An Investigative Study into the Sources of Senior High School Students’ English Test Anxiety

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Abstract. With the increasing value of English in this globalized world, more attention has been put on English learning in mainland China. The pressure of the test either from the test itself or the society, schools, parents, etc. is influencing the students’ performance on English test, especially for young learners. But less was known about those learners’ English test anxiety and its sources. This current research explored the factors influencing on students’ English test anxiety in a quantitative way, surveying 587 senior high school students in Liaoning Province. Four sources were found: the fear of negative evaluation from other people, the fear of doing badly in the test would damage the self-assessment, the fear of prospect; and the fear of lacking adequate preparation for the test. In the end, several implications were proposed for diminish the students’ test anxiety.

Sources of Test Anxiety: A Brief Review

Psychological research shows that test anxiety is the result of various factors. It is not only closely related to the influence of the internal subjective element, but also associated with the impact of the external objective environment. Zeidner (1998) stated that sources of anxiety can be divided in terms of the test-taker and the situation.

Numerous literatures also showed that anxiety-related self-perceptions especially focus on whether test-takers feel that they can meet the demands of tests. Aida (1994) argued that the source of student’s test anxiety was that they experienced an excessive number of failures in the past time. In their memory, they especially pay attention to their failed experience. Therefore, the more they recall the failure, the more anxiety they have. Finally, before and during the test they will come up with the negative and unrelated idea.

In terms of the external factors of the test anxiety, Horwitzs and Young (1991) found the language test lack of validity would negatively impact students and made them in high anxiety. Young (1999) found that students would feel anxious if the content of language test was never mentioned in class. In addition, improper language test method will also lead to high test anxiety. The finding of Young (1991) showed that students were highly anxious when they were not familiar with the text types. He also summarized several factors which might affect students’ language test behaviors, including the perception validity of language testing, time limitation, test mode, test form, test length, test environment and the clarity of the items.

In China, Zhang Chengfen and Mao Weizhen (1992) conducted a research on the relationship among the test anxiety, self-perception of competence and the achievement attribution. He investigated 339 junior school students from 12 classes and finally found that there was a close relationship between test anxiety and self-perception of competence. The result indicated that the lower self-perception they had, the higher test anxiety the experienced and vice versa. That is to say, self-perception is an important internal factor which has an effect on test anxiety. Chen Shulin and Huang Xin (1999) selected 298 junior and senior high students from three schools to investigate the correlation between the test anxiety and coping style. They found that there was a significant correlation between them. Namely, active coping style decreased the test anxiety, while negative
coping style aggravated it. Ouyang Ouchun (2007) investigated the sources of test anxiety among the 171 English majors and found that parents’ career had a great effect on students’ test anxiety in physical reaction, emotional response, thinking distraction and suppression. Wang Yuxiu (2009) claimed that parents’ negative evaluation was the major reason of the junior high school students’ test anxiety. Yu Jiaja et al. (2010) selected 1096 senior high school students and their parents to survey their test anxiety and its influence. The result showed that the intimacy and entertainment of the family had an impact on test anxiety. There is a negative relationship between them. It means the higher intimacy and entertainment they have, the lower test anxiety they get and vice versa.

On the way of studying the sources of English test anxiety, some researchers made some contributions. Zheng Richang (1994) designed a questionnaire about the sources of test anxiety. This questionnaire was adapted from the Test Anxiety Questionnaire (TAQ) which was designed by Mandler and Sarason in 1952. Zheng’s questionnaire is divided into four parts: (1) the fear of negative evaluation from other people; (2) the fear of doing badly in test would damage the self-assessment; (3) the fear of prospect; (4) the fear of lacking adequate preparation for the test. Wang Xiaohong (2006) and Kong Yuqin (2011) used this questionnaire to investigate the sources of English test anxiety of junior and senior high school students. Both of them found that the fear of negative evaluation from other people was the major source of students’ English test anxiety. In order to find out the sources of senior high students’ English test anxiety and get a further confirmation of the previous studies, this research used Zheng’s questionnaire.

Research Design

This survey was made among the 587 senior high students (212 males and 370 females) from a key school in Liaoning province (See Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Questionnaire Validation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>40.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>35.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>31.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>36.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Zheng Richang (1994) designed a questionnaire of the English test source which has been widely used. It contains 24 items under four categories (see Table 2). If the item is true to the respondents’ actual situation, they will tick “√”and get one point. If it is not true, they will mark the item with “×”and get zero. Finally, according to the score of each category, the main source of the subjects’ English test anxiety can emerged.
Table 2. The categories of the English test anxiety sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources of English test anxiety</th>
<th>Item Distributions</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fear of negative evaluation from other people</td>
<td>1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>1. If I do badly on the exam, people will doubt my ability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fear of negative self-assessment</td>
<td>2, 6, 10, 14, 18, 22</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>2. A good score of an English exam seems not to increase my confidence in other English exams.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fear of prospect</td>
<td>3, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>3. I hope to gain the success without taking English exam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fear of lacking adequate preparation</td>
<td>4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>4. I am fear of the teacher who likes making English exam suddenly.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 2 indicated, the Cronbach’s alphas of each dimension of the sources of English test anxiety ranged from 0.62 to 0.74, which proves the questionnaire is reliable.

The whole study is to explore the sources of senior high school students’ English test anxieties.

