



Influence of Anxiety on English Listening Comprehension: An Investigation Based on the Freshmen of English Majors

ZHAI Lili^{[a],*}

^[a]Foreign Languages School, Shanxi Normal University, Linfen, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Currently, in the study of second language acquisition, affective factors have attached great attention. "Among the affective factors influencing language learning, anxiety ranks high." (Arnold, 1999, p.59). Its importance has led to significant researches and discussions from different perspectives. In general, studies on language learning anxiety have developed to a more mature stage, while the empirical studies of specific language-skill anxiety, especially, second language listening anxiety, are inadequate. The present research made an investigation on students' anxiety in English listening comprehension by using quantitative and qualitative methods. The subjects were 82 freshmen of English majors in a normal university. A modified foreign language listening questionnaire was administered to examine the subjects' listening anxiety level, and a series of interviews were done for exploring the sources of anxiety deeply. Through thorough analyses, the paper arrived at the following conclusion: (a) the freshmen of English majors did experience a little higher listening anxiety; (b) there existed a significantly negative correlation between anxiety and listening comprehension; (c) the main sources were lack of confidence and listening strategies, characteristics of listening comprehension and materials as well as fear of negative evaluation. Based on the above conclusion, some useful suggestions were put forward to enhance the students' listening proficiency and improve the current situations of listening classes.

Key words: Foreign language listening anxiety; Listening proficiency; Correlation; Sources of listening anxiety; Suggestions

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INTRODUCTION

A. Anxiety in Language Learning

In recent years, an increasing number of foreign language researchers have taken learner variables, especially affective factors into consideration. "Among the affective factors influencing language learning, anxiety ranks high." (Arnold, 1999, p.59). Its importance has led to significant researches and discussions from different perspectives.

"Psychologically speaking, anxiety refers to the intense and enduring negative feeling caused by vague and dangerous stimuli from the outside as well as the unpleasant emotional experience involved, such as anticipation, irritation and fear" (Wen, 1998, p.47, qtd. in Song Yan), 2005), while language anxiety is the fear or apprehension occurring when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope 1986; Macintyre & Gardner, 1993). It is associated with feelings such as uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension and tension.

B. A Review of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)

Early researches, concerning the influence of anxiety on language learning achievements, can be dated back to 1940s. However, as summarized by Young (1991), "Early researches in the area of anxiety as it relates to L2 or foreign language learning and performance was scattered and inconclusive."

Since the 1980s, the anxiety research has experienced a breakthrough. Horwitz et al. (1986) were first to treat FLA as a separate and distinct phenomenon particular to language learning. They designed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) as a standard instrument to do researches on FLA. From then on, the FLCAS has been adopted by a lot of studies, like Philips (1992), Aida (1994) and these studies in FLA showed that anxiety negatively correlated with language learning.

Compared to the rich and productive studies conducted by western researchers, there are inadequate FLA researches in China. Chen Xiaoli & Zhang mei (2004), Lei Xiao (2004) and Zhou Xiaoli (2009), Guo Yan & Xu Jinfen (2014) etc. studied the influence of anxiety on English learning separately.

In general, studies on language learning anxiety have developed to a more mature stage.

C. Studies on Foreign Language Listening Anxiety (FLLA) at Home and Abroad

Most researchers have paid much attention to the influence of general foreign language anxiety on learners' performance, but little to the study of specific language-skill anxiety, like second language writing anxiety, second language reading anxiety, and second language listening anxiety. Therefore, the relevant theories about specific language-skill anxiety are inadequate.

In the 1970s, some researchers began to realize and acknowledge the existence of listening anxiety in foreign language learning. Wheels (1975) described listening anxiety as "receiver's apprehension—the fear of misinterpreting, inadequately processing or not being able to adjust psychologically to messages sent by others."

Vogely (1998), Kim (2000) conducted second language listening anxiety studies separately. Vogely (1998) and Kim (2000) are regarded as the representatives of these studies. Depending on the subjects' self-reports and diaries, Vogely investigated the intermediate-level students' listening anxiety sources and the corresponding listening anxiety strategies. Kim (2000) conducted in Korea an anxiety study specifically related to listening skills. His study indicated that there was a negative correlation between listening anxiety and listening achievements. His study also pointed out that tension and worry over English listening and lack of self-confidence in listening were the main anxiety sources.

