

Current situation of high school students' oral English anxiety and its solutions from the perspective of positive psychology

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Abstract: Foreign language anxiety has always been a hot topic in the field of second language acquisition. This study conducted a questionnaire survey on the oral English anxiety of the sophomore students in a middle school in Jilin Province. The results showed that the overall anxiety level of the sophomore students was in the middle level, and the communicative fear level was the highest. From the perspective of positive psychology, this paper proposes some strategies to reduce communication anxiety, negative evaluation anxiety, test anxiety and foreign language class anxiety.

Key words: high school students; Oral English anxiety; Positive psychology

1. Research background

In terms of language knowledge teaching, the English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 edition, 2020 revision) (hereinafter referred to as the “new curriculum Standards”) point out that teachers should attach importance to helping students form a certain sense of language and improve their confidence and fluency in expression. Obviously, foreign language anxiety is one of the factors that lead to negative emotions. Helping students overcome oral anxiety and build their confidence in expression is one of the important tasks of senior high school oral English. At the same time, the new curriculum standard points out that the use of appropriate emotional strategies can be conducive to foreign language learning, including “positive learning attitude”, “learning interest” and “cooperative learning consciousness”. In 2011, Seligman, the founder of positive psychology, revised his true happiness theory and proposed the well-being theory, which believes that improving human happiness is the highest goal of PP. Happiness is composed of five dimensions of PERMA, namely, positive emotion, engagement, relationship, meaning and achievement. This theory provides a wealth of enlightenment for foreign language education. Therefore, positive psychology can provide guidance for teachers on how to relieve students' foreign language anxiety, build up students' confidence in expression, and help students learn to use affective strategies.

2. The development of foreign language anxiety

(1) The presentation of foreign language learning anxiety

Since the 1980s, foreign language anxiety has been discussed by scholars. Krashen (1980) believes that foreign language learning anxiety is one of the affective variables affecting the second language learning effect. The higher the anxiety level of foreign language learners, the more obvious the affective filtering effect will be, which will hinder language input and make it difficult to make effective progress in foreign language acquisition. In 1986, American psychologist Horwitz defined foreign language learning anxiety as “a synthesis of self-awareness, beliefs, emotions and behaviors related to classroom foreign language learning caused by the particularity of foreign language learning”, and designed the foreign language Learning Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). It proved that foreign language learning anxiety can be measured effectively and credibly.

(2) Research on foreign language speaking anxiety at home and abroad

Foreign scholars have produced a lot of research results on foreign language learning anxiety, mainly focusing on the impact of foreign language learning anxiety, including the impact on listening, speaking, reading and writing. Smythe, Gardner and others are the representatives of foreign studies on the relationship between foreign language anxiety and oral expression level. Gardner et al. investigated more than 1,000 Canadian students who speak French as a second language and came to the conclusion that classroom anxiety is negatively correlated with students' oral English level. Under the same conditions, the lower the anxiety level, the stronger the oral expression level. Domestic research on foreign language oral anxiety began in the early 21st century. Cheng Yanping et al. proved that students' oral expression was affected by classroom anxiety through a survey. Subsequently, Jing Xiaoqian and Li Jie put forward corresponding strategies on how to overcome oral anxiety by analyzing the causes of oral anxiety. It can be seen that taking effective measures to overcome anxiety in time can help students to carry out language learning more smoothly.

3. The development of positive psychology

At the end of the 20th century, American psychologist Martin E. P. Seligman put forward positive psychology. After nearly two decades of research, the related research of positive psychology has developed rapidly, and its theoretical ideas have greatly influenced the practical research in various fields such as pedagogy, psychology and second language acquisition. Li Chengchen (2021) summarized the enlightenment on foreign language education from the well-being theory discussed by scholars since 2012, that is, the goal of foreign language teaching should not only be limited to improving the language knowledge and skills of second language learners and the teaching effectiveness of teachers, but also pay attention to the mental health of teaching and learning. In order to promote their well-being. Meanwhile, some scholars make further innovations based on this theory. For example, Oxford (2016) extends PERMA into EMPATHICS, where E is Emotion and Empathy, M is Meaning and Motivation. P stands for Perseverance, A for Autonomy, T for Time and H for Hardiness

and Habits of mind. I stands for Intelligences, C for Character strengths, and S for Self-factors. Compared with PERMA, EMPATHICS covers more topics on humanism, emphasizing the whole-person perspective on language learners, attaching importance to various individual difference factors and environmental factors such as emotion-motivation-cognitive-personality traits (such as perseverance). This theory points out the direction for the practice of second language education: that is, to integrate active education with language education, and to pay attention to the individual happiness and learning achievement of second language learners from the perspective of “whole person”. Based on this model, the present study explores strategies to alleviate foreign language anxiety.

