

# A Study on Foreign Language Listening Anxiety of English Majors in a Chinese University

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**Abstract**—Anxiety is one of the affective factors which plays a significant role in the teaching learning process. This study makes an inquiry into foreign language listening anxiety among L2 English majors in a Chinese university with its focus on students' learning experience. It seeks to reveal the dilemmas encountered by L2 English majors in the foreign language listening process. It also explores how these anxiety factors influence L2 English majors. The Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) from Kim and a semi-structured one-by-one interview are employed in the study. The sources of English majors' English listening anxiety found in this study are: vocabulary recognition, grasping the main idea, and detailed information, the speed of the delivery, lack of background knowledge of the listening material, speakers' accent, and high requirement of memory and attention. The study results also indicate that anxious listeners tend to engage in excessive self-evaluation, worry over potential failure, and concern over others' opinions. The study's findings also have some pedagogical implications for English listening courses for undergraduate students, especially English major students.

**Index Terms**—Anxiety factors, foreign language listening anxiety, L2 English majors

## I. INTRODUCTION

As one of the affective factors, anxiety, especially listening anxiety, affects the foreign language learning and teaching process. This study aims to find out foreign language listening anxiety among L2 English majors in a Chinese university. According to Spielberg, "Anxiety is the subjective feeling of nervousness, tension, apprehension, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system." Some symptoms of anxiety are self-belittling, feeling of apprehension, and even bodily responses such as a faster heartbeat (Mitchell and Myles).

Listening in a foreign or second language is a cognitively demanding process, including the coordination of memory, attention, perceptual processes, and also comprehension processes, yet some listeners are limited in attention and processing capacity (Rossman and McLeod). Many listeners in the listening process experience some degree of tension, frustration, and nervousness when they attempt to comprehend even the simplest foreign language message, especially when they cannot control the speed, volume, and topic of the speech. In reading comprehension, language learners can manage the input; however, listeners in the listening process have fewer chances of repetition and correction since the delivery rate of information is totally controlled by the speaker. Kim [1] from The University of

Texas Austin found that if listeners do not have appropriate listening competence, they may fail in decoding discrete information, even losing the first significant items of information. Thus, listeners may experience anxiety when they are not allowed to control the intake of the utterance.

Compared with the studies of foreign language listening anxiety in China, overseas research has covered a much wider field, including the influence of cognitive factors, pragmatic, and affective factors, listening teaching, multimedia environment, listening evaluation, academic listening, and language form in foreign language listening. Yet only five aspects of them have been studied at home, and in recent ten years, the number of studies on this topic has accounted for just 0.2% of the papers published in the major linguistic journals.

From the above it can be concluded that most of the studies in China underestimate the impact of affective factors on foreign language learning. Meanwhile, academic research on this issue in China started late, and the study on one specific language skill, such as listening, is limited. Given this situation, this study is designed to find out the causes and influence of foreign language listening anxiety among L2 English majors.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Early studies on anxiety date back to the mid-1960s. These studies failed to find evidence of the effect of general anxiety on second language learning. One problem was that they did not find a good way of measuring anxiety. In 2001, according to Horwitz [2], a rational solution was suggested to this problem by arguing that language researchers should be specific about the type of anxiety they are measuring. Generally, two important anxiety distinctions are mentioned:

### A. Beneficial/ Facilitating vs. Inhibiting/Debilating Anxiety

Facilitating anxiety motivates learners to fight the new learning task and encourages them to make extra efforts to overcome their anxiety. In contrast, debilitating anxiety makes learners flee from the learning task so as to avoid listening anxiety as Ellis's study in [3]. He also mentioned that a low-anxiety state facilitates the learning process, while a high-anxiety state has a debilitating one.

