

## The Relationship between Stress Factors and the Amount of Learning among Language Learners at Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch

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### Abstract

Stress is considered as an inseparable part of life. Although it is sometimes useful and positive, if there is overstress, there would be some disturbances created in human life as the negative aspect of stress. In this research the different dimensions of stress regarding family, environmental, and personal stress and their effects on the amount of learning English among students at Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch have been investigated. The statistical population of the present research includes students majoring in different courses at Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch who have selected to pass the courses entitled: 'General English' or 'Prerequisite to General English'. In the present study we have used a random sampling method. To determine the participants of the study, a questionnaire was distributed among them. Then, based on Cochran's formula our sample was calculated. Results showed that all stress factors (personal, environmental, family) affected the performance of the students in English learning, and they should be regarded as important factors in devising new materials to be presented to General English classes.

**Keywords:** Stress Factors, Family Stress, Environmental Stress, Personal Stress, Learning English

### **Introduction**

Stress is considered as an inseparable part of life. It is sometimes useful and positive. If there is overstress, there would be some disturbances created in human life as the negative aspect of stress. It is believed that by recognizing stress and its causes, we can control its negative effects on an organization or an individual. "Every human being experiences stress during life. It seems that stress is among the necessary and required parts of human life and it is the inevitable result of our interaction with the environment. In other words, to adapt with permanent changes in life environment and to survive, we need stress". (Luther & Gregson, 1996, p., 40)

In 1936 a young researcher called Haunch Sleigh published an article at MC Gills University that led to great changes made in our understanding of psychological disorders. He posed a novel definition for strain. Although he used it consciously, the term strain changed his ideas about the states he had discovered in his research and then he posed the term 'stress' in mid 1945 in his findings (Shaffer, Martin, Translated by Blourchi, 1991, p., 19). In this research, the different dimensions of stress regarding family, environmental, and personal stress and their effects on the amount of learning English among students in Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch have been investigated.

Industrial and beyond industrial revolutions and changes have created lots of problems and stress. The concerns of individuals about job, education, family, children, the distance between family members, social problems, economic status, development of technology, and concerns about inability in learning new skills have all resulted in anxieties, tensions, freights, and false hopes from the morning till night in an individual. Sometimes these are not compatible with the bodily and neural capacities of the individual. In behavioral and psychological sciences the whole set of such states and strains is called stress (Logan, 2005).

Our understanding of stress and how to adapt with it and make it compatible with our lives have reached a state through which we can recognize most of the causes and stress factors and prevent the occurrence of stress (Eivazi, 1995, p., 78).

The reasons of the importance and necessity of investigating the relationship between stress factors and the amount of learning English can be categorized as follows:

**a) Individual perspective**

- 1- The importance of paying attention to learners as the most valuable capitals of a society and considering the importance of their psychological and physical health
- 2- Understanding the destructive effects of stress on individuals especially learners
- 3- Paying attention to psychological health of learners and creating appropriate conditions to learn a new skill

**b) Family perspective**

- 1- The stress on a student can affect other family members as well.
- 2- The importance and necessity of paying attention to family is considered as a source to reduce or diminish stress.

**c) Social perspective**

- 1- The importance and necessity of paying attention to rapid social changes as a factor that causes stress

Thus, regarding the importance of learning English as an international language and its different applications such as being aware of scientific advances, creating connections with international assemblies, internet, etc. the necessity of teaching English and the recognition of issues and problems regarding learning English seems to be critical.

***Stress and its operational definition***

*What is stress or strain?*

Stress is rooted in the Latin word 'strictus' which is equal to the French word 'striction' which means being rigid and severe. It reminds us of the pressure that can block our throat. Today, the word stress is used regarding two causes: attaching stimulation such as noise that causes stress or the metabolic or physiologic reaction that creates a stimulus such as hands' sweats, pressure and throat being dried which represent stress (Gordon & Lionel, translated by Salehi, 2002, p., 80).

The concept of stress or strain has been used since Charles Darwin posed them in 1859 and it was utilized in social sciences and psychology at the end of the World War II in the United States (Shahidi & Hamdieh, 2002, p., 38).

Stress is a nervous strain that is caused by internal controversies resulting from different external positions (Ganji, 1981). Stress has destructive bodily and spiritual effects on human and can easily affect the nervous and psychological system and also the defensive system of the body and thus can harm the general order of all common movements and behaviors and the health of body. It can harm different functions of human body. Stress has different effects on society, firms, body, and performance.

