Education Reform and Development, 2025, Volume 7, Issue 2
https://ojs.bbwpublisher.com/index.php/ERD
Online ISSN: 2652-5372
Print ISSN: 2652-5364

Factors Affecting FLLA Among Chinese Junior Middle School Students: A Mixed-Method Study

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Abstract: The present mixed-method study aims to explore the factors affecting FLLA among Chinese junior middle school students. The analysis revealed that unfamiliar topics, fast play speed, low scores on previous English listening tests and grades are identified as factors triggering for FLLA, most of which negatively impact English listening acquisition except grade.

Keywords: FLLA; Mixed-method; Junior middle school

Online publication: March 13, 2025

1. Literature review

1.1. Foreign language listening anxiety and possible factors causing FLLA

Horwitz *et al.* [1] have defined a kind of anxiety, which is Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), as a complex self-cognition, belief, emotion, and behaviour related to classroom language learning because of the uniqueness of the language learning process. It limits anxiety to a specific situation, which is a foreign language learning situation. Therefore, FLA is regarded as a kind of situation-specific anxiety [2]. Horwitz *et al.* also developed a scale called Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), used as a measurement of learners' FLA.

FLA could be related to a specific language skill [3]. Cheng *et al.* [4] believe that it is significant to measure language anxiety associated with specific skills as it helps to identify specific language anxiety sources more accurately. Most research focuses on anxiety related to foreign language reading [5-6], foreign language speaking [7-8] and foreign language writing [9-10]. When it comes to both FLA and English listening, few studies can be found in early times. Although high levels of anxiety can be caused by weak listening skills [11], White [12] indicates that listening is the one that is mostly ignored in second language classrooms. Though foreign language speaking anxiety is reported mostly, Foreign Language Listening Anxiety (FLLA) has begun to become an issue needing to be paid attention to as listening has been seen as one of the most useful skills in the classroom and anxiety can affect English listening. Therefore, this study will focus on FLLA.

Furthermore, some possible causes leading to anxiety in a foreign language listening context have been explored. Vogely [13] examined 140 participants who registered for Spanish courses for tracing the sources of FLLA and found that the nature of the speech (e.g. fast speaking and different accents), level of difficulty, lack of clarity, lack of visual support, and lack of repetition can cause FLLA. In addition, Gkonou [14] conducted a study to explore the causes of English classroom anxiety among eight Greek learners. The result shows that fear of negative evaluation from the teacher, fear of peers paying special attention to errors and corrections, and fear of extrinsic motivation can result in their anxiety in classrooms. Besides, in Chang's [15] study, one hundred and sixty college students were selected as study objects to explore their hearing anxiety. By means of a questionnaire, the study evaluated the degree, intensity, and main sources of listening anxiety. The result indicated that participants were more anxious on the test than in general. Additionally, three main factors can lead to participants' listening anxiety: lack of confidence in understanding spoken English, regard English listening score as criteria, and concern about test difficulties.

After an in-depth research review, the study found three gaps. First of all, most of the current research focuses on college students. However, there has been little interest in and research on how the Foreign Learning Anxiety (FLA) works for junior high school students, those undergoing basic education [16-17]. Secondly, although scholars have revealed several key elements that may affect learners' FLLA performance, such as the form, depth and frequency of repetition of the course content, these elements have been proved to directly affect the learning effect of adult groups. However, the jury is still out on whether they can have the same significant impact on Chinese middle school students. Finally, it is worth noting that there may be other factors that have not been identified that can affect the FLLA ability of Chinese middle school students.

2. Method

2.1. Research design

This study adopts a mixed-method approach. To be more specific, the primary design I adopt in this study is convergent mixed methods (**Figure 1**), which can be explained as a form of mixed methods design that collecting both qualitative and quantitative data roughly at the same time but analyze the data separately and then integrating the information [18].

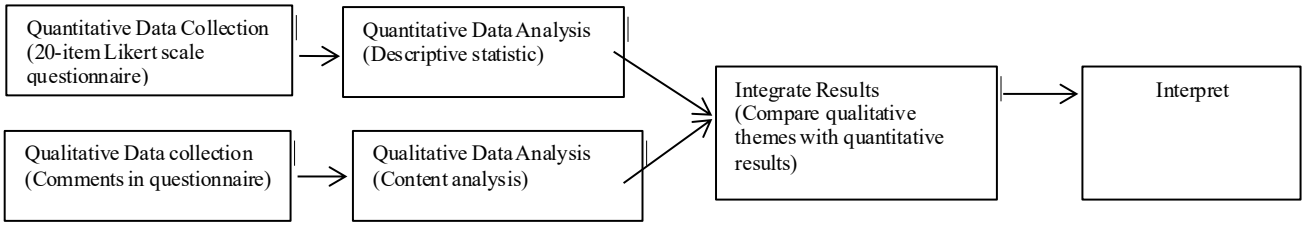

Figure 1. Visual display for the study's convergent mixed methods design (Ogilvie & McCrudden)

