

王天剑\编著

# 语言焦虑研究入门

Step by Step to Research on  
Language Anxiety

中国社会科学出版社



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# Preface

Anxiety is an emotional reaction to an object or event. Language anxiety is the anxiety experienced by second language learners in classroom situations. It is related to a variety of learner variables, task variables, and teaching variables. Those variables combine to constitute an intricate hierarchy, influencing the process of second language acquisition.

Though educators have long been aware of the role played by language anxiety in language learning, the formal study of language anxiety did not begin until 1940s. Early studies revealed confusing findings with regard to the relationships between anxiety and learning. With the standardization of research instruments in 1980s, findings have tended to converge. Language anxiety has generally been revealed to be a negative phenomenon in language acquisition. Though a lot of problems have been solved by research up to now, more problems seem to have been raised. That is why language anxiety is attracting more and more attention of researchers.

Language anxiety is an interdisciplinary issue. The study of language anxiety requires unique research methods, which are beyond many green hands. New researchers frequently ask the question "How can I begin the study of language anxiety?" Few books have been published to provide the answer in China. Beginners have to turn to books on methodology, which are usually too general to be helpful and are also time-consuming. One may give up in the course of preparation before one is well equipped for the actual task of research.

To help beginning researchers, the present author came up with the current work. It combines general research methods with the specific issue of language

anxiety. The book conveys the years of research experience and understanding of the author. It covers the essential parts of the authors' dissertation for his PhD degree abroad. Beginners can expect to grasp the methods and develop the competence for research on language anxiety in an efficient and non-threatening way.

The book is written in English so that beginners can become familiar with the research terminology in English. This can be very helpful for them. Firstly they can easily understand the mass of literature published in English. Secondly, they can be well prepared for publication in English on international journals.

# Introduction

## **Background of research on language anxiety**

“I’m afraid of speaking English in the classroom!”

“I’m overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to grasp in order to use a foreign language.”

“The more I prepare for my language test, the more poorly I tend to do.”

“I made so many grammatical mistakes because I was very nervous.”

Talks as such are not new to language teachers. They are symptoms of anxiety in language learning or language anxiety. Due to its significant roles in learning and performance, language anxiety has attracted a lot of attention and interests from educators and researchers. Efforts to address the problem of language anxiety resulted in a new field of research.

Scholarly interests in the relationship of anxiety to second language learning began in the 1940s. Early research produced confusing results. Some studies revealed positive correlations between anxiety and language proficiency, others revealed negative ones, and there were still others which revealed no correlations either positive or negative (Scovel, 1978). The confusing findings made researchers unable to establish a clear picture of how anxiety affects language learning and performance. Reviewing the literature then available, Scovel (1978) concluded that it was difficult to determine the effects of anxiety on language learning because of: (a) the inconsistency of instruments used to assess anxiety, and (b) the complex and intricate hierarchy of variables that may intervene in the process of language learning.

Scovel suggested that language researchers should take note of the different

types of anxiety that had been identified, and be specific about the type of anxiety they were measuring. MacIntyre & Gardner (1991c), suggested that three types of anxiety — trait, state, and situation-specific anxiety — could be identified in studies on the roles of anxiety in second language learning. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) proposed that the anxiety that was responsible for students' negative emotional reactions to language learning was situation-specific, and they called it Foreign Language Anxiety. They developed an instrument, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), to measure this anxiety. According to Horwitz et al., the scale had high internal consistency, achieving an alpha coefficient of .93. A test-retest reliability over eight weeks achieved an  $r = .83$  ( $p < .001$ ). A construct validation study was also conducted, showing that the FLCAS was related to but distinguishable from other specific types of anxiety.

The situation-specific view of anxiety clarifies a lot of the earlier confusing findings. Horwitz (2001) reviewed related literature and suggested that studies using the FLCAS and other specific measures of second language anxiety had found consistent moderate negative correlations between language anxiety and language achievement (typically final grades).

