

Research on Students' Anxiety in Online English Classes during the Epidemic

—Bohai University as an example

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ABSTRACT

In order to understand the anxiety of students in the online English classroom environment during the epidemic, this paper adopts the research methods of questionnaire survey and interview, and analyzes the data obtained quantitatively and qualitatively. The questionnaire survey found that students are generally at a moderate level of anxiety. When they use English to speak and answer questions, the anxiety value is the highest. The interview found that online English classes can relieve students' anxiety to some extent, but they will still be nervous when speaking or answering questions. They are also objectively aware of some disadvantages of online English classes, such as poor interaction, not suitable for listening and speaking classes, lack of professional equipment, and difficulty concentrating. Therefore, some suggestions for English teaching were put forward finally.

Key words: New Corona virus; Online English Classroom; Anxiety

1. INTRODUCTION

2020 is a "special" year for China and the world. Due to the extremely contagious nature of the new corona virus, different numbers and degrees of infected people have appeared in almost all countries. As a result, the Chinese government immediately adopted a series of measures during the Spring Festival to prohibit people from gathering in densely populated places, such as shopping malls, movie theaters, and squares. To prevent the movement of people, countless domestic tourist attractions were closed and trains were suspended. This has had a huge negative impact on China.

Not only China's economy, but the education sector has also been affected. Due to the safety of students, various schools have repeatedly postponed the start of school. In order not to affect the teaching progress, the school recently launched online teaching. Unlike traditional face-to-face teaching, online teaching can be carried out anytime and anywhere without being restricted by time and space. Students do not have to go back to school, which reduces the risk of infection and can temporarily solve the problem of delayed start. However, online teaching still cannot replace the traditional face-to-face teaching, and the interaction between students and teachers becomes worse across the screen. In the live broadcast state, unlike face-to-face teaching, the actual learning status of students is difficult for teachers to grasp. Students staying at home for a long time will inevitably produce an anxious mental state, and teachers will not be aware of the emotional state of students in online courses.

With the development of foreign language teaching theory and practice, foreign language classrooms are more "student-centered", and the learner's emotional factors have also become factors that cannot be ignored in teaching. Among them, foreign language learning anxiety plays a crucial role in the influence of foreign language learning. This emotional state affects the learner's attitude, efficiency and final level of learning English. Especially in this special period, the anxiety of foreign language learners deserves our attention and research.

1.1. Related Work

American psychologist Horwitz [i] first proposed the concept of "foreign language anxiety". Foreign language learning anxiety is related to the foreign language learning in the classroom, and the obvious self-perception, belief and emotional complex produced in the foreign language learning process. Horwitz et al. believed that foreign language learning anxiety should include three aspects: communication apprehension (CA), test anxiety (TA) and fear of negative evaluation (FNE). Scovel classifies foreign language learning anxiety into two types: facilitating anxiety and debilitating anxiety according to the influence of anxiety on foreign language learning [ii]. The former is a moderate tension, which has a stimulating effect on learning, while the latter is excessive tension, which will hinder the learning process. Zhou also pointed out that the relationship between anxiety and learning efficiency is an inverted U-shaped

curve, that is, too low or too high anxiety level is not conducive to learning [iii]. Too low anxiety level prevents learners from excluding the interference of irrelevant factors in the situation, and the detection of related cues is slow and inaccurate. This makes the learners lack of tension, depression, loose behavior, and indifferent attitude towards learning, so that they cannot arouse the enthusiasm for learning. On the contrary, excessive anxiety narrows the learner's attention, reduces the transfer of attention, and fails to detect important clues in the situation. It is easy to make the learners nervous, flustered, misbehaving, and confused, greatly restricting their cognitive ability.

