

Measures to Overcome Junior High School Learners' Foreign Language Test Anxiety

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Abstract

In the field of junior high school English learning, test anxiety has become a prominent problem affecting the acquisition and development of learners' English ability. Numerous studies at home and abroad have shown that test anxiety negatively affects test scores in most cases. In this study, the causes of English test anxiety among junior high school students were analyzed in depth, including internal physical and mental factors and external environmental factors. Based on these analyses, the solution measures of reasonable teaching and learning process, democratic teacher-student relations and appropriate evaluation mechanisms are proposed, so as to reduce test anxiety, improve the quality of junior high school students' English learning, and provide positive and powerful support for their overall development.

Keywords

Junior High School Learners; Foreign Language Test Anxiety; Causes of Anxiety; Measures.

1. Introduction

At the end of the 1950s, Sarason officially began to study test anxiety, and through his efforts, test anxiety has since become a specialized field of study. In 1950, the English language test was officially included as one of the key subjects in the Chinese college entrance examination, and with the globalization of the economy and the rapid development of the Internet, the use of the English language has become an important manifestation of the use of English in all aspects. In today's education system, foreign language examinations are not only an important tool to test students' learning outcomes, but also a key indicator of the quality of school teaching. However, for middle school students, this important part of assessment is often accompanied by anxiety that cannot be ignored. This anxiety not only interferes with their learning state, but may also have long-term effects on their psychological health and academic performance.

The middle school stage is an important period of individual development, in which adolescents are in the imperfect stage of self-knowledge and emotional regulation ability. When they face various challenges and difficulties in real life and study, it is often difficult for them to independently channel and resolve negative emotions. Especially in the current context of the still severe tendency of exam-oriented education, the academic pressure and challenges encountered by junior high school students often deviate from their ideal expectations, and this deviation is very likely to trigger self-doubt and self-concept shaking, thus giving rise to anxiety.

In recent years, more and more studies have shown that the phenomenon of test anxiety among secondary school students in China has shown a rising trend year by year, and the negative impact of test anxiety on students has become increasingly serious. Among them, the foreign language test, as one of the subjects that students generally find difficult and important, is particularly prominent in the anxiety it triggers. This not only affects students' enthusiasm for foreign language learning, but also may pose a threat to their overall academic development and psychological health.

Therefore, this paper aims to deeply analyze and explore the causes of foreign language test anxiety among junior high school students and propose practical coping strategies. Through a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of test anxiety, we can reduce junior high school students' foreign language test anxiety, improve their learning efficiency and mental health, lay a solid foundation for their overall development, and create a healthier and more positive environment for junior high school students' foreign language learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Key Terms

To explore foreign language test anxiety in junior high school students in depth, several key terms need to be defined. Foreign language anxiety and test anxiety are defined below.

2.1.1. Definitions of Foreign Language Anxiety

Language anxiety is a common phenomenon, especially among people learning a second or foreign language. Horwitz (1986) defines foreign language learning anxiety as a distinctive complex of individual learner self-perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors related to language learning in the classroom. Gardner (1994) provides a more specific explanation: language anxiety is the fear that learners experience when they are expected to perform in the target language, while categorizing foreign language anxiety into input anxiety, processing anxiety, and output anxiety.

To sum up, foreign language anxiety is a multidimensional and complex concept, which not only involves learners' physiological responses but also covers their behaviors and psychological states. More importantly, foreign language anxiety includes test anxiety.

2.1.2. Definitions of Test Anxiety

Test anxiety is an important concept in English language learning, and it is closely related to the learner's emotional state at the moment. Some different views on how to define test anxiety are presented below.

Alpert and Haber (1960) specified that test anxiety is an emotional experience triggered by a test situation that promotes or hinders academic performance. Spielberger (1976) identified test anxiety as a stressful response resulting from an individual's worry about a broad range of scenarios in an evaluative situation, and test anxiety as anxiety linked to a specific situation.

