

# A study on the causes and countermeasures of English listening anxiety in vocational college students

Jinxuan CHENG

School of Foreign Languages and cultures, Ningxia University, Yinchuan 750021, China

---

**Abstract:** The development of English listening and speaking skills is crucial for students at all educational levels, as it directly impacts their language usage and communicative abilities. However, vocational college students currently face challenges such as a lack of interest in listening, low listening proficiency, poor listening skills and limited class interaction, which significantly impede the enhancement of their English proficiency and classroom engagement. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the English listening anxiety and the utilization of listening strategies among 105 students from three classes at a vocational college in Ningxia. Based on these findings, corresponding measures will be explored to offer valuable insights for English teaching in vocational colleges.

**Key words:** vocational college English; listening anxiety; foreign language anxiety

---

## 1 Introduction

Researchers emphasize individual differences in language learning, such as age, individual competence and emotional factors like anxiety. There's a growing focus on how anxiety impacts the development of specific language skills, with listening causing more anxiety than reading and writing in second language acquisition [4].

Listening is often the most difficult language skill for foreign learners, linked to many language components and requiring quick reactions. This immediate response requirement, unlike other skills, makes listening complex and may lead to anxiety and comprehension issues, affecting self-confidence.

Vocational college students need to improve their English skills to meet market demands. However, traditional methods are often used in English listening teaching at these universities, which cannot attract students and cause them to feel anxious about listening. This research seeks to pinpoint these issues and suggest improvements for English listening in vocational education.

## 2 A review of domestic and international research on foreign language listening anxiety

### 2.1 Definition of foreign language listening anxiety

In the 1970s, both domestic and international second language researchers began to devote increased attention to foreign language anxiety, yielding fruitful research results. Nevertheless, there remains divergence in the definition of foreign language listening anxiety.

Howitz noted that language learning anxiety is multifaceted and affects self-perception. MacIntyre and Gardner found

anxiety hinders language learning. Ellis identified it as a key challenge for second language communication. In the same year, MacIntyre and Gardner described foreign language anxiety as the fear and tension in the process of language acquisition.

Wang, Yang, and Li say foreign language learning anxiety is the fear felt when using a less proficient second language, impacting all language skills [5]. It's a personal, automatic response and a unique part of second language learning, appearing as "situation-specific anxiety" throughout the language acquisition process.

Foreign language anxiety is a significant emotional factor that impacts the success of learners in acquiring a foreign language. This type of anxiety is associated with classroom language learning and reflects self-awareness, self-confidence, emotions, and behavior. Additionally, foreign language anxiety can also influence learning outcomes and academic performance, thus necessitating serious consideration.

## 2.2 A review of foreign studies on foreign language learning anxiety

Early research has indicated that there is a tendency to conflate anxiety and learning outcomes, potentially stemming from inconsistent measurements or ambiguous definitions of foreign language anxiety. Young did not observe any correlation between anxiety and performance in oral interviews. It should be noted that foreign language learning anxiety represents a distinct construct, as opposed to general anxiety, and is typically assessed through test scores.

Recent research on second language anxiety further confirms the existence of specific anxiety related to language ability. Vogely demonstrated the expression of anxiety in L2 listening comprehension, and Cheng distinguished anxiety related to various L2 abilities through factor analysis [1]. Furthermore, Horwitz argues that the origins of anxiety and its correlation with multiple second language abilities and skills can be more precisely described [2].

Vogely's research identified several key factors contributing to listening anxiety, including input characteristics, foreign language learning processes (such as improper use of listening strategies or insufficient information processing time), overly strict correction methods and teacher attitudes, and fear of failure. Additionally, Kim further investigated the origin of listening anxiety by utilizing carefully selected listening materials and corresponding test formats to evoke students' unease before conducting interviews with subjects [3]. Based on their statements, potential sources of anxiety were categorized into three groups: textual characteristics, personal characteristics, and process-related characteristics.

## 2.3 A review of domestic research on foreign language learning anxiety

China's research on anxiety began in the late 1980s, with significant contributions from scholars like Ling Wenquan and Weng Deshou. Early studies focused on foreign language anxiety and its correlation with other emotional factors in learning. For example, Ling Wenquan's study revealed higher test anxiety among female Chinese college students [6]. Since the 21st century, research has expanded to include comprehensive investigations, experimental teaching approaches, and various research methods such as surveys and qualitative interviews. This has led to significant progress in understanding foreign language learning anxiety.

The study concentrates on vocational college students' English listening anxiety, an area with limited research. It aims to develop theories, identify classroom issues, and provide insights for English teachers to address emotional aspects of teaching. The goal is to understand student anxiety in real teaching environments and enhance awareness of the challenges in English listening for vocational students.

# 3 The research process

## 3.1 Research the problem

Do vocational college students have English listening anxiety? If so, what is the level of anxiety?

What are the causes of vocational college students' English listening anxiety?

How to deal with vocational college students' listening anxiety?

