

A Study on Senior High School Students' Learning Anxiety in Online English Learning Under the Context of COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: *Affected by the epidemic, high school English teaching still has to use online teaching mode in some cases. However, learning anxiety often accompanies the process of online English learning for high school students, which affects students' learning outcomes to a greater or less extent. Under this background, this paper tries to examine the issue of online English learning anxiety among high school students. And this paper mainly illustrates the negative effects of online English learning anxiety on high school students, analyses the causes from both objective and subjective perspectives, and proposes corresponding effective strategies for teachers, parents and students to alleviate the learning anxiety. This paper can help a wider group have a better understanding of online English learning anxiety among senior high school students, which can help students improve their online English learning effectiveness.*

Keywords: *COVID-19 Pandemic, Senior High School Students, English Learning Anxiety, Online Learning*

1. Introduction

*The New Senior Secondary English Language Standards (2017 Edition Revised 2020) clearly states that students should learn to use affective strategies in their English learning process^[1]. *The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition)* re-emphasizes that teachers need to pay attention to students' affective factors in the process of teaching English^[2]. This means that teachers are required to pay much more attention to the emotions that students display during the English learning process and to guide them in regulating their own emotions so as to maintain a positive attitude towards English learning.*

Foreign language learning anxiety, as one of the emotional factors that students inevitably experience in the process of their language learning, has been receiving attention from foreign language learning researchers at home and abroad since the 1940s. Previous researches have shown that students' English learning anxiety is influenced by many factors, and different factors can lead to different levels of learning anxiety and performance characteristics. A study has shown that unexpected events such as natural disasters and major public safety events can affect students' learning anxiety^[3]. Since the outbreak in 2020, the epidemic has been back-and-forth, and consequently the mode of teaching English in high schools has changed into online teaching, which has had an impact on the students' existing psychological state of learning. Based on such a background, this paper studies the issue of online English learning anxiety among high school students, analyses its causes, and gives some suggestions for online English teaching and learning.

2. Connotation of English Learning Anxiety

2.1. English Learning Anxiety

Anxiety is a normal emotional reflection, but excessive anxiety can have a negative effect on people. Many scholars made definitions of anxiety, for example, Professor Scovel pointed out that anxiety is a kind of sorrow accompanied by fear, that is, anxiety refers to the fear and worry of unknown or uncertain things^[4]. At the level of English learning, English learning anxiety is a manifestation of learners' lack of confidence, nervousness and panic, triggered by various factors in the process of English learning, which

can affect students' normal learning.

2.2. Classification of English Learning Anxiety

Different scholars have categorised foreign language learning anxiety in different ways, and the more authoritative classifications mainly include the following three ones. Depending on the sources of the learner's language anxiety, Ellis classified foreign language learning anxiety into three categories: trait anxiety, state anxiety and situation anxiety^[5]. In terms of the impact of foreign language learning anxiety on learners' academic performance, Alpert & Habe divided foreign language learning anxiety into facilitative anxiety and obstructive anxiety^[6]. At the level of learning in the foreign language class, Horwitz identified foreign language learning anxiety as communication anxiety, negative evaluation anxiety, and test anxiety^[7].

2.3. Online English Learning Anxiety

Drawing on the above scholars' definitions of foreign language learning anxiety, this paper considers online English learning anxiety as the negative emotions such as nervousness, lack of confidence, excessive worry and panic that students show during online English learning. That is, online English learning anxiety is a kind of situational anxiety related to the English class, and it is also an obstructive type of anxiety, which affects students' English learning effectiveness and learning outcomes.

3. Status Quo and Influence of Online English Learning Anxiety

This paper mainly analyzes the performance, influence, sources and mitigation strategies of online English learning anxiety among high school students in the context of the epidemic according to Horwitz's understanding of foreign language learning anxiety. In this part, the paper analyzes the status quo and impact of online English learning anxiety among high school students during the epidemic. Students' English learning anxiety was mainly manifested in three aspects: communication anxiety, negative evaluation anxiety and test anxiety.

Communicative anxiety refers to the anxiety that arises when students are unable to express their opinions accurately or understand the speaker with their limited vocabulary, and is mostly found in speaking and listening. Students who suffer from communicative anxiety do not readily intervene in others' conversations and are repulsed and intimidated by verbal communication. In online English learning, this group of students are afraid to speak in class and are reluctant to participate in class activities, which can prevent students from mastering English.

Negative evaluation anxiety is the anxiety that arises from the fear of making a bad impression on others or from the fear of others making a negative comment on you. Students who have negative evaluation anxiety often fail to express themselves clearly because they are so nervous, and in the long run they tend to lose their self-confidence in self-evaluation. This excessive worry about others' evaluation will cause or exacerbate their class learning anxiety.

Test anxiety is one of the most common forms of situational anxiety, which refers to the worry and fear that students experience before, during and after an exam. And this anxiety has a great negative impact on students' English learning especially when the exam is approaching.