Researchers in China have also conducted some researches in this aspect, for example, Yang (2000), Zhou (2003), Chen (2004), Zhou (2009), Zhang and Zhao (2011). Yang (2000) studied the relationship between language and listening achievements. The results indicated that facilitating anxiety was significantly and positively correlated with listening achievements while debilitating anxiety, negatively. This research has studied the influence of anxiety on listening comprehension of two aspects, which have advanced listening anxiety

study, but it has two weaknesses. Firstly, this study only investigated 40 students, so the sample was too small to come to a representative conclusion; secondly, Chen's (1997) *English-Major Learners' Oral Anxiety Test Scale* was adopted to study listening anxiety, which was inappropriate and not very scientific.

All in all, only a few empirical studies have investigated foreign language listening anxiety. Thus, more researches should be done to explore the nature and effect of listening anxiety.

D. Research Questions

This research tries to study the influence of anxiety on English listening comprehension and attempt to answer the following questions.

(a) Do the freshmen of English major experience foreign language listening anxiety?

(b) What is the correlation between foreign language anxiety and English listening comprehension?

(c) What are the sources of foreign language listening anxiety?

1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research made an investigation on students' anxiety in English listening comprehension by using quantitative method and qualitative method. A modified foreign language listening questionnaire has been administered to examine the subjects' listening anxiety level, and a series of interviews have been done for exploring the sources of anxiety deeply.

1.1 Research Subjects

The subjects chosen for the study were 82 freshmen of English major from 2 classes in a normal university. Among the subjects there were 67 females and 15 males, whose age ranged from 19 to 22.

1.2 Research Instruments

The instruments used in the study were two questionnaires, one listening test and a series of interviews.

1.2.1 Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Questionnaire (FLLAQ)

A modified Kim's (2000) FLLAS was administered to the above-mentioned subjects. The reliability was .7551 based on Cronbach's alpha. The modified questionnaire is a student's self-report with 22 Likert-type items scored on a 5-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". For each subject, summing his or her ratings of 22 items gets a general anxiety score. A student's choice in a) "strongly disagree" is equated with one point; b) "disagree", with two; c) "neither agree nor disagree", three; d) "agree", four; e) "strongly agree", five. When the students of the FLLAQ are negatively worded, responses are reversed and recorded. The FLLAQ is the key instrument that is used to test the subjects' listening anxiety level.

1.2.2 Background Information Questionnaire (BIQ)

A Background Information Questionnaire was used to investigate specific information about the subjects' self-reported anxiety level, interest in listening and self-reported factors hindering listening comprehension.

1.2.3 Foreign Language Listening Proficiency Test (FLLPT)

In order to examine the correlation between FLLA and listening proficiency (LP), College English Test Band1 was administered to the subjects.

1.2.4 Interview

In order to obtain more general information about the subjects and explore the sources of FLLA deeply, several students were chosen to conduct a series of interviews.

1.3 Data Collection

The questionnaires were administered and collected in class by the researcher. Because one student failed to fill in one questionnaire (BIQ), his data was excluded. Therefore, the valid sample was 81 students.

(a) The FLLAQ was used to do a descriptive statistics with SPSS17.0 to test the degree of listening anxiety.

(b) The listening test was administered to obtain the listening scores.

(c) The scores of listening test and all the data obtained from the FLLAS were used to do a correlation analysis with SPSS17.0.

(d) A series of interviews were conducted to explore the sources of FLLA deeply, and attempt to find out some proper ways to reduce anxiety.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1 Results Analysis

2.1.1 Reliability and Validity of FLLAQ

To assess the quality of the FLLAQ, reliability analysis was carried out.

RELIABILITYANALYSIS - SCALE (ALPHA)
Reliability Coefficients
N of Cases = 81.0 N of Items = 22
Alpha = .7943

Figure 1
Reliability and Validity Analysis

Figure1 shows that the reliability and validity of FLLAS are .7943 based on Cronbach's alpha, which presents a good internal coefficient. Therefore, the FLLAS is an acceptable instrument and can be used for a further statistics analysis.

