A Study on the Current Situation of English Learning Anxiety of English Majors

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Abstract. By using adapted FLCAS as a questionnaire among 100 English majors from four different grades of Beijing Institute of Technology, Zhuhai, this study investigated the current English learning anxiety situation, the difference between different grades of English majors and the reasons of it. The results show that English majors at Beijing Institute of Technology, Zhuhai have moderate English learning anxiety and they are the most anxious at the aspect of communication apprehension. And for the English learning anxiety difference between two groups of participants, although high-grade students are slightly less anxious than low-grade students in communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety and negative belief towards English, no significant difference between high grades and low grades is found. Based on these findings, this study provides some suggestions for future English learning and teaching for English majors.

Keywords: English learning anxiety, English majors, grades differences

1. Introduction

Anxiety refers to negative emotional experience including uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension and tension and it is caused by some stimulus[1] and it influences language acquisition the most among all emotional factor[2]. In language learning, foreign language anxiety mainly refers to some negative emotion including fear of using the foreign language they are learning[3,4]. Since 1970s, many scholars have studied the influence of anxiety to foreign language learning. In China, there are also many studies focus on the influence of anxiety to foreign language learning. However, these studies mainly focused on low proficiency English learners like senior high students and non-English majors since high proficiency learners like English majors are supposed to be act better in English learning anxiety.

Nevertheless, most English majors are going to distribute to Chinese future English construction including English education and translation, thus, it is important to study the current English learning anxiety situation of them and investigate how the anxiety influence them, so that to provide some useful suggestions to improve the situation. Moreover, it is vital to investigate the anxiety differences of grades to find out whether study time can influence anxiety, so that provides specific suggestions to improve different grades' English learning anxiety. Therefore, this study intends to investigate English learning anxiety situations of low-grade and high-grade English majors by using adapted FLCAS questionnaire.

2. Literature review

2.1. Language learning Anxiety

As one of the important emotional factors that influence language development [2], language learning anxiety has become an important component in second language acquisition studies[5]. Horwitz et al. (1986) defined Foreign language learning anxiety 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" [6]. and constructed Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) based on it to measure the breadth and depth of foreign language learning anxiety.

The construction of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale made language anxiety measurement standardized. Aida (1994) studied the reliability of the FLCAS of Horwitz et al. and found that the FLCAS has high reliability [7]. Besides, the results showed that there existed a negative correlation between language anxiety and Japanese learning performance, study of MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) and the study of Awan et al. (2010) also found the similar things that language learning anxiety influences language learning negatively [8,9].

2.2. Anxiety in the Chinese Context

Liu (2015) studied the anxiety situation in senior high school by using FLCAS and found that there are significant differences between different grades' test anxiety and there is a significant difference between different genders' communication anxiety and test anxiety [10]. Ran (2019) also focused on the anxiety situation of senior high school students by investigating the speaking anxiety situation of grade one students [11]. The author used a questionnaire and interview method and found there is no significant difference between different genders' speaking anxiety, and there is a strong correlation between students' speaking anxiety and their speaking proficiency levels.

For the university level, Guo and Xu (2014) studied the foreign language anxiety of 457 non-English major college students from multi-dimensional perspective [5]. Researchers found that the level of reading anxiety was significantly lowest and there is no significant difference in anxiety between different gender. Fu et al. (2022) also conducted an experiment to non-English majors to study their English listening anxiety and found that there is a negative correlation between students' listening anxiety and their scores [12].

Yang (2000) conducted a study among 40 English major freshmen to study the relationship between anxiety and listening proficiency levels [13]. The results showed that there is a positive correlation between students' facilitating anxiety and listening proficiency levels and there is a negative correlation between students' debilitating anxiety and their listening proficiency levels. Gou (2019) also studied English major freshmen but focused on their English learning anxiety situation. It can be concluded that higher-score students have significantly lower anxiety levels than lower-score students [14].

