

A Comparative Study about Anxiety in English Listening of Chinese College Language and Non-language Majors

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ABSTRACT

Foreign Language Listening Anxiety is a specific kind of anxiety that influences students' learning performances. Through descriptive and factor analysis, paired t-test and independent t-test, our findings indicated that most college students experience a moderate level of English listening anxiety. Also, it is shown that major affects listening anxiety levels between language majors and non-language majors due to listeners' familiarity with the English language and knowledge. Therefore, to help improve students' study performance, several pedagogical implications are given to teachers and students of different majors to adopt appropriate teaching methods and relieve students' anxiety caused by their major.

Keywords: foreign language listening anxiety, language majors, non-language majors, causes of listening anxiety.

1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) refers to the negative learning emotion that more or less affects foreign language learners during the process of second language acquisition. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are four language skills that greatly mediate the levels of learning anxiety. According to E.M. Phillips, speaking proves to be the most anxiety-provoking part of English learning according to most of the literature on language learning anxiety [1]. Meanwhile, E.K. Horwitz, M.B. Horwitz and J. Cope acknowledged that listening was a crucial part of causing anxiety in foreign language learning [2].

Foreign Language Listening Anxiety (FLLA), a special type of Foreign Language Anxiety, has been widely studied and proved to be negatively correlated with learners' listening performance by Dandan Zhou and Chang [3] [4]. As reviewed below, causes of Foreign Language Listening Anxiety (FLLA) are various. Kim, J.H. pointed out that lack of confidence would lead to listening anxiety, while D.J. Young and L.L. Zhai separately considered that incomprehensible input and

listening strategies are the causes [5] [6] [7]. Although the current research on the causes of language learning anxiety is multifaceted, there is even no research on whether major affect listening anxiety level. It is worthwhile to do research on it to help students of different majors to relieve tension. For the reasons above, this essay will draw the causes of English listening anxiety and argue that majors will make listening anxiety level different between language majors and non-language majors.

Our study will target 199 Chinese college students, among which 98 are language majors and 101 are non-language majors, and adopt methods of questionnaire and open-ended questions. First, a descriptive analysis of FLLAS will be performed to get the participants' foreign language listening anxiety levels. Then, we will investigate variables in listening and summarize the factors affecting listening anxiety. Next, a Paired t-test will be conducted on FLLAS scales to explore whether major (language major and non-language major) will influence the level of listening anxiety or not. Consequently, based on the analyses of the data, our

survey will use an independent t-test to figure out what lead to a difference in anxiety levels caused by a major.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since the 1970s, FLA has attached great attention and studies showed that FLA could affect students' achievement to varying degrees. Kenneth Chastain and Howard H. Kleinmann believe that anxiety can promote language learning while Aida and Liu held that anxiety has a negative impact on learners' improvement in performance [8] [9] [10] [11].

Studies on general FLA have developed to a mature stage, but limited research has been done correlated to anxiety in specific language skills like listening. However, listening anxiety and general foreign language anxiety are separate but relevant phenomena. Thus, Peter D. Macintyre thought that research in such field should be conducted in specific SL/FL contexts [12].

Recently, researchers began to focus on FLA in specific aspects of SL/FL such as writing, reading, listening and speaking. For instance, Anita J. Vogely investigated the causes of listening anxiety according to subjects' self-reports and diaries [13]. Kim conducted research among Korean students and found that anxiety existed in listening learning. His study further showed a significantly negative relationship between anxiety and listening comprehension, which means the more anxious students feel in listening learning, the lower achievement they will get [5].

As more research on FLA and FLLA is done, the measurement of anxiety has become one of the most significant parts. Among previous studies in China and abroad, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz was most frequently applied in measuring general FLA. Horwitz's FLCAS has 33 variables focused on communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation [2]. Thus it has been widely used in research on FLA in various SL/FL contexts and in measuring the overall impact of anxiety on language learning in classroom. However, the FLCAS does not specialize in any specific language skills such as listening. For this reason, the Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) designed by Kim and Joo-hae has been used explicitly on FLLA [5]. The FLLAS was developed on the base of FLCAS. It explores the degree of FLLA from four aspects: fear of listening to spoken English, process-related anxiety, lack of self-confidence and apprehension of insufficient prior knowledge. In addition to this, the FLLAS also covers other possible factors that may be the causes of FLLA, such as difficulty, familiarity, speed and frequency of listening materials and necessary background knowledge. As the first scale with high reliability and validity and specializes in FLLA, the FLLAS has been applied mainly in relevant research.