In recent years, most research on foreign language learning anxiety has focused on normal classroom environments, such as Wang Caikang [iv]. However, the outbreak of new coronary pneumonia this year has affected normal classroom teaching, and the psychology of most students will be more or less changed. The causes of anxiety are closely related to the environment (Gardner et al.) [v]. Since the online foreign language classroom environment is very different from the traditional classroom environment, this is bound to have an impact on the learner's foreign language learning anxiety. Therefore, in this special environment, this article explores the foreign language learning anxiety of learners, discusses the changes in foreign language learning anxiety of learners, tries to find some problems in online teaching, and puts forward some suggestions for improvement. It is hoped that online foreign language teaching can make more effective use of the advantages of modern educational technology to improve the quality of foreign language teaching.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1. Research object

Participants in this survey were first-year students of Bohai University, and a total of 56 volunteers participated in the survey. As for gender, there are 19 males and 37 females. The age range is between 22 and 29, most of them are between 23 and 25, with an average age of 24.8. 46.43% of the participants are English majors (N=26), and 53.57% of the participants are non-English majors (N=30). The number of participants from rural areas was 44, accounting for 78.57% of the total participants; the number of participants from urban areas was 12, accounting for 21.43% of the total participants.

2.2. Research instruments

This study used the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale as a questionnaire. The FLCAS is based on the situation-specific construct of foreign language anxiety proposed by Horwitz, et al. The FLCAS is a 33-item self-report measure that consists of items scored on a 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The 33 items assess a learner's level of foreign language anxiety, as evidenced

by subjective feelings, perceptions, negative attitudes towards foreign language classes, and avoidance behaviors. In terms of specific language skills, the FLCAS mainly addresses anxiety associated with speaking in foreign language learning [vi]. Therefore, this study uses FLCAS as a blueprint, and makes corresponding changes to certain items in conjunction with the research problem context. For instance, originally the second question "I don't worry about making mistakes in foreign language classes", added a prerequisite "across the screen". In the fourth question, "I don't understand what the teacher said in the foreign language in the foreign language class, I will feel scared." The problem situation of "bad network signal" is added. The scale was reported to have high internal reliability, achieving an alpha coefficient of .93 with all items producing significant corrected item-total correlations and a test-retest reliability over eight weeks yielded a $r = .83$ ($p < .001$) [vii]. Therefore, the reliability of the data derived from the questionnaire can be guaranteed. In addition, in order to gain a deeper understanding of learners' feelings and attitudes towards online English courses, as well as some of their opinions and demands on online English courses, a semi-open interview outline was used to interview some students participating in the questionnaire. Based on this, some strategies for alleviating students' anxiety in online English classrooms were proposed.

2.3. Research process

First of all, the questionnaire was distributed to the 2019 graduate student social group by SO JUMP (a professional online questionnaire platform). With the principle of voluntary participation, students are encouraged to actively participate in the survey. Each participant takes approximately 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire during the student's free time. In order to guarantee the quantity and quality of participants, the questionnaire is publicized in the online group until the data is sufficient.

After the questionnaire survey, a few of the questionnaire participants were randomly selected for semi-open interviews. Due to the impact of the epidemic, in order to avoid direct contact, interviews can be conducted using social software. In addition, the interview data is directly saved in the social software and is not easy to be lost, which provides great convenience for the subsequent data extraction and analysis.

Finally, the data and texts obtained from the questionnaires and interviews are sorted out, screened, and then analyzed. Then summarize the texts obtained in the interview, and finally form the results of this study. After that, the results are discussed and suggestions for online English teaching are put forward.

3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

3.1. Results of questionnaires

Horwitz et al. divided foreign language classroom anxiety into three parts: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Based on these three aspects, this study will continue to refine the items of the Foreign

Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. FLCAS is finally divided into five parts: negative attitude of English learning, speech anxiety (fear of speaking English), test anxiety, negative evaluation anxiety and fear of taking English classes.

