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Anxiety and Self Efficacy in Foreign Language Learning—from the Perspectives of Learners in a Remote Chinese School of Cambodia

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Abstract
In the light of Foreign Language Learning (FLL), this investigation looks at the relationship of English learning anxiety and self-efficacy from the perspective of a Junior Two class in a remotely located Chinese school in Cambodia where English is rarely used in daily life but only taught as a subject. This study engaged a mixed-methods approach by triangulating questionnaire data with personal learning journals and classroom observations. Personal Learning Habits data show that "Use English on the Internet/online game" and "Learning English below ten of age" are evidently independent variables of FLL. Quantitative results suggested a tendency towards anxiety but not significant, whereas "Feel positive and expectant in English class", "Strongly believe that learning English leads to a promising future" and "Have a strong desire to speak fluently with foreigners" are the strongest self-efficacy beliefs held by the students. Qualitative data from journals revealed these fears are often correlated with self-perception, peer comparison as well as corporal punishment; while one's determination and teacher's compassion and encouragement always boost self-efficacy. Observation data indicated that tense classroom practices demotivate learners and reinforce anxieties while friendliness and patience in teaching, including life experience sharing motivate learners. Surprisingly, the FLA level found from the informants is low. Learners strongly disagree that they do not like English speaking people. It suggests students' personal determination and pedagogical adjustments stressing on supportive climate creation with a sense of humor without corporal punishment, as well as life-experience-sharing contributed to English learning and teaching.

Keywords: Foreign Language Learning, Foreign Language Anxiety, Self-efficacy, Cambodian Chinese School, Motivation

1. Introduction

English made an entry into Cambodia during the Khmer republic or Lon Nol regime in the 70s and was thereafter accorded in the curriculum (Neau, 2003) [15]. In 1989, English reappeared in the national curriculum after the collapse of the Pol Pot regime (1975-1979). As Em (2022) puts it, despite English has since been incorporated into the national curriculum, English learning and teaching challenges still beset teachers of the English subject and Cambodian learners of English, particularly in remote regions.

Notwithstanding the importance of English proficiency, many English learners experience anxiety in their learning. Therefore, for the sake of developing effective countermeasures, we not only want to understand its specific sources but also review its existence.

In the mid-90s, Chinese institutions mushroomed after the end of the Pol Pot regime which had forbidden English and French learning (Igawa, 2008) [10] and massacred some 1,700,000 to 2,000,000 civilians. Document disclosed there are over 55 Chinese schools (publicly run or privately run) scattered all over Cambodia at present. Of which, the student population of 13 schools are under 100; 14 between 100 to 300 and 11 totaled from 300 to 500 in capacity. Six schools have a population between 500 to 1000, whereas eleven schools have 1000 to 5000 population. Most of these Chinese schools are primary schools (Jian Hua Daily, 18 January 2025). Further, these Chinese schools nationwide are still excluded from the Cambodian national education system and categorized as private language training institutions (Zhang *et al*., 2025) [19].

The research context of this study is a privately-sponsored Chinese secondary/primary school with a student population of 320 in total (2025); it is located in Suong city of Tbuong Khmum province, Cambodia. Located 148 kilometers northeast from Phnom Penh. Suong city is near Tay Ninh province of Vietnam where English is hardly used in daily exchanges. In actual fact,

English is only a curricular subject in this Chinese school. For Junior Two, six periods are scheduled for English as a subject. The duration of each period is 40 minutes. In total, 240 minutes of English is taught weekly.

Document reveals, the secondary junior classes of Seng Meng Chinese School were called to a halt due to Covid 19 after enjoying a booming period of Chinese language learning. In 2024, attributed to school board decision, secondary junior class was restarted.

The informants were eleven (n=11) English language learners of Khmer nationality from Junior Two Class of Seng Meng Chinese School (2025); whereas the teacher observed were two separate teachers teaching the same class: the first one taught the students for a year then was replaced by another who had continued teaching them for another two consecutive years. As such, two pedagogical teaching practices were observed for insights in this study.

