

Causes and Regulation Strategies of English Listening Anxiety Among Non-English Major College Students: An Analysis Based on Literature Review

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Abstract

English listening anxiety is one of the core affective barriers that constrain the effectiveness of second language acquisition among non-English major college students. Based on relevant studies published in domestic and international core journals and dissertations from 2011 to 2025, this paper systematically reviews the current status, causes, and regulation strategies of English listening anxiety in this population. The findings indicate that listening anxiety levels in this group are generally moderate or higher, with significant differences across dimensions such as grade level and place of origin. The causes can be attributed to the interaction between subjective factors related to individual learners and objective factors such as teaching and materials. Existing regulation strategies encompass two main dimensions: learner autonomous regulation and teacher instructional intervention. However, limitations persist, including restricted research samples and insufficient practicality of strategies. Future research should broaden perspectives, strengthen analyses of multi-factor interactions, and enhance empirical validation of strategies, thereby providing theoretical and practical references for alleviating listening anxiety among non-English major college students and improving the quality of listening instruction.

Keywords

non-English major college students, English listening anxiety, causes of anxiety, regulation strategies, second language acquisition

1. Introduction

In the theoretical framework of second language acquisition, listening serves as the core channel for language input and forms the foundation for learners to develop linguistic competence and achieve intercultural communication (Krashen, 1982). With the shift in college English teaching reform toward an “applied” and “competence-oriented” approach, the cultivation of listening ability has been placed in a more prominent position. The proportion of listening scores in the national College English Test Band 4 and Band 6 (CET-4/6) has increased to 35%, underscoring the importance of listening skills. However, the instantaneous, passive, and complex nature of listening comprehension makes it the language skill most likely to trigger learner anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Foreign language listening anxiety refers to the complex of negative emotions, such as tension, fear, and frustration, experienced by learners during listening comprehension due to obstacles in processing language

input (Elkhafaifi, 2005). Compared to English majors, non-English major college students generally exhibit uneven English proficiency, insufficient listening practice frequency, diverse learning motivations with a stronger utilitarian orientation, and other characteristics, making their listening anxiety issues more prominent and causally complex (Deng, 2015). In recent years, domestic scholars have conducted a large number of empirical studies on listening anxiety among non-English major college students, yielding substantial achievements in areas such as the current status of anxiety, influencing factors, and intervention strategies. Nevertheless, existing research suffers from fragmentation, regional limitations, and a lack of systematic integration and review.

Against this backdrop, this paper draws primarily on authoritative publications from 2011 to 2025 retrieved from databases such as China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and Wanfang, supplemented by accessible specialized research reports. It systematically reviews the research trajectory on English listening anxiety among non-English major college students, summarizes the current status of anxiety, its multidimensional causes, and regulation strategies, and analyzes the shortcomings of existing studies along with future directions. The aim is to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for academic research in this field as well as for college English listening instruction.

2. Current Status of Research on English Listening Anxiety Among Non-English Major College Students

Since Horwitz and colleagues proposed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) in 1986 and defined the core connotations of listening anxiety, scholars both domestically and internationally have gradually focused on the status of listening anxiety in non-English major populations. Empirical studies over the past 15 years indicate that listening anxiety in this group is generally at a moderate or higher level, with significant differences observed across anxiety dimensions and demographic characteristics.

2.1 Overall Anxiety Levels Exhibit a Moderate or Higher Gradient

In terms of overall anxiety severity, quantitative data from various studies consistently show that listening anxiety among non-English major college students is at a moderate or higher level. Wang Qiaoling (2023) used the Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) to survey 113 cross-major university students, revealing an overall mean listening anxiety score of 3.398, falling within the moderate anxiety range. Among the dimensions, “fear of listening materials” ($M=3.518$) and “tension during the listening process” ($M=3.510$) scored above the critical value of 3.5, indicating high anxiety levels. Li (2025), in a longitudinal study of 89 second-year non-English major students, found an overall mean listening anxiety score of 3.255, also at a moderate level, with the “lack of listening skills” factor having the highest mean ($M=3.337$) among the four dimensions, serving as the primary trigger for anxiety. Wen (2022), in a survey of 380 vocational college non-English major students, reported a mean listening anxiety score of 3.394, at a moderate-to-high level, with 80.6% of participants scoring in the mid-to-low range on listening performance, showing a clear negative correlation between anxiety levels and listening proficiency.