#### *The effects of stress on society*

In addition to individual dangers, the public disturbances of stress are permanently increasing. These include the costs of public services, regularity and sanitary cares of the individuals suffering from diseases caused by stress, and early retirements due to pressures.

#### *The effects of stress on firms*

In the United States, stress solely incurs 150 billion dollars annually. This is due to the absences from work and the reduction of working efficiency of those individuals who work but their spirits wander somewhere else. In England, more than 60 percent of abnormalities resulting from absence from work are related with nervous pressures.

#### *The effects of stress on the body*

When physical and psychological pressure is enforced on human beings, the outflow of certain hormones such as adrenalin and cortisone increases in the body and these hormones create major changes in heart beat, blood pressure, body metabolism, and physical activities. Such activities do not have side effects in short term but if they continue and are repeated, some diseases such as blood pressure, heart attacks, and nervous pressures would emerge (Eivazi, 2005, p., 7).

*The effects of stress on performance*

The most important effect of stress is the one enforced on an individual's performance. These effects were investigated by two researchers called Yerkes and Dodson in 1908 for the first time. By increasing the psychological pressures on an individual, the performance can increase up to a point that the optimal increase happens and when stress becomes more than enough, the reduction of performance will happen.

Hassan Shahi and Darabi (2005) carried out a research entitled "the effects of strategies to combat against stress on the mental health of students" on a sample of 200 students. They concluded that people having high endurance have a higher level of mental health than those with lower amounts. Beheshti (2001) did a research entitled "studying the factors affecting job pressures of University teachers in Isfahan" on 120 lecturers in Isfahan University. Lots of works to be done, inappropriate educational leadership, lack of job security, and inappropriate relations have been reported as the highest effective factors on stress. Marx and Ladd (1973) stated that stress is the main cause for 6 to 27 percent of all mental health problems.

Bowling and Torenly (2005) carried out a research entitled "the relationship between individual innovation and the heavy responsibility on job stress and family problems by sampling 98 individuals and concluded that the high levels of individual innovations is along with high levels of job stress and family problems of the staff. Also their findings showed that individual innovations and family controversies have been balanced through gender, and this relationship is stronger among women than men.

Nozaat (1997) investigated the amount of job stress of teachers in Fars province. The means used to measure the amount of job stress was a Likert type, whose validity was measured through the interviews with scholars and it was calculated regarding alpha and Cronbach measures. The sample included 33 persons selected by using a random cluster method. The results showed that female teachers felt more job stress than men and also there has not been much difference among women regarding job stress. The main stress causes among teachers were inappropriate salary, amount of working hours, lack or insufficient resources, and the assessment of the performance

by the teachers themselves. There has been a positive and meaningful correlation between teachers' stress causes and job stress.

Kousari (1993) carried out a research among 240 students studying in medical sciences department of Kordestan province and concluded that there was not a meaningful difference observed between girl and boy students, single and married ones, natives and non-natives, different majors, admission privileges, the amount of education years in different departments, and part time and full time students. Also there was not any meaningful difference observed regarding the stress causes among single and married students, natives and non-natives, admission privileges, and part time and full time students. But the difference between students was meaningful regarding girl and boy students ( $P=0.05$ ), different majors ( $P=0.01$ ), the education years in University ( $P=0.05$ ), and different departments ( $P=0.001$ ). The most important concern of the students was 'being worried about the safety of their family members' and 'being worried about future job'.

Yagoubi (1997) investigated the mental health state of 536 students in Gilan medical Sciences University and concluded that 30 to 50 percent of them were suffering from interfering thoughts, difficulty in making decisions, lack of interest in daily life chores, being nervous, being concerned, and being sad. Also boy students had a better mental health level than girl students. On the whole, a meaningful relationship was found among the factors affecting their mental health (Yagoubi, 2007).

In the present study and regarding different types of stress imposed on individuals who want to learn a new skill, our aim is to recognize the factors and their effects on learning English and suggest the activities and guidelines to reduce stress factors that result in increasing the level of learning English among University students. Accordingly, the following research questions were asked:

1. What are stress factors and the relationship between them and learning English among students at Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch?
2. How much stress do students at Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch have when they are learning English?

