

# Investigation of English Majors' Perception of Classroom Climate at the Tertiary Level in China

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## Abstract

The study aims to investigate Chinese college English majors' perceived classroom climate and meanwhile examine the relationship between English majors' perception of classroom climate and their genders, university levels, and academic performance. By means of questionnaire surveys, the following findings are obtained: (1) College English majors' recognition of classroom climate is in a good state; (2) Male students have slightly higher perception of classroom climate than female students; (3) The recognition of classroom climate of students in first tier universities is slightly higher than that of students in third tier universities; (4) English majors with better academic performance have higher recognition of classroom climate. Therefore, it is suggested that English teachers should strengthen the construction of students' classroom climate in order to promote the improvement of students' academic performance and comprehensive quality.

## Keywords

Classroom climate; Student-to-student interaction; English majors.

## 1. Introduction

Class is an organization which affects the academic performance, growth and development of students. Students' perception of class forms classroom climate. Rogers, a humanistic psychologist, pointed out that harmonious classroom climate is an important psychological environment where students can express out their creativity freely, while inharmonious classroom climate results in a sense of repression and insecurity among students [1]. It clearly indicates that classroom climate is significant for students' development. Classroom climate helps students engage and succeed in learning [2]. Some scholars carried out investigation and research on classroom climate, and the results show that students with positive feelings about classroom climate have a better academic performance [3-4]. Therefore, the optimization of classroom climate can be used as an effective measure to improve students' performance. Based on this, the present study aims to investigate the classroom climate of Chinese college English majors and to analyze the relationship between genders, university levels, English levels and classroom climate of English majors, expecting to provide a new perspective for improving Chinese college English majors' academic performance and comprehensive quality.

## 2. Literature Review

Classroom climate can be described as perceptual connections, friendly and intimate relationships between teachers and students [5], or it can also be defined as a manner in which students experience the psychological and physical characteristics of the classroom [6].

Walberg's invention of the Learning Environment Inventory (LEI) starts the research on classroom climate [7]. Then Moos developed a series of social climate scales, which eventually promoted the development of the Classroom Environment Scale (CES) [8]. Many scholars

following the footprints of Walberg and Moos modified the Classroom Climate Inventory. Theo Wubbels and his colleagues, for example, invented the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI) and applied it to the research on interactions between teachers and students in the classroom [9]. Barry Fraser and his colleagues used the Individualized Classroom Environment Questionnaire (ICEQ) to study student-centered classrooms [10].

Based on the development of classroom climate inventories and questionnaires, the investigation and research on classroom climate involves such different aspects as the relationship between classroom climate and genders, teachers and students, and students' grades. Some scholars have carried out research on teachers' influence on classroom climate [11-14]. Gascoigne investigated the classroom climate of 252 French learners of different grades and found that students with higher foreign language level have higher recognition of classroom climate [15].

Although scholars have carried out plenty of research on classroom climate and have made some theoretical and practical achievements. However, few scholars have done research on the classroom climate of English majors under the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in China. Based on this, this research attempts to conduct a comprehensive investigation and analysis on the classroom climate and its related factors of college English majors.

### **3. Research Design**

#### **3.1. Research Questions**

The research tried to discuss and answer the following questions:

- (1) What kind of features does the classroom climate of English majors hold?
- (2) What is the difference between male English majors and their female counterparts in terms of their perceived classroom climate?
- (3) What kind of influence will university levels have on the classroom climate of English majors?
- (4) What is the relationship between English majors' classroom climate and their academic performance?

#### **3.2. Participants**

The study examined 162 English majors in their third college year from a first tier university and its independent third tier college both in central China, with 113 students from the first tier university and 49 students from its independent college. English major in China features small classes and interaction and cooperation between students. After three years of university life, these English majors have a deeper understanding of classroom climate, so choosing English majors in their third year in university as participants of this study can well ensure the validity of the study.

#### **3.3. Questionnaire**

The study chose and modified the Connected Classroom Climate Inventory applied by Gascoigne [15] and mainly focused on the classroom climate between students, instead of the classroom climate between teachers and students. The questionnaire has 18 questions and each question with five answers varying (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) are undecided, (4) disagree, to (5) strongly disagree. The reliability analysis-scale (Alpha) of the questionnaire is 0.942, which implies a high reliability.