Zheng Richang (1998) proposes that test anxiety is a psychological state inspired by certain test-taking scenarios, governed by individual physical and mental factors, with worry as the basic feature, and defense or avoidance as the mode of behavior, which is manifested through different emotional responses. Tian Bao (2001) proposes that test anxiety is a cognitive response and complex emotional experience such as worry, self-occupation, and self-centeredness that students experience when faced with a test situation.

Overall, although scholars have not yet achieved uniformity in the specific definition of test anxiety, there are two commonalities in scholars' definitions of test anxiety: first, test anxiety is considered to be stimulated by a specific test situation or evaluation situation, which belongs to a special form of anxiety; second, test anxiety is viewed as a complex psychological response involving multiple cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions.

2.2. Researches of Test Anxiety Abroad and at Home

In foreign language learning, foreign language test anxiety as a psychological barrier that cannot be ignored, has been attracting in-depth exploration by scholars at home and abroad.

2.2.1. Researches of Test Anxiety Abroad

During the period 1900-1950, research scholars conducted preliminary studies on foreign language test anxiety. Folin, Demis and Smillie (1914) issued the first research report on test

anxiety. Successively, the first book on test anxiety is *Anxiety and illness before examination* by Neumann (1933). In the 1940s, scholars in Europe and the United States studied anxiety, and Sarason et al. created the Test Anxiety Inventory (TAI).

From 1950 to 1970, scholars began to systematically explore test anxiety. Mandler (1952) suggested that test anxiety is an emotion in which an individual is in a state of helplessness and disorder. In 1967, Liebert and Morris (1967) identified worry and emotionality as two important factors in test anxiety: worry as a cognitive interference with academic performance and emotionality as an autonomic response to the test situation.

After the 1970s, research on test anxiety reached its peak and showed a trend of diversification and synthesis. Sarason (1980) published a book named *Test Anxiety: Theory, Research, and Applications*, which brought together comprehensive results on test anxiety. Hagtvet (1989) explored the relationships of intelligence, personality and achievement motivation with test anxiety. Bembennuty (2008) argues that students with higher test anxiety during exams are likely to set a lower goal for the outcome. Esim Gursoy and Tuba Arman (2016) and Dilek Cakici (2016) conducted a study on test anxiety among students of different genders and the results showed that there is a significant difference in the level of test anxiety between male and female students, i.e., male students generally have lower levels of test anxiety in English than female students.

In conclusion, research on test anxiety is gradually increasing, and the study of test anxiety in Western countries has entered a relatively mature stage.

2.2.2. Researches of Test Anxiety at Home

In the 1980s, research on anxiety began in China. Ling Wenquan was the first scholar in China to begin research on foreign language learning anxiety, and so far domestic research on foreign language test anxiety has been equally fruitful.

In a longitudinal study of test anxiety among elementary, middle, and high school students, Shen LieMin (2003) found that the level of test anxiety in general declined with age. Liu Huijun (2003) studied the relationship between test anxiety, achievement goals and test scores of high school test takers, and found that the total scores of high school test takers with high school test anxiety and English scores were significantly negatively correlated with pre-test anxiety, and the achievement goals were less correlated with high school test scores. Wang Xiaoxia (2006) pointed out that test anxiety is subject to individual achievement goals, self-efficacy, learning test skills, individual cognition, as well as parents and schools, and that cognitive-behavioral therapy, relaxation therapy, and systematic desensitization therapy can effectively reduce test anxiety. Chen Yingying (2015) also mentioned in her master's thesis that high school girls have higher levels of test anxiety than boys, and that girls are more concerned about the damage to their self-image when they fail and have severe somatic reactions.

Overall, despite the late start of research on test anxiety in China, research in this area has been deepening and progressing in recent years. Research has revealed the prevalence of test anxiety among students, a finding that highlights the importance and urgency of reducing the problem of test anxiety. Therefore, in-depth research on test anxiety not only has theoretical value, but also has far-reaching significance for teaching practice and students' psychological health.