Apart from the relationship between language anxiety and language achievement, many studies have also investigated the relationships of language anxiety to other factors. It has been found that language anxiety is related to many learner variables such as gender, age, experience, personality, language aptitude, achievement, learning motivation and culture. It is also related to the task variables such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Even the teaching approaches and beliefs of the language teacher can have an impact on language anxiety. Our knowledge about the relationships between language anxiety and so many variables is still quite limited. We can not arrive at conclusions on a lot of issues. There are disputes among experts on many fundamental problems. For example, researchers can still not agree on whether language anxiety is primarily a cause or "side effect" in the process of second language learning (MacIntyre, 1995; Horwitz, 2001; Sparks & Ganschow, 2007). Moreover, few empirical

studies have attempted to investigate remedies for language anxiety.

All the remaining problems justify more research efforts to be devoted to the issue of language anxiety.

### **An outline of the book**

The current book integrates theory with practice. It combines general methodology with the specific issue of language anxiety. The book is intended to equip beginning researchers with basic methods, techniques, and skills for them to pursue investigation on language anxiety independently.

The book is composed of 10 chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of language anxiety. Chapter 2 presents a brief discussion of the paradigm of research on language anxiety (quantitative and qualitative), as well as the general stages involved in a study. Chapter 3—8 cover the main tasks to be coped with in the research: selecting questions, conducting literature review, formulating hypotheses, drawing the sample, collecting and analyzing the data. For literature review, the employment of databases and web resources are well introduced. As to the data analysis, quantitative methods occupy most of the section, though qualitative techniques are also tapped. Quantitative analysis focuses on the statistical techniques frequently used in studies on language anxiety, including: descriptive analysis, comparing means and proportions, examining distributions, and investigating correlations and regressions. Once beginners have grasped the principles and rationales of those fundamental techniques, they can understand more complicated techniques beyond the scope of this book without much difficulty. The formulas and the calculations involved are expected to help the readers to understand the essence of the statistics. The actual analysis can be done conveniently with software such as SPSS or SAS. Chapter 9 presents the primary findings from studies on language anxiety, which is hoped to help beginners to lay a general literature foundation for further independent studies. Chapter 10 displays a speaking anxiety reduction model developed by the author of the present book. The rationale, the components, the time plot, and the script of an example are provided in details.

### **Special terms in research**

Construct



A construct is an abstraction that can not be observed directly but can be inferred from empirical data. For example, anxiety is a construct. Though you can not observe anxiety, you can infer the existence of it from empirical data such as the response to an anxiety questionnaire, behaviors in a language performance, and so forth.

#### Operational definition

An operational definition is a definition which describes how a construct can be measured or manipulated in a specific study. The operational definition for language anxiety, for example, can be the scores achieved by a participant on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al. , 1986).

#### Variable

A variable is a construct or property that can take on two or more values (levels). In the study of language anxiety, variables can be the level of anxiety, gender, age, grade, proficiency, major, the number of years of learning, nationality, culture, learning style, personality, and so on.

Variables can be classified into categorical and continuous variables. A categorical variable has a limited number of possible levels, while a continuous variable has an infinite number of possible levels in a given range. Gender is an example of categorical variable, so is major. But age, test score, and the level of anxiety are all examples of continuous variables. Sometimes, researchers may purposely convert continuous variables into categorical variables. For example, age can be distinguished between young and old based on an arbitrary dividing line. Similarly, the levels of language anxiety can be put into low, moderate, and high intervals.

Variables can also be classified into the dependent and the independent ones. A dependent variable is a variable on which the influence of other variables is to be examined. An independent variable is a variable whose influence on other variables is to be studied. The terms are typically used in experiments or causal comparative studies. The researcher seeks to examine the effects of the independent variable on the dependent variable. For example, if you investigate the effects of two types of relaxation exercises on language anxiety, you are emplo-

ying the exercises as the independent variables, and language anxiety as the dependent variable.

