

Study on Factors Impacting Chinese Higher Vocational College Students' English Learning Anxiety

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Abstract: Language anxiety has become a research topic of great concern in foreign language learning and teaching. This study adopted the qualitative research method of a case study to analyze factors impacting higher vocational college students' English learning anxiety. A questionnaire consisting of essential information and focused semi-constructed interviews was conducted among eight first-year students, who were from three different majors at a higher vocational college in Hunan Province, China. The participants' interviewed materials were coded according to different categories and analyzed. After open coding, ten individual nodes, two peer nodes and three teacher nodes were subsequently constructed. Then they were further classified after axial coding. Through selective coding, they were eventually categorized into five individual factors, one-peer factors and two teacher factors, which can be constructed a model of influencing factors of higher vocational college students' English learning anxiety. Therefore, the results show that there are mainly three factors affecting Chinese higher vocational college students' English learning anxiety, namely, individual factors, peer factors and teacher factors, among which individual factors are the most significant. These findings offer pedagogical implications for taking specific strategies to decrease English learning anxiety to improve students' English performance

Keywords: English Learning Anxiety; Influential Factors; Chinese Higher Vocational College Students; Qualitative Research; Correlation

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Necessity

With the cross-integration of psychology and pedagogy, the influence of emotional factors in language learning prospers, among which anxiety is considered to be an essential factor affecting second language acquisition [1]. Horwitz developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) in 1986. Many researchers use this scale and believe that learners' anxiety is negatively correlated with their academic performance [2-4]. In China, relevant studies started relatively late. Some scholars studied the relationship between learning anxiety and students' English scores, while others explored the types of students' English learning anxiety and the methods to regulate it [5].

The foundation of most students from higher vocational colleges is generally poor. Their learning habits are relatively far from satisfactory with the vast gap between the students with good performance and those with poor performance. Most students are under great anxiety [6]. Therefore, how to correctly understand the factors affecting the anxiety of higher vocational college students in the process of English learning so as to take effective strategies to improve English learning performance has become a common concern for students and teachers.

1.2 Research Purpose and Research Questions

This study explores the factors impacting English learning anxiety in Chinese higher vocational colleges, for the purpose of helping students reasonably regulate their anxiety in the process of English learning and helping teachers carry out effective teaching strategies to stimulate students' learning enthusiasm and improve teaching achievements. It mainly focuses on two questions: What are the types of anxiety impacting Chinese higher vocational college students' English learning? How do they

influence English learning?

2. Theoretical Background

Foreign language anxiety refers to “self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning that stem from the uniqueness of the language learning process” [2]. It includes three dimensions: communication anxiety related to real or anticipated speech behaviors; test anxiety for fear of failing in exams, which is common in many formal learning settings; and social assessment anxiety related to how to view one’s behavior in the social context [2].

The probability of foreign language anxiety aroused in a second language setting, such as in classroom, has been studied [7]. First, in terms of motivation, Gardner and MacIntyre suggested that learners’ anxiety might be mitigated by high level of motivation [4]. Horwitz argued that learners being motivated and having a strong desire to learn foreign language tended to feel anxious because they spent a lot of time, energy, and emotion to achieve high standards [2]. According to Baker and MacIntyre, learners’ subjective perception of foreign language skills played an important role in their anxiety level in using the target language [8]. Secondly, Toth showed that learners with high anxiety were poorer than their peers in language skills [9]. That is, learners who think they have poor foreign language learning ability are prone to high anxiety, while learners with high foreign language learning ability may not feel so anxious. Finally, MacIntyre and Young believed that the personality of foreign language learners was a factor leading to foreign language anxiety [6]. Toth pointed out that both perfectionism and competitiveness had influence on foreign language learning [9].

Price showed four potential factors for foreign language anxiety: the difficulty level of foreign language courses, the individual’s perception of language ability, certain personality variables, and stressful classroom experience [10]. Young confirmed six factors affecting foreign language anxiety from the aspects of learners, teachers and teaching behaviors: personal and interpersonal anxiety, learners’ beliefs about language learning, teachers’ beliefs about language teaching, interaction between teachers and learners, classroom procedures and language tests [11]. Learners might be anxious due to the following factors: fear of communication, such

as difficulty in understanding teachers’ guidance; negative evaluation, such as fear of making mistakes; and general feelings of anxiety, such as fear of failing in exam. In addition, Worde stated that the anxiety of foreign language learners might be caused by teachers’ inappropriate teaching methods and unwillingness to build a good relationship with students. Some researchers pointed out that there were many factors causing foreign language anxiety in the classroom: oral activities, negative classroom experience, native speakers, inappropriate teaching methods, learners’ learning style, difficulty in understanding teacher’s teaching and learning environment [6].

