

# Foreign Language Listening Anxiety and Listening Performance: Results of A Mixed-Method Study

Yuyao Li

**Abstract**—This study explored the relationship between listening anxiety and listening performance in a total of 30 bilingual learners. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were distributed: (a) the Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale tested listeners' anxiety level, and (b) the semi-structured interview looked further into participants' perceptions. The results programmed by SPSS Statistics 25 showed that anxiety level has no significant impact on listening performance. Interview results did fully support the relationship found in the survey. Most participants did not perceive themselves to be anxious in the middle of listening but they showed highest anxiety towards the pre-listening stage. They indicated that there is a positive relationship between performance and listening skills, as well as between anxiety and listening skills. This study presents results and discusses the related pedagogical implications.

**Index Terms**—Anxiety, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS), listening performance.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Listening, as one of many language learning skills, is highly valued by second/foreign language (L2) researchers in relation to anxiety, which has been one of the most investigated affective factors in language learning [1], [2]. Anxiety accompanies the listening task and is difficult to detect. Krashen asserted that listening comprehension can indeed be “highly anxiety provoking” [3], and Horwitz *et al.* [4] found that strong anxiety existed in listening. With the increasing emphasis on listening skill, anxiety thus merits closer examination. Research contexts such as investigating aspects of individual behavior or contextual characteristics that are difficult to understand with a single method can particularly benefit from a mixed methods approach [5]. The investigation of the influence of anxiety, a psychological state, and its relationship, in this case to the learning of English in listening, is a typical research situation that might benefit from a mixed-methods approach. Therefore, the author regards anxiety as an affective variable in listening by adopting a mixed-methods approach: questionnaire & interview, to investigate how anxiety relate to and affect listening performance among EFL learners.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Theoretical Background: Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis

The concept of the affective filter, initially posited by

Dulay and Burt [6], acts to prevent input from being used for language acquisition (see Fig. 1).

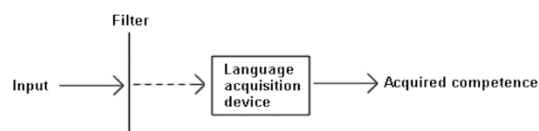


Fig. 1. Operation of the “affective filter”.

According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis [1], affective variables related to success in second language acquisition fall into three categories: motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. Affective variables such as anxiety that has a very potent influence on the affective filter may impede or facilitate the delivery of input to the language acquisition device (LAD). The affective filter acts as a barrier to acquisition: if the filter is down, the input reaches the LAD and becomes acquired competence; if the filter is up, the input is blocked and does not reach the LAD. Acquirers vary with the level of their affective filters and anxiety level. Those who has not optimal attitudes are hypothesized to have a high or strong affective filter that prevents full acquisition from taking place.

### B. Research on Listening Anxiety

Listening anxiety is a complicated construct influenced by internal and external factors, such as proficiency level [2] and emotional strategies [7]. In this way, listening anxiety testing is a complicated process for it may consist of current test anxiety and potential communication apprehension. In 2005, Elkhafaifi adapted Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) from the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) developed by Saito, Y., Garza, T., & Horwitz, E. It has been firstly tested in listening. In addition to speaking and writing skills, listening comprehension can indeed be highly anxiety provoking.

Before elaborating the precise definition of listening anxiety, it is necessary to refer to foreign language (FL) anxiety. Horwitz and Cope [4] defined FL anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 128). General FL anxiety is consistently present for many students; however, other students have reported “situation specific anxieties” [8] that related to a particular situation, such as speaking or listening. MacIntyre [9] recognized that language anxiety is a form of situational anxiety and that research of this field should be conducted in specific L2 contexts. Huang [10] revealed that trait anxiety and language anxiety both significantly and negatively impacted speaking test performance. Thus, listening anxiety and FL learning anxiety are separate but related phenomena [11]. Horwitz *et al.* [4]

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determined that anxiety plays an important role in determining students' success or failure in FL classes. But FL listening is a less thoroughly studied skill in general [11]; to date, research findings are not entirely identical in investigating the relationship between anxiety and listening performance. Elkhafaifi [11] confirmed that listening anxiety correlates negatively with achievement in Arabic courses. Deng [12] indicated that listening anxiety has significant negative effects on listening proficiency within 250 Chinese non-English majors. However, Macros-Llinás [2] claimed that language anxiety differs across proficiency level; in other words, learners with a high level of anxiety do not typically exhibit lower course achievement.

