Listening Anxiety in EFL Learning in China: An Autoethnographic Study

Chenyang Zhang and Ha Thi Nguyen
University of Melbourne and Monash University

Biographies

Ms. Chenyang Zhang is a PhD student at the School of Languages and Linguistics, University of Melbourne. Her research interests include language testing, language policy, and language education.

chenyang.zhang3@student.unimelb.edu.au

Dr. Ha Nguyen is a teaching associate in the Faculty of Education, Monash University. She accomplished her PhD program in TESOL- Education at Monash University in 2016. Her research interests include English language teaching and learning, second language assessment strategies, metacognition in L2 learning, feedback practices on academic English writing skills.

ha.nguyen1@monash.edu

Abstract

Listening anxiety in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning will reduce Chinese language learners’ academic performance, particularly in a formal listening test. In order to explore the effects of listening anxiety on EFL learners and how they cope, this article seeks to investigate my personal narratives and experiences as the first author to explicate challenges and seek solutions. Thus, this article focuses on my exploration of four vignettes, which identify crucial points in unravelling stories of how I could improve listening performance by reducing listening anxiety. This autoethnographic study is inspired by information processing (IP) theory and Schunk’s self-regulated learning (SRL) model. The former reveals how listening materials can be received by learners from an objective view. The latter, based on a subjective angle, highlights three aspects: motivational orientation, self-efficacy, and self-regulation, which collectively affect listening anxiety. Based on the analysis of my stories, findings suggest that anxiety can negatively impact EFL learners’ information processing abilities, thereby leading to poor listening performance. Findings also highlight a need to deal with listening anxiety, identifying and emphasising three approaches, namely, a mastery-oriented goal, higher self-efficacy and appropriate self-regulation.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, listening anxiety, autoethnography, information processing, self-regulated learning
Introduction

English as lingua franca has attracted more attention from educators and policymakers (Chang, 2006; Pan & Block, 2011) since China’s rapid socioeconomic development post-implementation of its Reform and Opening Up policy to promote globalisation (Cui, 2006). In line with policy strategy: “Education should be geared to the needs of modernisation, of the world, and of the future”, English has been a requirement for students from grade three in primary school from the early 2000s (Ministry of Education, 2001). Further, English is listed as a main subject in the college entrance examination (see Ministry of Education, 2003). In this sense, a student’s English language ability is associated with their academic success, which can assist with future employment (Chang, 2006; Haidar & Fang, 2019).

Given the crucial role of English, the Chinese Ministry of Education has implemented the College English Test-4 (CET-4) since 1987, which is a national standardised test to evaluate college students’ English proficiency (Yan & Yang, 2006; Zheng & Cheng, 2008). In Chinese colleges, students whose majors are in any discipline (except English) are required to sit the CET-4 (Jiang & Sharpling, 2011), which is the largest-scale English test in China (Wang, 2017). This is because students must obtain CET-4 certification before graduating from most Chinese universities (Gu & Liu, 2005).

Due to the importance of CET-4, college students spend time and energy on preparing for the test, specifically focusing on three aspects: listening, reading and writing (Yan & Yang, 2006). Listening can be a prerequisite for other aspects of English learning (see Li & Zhang, 2016). This is because listening is an indispensable channel for students to understand language from early to more developed stages – word, phrase, clause, sentence and discourse (see Milliner & Dimoski, 2019). The aim of listening tests in Chinese universities is to examine students’ abilities to comprehend aural information, which can promote knowledge input in language learning (Wang, 2017). Given its significance, the percentage of listening in CET-4 has increased from 20% to 35% since 2006 (Hou & Cao, 2007). Unfortunately, according to participants in CET-4, when facing the listening speed – 130 words per minute (Zheng & Cheng, 2008) – they become anxious and stressed and thus have a lower score in the listening section (see Wang, 2017).

In light of this issue, I review my experience in the EFL listening process. At that time, as a second-year student in a Chinese university, I was preparing again for CET-4 as I had failed the first test due to my low listening score. However, during this preparation, I felt confused and embarrassed. I had tried my best to listen. I had spent nearly two hours every day
on listening practice, but I could not improve my listening skills. Even worse, feelings of anxiety meant I was afraid to listen to any English materials and subsequently lost confidence to achieve my goal. As argued by Han and Yin (2016), university students in China feel challenged and pressured about enhancing their English listening skills. Meanwhile, during English-listening practice, the negative emotion – anxiety – would surface, which did not motivate EFL students to learn English. Instead, they felt dispirited (Zhang, 2013).