Regarding the distribution of anxiety across the group, Zhang and Zhou (2013), in a longitudinal study of 198 first-year science and engineering non-English major students, found that over 90% exhibited moderate-to-high listening anxiety at the initial stage. After one semester of specialized autonomous listening training, the total anxiety score decreased from 5931 to 5835; although the reduction was limited, it confirmed the effectiveness of intervention measures in alleviating anxiety. Chen Xuan et al. (2016), in a survey of 100 science non-English major college students, discovered that 77% experienced moderate anxiety, 9% severe anxiety, and 0% no anxiety, highlighting the prevalence of listening anxiety in this population.

2.2 Heterogeneity Characteristics of Anxiety Levels Across Groups

In analyses of differences across demographic variables, English listening anxiety among non-English major college students exhibits significant heterogeneity in terms of gender, grade level, and place of origin. Regarding gender differences, Shi Weizhao (2016), in a study of 115 non-English major students, found that males had a significantly higher mean listening anxiety score (115.36) than females (110.44), which aligns with the traditional view of females’ advantage in language learning; males are more prone to anxiety due to

perceived insufficient linguistic aptitude and weaker foundations. However, some studies present contradictory findings: Liu Hang (2011), in a survey of 152 non-English major students from science and engineering institutions, reported that females had a slightly higher mean listening anxiety score (101.27) than males (97.29), attributing this to females' greater attention to listening performance and higher psychological sensitivity.

With respect to grade-level differences, Wang Qiaoling's (2023) study confirmed significant differences in listening anxiety between first-year and second-year students, as well as between first-year and third-year students ($p < 0.05$), with first-year students exhibiting significantly lower mean anxiety scores than higher-grade students. This is because first-year students still retain the high-intensity English learning habits from high school, whereas second- and third-year students experience a decline in listening ability due to professional coursework encroaching on English study time,

thereby exacerbating anxiety. Concerning differences by place of origin, Xu Nuo's (2023) study indirectly supports the regional association with listening anxiety. In an overall foreign language anxiety survey of non-English major college students, rural-origin students had a significantly higher total anxiety score ($M = 110.23$) than urban-origin students ($M = 92.84$, $t = 7.09$, $p < 0.001$). This finding can be extended to the domain of listening anxiety, with the primary cause being the scarcity of listening teaching resources and inadequate speaking-listening practice in middle schools for rural-origin students, leading to psychological disparities upon entering university due to ability gaps with urban-origin peers.

3. Research on the Causes of English Listening Anxiety Among Non-English Major College Students

The causes of English listening anxiety among non-English major college students are not the result of a single factor but rather the multidimensional interaction between subjective factors related to individual learners and objective factors such as the teaching environment and listening materials. Existing studies categorize the core causes into two main domains, subjective and objective, each encompassing multiple levels of influencing factors.

3.1 Subjective Causes: Limitations at the Individual Learner's Ability and Psychological Levels

3.1.1 Weak Language Foundation and Lack of Listening Skills

A weak language foundation is a core antecedent factor triggering listening anxiety. Wu (2025), through semi-structured interviews, found that among 10 interviewed non-English major students, 8 mentioned "insufficient vocabulary" and "deficient phonetic recognition ability" as the primary reasons for impediments in listening comprehension. Some students experienced tension due to inability to recognize phenomena such as linking sounds and weak forms, or because unfamiliar words hindered information processing. Li Xiaoxiao's (2025) empirical study further confirmed that the "lack of listening skills" factor was significantly negatively correlated with listening performance ($r = -0.219$, $p < 0.05$). Participants frequently experienced information omission and comprehension deviations during the listening process due to not mastering core skills such as pre-listening prediction and rapid note-taking of keywords, thereby intensifying anxiety. Additionally, Chen Xuan et al.'s (2016) survey revealed that 34% of participants, due to unfamiliarity with cultural backgrounds of English-speaking countries, were unable to interpret cultural metaphors in listening materials, leading to comprehension barriers and subsequent anxiety.

3.1.2 Insufficient Self-Efficacy and Negative Cognitive Beliefs

Self-efficacy, a core concept in Bandura's social learning theory, refers to an individual's subjective judgment of their ability to complete specific tasks and is significantly negatively correlated with listening anxiety (Wang Chi, 2023). Lu Jiahui's (2023) study on 78 English major students (findings transferable to non-English major populations) found that over 80% of high-anxiety students exhibited "low self-evaluation of listening ability." During listening training or examinations, they frequently experienced negative psychological hints such as "I definitely won't understand it," and this cognitive bias directly elevates the

affective filter threshold, hindering effective processing of language input (Krashen, 1982). Li Xiaoxiao's (2025) research also indicated that although second-year non-English major students showed improved self-efficacy after one year of college English study, 50% of participants still experienced intensified anxiety due to insufficient cognition of their own listening skills and an overemphasis on the unrealistic goal of "understanding every word."