### B. Trait Anxiety, State Anxiety, and Situation-Specific Anxiety

Trait anxiety is a stable part of a person's personality, which is a more permanent disposition to be anxious. State anxiety can be defined as apprehension that is experienced at a specific moment in time. Dornyei and Vogely [4] shows that it is a transient, moment-to-moment experience of

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anxiety related to specific events or situations. Situation-specific anxiety refers to the anxiety caused by a particular type of situation, such as public speaking, tests, or class participation. Horwitz [2] conceptualized a situation-specific anxiety construct that they called foreign language anxiety. They argue that foreign language anxiety is responsible for students' negative emotional reactions to language learning. Foreign language anxiety consists of three components: test anxiety, communication apprehension, and the fear of negative evaluation.

Limited research has ever been done to discover the sources and effects of negative feelings in foreign language listening. Horwitz [2] divide foreign language classroom anxiety into general anxiety, communication apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation. They have found strong anxiety in listening based on several specific statements about listening in Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. The results indicate that highly anxious listeners are so apprehensive that they cannot understand all the input. They may experience difficulty in distinguishing the sounds and structures of the listening message, and also comprehending the contents of the extended utterances in a second foreign language. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis also states that the learners' motivation and emotion would have a filtrating function on language input. Vogely [4] follows the trend in the studies of language-skill-specific anxiety, which means he divides and analyzes language anxiety as it relates specifically to the four language skills, namely speaking, listening, writing, and reading. He has explored the four leading causes of listening anxiety: input features, listening process, teaching, and learning factors.

According to the "facilitating and debilitating anxiety" theory, the results show that facilitating anxiety is greatly and positively correlated with listening achievements, yet debilitating anxiety is negatively associated with listening achievements. These studies emphasize the effects of these two aspects of anxiety on listening comprehension, which has furthered listening anxiety study, however, the scale without high reliability and validity is not appropriate enough because the scale in this paper is used for an oral anxiety test and not specifically designed for listening anxiety. Furthermore, Zhou [5] have drawn a conclusion that there are no significant differences between gender, major, and time of language learning in foreign language listening.

However, the findings of the above studies could not clearly represent the listening anxiety in foreign language learning because their defects are noticeable, with just a small number of experimental subjects involved in the study, and their data collection rely too much on self-report, which may make the result quite invalid. In Zhou's studies [5], there are only 40 and 96 participants respectively. Therefore, a more detailed study with larger participant samples is needed to verify the findings on listening anxiety.

### III. METHOD

#### A. Research Questions

The study is based on previous foreign language learning anxiety taxonomies and attempts to investigate foreign language listening anxiety in light of the following questions:

#### Research Question 1:

What are the sources of English majors' foreign language listening anxiety?

#### Research Question 2:

How does foreign language listening anxiety influence English majors' learning?

#### B. Participants

Based on the non-probability convenient sampling method (Byrman), 198 undergraduate English major students from a language teaching university in the northwest part of China took part in the study. This study used a quantitative questionnaire and the qualitative interview. Due to twenty-two invalid questionnaires, the actual number of participants in this study is 176 (female=144 and male=32). They are all junior students from the same grade, and only 18 of them failed the TEM-4. The age of participants ranges from 20 to 22. Their length of formal English learning in the academic setting is at least six years, indicating that they have gained much experience in English listening and can perform the task in English. Furthermore, these junior students were preparing for the TEM-8 when this study was conducted, so they strongly desired to improve their English listening proficiency and participate in this study. Besides, gender differences will not be investigated here because there are often more female students in China's foreign language colleges.

#### C. Instruments

With the quantitative and qualitative methods, a questionnaire and semi-structured interview are adopted as research instruments. A quantitative questionnaire survey is conducted to find out the sources of English majors' foreign language listening anxiety. And qualitative open-ended questions are asked in the interview to explore the underlying effects of foreign language listening anxiety on the English majors.

The Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS), a questionnaire with all the items relating to potential anxiety in many different listening situations, is employed in this study. This questionnaire is a student self-report with 33 Likert-type items scored on a 5-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

The construct of this scale covers not only anxiety over many different aspects of listening comprehension and second language learners' opinions of listening difficulties but also their unique complexities of listening, compared to the anxiety and difficulty of other language skills such as speaking or reading. However, participants are not given hints about the connection between the questions and the appropriate categories in an attempt to avoid influencing their decisions. Participants are asked to respond to each item according to their honest assessment of their foreign language listening experience. Responses that miss any item or the randomness of strong invalid questionnaires should be excluded. A high score in this questionnaire represents a high level of foreign language listening anxiety, and a low score indicates low listening anxiety.

The interview has been widely used in applied linguistics research as a method to collect more accurate and descriptive qualitative data which cannot be gathered by the questionnaire. In this study, interview with five students one

by one is conducted to further explore the effects of listening anxiety on them. The five participants were selected because they experienced higher listening anxiety levels than others. After all the participants completed the FLLAS, five students were invited to be interviewed about their opinions and situations regarding English listening anxiety. These five participants were encouraged to express their thoughts frankly and freely. Each face-to-face interview lasted about fifteen minutes, and the whole process was recorded with permission.

*D. Data Collection and Analysis*

To obtain data on foreign language listening anxiety, a self-administered questionnaire and one-by-one interviews were employed to assess the anxiety in foreign language listening among Chinese English majors. Before the data collection started, the participants' permission had been ensured; meanwhile, all the questions used for this study did not cause any physical or emotional harm to participants. Full descriptive instruction regarding the procedures of administration was provided and students had been told there were no right or wrong answers to the questions.

Firstly, the FLLAS, which took about fifteen minutes, was done anonymously, and thus participants' confidentiality was secured. They were required to follow the instructions and choose the items according to their own learning experience. After all the participants finished that, their questionnaires would be collected. Yet twenty-two of them were invalid, so the data from the rest of the 176 participants would be analyzed.

Then, all the valid quantitative data were keyed into the computer and analyzed by the Excel software. The total score of each questionnaire was calculated separately, and the average score of all 176 questionnaires were examined to find out the Chinese English majors' overall listening anxiety condition. More importantly, the mean value of each item has been referenced to study the specific factors which influence the Chinese English majors foreign language listening anxiety.

Next, five students with relatively higher listening anxiety levels were invited to participate in the interview. The semi-structured interview, which lasted for about fifteen minutes, include five questions in Appendix. The interview location and time had been scheduled previously, especially for the convenience of the interviewee. At first, the interviewer indicated the purpose and length of the interview, and more importantly, addressed confidentiality. During the interview, the interviewer used silent probes, asking for clarification, and repetition to gain worthwhile and detailed insights. The interviewees also offered some examples and summarized their views. Besides, the interviewer should remain as neutral as possible, provided transitional words, and asked one open-ended question at a time. In the end, the interviewer also thanked and gave the contact information to the respondent.

Finally, the interview data were transcribed and analyzed to find out the underlying effects of foreign language listening anxiety on the participants. When there was any

equivocal reply in the interview record, the interviewer contacted the interviewee in time. And the actual words could be quoted in the analysis only after their formal confirmation.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

*A. Results of the Questionnaire Survey*

Since the questionnaire contains 33 items and the score of each item ranges from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree") points, the actual score of each questionnaire should theoretically be from 33 to 165 points. The figure below clearly shows the distribution of the participants' listening anxiety scores in the FLLAS.

