


Anxiety When Learning a Foreign Language: The Cases of Proficiency and Gender

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Abstract

Despite the bulk of literature on various aspects of anxiety, its multi-dimensional aspect generates many controversies among researchers. Sometimes, EFL learners may suffer from proficiency and gender dependent anxiety in language learning contexts. This correlational study aims to explore the relationship between the construct of general anxiety across different English proficiency levels including elementary, intermediate, and advanced in Iranian EFL learners. To this end, 108 male and female (54 in each group) Iranian EFL learners aged 14 to 18 took part in the present study at a private language school in Gorgan, Iran. The analyses explored the general relationship between anxiety levels and English proficiency levels and also EFL learners' gender. Chi Square tests were run in R software did not demonstrate a significant relationship between anxiety and levels of proficiency in general. Findings revealed a significant relationship between EFL learners' level of anxiety and gender. The results might help design future studies and assist teachers, teacher educators, and syllabus designers to devise their courses and tests considering affective factors which ultimately lead to students' self-efficacy.

Keywords: anxiety, English proficiency levels, gender, EFL learners

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1. Introduction

Language learning is a complicated process in which many factors are involved. Apart from cognitive factors, psychological factors play an inevitable role in the learning environment (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). Affective factors such as empathy, self-esteem, and anxiety are rooted in psychology and encompass emotional side of human behavior and over the last 30 years many studies confirmed their undeniable role in language teaching (Brown, 2014). Cognitive and affective factors, once considered to be the opposite ends of a continuum are now seen as complementary to each other (Dewaele, 2005). Anxiety is among the affective factors which have attracted the most attention since foreign language teachers have always encountered learners who demonstrate different degrees of uneasiness and worry in the classroom. Horwitz's study (1986) is considered to be the starting point for many other studies on the issue of "Foreign Language Anxiety" (FLA).

There are different perspectives with regard to FLA in the classroom; some believe that anxiety is a major problem and has detrimental effects on language learning (debilitative anxiety) (Gregersen, 2003; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002); however, other scholars have the opposite idea and consider a small dose of anxiety as a facilitative factor in foreign language learning (Frantzen & Magnan, 2005).

Almost all studies in the field proved the negative influence of anxiety on foreign language learning (Horwitz, 1986). Several studies have focused on the level of anxiety among the learners whereas others have investigated the relationship between FLA and students' oral performance or listening performance. Other researchers on the other hand have inspected its influence on students' test performance. However, since the construct is a multi-faceted one, more studies need to be conducted to cover all its aspects. Most of the studies regarding the issue so far have been implemented in academic contexts among university students with different majors and mostly focused on the influence of FLA on test performance (Birjandi & Alemi, 2010; Cheng, Horwitz & Schallert, 1999). The exclusive EFL context

of Iran in which students do not have the opportunity to be exposed to a great deal of English makes the situation even more challenging for the students to master a foreign language which adds to the importance of this research..

2. Literature Review

In Horwitz's (1986) study significant negative correlation was found between FLA and English achievement of students who were learning Spanish or French. Chapell, Blanding, and Silverstein (2005) carried out a study among undergraduate and graduate students outcomes of which revealed a significant difference of academic achievement among students showing various degrees of anxiety. In the Thai context, the results of an investigation in an English language program revealed significant correlation between FLA and performance in English language as well (Anyadubalu, 2010).

Wigfield and Kennedy (2007) reported students who have high anxiety do poorly in tests. A study by Batumlu and Erden (2007) showed a significant negative correlation between FLA and English achievement test among university students. Rahimi (1999) found 36.9 % of high school students in Sanandaj, Iran had severe anxiety; Mozaffari's (2001) findings were also in line with the previous research. Salehi and Marefat (2014) explored possible relationship between FLA and test anxiety and also the effects of FLA and test anxiety on foreign language test performance; the results displayed negative effects of both types of anxiety on test performance, and there was also a strong positive relationship between FLA and test anxiety. Daskzan (2004) documented that 37% of male and 53% of female high school students in Saghez, Iran had test anxiety and that there was a significant relationship between test anxiety and academic achievement. Mersi (2012) investigated FLA among male and females EFL learners and found out that females had higher level of anxiety. Rezazadeh and Tavakoli (2009) carried out a study on the relationship between gender, academic achievement, years of study and levels of test anxiety among

university students, and it was revealed that females had a higher level of test anxiety. Two qualitative studies concluded that students in upper-level courses experience higher anxiety (Ewald, 2007; Kitano, 2001). However, Gardner, Smythe, & Brunet (1977) concluded that anxiety decreased when experience and proficiency increased.

Despite the number of studies (Ewald, 2007; Sparks & Ganschow, 2007; Daskzan, 2004), there are still no conclusive results on the issue and research on the differences in anxiety levels among proficiency levels among male and females EFL learners at private language institutes is rather scarce. To narrow the gap, this correlational study explored the relationship between the construct of general anxiety across different English proficiency levels including elementary, intermediate, and advanced in Iranian EFL learners. Based on the purpose of the research, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Are there any significant relationship among anxiety levels of EFL learners and their proficiency?
2. Is there any significant relationship among anxiety levels of EFL learners and their gender?
3. Are there any significant relationship among anxiety levels of female EFL learners and their proficiency?
4. Are there any significant relationship among anxiety levels of male EFL learners and their proficiency?

Method

The participants comprised 108 male and female (54 in each group) EFL learners whose age ranged 13-18 studying at three different proficiency levels at a private language institute in Gorgan, Iran. Cognitive Test Anxiety and Academic Performance based on 4-point Likert scale by Jerrell C. Cassady *Ball State University* and Ronald E. Johnson (2002) was used. A number of 108 out of the original 172 questionnaires were selected in the current study based on the learners' age.

Data Analysis, Results, and Implications

The analyses explored the general relationship between anxiety levels and English proficiency levels and also EFL learners' gender. Chi Square tests were run in R software did not demonstrate a significant relationship between anxiety and levels of proficiency in general. Findings revealed a significant relationship between EFL learners' level of anxiety and gender. The results might help design future studies and assist teachers, teacher educators, and syllabus designers to devise their courses and tests considering affective factors which ultimately lead to students' self-efficacy.