

A Study of Chinese College Students' English Reading Anxiety

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Abstract Anxiety is one of the affective factors that have effects on Chinese college students' English reading comprehension. The study aims to investigate some causes of Chinese college students having English reading anxiety with the help of questionnaires and interview with some subjects, which may help them find out some useful and practical strategies to overcome it. After careful analysis of the subjects' scores, five causes are found out. They are students' lack of cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries, lack of confidence in reading English, lack of necessary reading skills, lack of English linguistic knowledge and lack of interest in reading English. Some measures may be taken by teachers to deal with their students' reading anxiety. They should try to motivate the students to make more efforts and help reduce their reading anxiety in order to increase their learning efficiency in English reading.

Keywords: Chinese college students, English reading anxiety, questionnaire, reading skills, confidence, interest in reading English

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1. Introduction

Language learning is a very complicated process. It is influenced by learners' cognitive abilities and their affective factors [2,7]. These two points cannot be separated from each other, and it has been widely believed that affective factors like anxiety have great effect on learners' cognitive abilities and their language learning achievements [6]. With the development of foreign language learning research, foreign language anxiety, a key affective factor, has attracted more and more researchers' attention since 1980s. Based on the results of many previous studies, Horwitz etc. claims that foreign language anxiety does affect foreign language learning [8]. Nowadays, researchers pay much of their attention to the specific aspects of language learning anxiety, like learners' anxieties in foreign language reading, writing or listening, and they attempt to distinguish them from the general language anxiety [4]. Some researchers studied language learning anxiety in different countries [1]. They all want to find out some ways of reducing learners' anxiety in language learning [10,14].

In China, people pay more and more attention to English learning and some factors that have effects on it [5]. Though the researchers began their study of foreign language reading anxiety late, they have got many achievements in this research field. In recent years, a few Chinese researchers have conducted some empirical studies about the effects of anxiety on English reading. However, people haven't got the comprehensive

recognition of the causes of Chinese college students having English reading anxiety. So some further researches are needed in this field. Based on the previous researches, this study attempts to find out the main causes of Chinese college students' English reading anxiety and figure out a few feasible and practical strategies to overcome it. It is hoped that this study may help people know more about the anxiety in English reading and it may help Chinese college students improve their English reading ability. In this study English reading anxiety is defined as English learners' negative feelings of fear when they input and process English reading materials, which in turn debilitates or even stops English reading and arouses the learners' negative attitude towards it.

2. Literature Review

Horwitz etc. firstly put forward the concept of foreign language classroom anxiety [8]. According to them, foreign language classroom anxiety means a complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors that are related to classroom language learning and that may show the uniqueness of the language learning process. They think that foreign language classroom anxiety exists not only at input process but also at output stages in the process of language learning.

In China, the study of a scholar named Chen Suhong shows that English learners who once failed in examinations have more anxiety than those who passed [3]. The investigation on 220 non-English majors conducted by two scholars named Shi Yunzhang and Liu

Zhenqian proves the negative correlation between the students' reading anxiety and their scores in CET 4 (college English test Band 4 in China) [13]. So, it can be seen from these studies that, to some extent, anxiety can affect Chinese students' English reading and their English achievements.

According to the previous researches, the impacts of reading anxiety on Chinese students' English reading can be found in the following three aspects:

(1) Effects of reading anxiety on English learners' cognitive process are the same as those of other kinds of anxieties. When a learner is over-anxious, the worry caused by anxiety will disturb his cognitive process in English learning and divert his attention. That will lead to the decrease of the learner's efficiency in English reading comprehension.

(2) The reduction of a learner's efficiency in reading comprehension caused by anxiety is also reflected in the prolonged time that is used to understand reading materials and the decreased reading speed. Generally, it takes the anxious readers more time to comprehend the meanings of the English words or the sentences. They have to make more efforts to understand the English texts they read.

(3) Reading strategies adopted by English learners are also affected by reading anxiety. The main cause is that reading anxiety can influence the readers' metacognitive strategies and it has a lot of effect on the establishment of reading objectives. Anxiety may damage the readers' self-control or self-management in reading process and decrease their absorption of English information. It has been found that the higher the level of a learner's anxiety is, the more strategies he will have to adopt so as to deal with the difficulties in reading English texts. However, it is usually not beneficial for readers to use more strategies to understand the reading materials because that needs the readers' more efforts.

Some causes of Chinese students having English reading anxiety have been found. Here three important causes are listed in detail as follows.