### 3.2 Research object

This study selected 105 students from a vocational college in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region as the research objects, all of whom were sophomore non-English majors from the college and had been learning English for more than 9 years.

### 3.3 Research tools

The FLLAS (Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale) was developed by Korean scholar Kim Hae-ju. To facilitate responses of Chinese students, the author translated the English version of the scale into Chinese and adjusted it to align with the learning environment in China. The questionnaire comprises 33 questions, representing three dimensions: learners' self-cognition and evaluation, English listening class, and English listening content. Each question utilizes a Likert five-level scale format, with response options ranging from "completely inconsistent" to "completely consistent". According to research by Rebecca L. Oxford, scores are categorized as severe anxiety (4.5-5.0), moderate to severe anxiety (3.5-4.5), moderate anxiety (2.5-3.5), and low anxiety (1.0-2.5). The average score of the 33 items in the questionnaire was calculated to assess the level of English listening anxiety among students at a vocational college in Ningxia.

## 4 The analysis of questionnaire survey results

### 4.1 Relevant background information of the subjects

The author initially conducted an analysis of the gender factors among the subjects in order to determine if there are significant differences in listening anxiety based on genders. The subsequent table presents the gender demographics of the subjects.

Table 1. Background information for subjects

| Gender | Number of participants | Ratio |
|--------|------------------------|-------|
| Female | 76                     | 72    |
| Male   | 29                     | 28    |
| Total  | 105                    | 100   |

Based on the findings presented in Table 1, it is evident that the gender distribution in this study is skewed, with a ratio of approximately 1:3 for men to women. This imbalance aligns with the typical gender distribution observed in vocational colleges and universities, including those in Ningxia. Consequently, the unequal representation of genders was not specifically addressed within the scope of this study.

The primary focus was to investigate potential factors contributing to listening anxiety among participants through an analysis of their self-assessment of listening scores. The following section presents the self-evaluations of listening performance provided by 105 participants.

Table 2. Self-assessment of listening performance of subjects

|           | Number of participants | Ratio |
|-----------|------------------------|-------|
| Excellent | 19                     | 18.2  |
| Good      | 45                     | 42.8  |
| Poor      | 41                     | 39    |
| Total     | 105                    | 100   |

### 4.2 Investigation of students' listening strategies and listening anxiety

To investigate the status of college students' English listening strategies and listening anxiety, the research data from the questionnaire on English listening anxiety were processed using SPSS26, resulting in clearer data.

Table 3. Statistics of mean listening anxiety in English

| Dimensions                     | Sample size | Question items and influencing factors                              | Single item mean value | Population mean |
|--------------------------------|-------------|---|------------------------|-----------------|
| Self-perception and evaluation | 105         | 6, 10 (Learning ability)  | 3.76                   | 3.91            |
|                                |             | 14 (Learning motivation and confidence)                             | 4.37                   |                 |
|                                |             | 20 (Learning interest)  | 4.06                   |                 |
|                                |             | 22 (Learning self-efficacy)   | 3.79                   |                 |
|                                |             | 32 (Learning effectiveness)   | 3.58                   |                 |
| English Listening Class        | 105         | 7 (Concentration situation)   | 4.02                   | 3.3             |
|                                |             | 8, 26 (Forms of oral communication)                                 | 3.45                   |                 |
|                                |             | 9, 23, 33 (Tolerance for blurry hearing)                            | 3.66                   |                 |
|                                |             | 13, 21 (Teacher-student relationship, student-student relationship) | 3.78                   |                 |
|                                |             | 11, 12 (Listening teaching method)                                  | 3.7                    |                 |
|                                |             | 15, 17 (Negative emotional interference)                            | 3.83                   |                 |
|                                |             | 19 (Listening habits)   | 3.57                   |                 |
|                                |             | 25, 27 (Listening scene presets)                                    | 3.69                   |                 |
|                                |             | 28 (Noise interference)   | 3.48                   |                 |
| English Listening content      | 105         | 2, 4, 18 (Listening speed and number of plays)                      | 3.92                   | 3.84            |
|                                |             | 16 (Listening background knowledge)                                 | 3.71                   |                 |
|                                |             | 5, 29 (Listening topic familiarity)                                 | 3.88                   |                 |
|                                |             | 1, 3, 30, 31 (Listening content vocabulary, pronunciation)          | 4.02                   |                 |
|                                |             | 24 (Listening volume)   | 3.69                   |                 |

Upon analysis of the questionnaire results, the mean value of each dimension was subjected to statistical scrutiny and their respective influencing factors were summarized in Table 3. The findings revealed that learners' self-cognition and evaluation anxiety ranked highest, followed by English listening content anxiety, with English listening classroom anxiety being the lowest. However, on the whole, the average for all three types of anxiety fell within the moderate to severe range. Concerning self-cognition and evaluation anxiety, learning motivation and self-confidence emerged as having the most significant impact on anxiety levels. As for English listening content anxiety, familiarity with listening topics, vocabulary and pronunciation in listening materials, relevant background knowledge, as well as listening speed and playback frequency were found to significantly affect levels of anxiety. In terms of English listening classroom anxiety, students' attention span, negative emotions experienced in class, teacher-student relationship dynamics and tolerance for unclear audio were identified as important factors on levels of anxiety.