3.1.1. Negative attitude of English learning

Table 1 Negative attitude of English learning

Item	Strongly Disagree (N/P)	Disagree (N/P)	Neither agree nor disagree (N/P)	Agree (N/P)	Strongly Agree (N/P)	Mean Score
5	3/5.36%	10/17.86%	21/37.5%	17/30.36%	5/8.93%	2.8
6	4/7.14%	8/14.29%	20/35.71%	21/37.5%	3/5.36%	3.2*
11	4/7.14%	15/26.79%	21/37.5%	14/25%	2/3.57%	3.09
29	3/5.36%	19/33.93%	16/28.57%	15/26.79%	3/5.36%	2.93
30	2/3.57%	15/26.79%	15/26.79%	18/32.14%	6/10.71%	3.2*
						3.044

N= Number of participants
P= Percentage

Items 5, 6, 11, 29, 30 in FLCAS can measure learners' negative attitudes towards English learning. It can be seen from Table 1 that the average scores of students on items 6, 11, and 30 are slightly higher than the general value, indicating that students have a negative attitude in this period of study, but the negative attitude is not particularly obvious. The average value of item 6 "Thinking about something unrelated to the classroom in a foreign language class" is 3.2. 37.5% of the learners agree, that means, the anxiety value is 4. 5.36% of the learners strongly agree, that is, the anxiety value is 5. About 43 percent of the learners' anxiety value exceeds the general value, which may be due to the environment of the online classroom, which prevents teachers from effectively monitoring the teaching environment, making some students easily distracted. The

average value of item 30 "I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn English" is also 3.2. This shows that excessive grammatical rules in foreign language learning are also one of the important reasons for students to have negative attitudes. Moreover, online English classes are not very helpful for the teaching of English grammar, because grammar teaching requires an appropriate amount of language and written exercises. Online teaching has some difficulties in performing these teaching tasks, and the quality of the exercises and the teaching effect to be achieved will be poor. Therefore, students will have a slightly negative attitude towards English learning.

3.1.2. Speech anxiety

Table 2 Speech anxiety

Item	Strongly Disagree (N/P)	Disagree (N/P)	Neither agree nor disagree (N/P)	Agree (N/P)	Strongly Agree (N/P)	Mean Score
1	2/3.57%	8/14.29%	32/57.14%	10/17.86%	4/7.14%	3.11
4	2/3.57%	15/26.79%	17/30.36%	18/32.14%	4/7.14%	3.13
9	2/3.57%	6/10.71%	15/26.79%	29/51.79%	4/7.14%	3.48*
13	3/5.36%	15/26.79%	17/30.36%	17/30.36%	4/7.14%	3.07
14	5/8.93%	15/26.79%	24/42.86%	12/21.43%	0	3.23*
18	3/5.36%	17/30.36%	26/46.43%	10/17.86%	0	3.23*
24	2/3.57%	13/23.21%	17/30.36%	22/39.29%	2/3.57%	3.16
27	2/3.57%	17/30.36%	14/25%	18/32.14%	5/8.93%	3.13
32	3/5.36%	21/37.5%	24/42.86%	8/14.29%	0	3.34*
						≈3.21

The items for measuring language anxiety include items 1, 4, 9, 13, 14, 24, 27, 32. As can be seen from Table 2, the average anxiety value of all items is higher than the average anxiety value of negative attitudes in English learning, indicating that students are more afraid to speak and talk in English. It may be that the education that students receive from an early age is acceptance teaching. Teachers' talk occupies the main time in the classroom, and students are also used to this teaching mode, sitting quietly in the classroom to listen to the teacher. Students rarely have the opportunity to express their own views and ideas. In addition, in the online classroom, teachers face a class with a large number of students, and the interaction effect will be affected by space. Only one classmate can speak at a time, and you cannot form a group discussion. When a student speaks alone, his heart will inevitably change, resulting in tension, rapid heartbeat and so on. Item 4 "Panic when making unprepared speeches in foreign language classes", about 52% of students expressed "agree", that is, anxiety value of 4; about 8% of students expressed "strongly agree", that is, anxiety is 5. This phenomenon shows that students feel anxious about expressing their opinions in English impromptu. Item 14 "I do not feel nervous about speaking