3. What is the relationship between personal stress factors and the amount of learning English among students at Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch?
4. What is the relationship between family stress factors and the amount of learning English among students at Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch?
5. What is the relationship between environmental stress factors and the amount of learning English among students at Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The statistical population of the present study includes students from different majors at Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch that had chosen 'General English' or 'Prerequisite to General English' courses. In this study, we used a random sampling method. We have used Cochran's formula to calculate the sample. Regarding this formula and the data collected, the total population was 210 persons and the sample comprised of 136 persons.

### **Instrumentation**

The present study was a descriptive study. "Questionnaire is considered as one of the most common data collection means in measurement studies" (Nejadirani, 2006, p. 102). The questionnaire (Zoghi, 2011) employed in this study was comprised of 27 questions. Ten questions were related to personal stress factors. Nine questions were related to environmental stress factors. Eight questions were related to family stress factors. The questions were in Likert's 5 scale items that were approved after being controlled for validation purposes by the scholars in the field.

### **Procedure**

In the present study we have used a random sampling method. To determine the participants of the study, a questionnaire was distributed among them. Then, based on Cochran's formula our sample was calculated. The data were analyzed after the administration was completed. Using

SPSS, the researchers run statistical analyses to test the hypotheses of the study.

## Design

The present study is a correlation type regarding the administration and data collection. This study dealt with investigating the relationship between stress factors and the amount of learning English among students at Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch. The research variables are Personal stress factors, Environmental stress factors, Family stress factors, and Learning English.

## Results

### Testing the normality of the data

We investigated the normality of the data by using Kolomogorov-Smirnov test. This test was carried out regarding all items of the main variables and was represented in the table below. This test has been carried out in an assurance level of %95 with a standard error level of %5 and we have had the two hypotheses below (Table 1).

Table 1

*Kolomogorov-Smirnov test to measure the normality of the main research variables*

Variables	No.	K-S statistic	P amount (Sig)	Result
Learning English	130	1.094	0.061	normal
Personal stress factors	130	0.875	0.429	normal
Environmental stress factors	130	1.147	0.144	normal
Family stress factors	130	1.409	0.380	normal

Regarding the results gained from Table 1, it can be seen that the amount of Sig has been greater than 0.05 in all variables and this shows that all data were normal. Thus, to study the hypotheses of these variables, we used parametric methods and Pearson's method is the best parametric method to be used.

To measure the meaningfulness amount of each of the hypotheses, we investigated the hypotheses in isolation consecutively. Since in all



hypotheses the independent and dependent variables are measured with distance, we have used Pearson's correlation coefficient to calculate them.

There is a meaningful relationship between stress of students and their English learning. Both independent (students' stress) and dependent (learning English) variables have been changed into interval measurement by using computer order in SPSS, to test the meaningfulness we have used Pearson's correlation coefficient test, as it can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

*Pearson's correlation coefficient test to measure the relationship between students' stress and learning English*

Test and variables		Learning English	Stress while learning English
Learning English	Pearson Correlation	1	**0.368
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	No.	130	130
Stress while learning English	Pearson Correlation	**0.368	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	No.	130	130

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

Regarding Table 2 and the amount of (Sig = 0.000), it can be observed that the amount is less than 0.05 and this means the existence and meaningfulness of a relationship. On the other hand, considering the amount of Pearson's correlation (0.368), it is completely clear that the amount noted is higher than 0.3 and less than 0.6 and this means the existence of a higher than average relationship. This means that the first main hypothesis is approved in an assurance level of %95. In other words, learning English is along with a little stress and anxiety among students in almost all majors among the students in Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch and the intensity of stress is a little higher than average.

Before testing the minor hypotheses, first we deal with regression test among stress variables. Regarding that stress has 3 main indexes in this research including personal, environmental, and family stress factors, we used each of them to investigate about the effect of each by using regression test. In fact, we wanted to know that which one has had a higher effect than the others. The correlation and prediction in statistics is so close that

sometimes we used them interchangeably. Whenever one of the two variables having correlation is known, we can predict the other. By using a regression line or its equation we can predict a variable considering the other one (Sharifi & Najafi-e-Zand, 2005, p., 315). Table 3 displays the results. To do so we have:

*Table 3*  
*Identifying regression coefficients*

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the estimate
Model	0.372	0.138	0.118	2.673

In Table 3, coefficient is known as multiple correlation coefficients, and the amount of multiple correlation between sets of dependent and independent variables is shown by it. The amount of this coefficient varies between (0) and (1). The closer to (1), shows a stronger correlation between independent and dependent variable. And the closer to (0) shows a weak correlation between them.