Huiling Zhang said, "Although listening anxiety has received some attention from researchers at home and abroad, the empirical research on listening anxiety sources and the corresponding listening anxiety strategies are still inadequate" [14]. It has been confirmed that lack of confidence and incomprehensible input are the causes of listening anxiety [5] [15]. In addition to this, Zhai indicated that a lack of listening strategies contributed to anxiety by investigating 82 first-year students of English major [7]. Even so, research on FLLA in Chinese general college students is still scarce. It is worthwhile also because of their major, which may make their listening anxiety level or sources different from language major learners'.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

Altogether 199 (42 male and 157 female) university students participated in our study. There are 98 language majors and 101 non-language majors in total. Among them, 11, 78, 25, and 85 were freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors respectively. The majors of the respondents were various as well. 98 language major subjects were composed of learners of English, Japanese, Russian, etc., while non-language major learners were from further diverse majors, such as law, accounting, finance, and so on. And we deleted three invalid samples, bringing the total number of samples to 196. (98 language majors and 98 non-language majors)

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Foreign language listening anxiety Scale (FLLAS)

The questionnaire is based on the FLLAS designed by Kim for Korean college students, which shows high internal reliability and high validity across studies. The internal consistency of FLLAS is 0.93(n=238), and the test-retest reliability is 0.84. The scale had 33 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale with responses of Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree. The total anxiety score of FLLAS ranges from 33 to 165, and reverse statements in the scale are converted when scoring. The higher the score is, the higher the listening anxiety level is;

3.2.2 BIQ (background information questionnaire)

Considering the variables that may affect the result of this research, a Background Information Questionnaire is added to investigate more specific information like age, gender, and major. Also, variables that could influence the participants' learning motivation will be included. For example, internal variables: proficiency levels,

discipline and interest in learning, and average learning time per day; external variables: family education and school learning atmosphere. In addition, an open-ended question is added: I feel anxious while listening to English, because_____.

3.3 Data analysis

All data were analyzed by SPSS 20. We first performed a descriptive analysis of FLLAS. According to the characteristics of the 5-point Likert scale, the anxiety level is divided into four levels: High anxiety level (>4.01), Moderate anxiety level (3.01~4), Low anxiety level (2.01~3) and No anxiety (< 2). By

comparing the average score, we can get the participants' foreign language listening anxiety levels. Next, we summarize the factors affecting hearing anxiety through the results of exploratory factor analysis and qualitative analysis. Paired t-tests were then conducted on FLLAS scales to explore the differences in professional anxiety levels. Finally, we use the independent t test to get the items that affect the contrast of anxiety levels, and then compare them with the items corresponding to the factors to get the final result.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

Table 1. Descriptive Analysis

Major	Number	Min.	Max.	Mean.	S.D.
Language major	98	74.000	151.000	109.245	16.771
Non-language major	98	69.000	165.000	117.082	22.708
total	196	69.000	165.000	113.163	20.294

To assess the degree of listening anxiety of subjects from different majors, a descriptive analysis of FLLAS was conducted in three groups individually. Table 1 is the descriptive analysis of the FLLAS. The total scores of FLLAS range from 69 to 165, with a mean of 113.163 (m=113.163) and a standard deviation of 20.294 (SD=20.294), which show that the subjects in our study have experienced a little high listening anxiety. It also illustrates the descriptive statistics of language majors and non-language majors separately. The mean (m=109.245) and standard deviation (SD=16.771) of language majors are lower than those in total. In contrast,

the numbers for non-language majors are higher, which indicates that non-language majors are easier to produce anxiety during the process of listening comprehension. This study compared the average score of all participants in the FLLAS (3.41) with the characteristics of the 5-point Likert scale. The results showed that university students generally experienced a moderate level of foreign language listening anxiety.