English with foreigners", about 9 percent of students said they were "strongly disagree" with an anxiety value of 5; about 27 percent of students said "disagree" with an anxiety value of 4. It is worth noting that there is no student choice for "strongly agree". In other words, students are more or less nervous when speaking English with foreigners. Item 18 "I speak confidently in foreign language classes", about 6% of students said "strongly disagree", that is, anxiety value of 5; about 31% of students said "disagree", that is, anxiety value 4. No student chose to "strongly agree", which is the same as item 14. This means that students are not full of confidence in speaking in foreign language classes. Item 32 "I feel relaxed with foreigners" is similar to the result of item 14. The average anxiety of this item is higher than normal. It can be analyzed from these items that the anxiety of the students is mainly manifested in: unprepared speeches in the foreign language class and unconfident speeches; feeling nervous when meeting foreigners and talking with them in English.

3.1.3. Test anxiety

Table 3 Test anxiety

Item	Strongly Disagree (N/P)	Disagree (N/P)	Neither agree nor disagree (N/P)	Agree (N/P)	Strongly Agree (N/P)	Mean Score
3	1/1.79%	20/35.71%	18/32.14%	13/23.21%	4/7.14%	2.98
8	3/5.36%	14/25%	18/32.14%	17/30.36%	4/7.14%	2.91
10	3/5.36%	14/25%	15/26.79%	21/37.5%	3/5.36%	3.13*
12	3/5.36%	14/25%	21/37.5%	15/26.79%	3/5.36%	3.02
16	1/1.79%	19/33.93%	19/33.93%	15/26.79%	2/3.57%	2.96
20	1/1.79%	7/12.5%	16/28.57%	28/50%	4/7.14%	3.48*
21	3/5.36%	25/44.64%	16/28.57%	10/17.86%	2/3.57%	2.7
						≈3.03

In general, students' anxiety for English testing is slightly lower than negative attitudes and language anxiety, with an average value of about 3.03. Item 10 "I'm worried that the foreign language class can't pass", about 38% of students said "agree", that is, anxiety value of 4, about 6% of students said "strongly agree", that is, anxiety value of 5. Explain that some students are still anxious about the English test and are worried that they will not pass. This may be due to the influence of the previous "test-oriented education", parents and teachers pay too much attention to students' academic performance, resulting in students' excessive learning pressure and exam anxiety. Item 20, "I will feel my heart beating when I am called to answer questions", 50% of the students said "agree", that is, anxiety value of 4; about 8%

of students said that "agree", that is, anxiety 5. The average value of this item reached 3.48. This shows that students are more nervous about the teacher's temporary test (question & answer) in the classroom. Item 21 "The more you prepare for the foreign language exam, the more you feel unsure". About 6 percent of the students "strongly disagree", that is, the anxiety value is 1, and about 45 percent of the students "disagree", that is, the anxiety value is 2. We can deduce that preparation before the exam can relieve students' anxiety.

3.1.4. Negative evaluation anxiety

Table 4 Negative evaluation anxiety

Item	Strongly Disagree (N/P)	Disagree (N/P)	Neither agree nor disagree (N/P)	Agree (N/P)	Strongly Agree (N/P)	Mean Score
2	1/1.79%	12/21.43%	17/30.36%	20/35.71%	6/10.71%	2.68
7	1/1.79%	8/14.29%	24/42.86%	19/33.93%	4/7.14%	3.3*

15	2/3.57%	11/19.64%	20/35.71%	21/37.5%	2/3.57%	3.18*
19	2/3.57%	24/42.86%	18/32.14%	11/19.64%	1/1.79%	2.73
23	1/1.79%	11/19.64%	24/42.86%	17/30.36%	3/5.36%	3.18*
31	2/3.57%	18/32.14%	17/30.36%	17/30.36%	2/3.57%	2.98
33	1/1.79%	4/7.14%	17/30.36%	31/55.36%	3/5.36%	3.55*
						≈3.09