#### Language

Except for the cases when the first language is mentioned, language in the book means the same as the second or foreign language.

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# 1 The concept of language anxiety

Language anxiety is the anxiety involved in language learning and using. It is a specific type of anxiety. To achieve a full understanding of language anxiety, it is essential to begin with general anxiety.

## 1.1 Anxiety

### 1) The definitions

The term of anxiety has been understood from numerous perspectives by scholars in various fields of research, such as anthropology and psychology:

- Darwin (1872) thought of anxiety as an emotional reaction that is aroused when an organism feels physically under threat.
- May (1977, p.205) considered anxiety as “an emotional response to threat to some value that the individual holds essential to his existence as a personality”.
- Beck and his associates (Beck, 1985; Beck & Emery, 1985) claimed that anxiety is an emotional response originating from a defective perception of danger in the environment.

Those are only a few examples of the divergent understandings of the term of anxiety. As the creator of the Theory of Evolution, Darwin stressed the adaptive function of anxiety, which prepares an individual for coping with the perceived physical threats. Anxiety thus helps one to survive dangerous situations. This notion has its limitation because in a civilized society there are still a lot of people complaining about the problem of anxiety though few situations are really

physically threatening. The definition by May seems to be praiseworthy for explaining the anxiety without physical threat: it is the threat to our value that matters. But it is still incomplete because it neglects the fact that even in modern society there are still physical threats such as earthquakes or hurricanes which may cause anxiety. As a psychotherapist, Beck attributed anxiety to the defective perception of an individual, rather than reality. This notion of anxiety is supported by the successes of psychotherapies which have effectively reduced anxiety through helping clients modify their problematic perceptions. But the definition by Beck is still imperfect. The perception leading to anxiety may not always be defective.

As is obvious, those concepts disagree with each other on the causes of anxiety. Each of them can explain some sorts of anxiety, but not others. The specification of the causes seems to be a drawback of the definitions of anxiety. Scovel (1978, p. 134) avoided the pitfall, simply defining anxiety as a state of "apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object". Without giving a clear cause, the definition is applicable to all cases of anxiety. That is why this definition has been widely cited or quoted by fellow researchers.

## 2) The components

It is generally agreed that typical anxiety can have four components: the cognitive, the emotional, the somatic, and the behavioral. These components combine to create a unique unpleasant experience of anxiety.

The cognitive element is the thinking or beliefs related to anxiety. It can be the expectation of the approach of certain threatening events, the estimation of the probability of the occurrence of the events, or the interpretation and evaluation of the consequences of the events. Anxious individuals are likely to have incorrect cognitions such as overestimating the probability, exaggerating the negative sides, and so on.

The emotional element is the psychological experience sustained by an anxious individual. Anxious people may experience apprehension, dread, irritability, obsession, tenseness, jumpiness, and so forth.

The somatic component of anxiety refers to the physiological reactions accompanying anxiety. These reactions are numerous and vary a lot across people. They may include muscle weakness, tension, fatigue, nausea, chest pain, shortness of breath, stomachache, or headache, depending on the seriousness of anxiety. The body may prepare to deal with a threat: heart rate is increased; blood flow to the major muscle groups is increased; and the functions of the immune and digestive systems are inhibited (the fight or flight response). External somatic signs of anxiety may include the pale skin, sweating face, and trembling.

The behavioral component is the behaviors selected by individuals when experiencing anxiety. Anxious people may choose to confront the threat head-on, to withdraw from it, or to do something else. Researchers have noticed that in social situations, anxious individuals “squirm in their seats, fidget, play with their hair, clothes or other manipulable objects, stutter and stammer as they talk” (Leary, 1982, p. 110). There are also image-protection behaviors such as smiling and nodding frequently, seldom interrupting others, or restraining themselves from participating in conversations (Young, 1991b).