In short, the main purpose of this study is to examine the self-efficacy scale and anxiety triggers existing within these Junior Two learners and the reasons behind these fears and beliefs under the framework of Foreign Language Learning (FLL), including the correlations and significances between English teachers' daily teaching practices and students' learning anxieties and self-beliefs revealed by internal and external factors obtainable. In this thread, this investigation addresses the following questions:

1. What are the primary self-reported sources of English learning anxieties and beliefs for these learners?
2. How do learners' extant experiences shed light on the nature of these anxieties and beliefs?
3. How will the observed classroom environment respond to the reported anxieties and beliefs?

2. Literature Review

FLL is the abbreviation for Foreign Language Learning. Foreign language learning refers to the process of acquiring an additional language, which involves both cognitive mechanisms and social interactions. It is increasingly viewed as a relational human activity shaped by environmental contexts and sociocultural dynamics (International Encyclopedia of Education [Third Edition], 2010). FLL has become more mature only when it touched on the relationship between FLA and the four language skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing (Gungle and Taylor, 1989; Vogely, 1998; Sellers, 2000) [8, 18, 16].

On one hand, Horwitz *et al*., (1986) [9] first conceptualized FLA as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process." On the other hand, Gardner & Lambert (1959, 1972) [3, 4] introduced the notions of instrumental and integrative motivation: The first one refers to the learner's desire to learn a language for instrumental purposes, whereas the latter refers to the desire to learn the language to merge into the target language community.

Psychologist Albert Bandura (1977) [1] postulated self-efficacy as people's belief in their ability to control their functioning and events that affect their lives. One's self-efficacy can provide the foundation for motivation for learning and others. He maintained that the beliefs in one's efficacy are developed by four primary sources of influence: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion and emotional states. Later, built on Bandura (1977) [1], Gist and Mitchell (1992) [6] followed up with two internal, individual difference factors which affect the development of self-efficacy; namely, (1) whether an individual sees his or her ability as fixed or malleable, and (2) the nature of the individual's arousal (either positive or negative).

Elaine Horwitz first concepted anxiety to classroom language learning in 1986 arising from the learning process. A review done by Ulhusna (2025) [17] noted a strong relationship between anxiety and self-efficacy, indicating that learners with higher self-efficacy tend to experience lower anxiety levels. In other words, English language learners with high self-efficacy scale are likely motivated learners with lower anxiety levels. According to the Oxford Dictionary, to motivate means to make somebody want to do something, especially something that involves hard work and effort (https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/motivate).

The anxieties exist in foreign language learning in general and English learning in particular can, to some extent, undermine sustainable learning. Contradictorily, self-efficacy in language learning predicts fruitful and effective learning down the road (Ulhusna, 2025) [17]. Self-Efficacy, put simply, means the positive belief of what one can do. Self-efficacy theory also maintains that positive beliefs play a paramount role in one's psychological, physical as well as professional dimensions. Regrettably, reports are unavailable on the examination of anxieties and self-efficacy beliefs of English language learners in Chinese schools of Cambodia. As such, findings from this study are meaningful in the Cambodian context as they not only help to suggest teaching practices and providing learning models, but also provide insight on how English is learned in privately-sponsored Chinese school.

In this study, self-efficacy focuses on capability in academic tasks and language learning. For triangulation, quantitative, qualitative and observation data were investigated for a more complete picture under the framework of both FLA and self-efficacy.

3. Methodology

This investigation is conducted in a convergent mixed-methods design. It is so decided for a comprehensive view from analyzing the collected data simultaneously. The instruments include Questionnaire (A 5-item scale measuring anxiety on a 1-5 Likert scale for three sections, namely [a] English Learning Habits, [b] Anxiety in English Learning and [c] Belief in English Learning, see Appendix Two), Learning Journals (Students' reflections on their learning experiences, challenges, and emotions, see Appendix One) and Observation Records (A structured observation form focusing on the moves, teacher fronted time, student-student interaction, error correction, physical environment of the classroom and textbook used [Adapted and modified from Mckay, 2011], see Appendix Three and Four).

Eleven Junior Two students of Khmer nationality studying in Seng Meng Chinese School of Suong and two English teachers having taught and was teaching them were the informants. The students' ages ranged from 11 to 17. Before data collection, the voluntary students and the teachers were ensured they would stay anonymous in the to-be-published report. The entire process was permitted in advance by the principal of the school. Lesson observations were likewise

scheduled for the class with prior consent from all parties. Later, the students were asked to respond to the questionnaire online administered by the researcher. At final stage, journals of English learning were collected in January 2025.