3. The Causes of Junior High School Learners' Foreign Language Test Anxiety

Many studies have shown that the formation of test anxiety is complex, not only the individual's internal physiological and psychological factors, but also external school, family and social factors, test anxiety is formed under the combined effect of these factors. Below are a few of my observations on the causes of foreign language test anxiety in junior high school students.

3.1. Internal Physical and Mental Factors

In terms of physiological factors, the level of maturity may influence the level of test anxiety in middle school students to some extent. Junior high school students are in adolescence, which is a stage of rapid development of the nervous system and brain structure. Due to the relatively high excitability and sensitivity of the nervous system, junior high school students are more prone to nervousness and anxiety when facing a foreign language test, and this physiological immaturity may lead them to show excessive anxiety reactions during the test. At the same time, compared with adults, junior high school students are relatively weak in self-regulation and may have difficulty in effectively managing their emotions when facing stressful situations such as foreign language examinations, thus increasing their anxiety levels.

In terms of psychological factors, the main influences are individual perceptions and personality traits. When exploring the relationship between test anxiety and self-perception of competence, Zhang Chengfen (1992) pointed out that the higher the self-perception of competence, the lower the test anxiety would be. Huang Gaogui (2000) pointed out that low self-evaluation, low self-acceptance, and emotionally buffered coping styles are the causes of test anxiety. Meanwhile, different personality traits can have significant differences in test anxiety. Junior high school students are in a critical period of psychological development, students with choleric temperament and sanguine temperament types may be anxious due to mood swings and lack of patience; students with phlegmatic temperament types may be anxious due to lack of flexibility and inability to adapt; and students with melancholic temperament types may be anxious due to pessimism and negative emotions as well as inefficient learning state. Extraverted students' test anxiety levels tend to be at the extremes of high and low anxiety, whereas introverted students are prone to negative emotional experiences due to being overly concerned with themselves. In conclusion, personality factors are also an important internal factor affecting test anxiety in middle school students.

3.2. External Environmental Factors

The external environment factors affecting junior high school students' foreign language test anxiety mainly include family environment and social environment. In the family environment, parents' excessive demands on their children's learning: they only care about test scores and hope that their children will go to a major university; or bad education methods: lack of communication with their children, using inappropriate rewards and punishments, and aggravating their children's psychological pressure may lead to their children's foreign language test anxiety. In terms of the social environment, the value orientation of the whole society and the national education policy will affect the education style of schools and teachers, which in turn will affect the attitude and cognitive evaluation of junior high school students towards the examination. At the same time, students in junior high school are in a highly competitive academic environment, and comparison and competition among peers in English performance may lead to students worrying about their performance in the test, thus triggering anxiety.

In a word, the reasons affecting junior high school students' foreign language test anxiety are complex. In order to effectively alleviate junior high school students' foreign language test anxiety, it is necessary to comprehensively consider these influencing factors and provide appropriate support and assistance to students from various aspects.

4. Measures Taken to Overcome Junior High School Learners' Foreign Language Test Anxiety

Anxiety can have a negative impact on English learning. This paper proposes adjustment strategies and appropriate evaluation mechanisms for the causes of foreign language anxiety in

junior high school students in the hope that students' anxiety can be effectively adjusted to make their English learning easier and more efficient.

4.1. Reasonable Teaching and Learning Process

In order to alleviate junior high school students' foreign language learning anxiety, first of all, teachers should have an in-depth understanding of junior high school students' learning realities, including their language basics, learning styles and interests. Based on this basic information, they should design teaching activities at different levels and with different levels of difficulty to meet the learning needs of different students. Secondly, teachers should actively advocate cooperative learning and provide equal communication opportunities for every junior high school student. Through group discussions, role-playing and other activities, students are able to practice their oral and communicative English skills and reduce communicative intimidation. This positive learning atmosphere helps to improve students' self-confidence and reduce learning anxiety. Meanwhile, according to psychologist Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" theory, teachers should set the teaching difficulty in the zone of proximal development of students' intellectual level when designing teaching activities. Such difficulty settings can stimulate students' learning potential, enhance their experience of success, and thus reduce the emotional burden of learning. Finally, in the teaching process, teachers should pay special attention to students' emotions, especially those who are introverted or have learning difficulties. For these students, teachers should give more care and help, encourage them to participate in classroom activities, and provide personalized learning guidance and support. By building up their confidence in learning English, these students can gradually overcome the anxiety caused by their lack of self-confidence and participate more actively in English learning.