Fortunately, through continuous learning exploration over six months, my anxiety was finally relieved, my listening scores improved, and I was successful in receiving CET-4 certification. Based on my (the first author) experience and that of my tutor (the second author), overlapping analytical visions and voices are provided. We aim to explore why anxiety can hinder listening performance and how listening anxiety can be alleviated. In this way, we gain more insights for EFL students to make sense of anxious feelings in listening practice and how to cope with them. Meanwhile, the aim of this study is to raise educators’ and teachers’ awareness of pedagogical design to reduce students’ listening anxiety in order to improve their language skills and to enhance their emotional wellbeing in English foreign language learning.

To fulfil this aim, initially, we will focus on information processing (IP) theory and Schunk’s self-regulated learning (SRL) model. The former reveals how learning materials can be received and processed by learners, and the latter theory highlights three aspects – motivational orientation, self-efficacy and self-regulation, which in turn affect learning anxiety and academic performance. Next, the methodology – autoethnography – will be explained. I will then explore four vignettes, which identify crucial points in unravelling stories about my experience of reducing listening anxiety and enhancing listening performance. Last, the conclusion will be drawn.

**Theoretical perspectives**

In this section, two theories will be explored to construct the theoretical framework for this article, to investigate the implications of listening anxiety on students’ language learning experiences. IP theory depicts the process of how people receive information and why anxiety impedes their progress. Schunk’s SRL model delineates how motivational orientation, self-efficacy and self-regulation play a role in students’ listening process, as well as the relationships between anxiety and these three aspects.

**Information Processing theory**

IP theory addresses the process by which humans receive, organise, store and retrieve information (see Simon, 1981), with three procedures seen as the operation of a computer to
process data as follows (Zhou & Brown, 2015). First, sensory memory in comparison to input data (e.g., CDs) refers to everything that people receive through five senses passively within three seconds: hearing, vision, taste, smell, and touch. Second, short-term memory (STM), or working memory, viewed as software, can apply pieces of sensory memory in thinking, holding about seven items of information. Finally, long-term memory (LTM), similar to hardware, can store information permanently. LTM highlights anything that individuals know and remember, as well as make sense of such knowledge. When messages retrieved from LTM relate to new knowledge in STM, the knowledge input will be understood and interpreted more efficiently (Rawl & O’Tuel, 1983; Zhou & Brown, 2015).

However, the process of humans’ information processing could not be fully simulated by computers, which may ignore the nuances of individual emotional interference. Anxiety, as a common human emotion (Cisler & Olatunji, 2012), can impact information processing abilities, which can be explained by three stages in terms of IP theory. To begin with, sensory memory receives everything via five senses, while the only way of transferring information to working memory (STM) is that the learner’s attention should concentrate on information accepted in sensory memory (Zhou & Brown, 2015). Unfortunately, anxiety can distract students’ attention, since it serves to transfer attention away from the current task, and accordingly, reduces a person’s ability to focus (see Hirsch & Mathews, 2012). In this regard, anxiety will hinder the delivery of information from sensory to working memory (STM).

Second, STM plays a crucial role in the individual’s cognitive process (Hambrick et al., 2005; Mayer, 2012), which can reflect efficacy in the organisation and analysis of goal-relevant information (Sari et al., 2017). However, due to the limited capacity of STM (Mayer, 2012), anxious interference, regarded as task-irrelevant messages, will consume the storage of STM (Eysenck, 1979). Accordingly, people with anxiety will have decreased information-processing efficiency for targeted tasks (Eysenck et al., 2007). Third, when the capacity of STM is occupied by anxiety, to some extent learners are forestalled to retrieve more relevant learning information from LTM to STM (Kensinger & Corkin, 2003). This will also reduce human information processing abilities since the interconnection between STM and LTM can benefit students in comprehending messages in STM (Rawl & O’Tuel, 1983; Zhou & Brown, 2015). In light of these three stages, anxiety has inevitable repercussions on processing learning information.
Schunk’s SRL model