3. Research Methods

3.1 Research Subjects

Eight students from Grade One have been chosen to be the subjects in this study because freshmen are more active and cooperative with teachers and English is a compulsory course for them. In order to ensure the representativeness of the research sample, when selecting the research participants, different majors (nursing major, medical laboratory major, rehabilitation treatment technology major), different gender (two boys, six girls), different English level (good English performance, medium English performance, poor English performance), different student representatives (student cadres, ordinary students), and regular classroom performance (positive, common, negative) were taken into account (*e.g.*, Table 1).

3.2 Research Procedures

As the researchers were in the South Republic of Korea, the 8 participants have been invited to conduct an individual interview in form of Internet, and the interview lasted about 30 minutes for each participant. Before the interview, the researchers sent Research Information Form and Interview Schedule to the participants and obtained their signatures. In the process, the researchers explained the contents involved in the study and informed the participants that the interview data would be collected anonymously and confidentially. It was guaranteed that only the researchers could access the data and participants had the right to withdraw from the research at any time. All data from the interviews have been assured to be destroyed once the study was completed. Each

interview went on on the basis of outline in Interview Schedule. The interviewees were allowed to answer in Chinese considering their oral English level and in order to get accurate

information. The interviews were recorded. After all the interviews were completed. The materials have been collected and translated into English. They were transcribed and encoded.

Table 1. Basic Information of Participants

Name (No.)	Grade/Major	Gender	English level	Cadre position	Regular classroom performance
Interviewee 1	Grade 1/Nursing	female	Good	Yes	positive
Interviewee 2	Grade 1/ medical laboratory	male	Medium	Yes	positive
Interviewee 3	Grade 1/ medical laboratory	female	Medium	Yes	positive
Interviewee 4	Grade 1/ Rehabilitation treatment technology	male	Poor	Yes	common
Interviewee 5	Grade 1/Nursing	female	Good	No	positive
Interviewee 6	Grade 1/ medical laboratory	female	Medium	No	common
Interviewee 7	Grade 1/ medical laboratory	female	Good	No	common
Interviewee 8	Grade 1/Nursing	female	Medium	No	positive

3.3 Research Tools

The research method employed is semi-structured interview. Cohen et al. believed that interviews enabled interviewees finish questions and answer complex and profound questions [8]. The questionnaire in this study was divided into three parts: the first part is background information, the second part is about factors impacting learning anxiety in English language class; and the third part is about how to relieve learning anxiety in English class from the perspective of students.

3.4 Data Analysis

The qualitative research method of a case study has been adopted to carry out this research. Researchers used semi-structured interviews to encode and analyze the materials of the interviews. First, the researchers read the interview materials repeatedly to familiarize with the data. All the interview materials were decoded. After that, key information was highlighted in different colors, then coded and grouped according to different categories (*e.g.*, Table 2.).

Table 2. Coding Process

15 open coding	8 axial coding	3 selective coding
A1 Awful listening ability	B1 English learning basis	C1 Individual-related factors
A2 Inadequate vocabulary		
A3 Terrible grammar		
A4 Poor writing ability		
A5 Weak foundation		
A6 Loss of concentration	B2 Learning attitude	
A7 Lack of preview and review	B3 Learning habit	
A8 Motivation	B4 Learning motivation	
A9 Lack of confidence	B5 Personality	
A10 Introversion or social phobia		
A11 Peers' accomplishment	B6 Peers' positive influence	C2 Peer-related factors
A12 Encouragement from peers		
A13 Teaching content is too simple	B7 Teachers' classroom teaching	C3 Teacher-related factors
A14 Adaptation of teaching methods by teachers		
A15 Emotions towards the teaching teacher	B8 Teachers' personal qualities	

4. Research Results

The result shows that factors impacting English learning anxiety of students in higher vocational colleges include three aspects: individual-related

factors, peer-related factors and teacher-related factors.