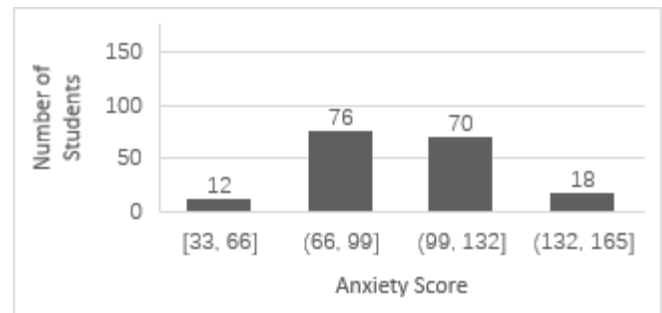


Fig. 1. The distribution of scores in the FLLAS

As demonstrated in the above Fig. 1, the levels of the Chinese English majors listening anxiety vary and most of these scores are between 66 and 99, which accounts for about 43.18% of all the participants. The second largest part in the anxiety level distribution is between 99 and 132, which is 39.77%. Yet the smallest number of students with the listening anxiety level from 33 to 66 takes only 6.82% of all the participants. Next, the second most minor proportion (10.23%) is found in the anxiety level from 132 to 165.

From the above results, it can be concluded that more than 93.18% of the participants experienced foreign language listening anxiety to a certain degree, and around 10.23% of the participants had a relatively higher foreign language listening anxiety level. The following table presents the data of minimum, maximum, and mean value of the participants' scores in the FLLAS.

As can be seen in Table I, the English majors in this study experienced a wide range of English listening anxiety levels, from 41 points to 161 points, which indicates a huge difference among these students. The mean value (101.12) is much higher than this scale's mid-point (82.5). Generally, most of these Chinese English majors suffer from a certain degree of foreign language listening anxiety, although the situation varies from person to person.

TABLE I: RESULTS OF THE PARTICIPANTS' SCORES IN THE FLLAS

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Anxiety Score	41	161	101.12

Then the following Fig. 2 provides thirty-three items' mean values in the FLLAS to investigate the sources of these participants' listening anxiety.

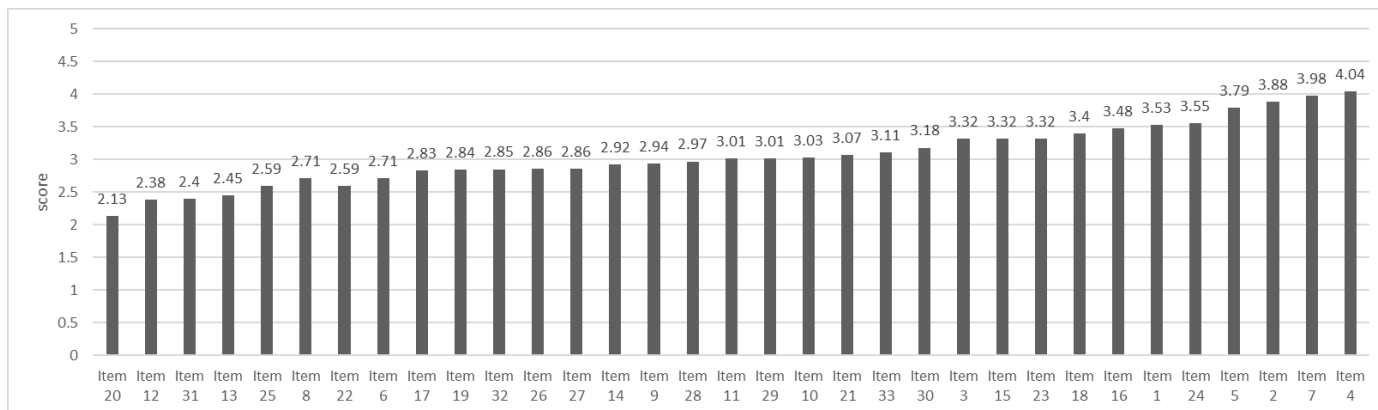


Fig. 2. Mean Values of Each Item in the FLLAS

According to the statistics in the above Fig. 2, all 33 items in the FLLAS are listed concerning their mean values. It shows that the mean values of all the items are higher than 2, representing “disagree.” And the mean value of all the things is approximately 3.06, which means that these participants are more likely to meet these situations in their English listening experience.