**Results and Discussions**

Based on the investigation of 587 senior high school students, the sources of their English test anxiety can be mainly divided into four categories: (1) the fear of negative evaluation from other people ($M=3.29$, $SD=1.94$); (2) the fear of doing badly in the test would damage the self-assessment ($M=2.73$, $SD=1.68$); (3) the fear of prospect ($M=2.86$, $SD=1.79$); and (4) the fear of lacking adequate preparation for the test ($M=3.11$, $SD=1.70$). Results showed that among the four sources of the English test anxiety, (1) the fear of negative evaluation from other people and (4) the fear of lacking adequate preparation for the test are the two main sources of the senior high school students’ English test anxiety, while (3) the fear of prospect and (2) the fear of doing badly in the test would damage the self-assessment rank the number three and four respectively.

The four sources of English test anxiety are associated with the test-related worry cognitions which have been discussed in Transactional Process Model. The worry cognitions, to some extent, may lead to additional negative feedback and make students feel anxious in a test situation.

For the students who are in puberty, they have strong sensitivity for everything, especially the stimulations from the external environment. In the period of senior high school, students’ main task is to study hard, achieve good achievements, and then get an opportunity to enter a key university. However, because most of them lack the ability of self-control, they have to study under the supervision of teachers and parents. Therefore, the opinions and evaluations which are from their parents and teachers will have a great influence on them. Moreover, children are parents’ hope, so every parent wants their children to get into a good university, have a bright future and a stable career. Hence, if children’s English performances not reach the parents’ expectation, they will be disappointed with children and even criticize and punish them. Besides, for the teachers, students’ poor English achievements can be regarded as the manifestations of laziness, carelessness and incapacity. Then like parents, teachers will also criticize them severely and punish them with lots of homework. However, all these pressures and punishments which are from the teachers and parents will have a great effect on children’s development. Therefore, the fear of the negative evaluation from other people becomes the major source of students’ English test anxiety.

As for “the fear of lacking adequate preparation for the test”, theoretically, this source of English test anxiety can be explained from the antecedent of the Transactional Process Model: study skills. According to this model, students with good test-taking skills usually feel less threatening than
those who do not have much test-wise. That is to say, if students want to reduce their test anxiety, they need to master the knowledge as much as possible. In terms of English, with the purpose of getting a good score, there needs to remember lots of words and expressions. It will take students much time to do these tasks. However, because there are numerous disciplines that students need to learn and lots of homework they have to finish, most of them cannot allocate time in a proper way. Especially after the separation of arts and science-orientations, the new tasks of their study become clear. For instance, science students will spend much time on mathematics, physics, chemistry, while arts students are forced on paying more attention to politics, history, geography and so on. Therefore, most of them have not enough time to learn English and they cannot prepare it adequately. Hence, fear of lacking adequate preparation for the test becomes the second source of the English test anxiety.

The fear of prospect is the third source of senior high school students’ English test anxiety. With the development of society, English becomes more and more important in education and employment. It plays an important role in College Entrance Examination (Gao Kao) and the choice of career. Therefore, English has a great effect on the students’ future development. However, compared with the previous two sources, it seems that this is not a major reason.

Finally, the fear of doing badly in the test would damage the self-assessment is the last reason for senior high school students’ English test anxiety. For the students, more attention was given to realize their self-worth. Most of them believe that they are the people who have the ability to achieve their goals. Therefore, if they get the poor English test score, they may believe that they are incompetent. However, this source is also not the main reason for senior high school students’ English test anxiety.

The factors “the fear of negative evaluation from other people” and “the fear of lacking adequate preparation for the test” are the most important two sources which affect the senior high school students’ English test anxiety. Wang Xiaohong (2006) investigated 799 senior high school students’ sources of English test anxiety in urban and rural area and the results of the investigation were mostly consistent with this study. In terms of the four factors about the sources, in Wang’s study only the ranks of “the fear of prospect” and “the fear of doing badly in the test would damage the self-assessment” are different from this survey. But this little difference will not influence the result’s accuracy. Meanwhile, the findings of Kong Yuqin (2011) who conducted a survey of the sources of English test anxiety among 239 junior high school students’ in Suzhou were consistent with this study.

Implications

For students, they should firstly face the negative evaluation in a proper manner and possess well exam-oriented motivation. The students should actively accept others’ negative evaluations and treat them in a positive way. Otherwise, negative feedback will increase English test anxiety. In addition, the students should take the English test with right motivation and attitude. They need to know that a good command of English will contribute to their future development and their choice of career. Secondly, build up confidence in the tests and evaluate themselves properly. Although most of the students are afraid of taking English tests, the students should have confidence in themselves and treat their strengths and weaknesses in right way. Thirdly, prepare for exams adequately and adjust the test status. The fear of inadequate preparation for English test is the second source of senior high school students’ English test anxiety. So before exams, students should conduct a well-rounded preparation, review carefully and exhaustively, and take exams in the best condition.

Because the fear of negative evaluation from other people is a major source of senior high school students’ English test anxiety, the teachers should evaluate students in a positive and effective way. Parents should not deny children’s abilities because of a failure in one English test. It is essential to encourage children even if they don’t get good scores. In addition, parents should communicate with children actively, showing respect and understanding to them. Meanwhile, parents should
actively create a harmonious atmosphere in the family to change the traditional concept of cultivating talents and establish proper expectations for children.

References