#### **3.4. Data Collection and Analysis**

In December, 2018, the anonymous questionnaires of Classroom climate of English Majors were distributed to 162 English majors. A total of 162 valid questionnaires were collected, amounting to a 100% callback rate. The collected data were analyzed by SPSS 18.0 software. In the study,

Independent Samples T test was used to analyze the difference in the perception of classroom climate between male English majors and their female counterparts, and also to analyze the influence that university levels have on the classroom climate of English majors, while the relationship between classroom climate and academic performance of English majors was analyzed through One-Way ANOVA.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Features of Classroom Climate Perceived by English Majors

As can be seen from Table 1, the mean of the classroom climate of English majors is 4.0018, which is between 4 (agree) and 5 (strongly agree). In the Likert scale, the mean equal to or higher than 3.5 indicates high frequency use, while the mean between 2.5 and 3.4 suggests medium frequency use, and the mean equal to or below 2.4 for low frequency use [16]. It can be seen that English majors in both first tier and third tier universities have a high sense of recognition towards their classroom climate, which reflects a harmonious relationship among them. The harmonious relationship has a positive impact on the classroom climate and can help enhance social interaction between students [17].

English majors have the highest recognition to question 12, "The students in my class engage in small talk with one another." (M=4.3148). The interactive communication behind the question is the embodiment of good connections, in which friendship emerges, encouraging students to express their own viewpoints bravely [6].

**Table 1.** The Classroom Climate Index of English Majors

| Question   | Minimum | Maximum | Mean   | Std. Deviation |
|--|---------|---------|--------|----------------|
| I feel a sense of security in my class.                                  | 3       | 5       | 3.5741 | 0.65755        |
| I have common ground with classmates                                     | 1       | 5       | 3.9691 | 0.91518        |
| I feel a strong bond with my classmates.                                 | 1       | 5       | 3.7716 | 0.89356        |
| The students in my class share stories and experiences with one another. | 1       | 5       | 3.9506 | 0.82509        |
| The students in my class are friendly with one another.                  | 1       | 5       | 3.7187 | 0.91920        |
| I feel included in class discussions in my class.                        | 1       | 5       | 4.1553 | 0.83336        |
| I feel included in class discussions in my class                         | 1       | 5       | 4.2230 | 0.68898        |
| The students in my class are courteous with one another.                 | 1       | 5       | 4.0000 | 0.84147        |
| The students in my class praise one another.                             | 1       | 5       | 4.2468 | 0.77268        |
| The students in my class are concerned about one another.                | 1       | 5       | 4.0559 | 0.85329        |
| The students in my class smile at one another.                           | 1       | 5       | 4.1358 | 0.79209        |
| The students in my class engage in small talk with one another.          | 1       | 5       | 4.3148 | 0.88796        |
| The students in my class are non-judgmental with one another.            | 1       | 5       | 4.2963 | 0.76320        |
| The students in my class laugh with one another.                         | 1       | 5       | 3.4596 | 0.99996        |
| The students in my class are supportive of one another.                  | 1       | 5       | 4.1235 | 0.80961        |
| The students in my class show interest in what one another are saying.   | 1       | 5       | 4.0932 | 0.78900        |
| The students in my class cooperate with one another.                     | 1       | 5       | 3.8395 | 0.86988        |
| The students in my class feel comfortable with one another.              | 1       | 5       | 4.1180 | 0.81685        |
| Total  | 1.17    | 4.94    | 4.0018 | 0.59337        |

## 4.2. Gender Differences of English Majors' Perception Towards Classroom Climate

From table 2, we can see that the mean of female English majors' perception towards classroom climate is 3.9945, and that of male English majors towards classroom climate is 4.944, both of which are higher than 3.5, indicating that both male and female English majors have a high sense of perception towards classroom climate, and male English majors' perception towards classroom climate outscores female English majors, but there is no significant difference between them. The conclusion is consistent with Sun Yunmei's research results concerning the perception of college comprehensive English classroom environment between male and female students [18]. In addition, this may have some relationship with the teaching mode of English major education and teaching in China. At present, small class teaching is popular for English majors. A series of main courses for English majors, such as basic English, advanced English, English listening, oral English, English writing and so on, are carried out in the means of class and all students participate in the after-class activities. Therefore, all the English majors, male and female included, have formed a strong sense of class belonging, and their perception towards the classroom climate is basically the same.

**Table 2.** The Difference Between Male English Majors' and Female Ones' Perception Towards Classroom Climate

| Gender | Mean   | Std. Deviation | T      | Sig.  |
|--------|--------|----------------|--------|-------|
| Male   | 4.1944 | 0.56928        | -1.128 | 0.598 |
| Female | 3.9945 | 0.59202        |        |       |

## 4.3. Influence of University Levels on Classroom Climate Perceived by English Majors

From Table 3, it can be seen that the mean of the perception of English majors of the first tier university towards classroom climate is 4.0448, and that of English majors of the third tier university is 3.9027, indicating that English majors from different level of universities all have high degree of perception towards the classroom climate, and the perception of English majors from the first tier university towards the classroom climate is slightly higher than that of English majors from the third tier university. The result of the homogeneity variance test is 0.877, and it outscores 0.05, which indicates that there is no significant difference between the two groups towards the classroom climate perception.

