

On Causes and Strategies of Senior High School Students' English Learning Anxiety in the Context of Information Technology

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Abstract

The Internet's widespread use and technological advancements pose challenges like information overload for English as a Foreign Language learners. This situation can lead to negative emotions and anxiety in language learning, notably affecting Chinese county high school students who lack access to quality educational resources. This study discusses the causes of English learning anxiety among these students within the context of information technology and proposes strategies to mitigate it. Highlighting a significant negative correlation between learning strategies and language anxiety, the research underscores the importance of metacognitive, cognitive, affective, and social strategies in creating effective and anxiety-reducing learning environments.

Keywords

English learning anxiety; learning strategy; county senior high school students.

1. Introduction

The popularization of the Internet and the advancement of information technology have led to a dramatic expansion in the quantity of available information. It has created many resources and convenient learning pathways for EFL learners. However, at the same time, it has introduced significant challenges for students such as over-loaded information, resulting in negative emotions in language learning. This is especially true for Chinese county high school students with less access to high-quality learning resources and teachers. According to the General Senior High School English Curriculum Standard (2017 Edition), emotions and attitudes, which need to be emphasized by teachers as well as learners themselves, are nonnegligible factors affecting English language learning (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Anxiety is common among students (Aida, 1994), which is also apparent in the context of information technology. Confronting with numerous information and learning resources of varied qualities, county high school students tend to be more confused and anxious, be it in EFL learning or coordinating learning. Lucas (2011) has pointed out that equipping foreign language learners with their own learning strategies can help them learn the target language and cope with their language anxiety. Oxford and Green (1995) defined learning strategy as specific actions or techniques that learners use intentionally to develop and improve their second language skills. Therefore, learning strategy contributes to improving language ability and relieving language anxiety.

To help students relieve English anxiety, it is necessary to figure out the causes of anxiety and put forward corresponding learning strategies. In this research, some causes of English learning anxiety among county high school students will be analyzed, and specific learning strategies

are suggested as available measures to crack language anxiety and improve the effect of English learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1. English Learning Anxiety

Foreign language learning anxiety in this study particularly refers to English learning anxiety (ELA), whose studies have become a hot issue since the early 1970s abroad. The studies on foreign language anxiety can be divided into three aspects: definition and classification, research subjects, and correlations.

For the definition and classification of foreign language anxiety, Horwitz and Cope (1986) were the first to study language anxiety as an independent phenomenon in the process of language learning, distinct from other types of anxiety. Foreign language anxiety is defined as a distinctive psychological condition involving self-perception, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors associated with classroom-based language acquisition, stemming from the nature of learning a foreign language. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) they designed includes “communication anxiety, test anxiety, negative evaluation anxiety, and general anxiety.” The scale has been widely used and has become the most authoritative tool for measuring foreign language anxiety (Meng et al., 2014). Besides, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), who defined it from the essence of ELA, characterized language anxiety as “a sense of unease and apprehension uniquely linked to the contexts of second language acquisition, encompassing speaking, listening, and learning activities”. In summary, these definitions attach importance to the correlation between psychology and the process of foreign language learning.

Research has revealed varying levels of ELA among different student populations. For example, Toth (2008) explored the influences of anxiety on academic achievement among learners of varied ages, finding that learning anxiety would discourage learners from learning ambition. Besides, studies have often focused on high school and university students, with findings suggesting that anxiety levels can be attributed to factors such as language proficiency, learning strategies, and educational backgrounds (Zhang, 2019; Botes et al., 2020). For instance, high school students in Chinese county towns may experience heightened anxiety due to the pressure of high-stakes examinations and the perceived importance of English in their future career prospects (Dong, 2021).

Much research has explored the relationship between ELA and language achievement, indicating a generally negative correlation (Teimouri et al., 2019). High levels of anxiety have been found to impede cognitive processing and hinder the acquisition of language skills (Horwitz et al., 1986). However, the degree of correlation varies across studies, suggesting the influence of moderating variables such as age, gender, and educational context (Liu, 2020).

Despite the wealth of research on ELA, there are notable limitations. Many studies have concentrated on urban student populations, neglecting the unique experiences of students in rural areas such as county or towns of China. The high-stakes nature of educational assessments and the cultural context may intensify ELA among these students. Hence it is necessary to consider the specific educational environment and sociocultural factors of Chinese county towns to provide a more nuanced understanding of ELA.

2.2. English Learning Strategies

Research on learning strategies can be divided into two parts: theoretical and practical research. Since the 1970s, the study of learning strategies has been a key topic in the field of second language acquisition (Gu et al., 2020). Numerous studies have focused on exploring the definition, classification, and factors influencing the application of learning strategies.

