

An Investigation into English as a Foreign Language Listening Anxiety among Taiwanese Senior High School Students

Cheng-Chang Tsai

Department of Applied Foreign Languages, Nan Kai University of Technology, Taiwan
(R.O.C.)

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the differences between genders as well as the proficiency differences of students who experienced English listening anxiety at a senior high school in Taiwan. The participants were 102 randomly selected students at a senior high school in Taiwan. An English listening anxiety questionnaire was adopted for data collection. The results have shown that students attributed the cause of anxiety to the fear of listening time constraint, the fear of fast speaking speed, a lack of prior knowledge, a lack of adequate knowledge about vocabulary and topics. The results showed there was no significant difference between male and female students in terms of their English listening anxieties in this study. On the contrary, the results showed there was a significant difference between two different proficiency groups in terms of their English listening anxieties. On the average, lower level listening proficiency group students had higher English listening anxieties than higher level listening proficiency group students.

Keywords: EFL listening anxiety, gender, proficiency levels, senior high school students

1. Introduction

Listening comprehension is one of the four basic skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, writing) that a foreign language learner should acquire, and it is also the most significant one. For EFL listening learners, listening comprehension is an active and interactive channel between the listeners and the listening materials. EFL listeners should construct meaning from listening contents by themselves. It involves listeners' receiving of sound, processing received information in their minds, through personal experience, and by using prior knowledge and so on. Therefore, listening comprehension is a complicated cognitive and metacognitive process and listeners are the processors of the input information (Vandergrift, 1997). Listening comprehension is totally different from the other basic skills (speaking, reading, writing) of language learning. It is unlike reading comprehension in which readers can go back and forward to explore the information that they are not quite sure about and might not understand completely. All the listeners can do is to catch up with the speakers as soon as possible. Because of this main reason, most of senior high school students are afraid of EFL listening comprehension and are under a lot of pressure due to listening time constraints. To our best knowledge, there have not been many studies on exploring EFL listening anxiety in Taiwan, especially among senior high school students. Thus, the present study aims to fill in this gap in the literature as it examined the extent of listening anxiety experienced by senior high school

students; overcoming this issue exploits the potential of improving foreign language listening education for senior high school students. Specifically, the following questions are addressed:

1. What are the top-three most frequent English listening anxieties faced by male and female students?
2. What are the top-three most frequent English listening anxieties faced by higher listening proficiency and lower listening proficiency students?
3. Are there gender differences in their perceptions of English listening anxiety?
4. Are there differences between higher listening proficiency and lower listening proficiency students in their perceptions of English listening anxiety?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Foreign Language Anxiety and Foreign Language Listening Anxiety

According to Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), there are three important affective factors in foreign language learning, which include attitudes, motivation, and anxiety. In other words, what the language learner brings to the learning situation and how the language learner feels can have an influence on what is learned. One of the most significant affective variables in language learning is foreign language anxiety. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) stated foreign language anxiety is “a distinct complex of self-perception, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p.128). Besides this, they also identified three kinds of related anxieties as components of foreign language anxiety: communication apprehension (the fear of communicating with other people), test anxiety (fear of exams and other assignments adopted to evaluate the students’ performance), and fear of negative evaluation (the worry about how others view the learner). Foreign language anxiety is a situation-specific form of anxiety, and it is also related to the language-learning context (Horwitz, 2001)

There is no denying that foreign language anxiety has a great impact on language learners. Generally speaking, foreign language anxiety is an emotionally and physically uncomfortable learning experience for some learners. For example, foreign language anxiety has been found to have negative effects on academic achievement (e.g., lower grades) (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991), and the social context (e. g., communicating less) (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994).

According to Bacon (1992), since listening is a complicated skill, students have the fear of understanding the message and interpreting it correctly. Why many language learners complain about the difficulties and challenges of listening in foreign language might also depend on feelings of inadequacies or lack of confidence (Dunkel, 1991). In doing so, foreign language anxiety may intervene in successful foreign language learning experience in successful foreign language meaning experience and may cause tension and fear while listening to the foreign language. In addition to this, the use of unfamiliar and difficult topics or unfamiliar and difficult vocabulary in the listening text was another cause for foreign language listening anxiety (Vogely, 1998). Vogely (1998) showed many potential sources of listening comprehension anxiety based on students’ reports: input that is not clear or is given too fast, and students’ belief that they have to make sense of every single word. Also, the nature of the listening comprehension practice and insufficiency of listening time were other reported causes for listening anxiety. As mentioned above, the causes of foreign language listening anxiety might come from many ways including of inner and outer reactions to listening task.

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

A total of 102 participants from the English listening classes of a highly competitive senior high school in Taiwan participated in this study. Their age range was 17-18 years of age.

Out of 102, there were 43 male and 59 were female participants. According to the English listening placement exams, all participants were divided into two groups: higher listening proficiency level ($n=48$) and lower listening proficiency level ($n=54$).

