The Relationship between Language Learning Anxiety, Self-Esteem, and Academic Level among Iranian EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

The present study is an attempt to explore the relationship between language learning anxiety, self-esteem, and academic level among Iranian EFL learners. To this end, two self-report questionnaires were administered to a total of 108 language learners enrolled for Teaching English as a Foreign Language in two universities in Shiraz, Iran. Results indicated a negative correlation between language learning anxiety and self-esteem among the learners. Similarly, language learning anxiety and academic level were found to be negatively correlated. However, a positive correlation was seen between the learners' self-esteem and their academic level. The findings include pedagogical implications for both language learners and language teachers.

Keywords: Academic level, language learning anxiety, self-esteem

INTRODUCTION

For the past two decades, research on affective factors in language pedagogy has received considerable attention from language practitioners. Two of the most pervasive affective factors that have been widely studied in the literature are language learning anxiety and self-esteem. Research has proved that these two variables can considerably influence one's language learning process (e.g. Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. A, 1986; Brown, 2007), and that these two variables are intricately interwoven. Although everybody has experienced some degree of anxiety or self-esteem, these two terms are not easy to define in one sentence. The definition of anxiety ranges from a mixture of overt behavioral characteristics that can be studied scientifically to introspective feelings that are epistemologically inaccessible

(Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2004). Horwitz *et al.* (1986) defined anxiety as "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (p. 125). In terms of self-esteem, Coopersmith (1967) defined it as a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in attitudes that the individual holds towards himself, and indicates the extent to which the individual believes in himself to be capable, significant and worthy. Research has shown that one's degree of self-esteem can play a crucial role in language acquisition. In fact, those individuals who benefit from a high level of self-esteem are expected to experience lower degree of anxiety and thus achieve more success in their language learning. Such being the case, the present study attempts to explore the relationship between language learning anxiety

and self-esteem among Iranian EFL learners. Moreover, it seeks to determine how learners' level of education is associated with their anxiety level and self-esteem. It is expected that the findings of the study would shed more light into this research area and help language learners and educators to be more successful in the process of language learning and teaching.

Learning Anxiety

The literature on anxiety reveals that learning anxiety affects one's performance in a negative way. It has been proven that there is a negative correlation between learning anxiety and second/foreign language achievement (Horwitz, 2001; Aida, 1994; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Horwitz *et al*. (1986) contend that foreign language anxiety consists of "self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz *et al*., 1986, p. 128). Moreover, they identify three components of foreign language anxiety: a) communication apprehension, b) fear of negative evaluation, and c) test anxiety. Students who do not feel comfortable enough in communicating with others suffer from what is known as communication apprehension. The reason could be attributed to their limited knowledge of the language or the stressful situation they are placed in. Due to fear of negative evaluation, some students prefer to remain silent because they are afraid of committing mistakes. Such individuals do not see their mistakes as a natural part of the learning process, but as a threat to their reputation and dignity, or as a source of negative evaluation either from the teacher or their classmates. Such students are silent most of the time and are not willing to take part in classroom activities. Finally, students who exhibit test anxiety are afraid of speaking situations since they see them as test situations, rather than an opportunity for them to practice their speaking ability.

Anxiety can be divided into two types: *trait* anxiety and *state* anxiety. Trait anxiety is the tendency of a person to be nervous or feel anxious irrespective of the situation he/she is exposed to (Pappamihiel, 2002). Indeed, such anxiety is a part of a person's character and is a more permanent predisposition, which is difficult to get rid of. The second type of anxiety, called state (situational) anxiety arises in a particular situation and hence is not permanent. It is a state of nervousness or tension experienced at a particular moment in response to some outside stimulus (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989). Foreign language classroom anxiety falls within this category.

In terms of the causes of language learning anxiety, Worde (2003) found that speaking activities, inability to comprehend, negative classroom experiences, fear of negative evaluation, native speakers, methodology, pedagogical practices, and the teachers themselves were the main causes of learning anxiety. Liu (2006), too, found out that students felt the most anxious when they responded to teachers or were singled out to speak English in class. The subjects in William and Andrade's (2008) study also see the teachers as the main source of anxiety. Therefore, Tsiplakides and Keramida (2009) advise teachers to identify the sources of anxiety in their classroom and take measures to remove them.

Anxiety and Self-esteem

Like learning anxiety, self-esteem is described in terms of three general levels. Firstly, general or global self-esteem is a stable quality within an individual and is an evaluation that one makes of one' worth. Secondly, situational or specific self-esteem is one's assessment of one's ability in a certain situation, such as work or education. Finally, task self-esteem refers to specific activities in particular situations (Brown, 2007). Research has established a relationship between self-esteem and learning anxiety. It has been demonstrated that anxiety is seen as a major threat to one's self-esteem. Patten (1983), for example, found a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and general anxiety among the participants of the study. Similarly, Peleg (2009) found a negative

correlation between test anxiety and self-esteem and a positive correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement.

