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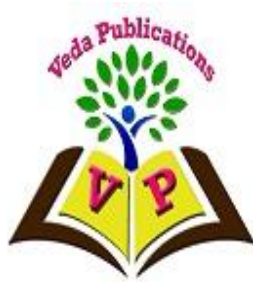
# A RESEARCH ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING ANXIETY AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN HUANG HUA, CHINA

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**ABSTRACT**

In China, according to the National English Curriculum Standards, there are four aspects of language skills namely reading skill, speaking skill, listening skill and writing skill. The combination of these four skills is the language ability. This paper aimed to investigate English learning anxiety among students caused by language skills. Quantitative research method is used for the study. The instruments were four questionnaires, Listening Anxiety Scale, the Speaking Anxiety Scale, the Reading Anxiety Scale, and the Writing Anxiety Scale. The subjects were 200 high school students from Huang Hua High School. The results showed that students do really experience different levels of anxiety and specifically, among the four dimensions, it is speaking anxiety, listening anxiety, writing anxiety and reading anxiety arranging from high to low. Then pedagogical implication was provided for teachers and students to reduce the foreign language learning anxiety in four dimensions, especially speaking anxiety.

**Keywords***: Listening Anxiety, Speaking Anxiety, Reading Anxiety, Writing Anxiety, High school student.*

## INTRODUCTION

Since 1950s, Rogers and Maslow put forward a new concept, which is called humanistic psychology. The theory points that the individuals' affective factors are so important that influence the individuals' development. After a decade, more researchers studied the humanistic psychology. The affective factors became a popular research topic and more attention was focused on it. For example, Krashen, as one of the first group of experts who were interested about this idea, started to research the relation of affective factors and language learning. From then on, there are more and more researchers who began to do such survey about it.

Even though more people start to accept that in the development of individuals, the influence of affective aspects cannot be neglected, a lot of problems still need to be solved gradually in the whole society. As we all know, the education still tends to pay more attention on the teaching of knowledge and developing of learning ability. Usually, the educators do not care much about the emotion of learners. Therefore, a lot of student cannot get the development in an all-around way, which means both the body and minds have been improved at the same time. A lot of students cannot get the enough communicative ability to adapt the new situation when they graduate from college and work in the real society.

On the deep studies on the affective factors, researchers put forward a classification. That is to say, affective factors contain two parts, learner factors and interpersonal factors. For example, motivation, personality and anxiety are learner factors. Relationship of learners and learners, and relationship of teachers and learners are belonging to interpersonal factors. There is no doubt that one of the affective factors, anxiety, commonly exist in the foreign language learning process. It influences the foreign language acquisition a lot.

Recently, the education concept experiences the shift, which means "teacher-centered" is becoming "learner-centered". Before, the educators focused on "how to teach". Nowadays, much more attention is paid on "how to learn" well by learners themselves independently. Researchers focus on the learners' individual development, which includes mental development. Among all the aspects, anxiety has attracted more attention, because it neglected confluence during the learning process. Therefore, no one can deny that better survey, which is related to foreign language learning anxiety. It is unanimously necessary for educators and experts.

What's more, according to the structuralism, the audio-lingual method points out that there are four aspects of language skills namely, reading skill, speaking skill, listening skill and writing skill. In China, according to the National English Curriculum Standards, the combination of these four skills is the language ability. Hence, it is wise and practical for the researchers and educators to combine the four language skills and language learning anxiety.

Nevertheless, most of the researchers survey a lot on only one dimension instead of all the four dimensions. It is necessary for us to connect those four skills and make a comparison. Few people focus on this idea. Hence, this paper aims to do the survey on the English learning anxiety among high school students from a muti-dimension perspective.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Horwitz (1986) set up a scientific system to evaluate the foreign language anxiety (FLA) status, which is called Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). Before this, there is no scientific measuring tool which can investigate the state of language learning anxiety. It ends up the history totally. In Horwitz's first application of FLCAS, the statistical data stated that the correlation between FLA and language learning achievement is moderately negative.

When it comes to English listening perspective, Chinese scholars, Chen and Hu, Gui and Ji make surveys on this issue too. Chen and Hu (2012) randomly selected adult learners as subjects and he finds that there is not distinct and significant anxiety level among learners of different listening achievement. Some results are different. It proved that listening anxiety is positively related to achievement. Gui (2007) makes a survey on English

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major students and find that listening anxiety is related to listening proficiency negatively.

Researches on speaking anxiety in China become prevalent in the late 1990s. For instance, there are some representatives. Lin (2016) tried to investigate the correlation between oral English proficiency and speaking anxiety. The results not only show that they are negatively related but also prove that there exists two types of anxiety-trait anxiety and situational anxiety. Chen(2007) also shows that the higher anxious the students are, the worse oral performance they are. They taken students from common school and key school as subjects and the subjects are separated into two groups, they are high-level performance group and lower-level performance group. Then the result shows that the high-performance students tend to be lower anxiety and the common school students are less anxious than key school students. All in all, the researches show that speaking anxiety is negatively correlated to oral performance or speaking proficiency.