3.2 Data Collection

Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Survey (FLIAS) (Kimura, 2008) measured the degree to which a participant felt anxious when listening in EFL. It contained 32 items that were answered on a five-point Likert Scale, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' (See Appendix A). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated and it was found to be .83. This finding indicates that this instrument has high reliability when used for the purpose of the study. Also, the questionnaire was translated into Chinese, and it was easier to be fully understood by the participants.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

All participants completed the questionnaire during class time, and the survey questionnaires took around 20 minutes to complete. The students were informed that the survey would have no effect on their grade. The data were analyzed to obtain descriptive and inferential statistics, the results of which are reported below.

4. Results

Descriptive statistics showed that the participants demonstrated a wide range of average anxiety levels, ranging from 1.52 to 4.63. The overall mean was 3.07 ($SD=.23$), which indicated an overall moderate rating of anxiety levels. The top three anxiety statements in the male group, which all had mean value exceeding 4: "I get nervous if listening test passages are read just once ($M=4.42$, $SD=0.11$)"; "I worry that I might not be able to understand when people talk too fast ($M=4.27$, $SD=1.20$)"; "I fear I might have an inadequate knowledge about the topic ($M=4.24$, $SD=0.74$)." The top three anxiety statements in the female group, which all had mean value also exceeding 4: "I get stuck with one or two unfamiliar words" ($M=4.40$, $SD=1.02$); "I get nervous if listening test passage are read just once" ($M=4.30$, $SD=0.79$); "I am nervous when I am not familiar with the topic ($M=4.12$, $SD=1.26$)." As mentioned above, these items seemed to reflect a generally negative and passive attitude towards listening time constraint, speech speed, and prior knowledge.

The top three anxiety statements in the higher level listening proficiency group, which all had mean value exceeding 3: "I get worried when I have little time to think about what I have heard" ($M=3.85$, $SD=0.91$); "I get annoyed when I come across new words" ($M=3.43$, $SD=1.19$); "I get nervous if listening test passages are read just once ($M=3.35$, $SD=0.72$)." The top three anxiety statements in the lower level listening proficiency group, which all had mean value exceeding 4: "It often happens that I do not understand what English speakers say ($M=4.42$, $SD=1.06$)"; "I get worried when I have little time to think about what I have heard ($M=4.23$, $SD=1.11$)"; "Listening to new information makes me uneasy ($M=4.11$, $SD=.36$)." As mentioned above, these items seemed to reflect a generally negative and passive attitude to listening time constraint, unfamiliar vocabulary, listening times, and unfamiliar topics.

An independent t-test was used to explore whether there were gender differences in perceptions of English listening anxiety, and the results showed there was no significant difference between male and female students in terms of their English listening anxieties due to $p>.05$. Also, an independent t-test was used to explore whether there were differences between the higher level listening proficiency group and the lower level listening proficiency group in perceptions of English listening anxiety and the results showed there was a significant difference between these two different proficiency groups in terms of their English listening anxieties due to $t(100)=4.383$, $p=.011$ with alpha set as .05. On the average, lower level listening proficiency group students ($M=4.41$, $SD=1.32$) had higher English listening anxieties

than higher level listening proficiency group students ($M=3.23$, $SD=1.05$) based on statistical analysis.

5. Conclusions and Discussions

Research findings in this study indicated that English listening anxieties were most often associated with the output and processing (in the stage of mental planning) stages of the listening process and the students attributed the cause of anxiety to the fear of listening time constraint, the fear of fast speaking speed, a lack of prior knowledge, a lack of adequate knowledge about vocabulary and topics. Most of the findings in this study were consistent with the previous research findings, including factors of topic familiarity (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992), vocabulary familiarity (Vogely, 1998), listening time constraint as well as speed of speaking (Kim, 2000). As mentioned above, these types of anxiety contribute to making formal foreign language listening a particularly unpleasant and pressured experience for many English language listeners. So recognizing that English language listening anxiety exists and that it can have negative effects on the listening process, what can we do as instructors to reduce anxiety and improve learning in the classroom? Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) state: “in general, educators have two options when dealing with anxious students: (1) they can help them learn to cope with the existing anxiety provoking situation; or (2) they can make the learning context less stressful” (p.131). In other words, we can help students reduce their anxiety levels based on the students’ characteristics that are causing the learning anxiety, and what we do as instructors and what goes on inside the classroom. To deal with these sources of anxiety, level-based listening instruction, students’ listening strategies training, cultural and prior knowledge in language instruction, intensive and extensive listening instruction, and alternative listening evaluation have to be improved. In terms of English listening instruction, there is a need to gauge students’ listening comprehensive ability in order to cultivate their listening strategies based on individual differences. In doing so, listening classes are related to the learners on a personal level and raise the learner’s feeling of confidence, thus provoking less anxiety and creating a less-pressure filled more pleasant environment and atmosphere. Also, listening comprehension tends to be an interactive, interpretive process in which listeners use prior knowledge (top-down strategies) and linguistic knowledge (bottom-up strategies) in making sense of messages. Listeners adopt metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective strategies to facilitate comprehension and to make their learning more effective and efficient. Metacognitive strategies are important because they regulate and direct the language learning process. Research shows that skilled listeners use more metacognitive strategies than their less-skilled counterparts (Kimura, 2008). The use of cognitive strategies helps students to manipulate learning materials and apply specific techniques to a listening task. Socio-affective strategies describes the techniques listeners use to collaborate with others, to verify understanding or to lower listening anxiety.