4.2 Factor analysis

Table 2. KMO and Bartlett test

KMO		0.924
	Approx. Chi-Square	3850.855
Bartlett test	df	528
	p value	0.000

To find out the causes of English listening anxiety, our study used factor analysis to replace the original 30 items with the main factors obtained. Firstly, whether the research data are suitable for factor analysis is analyzed. It can be seen from Table 2 that KMO is 0.924, more significant than 0.6, which meets the prerequisite

requirements of factor analysis and means that the data can be used for factor analysis. And the data passed the Bartlett sphericity test (P <0.05), indicating that the study data are suitable for factor analysis. It also shows that it can extract the most minor factor and explain the most variance simultaneously; that is, it has high efficiency.

Table 3. Total Variance Explained

Factor	Eigen values			% of variance (Initial)			% of variance (Rotated)			
	Eigen	% of Variance	of Cum. Variance	Eigen	% of Variance	of Cum. Variance	Eigen	% of Variance	of Cum. Variance	% of
1	13.185	39.953	39.953	13.185	39.953	39.953	4.407	13.356	13.356	
2	2.414	7.315	47.269	2.414	7.315	47.269	4.360	13.211	26.567	
3	1.838	5.569	52.837	1.838	5.569	52.837	4.304	13.042	39.609	
4	1.483	4.493	57.330	1.483	4.493	57.330	3.218	9.751	49.360	

Table 3. Total Variance Explained

Factor	Eigen values			% of variance (Initial)			% of variance (Rotated)		
	Eigen	% of Variance	Cum. % of Variance	Eigen	% of Variance	Cum. % of Variance	Eigen	% of Variance	Cum. % of Variance
5	1.066	3.231	60.561	1.066	3.231	60.561	2.564	7.768	57.128
6	0.962	2.915	63.476	0.962	2.915	63.476	2.094	6.346	63.475

As shown in Table 3, six factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted for further analysis. The variance explanation rate of these six factors after rotation is 13.356%, 13.211%, 13.042%, 9.751%, 7.768%, 6.346% respectively, and the cumulative variance explanation rate after rotation is 63.475%. Using varimax rotation, we obtained the following results: the common degree values corresponding to all the research items were higher than 0.4, which meant a strong correlation between the research items and the factors, and the factors could effectively extract information. After comparison with the qualitative research results, we ruled out factor 6 and named these five factors as: unfamiliar with English language (16,20,21,26,27,28,29,32), weak English basic

knowledge (8,9,10,11,12,13,19), poor listening comprehension (15,17,18,22,23,30,33), unfamiliar with listening material (1,2,4,5,7) and lack of confidence (6,14,25,31). The ordinal numbers in parentheses represent the items corresponding to each factor.

4.3 Paired t test between language major and non-language major

Next, this study explores whether there is a difference in the level of listening anxiety between language students and non-language students. The paired T-test was used to investigate the differential relationship of the paired data.

Table 4. Paired t test

Items	Paired (M±SD)		Mean difference (Paired1-Paired2)	t	p
	Paired1	Paired2			
Language major Paired non-language major	109.24±16.77	117.08±22.71	-7.84	-2.782	0.006**

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01

As can be seen from Table 4, the paired data presented travel heterogeneity (P <0.05). Through specific analysis, Language major and Non-language major showed a significant difference of 0.01 level (t=-2.782, P =0.006). As well as specific comparison differences, the average value of Language Major (109.24) was significantly lower than that of non-language Major (117.08). This indicates that students majoring in non-language have a higher level of foreign

language listening anxiety than those majoring in language. The question then arises: what causes the students of non-English majors to have higher levels of anxiety about foreign language listening.