Among previous studies, anxiety has emerged as an important variable correlating with listening performance. Hence, it is no surprise that this empirical study has been targeted at this field. Due to inconsistent study results, then, this study aims to define the relationships between anxiety and listening performance. As the reviewed literature shows, experimental investigations have demonstrated promising results. However, qualitative investigation of the relationship between listening anxiety and performance has yet to be identified. This study seeks to fill that research gap.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Participants

Thirty domestic EFL learners were recruited; among the 30 total participants, three volunteers were invited to have a detailed semi-structured interview. EFL learners refer to those who had/have enrolled in non-English majors in Chinese universities. Three consenting survey participants were given further interviews. These interviewees represented a balanced sample in terms of listening scores (each level: high, medium, and low). Interviewees' pseudonyms were chosen to reflect their gender, and the names are presented in a sequence of their listening proficiency levels from high to low (see Table I).

TABLE I: INTERVIEWEE PROFILE

Listening proficiency level		
High	Medium	Low
Leo (Male)	Queenie (Female)	Mike (Male)

#### B. Instruments

##### 1) Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS)

Elkahafaifi [11] adapted FLLAS from the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) by Saito, Garza, and Horwitz [13] and first tested it for listening. The FLLAS had a coefficient of .96 ( $n = 233$ ) for internal consistency with 20 items, each measured on a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (see Appendix A). Higher scores indicated more anxiety in language listening behaviour.

##### 2) Semi-structured interview

The interview was prepared and organized from three perspectives: listening anxiety, self-belief and listening skills,

which are also three sub-factors validated in the FLLAS questionnaire [14]. For example, the interviewee was asked about the perception of foreign language listening anxiety in relation to CET-4 performance and test anxiety in different stages and possible reasons for such anxiety. The whole online interview questions were transcribed verbatim in Chinese and then translated into English (see Appendix B).

#### C. Listening Scores

It is difficult to define students' listening performance based on observation or subjective evaluation. The CET-4 [College English Test Band 4] is one of most widely accepted tests admitted by Chinese authoritative official agencies to certify English proficiency, comprehension ability, and listening skills.

#### D. Procedures

The survey questionnaire for this study was sent to 31 invited participants via the Wenjuanxing platform. Questionnaires were withdrawn and then screened and excluded if any had low completion and reliability. Next, the anxiety data and listening scores were input into the SPSS Statistics 25 software for further explorations. Then, three volunteers from different listening levels (high/medium/low) were selected for in-depth semi-structured interviews.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### A. Survey Results

We found no significant interaction of anxiety on listening performance among EFL learners ( $r = .033$ ,  $p = .864$ ; see Table II). L2 listening is a complicated process that involves high attention, short-term memory, prediction, and evaluation; to some extent, it is predicated to produce anxiety, thus affecting the cognitive processing. Anxiety usually stands out as a main blocking factor for affective language learning, but anxiety has two functions: one is facilitation that motivates and makes learners alert and attentive, and the other is debilitation that causes learners to "flee" the learning task [15]. William [16] suggested that the distinction between these two types may correspond to the intensity of the anxiety, with a low-anxiety state having a facilitating function and a high-anxiety state a debilitating effect. Further, two kinds of anxiety may sometimes cancel each other out, resulting in no apparent effect on achievement. In the current study, the anxiety level among those in the domestic EFL group was average ( $M = 64.23$ ,  $SD = 10.08$ ), therefore suggesting little effect of anxiety on participants, which supports the findings by Ehrman and Oxford [17] and Macros-Llinás [2].