The results showed there was no significant difference between male and female students in terms of their English listening anxieties in this study. On a contrary, the results showed there was a significant difference between the two different proficiency groups in terms of their English listening anxieties. On the average, the lower level listening proficiency group students had higher English listening anxieties than the higher level listening proficiency group students. Due to this result, there is a need to gauge students’ EFL listening comprehension proficiency levels in order to cultivate their listening skills and strategies based on their individual differences.

In conclusion, there are various ways teachers can help reduce listening anxiety in the classroom in practice. First, teachers should pass on cultural and prior knowledge in language teaching, because the aspect of cultural knowledge transmission is an equal part of language improvement and development of work in listening development has the potential for

achieving a great impact on the formulation of students' thinking habits and the application of foreign language expressions (Dunkel, 1991). Second, listening instruction should combine intensive listening with extensive instruction. In general, intensive listening requires students to understand the meaning of each discourse and, finally, to make sense of every sentence and word. Also, it requires students to listen to a text several times, or divide the text into several paragraphs and sentences to understand each one. There is no denying that the teaching goal is for students to understand every sentence in detail. Alternately, extensive listening does not require students to understand every sentence, and every word, instead, students are encouraged to make a guess at the general ideas of the passage. The key point of listening is to understand the content. Third, with respect to listening alternative assessment, teachers need to assign students to outside-class listening tasks, For instance, when students watch movies, they must write the general meanings of the film or write a comment on a sound recording. Besides this, listening to many various sources such as TV programs, radio, the Internet should be taken them into consideration by teachers in terms of alternative listening evaluation. Exposure to demands of listening might include aspects of everyday life, science, fashion, technology, and so on. Teachers must create a language-learning environment that invokes students' interests and raises students' motivation for listening to English.

In terms of the research limitation, it should be noted that the results of this study are based on questionnaire data and not direct observation of students' behavior in the classroom. Thus, future research might use qualitative research methods to explore students' listening anxieties and gain deeper meanings of listeners' anxieties. Given the importance of listening anxiety on students' listening performances, future research might explore "What kinds of activities have proven to reduce anxiety and make EFL listening a more valuable experience for the learners? "Which activities can work best in which situations and for which groups of listeners?, and so forth. All in all, findings for this study have yielded a need for taking the affective side of EFL listening into consideration and helping our senior high school learners reduce listening anxiety and employ appropriate listening strategies. As a result of such an understanding and guidance, our students may overcome their anxieties and adapt various appropriate listening strategies when they are needed.

6. References

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Appendix A

1. 當聽英文時，我會困在一兩個不熟悉的字。
2. 當聽英文時，如果聽力測驗只播放一次，我會很緊張。
3. 當聽英文時，聽到不同口音的英文，我會聽不懂。
4. 當聽英文時，當人們說話速度太快時，我擔心聽不懂。
5. 當聽英文時，當我對主題不熟時，我會很擔心。
6. 當聽英文時，我能很輕易猜出我沒有聽清處的部分。
7. 當聽英文時，當我分心時，我會擔心我錯過了重要資訊。
8. 當聽英文時，當我看不到對方的嘴唇或臉部表情時，我會很擔心。
9. 當聽英文時，在做聽力測驗時，我遇到不懂的字我會緊張、困惑。
10. 當聽英文時，分辨字很困難。
11. 當聽英文時，當聽演講時沒看聽力內容，令我感到不自在。
12. 當聽英文時，對一個我不熟悉的人，我很難專注去聽他在講什麼。
13. 當聽英文時，我對我的聽力技巧很有信心。
14. 當聽英文時，當我記不住我所聽到的，我會很困惑。
15. 當聽英文時，我很害怕我對主題沒有充分的常識。
16. 當聽英文時，聽重要資訊時，我感到思緒混亂困惑。
17. 當聽英文時，當我幾乎沒有時間思考聽到的，我會很擔心。
18. 當聽英文時，我通常在不了解我所聽到的情形下，逐字翻譯每個字。
19. 當聽英文時，我寧可不要聽到人們說英文。
20. 當聽英文時，當不是以我習慣的速度聽英文，我會很擔心。
21. 當聽英文時，我覺得其他人都懂聽力內容。
22. 當聽英文時，當我不確定聽力內容，我感到生氣。
23. 當聽英文時，當人們降低音量說英文時，我會很擔心。
24. 當聽英文時，我不害怕聽英文演講。
25. 當聽英文時，當透過電話或想像透過電話聽英文，我會很緊張。
26. 當聽英文時，當我想像我聽演講時，我覺得很緊張。
27. 當聽英文時，當週遭很吵時，我聽英文有困難。
28. 當聽英文時，聽新的資訊令我很不自在。
29. 當聽英文時，當有新字時，我覺得很厭煩。
30. 當聽英文時，我對英文重音與語調很熟悉。
31. 當聽英文時，我常聽不懂外國人說的英文。
32. 當聽英文時，當我想到我可能遺漏關鍵字，會令我感到害怕。