4.4 Independent t test between the items of FLLAS and Majors

Table 5.Independent t test

	major (Mean±Std. Deviation)		t	p
	Language major (n=17)	Non-language major (n=33)		
10	3.00±0.87	3.67±1.22	-2.235	0.031*
11	3.12±0.93	3.88±1.11	-2.420	0.019*
12	2.29±0.92	3.30±1.26	-2.915	0.005**
13	2.59±1.18	3.36±1.19	-2.186	0.034*
29	3.06±1.20	3.76±1.06	-2.111	0.040*

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01

Then we used the independent t test to study the differences of different items in FLLAS for different majors to explain the differences in the causes of foreign language listening anxiety between language major

students and non-language major students. From Table 5, the samples of major for items of 5 items (10,11,12,13,29) present a significant difference. As well as specific contrast differences, the average of Language majors will

be significantly lower than that of non-language majors. At the same time, all the other 28 items showed consistency without a difference. By comparing these terms to the items corresponding to each factor, this research found that these terms focus on two factors, unfamiliarity with the English language and lack of knowledge.

4.5 Open-ended question

Based on analyses of statistics and generalization of answers to the open-ended question, the research shows that the main sources of FLLA of language majors and non-language majors are similar. The common causes for anxiety in listening comprehension were as follows.

4.5.1 Weak English basic knowledge

To the open-ended question, 38 language majors and 35 non-language majors responded that their poor English is one of the main causes of listening anxiety. As most of them noted, their listening anxiety came from not knowing words and grammar. When answering the questionnaire, 44.9% of language majors chose “agree” in the item “When listening to English, I tend to get stuck on one or two unknown words.” At the same time, 38.6% of non-language majors strongly agreed with the above item. It indicates that a large number of students provoke anxiety due to their weak basics of English.

4.5.2 Unfamiliar with Listening Materials

There are many factors contributing to different difficulty levels of listening material, such as speed, accent, the topic of the content, and acoustic conditions. 34 language majors and 22 non-language majors mentioned that listening material is one of their listening anxiety sources. As an English-major student remarked, “I feel more familiar with an American accent because I like to watch American movies and have subscribed to lots of American YouTubers, so when I listen to a British speaker, it’s more difficult for me to understand.” In addition, 40.8% language majors and 47.5% non-language majors chose “strongly agree” in the item “I get nervous if a listening passage is read only once during English listening tests.” Lack of background knowledge of the topic also causes some listeners’ anxiety. 39.8% of language majors agreed, and 42.6% of non-language majors strongly agreed with the item “I am nervous when I am listening to English if I am not familiar with the topic.” As for acoustic conditions, 45.5% of students agreed on the item “If a person speaks English very quietly, I am worried about understanding.” In addition to this, 43 of 56 subjects who thought listening materials caused their anxiety noted that fast speed was one of the main reasons. The results above show that unfamiliarity with listening materials cause different levels of anxiety.

4.5.3 Lack of Confidence

Some research has found that lack of confidence would cause listening anxiety, as well as our study. Forty subjects remarked that they feel anxious while listening to English because they are unconfident. Some noted that it was because they had been frustrated before in some listening tests, and worried about being frustrated again. When answering the questionnaire, 36.7% of language majors and 27.7% of non-language majors chose “disagree” in the item “I feel confident when I am listening in English.” At the same time, 18.8% of non-language majors strongly disagreed with the above item. Due to the lack of confidence, listeners are apt to be fearful and worry before listening tests, like the worry about missing information, which negatively correlates with listening performances. As shown in the report, eight subjects remarked that they always missed important messages during the process of listening comprehension, which mostly resulted from distraction. Therefore, it is undoubted that they are vulnerable to anxiety.

4.5.4 Poor Listening Comprehension

According to Zhai [7], “Listening comprehension is a complex process, which does not exist in space, but only stays in a short time.” To the open-ended question, twenty-one subjects responded that it was difficult to understand the listening material. 43.9% of language majors and 36.6% of non-language majors agreed with the item “When I’m listening to English, I often get so confused that I can’t remember what I have heard.” In addition, 11.2% of language majors and 25.7% of non-language majors strongly agreed. Besides, in the item “I get worried when I have little time to think about what I hear in English.” 53.1% of language majors chose “agree”, and 18.37% chose “strongly agree.” At the same time, 47.5% of non-language majors agreed, and 33.7% strongly agreed with the above item. Hence, it is evident that listeners easily feel anxious with poor listening comprehension.