Self-regulated learning (SRL) indicates that learners can stimulate and maintain cognitions and behaviours in order to achieve their learning objectivities (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2012). In Schunk (1990, 2019) SRL model, as illustrated in Figure 1, self-efficacy, goal setting and self-regulation are connected. This is because SRL occurs when students are motivated to initiate a learning task given their different goals (e.g., expanding their skills) (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2012). Then, during a particular learning activity, students evaluate their performance in terms of their goal settings (Schunk & Usher, 2011). This evaluation outcome would affect students’ self-efficacy, which could evoke different emotions (e.g., high or low confidence), and thus would have positive or negative implications for their academic performance (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2013). Given that these three elements are intertwined to affect students’ academic achievements, as acknowledged by numerous scholars (e.g., Bai & Wang, 2020; Fraile et al., 2017; Sun & Wang, 2020), when exploring the implications of anxiety on students’ learning performance, it is necessary to analyse how feelings of anxiety can be aroused, and perform functions, in regard to goal setting (motivational orientation), self-efficacy and self-regulation, which are explained in-depth below.

Figure 1

Self-Regulated Learning (SRL)

Goal setting – motivational orientation

Motivation is a driving force for students to pursue a lifelong learning journey (Albrecht & Karabenick, 2018; Amrai et al., 2011). Learners with high motivation tend to achieve better academic outcomes, as stated by Amrai et al. (2011). In terms of students’ learning objectives, there are three main types of achievement motivation: mastery-oriented, performance-oriented, and performance-avoided (Perry, 2011). Students guided by mastery-oriented motivation are inclined to study to acquire skills and extend their knowledge (Lau, 2009; Senko & Miles,
With this learning intention, students are more likely to overcome learning challenges and show their persistence to study (Kaplan & Maehr, 2007; Rolland, 2012).

On the contrary, students dominated by performance-oriented motivation value their learning results (e.g., success or failure) (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), emphasizing their efforts to study to acquire higher learning grades, receive more positive judgements and outperform other students (Dowson & McInerney, 2003; Dubéau et al., 2021). However, with the focus on performance, when they lack competence, skills or knowledge to be successful in their study, they usually feel anxious about low grades and/or looking stupid in class, and thus avoid challenging learning activities (Gindidis et al., 2017; Urdan, 2010). From this perspective, their motivational achievement will be transferred to performance-avoided orientation. This orientation will facilitate students to learn to avoid poor academic performance (e.g., low grades), and accordingly, when encountering high-challenge learning tasks, they are more likely to feel anxious (see Gindidis et al., 2017).

Self-efficacy
Self-efficacy is defined as the individual’s belief about their abilities towards the organisation and execution of required tasks, as reported by Bandura (2010). Thus, from the learners’ perspective, academic self-efficacy indicates their beliefs about their skills and knowledge to achieve desirable learning results (Bandura, 2012; Niehaus et al., 2012). With low self-efficacy, students are more likely to doubt their competence and thus avoid performing challenging learning tasks, perceived as threats (Tahmassian & Moghadam, 2011). Additionally, when experiencing learning pressure, these students tend to show negative emotions, including depression and anxiety (Bandura et al., 1999; Pajares & Kranzler, 1995), which lowers confidence to pursue their academic goals and improve learning performance (Pajares, 2002; Tahmassian & Moghadam, 2011).

On the contrary, a high achiever is more likely to be active and confident as a learner, show lower vulnerability to learning obstacles and stress, as well as overcome learning challenges to enhance educational achievement (Gindidis et al., 2017; Li & Wang, 2010; Zimmerman, 2000). However, even though these students maintain a positive attitude on their learning trajectory, they may not receive a satisfying outcome when they cannot regulate their learning progress (see Baleghizadeh & Masoun, 2013; Panadero et al., 2017), which will be examined in the following section.

Self-regulation
Self-regulation can be understood as a process through which students monitor and examine
the quality of their learning performance (e.g., academic behaviour and learning skills) (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2012; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2013). Based on such self-assessment, they can realise advantages and disadvantages and thus enhance their learning strategies (see Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009; Panadero et al., 2017). In other words, self-regulation is evident when learners evaluate their work, with the intention of benefitting their academic achievements by narrowing the gap between the current situation and desirable outcomes (McMillan & Hearn, 2008; Zimmerman, 1989). More specifically, as stated by Schunk (2019), there are three procedures in relation to self-regulation, namely, self-observation, self-judgement, and self-reaction.

