoid of concrete direction, leaving them uncertain about how to enhance their performance. In the course of these interviews, a student named Li Na recounted her personal experience. She conveyed that the prospect of delivering an oral presentation filled her with considerable anxiety, given its significant weight in her overall course grade. Despite her earnest efforts in preparation and endeavors to convey her thoughts effectively, the feedback she garnered was both perplexing and dispiriting. "I was told that 'my presentation needed more depth,' but there was no guidance on how to achieve that," Li Na lamented. Moreover, the inconsistency of feedback has been a source of confusion for students, as the advice they acquire from various teachers or peers can be markedly divergent. The subjectivity inherent in the assessment criteria also fosters a sense of injustice among students, who suspect that the personal preferences of teachers might be biasing the evaluation outcomes. The absence of prompt feedback deprives students of chances to refine their work, and negative feedback can erode their confidence. Additionally, cultural disparities must be acknowledged, as they can significantly influence students' comprehension and receptivity to feedback.

#### **4 Conclusion**

After thorough research and analysis, this study has summarized and refined the core characteristics of college students' affective responses to difficulty in English learning.

Firstly, the level of emotional arousal plays a crucial role in shaping students' cognitive processing, behavioral responses, and learning outcomes. High-arousal emotions such as fear and doubt heighten physiological and psychological activation, leading to reactions like increased heart rate. These emotions often stem from concerns about failure or sensitivity to teacher evaluations, which can impede immediate responses and fluency in language output. Conversely, low-arousal emotions like hesitation and prudence induce a more restrained cognitive state, making students overly cautious and risk-averse in language practice, thereby limiting their linguistic development. Variations in emotional arousal indicate that students have differing sensitivities and responses to emotional states. Classroom environments and emotional regulation strategies significantly influence these states. Therefore, educators should recognize the impact of emotional arousal on learning, create emotionally supportive environments, and equip students with emotional regulation techniques to optimize learning experiences and outcomes.

Secondly, affective responses to difficulty also exhibit endurance and escalation, shaping students' long-term academic experiences. These emotional states are not fleeting but can persist and intensify over time, especially when reinforced by repeated failures, ongoing stress, and inadequate emotional regulation. This accumulation can result in resistance to learning, where successive academic struggles amplify negative emotions, forming a cycle of demotivation. Emotional responses may vary across different learning stages, but overall, their intensity tends to increase with academic challenges. Individual differences further influence emotional persistence, with some students displaying resilience while others are more susceptible to negative emotional effects. Sociocultural contexts and pedagogical practices significantly shape these responses, as different educational expectations and teaching styles evoke distinct emotional reactions. Given this, educators must recognize the long-term impact of these emotional states and implement interventions such as emotional education, psychological counseling, and stress management techniques. Strengthening students' self-regulatory skills is crucial for mitigating the long-term effects of negative emotions. Timely interventions are essential, as unresolved emotional distress can hinder academic performance and overall well-being. Addressing these persistent and escalating emotions requires a collaborative effort among educators, researchers, and policymakers to create a more emotionally supportive learning environment that enhances both academic success and personal development.

Finally, the tension between students' affective responses to difficulty and prevailing teaching methodologies presents a challenge in second language education. This tension arises from the disconnect between test-driven education and students' emotional needs. A rigid focus on exam performance often fosters anxiety and fear, undermining the curiosity and intrinsic motivation necessary for effective language learning. Neglecting students' emotional well-being—such as their need for security, belonging, and self-worth—reduces engagement and learning motivation. Language acquisition involves both cognitive and social dimensions, yet assessment models centered on grades often fail to acknowledge the gradual and interactive nature of language learning, potentially stifling students' communicative competence. Certain instructional methods may elicit specific emotional reactions; for instance, highly competitive classroom environments can create stress, while a lack of individualized support may lead to feelings of isolation. These emotional states not only affect psychological well-being but also influence cognitive functions such as memory and attention, ultimately impacting learning efficiency. Recognizing the role of emotional regulation in education, educators should integrate strategies such as emotional education, stress management, and constructive feedback to help students manage their emotions. To bridge the gap between emotions and teaching methodologies, educators should incorporate collaborative and project-based learning approaches that foster active participation and emotional engagement. Assessment frameworks should expand beyond grades to encompass diverse evaluation methods that account for both

learning progress and emotional experiences. The educational environment should be designed to prioritize students' emotional well-being, fostering a supportive, secure, and encouraging atmosphere that allows students to explore and experiment in their language learning. Implementing these measures will create a learning environment that not only enhances linguistic proficiency but also supports students' emotional growth and overall well-being.

## **5 Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study

## **6 Author Contributions**

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows:

Chen Liang: The author was responsible for the conception, methodology, data collection, analysis, and manuscript writing. No external contributors were involved in this study.

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