2.3. Research gap

From the previous studies, it can be seen although there is much research studied the language learning anxiety in China, they mostly focused on senior high school, and for the university level, the research subjects are mostly non-English majors. Additionally, for the English majors, researchers mostly focused on students in the same grade. Few studies conducted focusing on the differences between different grades of English majors in university. Thus, this study aims to fill the gap by investigating the English learning anxiety situation among different grades of English majors.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research questions

This study aims to investigate the current English learning anxiety situation of English majors in different grades from four dimensions of anxiety. To be more specific, the study aims to address the following three research questions:

RQ1: What is the current situation of English classroom anxiety of English major students in FLCAS total scores and four-factor scores?

RQ2: Are there any differences in anxiety degree between English majors in high grade and low grade among totality and the four dimensions? If there are, what are they and why?

3.2. Research participants

With the help of teachers and students, 100 English majors (14 males, 86 females) at the Beijing Institute of Technology, Zhuhai participated in this study. Among them, 47 students were in low grades, including 24 freshmen and 23 sophomores. And 53 of them were in high grades, including 26 juniors and 27 seniors.

3.3. Research Instruments

Since it has been created by Horwitz et al. (1986) [6], Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) has been widely used in the research of foreign language anxiety. To meet the research need, the author adapted this scale. The expression "foreign language" was modified to "English", and the scale was translated into Chinese to avoid some misunderstandings caused by using the English version.

The FLCAS has 33 items and can be divided into four categories of foreign language anxiety factors including communication apprehension (item 1, 3, 4, 9, 13, 14, 18, 20, 24, 27, 29, 33), fear of negative evaluation (item 2, 7, 15, 19, 23, 31), test anxiety(item 8,10,21), and negative belief toward English(item 5, 6, 11, 12, 16, 17, 22, 25, 26, 28, 30, 32). Each item offers 5-point Likert-scale responses, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1 point) to "strongly agree" (5 points). In addition, for item 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 18, 22, 28, and 32 which are negatively worded, the responses are reversed and scored, which is "strongly agree" (1 point), "agree" (2 points), "neither agree nor disagree" (3 points), "disagree" (4 points) and "strongly disagree" (5 points). The anxiety score of each subject is gained by adding up the scores of the items. The higher the score is, the more anxious the student is.

3.4. Research procedure

First, the questionnaire was constructed. This questionnaire consists of three parts. The first part was designed to collect participants' personal information including their gender and grades. The second part was the Chinese version of the adapted Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) designed by Horwitz et al. (1986) [6]. The third part is the description of reasons for anxiety based on participants' experience in learning English.

Second, the questionnaire was distributed to participants. With the help of teachers and students, the questionnaire was distributed to 106 English majors including freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors via WeChat. Before distributing the questionnaire, the participants were told that the questionnaire can measure their English learning anxiety and the questionnaire results will only be used in this study and will not have any negative effect on their study or life. Thus, students finished the questionnaire carefully and honestly. Finally, 100 of the questionnaires returned were valid.

3.5. Data Analysis

All the quantitative data of the questionnaire were analyzed by SPSS 27.0. First, descriptive statistics of FLCAS total scores and 4-factor scores of all participants were generated to get the current situation of English classroom anxiety of English major students. Then, several independent-sample t-tests were used to find out the differences between the high-grade students and low-grade students in the overall English learning anxiety and four dimensions.

4. Results

In statistics, Cronbach's alpha is the most common reliability index and is used to measure the internal consistency reliability of a questionnaire. Since the Cronbach alpha of the FLCAS in this study is .950, which is above 0.8. It means the FLCAS used in this research has high reliability and good internal consistency. Thus, it can satisfy the demands of statistical analysis and can be employed for further analysis in the present research.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of overall English learning anxiety and four components of English majors.