In China, the research on foreign language reading anxiety begins very late, but it develops very fast. For example, Liu (2010), Rao (2007) and so on. Liu (2010) study shows that qualified students are more anxious and nervous than disqualified students. Liu (2010) also conducts a research on the relationship between reading proficiency and reading anxiety. Deng's result shows that reading anxiety can benefit or obstacle reading proficiency. And only in moderate or suitable anxiety level, can students get higher reading scores or get higher reading performance. Rao (2007) takes non-English major students as subjects and the result indicates that reading anxiety can reflects students' record of CET-4, but the research is not deep enough to explore the correlation between foreign language reading anxiety and reading proficiency.

In China, numerous researches on the relationship between foreign language writing anxiety and achievement are conducted. Some scholars are the outstanding ones. Wang (2013) make a survey on native speakers of Chinese in Taiwan and the result shows that the speakers with higher writing anxiety are prone to get lower

assessment or grades on examinations. Zheng (2013) takes college students as subjects and finds that college students experience high anxiety level generally. Besides, he also reports that low-anxiety students are easier to get high scores or be more fluent than higher-anxiety students. Certainly, there are other scholars who make a great contribution on the FLA.

## METHODOLOGY

The subjects are 200 students in Huang Hua High School. This survey is conducted to investigate high school students'English learning anxiety and find ways to overcome it and improve English acquisition.

This present study adopts quantitative research method and the instruments are four questionnaires. The listening questionnaire used in this study was modified with reference to Gui (2007) measurement, Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS). And it is an effective way to explore subjects' foreign language listening anxiety. The questionnaire is a self-reported scale and it is used by some researchers to explore subjects' listening anxiety because it is highly reliable and valid.

The speaking anxiety questionnaire was proposed by Chen (2007), who is an outstanding scholar. He proposed his speaking anxiety measurement. He completed the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) through the exploration of categories, structures, distribution and the processing features of undergraduate students. It showed that the measurement is highly reliable and valid. The items in the measurement is a construct of self-knowledge, the items include six dimensions, the six dimensions are low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, communication apprehension, avoidance tendency, less active tendency, and fear of negative evaluation. The six dimensions can measure the speaking anxiety thoroughly and well. In order to make his measurement more suitable for the research, some adoption was made. Some questions were canceled based on the teaching experience and the students' actual situation. Such as the item "I feel anxious when I am talking to native speakers" and "I am anxious when I stay with native speakers" were removed because it is not easy for students to meet

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foreigners let alone talking with them in small cities. The whole FLSAS were made up of 29 items in all and the scores range from 29 to 145. Undoubtedly, the score stands for the subjects' anxiety level.

The reading anxiety questionnaire was modified with reference to Saito and Horwitz (1999) Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS). It is a well-established measurement and it has been proved to be reliable. The FLRAS contains 20 items and the total questions were divided into three dimensions accordingly. The first-dimension deals with general reading comprehension apprehension, the second dimension relates to cultural apprehension, it includes the items that about unfamiliar culture material. The rest dimension is about emotional apprehension, which means the items in this dimension mainly measure the degree to which the individuals do or do not like reading English. it made some appropriate change on Saito's scale. For example, all the words "Russian, French Japanese" are changed into "English". What is more, it translates the measure into Chinese so as to help learners well understand the whole expressions. The FLRAS contains 20 items and the theoretical range is from 20 to 100. Similarly, the lower the score is, the less anxious the students are.

The writing anxiety questionnaire of this paper is the Second Language Writing Anxiety

Inventory (SLWAI) made by Zheng (2013). This questionnaire aims to determine the level to which the subject feels anxious when he is writing in English, and it has good internal consistency and it is well-established and widely accepted. To facilitate the subjects to read and response, the questionnaire is translated into Chinese. The instrument contains twenty-two items and three sub-scales. Twenty-two items can be divided into three dimensions. The first scale is somatic anxiety subscale which is comprised of items that relates to physiological arousal. The second scale is about avoidance behavior subscale which is defined by items indicative of avoidance behavior. The last dimension deals with cognitive anxiety, the items in this scale talks about the fear or worry of negative evaluation.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The general state of FLA of the students will be discussed in this part and the learning anxiety consists of four dimensions, they are English listening anxiety, speaking anxiety, reading anxiety and writing anxiety. The study in this part explores students' FLA levels in four dimensions and comparison between them is made. The result is essential for teachers and schools to adjust the teaching plans and is helpful for improving English teaching.

