

# Listening Anxiety in EFL Learning - Taking “Middle School Students” As an Example

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## **Abstract**

*Among the fundamental skills of English language learning such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, noticeably, listening is regarded as the most important part by Second Language researchers. This thesis will mainly reports the new findings of a survey on middle school student’s anxiety in English listening. The new findings of this survey indicate that importance should be attached to the possibility and potential besides students poor performance when English teachers attempt to come up with countermeasures on reducing English listening anxiety and assist students listen more effectively.*

**Key words:** middle school students; listening anxiety; countermeasures

## **1. Introduction**

Listening plays the first and the most important role in learning a foreign language. In China, however, teaching listening has been neglected for a long time. What most teachers do in class is merely to show the audio file and then check the answers. Some of them try to help students to understand the content by constantly stopping, repeating and explaining word by word. However, English listening is a much more complex activity in which the listener is expected to get the ability to follow the general trend of what is said, to understand special details, and to infer the speaker’s intention. Numerous students have their own listening habits. Some students usually try to understand each word or each sentence. They are badly afraid of missing any words. They will think hard when they meet some difficult words or sentences. And the words they failed to catch will lead to their failure to catch another sentence so that they miss more words. They often translate the English into Chinese in their mind, which frequently hinders their listening speed a lot. All of above factors will affect the middle school students to misunderstand the reading material, which also will cause them to feel anxious. Anxiety is one of the most important emotional factors affecting middle-school students’ English listening learning. How to deal with English listening anxiety effectively is extremely urgent.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Key concepts of anxiety and language anxiety**

Anxiety is often regarded as a kind of aberrant emotion, which is also termed as mental abnormality

(Wang&Wan, 2001). Anxiety is the “tense anticipation of a threatening but vague event; a feeling of uneasy suspense. It is a negative affect so closely related to fear that in many circumstances the two terms are used interchangeably.” (Rachman, 1998)

Language anxiety can be defined as the fear or apprehension occurring when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993) or the worry and negative emotional reaction when learning or using a second language (MacIntyre , 1993). Generally speaking, language anxiety has been viewed as particularly negative psychological factor in the language learning process by many of the researchers and academics who have considered its impact on learners.

## **2.2 Factors affecting students’ anxiety while listening**

Listener’s listening ability is influenced by psychological factors. Sometimes, listeners’ over-concentration on listening material frequently leads to nervousness. “Anxiety has a negative effect on listening comprehension.”(Bai Yaorong, 2003). Self-confidence is the psychological foundation on the way to success (Wan Yan, 1994). It is more necessary to be of self-confidence in learning a foreign language. “Attitude, as a factor of emotion, is of great importance to carry out a program about listening successfully.” (Dai Weidong, 1994). “Students cannot control the speed of speakers, and students can not interrupt or stop the speakers for clarification.” (Wang Yinglan, 2004). Comprehension and reaction speed are decided by the students’ degree of mastering the basic language knowledge---phonetics, vocabulary, grammar and cultural background. They also need to master the basic knowledge of pronunciation like stress, weakening, intonation, linking, etc. (Zhang Guihua, 2004).

## **2.3 Countermeasures on reducing English listening anxiety**

“Teaching is nothing if it is not relationship”. (Chi Yong, 2004) The first and foremost goal a teacher should achieve is to build a friendly, positive and supportive relationship with students. To establish a harmonious relationship between teachers and students, teachers should encourage and comment the students’ progress in order to enhance their self-confidence. Teachers’ tolerant attitude and encouragement will make them build up confidence to fight against English listening anxiety.

Rivers(1968) described that “ It is very important for students to have a good command of the basic knowledge of English and some useful listening skill. They can understand the listening materials well, and they will feel more successful and less anxious.” If they want to reduce the high anxiety while listening, they should enable themselves to strengthen their basic knowledge of English first.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Research questions**

This research aims at investigating the current situation of the anxiety in English listening among middle school students and answers will be found to the following questions after this survey.

Does anxiety emotion exist in the listening comprehension among middle school students?

What is the function of anxiety in listening among these students?

What is the relationship between listening and anxiety?  
 Is the anxiety a facilitative anxiety or debilitating anxiety?

**3.2 Research subjects**

The research subjects chosen for this survey were 122 students coming from class 1 and class 2 of Grade 8 in Nanchong No.1 Middle School. There are 52 girls and 70 boys in my research. To have a better command of the listening condition of these students, a piece of paper is selected as the final English test. The listening part holds 20 points in total.

Table 1

Listening question types	Marks	Average points	Full-mark students
1. listen and choose the right word	5'	4'	98
2. listen to the short dialogues and choose the right answer.	5'	3'	74
3. listen to the long dialogue and choose the right answer.	10'	6'	74

The grades of listening directly reflect the listening competence of students. According to this table, we can easily find out that difficulties do exist in students' listening, which part is more difficult for students and the general condition of students' listening. Thus, these 122 students are suit for my research about the anxiety of English listening among middle school students.

