

An Empirical Study on the Characteristics and Influencing Factors of College Students' English Classroom Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, with the deepening of college English curriculum reform, the unreasonable teaching methods, the incorrect learning strategies, examination pressure and learning burden and the students' cultural differences make college students more and more anxious about English learning. English learning anxiety is one of the biggest mental handicaps which hinder the students' English learning and its bad effects cannot be neglected. In this article, the author conducts a questionnaire survey on the students about English learning anxiety among college non-English majors and use SPSS 22 software for statistical analysis. It aims at giving guidelines for the teachers to adopt correct teaching methods so that they can help to improve teaching, release the college students' English learning anxiety and improve the students' English performances.

Keywords: college English, learning anxiety, classroom teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

Affective factor plays an important role in language acquisition. In the process of language teaching, positive emotions help to improve the effect of language teaching. On the contrary, negative emotions will frustrate learners' self-esteem and self-confidence in learning, forming a nervous and uneasy mood, namely anxiety. Anxiety is the fear or uneasiness of language learners when they express themselves in their second language or mother tongue. It is one of the important affective factors that affect language learning. Anxiety is the fear or uneasiness of language learners when they express themselves in the second language. It is one of the important affective factors that affect language learning. English teachers should realize the influence of anxiety on English learning, and take appropriate teaching methods to help students reduce their anxiety, so as to improve the efficiency of English learning. In this article, the author attempts to use the quantitative method to carry out a questionnaire survey and statistical analysis of college students' English learning anxiety, which provides guidance for teachers to take corresponding teaching strategies, and plays a positive role in reducing college students' English learning anxiety and improving the teaching and learning effect.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING ANXIETY RESEARCH IN CHINA AND FOREIGN COUNTRIES

Anxiety is one of the most important affective factors in foreign language learning. The study of foreign language anxiety began in the early 1970s. Brown (1973) put forward the relationship between affective factors and second language acquisition, and pointed out that anxiety is one of the main affective factors that affect second language learners. Horwitz et al. (1986:128) first put forward the concept of foreign language anxiety, which was defined as "learners' unique and complex self-awareness, belief, emotion and behavior related to foreign language learning in classroom due to the uniqueness of the foreign language learning process", and then proposed the "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale". This scale has become the most authoritative and frequently used foreign language anxiety research tool. Early foreign language anxiety research focuses on foreign language anxiety and its relationship with other anxieties. After that, the contents, scope and methods of foreign language anxiety research have been continuously expanded. And fruitful results have been achieved. Li Jiongying and Lin Shengshu (2007) reviewed the achievements and characteristics of foreign language anxiety research in the past 30 years up to 2006. Shi Yu and Xu Jinfen (2013) reviewed the development of

foreign language anxiety research at home and abroad in 40 years up to 2011.

The study of foreign language anxiety in China started in the mid-1980s. Ling Wenquan (1985) measured the test anxiety and its five factors from a psychological perspective. Weng Deshou (1988) analyzed the fear and anxiety that affect adults' foreign language learning and its main manifestations. He analyzed the factors of the anxiety formation from the perspective of psychology and neurology and pointed out that it is necessary to overcome the fear and anxiety and pay attention to the role of emotion in foreign language learning. Since the 21st century, the study of foreign language anxiety in China has made great progress.

III. METHOD

A. Research questions

The following three research questions are the focus of this study:

- (1) Do college students have anxiety in the process of English learning? If so, how about the degree of anxiety?
- (2) How about the distribution of different kinds of anxiety among students? Which is the highest level of anxiety?
- (3) Are college students' English learning anxiety related to learners' majors, grades of CET (College English Test) 4 and CET 6, and gender.

B. The participants

In this research, the undergraduates from grades of 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018 and postgraduates from grades of 2017 and 2018 in a university were investigated by questionnaire (24 males and 73 females). The majors of the investigated college students are philosophy, economy, management, literature, engineering, law, history, science, education and agriculture.

C. Instruments

This research consists of three parts: basic information questionnaire, English learning habits questionnaire and foreign language anxiety scale. The basic information questionnaire is mainly used to investigate the personal background information of college students, including learners' age, gender, grade, major, CET 4 scores, CET 6 scores and other English scores. The English learning habits questionnaire includes the time of learning English every day, the time of completing English homework every week, the most favorite contents of English class and the methods

of solving English learning problems. In the third part, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), compiled by Horwitz, is applied to the research. There are 33 items in the scale. The form of Likert 5-point scale is used. 1 is very inconsistent; 2 is relatively inconsistent; 3 is general; 4 is consistent; 5 is very consistent. The higher the score is, the higher the level of foreign language anxiety is. On the contrary, the lower the score is, the lower the foreign language anxiety is.