First, self-observation requires students to pay attention to what they are doing and thinking in the learning process (Gwo-Dong et al., 2014; Schunk, 2019). Second, in the self-judgement stage, they examine their performance in terms of relevant standards and criteria, which guides them to explore what they have mastered and what they should learn (Schunk, 2019; Zimmerman, 2013). Third, in the self-reaction stage, students identify learning tasks and strategies to improve their academic achievements (Schunk, 2019). However, self-regulation can also work when students employ an appropriate assessment method (Cascallar et al., 2006; Panadero et al., 2017), which means that criteria applied in self-evaluation should not be too challenging to reduce students’ learning confidence (Labuhn et al., 2010), or too simple so that students overestimate their competence (Dunlosky & Rawson, 2012). In this way, students can maintain their motivation and confidence to address the following learning activities (McMillan & Hearn, 2008).

Methodology
The methodology applied in this study is autoethnography – a qualitative research approach – to understand living moments or research processes in particular contexts, through systematically narrating and analysing these experiences (Ellis et al., 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Mostly, it is from a retrospective vision to employ moments in authors’ lives that concentrate on specific topics (see Ellis et al., 2011). This autoethnographic study analyses my experience as a university student in reducing listening anxiety during the EFL learning progress, identifying that the data will be collected and diarised by me, as the first author, and in face-to-face conversation with my English teacher. With the supportive perspectives, the second author provides feedback and questions in terms of my responses towards the emerging comprehension of my struggles and transformations during the uncovering of my stories. We
adopt an autoethnographic research method since it is crucial for firsthand narration and examination of complex and subtle personal experiences (see Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In this way, we incorporate the intricacies of my listening–practising moments.

Considering that autoethnography provides a time-extending vision, this permits me to evoke and re-evoke memories for in-depth analysis and interpretation of storylines (Altheide & Johnson, 2011). From an introspective view, this study is formulated in terms of my narratives (as the first author) through four vignettes, which symbolise invaluable learning experiences from which to explore the influence of anxiety in English listening, and to what extent this anxious feeling can be relieved to enhance academic performance. For me, these moments, regarded as formation and transformation, stand out since they have reshaped my EFL learning attitudes and behaviours.

**Analysis and Discussion**

In this section, four narrative vignettes will be analysed by applying significant notions from IP theory and Schunk's SRL model. These four vignettes are connected with four distinct English listening–practising periods as follows.

**Vignette 1: From ‘listening failure’ to enhanced listening**

On a Saturday morning, as a sophomore at university, I received the results of my scores in CET-4. As I predicted, compared with reading and writing areas, I showed poor performance in the listening part, which led to my failure to acquire CET-4 certification. At that time, I was confident of improving my listening issue since I felt I had a solid foundation in English language knowledge (e.g., vocabulary, phrases and grammar). The main challenge was that I might need more time for practising listening. Thus, I set a timetable to do English listening practice for one and a half hours daily, with a clear objective of increasing my listening scores in the next CET-4 test.

During listening practice, I followed five procedures: (1) In the first listening time, I would take notes about the important information I heard, (2) In the second listening time, I would compensate for some messages I may have ignored, (3) I would respond to the listening questions based on my notes, (4) I would evaluate my answers according to the original listening text, and (5) I would conclude with what I needed to learn to improve my listening performance. During this listening method over two months, with confidence and motivation, I felt that my listening skills had improved since I could reply with more right answers to listening questions.
Applying Schunk’s SRL model to analyse this vignette, in the beginning, even though I realised that my CET-4 result was not desirable, a performance-oriented motivation supported my driving force to pursue a successful test result, highlighting the significance of improved listening scores in CET-4 in the first two months. Apart from a motivational force, I had high self-efficacy to believe my abilities to enhance my listening performance. As stated by Zimmerman (2000), with higher self-efficacy, individual confidence can be increased to promote him or her to overcome learning obstacles, which is similar to my experience.

Meantime, self-regulation was achieved when I designed my listening procedures across three stages, namely, self-observation, self-judgement, and self-reaction (Schunk, 1990, 2019). First, in the self-observation stage, I focused my attention on listening, specifically, the information I could grab during the listening process in procedures 1 and 2, as well as responding to listening questions based on my notes in procedure 3. In procedure 4, I could evaluate my understandings towards the listening questions based on original listening materials as criteria in the self-judgement stage. Last, in procedure 5, I could identify listening issues and conclude what I needed to learn to improve my listening skills, in the self-reaction stage. In this way, as an EFL student with a performance-oriented motivation, high self-efficacy and appropriate self-regulation, I could improve my language learning performance.