4.1 Individual-related Factors

4.1.1 English foundation affects students'

learning anxiety.

Students with good English foundation have less anxiety. In terms of basic abilities of English learning, students generally have various problems such as poor listening ability, insufficient vocabulary, confused in grammar and poor writing ability. Insufficient storage of vocabulary is especially serious.

I think (English) is quite difficult to learn. There are so many words to remember, and I need to memorize the grammar but I can't understand it clearly. (Interviewee 2, first interview, July 18, 2023)

It's mainly due to poor storage of vocabularies, which leads to difficulties in understanding, translating, writing, listening and so on. I can't communicate for fear of poor pronunciation. (Interviewee 6, July 18, 2023, the first interview)

Because I think my English is fairly good, so sometimes I will be asked to answer questions in class. I think I am not easily worried. If I study hard, it will make me confident. (Interviewee 5, first interview, July 18, 2023)

4.1.2 Learning attitudes Affect Students' Learning Anxiety.

Students who attach more importance to English have less anxiety than those who attach less.

The main reason is there are so many courses to learn. Our energy is limited and it's easily to fall behind of others. And then it may result in less interest in English. (Interviewee 2, first interview, July 18, 2023)

Because English is different from other subjects, it needs hard work. I didn't work hard enough. (Interviewee 2, first interview, July 18, 2023)

4.1.3 Study habits affect students' learning anxiety.

Those who don't have good study habits, such as previewing before English class, reviewing after class, self-learning and so on, are more likely to suffer anxiety.

Once in English class, the teacher asked us to remember the verb tenses..... I took a chance that the teacher would not call on me. So I didn't memorize the verb tenses. In class, when the teacher asked one or two classmates to write, I was still doing other things. Suddenly the teacher called my name, and then I was hard to scalp on the platform. I stood on the platform holding the mark pen and my brain was blank. I could only rely on the vague impression in my mind to write, but I could only write part of it. Then I looked at the teacher very embarrassed

and said sorry. The teacher let me back to my seat, but at that time there was a kind of embarrassed feeling. (Interviewee 1, first interview, July 18, 2023)

4.1.4 Learning motivation affects learning anxiety.

Learning motivation has both positive and negative effects on anxiety.

Now there is no compulsory requirement to learn English in college, but there are many English exams, so I usually recite vocabularies, and then learn some English courses and some online English teaching videos. (Interviewee 1, first interview, July 18, 2023)

As a member of the study committee, I have to play a leading role in demonstration, so I pay more attention to this course. I know my future work requires me to learn English well and I have great interest in it. (Interviewee 4, first interview, July 18, 2023)

4.1.5 Students experience anxiety differently depending on their personality.

Students who are introverted and lack of confidence are more likely to experience anxiety.

In this semester, the teacher required each of us to make a speech on the stage. Since I was not good at English, I was not confident about myself, which lead to anxiety. Although the teacher encouraged us not to be afraid, it was hard for me..... Every night, I would silently read the article for many times and told myself not to be afraid. When I first came to the stage, I was still a little nervous, so my voice was a little shaky and low. I did not dare to look up at the students and teacher, and dared not stare at them together. I still failed, but the teacher gave me a second chance. (Interviewee 4, first interview, July 18, 2023)

Because of shyness, I think I am not confident, so sometimes when there are many people I feel very nervous..... But when I walked on the platform, in front of more than 90 students, immediately I was timid up, and my partner in the speech was also hesitated, my eyes have been disorderly floating, paused for a long time to recover. (Interviewee 5, July 18, 2023, the first interview)

4.2 Peer-related Factors

4.2.1 Peers' active participation, positive performance in class, and excellent English scores increase anxiety.

What impressed me most was the teacher's

self-introduction about job hunting after graduation. At that time, the teacher found some job introduction about our major, and when she finished explaining, she invited us to have a practice. At that time, she invited several students who were good at English. When I heard that they could introduce us fluently and show English as their advantage, I felt very anxious. In the class, my English was pretty good, but at that time, I suddenly felt that my English was not good, so I had a long time of anxiety, I didn't know whether I should continue to learn English. (Interviewee 2, first interview, July 18, 2023)