4.2. Democratic Teacher-Student Relations

English teaching requires communication and interaction between teachers and students, and a harmonious teacher-student relationship is the key to alleviating junior high school students' anxiety and realizing good interaction.

Under the system of quality education, constructing a new type of teacher-student relationship is especially important for alleviating junior high school students' foreign language learning anxiety. The core lies in the equality and mutual respect between teachers and students in terms of personality, and this relationship not only helps to create a positive learning atmosphere, but also significantly reduces junior high school students' learning anxiety. First of all, teachers should actively change their roles from traditional authoritative teachers to students' guides and friends. In foreign language learning, junior high school students may have anxiety due to language difficulty and communicative fear, etc. The teacher's transformation can make students feel more care and support, thus reducing anxiety. Secondly, teachers' concern for students should be carried out throughout the whole education process. After class, teachers can learn about students' emotional state and personality development by chatting with them and sharing their lives, so as to provide them with necessary help and support. This kind of all-round concern can make students feel the sincerity and care of teachers, thus enhancing their learning motivation and self-confidence. Finally, in the process of interacting with junior high school students, teachers' language should reflect respect and understanding for students. When students express their thoughts and confusions, teachers should listen carefully and give positive responses. At the same time, teachers should also encourage students to express their views so that they can feel their existence and value. This language of respect and understanding can make students feel the teacher's sincerity and motivation, so that they can participate in foreign language learning more actively.

4.3. Appropriate Evaluation Mechanisms

The motivation of junior high school students to learn a foreign language comes largely from the affirmation of others, especially the teacher's positive evaluation. Fear of negative evaluation is an important aspect of classroom anxiety: if the teacher's evaluation is inappropriate, such as too low or hard, it will dampen the students' motivation to learn. Therefore, teachers should actively encourage students and use flexible and vivid evaluation language to let students feel the sincerity and concern of teachers. Students who encounter difficulties in foreign language learning tend to be more prone to anxiety, so teachers should pay more attention to them and make positive evaluations in time, so that they can feel their progress and achievements, enhance their self-confidence, stimulate their learning motivation, and make them more willing to devote themselves to foreign language learning. At the same time, teachers should also pay attention to individual differences when evaluating students and avoid a one-size-fits-all evaluation method. Each student has his or her own learning rhythm and characteristics, and teachers should make targeted evaluations according to the actual situation of the students, so as to better meet the students' learning needs and reduce the anxiety of foreign language learning.

All in all, in response to the anxiety prevalent among junior high school students in the process of foreign language learning, the role and influence of teachers are of vital importance, and their active guidance and care is an important support for students to overcome their learning difficulties and make progress in learning. Teachers should actively adopt diversified anxiety regulation strategies to help junior high school students reduce or even eliminate foreign language learning anxiety, mobilize their learning enthusiasm, and make students more willing to learn and enjoy learning.

5. Conclusion

Anxiety has a greater negative impact on students' foreign language learning and physical and mental health, which has been confirmed by many studies at home and abroad. In English teaching, teachers should actively explore and flexibly use a variety of teaching methods to help students effectively regulate their emotional state by focusing on them and controlling their learning anxiety at a moderate level, so as to achieve the ultimate goal of optimizing the quality of English teaching as a whole.

In future studies related to the level of foreign language test anxiety among junior high school students, the effects of different psychological intervention methods (e.g., cognitive-behavioral therapy, psychoeducation, etc.) on junior high school students' foreign language test anxiety can also be examined and their effects can be compared. Or examine the characteristics and differences of middle school students' foreign language test anxiety in different cultural backgrounds and the corresponding relief measures. Thus, we will gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and influencing factors of foreign language test anxiety in junior high school students, and provide more comprehensive support for students' foreign language learning and psychological health.

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