D. Data collection and analysis

Before filling in the questionnaire, the author gave the necessary explanations to the students. There are 97 valid questionnaires collected in all. Then the data were uploaded to SPSS 22 for quantitative study.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. The general situation of college students' English learning anxiety

The maximum score of foreign language anxiety scale is 165. The minimum is 33. And the average is 82.5. According to the statistical results, the English learning anxiety value of the 86 respondents out of 97 exceeds the average 82.5, accounting for 88.66% of the total number. The average score of all 33 items in the scale is 98.66. Based on the data, it can be seen that college students have high level anxiety in the process of English learning.

B. The comparison of different kinds of anxiety indexes

Based on Horwitz's (1986) classification theory of foreign language anxiety, 33 questions are divided into four categories: test anxiety (8, 10, 21), negative evaluation fear (2, 7, 15, 19, 23, 24, 31), communication anxiety (1, 3, 4, 9, 13, 14, 18, 20, 27, 29, 32, 33) and English classroom anxiety (5, 6, 11, 12, 16, 17, 22, 25, 26, 8, 30).

TABLE I. DIFFERENT KINDS OF ANXIETY INDEX

Categories of anxiety	Mean values of anxiety
Test anxiety	2.77
Negative evaluation fear	2.80
Communication anxiety	2.79
English classroom anxiety	2.64

"Table I" shows the comparison of the mean values of the four categories of anxiety. It can be found that the highest anxiety index is negative evaluation fear, with a mean value of 2.80. The next is communication anxiety, reaching a mean value of 2.79 and another is test anxiety, about 2.77. And the last one is English classroom anxiety, with a mean value of 2.64. These data show that most college students are troubled by the negative evaluation fear.

C. The relationship between English learning anxiety and personal factors

1) *Majors and English learning anxiety*: In order to know the relationship between majors and English learning anxiety, the author divided the majors of the respondents into two groups: arts and science. There are 47 (48.45%) students major in arts (including philosophy, economics, management, literature, history, pedagogy and law) and there are 50 (51.55%) students major in science (including engineering, science and

agriculture). The differences in English learning anxiety level of arts students and science students are analyzed by SPSS 22 software (t-test), shown in "Table II" and "Table III".

TABLE II. ANXIETY GROUP STATISTICS OF ARTS AND SCIENCE

Majors	Number of people	Mean values	Standard deviation
Arts	47	139.58	8.17
Science	50	150.42	15.43

TABLE III. INDEPENDENT SAMPLE TABLE T-TEST FOR THE DIFFERENCE OF ANXIETY LEVEL BETWEEN ARTS GROUP AND SCIENCE GROUP

English learning anxiety	The homogeneity of variance test				T-test of mean variance				
	F value	Probability of significance	T value	variance	Probability of significance	Mean difference	The standard error of mean	95% Confidence interval	
							Prescribed minimum	Prescribed Maximum	
Homogeneity of variance	14.253	0.289	-3.569	64	0.001	-10.84848	3.03984	-16.92127	-4.77570
Heterogeneity of variance		0.000	-3.569	48.630	0.001	-10.84848	3.03984	-16.95845	-4.73852

The statistical results show that there is a significant difference between the anxiety level of arts students and science students ($P < 0.05$). And the average anxiety level of science students is higher than that of arts students. The main reason is because of the differences of the students' personality and language learning ability. Science students are calm and introverted. They are reluctant to communicate with others in English in class. When they encounter problems in learning, they regulate their emotions by themselves. Their emotional adjustment ability is slightly lacking while arts students are lively, good at language expression, like to participate in classroom communication activities and good at completing learning tasks with others. Therefore they are active in learning and the language learning anxiety is lower.

2) *CET 4 and CET 6 scores and English learning anxiety*: In order to study the relationship between CET 4 and CET 6 scores and English learning anxiety, the author conducted Pearson correlation analysis with CET 4 scores, CET 6 scores and English learning anxiety respectively.