What needs to be highlighted here being, the lesson observations were conducted between 2023 and 2025, i.e., the same class from Grade Six all the way up to Junior Two. Two separate teachers' lesson observations (twice for each teacher) were collected for examination. The situation being, at the end of 2023, the original English teacher was replaced by another. From February 2024 onwards until February 2025, the new English had taught the class of 11 students (student number dropped from 20 to 11) stretching from Junior One to the first semester of Junior Two when the observation data were collected.

3.1 Data Analysis

Accordingly, the questionnaire data were analyzed with the assistance of the SPSS. Tabulated diagrams were then examined for statistics like mean and standard deviation. These data provide evidence for each anxiety item to be ranked the most prevalent. Concurrently, thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns/themes for qualitative data such as the journal (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004) [7]. Finally, the datasets (Quantitative rankings for a deeper qualitative investigation; observation records for explanatory context) were examined amenable to the purpose of triangulation.

4. Findings

An SPSS analysis of English Learning Habits, Anxiety, and Beliefs was conducted after the data were collected. The following tables present an analysis of questionnaire data from 11 informants concerning the above constructs.

4.1 Quantitative Findings

Descriptive statistics are used for Section A. For Sections B and C (5-point Likert scales), means, standard deviations, and one-sample t-tests (against a test value of 3, the scale midpoint) are provided to indicate the strength and direction of responses.

Table 1: English Learning Habits (Section A)

This table displays the frequency and percentage of "Yes" responses for each source. With n=11, the percentage is often more informative for comparison.

S. No	Question	n (Yes)	% (Yes)	n (No)	% (No)
1	I speak English at home.	0	0.0%	11	100.0%
2	Subscription to English media.	2	18.2%	9	81.8%
3	I use English on the Internet/online games.	9	81.8%	2	18.2%
4	I have learned English below ten years of age.	10	90.9%	1	9.1%
5	I attend English tuition besides formal schooling.	3	27.3%	8	72.7%

Note. N = 11.

Table 2: Anxiety in English Learning (Section B)

This table presents the mean score for each item on a 5-point scale (1=Weakest, 5=Strongest). A one-sample t-test was conducted for each item to compare the mean score to the scale midpoint (3). A significant result ($p < .05$) suggests the anxiety level is statistically significantly different from a neutral level.

S. No	Question	M	SD	t(10)	p-value	Interpretation
1	I am afraid of being corrected in class.	3.18	1.08	0.56	.589	Not Significant (Neutral)
2	I am reluctant to answer questions in English.	3.09	0.70	0.43	.678	Not Significant (Neutral)
3	I feel uncomfortable in English class.	3.55	1.21	1.51	.162	Not Significant (Neutral)
4	I try to avoid English, if possible.	3.27	0.65	1.38	.198	Not Significant (Neutral)
5	I do not like English speaking people.	1.82	1.40	-2.80	.019*	Significantly Low

Note. N = 11.

Scale: 1 (Weakest) to 5 (Strongest). The test value for the t-test is 3.

- $p < .05$

While the means for items 1-4 are above 3, indicating a tendency towards anxiety, none are statistically significant, likely due to the small sample size and high variability. The only significant finding is for item 5, where the mean (1.82) is significantly *below* the neutral point, indicating that participants strongly disagree with the statement "I do not like English speaking people."

Table 3: Belief in English Learning (Section C)

S. No	Question	M	SD	t(10)	p-value	Interpretation
1	1. I feel good and am full of expectations in English class.	4.18	1.08	3.63	.004*	Significantly High
2	2. I learn English because of informed promising future.	4.45	0.82	5.88	.000*	Significantly High
3	3. I want to be able to speak fluently in English with foreigners...	4.27	1.01	4.18	.002*	Significantly High
4	4. I enjoy conversing with my own English sentence patterns.	3.45	1.13	1.34	.209	Not Significant (Neutral)
5	5. I want to know about the culture and life of foreigners through English.	3.73	1.42	1.70	.120	Not Significant (Neutral)

Note. N = 11. Scale: 1 (Weakest) to 5 (Strongest). The test value for the one-sample t-test is 3.