Together with Schunk’s SRL model, we will apply IP theory from an objective perspective to explore the listening process. In the first two months, I collected listening materials such as vocabularies, different topics and grammatical structures. In this way, language knowledge as input information can be stored in LTM (see Rawl & O’Tuel, 1983). Thus, in the next listening time, when I could concentrate on transferring learning materials from sensory memory (hearing) to STM, and information in STM could connect with messages stored in LTM, I could understand and process the information in my working memory more effectively. This explained the reason why, after two months of listening practice, my comprehension of listening materials improved.

**Vignette 2: Hitting a bottleneck with lower self-efficacy**

With unremitting effort for listening practice, one day, after listening, I could respond to all questions with the right answers. Thus, I believed that my competence could facilitate me to challenge more difficult listening practices. Accordingly, I adjusted the listening speed from 130 words per minute to 140 words per minute. However, in the following month, I applied the same listening procedures (mentioned in Vignette 1) in practice and realised that I always made lots of mistakes when answering questions. At
that time, I consoled myself with the fact that I was encountering a faster listening speed in order to improve my listening skills. Unfortunately, after four weeks, I could not see any improvement (based on 60%-70% accuracy) with regard to the listening questions. In this stage, I felt depressed and confused. While facing the imminent CET-4 test in two months, I decided to do more listening practice. Accordingly, I allocated an additional hour per day to listening. In this way, I muttered to myself, “no pain, no gain; more pain, more gain”. During the following listening process, I tried to grasp each word/vocabulary, which could affect my listening scores. Unfortunately, the more I tried to focus during listening, the less I understood the listening materials. I began to doubt my abilities (i.e. ‘more pain, no gain’), with less confidence to achieve success and pass the next CET-4.

Employing Schunk’s SRL model to analyse this vignette, self-regulation and self-efficacy play crucial roles. Self-regulation could help to examine my learning performance for designing learning schedules to improve my listening competence, while inaccurate assessment would hinder this process (see Dunlosky & Rawson, 2012). For example, in the self-judgement stage, I used the only one listening result – the accuracy of answers, to evaluate my listening ability. As a consequence, I relied on evaluation – 100% accuracy, so that in the following stage (enhancing learning performance), I applied listening materials at a faster speed to improve my listening performance. Some scholars (e.g., Gibbons, 2008; Hammond, 2014) argue that when English language learners tackle high-challenge learning tasks, they are more likely to strengthen their academic achievement. However, my current competence (at that time) could not satisfy the learning needs of challenging practices with a listening speed of 140 words per minute. In relation to Vygotsky’s theory, I did not design my learning activities in the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the learning area between what students have mastered and what they can attain (Vygotsky, 1980). This is because my self-judgement was not accurate when I presented a one-sided evaluation, which relied on the accuracy of responding answers based on the only one listening practice. Therefore, with biased self-judgement, when I planned learning activities, I overestimated my capabilities to expand in the ZPD: the learning area between what I had comprehended and what I could not attain. In this regard, I could not achieve a desirable learning result. I began to suspect my abilities to improve my listening scores, as my self-efficacy decreased, which created negative emotions, including anxiety and depression (see Bandura et al., 1999; Pajares & Kranzler, 1995). In view of this situation, an inaccurate self-
judgement could lead to an unachievable learning aim, which in turn would decrease a student’s self-efficacy to face the learning bottleneck.

**Vignette 3: The listening dilemma immersed with anxiety**

With low confidence in my competence, depression about my listening scores and concerns about the upcoming CET-4 test, when I could not grasp key words and the gist of listening materials, I became even more anxious. Even though I had spent two and a half hours on listening per day as preparation, I felt that I could not improve my performance. In order to resolve this dilemma, I asked for support from my English teacher (Tom) in face-to-face conversation.

**I:** I am so sorry to disturb you since I am confused about the reasons why I could not improve my listening competence.

**Tom:** How could you know that?

**I:** After each listening practice, I check my answers to listening questions, but recently I always give wrong responses.

**Tom:** Did you only focus on the listening result?

**I:** Yeah, I care about it and feel nervous when missing any words in the listening process.

**Tom:** I understand…….It feels like you did not enjoy the listening process. The driving force of your study might be to acquire a good result. Therefore, you worry about losing scores. How about in the following days, try to focus on what you could learn from each listening practice, with less attention to how many questions you could provide with the right answers?