**3.3 Research instruments**

**3.3.1 Individual interview**

This research interviews 10 students individually in class 1 and class 2 in Nanchong No.1 Middle School. Among these 10 students, some got high grades and others just got lower grades in their English listening. Descriptions about their English listening anxiety in class and in test, the reasons of their anxiety and their methods to relief from anxiety were collected to better design my questionnaire.

**3.3.2 Questionnaire**

There are 15 questions totally in the questionnaire which is designed for the influential mental feelings including language memory, mental and listening strategies in class and in test. The research subjects choose one from 5 options. 5 points for option A; 4 points for B; 3 points for C; 2 points for option D; 1 point for E. In this way, for all the subjects as well as the students, the level of anxiety will higher when he or she gets higher grades in this questionnaire. Before filling the questionnaire, I give my explanation to the relevant request of this questionnaire and encourage my students to come up with their questions. This questionnaire was given out for 122 students and then was collected after being filled in.

**3.4 Data collection procedure and analysis**

To guarantee my questionnaire to be suit for the reality of the listening class and listening test, this research interviews 10 students individually in class 1 and class 2 in Nanchong No.1 Middle School in Sept.2015 and the analysis is below:

Most students mentioned the feeling of anxiety while listening during the individual interview and a boy said: “I always feel my heart beating, my body shaking, and my brain messing and don’t know what the tapes plays. Once there is something I can’t listen clearly, nothing can I accomplish.” On the other hand, a girl who did well in the pre-test said with ease: “Even though I feel a little nervous before listening, I will be more confident if I encourage myself that I can do it.” Another boy who is expert in English listening but common in total English shared that English listening anxiety is a good thing on the ground that it urges me to listening carefully and stops me from sneaking off. From this individual interview, we can see that middle school students have facilitative and debilitative anxiety, namely, both positive and negative influences from anxiety could be found on listening comprehension, which contributes to design the questionnaire.

Does anxiety emotion exist in the listening comprehension among middle school students? Answer to this question is YES according to the questionnaire

Table 2:

Anxiety does exist whether I prepare or not

	I Extremely agree	I Agree	I don’t know	I disagree	I Extremely disagree
Students	10	63	25	21	3
Percentage( % )	8.1%	51.6%	20.4%	17.2%	2.4%

More than a half of these 122 middle school students feel anxious whether they prepare or not, which means that anxiety is a common mental feeling during the process of testing English listening among these students. This personal mental characteristic is an important aspect having an influence on the listening.

So, what is the function of anxiety in listening among these students? What is the relationship between listening and anxiety? Is the anxiety a facilitative anxiety or debilitative anxiety? Look at the following table.

Table 3: Anxiety helps me concentrate on English listening

	I Extremely agree	I Agree	I don’t know	I disagree	I Extremely disagree
Students	14	31	7	37	33
Percentage( % )	11.4%	25.4%	5.7%	30.3%	27%

Just as the table shows, more than a quarter students who have the feeling of anxiety but regard it as a “motivation” instead of a horror. They think that anxiety helps them concentrate on English listening and

this indicates anxiety among middle school students plays a positive role of promoting and motivating.

Table 4: Once there is something I can't listen clearly, nothing can I accomplish

	I Extremely agree	I Agree	I don't know	I disagree	I Extremely disagree
Students	21	57	25	17	2
Percentage( % )	17.2%	46.7%	20.4%	13.9%	1.6%

78 middle school students among the 122 subjects obviously feel the negative effect of high-level anxiety on English listening comprehension.

## 4. The results of the study and discussion

### 4.1 The results of the study

Taking all the analysis into consideration, quite a few middle school students have the feeling of anxiety, among which some students see it as a motivation and thus anxiety helps them to listen more intently; while others can't deal with listening anxiety and then anxiety stops them from promoting listening ability. We can say the result is that the facilitative anxiety and debilitating anxiety do exist in the English listening anxiety among middle school students.

From the analysis of the survey done with the instruments of individual interview and questionnaire in the process of testing English listening in class, anxiety is a common mental feeling and not all the anxiety is harmful and it is urgent to distinguish the facilitative anxiety and debilitating anxiety. The former fosters challenging new tasks and assists learners overcome their anxious emotion; the latter impedes them from promoting listening ability while the learners attempt to evade their learning tasks.

### 4.2 Discussion

#### 4.2.1 Reasons of English listening anxiety

##### (1) Non-repeatability

Non-repeatability of English listening comprehension is the main cause of students' anxiety. Listening happens when the voice is recorded and then displayed. If some is absent-minded or has difficulty in listening, he or she will be anxious easily.

##### (2) Haste makes waste.

The majority of students are occupied by the personality of competition and ambition even the students in lower grades, but they will face anxiety when they urge to get excellent grades every time.

