

The Influence of Reading Anxiety on English Reading Achievement

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Abstract. In recent years, researchers have begun to study the relationship between reading anxiety and foreign language achievement. In China, reading is the most important way of obtaining English knowledge and accounts for a great proportion in various examinations. The traditional teaching method; however, leads to the lack of cultural background, ambiguity tolerance and discourse awareness. As a result, relatively high anxiety exists in students' reading comprehension and influences their reading achievement. Therefore, it is necessary to study reading anxiety. The aim of the thesis is to summarize the previous researches and experimental results and to investigate the influence of reading anxiety on English reading achievement, which provides teaching implications for English reading teaching.

Introduction

Since 1970s, the focus of second language acquisition has shifted from the way that teachers teach to the way that learners learn. It is more and more realized that the success of second language acquisition depends largely on the learner himself. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests that learners are distracted by affective factors in second language acquisition, while foreign language anxiety is one of the most important affective variables in it.

Later, most anxiety studies investigated the relationship between anxiety and foreign language achievement. Results have consistently revealed moderate negative correlation between foreign language anxiety and foreign language achievement in the classroom. According to the findings, when anxiety is associated with learning a foreign language, it can manifest itself in "deficits in listening comprehension, impaired vocabulary learning, reduced word production, low scores on standardized tests, low grades in language courses or a combination of these factors" (Gardner, 1997).

In recent years, researchers have begun to study the relationship between reading anxiety and foreign language achievement. Satio et.al. and Seller have investigated the relationship between reading anxiety and foreign language achievement, the results shows that foreign language reading anxiety exists as a phenomenon, students' reading anxiety levels increase with their perceptions of the difficulty of reading in their foreign language, and the higher levels of foreign reading anxiety is, the lower scores of achievement is. In China, Chen Suhong' experimental study shows that the level of reading anxiety of the failing students is significantly higher than those of the passing students, and female students are influenced by reading anxiety more easily. Deng Huan' experimental study about learners' emotion of reading anxiety and learners' reading efficiency shows that learners'emotion of reading anxiety not only exerts a positive influence but also exerts a negative influence which indicate the double effects of reading anxiety. ShiYunzhang' study about freshmen of English major shows that the level of reading anxiety of Chinese college students is obviously higher than American students who are the beginners of learning foreign language, and negatively correlated with scores of both CET4 and reading comprehension.

From above background introduction, it can be clearly seen that there exist language anxiety and reading anxiety among foreign language learners, moreover these anxieties influence their foreign language achievement. Based on these findings, the author attempts to investigate the relationship between reading anxiety and English reading achievement.

Anxiety

Definitions of Anxiety

Although “anxiety” is a term frequently used in both educational and research contexts, definitions to this concept are varied. The definition of anxiety has frequently changed with the purpose of the research and comparisons across research studies are often hindered by a lack of consistency in anxiety research

Very few researchers, taking the role of personality into consideration, offered a definition of anxiety as “the apprehension cued off by a threat to some value that the individual holds essential to his existence as a personality”. Spielberger (1972) offered a cognitive perspective of anxiety as “an unpleasant emotional state or condition which is characterized by subjective feeling of tension, apprehension and worry, and by activation or arousal of the autonomic nervous system that accompanies these feelings”. Scovel defines anxiety as an emotional state of “apprehension. a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object” (Scovel, 1978). Horwitz defines it as a “subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system (Horwitz et al, 1986).”

Effects of Anxiety on Learning Achievement

Over the last several decades, a lot of researches have been done to clarify the relationship between anxiety and achievement. Actually, their relationship has been one of the most closely examined subjects in all psychology and education (Horwitz, 2001). Previous studies of the effects of anxiety on learners’ learning achievement in class have produced mixed and confusing results. Alpert examined the different effects of anxiety on learners’ performance. They held that anxiety has double effect: it can be either facilitating or debilitating. The former is facilitating anxiety, which affects learning and achievement positively, and the latter is debilitating anxiety, which hampers learning and performance. They found a positive correlation between facilitating anxiety and grade-point average, and a negative correlation between debilitating anxiety and grade-point average. To address the possibility that some anxiety may actually improve achievement, Eysenck further posited that anxious individuals would compensate for the increased cognitive demands by increased efforts and that “the extent to which anxiety either facilitates or impairs performance was determined by the extent to which high-anxiety subjects compensate for reduced processing effectiveness by enhanced efforts”. Eysenck’s theory is similar to the well-known Yerkes-Dodson Law. This “law” delineates a curvilinear relationship between anxiety and achievement as a function of task difficulty.

Although some of the previous researches point out the possibility of beneficial effect of anxiety on achievement, it is important to note that its negative effects have been more apparently seen in the literature of psychology and education. For instance, high levels of anxiety have been shown to be negatively correlated with: IQ, aptitude, academic achievement in a wide range of subjects (such as foreign language, math, natural sciences, psychology, and mechanical knowledge), problem solving, memory, and grades. A majority of subsequent researches on language anxiety has also achieved consensus on negative relations between anxiety and language achievement. Following this, anxiety is typically considered as the major factor associated with these achievement decrements.

From the above findings, it can be said that achievement, in general, is negatively affected by anxiety, which creates the cognitive distraction of task-irrelevant thinking.