TABLE II: THE CORRELATION MATRIX OF EFL LEARNERS

FLLA		
	Pearson Correlation	.033
CET-4	Sig. (2-tailed)	.864
	N	30

#### B. Interview Results

The interview looked further into participants' perception of listening anxiety from three perspectives: first, how did they feel about listening anxiety in the context of the CET-4 and their assessment of anxiety in three stages: pre-test, mid-test and post-test; second, what do they think about listening

skills or strategies and the relationship between that and anxiety. The last part includes more free questions about other variables they think that play a role in listening comprehension and their expected classroom atmosphere.

### *1) Listening anxiety*

None of interviewees perceived him or herself to be affected by anxiety, except for Mike. He described that sometimes anxiety has a negative effect on his performance and results in listening ambiguity and hesitation. However, Leo said that, compared with anxiety, English competence is more directly related to listening scores. Leo's view of competence was echoed by Queenie, who expressed a similar idea occurring in the process of listening. The only student who mentioned that he did not feel any sort of anxiety in CET-4 test because he had a high level of self-confidence was from the low proficiency group of participants. Two of the interviewees reported that they had the highest degree of anxiety in the pre-listening stage because of insufficient preparation and worries about the unknown. Amid listening, they concentrated on questions and had no time to worry about anxiety; even less so after the test.

### *2) Listening skills*

When it comes to listening skills or strategies, three interviewees were quite similar on the choice of strategies such as mental translation, semantic inference and highlight keywords. As for mental translation, the most widely used strategy, the participants' opinions differed slightly. Mike considered that mother tongue has both pros and cons on English learning and that depends on personal cases. The high-proficiency student, Leo, regarded mother tongue as a negative factor. However, all of them realized that, listening skills has a positive effect on understanding questions and improving listening scores. Queenie also mentioned that she felt less anxious when she used pre-reading strategy. Additionally, as for anxiety related to listening skills, Leo and Mike believed that anxiety would increase the possibility of using listening strategies, however, they did share different idea on whether the use of skills would reduce anxiety. For Queenie, she felt less anxiety when she was focusing on answering questions, thus anxiety and listening skills do not correlate as closely for her.

### *3) Other affective factors*

Both reading and writing ability were highly valued in high school and universities, while listening was not. English teaching focused less on listening and more on grammar and overall understanding of articles. With listening, the lack of opportunities to practice prevented the students from improving their proficiency. Queenie felt she suffered more difficulty in listening because of her vocabulary. Leo, Queenie and Mike commented that motivation, difficulty, personal feelings, L2 environment could affect listening performance. For example, some students are resistant to the listening practice which causes poor listening performance, Queenie said.

## V. CONCLUSION

This empirical study verified the correlation between anxiety and listening performance and was conducted in domestic EFL learners, resulting in a new finding that anxiety has no relationship with listening performance. Interview results indicated that most students did not perceive

themselves to be very anxious in CET-4 listening testing environment. However, they did express their anxiety toward the pre-listening stage. In addition, these students considered themselves to be experienced with listening skills and were good at using them under pressure. These studies support a relationship between anxiety and listening skills. An understanding of anxiety and listening skills provides a rationale for a careful investigation of EFL learners in China. Practically, a great deal of attention should be paid to the pedagogical implications. For example, anxiety will increase the possibility of students using strategies; thus, L2 instructors could teach students how to use strategies under stressful conditions. More research into the exploration of affected variables was also indicated. Learners' L1/L2 skills, L2 environment, motivation, learning habits are some of factors to be considered in future studies of anxiety in listening performance. However, the inherent limitation in the current study was the small sample size with a lot of variations (e.g., location). If possible, future researchers exploring this topic should expand the number of group members and select participants under fair conditions (e.g., the same university or location); results from such studies could be convincing.

## APPENDIX

### Appendix A: Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS)

\*Please indicate whether you *1) Strongly Disagree, 2) Disagree, 3) Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4) Agree, or 5) Strongly Agree*. Read each statement carefully, give your first reaction to each statement, and mark an answer for every statement.