First, regarding the definition of learning strategies, scholars generally agree that learning strategies are specific actions or steps taken by learners to promote autonomous and effective learning (Rubin, 1975). However, there is no complete consensus on the definition of learning strategies (Zhang et al., 2019). Furthermore, existing research presents various perspectives on the classification of learning strategies. One widely used classification method categorizes strategies into direct and indirect types (Oxford, 1990). Direct strategies involve those directly engaging with the target language, such as memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies, while indirect strategies encompass those not directly involving the target language but supporting language acquisition, including metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Another classification system categorizes learning strategies into management and language learning strategies (Wen, 2001).

Second, concerning the factors influencing the use of learning strategies, the research includes individual differences among learners, such as language proficiency, learning styles (Wen, 2004), learning motivation and self-efficacy, learning environment factors, such as classroom teaching conditions, extracurricular learning atmosphere, and teaching methods and requirements, as well as the integration of information technology (Gu & Zang, 2017).

In addition to theoretical research, numerous studies focus on the effectiveness of learning strategies and how to integrate them into teaching practice (Ouyang & Zhang, 2008).

On the one hand, concerning the effectiveness of learning strategies, research indicates a close relationship between the use of learning strategies and language proficiency and learning outcomes. For instance, proficient English learners typically employ cognitive strategies, whereas less proficient learners tend to rely on metacognitive strategies (Cao & Ding, 2020). On the other hand, in terms of teaching practice, teachers can teach students learning strategies to help them improve learning efficiency and outcomes (Chen, 2019). Research has shown that strategy training is feasible and can effectively improve students' academic performance (Li, 2008). For example, teachers can introduce various vocabulary learning strategies to students, such as guessing word meanings from context, using roots and affixes to memorize words, and using vocabulary flashcards.

Overall, existing research on learning strategies has achieved significant results, but there are still some deficiencies. For instance, most studies focus on university students (Xiong, 2012), and there is relatively little research on the learning strategies of high school students in rural areas of China. Therefore, it is significant to consider the learning strategies of county high school students in the age of information technology.

2.3. Affective Filter Hypothesis

The Affective Filter Hypothesis, proposed by the American linguist Krashen in the 1980s, is a crucial component of his second language acquisition theory. This hypothesis posits that while language input plays a vital role in learners' second language acquisition process, not all language input can be fully absorbed and internalized due to the influence of affective factors. Learners' affective factors, such as anxiety, confidence, and motivation, act as filters that influence the extent and effectiveness of language input. When learners experience high anxiety, low confidence, and lack of motivation, these affective factors form a "psychological barrier" that limits language input and reduces the efficacy of language acquisition (Krashen, 1985).

Individual differences and social environmental factors collectively influence learners' selection and use of learning strategies. In Ellis's (1994) second language acquisition model, anxiety, as a significant affective variable, is incorporated into learners' individual differences and theoretically influences their choice and use of learning strategies. The Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests that learners' anxiety can impede part of the language input, thereby diminishing the overall effectiveness of language acquisition.

Benjamin (1981) has found that high-anxiety students use language learning strategies much less frequently than low-anxiety students and most of them fail to master effective learning strategies. High-anxiety students often struggle to effectively utilize memory strategies, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies, thereby exacerbating language learning difficulties and creating a vicious cycle.

3. Causes of English Learning Anxiety among County High School Students

English learning anxiety among Chinese students is a widespread issue. Specifically, the causes of English learning anxiety among county high school students in China may include the following factors.

3.1. Overloaded Information

In the era of information explosion, county high school students in China face overwhelming information. They need to sift through massive amounts of English learning materials to find suitable content. This not only increases their cognitive burden but can also lead to information overload, thereby triggering feelings of anxiety. Furthermore, county students often lack access to high-quality learning resources compared to urban students, exacerbating their anxiety due to this imbalance in resource distribution.

3.2. Lacking Information Processing Skills

Students may lack effective cognitive strategies, manifesting in two aspects. First, they may find it difficult to extract key information, struggling to identify and extract important and relevant information from complex online texts. This deficiency can lead to spending excessive time and effort in the learning process without achieving effective learning outcomes, thereby increasing anxiety. The second point is inadequate summarization skills. Students may struggle to synthesize and summarize scattered information, which will lead to a sense of disorganization and lack of systematic progress in learning, further increasing anxiety.

3.3. Exam-Oriented Education Pressure

In the current educational system, high-stakes exams such as the National College Entrance Examination impose strict requirements on English proficiency. However, examinations, as an indispensable component for assessing learning outcomes, often induce anxiety in learners. This anxiety arises from concerns that exam results may not meet expectations, subsequently impacting learners' performance during examinations. County high school students face immense pressure to perform well in these exams. This exam-oriented pressure often leads to anxiety during the learning process, particularly in subjects like English that require long-term accumulation and practice of skills.