4.5.5 Unfamiliar with English Language

As a subject responded to the open-ended question, “Since the College Entrance Examination canceled the listening part, I have never practiced listening.” In addition to this student, 29 more subjects regarded lack of practice as their listening anxiety cause. Among them, four subjects remarked that they lack an immersive environment to be exposed to English speakers and have low English language proficiency. Besides, 50% of subjects agreed with the item that “I fear I have inadequate background knowledge of some topics when listening in English.” Undoubtedly, familiarity with

English language and English culture has a significant effect on students' listening anxiety.

5. DISCUSSION

An important result of this study was the finding that there was a significant difference in English listening anxiety level between language majors and non-language majors. The anxiety level of non-language majors is generally higher than that of English majors. The results revealed the reasons for such difference between these two groups: unfamiliar with the English language and lack of knowledge. It's obvious that language majors have more access to English. During the process of learning and training, language major students definitely practice listening comprehension, build up vocabulary, and hone listening skills. For this reason, they easily perform better than non-language majors who nearly have no chance to listen to English without professional requirements or examination needs. In addition, students' lack of confidence also aggravates their English listening anxiety, while anxiety will return to poor confidence. It ends up in a vicious circle.

As for causes of English listening anxiety, this study found similar results. The present study revealed five causes of college students' English listening anxiety in general: weak English basic knowledge, unfamiliarity with listening materials, lack of confidence, poor listening comprehension, and unfamiliarity with English language and culture. This was concurring with Zhai's findings. She noticed that lack of confidence, poor listening comprehension and characteristics of listening materials were the main sources of listening anxiety [7]. Also, Zhang found that weak English basic knowledge and lack of knowledge about English culture could cause listening anxiety [14]. However, the interesting finding in this study was the observation that there was little difference in the main causes of listening anxiety between language majors and non-language majors. This could be attributed to the same framework of foreign language teaching in China, which was represented by lacking listening and oral speaking practice while largely focusing on reading and writing. That means no matter what subjects students major in, they are facing the same condition that access to English listening is totally insufficient. Therefore, this study also gives a hint to language teachers on how to efficiently reduce students' anxiety about learning a foreign language.

Despite the findings, some limitations existed in the research. The present study didn't consider the correlation between listening anxiety level and listeners' listening performances, as a lot of studies have shown that anxiety is negatively correlated with learners' listening performance. In addition, a possible difference in listening anxiety between English majors and other language majors is not considered. So in future research, long-term measures such as final listening grades based

on several times of listening tests should be used, which may find out a difference in anxiety causes among students of different levels. And more samples of other language major students should be collected, which may cause the result of English majors and non-English majors to be different from that of language majors and non-language majors.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The present study attempted the exploration of the differences in English listening anxiety between language majors and non-language majors, resulting in a finding that there was a significant difference in their listening anxiety levels, and familiarity with English language and listeners' knowledge are the main causes for such difference. The research also revealed five causes of college students' English listening anxiety in general: weak English basic knowledge, unfamiliarity with listening materials, lack of confidence, poor listening comprehension, and unfamiliarity with English language and culture. Statistics in the research reflected that the English listening anxiety is closely related to listeners' background factors and listening material. In order to help listeners reduce listening anxiety, there are some pedagogical implications. English teachers need to provide students with sufficient opportunities to have access to English and high-quality listening materials because they feel insufficient in practice and their own skills. Teachers should also address the emotional concern of students and release listeners' psychological pressure to ensure their awareness that the aim of listening should not only be to test listeners' ability but to help students learn. As shown in results, causes of such a significant difference in English listening anxiety level between language majors and non-language majors also give language teachers a hint that how to reduce listening anxiety of different groups and levels of students in targeted and more efficient ways. If possible, future research exploring this topic should select participants in various kinds of levels and study on possible differences in causes of listening anxiety, which will benefit both teachers and learners.

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