**Note that there are no right or wrong responses to any of the items on this questionnaire.**

1. I get upset when I'm not sure whether I understand what I'm hearing in English.
2. When I listen to English, I often understand the words but still can't quite understand what the speaker is saying.
3. When I'm listening to English, I get so confused I can't remember what I've heard.
4. I feel intimidated whenever I have a listening passage in English to listen to.
5. I am nervous when I am listening to a passage in English when I'm not familiar with the topic.
6. I get upset whenever I hear unknown grammar while listening to English.
7. When listening to English I get nervous and confused when I don't understand every word.
8. It bothers me to encounter words I can't pronounce while listening to English.
9. I usually end up translating word by word when I'm listening to English.
10. By the time YOU get past the strange sounds in English, it's hard to remember what you're listening to.
11. I am worried about all the new sounds you have to learn to understand spoken English.
12. I enjoy listening to English.
13. I feel confident when I am listening to English.
14. Once you get used to it, listening to English is not so difficult.
15. The hardest part of learning English is learning to understand spoken English.
16. I would be happy just to learn to read English rather than having to learn to understand spoken English.
17. I don't mind listening to English by myself but I feel very uncomfortable when I have to listen to English in a group.
18. I am satisfied with the level of listening comprehension in English that I have achieved so far.
19. English culture and ideas seem very foreign to me.
20. You have to know so much about English history and culture in order to understand spoken English.

(Queenie)

**1. What kind of strategies or methods you will use in English listening test? At least three of them.**

Read choices ahead and guess the topic and important parts of questions

Write down keywords

Mental translation

**2. Do you think listening skills or strategic awareness will affect listening performance? Is it a positive or a negative impact?**

Yes, I think if I read choices ahead can to some extent reduce my anxiety in listening and it is convenient for me to catch related important content by reading ahead.

**3. Please rank the anxiety level among three periods: pre-test, mid-test, post-test and explain the reasons.**

Anxiety level: pre>post>mid

Before listening test, I am anxious and worried about the unknown for example I will worry about if I cannot finish all questions; after the test, I know the result and that depends on my basic competence; in the middle of listening, I fully concentrate on answering questions and can calm myself down.

**4. As far as you're concerned, why do you produce anxiety in the pre-test, mid-test and post-test periods?**

For example, pre-listening anxiety comes from my poor listening skills and ability and little confidence on English listening; mid-listening anxiety comes from uncertainty on several unheard questions; post-listening anxiety is about whether my answer sheet is filled correctly.

**5. Do you think anxiety will influence your listening performance? in a positive or negative way?**

I think it will but in a minimal way because I focused on answering and listening instead poor listening ability will largely influence my final score.

**6. Do you think learning listening skills or strategies awareness will increase/decrease your anxiety? Likewise, do you think anxiety will increase/decrease your awareness of using listening skills or strategies?**

I think anxiety and listening skills do not correlate as closely for me. Listening strategies acts as an assistant tool and helps me more quickly find out right answer. When I concentrated on answering, I feel less anxious.

**7. What do you think of your English listening level? Which part do you think is the most difficult?**

I think my listening competence is not so good and my scores is in a middle level. I can almost get foreigners' ideas in daily chatting but it is difficult for me to understand academic listening. The most difficult part is my vocabulary. I think that insufficient vocabulary (especially nouns) affects my performance in conversation and understanding academic lecture.

**8. What do you think causes your listening difficulty?**

External factors such as noises, mental state but the most fundamental difficulty is my poor vocabulary.

**9. Did you ever take any English listening class? What do you think is the biggest difference between listening practice and listening test?**

No. When I was doing classroom exercises, I was relaxed and not worried about my scores but in the actual examination environment, I was worried.

**10. Apart from listening anxiety and listening strategies, what other factors do you think will affect listening performance?**

Learning motivation. For example, some students don't like English and reject doing listening exercise.

**11. Do you think your mother tongue (Chinese) has potential influence on English learning? in a positive or negative way? Please give me an example.**

I don't know.

**12. If you were an English teacher, what kind of ways of teaching you will take in teaching student listening?**

I will put students in a relatively more relaxed environment and intrigue students' interests by watching English TV series and listening English songs.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author, Yuyao Li, contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript and approved the final version.

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