……

In this stage, I realised that my anxious feelings had become the main obstacle for improving my listening skills, which I will now explore in three stages based on IP theory. First, with nervous emotion, my attention would be shifted from received listening materials to the concerns about the avoidance of missing any words. In this regard, anxiety could direct the individual’s attention away from their current tasks, and thus hinder their ability to focus (Hirsch & Mathews, 2012). Given such distraction, the effectiveness of transferring listening materials from my sensory memory to STM would be reduced.

Second, anxiety would play a negative role in STM, which is significant for me to
process information (Hambrick et al., 2005; Mayer, 2012), since it will consume the storage of my STM to receive and analyse goal-relevant information (Eysenck et al., 2007). Third, considering that anxiety can inhibit the capacity of my STM, I would not retrieve more learning information from LTM to STM. Similar to my prior experience, when I could not connect received information in STM with relevant messages stored in LTM, I struggled to understand listening materials in STM. In light of these three stages, anxiety decreased my information processing abilities, and thus I could not enhance my listening performance.

Even though IP theory can explain why anxiety affects the information-processing process, such theory still needs to find a way to eliminate this anxious feeling. After exploring Schunk’s SRL model, I understood why Tom suggested that I transfer my learning objective from the learning result to the learning process. Based on students’ learning goals, there are two kinds of motivational orientation: mastery and performance orientation (e.g., Ames & Archer, 1988; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). During the listening process, I held performance-oriented motivation, which highlights the importance of acquiring higher learning grades. In this stage, compared with Vignette 1, I had low self-efficacy with less confidence to achieve a better listening score, and thus I began to avoid failure and lower grades in the listening process. In this way, performance-oriented motivation becomes performance-avoidance motivation (see Gindidis et al., 2017). Therefore, a challenging learning practice was seen as a threat (Tahmassian & Moghadam, 2011) and created anxiety.

In order to resolve the dilemma, Tom suggested that I focus on what skills or knowledge I could learn from listening. In this regard, I could transfer my dominant motivation from performance-oriented to mastery-oriented, which promotes enhanced learning skills and extending academic knowledge (Ames, 1992; Kaplan & Maehr, 2007). With this learning intention, students can persist when facing learning difficulties (Kaplan & Maehr, 2007; Rolland, 2012), rather than worrying about an unsuccessful learning outcome (e.g., a low learning grade).

**Vignette 4: A breakthrough for making progress in listening**

After discussion with my teacher, Tom, I adjusted my listening strategy from ‘evaluating and checking my answers’ to ‘reflecting what I have learned (e.g., vocabulary and phrases)’. Over the last two months, I have maintained one and a half hours daily listening practice from Monday to Saturday. On Sunday, I reviewed these listening questions to check which answers I needed to rethink. This method had a demonstrable effect on reducing my anxiety. Without the pressure of having to improve
the accuracy of my answers, there was more impetus to study since I had a sense of fulfilment when I realised that I could accumulate new knowledge, even sometimes just one unfamiliar word. Thus, I was more likely to share my experiences with both my teacher and my mother. They usually encouraged me, which gave me lots of confidence. With a resurgence of motivation and confidence, I finally acquired a satisfactory grade in the listening part of the test and achieved CET-4 certification.

In this stage, the dominant motivation was transferred from performance-oriented to mastery-oriented, which enabled me to acquire skills and knowledge along the learning trajectory. With this motivation in mind, during listening, I could concentrate on how much I might understand the information that I processed in my working memory, rather than worrying about losing a word, which influenced my listening scores. My nervous emotion declined, which improved my information-processing abilities. I could focus on goal-relevant information to transfer more messages from sensory memory to STM, and little or no anxiety means this will not consume the capacity of my STM (see Eysenck et al., 2007). In light of this, I could retrieve more relevant knowledge from LTM to assist me in processing information input in STM. Additionally, I could acquire encouragement from my teacher and my mother, as well as a sense of achievement in listening practice, which improved my self-efficacy. With high self-efficacy, I can grow more confident about my abilities to overcome learning obstacles and achieve my academic goals (see Pajares, 2002; Zimmerman, 2000).