According to Table 4, students' anxiety for negative evaluations is also at a medium level, with an average of 3.09 for all included items. Item 7 "I always feel that my classmates' language ability is better than myself". There are 47 students whose anxiety value is ≥ 3 , accounting for about 84% of the total number. Item 23 "I think other students speak English better than me" is very similar to the result of item 7, 44 students have anxiety value ≥ 3 , accounting for about 79 of the total number. These results indicate that most students lack confidence in their language skills and always think that other students are better than themselves. This is also the students' negative evaluation of themselves. It may be due to the pressure caused by their peers. The students will compare from time to time, whether it is ranking of

achievements, or an inner secret. Item 15: "When students do not understand the teacher's correction, they will feel uncomfortable". About 77% of students (N = 43) have an anxiety value ≥ 3 . Item 33 "I was nervous when the teacher asked unprepared questions". About 91% of the students (N = 51) had an anxiety value ≥ 3 . These two items show that students are more afraid of negative evaluations from teachers, especially in the absence of preparation, most students will be very nervous, afraid of being criticized for wrong answers.

3.1.5. Fear of taking English classes

Table 5 Fear of taking English classes

Item	Strongly Disagree (N/P)	Disagree (N/P)	Neither agree nor disagree (N/P)	Agree (N/P)	Strongly Agree (N/P)	Mean Score
17	5/8.93%	22/39.29%	16/28.57%	12/21.43%	1/1.79%	2.68
22	1/1.79%	14/25%	20/35.71%	18/32.14%	3/5.36%	2.86
25	2/3.57%	16/28.57%	17/30.36%	19/33.93%	2/3.57%	3.05*
26	2/3.57%	19/33.93%	16/28.57%	14/25%	5/8.93%	3.02
28	4/7.14%	10/17.86%	25/44.64%	16/28.57%	1/1.79%	3
						≈2.92

According to Table 5, students have the lowest anxiety value for taking English classes, and the average score of the items is about 2.92. This shows that the main reason for students' anxiety is not to take English classes. Among these items, items with higher anxiety values are items 25, 26, 28. Among them, item 28 "The progress of foreign language classes is fast, I am worried that I can't keep up", about 68% of students (N = 38) have an anxiety value ≥ 3 . It shows that the main concern of the students is that they cannot keep up with the progress of the class. It may be because of the delayed start of the school. In order not to affect the teaching progress, the teachers speed up the class. Moreover, online teaching resources are abundant, which provides convenience for teaching and shortens the preparation time for teaching to a certain extent.

3.2. Results of interviews

Most students think that the online English teaching environment is less anxious than the face-to-face teaching environment. That is to say, they think they are more nervous and anxious in face-to-face teaching. As stated by student A, "The teacher's eyes and tone are too terrifying. At

school, there are only three people in our class. The teacher can glance at what the three of us are doing. It is different at home. There is only sound in class, and occasionally we can press the mute button allows you to secretly relax. Intuitive language including some body language is very intimidating. Through the phone, only the sound has no body and eye contact, the power of the language is much smaller, so it is not so scared." Student B also expressed her view from another perspective, "In online teaching, there will be a delay time in the teacher's question, or in the interactive session. This delay time will allow you more time to think. And if you do not have a face-to-face class, you do not have the tension and pressure ... online teaching, without the classmates around you, for example, the influence of your peers, so the pressure will be less." This indicates that the online classroom environment has no eye contact, no peers, and a delay time, so it can alleviate the students' anxiety to some extent.

However, students also experience anxiety in the online English classroom in some cases. Most students say they will be suddenly nervous when asked by the teacher. For example, student B pointed out that "The reason for the online classroom tension may be that there was a sudden

network failure, and then, without hearing the question, suddenly I was asked the question.” Student A said “When I cannot answer questions that I do not understand.” Student C said, “However, when the online teacher asks questions, I will also be nervous ... because I am worried that I won’t be able to answer them.” Student D expressed her inner thought more vividly, “When the teacher asks questions, everyone is listening as soon as you open the microphone. That ‘static voice’, you will speak alone.” This also validates the results of the questionnaire survey again.

