

Causes of Language Anxiety and Coping Strategies in Junior High School English Teaching: A Case Study of Listening-Speaking Learning Among Ninth Graders in an Urban School

Shihui Su

Chengyi College, Jimei University, 361021, Xiamen, Fujian, China

ABSTRACT

This study examines language anxiety in English listening and speaking learning among ninth-grade students in urban junior high schools. Through questionnaires, classroom observations, and student interviews, the causes of anxiety were analyzed, and targeted intervention strategies were proposed. Findings indicate that student anxiety primarily stems from low self-efficacy, performance evaluation pressure, and limited instructional resources. Interventions such as tiered task design and low-risk classroom environments demonstrated measurable anxiety reduction. The results provide localized pedagogical insights for English teaching in urban secondary schools.

KEYWORDS

language anxiety; junior high school English; listening and speaking learning; coping strategies

1 Introduction

As globalization accelerates, English has become the lingua franca of international communication, underscoring its critical role in education. Economically, English serves as the primary language of global business. Proficiency enables employees to communicate effectively with international partners, minimizing misunderstandings and financial losses while facilitating market expansion and cross-border trade. Furthermore, the rise of multinational corporations has created a competitive advantage for job candidates with strong English skills, who typically secure better employment opportunities, higher salaries, and enhanced career prospects in transnational or foreign-related enterprises. From a scientific perspective, English dominates the publication of cutting-edge academic papers, research reports, and technical standards. Researchers proficient in English gain direct access to global scientific advancements, enabling them to track industry trends, maintain parity with international peers, and conduct innovative studies. In collaborative projects, English serves as the medium for sharing findings and addressing complex challenges, thereby optimizing the integration of global scientific resources and accelerating technological progress. Culturally, English functions as a bridge for cross-cultural exchange. China utilizes English-language media and cultural initiatives to share its narratives globally, fostering international understanding of Chinese culture. Simultaneously, English allows individuals to appreciate foreign cultural products—films, music, and literature—promoting mutual cultural enrichment and nurturing a pluralistic, inclusive global ethos.

Nevertheless, language anxiety remains prevalent among junior high school students, particularly during English listening and speaking instruction. For ninth graders facing high-stakes examinations, such anxiety not only reduces classroom engagement but also impedes linguistic development (Horwitz et al., 1986). This empirical study investigates the causes of listening-speaking anxiety in an urban junior high school context and proposes targeted intervention strategies aligned with China's "Double Reduction" policy. The findings aim to inform pedagogical practices for improving English language education in comparable settings.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Language Anxiety

Language anxiety constitutes a distinct affective barrier in second language acquisition (SLA), characterized by learners' tension, apprehension, and self-doubt stemming from perceived linguistic inadequacy (Horwitz et al., 1991). As operationalized through the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), this construct manifests in three core dimensions: (1) communication apprehension (e.g., fear of oral participation), (2) test anxiety (e.g., excessive worry about academic performance), and (3) fear of negative evaluation (e.g., distress over potential criticism from instructors or peers).

The Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) provides a neurocognitive explanation, positing that elevated anxiety creates psychological barriers that impede the processing of comprehensible input. This effect is particularly pronounced in oral-aural skill development, where real-time performance demands exacerbate learners' affective responses.

2.2 Current Research Landscape

2.2.1 International Research Developments

International scholarship has established a robust body of research on language anxiety, with particular emphasis on its manifestations and mitigation strategies in English listening and speaking instruction. Scovel's (1991) seminal work delineates a dual analytical framework for language anxiety, examining the phenomenon through both psychological and sociological lenses.

From a psychological perspective, language anxiety emerges as an affective response to language learning processes, intrinsically linked to:

- Self-efficacy beliefs
- Achievement motivation
- Psychological apprehension

The sociological dimension reveals how anxiety is mediated through:

- Social interaction patterns
- Cultural background factors
- Instructional environment characteristics

In pedagogical practice, researchers have developed empirically-validated interventions to reduce language anxiety, including:

- Modified instructional approaches
- Classroom climate optimization
- Socio-emotional learning integration

First, establishing good teacher-student relationships and creating a harmonious classroom atmosphere are widely recognized as effective ways to alleviate language anxiety (Hashemi, 2011). Teachers should enhance students' self-confidence and sense of belonging through positive feedback and encouragement, thereby reducing their nervousness and fear in the learning process. Williams and Andrade (2008) found that a positive classroom atmosphere can effectively reduce students' language anxiety and improve their learning interest and participation. For example, using interactive teaching, task-based teaching, and scenario simulation can help students improve language skills in a relaxed environment. Nunan (1989) suggested that teachers should focus on cultivating students' practical communication abilities rather than merely paying attention to grammar and vocabulary mastery. Second, enhancing students' self-confidence is an important strategy to reduce language anxiety. Teachers can strengthen students' self-confidence through positive feedback, encouraging them to participate in classroom activities, and setting achievable learning goals. Brown (2000) proposed that teachers' support and encouragement can significantly improve students' self-efficacy, thereby reducing language anxiety. Foreign scholars also emphasize paying attention to students' individual differences. Teachers should design personalized teaching plans and goals according to students' different situations to meet their diverse needs. At the same time, they should focus on cultivating students' autonomous learning abilities and learning strategies to help them establish correct learning concepts and habits, thus fundamentally reducing the occurrence of language anxiety.