4.2.2 Encouragement and support from peers reduce anxiety.

Before that, I was in the dormitory alone repeatedly reciting a dialogue. But in classroom I couldn't take a hand; my mind went blank, and I forgot it. It made me envied that others could give a good performance on the stage. My friends found me in bad mood. They encouraged me to raise my hand, they knew I had paid efforts, and encouraged me brave to show myself. But even with their encouragement I couldn't summon up the courage to raise my hand, in the seat on pins and needles. Then I raised my hand overcoming the tension, at that time there was a girl cooperating with me, I felt smoothly on the platform. (Interviewee 5, July 18, 2023, the first interview)

4.3 Teacher-related Factors

4.3.1 Teachers' classroom teaching affects students' anxiety.

Classroom teaching includes two aspects: teaching contents and teaching methods. Both unreasonable arrangement of teaching contents and inappropriate teaching methods lead to anxiety for students.

I think the English I learn in college now is the same as that in junior high school, which is simply to learn. I think it wastes my time. Although my English is not very good, but I feel that I can fully catch up with what the teacher said. So I think it is a bit waste of my time. The English teacher also knew our English level was not so good, so I was only interested in some superficial knowledge. (Interviewee 1, first interview, July 18, 2023)

I think English we are learning now is relatively simple. I can keep up with it. Compared with other unfamiliar course contents, I can keep up with it. So I feel very relaxed when I have

English class, and then I can quickly catch up with the teacher. (Interviewee 7, first interview, July 18, 2023)

I also feel that the teacher's teaching method is a little different from the original teacher (middle school stage), so I cannot adapt into it. When I was in high school, I could still speak English, because I was the English class representative of our class, and then I felt different. (Interviewee 3, first interview, July 18, 2023)

4.3.2 Teachers' charisma has an effect on students' learning anxiety. Students' affection for teachers will directly affect students' English learning and anxiety.

The teacher is also very serious about the course, very patient and nice. (Interviewee 6, first interview, July 18, 2023)

When the English teacher speaks some sentences, words and so on, he shows poor pronunciation, which I think is useless for my listening..... Sometimes the teacher will talk gossip in class. The content of extra-curricular talk was much more than the content of the lecture, and I felt it was of no benefit, that is. After class, he was always joking and talking to the students about these things that had nothing to do with the content in class. I don't think it makes any sense. (Interviewee 8, first interview, July 18, 2023)

5. Research Conclusion

5.1 Research Conclusion

This study took eight freshmen from a higher vocational college as the research subjects, and investigated the factors impacting English classroom. The qualitative research method of open interview has been adopted in this study. The main findings are as follows:

First of all, according to this study, students' individual factors impact their English classroom anxiety, which is the core level. After open coding, ten independent free nodes are obtained, which are poor listening, insufficient vocabulary, confused grammar, poor writing ability, different English foundation, insufficient emphasis on English, no preview and review timely, different learning motivation, lack of confidence, introversion or social fear. These nodes are further abstracted into five codes after spindle coding: English learning foundation, learning attitude, learning habit, learning motivation and personality. Among these five codes, it is obvious that English foundation has a

great impact on students' anxiety in English class and is closely related to learners' self-efficacy. A solid English foundation will certainly promote students' future learning to a certain extent, while a weak English foundation will not only produce different degree of anxiety in class, hinder their current English learning, but also make them lose confidence and prone to anxiety. A more interesting phenomenon is that being student cadres has a certain incentive effect on students' learning. They will feel more anxious because they want to set a leading example for their classmates. However, at the same time, they will motivate themselves to work harder and achieve more academical performance. Studies have found that learning motivation is positively correlated with anxiety. Students with stronger learning motivation are more demanding of themselves and tend to be more anxious.

Secondly, peer factors affect students' English learning anxiety. In terms of peer factors, 2 free nodes are formed after open coding, namely, active participation of peers in class, good English performance, and encouragement from classmates. In the axial coding phase, these behaviors were grouped into one code: peer positive oriented behaviors. The collected data clearly show that positive behaviors have a significant impact on students' anxiety in English class, because fierce comparison among peers is more likely to bring heavy psychological stress to students and make them bear great learning pressure. On the other hand, the encouragement and positive guidance of peers can also make students who are not confident enough have more courage to challenge themselves and reduce their anxiety.

