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Research Progress on the Impact of English Anxiety on Oral English Learning among Junior High School Students

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Abstract. The 2022 Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards highlight oral proficiency as central to junior high English teaching, making listening and speaking competence key parts of students' overall language assessment. Yet current instruction still prioritizes reading and writing, and many students experience oral anxiety that hinders their speaking development. This paper reviews existing research to identify major causes of oral English anxiety among junior high school students and clarify how anxiety interacts with speaking performance, providing both theoretical foundations and practical strategies for alleviating anxiety and improving oral teaching. Key findings: (1) junior high school students have relatively high levels of oral English anxiety; (2) Teachers can employ multimodal teaching and cooperative learning to reduce students' speaking anxiety; (3) students should recognize moderate anxiety as normal, learn to manage excessive anxiety, and apply cognitive restructuring. By integrating anxiety theory, self-efficacy, and the Affective Filter Hypothesis into oral English teaching practice, this study supports future research and helps teachers foster supportive classrooms, reduce student pressure, and enhance oral instruction effectiveness.

Keywords: Junior high school students, Oral English anxiety, English learning

1. Introduction

In recent years, the Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) has set clear objectives for middle school students' oral English skills, and the listening section of China's high school entrance English examination will be transformed into an integrated listening and speaking test, with oral performance included in the total score. However, current English education overemphasizes reading and writing skills while neglecting oral proficiency improvement, resulting in the "mute English" phenomenon—teachers often focus solely on test scores and overlook students' psychological states, leaving students lacking confidence and hesitant to express themselves in English. Existing literature on oral English anxiety predominantly targets tertiary education students majoring in English, such as postgraduates and undergraduates, with relatively few studies focusing on basic education [1].

Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Self-Efficacy Theory and the Affective Filter Hypothesis, this paper aims to (1) summarize the key triggers of English anxiety among junior high school students and explain the interactive mechanism between anxiety and oral performance, and

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(2) provide theoretical foundations and solutions for alleviating students' English anxiety and improving oral English instruction. By integrating anxiety, self-efficacy, and the Affective Filter Hypothesis into junior high oral English teaching contexts, the author seeks to offer theoretical references for subsequent research, help students develop anxiety regulation skills, enable teachers to optimize classroom atmosphere, reduce students' expressive pressure, and enhance the efficiency of oral English teaching.

2. Concepts and current status of foreign language anxiety

2.1. Concepts related to foreign language anxiety

Anxiety is a psychological state marked by tension, worry, fear, and unease, often accompanied by physical symptoms such as sweating, trembling, dizziness, increased heart rate, and elevated blood pressure [2]. Scholars agree it arises from interacting internal and external stressors.

Foreign language anxiety is a distinct, language-specific affective barrier in second language acquisition, especially disruptive to oral performance. Horwitz et al. Introduced the concept of "foreign language classroom anxiety" and developed the widely used Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) [3]. Wang Caikang verified FLCAS in Chinese contexts, defining the construct as tension and unease under foreign language learning pressure [4]. Li Chengchen emphasizes its inhibitory effect on speaking [5]; Wang Minhua confirms it is a key obstacle to oral language learning among junior high students [6]. Overall, foreign language anxiety manifests as persistent tension, self-doubt, irritability, and avoidance of speaking, driven by fear of errors, concern about negative evaluation, perceived language inadequacy, or excessive pressure.

2.2. Current status of foreign language anxiety among junior high school students

Research indicates that the overall level of English learning anxiety among Chinese junior high school students is moderate [6-8]. Among various anxiety types, oral anxiety is most prominent: Li Chengchen found it to be the primary anxiety type among junior high school students, with incidence rates generally higher than among university students [5]; Xu Xing's investigation under the background of the new curriculum standards revealed that 52% of junior high school students experience classroom interaction anxiety [9]; a survey of 21,370 middle school students by Ying Bin et al. further confirmed that English anxiety follows a normal distribution, with the moderate level accounting for the highest proportion, and that female students and rural township students exhibit higher anxiety levels [8]. Additionally, Wu Shidan notes that anxiety levels are significantly correlated with the use of self-regulation strategies [7].

3. Influencing factors of foreign language anxiety

Based on a review and synthesis of relevant literature, the author summarizes that factors contributing to foreign language anxiety among junior high school students primarily include two dimensions: external teaching environment factors and internal learner personal factors.

External teaching environments are major triggers of English learning anxiety. Traditional teacher-dominated instruction, neglect of individual differences, harsh error correction, and overemphasis on linguistic forms create a stifling classroom atmosphere and provoke learner anxiety [10, 11]. Peer proficiency gaps induce social comparison and fear of ridicule, which inhibit students' oral participation and increase classroom anxiety [12]. Furthermore, exam-oriented assessment

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systems and excessive attention to academic scores lead to test stress and foreign language learning anxiety [13].