The first cause is the big difference between Chinese and Western cultures [13]. In China, most college students have difficulties in grasping systematically the cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries because many of them don't have the opportunity to take the courses about Western cultures. So these English learners will inevitably feel anxious when they meet those unfamiliar culture topics in the reading process.

The second cause is Chinese learners' lack of English linguistic knowledge. The "linguistic knowledge" here means the knowledge of English words, structures, texts and so on. As we all know, a language is a carrier of information, so if one lacks relevant linguistic knowledge, he will be anxious when he meets complicated reading materials.

The third cause is about English learner's improper reading methods. In China, by the traditional English teaching approach, Chinese teachers are inclined to pay more of their attention to teaching words and structures than to other language aspects. Consequently, Chinese students tend to read English passages word by word, and sentence by sentence. So it is difficult for them to improve their reading capability.

In order to improve learning efficiency, people have been trying to find useful ways of overcoming foreign language anxiety. A traditional approach is to make learners become more confident and let them know that making mistakes is an essential part of learning a language. Oxford puts forward three strategies to reduce foreign language anxiety [11]. They are: 1) using progressive relaxation, deep breathing or meditation; 2) listening to music; 3) using laughter.

3. Research Report

This study is designed to examine the effects of Chinese college students' anxiety on their English reading comprehension with the help of questionnaires and interview with some students.

3.1. Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the sources of Chinese college students' English reading anxiety and find out some useful and practical strategies to help them overcome it. The findings of this study can help us gain an insight into the correlation between their English reading anxiety and their reading performances. They can also be used by the learners to reduce their anxiety and improve their English reading ability.

3.2. Subjects

The subjects involved in the study are all freshmen in the University of Jinan in China. They are 265 students including 136 boys and 129 girls. The subjects range in age from 17 to 21, with an average of 19. All of them have learned English for at least 9 years and most of them learn English in traditional academic setting. In their classroom, their English teachers usually use both English and Chinese to give the lesson; after class, the students have few opportunities to talk in English with English native speakers or their English teachers. The reason for choosing these students as the subjects is that they have learned English for many years and they are willing to participate in this study in hope of improving their English reading ability by overcoming anxiety.

3.3. Instrument

Based on Horwitz's FLCAS (foreign language classroom anxiety scale) [8], a questionnaire "Chinese College Students' English Reading Anxiety Scale" (CCSERAS) is designed by the researcher in order to investigate Chinese College students' English reading anxiety status as well as the reasons for it. When compiling the items of the questionnaire, much attention is paid to the characteristics of Chinese students in learning English. The questionnaire is composed of fifteen items about English reading, which are intended to investigate the causes of the subjects' anxiety from different perspectives including their Western cultural background knowledge and English linguistic knowledge, their confidence and interest in English reading, their reading strategies, etc. These things are closely related to Chinese college students' English reading and their anxiety in it. When conducting the investigation, the researcher mainly

used this questionnaire, coupled with some interviews with a few students.

For the subjects to get their scores in the fifteen items about English reading, each item is on a 5-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” (point 5) to “strongly disagree” (point 1), the middle point being neutral (point 3). The higher a subject scores, the higher level of English reading anxiety he/she shows.

3.4. Data Collection

On November 15 of 2013, the researcher conducted the investigation with the help of questionnaires. In order to have more understanding of the subjects’ English reading anxiety, the researcher also had some interview with them. In their classroom, the 265 subjects finished the questionnaires in 15 minutes. Before they did them, the researcher explained the items of the questionnaire in Chinese so as to avoid misunderstanding. After the subjects finished, all the questionnaires were collected and 260 copies were found to be valid after careful examination. 5 copies were invalid because the subjects’ scores in these copies were not clear.

3.5. Results and Analysis

In order to find out the main causes of Chinese college students’ English reading anxiety, the researcher adopted the method of analyzing the subjects’ scores and getting the means of them in each item.

Table 1 shows the means of the subjects’ scores in the CCSERAS items in descending order.

Table 1

Items	Numbers of the subjects	Means of the subjects’ scores
Item 1	260	4.25
Item 4	260	4.17
Item 2	260	4.06
Item 5	260	3.88
Item 3	260	3.75
Item 6	260	3.69
Item 11	260	3.66
Item 7	260	3.53
Item 8	260	3.51
Item 10	260	3.48
Item 12	260	3.39
Item 14	260	3.25
Item 13	260	3.16
Item 9	260	3.09
Item 15	260	3.05

From the statistics in the table, it can be seen that all the means of the subjects’ scores in the 15 items are beyond 3.00. So the figures show that English reading anxiety does exist widely among Chinese college students, which is very similar to the findings of previous researches [3,13].