3.4. Insufficient Language Environment

Students in rural areas frequently encounter an inadequate language environment for acquiring English skills. Due to their geographical isolation, opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations with native English speakers are scarce, which hinders their language practice and limits their firsthand experience with authentic English language use. Moreover, the absence of practical application settings exacerbates the challenges they face in mastering English. Without opportunities to apply their language learning in real-world contexts such as workplace interactions or social settings, students struggle to bridge the gap between classroom learning and practical usage. This disconnect contributes significantly to their anxiety levels, as they feel ill-prepared to navigate real-life situations where English proficiency is crucial.

4. Strategies to Relieve English Learning Anxiety

The increasing integration of information technology into education presents challenges for high school students in rural areas of China. These students often face a scarcity of English learning strategies but pervasive English learning anxiety. Moreover, there exists a significant negative correlation between the use of learning strategies and English learning anxiety (Wang, 2021). In other words, a lack of effective learning strategies can lead to or exacerbate English learning anxiety. Hence, implementing appropriate strategies is crucial to mitigate students' anxiety in learning English.

4.1. To Enhance Metacognitive Strategies and Overcome Learned Difficulty

In the context of rapid advancements in information technology, although county high school students have access to increasingly abundant English learning resources, high-quality resources remain scarce. Therefore, it is crucial to help students refine learning resources and cultivate metacognitive strategies to effectively navigate extensive learning resources as well as manage their learning processes. More specifically, teachers should guide students in developing online learning plans, setting clear learning objectives, and instructing them on utilizing online resources for autonomous learning, such as watching courses online and English TV programs. Furthermore, encouraging students to document their learning experiences, consistently reflect on their learning processes, and adjust their methods and objectives according to their progress can significantly improve learning outcomes and reduce anxiety.

4.2. To Intensify Cognitive Strategy Training and Enhance Information Processing Abilities

Faced with an abundance of online information, county high school students need to master effective cognitive strategies. Firstly, teachers should train students in extracting key information, summarizing, analyzing, reasoning, and comprehending essential English learning content from online texts. This approach can significantly improve their learning efficiency and reduce anxiety. Secondly, teachers should guide students in utilizing online tools for vocabulary acquisition, such as using online dictionaries, analyzing word roots and affixes, and memorizing words in context, thus avoiding the pitfalls of aimless and inefficient online learning. Through rigorous cognitive strategy training, teachers can help students overcome potential causes of anxiety.

4.3. To Address Emotional Strategies and Foster a Positive Learning Atmosphere

When facing high-stakes exams like the Gaokao, which elicit intense pressure, high school students often experience anxiety, a situation that may be exacerbated by the relatively unstructured nature of online learning environments. Teachers should monitor students' emotional fluctuations and create a relaxed and enjoyable online learning atmosphere. Moreover, promoting the documentation of positive learning experiences, sharing achievements, and fostering a sense of accomplishment among students can reduce anxiety. Additionally, instructing students in relaxation techniques and positive psychological strategies can effectively alleviate anxiety.

4.4. To Utilize Social Strategies and Overcome Geographical Constraints

County high school students have limited opportunities for English communication, but online platforms can provide them with broader avenues for interaction. Teachers should encourage students to actively engage in English learning communities, forums, and other platforms to share learning experiences. Organizing online activities such as virtual English corners, role-

playing simulations, and cooperative learning projects can significantly enhance students' frequency of English interaction and further stimulate students' interest and engagement in English communication.

4.5. To Combine Teacher Guidance and Avoid Pitfalls of Online Learning

Teachers play a crucial role in overseeing students' adherence to their online learning schedules and intervening promptly to resolve any challenges they face in the online learning process. In addition to monitoring task completion, educators should guide students to utilize online resources effectively, which includes encouraging students to strike a balance between educational use and recreational activities online, thereby fostering a disciplined approach to learning English. Furthermore, teachers can empower students with strategies to maximize the educational potential of digital tools, ensuring that their engagement remains focused and productive.

In conclusion, against the backdrop of information technology, English education for rural high school students necessitates a strategic application of learning methodologies tailored to their distinctive traits and the factors contributing to their learning anxiety. Teachers are pivotal as guides and supervisors, developing reasonable online learning plans, making full use of online resources, and focusing on applying affective strategies to create a positive learning atmosphere. Through collaborative endeavors between educators and students, the efficacy of English learning among rural high school students can be significantly enhanced.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, integrating information technology in English language learning presents a dual-edged sword for county high school students in China. While it offers unprecedented access to diverse learning resources and opportunities for global interaction, it also introduces challenges such as information overload and heightened anxiety due to the pressure of high-stake exams. This research underscores the ways of using learning strategies to mitigate English learning anxiety. Educators can foster a conducive learning environment that promotes efficiency and reduces anxiety by enhancing metacognitive strategies, intensifying cognitive training, addressing emotional factors, and leveraging social strategies. Moreover, the pivotal role of teachers in guiding students through the complexities of online learning cannot be understated. Navigating the digital age, researchers are expected to further explore and innovate educational practices that cater to the unique needs of these students, ensuring that they are equipped with the necessary skills and confidence to succeed in an increasingly interconnected world.

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