TABLE IV. THE CORRELATION BETWEEN CET 4 SCORES AND ENGLISH LEARNING ANXIETY

	CET 4 scores	English learning anxiety
CET 4 scores		
Pearson correlation	1	-0.069
Sig.(2-tailed)		0.504
English learning anxiety		
Pearson correlation	-0.069	1
Sig.(2-tailed)	0.504	

TABLE V. THE CORRELATION BETWEEN CET 6 SCORES AND ENGLISH LEARNING ANXIETY

	CET 6 scores	English learning anxiety
CET 6 scores		
Pearson correlation	1	-0.073
Sig.(2-tailed)		0.475
English learning anxiety		
Pearson correlation	-0.073	1
Sig.(2-tailed)	0.475	

From the data in "Table IV" and "Table V", it can be found that the significance of CET 4 and CET 6 scores and English learning anxiety is $p > 0.05$, indicating that CET 4 and CET 6 scores have no relationship with learning anxiety. It can be seen that students' English learning anxiety is more from the English classroom. So how to relieve students' stress in teaching is an important issue to be considered.

3) *Gender and English learning anxiety*: In order to understand the relationship between gender and English learning anxiety, the author conducted Pearson correlation analysis.

TABLE VI. THE CORRELATION BETWEEN GENDER AND ENGLISH LEARNING ANXIETY

	Gender	English learning anxiety
Gender		
Pearson correlation	1	0.089
Sig.(2-tailed)		0.387
English learning anxiety		
Pearson correlation	0.089	1
Sig.(2-tailed)	0.387	

From the data in "Table VI", it can be found that the significance of gender and English learning anxiety is 0.387, indicating that gender has no relationship with English learning anxiety. For a long time, many teachers believe that there are differences between male and female students in learning English. Male students are not as good as female students in language learning. However, according to the author's actual investigation, gender has no effect on College Students' English learning anxiety.

V. TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

The research in this article proves that there is a high level of foreign language anxiety among college students. This has a significant negative effect on college students' English learning effect, personal development and physical and mental health. Therefore, teachers should put students in the center and adopt some appropriate emotional strategies to reduce students' anxiety in English learning, so as to improve the teaching and learning effect.

A. *Training students to use effective emotional strategies*

It is necessary for students to realize that anxiety is common in the process of foreign language learning. Then students should master some effective emotional strategies to relieve anxiety, such as laughing and breathing deeply, using positive words to encourage themselves, communicating with others to express the anxiety feelings in the process of language learning, seeking professional psychological help, and reducing negative self-evaluation, so as to overcome anxiety.

B. *Encouraging students to set personalized learning goals and stimulating learning motivation*

In view of the level of learning motivation will affect students' anxiety degree, so it is necessary to stimulate students' learning motivation. In order to stimulate motivation and interest in English learning, students should set up a clear and personalized learning goal based on their learning level. When students' interest in learning is aroused, they can actively put more time and energy in English learning than others. And they will not be afraid to communicate in English in class. Also they will not be worried about being negatively evaluated, so the anxiety of learning English will naturally weaken. In this way, students get a higher sense of achievement and satisfaction from the learning process, so as to continuously enhance their self-confidence in learning English.

C. *Creating a relaxed and pleasant teaching mode*

Foreign language teachers should create a relaxed and pleasant classroom atmosphere. They should use their own positive emotions to infect students instead of

adopting a commanding and dominating teaching method, which will cause pressure to students and increase their anxiety. At the same time, as a guide, helper and promoter in the classroom, teachers should not only guide students with learning strategies and improve their ability of autonomous learning, but also respect, understand and care for students. And teachers should encourage introverted and diffident students to actively participate in class and encourage students to speak and practice more. Also more praise can enhance students' confidence in foreign language learning and further reduce their anxiety.

D. *Increasing language input to ease students' fear of communication*

The basic purpose of foreign language teaching is to train students to use foreign language easily for communication. To achieve this goal, it must be firstly ensured that students have enough comprehensible language input. At present, most of the teachers pay more attention to vocabulary, grammar, text content and exercises in class but less analyze the language materials as well as the expansion of related topics of texts. Consequently the amount of language input is not enough. It is difficult to promote their communication abilities. In English classroom teaching, teachers should weaken grammar teaching, strengthen the students' comprehensive language ability, select interesting materials to arouse students' interest in language learning. Also life or social hot spots can be topics for discussion. By doing so, the fear of communication will be reduced.

VI. CONCLUSION

The author conducts an empirical study on the factors of college English classroom learning anxiety and finds that the value of college students' English learning anxiety shows a high frequency. Among the four different foreign language anxieties, the highest one is negative evaluation fear. The average value of science students is higher than that of arts students but there is no correlation between gender, CET 4 and CET 6 scores and English learning anxiety. Students' anxiety in English learning is more from the classroom. Therefore the author puts forward the suggestions to reduce the anxiety in college English classroom. This study enriches the research on foreign language classroom anxiety and affective strategies, and plays a positive role in reducing college students' English learning anxiety and improving the teaching and learning effect.

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