R square refers to square of multiple correlation coefficients and this coefficient shows the identification amount of variance and the changes in dependent variable by the set of independent variables. The amount of this coefficient varies between (0) and (1). The closer to (1), shows a greater identification of dependent variable variance. And the closer to (0) shows a weaker role of independent variables in identifying the dependent variable. The coefficient gained for identifying stress and learning English is 0.138.

Adjusted R Square shows the amount of the goodness amount of model adjustment. In the table above, the adjusted identification coefficient equals 0.118 and it shows that the independent variable of personal stress factors could identify 11 percent of the changes in the dependent variable of students' stress. Therefore, the rest of such changes are affected by variables outside the model. Std. Error of the Estimate shows the prediction power of regression equation. Table 4 shows the variance analysis of hypothesis one.

Table 4  
Variance analysis of hypothesis 1

Model	R square	df	Average	F	Meaningfulness
regression resource	144.297	3	48.099	6.732	0.000
residual resource	900.195	126	7.144		
Total	1044.492	129			

As Table 4 indicates, df shows the degree of freedom in the regression. It means that we have 3 independent variables to measure students' stress. F shows whether the regression model is appropriate or not. In other words, are independent variables able to describe the changes in the dependent variable or not? The recognition of such issue is possible regarding the meaningfulness of F in an error level of less than or greater than 0.05. The amount of F calculated in this hypothesis with 6.732 shows that the independent variables have had a high ability to identify. Table 5 displays Beta coefficient.

Table 5  
Beta coefficient

Test	Non-standardized coefficients		standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
	15.094	1.601		9.426	0.000
Personal stress factors	0.117	0.069	0.165	1.691	0.011
Environmental stress factors	0.066	0.056	0.117	1.182	0.023
Family stress factors	0.113	0.066	0.177	1.706	0.019

Dependent variable: Learning English

In Table 5 in column (B), the regression coefficients and the fixed amounts were presented, respectively. The rest of the columns include items such as criterion error of column coefficients, beta (the standardized amount of the coefficients that show the change amount in dependent variable for each change as a standard error happens in independent variable), and the bigger the absolute amount shows a stronger relationship between independent and dependent variables. Based on column (B), we can not conclude that the variable with higher coefficient can have more effects on the dependent variable because the measurement units of the variables are

different. Therefore, to compare the effect of variables we have used beta standardized coefficients. The column related to standardized coefficients show that environmental stress factors have had the highest effect regarding the responses given by the statistical sample members because for each unit of change in this variable, 0.177 unit of change happened in learning English variable and the rest of the variables were the same too. T and sig statistics were presented to test the equilibrium presupposition of each of the coefficients of column (B) with the number 0. Since sig. has been less than 0.05, the presupposition to consider regression coefficients and the fixed amount equal with 0 was rejected and there is no need to exclude it from the regression equation either. In other words, these 3 variables and the fixed amount do not affect the dependent variables anymore. Accordingly, all 3 independent variables mentioned affected learning English by students in Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch and have had the priorities below regarding the amounts of beta coefficient:

The first affective factor in learning English (environmental stress factors with beta coefficient of 0.177)

The second affective factor in learning English (personal stress factors with beta coefficient of 0.165)

The first affective factor in learning English (family stress factors with beta coefficient of 0.117)

### ***Testing hypothesis 1***

There is a meaningful relationship between personal stress factors and learning English.

Since both independent (personal stress factors) and dependent (learning English) variables have been changed into interval measurement by using comput order in SPSS, to test the meaningfulness we have used Pearson's correlation coefficient test as it can be seen in Table 6:

Table 6

*Pearson's correlation coefficient test to measure the relationship between personal stress factors and learning English*

Test and variables		Learning English	Personal stress factors
Learning English	Pearson Correlation	1	**0.301
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.001
	No.	130	130
Personal stress factors	Pearson Correlation	**0.301	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	
	No.	130	130

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

Regarding the table above and the amount of (Sig = 0.001), it can be observed that the amount is less than 0.05 and this means the existence of a relationship and it is meaningful. On the other hand, considering the amount of Pearson's correlation (0.301), it is completely clear that the amount noted is higher than 0.3 and less than 0.6 and this means the existence of a higher than average relationship. This means that the second hypothesis is approved in an assurance level of %95. In other words, learning English is accompanied with personal stress factors among students in Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch and the intensity of such stress is a little higher than average.