Components	No. of the participants	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Communication Apprehension	100	1.17	4.92	3.2667	.73627
Fear of Negative Evaluation	100	1.17	4.67	2.9600	.67550
Test Anxiety	100	1.00	5.00	3.2633	.80584
Negative Belief Towards English	100	1.33	5.00	2.9900	.69047
Overall Anxiety	100	1.29	4.81	3.1200	.65728

Table 1 presents the current English learning anxiety of English majors. According to it, the overall English learning anxiety scores of 100 English majors are between 1.29 and 4.81, and the mean is 3.1200. According to Oxford and Burry-Stock's classification to Likert's five points scale (1995), the subjects in this study have experienced moderate English learning anxiety in general [15]. From the data, it can be seen that the anxiety caused by communication apprehension is the highest (M=3.2667) and fear of negative evaluation is the lowest (M=2.9600). The anxiety caused by test ranks the second (M=3.2633) and is followed by negative belief towards English (M=2.9900). And according to Oxford and Burry-Stock's categorization (1995), it can be concluded that English majors experience moderate communication apprehension anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety and negative belief towards English.

Table 2 presents the different anxiety situations of English majors in low grades and high grades among four components and overall anxiety scores. As for overall anxiety, the mean value of high grade is lower than low grade, with mean value 3.0641 and 3.1831. However, the data indicates that there is no significant difference between high grades and low grades for overall anxiety ($t(98) =0.903, p=0.369$).

As for communication apprehension anxiety, the mean value of high grades is slightly lower than low grades, with mean value 3.2358 and 3.3014. But the independent samples t-test indicates that there is no significant difference between high grades and low grades in the aspect of communication apprehension ($t(98)=0.443$, $p=0.659$).

For fear of negative evaluation, the mean value of high grades is slightly higher than low grades, and the means of low grade and high grade are 2.9397 and 2.9780 respectively. And the data shows that there is no significant difference between high grades and low grades in terms of negative evaluation anxiety ($t(98)=0.281$, $p=0.779$).

For test anxiety, high-grade students have lower mean value than low-grade students, with mean value 3.1321 and 3.4113. But it can be seen from the data that there is no significant difference between high grades and low grades for test anxiety ($t (98) =1.748$, $p=0.084$).

For anxiety caused by negative belief towards English, the mean value of high-grade students is lower than low-grade students, with mean value 2.9104 and 3.0798. And viewed from the table 2, there is no significant difference between high grades and low grades in the aspect of negative belief towards English ($t(98)=1.228$, $p=0.223$).

Table 2. Independent samples T-tests of FLCAS scores of low-grade and high-grade English majors.

Components	Grade	N	Mean	SD	T	P
Communication Apprehension	Low Grade	47	3.3014	.75872	.443	.659
	High Grade	53	3.2358	.72164		
Fear of Negative Evaluation	Low Grade	47	2.9397	.77586	.281	.779
	High Grade	53	2.9780	.57923		
Test Anxiety	Low Grade	47	3.4113	.84902	1.748	.084
	High Grade	53	3.1321	.74919		
Negative Belief Towards English	Low Grade	47	3.0798	.74149	1.228	.223
	High Grade	53	2.9104	.63839		
Overall Anxiety	Low Grade	47	3.1831	.71437	.903	.369
	High Grade	53	3.0641	.60356		

5. Discussion

To answer RQ1, this study used descriptive statistics including mean value and standard deviations. The data indicates that English majors have moderate anxiety, which is different from the finding of Zhao and Zhang (2021), which concludes that English majors have low anxiety scores, and this may be due to the participants' proficiency levels of the two studies are different [16]. Additionally, the data indicates that English majors feel the most anxiety in the aspect of communication apprehension, which corresponds with Cheng's study (2023) [17]. According to sociology, students are sensitive to others' especially their classmates' comments [5]. When speaking in class including answering questions and making presentations, students are easy to be judged by their classmates on their pronunciation and correctness, which may lead to strong anxiety, thus, students feel the most anxious in the aspect of communication apprehension. Meanwhile, it can also be seen that English majors got the lowest scores in fear of negative evaluation, and this may be because most students care about the test results the most and they know clearly that the negative evaluation in class will not influence their test score, thus they do not care about it much. Furthermore, students' attitudes toward tests can also explain why the test anxiety is nearly high as communication apprehension anxiety.