In recent years, with the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) technology, its application in the field of English teaching has become a research hotspot. The report *Artificial Intelligence and English Teaching: Preparing for the Future* published by the British Council states that AI technology demonstrates unique value in supporting oral communication, promoting writing training, and generating personalized reading materials. For example, intelligent speech recognition technology can correct students' pronunciation in real time, provide instant feedback for oral practice, and effectively improve the accuracy of students' oral expressions and their self-confidence, reducing language anxiety caused by incorrect pronunciation. The application of natural language processing technology in writing teaching can not only automatically grade compositions but also give detailed improvement suggestions on grammatical errors, vocabulary usage, and article structure, alleviating students' fear of writing tasks. Relevant studies also point out that AI-driven personalized learning systems can intelligently push learning content and practice tasks according to students' learning progress and ability levels, meeting the learning needs of different students and effectively relieving anxiety caused by inappropriate learning difficulties. However, at present, empirical research on applying AI technology to English teaching in urban and rural junior high schools to alleviate students' language anxiety is still scarce, especially research targeting the special teaching environments and student characteristics of urban and rural schools needs to be strengthened.

2.2.2 Domestic Research Focus

In China, there is also abundant research on the causes and coping strategies of language anxiety among junior high school English learners. Researchers mainly explore this from multiple perspectives such as psychology, pedagogy, and

linguistics. First, from a psychological perspective, the main causes of students' language anxiety include lack of self-confidence, fear of failure, and lack of interest in foreign languages. Studies show that these factors can lead to anxiety when students communicate in a second language. Second, from a pedagogical perspective, teachers' teaching methods and attitudes also affect students' level of language anxiety. Studies show that using methods such as task-based teaching and interactive teaching can effectively reduce students' language anxiety. Finally, from a linguistic perspective, students' language proficiency, vocabulary size, and grammatical knowledge also influence their level of language anxiety. Studies show that improving students' language proficiency and expanding their vocabulary can effectively alleviate their language anxiety.

There are certain research gaps and limitations in academic circles both at home and abroad regarding English language anxiety in junior high school students. Some studies may overly rely on specific theories (such as cognitive load theory or self-efficacy theory), ignoring other factors that may significantly influence English learning anxiety, such as cultural adaptation and social support systems. Some studies fail to comprehensively consider multiple factors affecting language anxiety, including language skills, emotional states, social environments, and educational systems, resulting in coping strategies that may lack comprehensiveness or specificity. Many studies may excessively depend on students' self-reported data while using fewer direct observations or objective test results. This may cause results to be affected by subjective biases and unable to fully reflect real-world situations.

2.3 Research Gaps

Current research generally has three limitations: first, it ignores the unique contexts of urban and rural schools (such as large class sizes and teacher mobility); second, it mainly relies on quantitative research, lacking qualitative analysis of the dynamic processes of anxiety; third, intervention strategies have strong universality but insufficient localization.

Based on the research theories of domestic and foreign scholars, the authors of this paper designed and distributed questionnaires to collect data on English learning situations of primary and secondary school students in rural areas, sorted and analyzed the collected data to reveal the causes of language anxiety and its relationship with English learning performance. In addition, in-depth case analyses were conducted through interviews, observations, and other means.

3 Research Design

3.1 Research Subjects

The study selected Class 4 (experimental class, 50 students) and Class 5 (control class, 50 students) of Grade 9 in an urban junior high school as research subjects. This is a regular urban-rural middle school with characteristics such as large class sizes (approximately 50 students per class) and outdated listening equipment. The experimental class received anxiety intervention teaching for 12 weeks, while the control class adopted conventional teaching.

3.2 Research Methods

3.2.1 Questionnaire Survey

The adapted English Listening and Speaking Anxiety Scale (designed based on FLCAS, Cronbach's $\alpha=0.89$) was used, containing 33 items divided into three dimensions: communication anxiety (12 items), test anxiety (10 items), and environmental anxiety (11 items). A total of 100 questionnaires were distributed, and 96 valid questionnaires were recovered (validity rate 96%).

3.2.2 Classroom Observation

Two listening and speaking classes of each class were observed weekly, recording students' classroom behaviors (such as hand-raising frequency, speaking duration, error responses), with a focus on overt anxiety behaviors (such as voice trembling and avoiding eye contact).

3.2.3 In-depth Interviews

Ten students each from the high-anxiety group (questionnaire score ≥ 80) and low-anxiety group (questionnaire score ≤ 50) were selected for semi-structured interviews. Questions included: "What do you worry most about in listening and speaking classes?" and "What practices by teachers make you more nervous?"