2.1.2 Descriptive Analysis of FLLAQ

To test the degree of the subjects' listening anxiety, descriptive statistics of FLLAQ was conducted.

Table1
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.deviation
Total scores	81	48.00	97.00	70.1481	8.6199
Valid N(listwise)	81				

Table 1 is the descriptive analysis of the FLLAQ. The mean ($m=70.1481$) and Std.Deviation $SD=8.6199$) show that the subjects have experienced a little high listening anxiety, which reflects that during the process of listening comprehension, the subjects are quite easy to produce anxiety. This phenomenon is probably related to the mechanism of listeners. Listening is a kind of process that listeners receive and decode the speech signals. Compared with speaking, writing and translating, listeners are in a relatively passive position. In addition, speech signals are fast, continuous and fleeting, so learners always take a heavy psychological burden and need to concentrate the mind completely. In the investigation of FLLA, 61.7% students chose "agree" when answering the item "I get nervous if a listening passage is read only once during English listening test"; 59.3% students chose "agree" in the item "when a person speaks English very fast, I am worried that I might not understand all of it"; meanwhile, 55.6% students chose "agree" in the item "when listening to the important information, I persuade myself into writing down the key points timely." Therefore, anxiety is pervasive in foreign language listening comprehension.

2.1.3 Correlation Analysis

To find out what kind of effect FLLA has on LP, the research made a correlation analysis between FLLA and LP.

Table 2
Correlation Between FLLA and LP

	FLLA	LP
FLLA pearson correlation	1.000	-.639**
Sig.(2-tailed)	.	.000
N	81	81
LP pearson correlation	-.639**	1.000
Sig.(2-tailed)	.000	.
N	81	81

Note. ** Correlation is significant level at 0.01 (2-tailed).

Table 2 shows that FLLA and LP have a significant high negative correlation ($r= -.639^{**}$), that is, FLLA has a passive effect on listening proficiency. The result also indicates that much higher anxiety interferes with the processing of listening comprehension, and the stronger anxiety the students experience, the worse listening achievements they make. According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985), which states that there exists "a mental block" caused by affective factors such as motivation, anxiety, attitude, which prevents acquisition from fully utilizing the comprehensible input they receive. Therefore, acquirers with a high affective filter (filter is "up") fail to take in the available target language. Anxiety is a kind of affective filter, so listeners with higher anxiety

level prevent themselves from receiving comprehensible input, which leads to worse listening achievements. Meanwhile, higher anxiety is easy to distract attention, and interferes with the normal process of listening comprehension. When students come across unfamiliar words and difficult sentences, they become stressed and anxious, which influences the following content. Although it seems that they are listening, in fact, they have given up. After a series of vicious circles, they lose all interest in listening. In addition, thinking process can be broken up by higher anxiety. The students with lower anxiety not only can make a positive response immediately according to the obtained information and corresponding clues, but also adjust thinking promptly when meet with interference. While students with higher anxiety, whose thinking process is restrained, can not make a correct judgment.

2.1.4 Interview

In order to explore the sources of FLLA deeply, and attempt to find out some proper ways to reduce anxiety, the researcher did a series of interviews. 81 students were equally divided in 3 groups, that is, high anxiety, average anxiety and low anxiety based on their FLLA scores. Then 3 students were chosen from the groups of high anxiety and low anxiety separately to conduct the interview in their spare time.

The researcher firstly chatted with the interviewees individually about their English learning experience, trying to put them at ease and then gradually led them to answering the following questions:

(a) Have you experienced the feeling of anxiety while listening to English in a test or in the classroom? If you have, how do you adjust yourself in a calm mood?

(b) What has caused the anxiety in English listening activities?

(c) How many listening strategies do you know in English listening? What strategies do you often use?

(d) What can you suggest to lessen the anxiety while listening to English in a test or in a classroom?

Generally, each interview lasted about 30 minutes. During the interview, the researcher wrote down some important information for the following analyses.