4. Causes of Online English Learning Anxiety

The causes of anxiety in online English learning are diverse and complex, which can be analyzed from both objective and subjective perspectives. Objective factors mainly refer to the external environment of students, including teaching mode, learning burden, peer competition and others' evaluation, etc. Subjective factors simply refer to individual differences, including students' learning self-discipline, learning motivation, learning methods, learning ability, self-efficacy and emotional processing ability, etc. And the main sources of anxiety for high school students will be discussed in detail from both internal and external factors as follows.

4.1. External Causes

4.1.1. Changes in Teaching Model

Due to the recurring epidemic, English class for high school students often alternate between online and offline. This change in teaching mode can affect students' psychological state of learning, and can easily cause them to become anxious about learning English.

On the one hand, online English teaching demands high levels of self-discipline from students. If students do not complete their pre-class work effectively, they will have difficulty keeping up with the class. On the other hand, there is poor interaction in online English teaching. In the online English class, the atmosphere is rather dull as the teacher mostly explains knowledge and there is little interaction between teacher and students. In such a class atmosphere, students will become bored and less interested in English learning, thus becoming resistant or even fearful of learning English. The more relaxed and pleasant the English class atmosphere is, the less anxious students will be about learning English; conversely, the more anxious they will be about learning English^[8].

4.1.2. Study Pressure

In facing the challenges, teachers also face professional pressures such as pressure to teach and pressure to improve students' learning outcomes. However, teachers' teaching pressure can be transferred to student learning pressure, thus triggering students' anxiety about learning English^[9]. Besides, inappropriate competition between students can make them feel nervous in the learning process. In such an unhealthy competitive environment, students always worried about being surpassed by their peers, which is easy to trigger their learning anxiety. In addition, parents' excessive expectations and demands on students may also increase students' learning pressure, which can trigger their examination anxiety.

4.1.3. Negative Evaluation From Others

Negative evaluation is also one of the most important factors affecting students' online English learning anxiety. A research has shown that high school students are more likely to be anxious about negative evaluations in English learning. This is because students are at a stage in their psychological development when they are seeking self-identity and are easily influenced by the evaluations of themselves from others^[10].

4.2. Internal Causes

4.2.1. Low Self-discipline

During the online English learning period, students with low self-discipline are easy to be anxious about learning English, which is mainly manifested in the two stages: before and in class. For example, when undisciplined students do not complete their pre-class learning tasks on time and effectively before class, they will have difficulty in keeping up with the class. And they may not understand the content and questions asked by the teacher, thus creating nervousness, panic and anxiety.

4.2.2. Lack of Confidence and Fear of Communication

Lacking of confidence can exacerbate students' English learning anxiety. The most obvious characteristic of unconfident students in the online English class is their fear of communication, which is one of the main causes of their learning anxiety. Fan and Zhou found through the questionnaires that most of the students said that they were very nervous when conducting group debriefings and answering questions, and that this language anxiety was more evident in the online English class^[11]. What's more, unhealthy competition among peers can also exacerbate the learning anxiety of unconfident students. They perceive themselves as having insufficient English expression and poor communicative skills and therefore rarely take the initiative to speak in class.

4.2.3. Lack of Effective Learning Strategies

However, in the online English class, students may be constrained in their use of learning strategies. For example, when students want to seek help from their peers in the class, they can not communicate with each other as they do in the offline class. This prevents students from using communicative strategies effectively to address learning difficulties. When students fail to seek help, they are unable to keep up with the class, thus triggering or exacerbating their feelings of anxiety about learning English.

Students' learning motivation is also one of the factors that influence their online English learning anxiety. A study by Luo and Zhu showed that highly motivated students also experienced higher levels

of learning anxiety despite having high levels of learning strategies^[12]. This is because when students are overly motivated to learn, they also have relatively high requirements for themselves and have less tolerance for making mistakes in class. In such a situation, they are under a lot of psychological pressure and thus show extreme tension in class, which triggers their learning anxiety.

5. Suggestions for Relief Online English Learning Anxiety

5.1. Suggestions for Teachers

5.1.1. Enhancing Online Teaching Competence

Online teaching, as an emerging teaching model, requires teachers to have professional online teaching competence, for example, the ability to manipulate the online class. In online English teaching, teachers should pay attention to making the class more interesting and stimulating students' enjoyment of English learning. In a relatively isolated online learning environment, teachers need to strengthen the communication with students, which can help students devote themselves to their study. In addition, teachers need to organically combine English teaching with emotional care to create a relaxed and harmonious online class atmosphere for students. In such a class atmosphere, it can help reduce the possibility of students' anxiety about learning English.