**Table 3.** The Influence of University Level on the Classroom Climate

| University level      | Mean   | Std. Deviation | T     | Sig.  |
|-----------------------|--------|----------------|-------|-------|
| First tier university | 4.0448 | 0.58072        | 1.405 | 0.877 |
| Third tier university | 3.9027 | 0.61619        |       |       |

The reason behind the result is closely related to the fact that in Mainland China, college English majors' education is characterized with salient interdependence, interaction and cooperation in their learning. In the curriculum design, some English major courses, oral English class, for instance, embodies the strong mutual dependence and interaction in oral English practice. And the after-class activities, such as English corner, debate competition, speech competition and so on, reflect the cooperation of English majors. Because the nature of curriculum and activities of English majors in different level of universities is basically the same, Unsurprisingly the classroom climate of English majors cannot reflect significant differences.

#### 4.4. Relationship Between Classroom Climate and Academic Performance of English Majors

In order to investigate the relationship between students' academic performance and their perception towards classroom climate, we divided the students' academic performance into three groups according to their scores of Test for English Majors-Band 4 (TEM-4): high ( $\geq 70$ ), middle ( $\geq 60 < 70$ ) and low ( $< 60$ ).

**Table 4.** The Relationship Between Classroom Climate and Academic Performance of English Majors

| English level | Scores of TEM-4 | Mean   | Std. Deviation | Mean in total | Std. Error | Sig. of Homogeneity of Variances | F     | Sig. of ANOVA |
|---------------|-----------------|--------|----------------|---------------|------------|----------------------------------|-------|---------------|
| High          | $\geq 70$       | 4.3111 | 0.32312        |               |            |                                  |       |               |
| Middle        | $\geq 60 < 70$  | 4.0495 | 0.63359        | 4.0018        | 0.59337    | 0.246                            | 3.322 | 0.039         |
| Low           | $< 60$          | 3.9108 | 0.58145        |               |            |                                  |       |               |

**Table 5.** Results of Multiple Comparison of Post Hoc Test

| English levels | Mean Difference | Std. Error | Sig. of Multiple Comparisons |       |
|----------------|-----------------|------------|------------------------------|-------|
| High           | Middle          | 0.26157    | 0.16807                      | 0.122 |
|                | Low             | 0.40028    | 0.16398                      | 0.016 |
| Middle         | High            | -0.26157   | 0.16807                      | 0.122 |
|                | Low             | 0.13871    | 0.09750                      | 0.157 |
| Low            | High            | -0.40028   | 0.16398                      | 0.016 |
|                | Middle          | -0.13871   | 0.09750                      | 0.157 |

From Table 4, it can be seen that students with the high English level have the highest sense of recognition towards the classroom climate ( $M = 4.3111$ ), followed by those with middle English level ( $M = 4.0495$ ) and those with low English level ( $M = 3.9108$ ). The results of Multiple Comparisons of Post Hoc Tests in Table 5 further show that there is a significant difference in classroom climate perception between students with high English level and those with low English level ( $\text{Sig.} = 0.016$ ). The results show that the higher the English level, the higher the students' recognition towards the classroom climate. In return, students' pleasant class experiences promote students' academic performance [19].

By analyzing the answers of students of different English levels to the 18 questions of the questionnaire, it is found that students with high English level have the highest recognition towards question 1 (I have sense of security in the class) ( $M = 5$ ), indicating that they have sense of security and belonging in the class. The degree of learners' recognition and belonging to the class directly affects their enthusiasm to participate in learning [20].

## 5. Conclusion

The study analyzed the classroom climate of English majors by means of questionnaire survey. The results show that: (1) The English majors' recognition of classroom climate is in a good state; (2) While male students have slightly higher perception of classroom climate than female students do, there is no significant difference between male English majors' and female English majors' recognition towards the classroom climate; (3) The recognition of classroom climate of students from first tier university is slightly higher than that of students from third tier university; (4) Students with better academic performance have higher recognition of classroom climate among English major students.

Based on the results of the study, it is suggested that teachers should guide students to build pleasant classroom climate and organize English majors to hold affluent and colorful class activities such as thematic class meetings, English phonetic imitation competitions, English speech competitions, English debate competitions, English drama competitions, and English reading sessions, in the hope of helping students to have a strong bond with each other and to improve their recognition towards classroom climate, and in the end to promote the academic performance and comprehensive quality of Chinese English majors.

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