To answer RQ2, this study used an independent samples t-test. From the data of table 2, it can be seen for overall anxiety, high-grade students have lower anxiety than low-grade students but there is no significant differences between them, and this is correspond with Zhao and Zhang's study (2021) [16], and this demonstrates that English majors in every grade all suffer from anxiety and years of English learning cannot solve this problem.

For communication apprehension anxiety, English majors in high grades are less anxious than low grades, but there is no significant difference between these two groups, which is correspond with Cheng's study (2023) [17]. Influenced by traditional Chinese culture, most students are reluctant to speak actively as they are afraid of being judged as a show-off[18], and the lack of communication need in English also makes language practice rare, which leads to anxiety[17], and it can also explain why high-grade students feel less anxious since they are facing job pursuing, and English related jobs require them to communicate with others in English. However, since these issues mentioned above existed in both high grades and low grades, no significant difference can be found between these two groups. To decrease English majors' communication apprehension, more chances of speaking English should be provided, teachers can organize some English corners or cooperative activities in class since students feel more comfortable and secure and thus experience less anxiety when they feel part of a group [19].

As for fear of negative evaluation, the data indicates high-grade students are more fear of being evaluated negatively, but there is no significant difference between these two groups, and this is consistent with Liu's study (2015) [10]. As for low-grade students, they can always comfort themselves as they have not learned much and they can make better efforts later when receiving a negative evaluation, however, after several years of learning as English majors, high-grade students cannot comfort themselves anymore like that and some negative evaluation may make them feel that they were not hard enough and cannot repair anymore, which makes them feel more anxious than low-grade students. To decrease students' fear of negative evaluation, teachers should avoid correcting students' mistakes too strictly and directly. Instead, teachers can show students their mistakes by repeating the mistakes or asking students to work together to solve the problem.

For test anxiety, the data shows that high-grade students are less anxious to anxiety than low grades, but there is no significant difference between these two groups, this is different from Zhai's study (2011) and this may be due to the different majors of the participants in two studies [20]. At Beijing Institute of Technology, Zhuhai, failing the test need to pay for the class and learn it again, thus students in all grades all anxious about the test results. Additionally, students are more anxious when they compete with others [21]. Moreover, test results are closely related to the scholarship competition, thus the test may increase students' competition awareness and lead to high anxiety, and this can be the reason for lower anxiety scores of high grades since high grades students are more focused on job pursuing or Unified National Graduate Entrance Examination instead of those

competitions. To make English majors feel less anxious to test, a more appropriate assessment system combined with the proper percentage of formative assessment and summative assessment should be established.

In addition, for negative belief towards English, it can be seen that high-grade English majors have fewer negative belief than low grades, while there is no significant difference between these two groups, which is inconsistent with Cheng's study (2023) [17]. In traditional English classes, teachers focused on simple knowledge teaching such as teaching vocabulary and grammar rules instead of teaching them in the context, and students in every grade may increase anxiety when they are taught this knowledge which is quite different from their mother tongue in such a boring way. However, compared with low-grade students, high-grade students have more study experience and thus can use better study strategies and emotional adjustment strategies to decrease their anxiety. To decrease English majors' negative belief towards English, teachers can combine knowledge teaching with culture introducing so improve students' inner interest and make them get more familiar with English. What is more, teachers can use task-based language teaching to combine English with reality and help students realize anxiety and mistakes are common in English learning, and the main purpose of English learning is communication and ideas expression but not achieving native-like level.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, this study found that English majors at Beijing Institute of Technology, Zhuhai have moderate English learning anxiety and they are the most anxious at the aspect of communication apprehension. And for the English learning anxiety difference between two groups of participants, although high-grade students are slightly less anxious than low-grade students in communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety and negative belief towards English, no significant difference between high grades and low grades is found, which means English majors are still anxious about English learning after several years of university English study. Based on it, this study provides some suggestions including providing more speaking chances for students, optimizing correcting ways, establishing appropriate assessment system, building up self-confidence and correct belief towards English.

Future research should take gender difference and proficiency levels difference into consideration by using more comprehensive research methods including interviews and teaching experiments. Additionally, larger sample size should be used to conclude more representative and reliable results.

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