- $p < .05$

The above analysis reveals a clear and positive trend in participants' beliefs about English learning.

Strong Positive Beliefs: The first three questions show mean scores significantly above the neutral point of 3. This indicates that informants:

1. Feel positive and expectant in English class.
2. Strongly believe that learning English leads to a promising future.
3. Have a strong desire to speak fluently with foreigners.

Neutral Beliefs: The last two questions, while having means above 3, were not statistically significant. This suggests, on average, informants feel neutral-to-positive about:

1. Enjoying the process of constructing their own English sentences.
2. Learning English to understand foreign cultures.

This pattern suggests that while learners are highly motivated by the instrumental benefits and outcomes of

learning English (future opportunities, fluency), their attitudes towards the process itself and cultural curiosity are less pronounced.

4.2 Qualitative Findings

The qualitative analysis is presented thematically.

The themes related to anxiety are "Fear of Peer Judgement", "English was My Least Favorite Subject" and "Fear of Asking Questions in the Class."

For self-efficacy beliefs, the themes include "Determination to Learn English", "Entertain oneself with Whatever Related to English", "Intention to Learn with Foreign Teacher", "Hope to Merge in English Speaking Community" and "Try Ways to Get Access to English Spontaneously."

In addition, teaching practice theme involves "Previous Teacher's Teaching Practice", "Feel more Confident with New Teacher's Teaching", "New Teacher Not Only Teaches Knowledge but Also the Way to Deal with Life" and finally, "Linguistically Competent New Teacher Changed Us".

4.2.1 Anxiety

Theme 1: Fear of Peer Judgement

Student E: *I like English but I think my classmates can understand faster and better than me. They can do English exercises and speak English easily, but I cannot.*

Theme 2: English was My Least Favorite Subject

Student K: *English used to be my least favorite subject. In fact, I barely passed English in the past.*

Theme 3: Fear of Asking Questions in the Class

Student G: *Now, I am able to speak and listen to foreigners better. But there is still one thing I am afraid of doing in class: to ask questions in public*.

4.2.2 Beliefs

Theme 1: Determination to Learn English

Student J: *...when I came across a new English teacher from abroad, I determined to learn English seriously.*

Student K: *So, what had changed my mind in English learning? To keep long story short, it was because a determination at the right time.*

Theme 2: Entertain Oneself with Whatever Related to English

Student K: *Even while I entertaining myself, I chose whatever related to English: such as watching videos created by native speakers or playing games that demand word power.*

Student A: *Moreover, practicing speaking with friends and joining online discussion groups has boosted my confidence.*

Theme 3: Intention to Learn with Foreign Teacher

Student J: *Since I had not learned English from someone from abroad, I had to take initiative to make my parents feel proud of me for studying with a foreign teacher.*

Student I: *In my current school, the new English teacher's teaching approach is so different from other teachers. His teaching is easy to understand and he always points out mistakes that we have made in writing and speaking. Sometimes, he would ask us to think about or tell the similarities and differences of two similar sentences*.

Theme 4: Hope to Merge in English Speaking Community

Student I: *Though English is not my favorite, I hope in future I can use it to communicate in my career with English speakers and get along well with them.*

Student K: *...it (English learning) really did help me on my journey to the world.*

Theme 5: Try Ways to Get Access to English Spontaneously

Student G: *I used to struggle a lot when it came to English learning. I tried new approach but the outcome was not as good as it should be.*

Student A: *Reading books, listening to English songs, and watching movies are incredibly helpful in my course of English leaning. The above activities not only enhance my vocabulary but also improve my understanding of sentence structure and expression.*

4.2.3 Teaching Practice

Theme 1: Previous Teacher's Teaching Practice

Student H: *Previously, our English teacher… explained and told us how to use English in speaking but could not explain thoroughly. Eventually, when we sat for the exams, we simply memorized…: translating words from English to Khmer or the other way around; memorizing grammar usage, etc. But all these didn't help improve my English.*

Student G: *...Unlike others (previous English teachers), he (the new teacher) came into the class not to delve into teaching but test our English proficiency.*