Thirdly, this study also makes an in-depth analysis of the teacher-related factors impacting students' English classroom anxiety. After using open coding for the first time, three free nodes were identified; namely, simple teaching content, inappropriate teaching style, and affection for the teacher. In the axial coding phase, these behaviors were divided into two codes: teacher's classroom teaching and teacher's personal charisma. Among them, teacher's classroom teaching is the most prominent factor affecting students' English classroom anxiety because teaching is actually completed through various classroom activities. If teaching is well organized, it is helpful for students to participate in and interact in class; while it is poorly

organized, it will prohibit students' participation, which will cause students' anxiety in class. In addition, the teacher's personal cultivation and personality charm are also important factors affecting students' learning, indirectly affecting students' anxiety.

In general, students' individual factors have a greater impact on students, but peer factors and teacher factors are also very important influencing factors (*e.g.*, Figure 1).

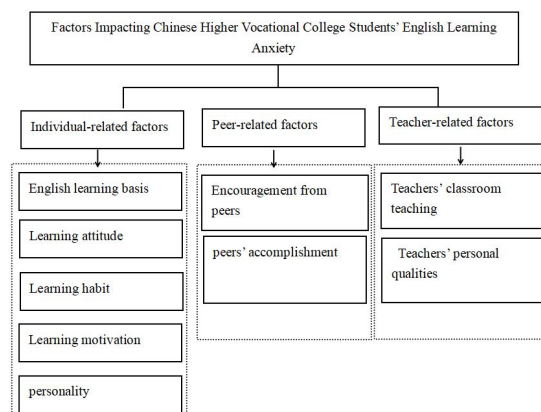


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Factors Impacting Students' English Learning

5.2 Research Implication

According to the research results, some teaching implications are drawn.

Firstly, higher vocational college students' English classroom anxiety is mainly caused by the learners themselves, especially their English foundation, which should be fully taken into account in English teaching. Nowadays, student-centered classroom teaching has become a prevailing trend. It seems to be especially significant in higher vocational colleges. As students' English foundation is poor, teachers have the responsibility to help students consolidate their basic language knowledge and further improve their basics to cultivate their key competencies. Meanwhile, some effective autonomous learning strategies should be introduced to students from time to time, so that they gradually realize that it is the individuals themselves who can really change the status quo.

In addition, there is no doubt that students' learning interest and initiative are largely influenced by teachers, especially the organization of classroom activities mentioned in this study. It is crucial to create a variety of classroom activities for students with different

English levels. Interesting and well-designed classroom activities together with teachers' unique personal charm and high literacy can effectively reduce students' uneasiness in English class. In addition, it is suggested to provide students with more independent learning content to meet their individual learning needs. Finally, since some peer behaviors, such as active participation in class and efficient completion of assignments, can cause students a certain degree of anxiety, teachers should not only guide students aware of their own strengths, but also guide students learn to appreciate their peers. That is very important for college students because they are at a crucial phase in which their worldview, values and outlook on life are formed. Proper competition is helpful for creating a positive learning atmosphere in the classroom. No one is willing to be left behind, which is the prime motivation of development. However, teachers should pay close attention to the malicious competition and the psychological health of students who do not have good English performance.

5.3 Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

Although this study has identified the factors impacting higher vocational college students' English learning anxiety from a new perspective, there are still some limitations.

To start with, the experimental sample of this exploratory study is limited to 8 students in a higher vocational college. And the results of this study cannot be generalized to all students in Chinese higher vocational colleges. In addition, this study does not include students from other grades, so the results do not include the degree of everyone. Therefore, the findings may not be sufficiently persuasive and generalizable.

Furthermore, the study was just over a week long, which may not be enough to collect more data. Actually it should conduct more in-depth interviews and more classroom observations with different teachers.

At last, although the qualitative approach employed in this study can provide novel research perspectives, it is subject to individual interpretation. It is difficult to draw accurate conclusions compared to quantitative studies.

Therefore, given the above limitations, this paper suggests that quantitative methods, etc.,

can be carried out in the future. Longitudinal large-scale studies of multiple data collection methods should be adopted to obtain more enlightening results.

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