The questions (Q21, Q33, Q30, Q3, Q15, Q23, Q18, Q16, Q1, Q24, Q5, Q2, Q7, and Q4) all have mean values higher than 3.06, which suggests that these situations should be the primary sources of the participants’ listening anxiety. Then, the classifications and analysis of these items with relatively higher mean values will be made to investigate the sources of English majors’ listening anxiety.

#### 1) Vocabulary

*Item 30: I get annoyed when I come across words that I cannot understand while listening to English.*

*Item 1: When listening to English, I tend to get stuck on one or two unknown words.*

Due to the lack of relatively necessary vocabulary, listeners may have difficulty grasping coherent and complete information, so sometimes they cannot catch the information or keep pace with the listening material. Vocabulary is an essential part of linguistic knowledge containing the knowledge about phonetics and also grammar. As we know, looking up new words in the dictionary is always seen as the necessary first step in foreign language listening. During this process, listeners mainly focus on the word’s pronunciation, words meaning, and also the syntax. And listeners usually are required to figure out the words meaning at the moment when they hear the sounds. Therefore, in the foreign language listening process, listeners’ anxiety occurs because of the lack of linguistic knowledge. Just as Vogely [2] found that vocabulary can arouse listening anxiety.

#### 2) Speed and volume of the listening materials

*Item 21: I get worried when I can’t listen to English at my own pace.*

*Item 4: When a person speaks English very fast, I worry that I might not understand all of it.*

*Item 18: I get worried when I have little time to think about what I hear in English.*

*Item 24: If a person speaks English very quietly, I am worried about understanding.*

When foreign language listening starts, listeners cannot control the speakers’ speaking speed or volume, and if it is too fast or too low for the listeners, they are unable to gain

much information or enough time to write down some key notes. In a word, speaking speed and the volume of the listening material affect the learners’ anxiety level.

#### 3) Topic familiarity

*Item 5: I am nervous when listening to English if I am unfamiliar with the topic.*

*Item 16: I fear I have inadequate background knowledge of some topics when listening in English.*

As language is the carrier of cultural information and social conventions, topic familiarity and previous experience with the listening materials’ background knowledge influence listeners’ ability to understand the foreign language listening materials. Anxiety from cultural differences is very common in foreign language teaching and learning (Hammer). Especially in the actual listening process, the message conveyed by the listening materials is not just a simple combination of words, grammar, and sentence structures, but the examination of the listeners’ comprehensive grasp of the listening materials. Thus, when foreign language learners are unfamiliar with the background knowledge of the listening materials, they may find it challenging to comprehend the overall meaning of the listening materials. With this difficulty, listeners are more likely to feel anxious and upset in the listening process.

#### 4) Pronunciation

*Item 3: When someone pronounces words differently from how I pronounce them, I find it difficult to understand.*

Pronunciation plays a really essential role in the foreign language listening process. Although learners often try their best to imitate the accent in the target language, sometimes they just cannot figure out the correct words stored in their minds at the moment they hear the sounds from others. They may not master English phonetics and phonology, or the way that speakers make sounds may unconsciously change over some time. Therefore, when foreign language learners struggle to understand the speakers’ pronunciation, it may arouse their anxiety or frustration as the founding with Marton [6].

#### 5) Cognitive factors

*Item 23: I get upset when I’m unsure whether I understand what I am listening to in English.*

*Item 33: It frightens me when I cannot catch a word of an English listening passage.*

According to Tobias’ model of accounting for the cognitive effect of anxiety on learning, anxious listeners tend to engage in self-directed, derogatory cognition, such as excessive self-evaluation, worry over potential failure, and

concern over the opinions of others. Therefore, anxious listeners have divided their attention between task-related cognition and self-related cognition, which causes cognitive performance to be less efficient. While nonanxious listeners tend not to engage in such self-preoccupations, and they are able to focus more on the task itself, and thus they can comprehend more than anxious listeners.