### **Testing hypothesis 2**

There is a meaningful relationship between family stress factors and learning English.

Since both independent (family stress factors) and dependent (learning English) variables have been changed into interval measurement by using comput order in SPSS, to test the meaningfulness we have used Pearson's correlation coefficient test as it can be seen in Table 7:

Table 7

*Pearson's correlation coefficient test to measure the relationship between family stress factors and learning English*

Test and variables		Learning English	Family stress factors
Learning English	Pearson Correlation	1	**0.275
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.002
	No.	130	130
Family stress factors	Pearson Correlation	**0.275	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.002	
	No.	130	130

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

Regarding Table 7 and the amount of (Sig = 0.002), it can be observed that the amount is less than 0.05 and this means the existence of a relationship and it is meaningful. On the other hand, considering the amount of Pearson's correlation (0.275), it is completely clear that the amount noted is less than 0.3 and this means the existence of a weak relationship between dependent and independent variables. This means that the third hypothesis is approved in an assurance level of %95. In other words, learning English is accompanied with family stress factors among students in Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch and the intensity of such stress is low.

### **Testing hypothesis 3**

There is a meaningful relationship between environmental stress factors and learning English.

Since both independent (environmental stress factors) and dependent (learning English) variables have been changed into interval measurement by using computer order in SPSS, to test the meaningfulness we have used Pearson's correlation coefficient test as it can be seen in Table 8:

Table 8

*Pearson's correlation coefficient test to measure the relationship between environmental stress factors and learning English*

Test and variables		Learning English	Environmental stress factors
Learning English	Pearson Correlation	1	**0.319
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	No.	130	130
Environmental stress factors	Pearson Correlation	**0.319	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	No.	130	130

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

Regarding Table 8 and the amount of (Sig = 0.000), it can be observed that the amount is less than 0.05 and this means the existence of a relationship and it is meaningful. On the other hand, considering the amount of Pearson's correlation (0.319), it is completely clear that the amount noted is higher than 0.3 and less than 0.6 and this means the existence of a higher than average relationship. This means that the fourth hypothesis is approved in an assurance level of %95. In other words, learning English is accompanied with environmental stress factors among students at Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch and the intensity of such stress is average.

### Discussion

The present study has investigated the effect of the different dimensions of stress regarding family, environmental, and personal stress on the amount of learning English among students at Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch. Stress has always been one of the most challenging issues in EFL settings and it has caused lots of inconveniences on Iranian EFL students. Stress is a nervous strain that is caused by internal controversies resulting from different external positions (Ganji, 1981). Stress has destructive bodily and spiritual effects on human and can easily affect the nervous and psychological system and also the defensive system of the body and thus can harm the general order of all common movements and behaviors and the health of body. It can harm different functions of human body. The results of studying variables in the present research project showed that all three

independent variables mentioned affected learning English by students at Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch.

The approval of all three stress indexes demands universities to think about holding some meetings with parents in the University while University teachers and parents cooperate to remove the family stress factors. For example, regarding family stress factors, many families are unaware of their children's courses and majors and they do not know much about their children's classes or the like that affect students' learning. Some students hide their schedule from their parents and sometimes they drop out without letting their parents know.

Regarding environmental stress factors, it can be suggested to hold in service classes to teach lecturers how to behave with students and how to prepare a comfortable atmosphere for the students to learn without stress.

Regarding personal stress factors, it can be suggested to establish free educational counsel committees for those students whose family problems have been transferred into the University atmosphere somehow and make them stressed and sad.

Regarding the problems mentioned in this research, it can be suggested to the researchers to devise some qualitative studies such as deep interviews or other types of interviews to carry out the research in other environments with other participants. This is due to the fact that questionnaire is a quantitative method and we can not measure broad indexes such as stress and learning by using numerical data solely. Second, the measurement of stress among students is not bound to learning English, and it would be better to collect data and analyze them regarding all other courses too.

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### **Biodata**

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