Table 4-1 Descriptive statistics of listening anxiety

| N | Std. Deviation | Minimum | Maximum | Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 200 | 16.328 | 54 | 117 | 85.328 |

The theoretical range of the listening anxiety should be between 33 and 165. The extreme value in this study is 54 and 104. 54 is 21 higher than the minimum of the theoretical range. And the maximum listening score of the subjects in the research is 104, which is 48 points lower than the extremum of the theoretical range. And the mean is 85.328, which is

close to Chen and Hu (2012) study. They (2000) carried out a study on the English foreign language learners in China to explore their listening anxiety levels. It obtained a mean score of listening anxiety level of 107.6, his total subjects' number is 238. In this study, the mean score is 87.417, which is lower than mean scores 107.6in Chen and Hu's study.

Table 4-2 Descriptive statistics of speaking anxiety

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| N | Std. Deviation | Minimum | Maximum | Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 200 | 12.206 | 63 | 121 | 87.952 |

As is shown in the table 4-2, the subjects' foreign language speaking anxiety scores ranges from 63 to 121 and the mean is 87.952. The maximum is 121, which is 24 points lower than the maximum in theory. Comparing the average score of this study to the previous studies, the researcher finds that the average score of the present study is quite similar to the studies of Chen (2007). Specifically, Chen's research shows that the average score of the subjects' speaking anxiety is 92.6, which is quite similar and close to this study.

Table 4-3 Descriptive statistics of reading anxiety

| N | Std. Deviation | Minimum | Maximum | Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 200 | 15.209 | 28 | 67 | 42.014 |

The table 4-3 vividly shows the important data of students' foreign language reading anxiety. The descriptive statistical analysis shows that when students are confronted with English reading tasks, they do really experience anxiety. 28 is the minimum reading anxiety score and it is 10 points higher than the minimum of the theoretical range. And the maximum reading score of the subjects in the research is 67, which is 33 points lower than the maximum of the theoretical range. 42.014 is the mean, which is quite close to the previous studies.

Table 4-4 Descriptive statistics of writing anxiety

| N | Std. Deviation | Minimum | Maximum | Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 200 | 11.592 | 32 | 97 | 53.709 |

Table 4-4 shows the subjects' second language writing anxiety level, which vividly shows the minimum, maximum, mean and the standard deviation of the data. The second language writing anxiety scores of the students range from 32 to 97, the mean is 53.709 and the standers deviation is 11.592. The mean of all the participants' scores on the writing anxiety in this present research is a little lower than that of Zheng (2013).

In a summary, the result shows that students do really experience English learning anxiety. But they show different degree of anxiety in each dimension, that means the students' anxiety level varies. Specifically, the order from high to low is speaking, listening, writing and reading. The reasons may relate to Chinese education system and education custom, for example, the students in high school are confronted with lots of reading tasks every day and the speaking classes are ignored by schools and teachers because of the pressure of National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), which will determine whether students can get the offer of ideal school.

The reason why reading anxiety is the lowest in the four dimensions may be that students in China have to do lots of reading tasks every day, reading plays a deciding role in students' NCEE and the teachers and schools think highly of the reading class. Similarly, the reason why speaking anxiety is the highest in the four dimensions may be that speaking is ignored by teachers and students because it is not involved in the NCEE. The result vividly claims that in

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what degree the attention the teachers pays depends on the students' anxiety level in some extent.

The study shows the students do experience English learning anxiety more or less, and they all in the moderate level in four dimensions. The result is consistent with the previous studies. Some previous studies show that students really experience moderate anxiety level in four dimensions. Specifically, the anxiety levels of four dimensions are various, it is speaking anxiety, listening anxiety, English writing anxiety and reading anxiety arranging from high to low. The result highly corresponds with the previous theoretical presumption that anxiety is a kind of undesired feeling, such as apprehension and fear. The result indicates that more attention needs to be paid on reducing listening anxiety, writing anxiety, as well as reading anxiety. Specially, in speaking class, extra and effective action should be taken to reduce students' speaking anxiety, since it is the higher than other three dimensions.

## CONCLUSION

English has played an essential role in students' studies, because it not only can provide then with international views and tools of exploring the outside world but also plays a deciding role in their tests. The present study adopts quantitative methodand theresults show that students do experience FLA in four dimensions. Therefore, it is urgent for teachers to pay more attention to this issue and attach importance to control and reduce the foreign language learning anxiety in four dimensions.

Lectures should realize the existence and significance of foreign language anxiety and tries to help them in controlling and reducing it. Even some opening discussions with the students who are in highly anxious are acceptable. Comfortable environment for English learning needs to be created with the help of schools, and more interesting activities related to English learning can be held regularly and thus can lower the students' language learning anxiety and make students cooperative and confident.

All students need to be encouraged and teachers should view students equally when it comes to language leaning ability. Enough attention should be given for male students, especially the students who are shy and not confident.Being confident is vital for students. Students should be confident in language learning, especially the male students. Once a student is confident in class, he or she will be active and positive in class and even can perform well in the activities.

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