## 5 Discussion

Based on the analysis of questionnaire data, it can be inferred that a multitude of factors contribute to students' anxiety in listening comprehension. This section specifically focuses on examining the primary causes of such anxiety among students.

### 5.1 Students' own factors -- phonetic basis and self-cognition

### 5.1.1 Speaking speed of listening materials

Many students hold the belief that a faster speaking pace can easily induce anxiety, and that the level of anxiety is positively correlated with the speed of speech in listening materials. Therefore, it can be concluded that the nature of speech is a significant contributing factor to listening anxiety.

### 5.1.2 Weak vocabulary base

When students encounter unfamiliar words, they may pause to contemplate their meanings, potentially leading to a loss of focus on the remaining content of the listening material and ultimately hindering their ability to extract important information from the speech.

### 5.1.3 Students lack motivation and confidence in learning

Vocational college students exhibit a lack of interest and confidence in English, particularly in the realm of listening comprehension. This is evidenced by their perceived inability to successfully complete listening tasks, as well as a lack of motivation for deepening their understanding of English listening. Consequently, they do not feel assured in their progress and improvement in English listening skills, leading to apprehension towards encountering difficulties.

## 5.2 Improper difficulty setting of listening materials

The average values of items 2, 4, 18 (listening speed and frequency of playback), 16 (listening background knowledge), 5, 29 (listening subject familiarity), 1, 3, 30, and 31 (listening content vocabulary, pronunciation) in the English listening anxiety questionnaire all fall within a relatively high range. Rapid speech delivery and complex sentence structures may impede learners' ability to comprehend key words and essential information; absence of relevant background knowledge may expose students' lack of understanding in a specific field, hindering their grasp of the overall concept of the listening material; excessive length of the listening material is likely to result in reduced attention span among learners and diminish their patience and confidence during question-solving processes.

## 6 The corresponding countermeasures

### 6.1 Guide listening anxiety cognition, enhance learning motivation and self-confidence

English listening anxiety is common in language learning. Teachers should help students understand that this anxiety is normal and encourage them to face it. After recognizing anxiety, the focus should be on boosting students' inner motivation for English listening, building their confidence, sparking interest, promoting self-directed learning, and helping them feel competent. Increasing interest and motivation through engaging teaching can reduce anxiety about English listening challenges.

### 6.2 Lay a good foundation of pronunciation and vocabulary, and make up for students' shortcomings

Poor development in pronunciation and vocabulary is due to a lack of knowledge accumulation, low self-directed learning awareness, and the reliance on classroom teaching for learning among vocational college students. Teachers should use classes and homework to provide systematic resources for English listening skills. They should focus on pronunciation training and linking in exercises to give students more practice. Teachers should also encourage daily vocabulary accumulation and provide ways to expand vocabulary effectively.

### 6.3 Adjust the difficulty of listening teaching to adapt to students' learning situation

The selection of English listening materials should be aligned with the learning context, reflect real-life and societal developments, and offer authenticity and variety. Educators can effectively use a mix of online and offline resources to provide suitable materials for students. The content should have clear pronunciation, comprehensive subject matter, and engaging storylines; topics should be relevant to both society and students' lives, and connected to their cognitive experiences. The difficulty of the materials should match students' vocabulary and listening comprehension skills, starting

with basic concepts and gradually increasing complexity. This selection should follow principles of interest, authenticity, timeliness, and diversity.

## **7 Conclusion**

This study examines the prevalent issue of listening anxiety among vocational college students, identifying two main causes: individual student factors and challenges in selecting appropriate listening materials. The study proposes corresponding solutions to address these issues. Anxiety is recognized as a significant factor impacting students' performance in English classrooms, necessitating attention from teachers. Furthermore, the findings of this study can serve as a valuable resource for educators seeking to understand and address students' anxiety in basic listening classes. It is hoped that more teachers will engage in comprehensive research on listening anxiety to support students in managing their concerns effectively.

## **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

## **References**

- [1] Cheng YS. 2002. Factors as associated with foreign language writing anxiety. *Foreign Language Annuals*, 35: 647-656.
- [2] Horwitz EK. 2001. Language anxiety and achievement. In S. Young & L. Helman (Eds.), *Second Language Classroom Research: Contributions of SLA Research to the Classroom*, 83-97. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- [3] Kim J. 2000. Foreign language listening anxiety: A study of Korean students learning English. Unpublished PH.D dissertation Austin: University of Texas.
- [4] Renée VW. 2003. Students' perspectives on foreign language anxiety. *Inquiry*. 8(1): 21-40.
- [5] Wang R, Yang J, Li L. 2016. *Second Language Learning*. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press.
- [6] Ling WQ. 2001. A study on foreign language learning anxiety. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 33(3): 172-178.