# An Empirical Study of Language Anxiety in Junior School Students' English Learning

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*Abstract:* With the deepening of education reform, governments all over the world have raised the requirements for teachers and students. In 1997 the term of "Competencies" was first introduced by the OECD. The Ministry of Education (China) issued the English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 edition) in April 2022. The new English Curriculum Standards adds emotional goals, advocating the cultivation of students' emotional attitudes into English teaching, which is in line with its basic philosophy of people-oriented and focusing on students' quality education. In addition, with the development of linguistics and humanistic psychology, linguists have gradually shifted their research focus from how teachers teach language knowledge and improve language learners' language skills to how to infiltrate emotional development into language teaching to help foreign language learners learning language. Anxiety is one of the main components of emotional factors. This study investigates the English learning anxiety of grade seven students, analyzes the class differences of students' anxiety, the influence of anxiety on English performance and the causes, and puts forward the corresponding teaching strategies to overcome anxiety. In order to help students to reduce anxiety, it is necessary to improve the effectiveness of English learning.

## 1. Introduction

With the development of linguistics and humanistic psychology, since the late 1970 s, the study of language teaching researchers have gradually attention from the teachers how to teach language knowledge and how to improve language learners' language skills to their emotional development penetration into language teaching, help language learners to learn language. In the hypothesis of affective filtering proposed by American psycholinguist Krashen (1982), anxiety is one of the main components of affective factors, which greatly affects learners' input, processing and output of new language. [1]

The new Version of English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition, PRC) also adds emotional goals, advocating the cultivation of students' emotional attitudes into English teaching, which is in line with its basic philosophy of people-oriented and focusing on students' quality education. [2] However, for a long time, English education in primary and

secondary schools in China has not paid enough attention to the emotional factors in students' learning, but paid more attention to the knowledge instilled by teachers. Implement exam-oriented education. However, the study of English as a subject plays an increasingly important role in increasing students' knowledge, entering schools and employment, and realizing their own value. Some students are under great pressure in English learning and are in a state of sub-health. They are nervous and dare not speak in English class. Blushing, stuttering, avoiding the teacher's sight, in an anxious state, learning efficiency is affected. Therefore, it has become very important to study the affective factors and pay attention to the anxiety degree of students in English classroom learning.

The purpose of this paper is to study the anxiety level of grade 7 students in a junior school and the differences between different classes in English learning. According to relevant theories, a general questionnaire with high reliability and efficiency was used to understand students' English learning anxiety and the impact of anxiety on their English performance. If there is anxiety, it further analyzes the reasons, discusses and puts forward the corresponding countermeasures to help students improve learning methods, reduce the degree of anxiety, and improve students' scores comprehensively.

## 2. Overview of Language Anxiety

### 2.1. The Concept and Research Status of Foreign Language Learning Anxiety

In the 1940s, the study of foreign language learning anxiety began in the field of educational psychology. In the 1970s, the whole academic circle paid much attention to foreign language learning anxiety. Spielberger (1983) defines anxiety as a common emotional state that has a profound effect on many aspects of language learning. Anxiety can be defined as the subjective feelings of tension, fear and worry associated with the activation of the autonomic nervous system. [3]

There are some anxiety researchers proposed situational anxiety. At present, many researchers study foreign language learning anxiety based on affective anxiety. As a unique type of anxiety, foreign language learning anxiety was not recognized by academic circles until the mid-1980s.

Horwitz (1986) pointed out that foreign language learning anxiety is a complex psychological phenomenon peculiar to language learning, and refers to the unique and complex self-knowledge, beliefs, emotions and behaviors generated in the process of language learning related to classroom language learning. [4]Apprehension can be divided into three types: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. He also believes that foreign language learning anxiety is not a simple combination of these three fears, but "a synthesis of one's self-perception, perceptions, emotions and behaviors related to foreign language classroom learning." In a word, foreign language learning anxiety refers to the fear and anxiety aroused by foreign language learning tasks in the specific situation of foreign language learning activities in a certain period of time, which belongs to specific situational anxiety.

In addition, many scholars have studied the degree of language anxiety and its intervention. Sparks (1997) found differences in foreign language proficiency among high school students with different anxiety levels. [5] Chang (2008) investigated students' listening anxiety and its causes through listening test. [6] Liu et al. (2008) studied the current situation of Chinese non-English major undergraduates' lack of communicative ability and foreign language anxiety in class. [7]Tran et al. (2013) used interviews and questionnaires to investigate the understanding and attitude of non-English major students and teachers towards foreign language anxiety, and found that most students have a sense of foreign language anxiety, and teachers do not pay enough attention to foreign language anxiety. [8]