### 3) State and trait anxiety

Spielberger (1983) distinguished between trait and state anxiety. The former was regarded as a comparatively stable personal difference in anxiety-proneness. The latter was a transitory subjective feeling of worry, apprehension, nervousness, and tension, accompanied by activation of the individual’s nervous system. As is obvious, the anxiety discussed in the previous sections is only state anxiety. Trait anxiety, strictly speaking, is not anxiety. It is a personality trait related to anxiety.

To measure the two types of anxiety, Spielberger (1983) developed the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), an instrument composed of a state anxiety subscale and a trait anxiety subscale. Both of the subscales take the Likert format, with each composed of 20 items. For the state anxiety subscale, each of the 20 items is followed by four choices: (a) Not at all, (b) Somewhat, (c) Mod-

erately so, and (d) Very much so, with “Not at all” indicating the lowest level of anxiety and “Very much so” the highest level. As to the trait anxiety subscale, each of the 20 items is followed by four different choices: (a) Almost never, (b) Sometimes, (c) Often, and (d) Almost always, with “Almost never” signifying the lowest degree of trait anxiety, and “Almost always” the highest degree. The direction or instruction accompanying the state anxiety subscale notifies the participants to provide selections based on the momentary emotions experienced at the time of the anxiety test, while that accompanying the trait anxiety subscale informs the participants of providing responses based on the emotions usually felt, rather than that felt at the time of the test. Here are a few sample items included in each of the subscales:

#### State Anxiety Subscale

- I feel calm.
- a) Not at all b) Somewhat c) Moderately so d) Very much so
- I feel secure.
- a) Not at all b) Somewhat c) Moderately so d) Very much so
- I am tense.
- a) Not at all b) Somewhat c) Moderately so d) Very much so

#### Trait Anxiety Subscale

- I feel pleasant.
- a) Almost never b) Sometimes c) Often d) Almost always
- I feel satisfied with myself.
- a) Almost never b) Sometimes c) Often d) Almost always
- I feel rested.
- a) Almost never b) Sometimes c) Often d) Almost always

## 1.2 Language anxiety

Though helpful, the concept of general anxiety is not adequate for research on second language acquisition, for it can not help to clarify the confusing results of early studies. Some of those studies revealed incomplete correlations be-



tween anxiety and language achievements. For example, Swain and Burnaby (1976) studied English speaking French students, finding a negative correlation between one measure of French proficiency and anxiety and no correlation between other measures of French proficiency and anxiety. Tucker, Hamayan, & Genesee (1976) also found that anxiety correlated again with one measure of French proficiency, but not with any of the three other measures of language proficiency. Other studies found complete correlations, but these correlations contradicted the results got from other students or languages. The study by Chastain (1975) showed that the test scores of French audio-lingual method students negatively correlated with anxiety, while the test scores of German and Spanish students using the traditional method positively correlated with anxiety.

The confusing findings were not caused by the measurement of proficiency. Instead, they were caused by the measurement of anxiety. Consistent findings on the relationship between proficiency and anxiety can not result from studies which measure anxiety as a trait or as a state.

What is consistently correlated with language proficiency? It is the language anxiety. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994b) defined language anxiety as the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically connected with the second language contexts, including speaking, listening and learning. A more detailed description of language anxiety was provided by Horwitz et al. (1986). They regarded communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation as the conceptual building blocks for the description of language anxiety. Communication apprehension is considered as the fear or anxiety related to communicating with people. The inability to express one's thoughts and ideas in the foreign language, and the inability to comprehend another person are both potential sources of communication apprehension. Test anxiety is a type of performance anxiety due to a fear of failure (Gordon & Sarason; Sarason, as cited in Horwitz et al., 1986). Test-anxious students often set excessively high standards for themselves and get anxious when they fail to show perfect test performance. Students who are test-anxious in foreign language class suffer a lot owing to the frequent assessments inherent in the learning. Fear of negative evaluation is defined as the ap-