2.2. Data generation

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected by a questionnaire adapted from Zhang's [19] foreign language listening anxiety scale (FLLAS). Zhang's FLLAS was a replication of the FLLAS by Elkhafaifi [20]. The major reason for choosing this FLLAS is that, Elkhafaifi's FLLAS contains fewer items than other scales and thus may not lead to the loss of interest or motivation of participants to finish the questionnaire. The selected questionnaire is a 20-statement 5-point Likert scale using numbers 1–5 to indicate the continuous scales

(strongly disagree to strongly agree). Statements 1 through 20 describe how participants feel about listening to English. The study adapted Zhang's by adding demographic information questions such as gender and grade and also adding an item for collecting data on the participants' mid-term English listening score. Besides, in order to collect quantitative and qualitative data at the same time, the study added a comment column after each statement and added an overall comment at the end of the 20 items. Last, the query for consent was included at the end of the questionnaire. To consider the English language proficiency may not be enough for student participants to understand, the study translated the questionnaire from English to Chinese to make sure participants could understand each item. Several words were adjusted to increase the accuracy of the translated version.

2.3. Participants

The participants of this study were 101 students from a Chinese junior middle school. Among students, there are 51 males and 50 females. 52 are seventh-grade students and 49 are eighth-grade students. All the student participants were Chinese at the age of 12 to 14 from the same junior middle school. Participation is entirely voluntary in this study. The anonymity of the participants is assured in this study.

2.4. Data analysis

Data analysis is composed of two parts: quantitative data analysis and qualitative data analysis. For quantitative data, the Spearman's rank order correlation coefficient is adopted to deal with the relationships between FLLA and gender, and between FLLA and grade, as the main quantitative data involved in this study are ordinal data, which are non-parametric. It is appropriate for ordinal data to adopt this correlation, as it is on the basis of the ranks of the data instead of the actual values [21]. Apart from the ordinal data, the nominal data, such as gender were included in the quantitative data. To cope with the correlation involves gender, which has no numerical values, the study coded '1' as male and coded '0' as female because this way did not "indicate any difference in size or salience".

In addition, qualitative content analysis was conducted for identifying the 'themes' from the comments part in questionnaires, as this kind of analysis could be helpful with finding themes, identifying patterns, making interpretations, and constructing theories. Besides, the frequency count and percentage were used to show the transcribed qualitative data. Finally, quantitative data results were integrated with qualitative data results in order to draw the final findings.

3. Results

Through a content analysis of qualitative data, topics, grammars, words, the playback speed of the English listening materials, interest, the scores of previous English listening, the length of English listening materials, peer pressure and habits are the possible factors that students mentioned in their comments. Furthermore, among these nine possible factors, topics (46%), the playback speed (35%), the scores of previous English listening test (43%) and habits(27%) are the most frequent mentioned factors among 101 students participants (**Table 1**).

Table 1. The frequency and percentage of identified themes

Themes	Frequency and percentage
Topics	46 (46%)
Grammars	16 (16%)
Words	23 (23%)
The playback speed of the English listening materials	35 (35%)
Interest	18 (18%)
The scores of previous English listening	43 (43%)
The length of English listening materials	10 (10%)
Peer pressure	4 (4%)
Habits	27 (27%)

Many students hold that topics can be regarded as an important factor influencing their FLLA:

When I encountered the topic that I didn't know much, it would make me more and more nervous because I was worried that whether I could answer the questions. I can be more relax if I met familiar topic, but I can be very nervous if the topic was unfamiliar." "I can be stressful with different topics because I didn't know whether I can understand them.

There are also many students perceive the playback speed as a factor that affects their FLLA, for example:

Sometimes the teacher read the listening material and she read too fast, which made me feel very stressful because I had to pay all my concentration on listening to what the teacher was saying. I think I can be nervous when the playback speed of the English recording was fast. When it was not fast, I felt more comfortable to listening to English.

A conclusion can be drawn through the comments below that the scores of previous English listening test can affect Chinese junior middle school students' FLLA:

I didn't get a good grade in English last time, so I worried my English grade this time when listening. I felt anxious. I am confident in English listening because I got high grades in previous English listening tests.