Grefersen *et al.* (2014) used quantitative and qualitative research methods to study language

learners' language anxiety and its causes, and tried to reflect and explain them. [9] Jin *et al.* (2015) investigated the influence of foreign language proficiency, self-esteem and competitiveness of Chinese foreign language learners on foreign language learning anxiety by using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. [10]

At the same time, Chinese scholars' research on foreign language learning anxiety has been enriched and expanded. Wang (2015) investigated the English anxiety of college English teachers through the Teacher Foreign Language Anxiety Scale. The results show that English anxiety of college English teachers is at a low level. [11]Zhong *et al.* (2015) made an in-depth study of the current situation and influencing factors of English anxiety among master's students of science and engineering through the Academic English Anxiety Scale, and found that many master's students have a high level of English anxiety. [12] Li (2015) studied the quasi-causal relationship between non-English major students' anxiety and their scores and found that writing anxiety was a factor influencing their writing scores. [13]Chen *et al.* (2018) conducted a study on classroom anxiety of Japanese major students and found that the average anxiety level of students was relatively high and negatively correlated with their scores. [14]

## 2.2. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

Horwitz (1986) designed a scale with high reliability and efficiency based on the self-report, clinical experience and situational anxiety theory of foreign language learners, in view of the lack of a measure with high reliability and efficiency in the study of foreign language learning anxiety. [15] Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). This measurement method, which has been widely used since then, is mainly used to measure the breadth and depth of foreign language learning anxiety, so as to further understand the psychological response of learners in foreign language learning and the influence of anxiety on learners' foreign language learning. The 33 questions in the scale are designed according to the physical and mental reactions of learners in a specific situation, including communicative fear, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Questions about common difficulties in listening, speaking, reading and writing and how quickly you remember and process language covered 29 of them. Each question is followed by 5 options, that is, 5 points, requiring the subjects to choose one of them according to their actual situation. The scale describes language anxiety according to the scoring principle of likert 5-point scale. The whole scale items are divided into anxiety index that the higher the score, the more serious the anxiety.

## 3. Investigation and Research of Language Anxiety

## 3.1. Research Object

In this study, 200 students from grade 7 (4), Grade 7 (7), Grade 7 (10) and Grade 7 (12) in a junior school in a certain city are selected as the research objects. The first two classes are regular classes and the last two are experimental classes. The regular and experimental classes are placed on the basis of students' grades when they enter junior school. The experimental class and the ordinary class are parallel classes.

## 3.2 Research Methods

## 3.2.1. Literature Research

This study was guided by referring to theories and research results on the formation causes,

coping strategies and related information of foreign language learning anxiety.

### 3.2.2. Scale Measurement

The foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale designed by Horwitz (1986) used in this study is the most widely used tool to measure anxiety at present. It has many advantages, such as economic implementation; Due to anonymity, the data is more reliable: the questionnaire format is unified, which is convenient for statistical comparison; the distribution and recovery of the questionnaire are simultaneous, so it is more accurate.

### 3.2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was distributed and filled in by class. After the questionnaire is distributed, students are required to read the instructions at the beginning of the questionnaire carefully and fill in the questionnaire truthfully. It is estimated that it will take about 20-25 minutes for students to complete the questionnaire. A total of 200 questionnaires were sent out, and 200 were actually recovered. 185 copies were effectively recovered. The effective recovery rate was 92.5%. Results were provided in 165 valid questionnaires. SPSS 22 was used to analyze the data.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. English Learning Anxiety of Junior School Students and Class Differences

### 4.1.1. English Learning Anxiety of Junior School Students

The descriptive analysis of the data shows that the average value of 33 descriptions is 2.79, indicating that there is some anxiety in English class among the grade one students surveyed. In Table 1, the mean and standard deviation of the four kinds of anxiety of all respondents are given. The average value of test anxiety was 2.98, which was the biggest source of anxiety. However, since it also has the largest standard deviation, it indicates that the respondents vary greatly in this anxiety. The second was fear of negative evaluation, with an average of 2.85. The third was communicative fear, with an average of 2.77. The lowest was other anxieties, with a mean of 2.68.

Table 1: Statistical table of specific anxiety description

| | Number | Mean value | Standard deviation | | Number | Mean value | Standard deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Communication apprehension | 183 | 2.7715 | .60241 | Test anxiety | 183 | 2.9836 | .81296 |
| Fear of negative evaluation | 183 | 2.8495 | .62678 | Other anxiety | 183 | 2.6762 | .67558 |

### 4.1.2. Comparison of Classroom Anxiety Levels between Ordinary Classes and Experimental Classes

Table 2 shows that in terms of three specific anxiety levels, namely communicative fear, fear of negative evaluation and other anxiety, the average of the ordinary class is lower than that of the experimental class. In terms of exam anxiety, the average value of students in ordinary class and experimental class is almost the same, which is 2.98, which is also the highest among the four kinds of anxiety level.