Theme 2: Feel More Confident with New Teacher's Teaching

Student H: *...it turned out that his all-English teaching made my English improved a lot because he explained clearly and thoroughly. He taught us grammar with applicable rules which I have been applying until now in my use of English. Now, honestly, I feel confident in using English.*

Student G: *Later, through his patient teaching, gradually my English was never, but better. I started to know a lot about English and my speaking skill got even better than before.*

Student K: *My English was really bad and I did not know how to learn it properly until one day when a foreign teacher came to our school. He told us where to start…*

Student E: *...he made me feel that English is very interesting.*

Student C: *After some time, due mainly to his patience in explanation, I began to follow. Now, I believe my*

English has made great progress. I can now understand the chainsaw that I could not see before.
Student D: *He began with IPA. We learned the symbols for vowels and how to articulate their sound by placing our tongue on the exact position of our mouth. Though I found it difficult, it was fun… Before that, I always thought there were only five vowels in English; after taking his lessons, I realized that my previous thought was wrong.*

Theme 3: New Teacher Not Only Teaches Knowledge but Also the Way to Deal with Life

Student G: *He not only teaches us key knowledge and words but also the way to deal with life.*
Student B: *During the years he taught us, his kindness, humor and encouragement had made his class feel so happy. He is not just a teacher, but a father figure who deeply cares for his students. His lessons and warmth greatly help me improve and deepen my love for English.*
Student D: *…his teaching style is unique and engaging. He not only imparted us knowledge, but also shared his life experience with us…He showed us that English is not only a subject to be studied but a world to be explored.*

Theme 4: Linguistically Competent Teacher Changed Us

Student F: *One day, a new English teacher… came, things changed. His English is good and he has a lot of experience, so my English improved and I began to understand its grammar. Even though I occasionally make mistake in English, my English improves a lot in comparison*.
Student C: *Then a new English teacher came to our class. He changed us. He taught each of us step by step and it made our English better.*

4.3 Classroom Observation Findings

Classroom observations were used to counter check the information compiled from the questionnaire and journals. From the first teacher (see Appendix Three), teacher fronted time (teacher spent most of the time talking) and little whole-class questioning was the dominant interaction pattern, and error correction was most often performed immediately by the teacher. Yet attributed to weakness in linguistic competence, misspelt and mispronounced words were found:

The teacher wrote the date on the board by putting "th" on top of 19.
Mistake was found again on the board: "It use for…", should be "It is used for…"
*The word "subjective" was misspelt as /səbˈdʒek.**tɪʊ**/.*
"Saturday" was wrongly spelt as "Satursday" (Appendix Three).

The class began when students entered the room without asking for permission, the teacher did not seem to notice or opted to ignore. Moreover, no interaction between students was noted in the entire period. At a certain point of time, students were asked to stand as corporal punishment when they could not answer correctly.

Further, close to the ringing of the bell, no repetition of the topic or homework were given.

More examples written on the board. Students were told to carry on copying. No homework was given. The bell rang finally. The teacher dismissed the class (Appendix Three).

However, the second teacher (Appendix Four) teaching the class at later time behaved otherwise. Data showed, the teacher did not go straight to the topic when the lesson began, but rather, using reminding approach to review what the students had learned previously. In the meantime, no punishment was implemented when students could not respond correctly but mere understanding gestures.

The teacher just carried on asking others when the first one failed to answer the question. No demanding courses were heard towards the non-response but friendly and calming eye contact (Appendix Four).

When nobody could give the correct answer, the teacher stopped to explain:

The teacher stopped asking and turned to the board to quote examples for explanation. He wrote two sentences separately with "few" and "a few" for comparison. He showed the difference by linking "abstract" for "few" and "concrete" for "a few"... (Appendix Four).

At this juncture, student to student interaction was noted. Later, Johnson's (1995) [11] three-part sequence-teacher asked, student answered and teacher responded-and Mehan's (1979) [13] IRE construct-Initiation/Response/Evaluation-were likewise identified. These patterns are believed by Gazden (1988) [5] to be the most common classroom discourse around the globe.

The teacher walked towards the board to explain something on and off. Some students stopped him to enquire about something (Appendix Four).

Additionally, after the teacher had given exercises on the board, the students were asked to answer voluntarily.

The teacher said, "I am not going to point at you for answer. Feel free to write the answer if you happen to know." (Appendix Four).