6) *Bad memory and short-attention*

*Item 15: When listening to English, I often get so confused that I can't remember what I have heard.*

*Item 2: I get nervous if a listening passage is read only once during English listening tests.*

*Item 7: If I let my mind drift even a little bit while listening to English, I worry that I will miss important ideas.*

Since foreign language listening has a high requirement of memory and attention, listeners may be depressed, nervous and frustrated when they meet obstacles in grasping the main idea and some detailed information. Bad memory or short attention hinders listeners from gaining more information as the speed of the speech cannot be controlled, or the listening material is only read once.

All in all, these are all major sources of the participants' listening anxiety found in this study. Listeners always get anxious when they encounter difficulties in vocabulary recognition and grasping the main idea and detailed information. Unique features of listening, such as the speed of the delivery, the speaker's accent, and the high requirement of memory and attention, also cause listeners' tension and depression in the listening process. What's more, if listeners are not equipped with adequate background knowledge of the listening material, it does affect their anxiety level.

*B. Results of the Interview Survey*

The quantitative questionnaire can be used on a large scale which can provide more succinct data, while the qualitative interview can produce a more realistic picture of reality and also reveal more complexities. As in reference [6], The use of the two designs can produce more powerful and more convincing results (Marton). The face-to-face interviews with five participants who have relatively higher anxiety levels have provided more accurate and descriptive qualitative data, which may not be gathered by the questionnaire. Each participant's response was recorded, and some of their words are presented below:

*I'm really not good at English listening. Maybe my English listening anxiety state is really serious since it badly influences my English listening tests scores. Ha, ha, ha~ Listening to English tape even with a little bit of background noise makes me uneasy. And I can feel my heart beat faster when I cannot catch or understand the words meaning.—Student B*

*Actually, every time I do English listening tests, I really worry about my poor performance. And the more I'm concerned about others' evaluations, the more I could not concentrate on the task itself. I am not passionate about English listening tests, which always makes me nervous.—Student A*

*I do not practice my English listening skill very often, due to my poor performance. Even in English listening class, I'm*

*usually unwilling to do listening exercises though I know listening is essential for English learning.—Student D*

*I am anxious when I practice my English listening, especially doing the listening tests in English listening class. And I doubt myself sometimes that I'm just not good at English listening.—Student E*

*I hate doing English listening tests, though I love the English language itself. And I found it difficult to grasp the speaker's idea in English listening since my first English listening class in college because before that, I hadn't practiced my listening skill very often.—Student C*

All five participants stated they all suffered from anxiety about listening to English to some degree, especially in the listening tests, mainly due to their difficulty in English listening comprehension. While some mentioned their passion for the English language, they admitted that listening plays a significant role in language learning. Some symptoms of listening anxiety can be concluded: self-belittling, apprehension, test anxiety, the fear of negative evaluation, and even bodily responses such as a faster heartbeat.

*My major obstacle in English listening is my limited vocabulary. I often hear unfamiliar words in listening, and sometimes I just cannot catch the meaning of the sound because the intonation and stress seem unfamiliar.—Student A*

*In the English listening process, I cannot catch the speaker's main idea immediately, even sometimes I just could memorize what the speaker said for a few seconds.—Student C*

*I often get confused when doing English listening practice, maybe because I always try to understand every word.—Student D*

*I always feel that the speakers speak English really really fast than I thought, then I begin to worry that I can not understand all of it.—Student B*

*Honestly, it is very hard for me to concentrate on what speakers are saying, and I often let my mind drift while listening to English, maybe that's the reason why I often miss important ideas.—Student E*

From the above data, it can be seen that these participants have met many different kinds of obstacles in their foreign language listening process. Highly anxious listeners are so worried about that they cannot understand all the input. The participants experienced difficulty in distinguishing the sounds and structures in listening, and also comprehending the contents of both the main ideas and detailed information for high requirements of attention and memory.