Table 2: Statistical table of anxiety difference description between ordinary class and experimental class

|  | Class | Number | Mean value | Standard deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Communication apprehension | Regular | 100 | 2.7409 | .62656 |
|  | Experimental | 83 | 2.8083 | .57356 |
| Test anxiety | Regular | 100 | 2.9833 | .77615 |
|  | Experimental | 83 | 2.9839 | .85999 |
| Fear of negative evaluation | Regular | 100 | 2.7882 | .61183 |
|  | Experimental | 83 | 2.9233 | .64023 |
| Other anxiety | Regular | 100 | 2.5988 | .70135 |
|  | Experimental | 83 | 2.7686 | .63483 |

However, in the independent sample T test (see Table 3), the bilateral SIG of the four kinds of anxiety were all greater than 0.05, indicating that there was no significant difference between the students in the ordinary class and the experimental class in the four specific anxiety scales.

Table 3: Independent sample means of anxiety difference between ordinary class and experimental class

|  |  | T-test for the mean equation | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  | T | Sig(bilateral) | Mean difference |
| Communication apprehension | Equal Variances Assumed | -.753 | .453 | -.06742 |
| Test anxiety | Equal Variances Assumed | -.005 | .996 | -.00060 |
| Fear of negative evaluation | Equal Variances Assumed | -1.457 | .147 | -.13515 |
| Other anxiety | Equal Variances Assumed | -1.712 | .089 | -.17083 |

## 4.2. The Relationship between Junior School Students' English Learning Anxiety and Performance

Table 4: Correlation between English anxiety and performance

|  |  | Performance | Communication apprehension | Test anxiety | Fear of negative evaluation | Other anxiety | English classroom anxiety |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Performance | Person correlation | 1 | -.323[**] | -.430[**] | -.424[**] | -.393 | -.439[**] |
|  | Significance (bilateral) |  | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 |
|  | Number | 165 | 165 | 165 | 165 | 165 | 165 |

**. Significant correlation at the level of .01 (bilateral).

In the questionnaire, the researcher asked the respondents to provide the results of the most recent midterm exam. Correlation analysis was made between students' scores and English class anxiety and four kinds of specific anxiety. The results showed that there was a significant negative correlation between English learning performance and English classroom anxiety, communicative fear, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation and other anxieties (P =0.000<0.01), indicating that anxiety does have an obstacle effect on junior school students' English learning (See Table 4).

## 4.3. Analysis of Junior School Students' English Learning Anxiety and Class Differences

### 4.3.1. Analysis of the Overall Degree and Dimensional Characteristics of Junior School Students' English Learning Anxiety

The anxiety score of all the respondents (2.79) is below the medium anxiety value, indicating that these students do have anxiety in English classroom learning, but the overall level of anxiety is not high. The reasons may be as follows: (1) Great individual differences lead to low average level; (2) Students are extroverted, with strong communicative ability and more opportunities to contact English, so their anxiety degree is not high; (3) Admitting anxiety is not a glorious thing, so students give low scores intentionally or unintentionally for some description items that are easy to expose their own problems and negative to their own image; (4)Traditional English knowledge is still the main teaching method in foreign language teaching, and mother tongue and grammar translation method are used in a large number of classes. Mechanical and stylized content is more than communicative and coping content, so students' anxiety level is not high.

Among the various dimensions of English learning anxiety, the average value of test anxiety is the highest, and the main reasons may be : (1)Seventh grade students have gone through a series of examinations from primary school to senior high school. They are deeply influenced by China's examination system and attach great importance to the results of examinations. Moreover, three years later, they will have to face the high school entrance examination, the difficulty and importance of which make them feel great pressure and aggravate their anxiety; (2)The employment competition pressure from the society, the school attaches importance to the examination and the pressure of entering a higher school, and the parents' high expectation in the family all make students feel nervous and the degree of examination anxiety increases; (3) Frequent examinations make students who have failed in the past more nervous, and the difficulty and unfamiliar content of examinations increase students' anxiety, thus affecting their exam performance.

Fear of negative evaluation is also an important factor of junior school students' Anxiety in English class, with an average of 2.85. Many students lack confidence in their English learning, have low self-evaluation, think they are inferior to others, and worry about negative evaluation. And the fear of losing face, hope that they can have a good performance in front of peers and teachers, care about competition, so as to produce anxiety.

In the survey, the average communicative fear of students was 2.77, slightly lower than the fear of negative evaluation. Although in The English class, the author also observed that some students buried themselves in taking notes, consciously avoiding eye contact with the teacher, or avoiding speaking in class. In group discussions and conversations with others, the researchers try not to initiate the topic, or keep silent, afraid of expressing myself in English in front of classmates or teachers. This is mainly introverted, lack of confidence in their English ability, English scores low students. But the researchers are also glad to see that this group of grade one students are lively and outgoing post-00s, many students are willing to take the initiative to participate in class speech, performance, discussion activities and so on, express themselves in English, show their ability to classmates and teachers, in order to get the recognition of students and teachers' encouragement and praise.