3.1.3 Utilitarian Learning Motivation and Lack of Autonomous Learning Ability

The English learning motivation of non-English major college students often exhibits utilitarian characteristics, with learning objectives focused on passing the CET-4/6 examinations rather than enhancing actual language proficiency. This motivation orientation easily leads to test-oriented listening anxiety. Liu Hang's (2011) survey showed that although 78.9% of participants expressed a desire to improve their listening skills, 86.8% did not engage in autonomous listening practice after class, relying solely on limited in-class exercises, resulting in slow proficiency gains and subsequent anxiety in testing scenarios. Zhang and Zhou's (2013) longitudinal study further confirmed that students lacking autonomous listening planning experienced significantly smaller reductions in anxiety compared to those who consistently maintained listening learning logs, indicating that deficiencies in autonomous learning ability exacerbate the persistence of anxiety.

3.2 Objective Causes: Limitations in the External Environment Related to Teaching and Materials

3.2.1 Insufficient Adaptability of Listening Materials

The difficulty, speech rate, and topic types of listening materials are direct external factors influencing anxiety. Lu Jiahui's (2023) study found that the difficulty level and speech rate of listening materials are the primary objective triggers of anxiety, with students in the moderate anxiety group explicitly stating that "excessively fast speech rates" and "overly long material passages" lead to distracted attention and failed information processing. Fan Jie (2011) also pointed out that if material topics exceed students' cognitive scope or contain a large number of specialized terms, comprehension difficulty significantly increases, thereby triggering anxiety. In addition, Wang Qiaoling's (2023) survey revealed that defects in material presentation forms, such as "non-standard pronunciation" and "audio noise," cause listening obstacles for more than 30% of participants, exacerbating anxiety levels.

3.2.2 Limitations in Teaching Modes and Classroom Atmosphere

The rigidity of traditional listening teaching modes and the suppressive classroom atmosphere are important triggers that exacerbate anxiety. In Wu Shangli's (2025) interviews, multiple students reported that listening classes still predominantly follow a unidirectional mode of "playing recordings—checking answers," with teachers lacking systematic instruction on listening strategies and random classroom questioning easily provoking students' tension. Lu Jiahui's (2023) study indicated that 56% of students experienced anxiety during classroom listening interactions due to fear of teacher criticism or negative peer evaluation, and such a low-support classroom atmosphere elevates students' affective filter levels. Additionally, Fan Jie (2011) noted that some teachers overemphasize listening scores while neglecting individual differences among students, leading to learned helplessness in those with weaker foundations and further intensifying anxiety.

3.2.3 Insufficient Teaching Resources and Equipment

Shortcomings in teaching resources and equipment indirectly induce listening anxiety. Liu Hang's (2011) survey of 152 students from science and engineering institutions found that in some institutions, outdated listening equipment resulted in issues such as audio noise and playback stuttering, causing 40% of participants to miss key information due to equipment failures and subsequently experience irritation and anxiety. Xu Nuo's (2023) study, from the perspective of place of origin, confirmed the impact of resource disparities: rural-origin students, having lacked multimedia listening equipment and systematic training during middle school, struggle to adapt to digital listening teaching modes in university, resulting in significantly higher anxiety triggered by ability gaps compared to urban-origin students.

4. Research on Regulation Strategies for English Listening Anxiety Among Non-English Major College Students

In response to the multidimensional causes of listening anxiety, existing studies have proposed systematic regulation strategies from two dimensions: learner autonomous regulation and teacher instructional intervention, forming a “dual-subject linkage” intervention framework.

4.1 Learner Level: Autonomous Regulation and Ability Consolidation

4.1.1 Strengthening Positive Anxiety Self-Regulation Strategies

Self-regulation strategies represent the core endogenous motivation for learners to alleviate listening anxiety. Wen Min’s (2022) study on vocational college non-English major students showed that positive self-regulation strategies (cognitive change, situational modification, and action strategies) are significantly positively correlated with listening performance. Among these, “cognitive change strategies” (such as pre-test positive psychological hints and reframing perceptions of listening difficulty) can effectively mitigate the negative impacts of anxiety, whereas negative “avoidance strategies” exacerbate the vicious cycle between anxiety and performance. Wang Mingming’s (2019) research also confirmed that if non-English major students proactively adopt situational modification strategies such as “deep breathing relaxation” and “pre-listening topic preview,” their anxiety levels can be reduced.