4 Research Results and Analysis

4.1 Current Status of Language Anxiety

4.1.1 Overall Anxiety Level

The average total anxiety scores of the experimental class and the control class were 78.5 and 82.3, respectively, both falling within the "moderate anxiety" range (61-80 points for moderate). Among them, 15 students (30%) in the control class reached "severe anxiety" (≥ 81 points), indicating that listening and speaking anxiety is prevalent among urban junior high school students.

4.1.2 Dimensional Differences

- Communication Anxiety: 62% of students "fear speaking English in front of classmates," and 58% "worry about being mocked for incorrect pronunciation."
- Test Anxiety: 75% of students "suffer from insomnia before listening and speaking tests," and 68% "experience rapid heartbeat when hearing listening instructions."
- Environmental Anxiety: 43% of students believe that "large class sizes mean few opportunities to speak," and 37% report that "poor audio quality of listening materials makes it difficult to hear clearly."

4.2 Cause Analysis

4.2.1 Personal Factors: Insufficient Self-Efficacy

Interviews revealed that high-anxiety students commonly exist "self-devaluation of language abilities." For example, Student A stated: "I make mistakes every time I speak and feel like I can never learn English well." This negative self-perception aligns with Bandura's self-efficacy theory—low efficacy reinforces the anxiety cycle (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

4.2.2 Teaching Factors: Single Evaluation Method

Classroom observations showed that teachers immediately corrected errors with a frequency of 89%, often using a "public correction" model (e.g., "This sentence has a grammatical error; sit down"). This evaluation method caused students to develop a "fear of mistakes," with 45% of interviewees stating, "I would rather not speak than be criticized."

4.2.3 Environmental Factors: Resource and Class Size Limitations

The school's listening equipment is outdated, with 38% of students reporting "noise when playing listening materials." Meanwhile, large class sizes made it difficult for teachers to focus on individuals, with the experimental class having an average of only 1.2 speaking opportunities per student per class, far below the small-class teaching standard (Young, 1991).

5 Coping Strategies

5.1 Student Level: Metacognitive Strategy Training

5.1.1 Establish an "Anxiety-Strategy" Connection Table

Guide students to record anxiety scenarios (e.g., "during listening tests") and corresponding strategies (e.g., "browse questions first before listening"), and strengthen strategy transfer ability through case sharing sessions. For example, Student B increased listening comprehension accuracy from 52% to 78% through the "keyword shorthand method."

5.1.2 Carry Out "Success Experience" Activities

Set up "error-free speaking time" weekly (e.g., the first 10 minutes allow grammatical errors) to encourage students to share simple daily conversations; hold "progress portfolio" exhibitions to record students' transitions from "daring not to speak" to "asking questions actively," enhancing self-efficacy.

5.2 Teacher Level: Optimize Classroom Ecology

5.2.1 Implement Hierarchical Task Design

Divide listening and speaking tasks into three levels according to students' proficiency:

- Basic Level: Shadow textbook dialogues with text reference allowed (suitable for low-proficiency students);
- Progressive Level: Retell with keyword substitution (suitable for intermediate students);
- Challenge Level: Scenario creation (suitable for high-proficiency students).

After the intervention in the experimental class, classroom participation of low-proficiency students increased by 34%, and anxiety scores decreased by 12 points.

5.2.2 Adopt "Delayed Error Correction + Peer Assessment"

Reduce immediate error correction to below 30%, and use "after-class written feedback" for non-critical errors (e.g., tense errors without affecting comprehension); introduce peer assessment forms, allowing students to evaluate each other with sentences like "You spoke clearly, and it would be better if you paid attention to ××," reducing pressure from teacher authority.

5.3 Environmental Level: Build a Low-Risk Learning Space

5.3.1 Improve the Physical Environment

Recommend schools to update listening equipment by distributing Bluetooth speakers for individual student use; adjust seating layouts to group-style arrangements to reduce anxiety from "being watched by the whole class."

5.3.2 Home-School Collaborative Intervention

Popularize the concept of "normalizing language anxiety" through parent workshops, and guide parents to evaluate children with a "growth mindset" (e.g., "Your pronunciation was clearer this time") to avoid over-focusing on academic rankings. After the intervention, the communication pattern of "only asking about grades" among parents of the experimental class decreased by 51%.

6 Conclusions and Prospects

6.1 Research Conclusions

This study confirms that English listening and speaking anxiety among ninth-grade students in urban-rural areas mainly stems from insufficient personal efficacy, teaching evaluation pressure, and environmental limitations. Intervention measures such as metacognitive strategy training, hierarchical teaching, and creating low-risk classrooms can significantly alleviate anxiety levels and improve learning participation. The results provide "low-cost and easy-to-implement" practical solutions for urban-rural middle schools, such as hierarchical task design in large classes and delayed error correction techniques.

6.2 Research Limitations and Future Directions

The research sample is only from a single school, limiting the generalizability of the conclusions; the intervention period is relatively short (12 weeks), and long-term effects require further tracking. Future research could expand the sample scope, deepen the study of anxiety mechanisms by integrating technologies such as eye-tracking, and explore the application potential of new technologies like AI oral assessment in alleviating anxiety.

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