The average value of other anxiety was 2.68, which was the lowest among the four dimensions. The reasons may be as follows: (1) Students have more opportunities to contact English when they are young. In the English class before entering junior school, teachers organize classroom teaching with English. The wide popularity of original English reading materials, movies and TV news in daily life provides favorable conditions for the improvement of students' listening level. Therefore, after entering junior school, they can adapt to the English teaching of junior school teachers and do not have to be afraid of not understanding. (2) At present, the content of junior school English class

is mainly based on intensive reading, language interpretation, practicing sentence patterns and grammar translation, which is relatively mechanized and requires less practice of classroom speech and communicative response. As a result, students' anxiety levels may be lower.

### 4.3.2. Class Difference Analysis of Junior School Students' English Learning Anxiety

In this study, the average test anxiety of students in regular class and experimental class is almost the same, and both are higher than the other three kinds of anxiety. This shows that students of the two class types are facing the pressure of entering school, and they care about the test scores and fear the exams. It can be seen that under the exam-oriented education system, the frequency, variety and difficulty of examinations have a great impact on students. In the other three dimensions of anxiety, the average value of students in ordinary class was lower than that in experimental class, but the difference was not significant. The reasons may be as follows: (1) Due to the psychology of "self-decoration", some ordinary class students give low scores to the description options that may expose their own problems and are disadvantageous to them. (2) Some ordinary class students have low academic requirements and are open-minded, so their anxiety level is high, while experimental class students have great learning pressure due to their environment, their sense of competition and their parents' high expectation.

### 4.4. Correlation Analysis between English Learning Anxiety and English Scores of Junior School Students

The results show that there is a significant negative correlation between English learning anxiety and English scores of junior school students, and there is a significant difference between English anxiety levels of high and low score groups, which is consistent with the previous conclusion. It shows that students with high anxiety in English learning do worse in English, while students with low anxiety do better. This also validates the domestic and foreign research conclusions in this area, that is, English learning anxiety is often negatively correlated with English performance. However, there is no consensus on the causal relationship between the two in academic circles.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1. Main Findings of the Study

In this study, the author used the form of questionnaire to understand the anxiety of junior school students in the English class, and drew the following conclusions: (1) Students do have anxiety in English learning. Among the four kinds of specific English learning anxiety, students' test anxiety is the highest, indicating that students value the test most, and the test brings the greatest pressure to students. (2) The level of test anxiety of students in ordinary class and experimental class is the same, which is higher. In the other three specific anxiety levels, the anxiety degree of ordinary class students is lower than that of experimental class students, but the difference is not obvious. (3) Students with high anxiety level in English class have lower Scores in English. Conversely, students with lower anxiety levels did better.

### 5.2. Enlightenment of Education and Teaching

In view of the above research findings, combined with the theories and research literature reviewed previously, the author puts forward corresponding coping strategies:

Care for students with the teacher's love, care for, love and encourage students to learn English. Teachers should take "learning" as the center, become the facilitator of classroom teaching, and

create a relaxed classroom atmosphere. Eliminate students' anxiety.

Standardize the content and form of examination, correct students' view of examination, and help students realize that examination is to check and fill up the gaps in knowledge, and score is not the most important. Encourage students to prepare for exams and improve their English learning ability. Relieve test anxiety.

Stimulate learning motivation and interest, and encourage students to actively participate in classroom language activities. Use correct error correction methods and evaluation methods to communicate with students and encourage them to cultivate their self-confidence and reduce negative evaluation anxiety.

Carry out classroom activities of cooperative learning to reduce students' communicative anxiety and cultivate students' communicative ability. Encourage collaboration, not competition, and interact with students.

In view of the essential characteristics of English language complexity, help students to establish a correct understanding of language learning, improve students' tolerance of English ambiguity and eliminate learning anxiety.

Through the application of strategies, we can help students relieve their anxiety in language learning, maintain moderate anxiety, give full play to their potential, promote their English learning, improve their scores, and let students experience the joy of success.

## 5.3. Issues Needing Attention in Follow-Up Research

In the future teaching practice, further in-depth research can be carried out: (1) Investigate and analyze the English classroom learning anxiety of more students in different grades and schools, and make a longitudinal comparison study; (2) Deepen theoretical learning and teaching practice research, explore how to transform the negative effects caused by anxiety, and put forward more effective and comprehensive coping strategies; (3) After the implementation of coping strategies, subjects were tested before and after to verify the effectiveness of anxiety coping strategies.

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