Internal psychological factors also determine students' anxiety levels. Low self-efficacy and inaccurate self-ability evaluation cause self-doubt, correlate with higher anxiety scores, and lead to avoidance of oral and listening learning tasks [14, 15]. Emotional intelligence negatively predicts classroom anxiety, as students with low emotional intelligence struggle to regulate negative emotions and are more susceptible to persistent learning anxiety [16]. Overall, students' English learning anxiety results from the combined effects of external teaching environments and learners' internal self-regulating traits.

Synthesizing the above literature, student anxiety arises not only from external environmental influences but also from internal self-regulation. Both emotional intelligence and self-efficacy affect learners' anxiety levels.

4. Current status and problems of oral English learning among junior high school students

The new curriculum reform and the English core competency framework explicitly identify oral communicative competence as a core objective of language learning. Current research indicates that the "mute English" phenomenon is prevalent among students, with a large number of junior high school students exhibiting oral avoidance behavior and lacking oral output.

4.1. Current status and problems of oral English learning

Junior high school students' oral English learning is mainly hindered by psychological barriers, unreasonable learning orientation and limited language resources. Firstly, affected by foreign language anxiety, most students lack oral expression confidence, avoid speaking in class, and fear being ridiculed for linguistic errors, forming a silent learning state [17-19]. Secondly, under the exam-oriented learning environment, students regard English as a test subject rather than a communication tool, lack active oral practice motivation, and merely complete passive learning tasks [20, 21]. Besides, students' fragmented vocabulary and rigid sentence structures restrict flexible and coherent oral output in real communicative scenarios [19]. Overall, students' poor oral proficiency is the result of multiple interacting internal factors.

4.2. Shortcomings of oral English teaching in junior high schools

Junior high oral English teaching has obvious systematic defects. Current teaching is largely exam-oriented, featuring rigid and test-oriented drills while ignoring authentic communicative training, which creates a gap between classroom teaching and practical language use [22]. In addition, insufficient teachers' oral English proficiency fails to provide effective language demonstration and learning guidance for students [23]. Furthermore, the lack of diverse extracurricular English practice platforms limits students' communicative opportunities, and oral training is confined to limited classroom time, making it hard for learners to consolidate and improve their speaking competence [24].

5. Impact of foreign language anxiety on oral English learning

Research shows foreign language anxiety affects oral learning through three interconnected dimensions: learner characteristics, teaching and evaluation practices, and teacher-student relationships. Learners' personality traits and self-cognition moderate this effect. Those high in

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neuroticism or introversion, or with low language self-esteem, tend to experience greater communication apprehension. When speaking, they overfocus on potential errors and others' judgments, which consumes working memory and reduces oral fluency [25]. Teaching and assessment, including classroom interaction, oral presentations, and evaluations, directly shape students' speaking-related emotions and thus influence oral learning progress. Empirical studies with Pakistani students confirm that assessment practices are a key driver of foreign language anxiety [26].

Teacher-student relationships also play a critical regulatory role: supportive interactions can buffer anxiety's negative impact on oral performance. Young's classroom-based research further identifies the quality of teacher-student interaction as a core factor in modulating learners' anxiety levels [27, 28].

6. Corresponding solutions

To address foreign language anxiety's impact on junior high school students' oral English learning, research identifies two main solution pathways: student-centered strategies and teacher-centered strategies. For students: Recognize that mild anxiety is normal and non-harmful; only excessive anxiety requires intervention. Cognitive restructuring helps—replacing thoughts like "I'll make mistakes and be ridiculed" with "mistakes are essential to learning"—to reduce fear of evaluation [6, 16]. For teachers: Use multimodal instruction (e.g., visual, auditory, and interactive elements), which evidence shows effectively lowers oral anxiety [29]. Also integrate cooperative learning, such as group problem-solving and peer-led speaking practice, to boost motivation, foster a relaxed classroom atmosphere, and ease anxiety [30].

Notably, current solutions largely overlook broader contextual factors, particularly school climate and societal attitudes, leaving these areas underexplored and underserved.

7. Conclusion

This paper systematically examines the causes, impacts, and intervention pathways of oral English anxiety among junior high school students. Findings indicate that excessive anxiety constrains oral proficiency development both psychologically—by weakening willingness to speak and fostering interaction avoidance—and cognitively—by disrupting language organization, working memory, and phonetic output, ultimately impeding core communicative competence and reducing learning efficiency. Building on empirical evidence, four intervention strategies are proposed: (1) cognitive adjustment to distinguish benign tension from excessive anxiety; (2) cognitive restructuring to establish a fault-tolerant learning mindset; (3) multimodal teaching to diversify input forms and reduce oral output pressure; and (4) small-group cooperative learning to create low-pressure classroom environments through peer support. Existing research is largely classroom-centered, with limited attention to broader school, social, and home-school-society collaborative mechanisms—representing this study's innovative perspective. Future research should expand investigation to campus language culture, social language environments, and differentiated intervention systems for diverse learner profiles.

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