3.5.1. The Causes of Chinese College Students having English Reading Anxiety

The first cause can be found in the items concerning the Western cultural background knowledge. The items are “When I read English, I may feel confused because I can’t understand some differences between Chinese and Western cultures.”(Item 1, M=4.25), “Those English

customs that are not familiar to me make me feel very nervous.”(Item 2, M=4.06) and “When I read an English passage, I may feel quite nervous if I am not familiar with the related knowledge about the topic of the passage.”(Item 3, M=3.75). When the researcher interviewed some students, all of them believed that knowing the related cultural knowledge was very important to English reading. So it is believed that lack of cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries is really the key obstacle in Chinese college students’ English reading comprehension.

The second cause of students having English reading anxiety is their lack of confidence. This conclusion can be drawn from the items below: “I am not content with my current level of English reading ability.”(Item 4, M=4.17), “I do not feel very confident when I read some English papers.”(Item 5, M=3.88) and “Although I am prepared well, I still feel very worried about making mistakes in English reading classes.”(Item 6, M=3.69). So, it can be accepted that the learners’ lack of confidence and dissatisfaction with their reading ability may easily lead to their reading anxiety in English learning.

Another thing that causes many Chinese college students’ English reading anxiety is that they don’t have necessary reading skills. The subjects’ scores in Items 7 to 10 may prove this point. Item 7 is “When I read English, I may feel worried because I cannot figure out the meanings of some unfamiliar words.”(M=3.53). Item 8 is “When reading some English essays, even if I know the meaning of each word in a sentence, I still cannot comprehend the sentence.”(M=3.51). Item 10 is “In English reading classes, I often feel so nervous that I may forget the meanings of some words which I’ve learnt.”(M=3.48). Item 9 is “When I read English I may become anxious for I cannot grasp the general ideas of some texts.”(M=3.09). From the interview with some subjects, the researcher got the similar words. So, it can be found that most students can’t adopt some useful skills to reduce their reading anxiety and improve their reading efficiency.

The fourth cause is students’ lack of English linguistic knowledge including some difficult grammatical rules and words. It can be known from their scores in Items 11 to 13. Item 11 is “It makes me bothered to encounter the grammar rules that I cannot understand while reading English.”(M=3.66), Item 12 is “It makes me anxious that I have to memorize so many grammar rules in English learning.”(M=3.39). Item 13 is “I feel confused when I encounter new words in English passages.”(M=3.16). When having interviews with the subjects, some of them told the researcher that they felt very worried about those unfamiliar grammars and words when they read English passages. Thus, it can be concluded that lack of English linguistic knowledge may make many Chinese college students feel anxious in English reading.

In the study the researcher finds that most of the subjects are not very interested in reading English. It can be seen from the subjects’ scores in the following items. One is “I am not willing to do English reading exercises after class.”(Item 14, M=3.25). Another is “It makes me feel very anxious that I must attend English reading classes every week.”(Item 15, M=3.05). In the interview, some students told the researcher that they would like to speak English rather than read English. So it can be found that lack of interest in reading English is also a cause of

many Chinese college students having English reading anxiety.

In sum, from the findings of the study, we can find five causes of English learners' reading anxiety in Chinese colleges. They include lack of cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries, lack of confidence in reading English, lack of necessary reading skills, lack of English linguistic knowledge and lack of interest in reading English.

3.5.2. The Strategies of Overcoming English Reading Anxiety

According to the findings of the study, some strategies can be applied by Chinese college teachers to help their students overcome English reading anxiety.

Firstly, Chinese college teachers should encourage their students to read many kinds of materials about English-speaking countries' cultures. Either intensive or extensive reading is acceptable. Also, more lectures on Western cultures are suggested to be made in order to broaden students' academic horizon. The students may gradually become familiar with Western cultures, which is beneficial to their English reading.

Secondly, the teachers should give their students more positive evaluation whether they do well or don't have good performance in English reading so as to boost their confidence. It is believed that teachers' positive suggestions or praise are quite helpful for their students to become more confident in English reading, especially when they have difficulties. Many students need encouragement to become confident in language learning^[9]. Also, teachers should warn students of the possible anxiety they may have in English reading, which may help them alleviate their anxiety, because they may feel less stressful by thinking that it is very natural and common to have reading anxiety.