Conclusion

In this article, we explored my (the first author’s) listening experience through four vignettes to reveal how anxiety affected my cognition during listening and in what ways listening anxiety could be relieved. My story represents the phenomenon that EFL learners encounter during their listening processes. Based on the analysis of my experience, as the first author, we found that anxiety could hinder the improvement of EFL students’ listening skills. First, students’ attention was distracted by listening anxiety, and thus information received by sensory memory (hearing) would be forestalled from being transformed into STM, which is crucial to process, organise and understand information. Second, due to the limited capacity of STM, when anxiety consumed the storage of STM to some extent, information in LTM could be less retrieved by students to comprehend received listening materials in their STM. In this regard, listening anxiety would inevitably damage EFL students’ information processing abilities.

In light of this situation, we investigated the reasons why listening anxiety could be
aroused and then sought solutions to reduce this anxious feeling. According to the analysis of my narrative, performance-oriented motivation could provide students with a driving force to pursue their learning goals. Then, when performing a particular learning task, students would examine their performance in line with their goal settings, highlighting that appropriate self-regulation could help them to design learning activities in the ZPD. In this way, through continuous listening practices to facilitate language knowledge as input information to be stored in LTM, they would enhance their listening abilities to improve their self-efficacy. As illustrated in Vignette 1, without the distraction of anxious feelings, I could focus my attention on transferring listening materials from sensory memory (hearing) to STM. Thus, when information was received in STM, it could be linked with messages in LTM, which meant that I could process and comprehend information in my STM more effectively, and thus improve my listening performance.

However, in the second stage, despite the same learning goal – achieving a high listening grade in CET-4, I used the only one listening result to overestimate my abilities. I thus designed a high-challenge learning task, as delineated in Vignette 2. Accordingly, when I showed low competence to attain my listening goal, I would generate low self-efficacy to become nervous when losing scores. In this regard, with respect to Vignette 3, my motivational achievement was shifted to performance-avoided orientation – to prevent poor academic performance. With less confidence, I became increasingly anxious when facing challenging listening tasks. In order to resolve this learning dilemma, in the last stage (Vignette 4), I attempted to focus on skills or knowledge that I could master from listening. In this way, I had gradually transferred my dominant motivation to mastery-oriented. With this learning intention, I was more likely to show my persistence when encountering learning difficulties instead of worrying about an unsuccessful learning result. This could help me to reduce listening anxiety that was evoked by a performance-oriented goal and low self-efficacy.

Based on analyses of four vignettes, this article has several implications. First, the present study offers a platform for me to give a voice to my English-listening experiences. Based on my stories, this research can help EFL learners understand why their listening anxiety reduces their information processing abilities. This could be because anxiety can hinder listening information from being transformed from sensory memory to STM, and anxious interferences consume the limited capacity of STM. Thus, information stored in LTM could be less retrieved to comprehend listening materials received in STM.

Second, this study could also help EFL students understand the extent to which their listening anxiety can be evoked and how it can be reduced. Based on Schunk’s SRL model to
analyse my experience, performance-oriented motivation with inaccurate self-judgement was more likely to decrease self-efficacy, and thus create listening anxiety. When EFL learners share similar situations during English-listening practice, they should try to set a mastery-oriented learning goal. Additionally, they should avoid a biased self-judgement to overestimate or undervalue their abilities, which can reduce their self-efficacy. In this way, EFL students can eliminate anxiety to enhance information-processing abilities and increase their confidence to achieve their listening goals.

Third, this study can also improve educators’ and teachers’ awareness of why more focus should be on pedagogical design to reduce EFL students’ learning anxiety so as to improve their English-listening performance and to enhance their emotional wellbeing in foreign language learning. Additionally, this study has made a contribution to the role of anxious feelings in students’ information-processing abilities and how this anxiety can be overcome. Thus, it could expand the body of literature to explore the relationship between listening anxiety and EFL learners’ information processing competency in terms of sensory memory, STM and LTM.

However, two main limitations in this research should be noted. First, the nature of the autoethnographic study is to collect and analyse data from a subjective perspective. Accordingly, this would make the research findings impossible to generalise. Thus, further research can be designed by applying mixed methods to enrich the dataset and thus improve the generalisability of results. Second, this article identifies the importance of appropriate self-regulation with accurate self-judgement during the EFL learning journey, while it cannot provide the criteria to evaluate the ‘appropriateness’ of self-regulation and ‘accuracy’ of self-judgement. Thus, these uncertainties should be investigated in future research to help EFL learners better relieve their listening anxiety.

References


as subject. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 733-768). Sage.


gifted. *Roeper Review*, 6(2), 83-85. [https://doi.org/10.1080/02783198309552764](https://doi.org/10.1080/02783198309552764)