Habits are seen as a factor that influences students' FLLA as well. The following students commented:

When I was in the first semester of seventh grade, I always felt anxious when I listening to English, but I (an eighth grade student) now get used to it, so I think that anxious feelings won't trouble me anymore. When I get used to listening to English, listening to English becomes easier and easier for me.

In addition, the correlation analysis conducted using JASP to examine the relationship between gender and each statement, along with the effect size, indicates that there is either no correlation or a very weak correlation between gender and FLLA. Additionally, the correlation matrices concerning grade and FLLA revealed that five specific statements (Q1, Q3, Q5, Q7, and Q14) exhibited a correlation with FLLA (**Table 2**). Conversely, the remaining statements demonstrated either no correlation or a very weak correlation with grade. First, there was a strong negative correlation between grade and the level of anxiety when students are not sure whether they understand what they are hearing in English (Q1) (ρ = -0.535, $p < 0.001$, n = 101). Second, there was a weak negative correlation between grade and the level of confusion when students are listening to English (Q3) (ρ = -0.233, p = 0.019, n = 101). Third, there was a strong negative correlation between grade

and the level of anxiety when students are listening to an English passage that that are not familiar with the topic (Q5) (ρ = -0.394, p < 0.001, n = 101). Fourth, there was a moderate negative correlation between grade and the level of anxiety when students do not understand every words in English listening (Q7) (ρ = -0.275, p = 0.005, n = 101). Fifth, a weak negative correlation between grade and the level of feeling not difficult (less anxiety) after students became accustomed to listening to English (Q14) (ρ = -0.210, p = 0.035, n = 101) has been found (**Table 2**).

Table 2. Spearman correlations grade &score

	Questions	Spearman's rho	*p*
Grade	Q1	-0.535	< 0.001
Grade	Q3	-0.233	0.019
Grade	Q5	-0.394	< 0.001
Grade	Q7	-0.275	0.005
Grade	Q14	-0.210	0.035

Note: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

In short, unfamiliar topics, fast play speed, low scores of previous English listening test and grade are identified as factors influencing FLLA.

4. Discussion

Students reported experiencing reduced anxiety when engaging with familiar topics and felt more at ease as they became accustomed to listening to English. This phenomenon may be attributed to the perception of diminished control over specific situations, as suggested by Rapee *et al.* [22], indicating that familiarity with topics may enhance students' sense of control.

Apart from topics and habits, playback speed, prior English listening test scores, and grade were identified as potential factors affecting FLLA. Vogely' s study found that fast speaking and level of difficulty were two factors causing FLLA. Many participants reported that increased speaking speed heightened their anxiety, as faster speech correlates with greater difficulty in English listening comprehension. This finding corroborates Vogely' s conclusions. Furthermore, Chang identified English listening test scores as a factor affecting FLLA. In the present study, previous English listening test scores similarly impacted students' FLLA. This phenomenon could be attributed to cultural influences and substantial academic pressure, which often lead Asian learners to experience a lack of confidence in their studies and place a higher value on test scores. Thus, increased focus on scores may exacerbate feelings of anxiety among students. As for grades, quantitative data analysis revealed a negative correlation between grades and anxiety across various contexts, as evidenced by the initial four correlational analyses. This can be accounted for by the fact that the familiarity of English listening would improve with the increase of grade, and therefore reduce FLLA.

5. Conclusion

Overall, this research investigates the factors influencing FLLA among Chinese junior middle school students with the goal of mitigating FLLA's negative effects to enhance listening acquisition. Using a mixed-methods

approach, data were collected through a questionnaire. The study is significant as most existing research focuses on college students, whereas this research examines younger learners. Additionally, it highlights some new influencing factors alongside those identified in previous studies. Some implications could be drawn to help Chinese junior middle school students mitigate the negative impact of FLLA. First, practice more. Engaging in more listening practice provides students with greater exposure to unfamiliar topics, grammatical structures, and pronunciations. Through repeated practice, students may become more accustomed to the various unknown elements in English listening, which can subsequently diminish their apprehension and anxiety associated with listening tasks. Second, reassessing the importance of grades. It is crucial to recognize that an excessive focus on scores can detract from the listening process. This distraction may lead students to miss critical information. Therefore, fostering an understanding that the primary objective of learning English extends beyond merely achieving high scores is essential. Furthermore, in this study, the use of a questionnaire that required participants to read and respond to statements before providing comments may have constrained their responses, limiting the exploration of themes not covered by the questionnaire. Future research could begin with semi-structured interviews to gather more comprehensive insights, followed by questionnaires based on interview data.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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