Thirdly, it is important for English teachers to teach their students some practical reading strategies such as skimming, guessing meanings of new words, inferring the main ideas of English materials and so on. Applying some good reading strategies may help students to read English very efficiently^[12], which may make them feel more confident and less anxious in English reading. Teachers should give students some explicit instructions on how to apply reading strategies appropriately. They should select the reading materials at an appropriate level of difficulty and choose some interesting articles in the training of reading strategies.

Fourthly, English teachers should try to stimulate their students' interest in English reading and teach them the importance of accumulating English linguistic knowledge including some difficult words and grammatical rules. In order to fulfill this purpose, cooperative learning may be advocated. We know that reading comprehension exercises are generally done by one person alone. Under this circumstance, if the person meets some difficulties, he may become anxious. So cooperative learning may help change the situation. In English class, students may fall into some learning groups voluntarily. In each group the members may share their views based on their understanding of the materials. Students may exchange their experiences and feelings after reading some English passages. All this should be done in a relaxing and harmonious atmosphere. It is hoped that the cooperative

work will be helpful for students to improve their interest and motivation in reading English, which is also very beneficial to their accumulation of English linguistic knowledge.

In spite of the fact that some important findings have been got in this study, there are still some limitations of the study. Firstly, there are only 265 subjects in this study and 260 valid copies of questionnaire. More subjects are needed in future study. Secondly, the researcher only analyzed the means of the subjects' scores, without considering the relationship between reading anxiety and the subjects' English achievements.

4. Conclusion

The findings of the study show that reading anxiety does exist widely in Chinese college students' English learning. With the help of questionnaires and interview with some subjects, the researcher has found five causes of the anxiety. They are students' lack of cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries, lack of confidence in reading English, lack of necessary reading skills, lack of English linguistic knowledge and lack of interest in reading English. Some measures may be taken by teachers to deal with their students' reading anxiety. They should try to help their students become more familiar with Western cultures, develop some useful reading skills, boost their confidence and improve their interest in reading English. Only in this way can the students gradually get a sense of success in English reading, which may motivate them to make more efforts and help reduce their reading anxiety. Besides, teachers should spend more time in communicating with students and try to make friends with them, for the harmonious atmosphere may help reduce students' anxiety and increase their learning efficiency in English reading. In all, this study may let people know more about Chinese college students' English reading anxiety, which can encourage more scholars to conduct investigations in this field.

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Appendix

Chinese College Students' English Reading Anxiety Scale

Based on Horwitz's FLCAS (1986), a questionnaire "Chinese College Students' English Reading Anxiety Scale" (CCSERAS) is designed by the researcher in order to investigate students' general English reading anxiety state as well as the reasons for their anxiety. The results of the survey are only used in the study of English teaching and learning.

Items 1-15 are about your feelings when you learn English reading. Please choose the number after each item, which may embody your true condition concerning the item. The five numbers 1-5 after each item stands for "extremely disagree", "disagree", "uncertainty", "agree", "extremely agree" respectively.

Thanks for your cooperation!

1. When I read English, I may feel confused because I can't understand some differences between Chinese and Western cultures.

[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

2. Those English customs that are not familiar to me make me feel very nervous.

[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

3. When I read an English passage, I may feel quite nervous if I am not familiar with the related knowledge about the topic of the passage.

[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

4. I am not content with my current level of English reading ability.

[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

5. I do not feel very confident when I read some English papers.

[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

6. Although I am prepared well, I still feel very worried about making mistakes in English reading classes.

[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

7. When I read English, I may feel worried because I cannot figure out the meanings of some unfamiliar words.

[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

8. When reading some English essays, even if I know the meaning of each word in a sentence, I still cannot comprehend the sentence.

[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

9. When I read English I may become anxious for I cannot grasp the general ideas of some texts.

[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

10. In English reading classes, I often feel so nervous that I may forget the meanings of some words which I've learnt.

[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

11. It makes me bothered to encounter the grammar rules that I cannot understand while reading English.

[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

12. It makes me anxious that I have to memorize so many grammar rules in English learning.

[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

13. I feel confused when I encounter new words in English passages.

[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

14. I am not willing to do English reading exercises after class.

[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

15. It makes me feel very anxious that I must attend English reading classes every week.

[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]