5.1.2. Enhancing Students' Self-confidence

Self-confidence is very important to students' English learning. If students lack it, they will tend to be anxious about English learning. So English teachers should encourage students as much as they can to enhance students' self-confidence in English learning. For example, when correcting errors, teachers should avoid using overly strict correction words, as overly negative comments can cause negative evaluation anxiety in students. And teachers should give more positive comments to students, which will help to increase their self-efficacy in English learning. After class, when students encounter English learning problems, teachers should encourage students to face the problems with a active attitude, and help students solve their problems, which can effectively avoid students' English learning anxiety.

5.1.3. Teaching Students Learning Strategies

Learning strategies include meta-cognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, communicative strategies and affective strategies, etc. The effective selection and use of strategies is a means of aiding understanding and expression, enhancing learning efficiency, and is essential for students to develop independent and lifelong learning skills.

Teachers should teach not only knowledge but also some learning strategies to their students in the class. For example, teachers can guide students to develop a reasonable English learning plan, as well as short-term and long-term goals for their English learning. After setting goals, teachers need to teach students to acquire the ability to self-monitor. In the early stages of self-monitoring learning, teachers can first act as supervisors, giving students stage rewards for completing appropriate targets.

5.1.4. Paying More Attention to Students' Mental Health

Teachers need to maintain active communication with students and their parents to keep an eye on students' mental health. Besides, teachers need to gain insight into the level of students' anxiety about learning English and provide timely assistance to them. Moreover, teachers can also discuss with the headteacher to conduct a class session on topics related to relieving learning anxiety. Such a class session can help students form an objective view of learning anxiety, learn how to attribute the sources of their learning anxiety and find effective strategies to relieve the anxiety.

5.2. Suggestions for Students

5.2.1. Enhancing Self-discipline Learning Awareness

Students are expected to have a proper attitude towards online English learning, and they should value online learning and increase their sense of self-discipline in learning. More specifically, students need to complete homework assignments on time and prepare well for online class. In doing so, they can keep up with the teacher and they are more willing to take a active part in class activities, which can reduce the possibility of a feeling of nervousness, panic and anxiety.

In addition, students need to increase their investment to learning English. When students invest more

time, energy and emotion in their English learning, they will have more positive experiences from it, thus experiencing the joy of learning English. At the same time, having a greater emotional and operational engagement in English learning can help students improve their academic achievement in English. As a result, their self-confidence and sense of efficacy in learning can be enhanced.

5.2.2. Clarifying Learning Objectives and Mastering Learning Methods

Students need to have clear learning goals for English learning. When students have clearer learning goals, they are able to engage in online English learning with a more positive attitude, thus reducing negative emotional experiences in the class. It is also essential for students to have a scientific approach to online English learning, which can reduce their learning stress and make the learning much more effective. For example, in online English learning, they can combine both autonomic learning and cooperative learning methods to effectively solve the difficulties they encounter in learning.

5.2.3. Increasing Confidence in Learning

Negative evaluation by others can easily trigger students' English learning anxiety, and students should not be overly concerned about the negative evaluations of themselves by others. Besides, students should not limit their evaluation of themselves to test results only, but make objective evaluations of themselves from multiple perspectives. What's more, Students should not magnify their shortcomings, but be good at finding their strengths. More importantly, students should not be afraid of making mistakes or overly concerned about their own performance. They should be actively involved in the class and be willing to speak up in class.

5.2.4. Daring to Ask for Help

Facing with learning anxiety, students should learn to use effective affective strategies to alleviate this negative emotional experience. When students feel stressed and anxious about learning English, there is no need to hide it or suffer it alone, they can actively seek help from others. Experienced teachers are able to provide appropriate psychological support to students and analyse the sources of their anxiety, and then provide effective strategies for them. In addition, effective communication among classmates can also help to alleviate students' learning anxiety. In communication, they empathize with each other, which helps them to understand that it is common to feel anxious. And they can also share with each other ways to relieve the anxiety.

5.3. Suggestions for Parents

Parents play a vital role in helping to alleviate their children' learning anxiety. Here are some suggestions for parents to help their children relieve their learning anxiety. Firstly, parents should not have excessively high expectations and demands on their children, which can cause students' learning stress and learning anxiety. Secondly, parents need to communicate regularly with their children. Through communication, parents can understand the state of their children's mental health better. And they can guide their children out of negative emotions when necessary. What's more, parents also need to provide as much material support and assistance as possible in their children's English learning process.

6. Conclusion

There are a variety of reasons for online English learning anxiety, ranging from external reasons from teachers and parents to internal reasons from students themselves. Online English learning anxiety has a negative impact on students' learning effectiveness and outcomes. Therefore, teachers and parents should help students reduce their anxiety about learning English.

As for English teachers, we need to create a harmonious online learning environment for our students, stimulate their interest in learning English and boost their confidence in mastering English. As for parents, they should actively communicate with their children, lower their demands and expectations of their children' study, encourage and support their children as much as possible. As for students themselves, they need to realize that their anxiety about learning English is universal and they should be rational about such negative emotions. When they find themselves experiencing such emotions, they need to actively seek help to find effective strategies to alleviate the anxiety.

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