Additionally, before the bell rang, the teacher proceeded to do a fast review of what had been taught and provide homework to call it a day.

5. Discussion

In this investigation, questionnaire on English Learning Habits (Appendix Two, Section A) informed that all learner informants do not speak English at home. Out of the eleven, only two subscribed English media (18.2%); nine use English on the Internet/online game (81.8%); ten have learned English below 10 of age (90.9%) and a mere three attend English tuition (27.3%). The data strongly suggest, "Use English on the Internet/online game" and "Learning

English below ten of age" are two of the independent variables in foreign language learning among these learners.

Quantitative results (Appendix Two, Section B) suggested a tendency towards anxiety but not significant in that out of the five listed anxieties, the means for four of them are above the test value of 3, viz., 3.18, 3.09 and 3.55 respectively. In other words, learners agree with Anxiety. This could be due to the small sample size (n=11) and high variability (only 5 statements). But the learners strongly disagree (means=1.82, below test value 3) with the statement that "I do not like English speaking people".

Nevertheless, out of the five statements on Beliefs (Appendix Two, Section C), the means for the first three statements are more than 4 showing high significance, though the remaining two statements show a not-significant means of above 3 (3.45 and 3.73). They all evidenced the learners agree with self-efficacy beliefs.

On the other hand, qualitative data (Appendix One) revealed these fears are often correlated with self-perception and peer comparison; while one's determination to learn and teacher's teaching approach, compassion, encouragement and life-experience sharing always boost self-efficacy.

Observation data (Appendix Three and Four) maintained that tense classroom practices demotivate learners and reinforce anxieties while friendliness and patience, together with relevant reasoning in pedagogy motivate learners. This study concludes that anxiety and self-efficacy in language learning can stem from internal and external factors. The three data sources converged to give a deeper understanding of FLL among the 11 learners. The FLA scale found from the informants is low and the learners strongly disagree that they do not like English speaking people. Surprisingly, the commonly cited anxieties (e.g. answering questions in class; being corrected in class) were not major issues for the informants. It points out that self-efficacy leads to the build-up of positive motivation for probably a successful learning experience.

Moreover, it further suggests students' personal determination and pedagogical adjustments stressing on supportive climate creation with a sense of humor without corporal punishment, as well as life-experience-sharing contributed to successful English learning and teaching.

6. Conclusion and Implications

The conclusion and implications drawn are responsive to the research questions listed at the outset of the study, namely, (1) What are the primary self-reported sources of English learning anxieties and beliefs for these learners? (2) How do learners' extant experiences shed light on the nature of these anxieties and beliefs? (3) How will the observed classroom environment respond to the reported anxieties and beliefs?

6.1 Summary of Findings

The primary self-reported sources of English learning anxieties for these learners are "Fear of peer judgement", "English was my least favorite subject" and "Fear of asking questions in class"; whereas "Determination to learn English", "Entertain oneself with whatever related to English", "Intention to learn with foreign teacher", "Hope to merge in English speaking community" as well as "Try ways to get access to English spontaneously" are the existing self-efficacy beliefs identified. The nature of these anxieties and beliefs derived from classroom pedagogical practices, especially tense and interesting teaching milieu. To a certain extent, teaching practices are decided by one's own behaviors and linguistic competence either knowingly or unwittingly and it influences the learning outcomes. From all the data, no indication suggests that the classroom environment and textbook contribute to the reported anxieties and beliefs.

6.2 Implications

Drawing from the findings, it is recommended that an online group be opened and regular teaching-sharing session be organized for teachers. For pedagogical practice, more task-based work is suggested to be organized to reduce peer pressure. During grammar translation, the build-up of tense milieu and use of corporal punishment of sorts should be avoided or reduced to the lowest. In fluency and accuracy activities, delay of immediate correction is proposed for younger learners. The effective approach can be, if any, the creation of a friendly and interesting learning environment where not only knowledge but relevant personal experience be incorporated into the process.

6.3 Limitations

The limitations of this investigation are the number of statements posted in the questionnaire and the absence of comparative class for comparison. A longitudinal study on larger scale tracking anxiety and belief or an action research project implementing the suggested pedagogical changes and measuring their impact on anxiety and belief is recommended for further research.

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