##### (3) Dull class atmosphere

Class is the place where teacher and students conduct their teaching-learning activity. Thus the class atmosphere is indispensable. Colorful and active class atmosphere can raise the interest of students to participate in the class activity, while the boring and dull class atmosphere may bring pressure and

anxiety.

(4) Inappropriate listening strategies

We can easily find out the fact that lower anxiety is for the students who have appropriate listening strategies and good listening habits; Otherwise, the anxiety is in a high level.

(5) Weak knowledge of language

The process of listening comprehension is the also the process of applying all kinds of language knowledge and skills. In the course of listening, the language knowledge the students have acquired plays significant role in comprehension. Speed of comprehending will slow down and even anxiety will emerge if the language knowledge is weak in English listening.

#### 4.2.2 Countermeasures on English listening anxiety

(1) Create the environment for forming listening habits

When doing listening exercises, students are easy to be stuck in the following situations: trying to understand word from word and failing to listen to the latter part because the former part occupy too much time; time-consuming process of translating the English into Chinese and so on. Admittedly, a good listening habit is of great help in the listening exercises.

Classroom teaching is the main way of practicing listening. Thus English teachers should gain the self-improvement in pronunciation and intonation, reduce the use of nonstandard English with dialect, and insist in using English to teach and let the students be exposed to English as much as possible. Teachers can also offer some pictures and videos to display the content of teaching, making listening teaching more situational and communicative and forming the ability of thinking in English instead of the deep-rooted mother tongue. After class, examples should be set by teachers such as communicate with classmates and make dialogues in English. By creating a good environment for English, listening level could be improved easily.

(2) Focus on skills to promote listening effectiveness

Stressing on listening skills means stressing on the guide of listening strategies. Being good at applying appropriate strategies in English listening can definitely decrease the anxiety. Exercising listening strategies is an efficient way to enhance the level of listening comprehension. The so-called listening strategies include pronunciation strategies and comprehending strategies.

Pronunciation strategies consists of strong and weak forms, linking of sounds, intonation, division of sense group and so on, asking for teachers teach the 48 international phonetic symbols with the correct pronunciation and rules.

Comprehending strategies refer to the skills in searching the content, predicting through the cultural background and adding or decreasing information. Mastering the comprehending strategies, students will decrease their anxiety in English listening. More importantly, 3 aspects matters in English listening strategies: 1) Facts, namely, 5w: where, when, what, who, why, 2) Deduction, 3) Calculation

(3) Induce interests and strengthen the listening motivation

“Trust your teacher, and follow his way”. Harmonious relationship between teacher and students can turn the enthusiasm from students to the interests and motivation. Students will be more active and

imaginative with fresh memory in front of something they are interested in. Thus teachers should arrange the different parts of listening, speaking, reading and writing properly, design some communicative activity consciously for students, and combine the dynamic and still scenes to arouse the interests and enthusiasm of students. With better understanding of language material, impressive memory, greater listening confidence and a cheerful heart, students will undoubtedly and naturally feel a sense of relief from English listening anxiety.

## **5. Conclusion**

### **5.1 New findings**

From the survey of individual interview and questionnaire, we come to know that the majority of middle school students are occupied by the feeling of anxiety, in which debilitating anxiety has negative effects, making the students frustrated and impeding their listening development. These middle school students are in their young age, have lower ability to control themselves and are easily influenced by the feeling of anxiety. Fortunately, they are of plasticity in their mental at the very start of learning English. Thus English teachers can assist them decrease and even overcome anxiety in English listening to gain their confidence in facing with difficulties in English bravely. So, the analysis of listening comprehension is of guide meaning and practice.

The main findings in this paper are below: 1) From the analysis of the survey done with the instruments of individual and questionnaire in the process of testing English listening in class, anxiety is a common mental feeling and not all the anxiety is harmful and it is urgent to distinguish the facilitative anxiety and debilitating anxiety. The former fosters challenging new tasks and assists learners overcome their anxious emotion; the latter impedes them from promoting listening ability while the learners attempt to evade their learning tasks. 2) Based on the result, reasons for English listening are mentioned: non-repeatability, haste makes waste, dull class atmosphere, inappropriate listening strategies and Weak knowledge of language. 3) Countermeasures on English listening also came up from this paper are: creating the environment for forming listening habits, focusing on skills to promote listening effectiveness and inducing interests and strengthen the listening motivation.

### **5.2 The limitations and future suggestions**

As a matter of fact, there are still some limitations due to the restriction of conditions. For example, the research subjects are 122 middle school students who are of one-sidedness and not enough representatives, and there is too much reliance on the data of self-report and so on.

The cultivation of English listening competence among middle school students is a long-term and tough process; similarly, the promotion of English listening level is a progressive transformation from the simpler to the more complex, from the shallower to the deeper, from the little point to the aspect. However, as for the middle school students, a specific group, the ability of reducing and overcoming of English listening anxiety mainly depend on the cultivation and assistance of English teachers.

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