After the interview, the researcher found that nearly every interviewee has experienced different degrees of listening anxiety. 4 of them mentioned that lack of listening strategies led them to anxiety, and they all thought that small vocabulary caused anxiety. Besides, the characteristics of listening materials, like speed, accents, topics, length and so on also made them anxious at different levels. Meanwhile, the results of the interview reveal that the freshmen only know a few listening strategies and students with low anxiety use better than the others do. Therefore, it is urgent to teach them how to use listening strategies properly. In the interview, 6 representatives made some useful suggestions to reduce

anxiety in listening classroom or in a test, and their advice is worth attempting. For example, one student advised that students should read some English newspaper and practice listening a lot.

2.2 Results Discussion

Based on careful analyses of statistics and a series of interviews, as well as the specialty of freshmen, the research generalized the main sources of listening anxiety as follows.

2.2.1 Lack of Confidence

The freshmen are a special group. In the middle school age, facing the heavy stress from the National Entrance Examination, they have paid little attention to developing the skills of listening. When entering the college, they are lack of confidence and at a loss in the listening activities. Therefore, they are apt to feel anxious in listening comprehension. When answering the questionnaire (FLLAQ), 48.5% students chose “disagree” in the item “I feel very confident of my listening ability, so won’t feel anxious or worried about listening test.” At the same time, 5.9% students strongly disagreed to the above item. It reveals that a great number of students lack confidence in their listening ability, especially in the listening test.

2.2.2 Lack of Listening Strategies

Previous researches about middle school students in China showed that they are not always using learning strategies (Ji & He, 2004). The present research adopted the freshmen of English major at the subjects, so their learning methods and styles are under the shadow of middle school age unavoidably. Thus, they cannot use listening strategies properly. In the interview, when answering the question “How many listening strategies do you know in English listening? What strategies do you often use?”, 6 interviewees referred to some methods they knew in detail. Based on their description, the researcher generalized the following strategies: self-supervise strategy, memory strategy, and inference strategy. In addition, students with low anxiety use better than the others. It is obvious to find that the freshmen only know a few strategies and not everyone can use them properly. It is no doubt that they easily feel nervous and worried in listening activities.

2.2.3 Characteristics of Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension is a complex process, which does not exist in space, but only stays in a short time. Compared with reading and translating, listening is more demanding, for listeners can’t go back to what they don’t understand. Although it is so fleeting, the listeners need to catch the speakers’ main ideas. 3 interviewees with high anxiety said, “Usually I can’t help but stop listening to think about what I don’t understand. Consequently, I miss the following content.” Therefore, listeners feel anxious easily.

2.2.4 Characteristics of Listening Materials

“The characteristics of listening materials include speed, pronunciation, acoustic conditions, length of listening materials, the level of vocabulary and the topic of the materials” (Yuan, 2006). The speed of message delivery is anxiety-provoking. 61.7% students chose “agree” when answering the item “when listening to English, sometimes I want to give up if the materials are read too fast”. 8.6% students strongly agreed. As for acoustic conditions, 54.4% students made a consensus on the item “I feel confused when some noises from the machine occur in the course of listening.” Background noises easily divert their attention. 6 interviews remarked that listening to different accents or long materials was full of challenge, because they easily missed some important information and led to anxiety. Besides, 4 interviewees mentioned that materials containing too many difficult words made them anxious, for their string of thinking were cut. 52% students agreed the item “I feel I have inadequate back knowledge of some topics when listening to English”. That listeners come across unfamiliar with background knowledge also causes them anxious.

2.2.5 Fear of Negative Evaluation

Classroom is a social environment where teachers and students carry personal communication. During the interview with the 3 students who have a high anxiety, they all said that volunteering to respond in class could make them anxious. As for why they have that feeling, they replied that they feared to be looked down upon by others. Therefore, the fear of negative evaluation can raise their anxiety feelings.

To sum up, general statistics in the study indicate that the students of the students in the study have experienced a little higher listening anxiety; in addition, English listening anxiety does have a negative correlation with English listening comprehension. Listening anxiety can be attributed to 5 sources: lack of confidence and listening strategies, the characteristics of listening comprehension and materials as well as fear of negative evaluation.