Reading Anxiety

The General Idea of Reading Anxiety

Reading anxiety being regarded as less experienced by students (Young, 1992) has long been neglected in anxiety research. Not until the late 1990s did research on foreign language reading anxiety appear. In 1999, Saito, Horwitz and Garza carried out a preliminary study of reading anxiety

among the students in 30 intact first-semester classes of Spanish, Russian and Japanese. In their paper, they introduce the construct of foreign language reading anxiety and develop Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) as its measurement.

Studies on Reading Anxiety Abroad

Saito et al. (1999) is the earliest and prominent figures pioneering in the study of specific foreign language reading anxiety. Saito et al. not only gave a clear relationship between reading anxiety and general foreign language learning anxiety but also designed a Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS), which was the first specific instrument and measurement to demonstrate and measure the level and condition of specific foreign language reading anxiety. According to his study, the students with the higher level of foreign language reading anxiety and general foreign language learning anxiety would get the lower grades in their final exams.

Sellers (2000) carried out a study of relationship between anxiety and reading comprehension in Spanish as a foreign language. His study showed that: foreign language reading anxiety is unique and distinguishable from general foreign language anxiety, learners with higher levels of foreign language anxiety also tend to have higher levels of foreign language reading anxiety and vice versa, moreover, learners with higher levels of anxiety have the tendency to experience more “off-task thoughts” and recollect fewer important and less systematic language points than learners with lower levels of anxiety.

Athey and Lee investigated the relationship between anxiety and reading in a foreign language and ascertained that anxiety may indeed impair students’ reading achievement.

Studies on Reading Anxiety at Home

In our country, some researchers begin to study the foreign language reading anxiety, and the study of Wen Qiufang should be the most systematical and reliable. They give the definition of reading anxiety which is the relatively personal negative feeling shown in the process of foreign language reading and learning. They found that: the levels of reading anxiety experienced by Chinese university students were higher than those of American students; the levels of reading anxiety of males were significantly higher than those of females, a significant negative correlation between reading anxiety and language achievement has also been found.

Wen Qiufang also conducted a study on effects of writing, speaking and reading anxiety on English achievement of English majors. The findings showed that students with medium levels of anxiety perform better than students with high or low levels of anxiety. What’s more, she also found that students lack confidence and tolerance of ambiguity when reading relatively longer English materials.

Chen’s study should be the earliest one on the English reading anxiety used the FLRAS in China. Chen defines foreign language reading anxiety as a kind of nervous and worried feeling produced during the process of foreign language reading. Her study focuses on the relationship between reading anxiety and scores of vocational students. She also gets the similar conclusion that there is the negative relationship between the two variables but the processes of using statistics in her study are too simple.

Among all of the studies above, researches by Saito et al. (1999) and Wen Qiufang (1997) specially stimulated the present study and paved a good way. However, none of them focuses on the relationship between reading anxiety and English reading achievement. This situation motivates the author to further research in the field.

Teaching Implications

The research findings may provide a number of pedagogical implications for the college English reading teaching.

Firstly, teachers should realize the important role that reading anxiety play in reading comprehension, which will help teachers to develop proper awareness and take appropriate measures to reduce and control anxiety arising from reading.

Secondly, learning context should be less stressful. Combined with the findings of those previous studies, the following suggestions for reading anxiety reduction are offered. If reading anxiety is widely found, teachers should be aware of reading difficulties and possible anxiety when giving reading assignments, and make full preparation for them. For example, even at the beginning of reading class, teachers can tell them it is natural and common to have reading anxieties due to the intrinsic characteristics of foreign language learning.

Thirdly, in order to make reading itself less stressful, strategy training for reading, especially extensive reading, is urgently needed to help students overcome their unrealistic expectations for understanding everything they read and develop their critical reading ability. Considering male students have higher anxiety when reading, and use less reading strategies, improving males' engagement in reading in order to ensure that all students realize their potential. For instance, male students can be organized to form different English reading-interest groups consisting of mere roommates. Each group member is encouraged to share his views or difficulties with others based on his understanding of the reading materials, then seminar can be held each week to exchange their experience reactions and comments after reading. All this should be done in a friendly, relaxed, helpful and atmosphere. In addition, lectures concerning successful reading strategies should be accompanied to solve the problems encountered.

Fourthly, it is strongly recommended offering American and British Culture course to students, because culture triggers the highest level of reading anxiety. In addition, more lectures on culture and diverse topics are suggested to broaden their academic envision. As for the culture of learning, both teachers and students should be sensitive to that and transform their beliefs, then work out solutions.

Finally, teachers should pay special attention to cultivating students' confidence in reading, for low self-confidence and capability trigger reading anxiety. The following advices are suggested: a) When assigning homework, select authentic, materials that are at an appropriate level of difficulty. By doing so, students' interests in reading and sense of achievement can be gradually developed. b) Enhance college students' awareness of self-confidence. c) Create more changes for students to experience success in reading English, heighten their motivations and reinforce their positive self-concepts about reading. d) In the face of students' errors and low achievement, teachers should be patient enough. Instead of harsh correction and criticism, give them more encouragement.

In teaching reading, collaborative teaching and task-based teaching are useful to help alleviate reading anxiety. Of course, the existence of reading anxiety does not imply that English teachers should pay less attention to other forms of language anxiety particularly the anxiety associated with listening and speaking English.

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