*Yes, since I realize that I have difficulty in English listening, I begin to feel uncomfortable in class when listening to English. And gradually, I find a way to relieve my burden. That's having the written text of the listening material.—Student B*

*Yeah~ I've tried a lot to improve this situation, by doing more exercises, enlarging my vocabulary, and practicing the note-taking skill, which helps relieve my anxiety effectively.—Student A*

*Yes, I once asked my teacher to help me find the problems. And I think that my difficulty in English listening is distinguishing English sound changes rules, such as stress,*

*nasal, dental, etc. So I've tried to pay more attention to solving these problems.—Student D*

Three of the participants said they tried to find a way to relieve their anxiety by doing more exercises, reading the written text of the listening material, enlarging their English vocabulary, and practicing note-taking skills. One student also pointed out the importance of familiarity with the standard pronunciation and sound change rules.

### C. Discussion

From the statistical analysis of 176 valid questionnaires, it can be seen that 93.18% of these participants do suffer the foreign language listening anxiety, and around 10.23% of the participants had a relatively higher foreign language listening anxiety level.

English major students often feel anxious when they are required to accomplish listening tasks in the target language. The primary sources of the participants' listening anxiety proved in this study include individuals' limited vocabulary, unfamiliarity with the specific topic, insufficient knowledge about words pronunciation and sound-changing rules, and the particular characteristics of listening materials such as volume, speed, and task complexity.

When listeners are not equipped with adequate vocabulary, they can hardly perceive the speakers' pronunciation. Knowledge about English phonetics, phonology, and sound-changing rules such as intonation, reduction, liaison, and stress are also aspects that some students are lacking in. If learners are not familiar enough with some words' pronunciation, sometimes they cannot recall certain words or phrases at the moment they hear the sound. So, it can be summarized that learners' low linguistic competence can cause foreign language listening anxiety.

Yet linguistic knowledge is not sufficient in decoding the listening material. For language is an instrument for cultural communication, topic familiarity, and previous experience influence the learner to understand the information in the listening process. Thus, unfamiliarity with specific topics or the lack of relative background knowledge arouses foreign language listening anxiety.

Besides the individual differences, the features of listening materials also trigger learners' anxiety. Listening tasks often require the listener to recall the words meaning at the moment when they hear the sound, which demands highly of memory and attention. Furthermore, if speakers' speaking speed or volume is too fast or too low for the listeners, they are unable to gain much information or enough time to write down some key notes. For the above factors, task complexity affects listeners' performance and results in their foreign language listening anxiety.

The interview results indicate that anxious listeners tend to engage in self-directed, derogatory cognition, such as excessive self-evaluation, worry over potential failure, and concern over the opinions of others. At the input stage of listening, anxiety can divide listeners' attention, which may limit the highly anxious listeners' ability to comprehend the coming information since less information appears to be

available in their short-term memory. For the processing stage of listening, anxiety impedes listeners' cognitive processing on tasks that rely more heavily on memory. Also, anxiety can impair listeners searching for appropriate items in memory and slow their speeds of recalling during the time-limited task. This finding is in accordance with the finding of Gardner as in [7]. Besides, some symptoms of listening anxiety can be found in the study: self-belittling, feeling of apprehension, test anxiety, the fear of negative evaluation, and even bodily responses such as a faster heartbeat.

### V. CONCLUSION

The primary sources of the participants' listening anxiety found in this study are: vocabulary recognition, grasping the main idea and detailed information, the speed of the delivery, lack of background knowledge of the listening material, speaker's accent, and high requirement of memory and attention. The study results indicate that anxious listeners tend to engage in self-directed, derogatory cognition, such as excessive self-evaluation, worry over potential failure, and concern over the opinions of others.

The findings of this research also have some pedagogical implications for English listening courses for undergraduate students, especially English major students. Based on the interview study, there are some effective ways to relieve students' burdens to some degree: teachers should guide students to make a guess on unfamiliar words and do not linger on them in the process of listening, encourage students to develop positive self-confidence, remind themselves to concentrate on the task itself, and do more practice in short-term memory.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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