CONCLUSION

After doing a systematic review of the previous studies and the research has preliminarily explored the influence of anxiety on listening comprehension with freshmen of English major as subjects. The research made a combination of quantitative study and qualitative study. For quantitative study, a modified foreign language listening questionnaire has been used to examine the subjects’ listening anxiety level and the correlation between listening anxiety and listening achievements. Qualitative study (interview) has been done in exploring the sources of anxiety deeply. Through careful analyses, the research has come to the following conclusion:

(a) The freshmen of English majors do experience a little higher listening anxiety.

(b) There exists a significantly negative correlation between listening anxiety and listening comprehension.

(c) Lack of confidence and listening strategies, the characteristics of listening comprehension and materials as well as fear of negative evaluation are the main factors that cause listening anxiety.

Since the freshmen are lack of confidence and listening strategies, they become anxious easily. During the process of listening comprehension, the learners are in a passive position. It is difficult for them to deal with the coming information promptly; thus they feel anxious in the following process of listening. And the characteristics of listening materials including speed, pronunciation, acoustic condition, length, level of vocabulary and topics also influence listeners’ listening comprehension and raise listening anxiety at different levels. Besides, fear of negative evaluation makes the subjects keep silent and seldom respond to teachers in listening classes.

In order to help students enhance listening proficiency and improve the current situation of English listening classes, the researcher made some suggestions to reduce listening anxiety as follows.

(a) Students should build confidence of improving listening proficiency.

They should face listening anxiety bravely and understand that listening anxiety is a common psychological phenomenon. It is normal to feel anxious in the process of listening.

(b) Students should learn to use listening strategies properly to enhance listening proficiency.

The results of the interview reveal that freshmen of English majors only knew a few listening strategies, and they didn’t understand how to use them properly. It shows that the study of listening strategies is ignored in the current listening teaching. Therefore, students should pay more attention to listening strategies, since using them properly can direct their listening comprehension and enhance their listening proficiency. Besides, students should learn to adjust their states of mind and keep high spirits to overcome every difficulty. What’s more important, students should establish realistic goals and raise their tolerance of ambiguity. While listening, they should try to grasp the general idea not to understand every word.

(c) Students should try their best to reduce the fear of negative evaluation, and treat their weaknesses objectively.

They should know that even though they cannot respond satisfactorily or give correct answers, they won’t be regarded as fool or others’ laughingstock. Meanwhile, students can advance the communication with teachers, because teachers usually can encourage students to make to process consciously, and give them affirmative praise.

54.3% students agreed the item "I feel more confident as a result of the teacher's encouragement when I meet with some difficult points in listening class". 23.5% students strongly agreed. It reflects that students look forward to teachers' encouragement, for with teachers' help, they can evaluate themselves correctly and take part in the activities actively.

(d) Students should practice a lot.

They can read some English newspaper like *China Daily*, the 21st century, and stick to listening to the English programs of VOA, BBC, and China Radio International in their spare time to enlarge eyesight and enrich their background knowledge. Through a great number of practices, students can build a solid foundation. After all, high level of listening proficiency can deal with every unpredictable difficulty.

(e) A harmonious and relaxed atmosphere should be created in listening classes.

Classroom is a place where teachers and students conduct a wide variety of activities, so its atmosphere is extremely significant. Colorful and active ambience can encourage students to take part in activities positively. While dull and humdrum ambience can reinforce students' stress, make them frustrated and anxious. Therefore, a relaxed atmosphere benefits students in reducing their anxiety and increasing their receiving comprehensible input. The interviewees advised that listening to soft music before class was a good way to relax. In addition, they hoped that teachers could arrange some humorous movies to make them relaxed. When answering the questionnaire (FLLAQ), 56.8% students agreed to the item "in listening class, if the teacher arranges some interesting activities such as time-limited dictation, retelling, and group competition, I will listen more actively". Therefore, colorful and harmonious atmosphere can reduce the students' listening anxiety.

Undoubtedly, anxiety is not the only factor that influences listening comprehension. In the questionnaire (BIQ), students thought that lack of phonetic knowledge, small vocabulary, poor memory, and low interest etc. also hindered their English listening comprehension. This gives other researchers a hint that in order to explore the field of FLLA in the future, many other factors need to be taken into consideration.