4.1.2 Consolidating Language Foundation and Enhancing Listening Skills

Consolidating the language foundation is the fundamental path to alleviating anxiety. Chen Xuan et al. (2016) proposed that non-English major students need to strengthen systematic learning of phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar, particularly mastering phonetic rules such as linking sounds and weak forms to reduce anxiety caused by phonetic recognition errors. At the same time, accumulating knowledge of cultural backgrounds in English-speaking countries is essential to eliminate comprehension barriers arising from cultural gaps. Li Xiaoxiao (2025) emphasized specialized training in listening skills, recommending that students master core strategies such as “pre-listening prediction,” “rapid note-taking of keywords,” and “tolerance for ambiguity,” while abandoning the unrealistic goal of “understanding every word” to improve the efficiency and accuracy of information processing.

4.1.3 Conducting Regular Autonomous Listening Training

Autonomous listening training is a long-term mechanism for enhancing proficiency and alleviating anxiety. Zhang and Zhou’s (2013) longitudinal study showed that after one semester of autonomous training involving 3 to 5 hours of intensive listening and 5 to 8 hours of extensive listening per week, participants’ total listening anxiety scores decreased by 96 points, listening performance improved by 18.7%, and autonomous learning awareness was significantly strengthened. Deng (2015) suggested that students utilize diverse listening resources (such as TED talks and VOA Special English) to expand input channels, adopting a combined “intensive + extensive listening” mode to increase listening proficiency, thereby boosting confidence and reducing anxiety.

4.2 Teacher Level: Teaching Optimization and Environment Creation

4.2.1 Optimizing Listening Materials and Teaching Pace

Teachers should adapt listening materials and teaching pace according to students’ ability gradients. Lu (2023) proposed that the difficulty of listening materials should follow Krashen’s “i+1” input hypothesis, progressing gradually from basic short dialogues to longer passages while ensuring the materials are both interesting and practical, thereby reducing frustration caused by excessive difficulty. Fan Jie (2011) emphasized the importance of a progressive teaching pace, recommending the provision of background knowledge and key vocabulary for materials before listening training to lower comprehension thresholds, and employing methods such as “multiple playbacks” and “segmented breakdown” to help students gradually adapt to the listening rhythm.

4.2.2 Innovating Teaching Modes and Creating a Low-Anxiety Classroom

Creating a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere is key to intervening in listening anxiety. Wu (2025) suggested that teachers adopt a “heterogeneous cooperative learning” mode, grouping students of varying listening proficiency levels to complete listening tasks together, thereby reducing individual anxiety through peer assistance. At the same time, teachers should reduce the frequency of random classroom questioning and replace corrective evaluation with encouraging feedback to protect students’ self-esteem. Deng (2015) proposed integrating metacognitive strategy training into listening instruction through a process of “pre-listening planning—monitoring during listening—post-listening evaluation,” enhancing students’ autonomous regulation of listening and indirectly lowering anxiety levels. Additionally, the application of multimodal teaching modes can effectively alleviate anxiety; Fan Jie (2011) noted that incorporating visual resources such as images and videos into listening instruction helps students establish informational connections and improve comprehension efficiency.

4.2.3 Imparting Specialized Listening Strategies and Addressing Individual Differences

In response to the proficiency shortcomings of non-English major students, teachers need to conduct systematic training in listening strategies. Wang Qiaoling (2023) recommended that teachers focus on imparting strategies such as “selective attention” and “contextual inference,” guiding students to focus on main ideas rather than individual unfamiliar words. At the same time, differentiated instruction should be implemented for students with varying anxiety types: providing one-on-one strategy guidance for high-anxiety students and setting advanced tasks for low-anxiety students. Shi Weizhao (2016) emphasized attention to gender differences, suggesting the design of more practical listening tasks tailored to the higher listening anxiety observed in males, thereby enhancing their engagement and sense of achievement.

5. Conclusion

English listening anxiety among non-English major college students is the result of multidimensional interactions between subjective individual factors and external objective factors. It generally manifests at a moderate or higher level, with significant heterogeneity across dimensions such as gender, grade level, and place of origin. To alleviate listening anxiety in this population, a dual-subject linkage framework of “learner autonomous regulation + teacher instructional intervention” should be constructed: learners need to strengthen self-regulation, consolidate their language foundation, and engage in autonomous training; teachers need to optimize teaching materials, create a low-anxiety classroom environment, and impart specialized strategies. Although existing research has achieved phased progress, limitations persist, including restricted research samples, monolithic methods, and insufficient practicality of strategies. Future studies should expand the research scope, diversify methods, strengthen empirical validation of strategies, and deepen interdisciplinary integration, thereby advancing research in this field toward greater systematization, precision, and practicality. This will provide more robust theoretical and practical support for improving the quality of college English listening instruction and optimizing students’ second language acquisition outcomes..

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