Although online classrooms can alleviate students’ anxiety to some extent, there are also some disadvantages. For instance, because the teacher cannot see the student and lacks the teacher’s supervision, the probability of the student distracting increases. The interaction is not good.

As Student A said, “Online classes are not suitable for listening and speaking classes, only for reading classes.” Student B said: “Online English courses are still not as effective as face-to-face teaching, mainly because the interaction will be slightly worse.” “I think the online courses are good for students with strong self-discipline and save time. But if the self-discipline is not strong, the effect is not good. In fact, I feel that online and offline courses are similar to me.” From the perspective of self-discipline, Students C expressed her views on online teaching. As an interpreter major, D student said, “The equipment required by the major, and there is no such condition online, such as simultaneous interpretation equipment.”

In general, most students believe that the online classroom environment can ease their anxiety. They can be in a relaxed state of listening to lectures, instead of tightening every nerve like face-to-face classes. However, they also objectively recognized the limitations of the online English teaching environment, and still hoped to return to school.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH TEACHING

Foreign language learning anxiety is the concentrated manifestation of many unpleasant emotions and psychological discomforts caused by many self-threatening factors in foreign language learning. In order to make foreign language learning successful, the author proposes the following measures to overcome the anxiety problem in foreign language teaching.

4.1. Enhance students’ self-confidence

Most students are afraid to speak in English and are afraid of the teacher asking questions, mainly because of the lack of self-confidence of the students, fear of being wrongly criticized by the teacher or mocked by the classmates. The most important thing for teachers is to encourage students and enhance their self-confidence. When a student encounters a question that will not be answered, the teacher should guide as much as possible to relieve the student’s nervousness, and give the student appropriate praise,

especially the student with a more introverted personality. They are more concerned about others’ evaluation of themselves, and therefore lack confidence. After receiving positive feedback from the teacher, students will gradually become more confident and will not be as anxious as they did in the classroom.

4.2. Teaching according to aptitude

As the German philosopher Leibniz said, “There are no two identical leaves in the world”, each student is unique. They may be at the same age and in the same class, but their intelligence level, understanding ability, learning style, and personality are not all the same. Each student has its own uniqueness. As teachers, we should consider the differences of students. Teachers should set corresponding learning tasks according to the students’ level, which is generally slightly higher than the students’ actual level. For example, in the face of students with poor English grades, teachers can ask simple questions; for students with good English grades, teachers can ask challenging questions. In this way, students can have a successful experience in these tasks. This plays a vital role in improving students’ internal motivation in English learning.

4.3. No or less error correction

Interlanguage errors like: Dose John can sing? This is a good indication of creative application of a system within the learner’s mind. Try to recognize this form of creativity as a positive sign of language development and of the internalization of coherent system [viii]. Therefore, teachers can make less or no corrections and increase students’ courage to speak English. Even if teachers want to correct errors (errors that affect communication and understanding), they have to wait until the students have finished speaking and point out the errors gently. The student’s speech must not be interrupted midway, making the student more anxious about the subsequent speech and fearing that the teacher will correct the error again. Therefore, teachers should have a certain tolerance for some errors of students, and there is no need to require students to make every sentence, every word must be accurate, causing students to “throw away the apple because of the core”.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of questionnaire and interview, we can conclude that the main reason for students’ anxiety is the fear of speaking English and the fear of asking questions in the classroom, especially when they are not prepared, students will have a faster heartbeat. This point reflects the difficulty of most students learning English. The lack of necessary communication strategies and the

fear of using English for communication are the main reasons for their anxiety. Speech anxiety may be the biggest psychological barrier Chinese college students encounter when learning English. The conclusion is basically the same as Wang's research findings.

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