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APPENDIX I: LISTENING ANXIETY QUESTIONNAIRE

Class: _____ **Name:** _____ **ID:** _____ **Investigator:** Zhai Lili

Dear students,

Here is a college students' English listening anxiety questionnaire for scientific research. The purpose of this survey is to understand the psychological factors, namely the impact of anxiety on college students' English listening proficiency. This survey can help teachers improve their teaching methods and create a relaxed learning environment for you. There is no right or wrong answer to each of the items in the questionnaire, but the valuable information you provide will be taken seriously and kept secret to others. Please answer each question in the quiz seriously based on your situation to ensure the research scientifically and help you truly understand yourself. Thanks for your cooperation!

APPENDIX II : BACKGROUND INFORMATION QUESTIONNAIRE (BIQ)

According to your actual situation, please tick the answer of each question.

1. You think your listening ability is _____.
① bad ② poor ③ just so so ④ well ⑤ perfect
2. You think your English listening anxiety level is _____.
① zero ② low ③ medium ④ high ⑤ very high
3. Your interest in listening is _____.
① no interest ② low ③ just so so ④ high ⑤ very high
4. Which of the following factors do you think affect your listening? (Can select more)
① poor pronunciation ② small vocabulary ③ unfamiliar listening materials
④ fast speaking speed ⑤ poor memory
⑥ separate memory of word pronunciation, spelling and meaning
⑦ inappropriate use of listening strategies
⑧ anxiety, stress and other psychological factors

APPENDIX III: FOREIGN LANGUAGE LISTENING ANXIETY SCALE (FLLAS)

Please carefully read each item, then tick the number according to your actual degrees, and don't forget any question (Note. you can only select one answer for each question).

- 1 — Strongly disagree 2 — Disagree 3 — Neither agree nor disagree
4 — Agree 5 — Strongly agree
1. When listening to English, I tend to get stuck on one or two unknown words.
1 2 3 4 5
 2. I get nervous if a listening passage is read only once during English Listening test.
1 2 3 4 5
 3. When a person speaks English very fast, I am worried that I might not understand all of it.
1 2 3 4 5
 4. I am nervous when I am listening to English if I am not familiar with the topic.
1 2 3 4 5
 5. I prefer doing objective exercises to subjective ones like listening dictation in listening classroom.
1 2 3 4 5
 6. In English listening test, I get nervous and confused when I can't understand every word.
1 2 3 4 5
 7. I feel uncomfortable in class when listening to English without the written text.
1 2 3 4 5
 8. When listening to English, sometimes I want to give up if the materials are read too fast.
1 2 3 4 5

9. When listening to English, I often get so confused that I can't remember what I have heard.
1 2 3 4 5
10. I fear I have inadequate background knowledge of some topics when listening to English.
1 2 3 4 5
11. My thoughts become jumbled and confused when listening to important information in English.
1 2 3 4 5
12. I get worried when I have little time to think about what I hear in English.
1 2 3 4 5
13. I get worried when I can't listen to English at my own pace.
1 2 3 4 5
14. When listening to the important information, I persuade myself into writing down the key points timely.
1 2 3 4 5
15. I'm worried about answering questions in listening class, because if my key is wrong, I would feel embarrassed.
1 2 3 4 5
16. I feel confused when some noises from the machine occur in the course of listening.
1 2 3 4 5
17. I feel very confident of my listening ability, so won't feel anxious or worried about listening test.
1 2 3 4 5
18. Listening to new information in English makes me uneasy.
1 2 3 4 5
19. If I can not answer questions in listening class, I am afraid that the teacher would give me a low evaluation.
1 2 3 4 5
20. I am afraid my listening comprehension will suffer as I am not good at grammar.
1 2 3 4 5
21. I feel more confident as a result of the teacher's encouragement when I meet with some difficult points in listening class.
1 2 3 4 5
22. In listening class, if the teacher arranges some interesting activities such as time-limited dictation, retelling and group competition, I will listen more actively.
1 2 3 4 5

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Q1: Have you experienced the feeling of anxiety while listening to English in a test or in the classroom? If you have, how do you adjust yourself in a calm mood?
- Q2: What has caused the anxiety in English listening activities?
- Q3: How many listening strategies do you know in English listening? What strategies do you often use?
- Q4: What can you suggest to lessen the anxiety while listening to English in a test or in a classroom?