4. Research design

(1) Research object

The subjects of this study were 280 students from the second grade of a middle school in Changchun, Jilin Province.

(2) Research tools

This study adopts the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) revised by Chinese scholar Wang Caikang (2003), which is suitable for Chinese students. The research shows that the revised scale has good reliability and validity, and the scale contains more questions related to students’ oral English. A total of 280 valid samples were used in this study.

5. Results and discussion

The author made a descriptive statistical analysis of the total score of spoken English anxiety and the four strategic scores of the study subjects, and the results were shown in Table 1:

Table 1 describes the statistical table

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum value	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Total points	280	33	165	2.6607	27.160
Sociophobia	280	12.00	36.00	2.9478	4.67438
Negative evaluation fear	280	9.00	45.00	2.6742	9.08062
Test anxiety	280	5.00	25.00	2.6379	5.22846
Anxiety about foreign language classes	280	13.00	55.00	2.5896	8.63060
Number of valid cases (in columns)	280				

From the analysis of Table 1, it can be seen that the average average of high school students’ oral English anxiety is 2.6607, which is in the middle level, and this result is good. As the research of Chen Cong & Xu Jinfen (2019) shows, anxiety has a negative impact on the quality of spoken English output, but appropriate anxiety can enhance the learning effect.

The results show that the anxiety levels of high school students in various aspects of oral English from high to low are communicative fear (2.9478), negative evaluation fear (2.6742), test anxiety (2.6379) and foreign language class anxiety (2.5896). Communication Apprehension (CA) refers to the fear of oral communication, which is one of the main components of language anxiety. Communication apprehension can be found in both native and foreign language communication. In foreign languages, communicative fear can be attributed to the transfer of native language anxiety, limited language skills, and the expectation of communicative difficulties. The evaluation of teachers and students in the foreign language class, the collective attention and other factors can aggravate the foreign language communication fear (Li Hui, 2013). When scholars Gao Chi (2013) and Tang Rui (2018) conducted a survey on the current situation of high school students’ oral anxiety, they also found that high school students had the highest mean communicative fear, which supported the author’s research results.

To sum up, through the questionnaire survey, the overall oral English anxiety of high school students is at a moderate level, and the anxiety of high school students is mainly due to fear of communication, and the overall confidence of students in their own expression ability is not high.

6. Strategy

(1) Design various classroom questions to cultivate students’ quality advantages

Scholars H.Ynn Erickson, Lois A.Ning and Rachel French (2017) put forward three categories of questions, namely factual questions, conceptual questions and argumentative questions. Among them, argumentative questions are designed based on reasonable logic, and the respondents need to use scientific and reasonable reasons and arguments to support their own opinions. According to the EMPATHICS happiness theoretical model, teachers should learn to cultivate students’ quality advantages, which include six major virtues, intelligence being one of them. Intelligence includes curiosity, creativity, open thinking and so on. In English class, teachers can properly design debate competitions and open questions, encourage students to participate in them, give full play to students’ subjectivity, and cultivate their own advantages of thinking quality, so as to improve the happiness of learning English.

(2) Use teachers' evaluation words skillfully to build students' self-confidence

In the past, due to the lack of relevant theoretical guidance, the study of gestures, body language and other non-verbal language signs was neglected. With the continuous development of science and technology, the theory of multimodal language analysis has come into being, and teachers can try to use interesting pictures and emojis to give students positive emotional feedback. From the perspective of individual factors, students' self-efficacy, self-recognition, self-esteem and self-regulation are closely related to personal happiness. Teachers' appropriate encouraging and guiding discourse can enhance students' sense of self-efficacy and show their respect for students' answers, thus establishing students' confidence in expression and relieving students' foreign language anxiety.

(3) Organize cooperative activities to cultivate students' interpersonal intelligence

From the perspective of intelligence, the multiple intelligences theory proposed by Howard Gardner is an important part of the EMPATHICS happiness theoretical model. According to the results of the questionnaire, the degree of communication fear of students is not low. Therefore, cultivating students' interpersonal intelligence can alleviate students' communicative fear. Let students exercise their ability to get along with others in cooperative activities. In the daily teaching process, almost every course can adopt some group activities to learn, such as group problem discussion, role play, project design, team competition and so on. In these activities, students who are afraid of communicating with others can also try to express their own opinions actively in this process, so as to feel the charm of cooperative learning and improve their happiness and sense of achievement in learning.

Summary

The influence of anxiety on foreign language learning cannot be ignored. As a teacher, from the perspective of positive psychology, we should enhance the interaction with students, give students more help, encourage and praise students scientifically, cultivate students' sense of cooperation, and improve students' happiness in learning foreign languages. At the same time, teachers should also know how to guide students to understand and master some English learning strategies and methods, and cultivate students' independent learning ability, which can help alleviate learning anxiety.

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