Given the fact that affective variables, in general, and anxiety and self-esteem, in particular, can greatly influence one's learning process, investigating the relationship between the two seems plausible. Such being the case, the present study aims at investigating the relationship between EFL learners' anxiety level and their self-esteem at different academic levels. Most of the studies carried out in this area have been conducted in second language environments where the amount of exposure learners receive to the target language is not comparable to that of foreign language settings such as Iran. Such being the case, the present study aimed to fill this gap in the literature and find out if similar or different results would be obtained. Specifically, the study attempted to seek answers to the following questions:

1. What is the relationship between language learning anxiety and self-esteem among Iranian EFL learners?

2. Does the learners' academic level influence their level of anxiety?

3. Does academic level affect self-esteem in EFL learners?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A total number of 108 EFL learners (44 males and 64 females) were recruited for the current study. They were selected based on cluster random sampling from two universities located in Shiraz, Iran. As for the sampling procedure, it is neither possible nor necessary to select a sample of individuals from the population of interest due to administrative problems or other restrictions. Moreover, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to select a random sample of individuals from the population. As a result, the researcher had to resort to groups rather than individuals. Such being the case, the present study utilized *cluster random sampling*, which

is a form of probability sampling. Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) define cluster random sampling as the selection of groups or clusters instead of selecting individuals. They see this particular technique as effective when considering large numbers of clusters. In this technique, the researcher first randomly chooses a number of clusters, followed by selecting a number of intact classes at random and then including all the individuals in those classes into the study. The students' major was Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). With regard to their educational level, the participants comprised 33 sophomores, 36 juniors and 39 seniors. The freshmen were excluded from the study since it was assumed that the questionnaires used might not be comprehensible to them.

Instruments

Two questionnaires were employed in the study, namely, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). The FLCAS, developed by Horwitz *et al*. (1986), consists of 33 items that measure the degree to which language learners experience anxiety in language classrooms. The RSES, designed by Rosenberg (1965), comprises 10 items which measure individuals' self-esteem. Both the questionnaires use a Likert type scale. The reason for selecting the two instruments for the present study is that these two questionnaires are the most popular and most frequently used in the research in this area. Prior to data collection, a pilot study was carried out to determine the reliability of the instruments. The results of the pilot study revealed reliability values of .87 for FLCAS and .80 for RSES.

RESULTS

The data collected were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version 16.0. As discussed earlier, the study investigated the relationship between language classroom anxiety and self-esteem among Iranian EFL learners. It also investigated the relationship between these variables and the learners'

academic level. In addition, Pearson Product Moment Correlation was also employed to analyze the collected data. The first objective of the study was to identify the relationship between foreign language classroom anxiety and self-esteem. The correlation results are displayed in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Correlation between FLCAS and Self-Esteem

		FLCAS	Self-Esteem Scale
FLCAS	Pearson Correlation	1	-.742**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	108	108
Self-Esteem	Pearson Correlation	-.742**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	108	108

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

As illustrated in Table 1, the correlation between foreign language classroom anxiety and self-esteem is - .74. This correlation coefficient is significant at the level of 0.01. This indicates a strong negative correlation between the two variables among the subjects of the study.

The second objective of the study was to explore the relationship between foreign language classroom anxiety and academic level. To this end, correlation analysis was run. The following table demonstrates the related results.

TABLE 2
Correlation between FLCAS and Academic Level

		FLCAS	Academic Level
FLCAS	Pearson Correlation	1	-.821**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	108	108

Table 2 (continued)

Academic Level	Pearson Correlation	-.821**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	108	108

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

As shown in Table 2, the correlation between foreign language classroom anxiety and academic level is -.82, which is significant at 0.01. This suggests a high negative correlation between the two variables.

The third objective of the study was to uncover the relationship between the learners' self-esteem and their academic level. For this purpose, the correlation analysis was conducted to interpret the data. The obtained results are shown in Table 3 below.

TABLE 3
Correlation between Self-Esteem and Academic Level

		Self-Esteem	Academic Level
Self-Esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	.791**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	108	108
Academic Level	Pearson Correlation	.791**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	108	108

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

The results show that the correlation between self-esteem and academic level is .79. The correlation coefficient is significant at 0.01. This value indicates a high positive correlation between the two variables among the subjects undertaken in the study.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study was an attempt to investigate the relationship between foreign language classroom anxiety and self-esteem among Iranian EFL learners. In addition, it also investigated the relationship between the two variables and the learners' academic level which was determined by the year they were in, namely, sophomore, junior, and senior. For this purpose, three research questions were reiterated and answered based on the findings of the study.

1. *What is the relationship between language learning anxiety and self-esteem among Iranian EFL learners?*

The results of the study revealed a high negative correlation ($r = -0.74$, P < .01) between language learning anxiety and self-esteem. Thus, it could be concluded that learning anxiety drops as self-esteem increases. In other words, the learners who benefit from a high degree of self-esteem experience lower anxiety. However, those who suffer from learning anxiety are considered to have lower self-esteem. Such finding is supported by previous research studies that have shown a negative correlation between learning anxiety and self-esteem (see Patten, 1983; Peleg, 2009). When learners perceive themselves to be capable of learning the language successfully, they will naturally experience less anxiety. With a high level of self-esteem, learners are able to overcome the obstacles of learning the language much better and consequently feel less anxious in the language learning process.

2. *Does the learners' academic level affect their anxiety level?*

The second research question was aimed at investigating the relationship between language learning anxiety and academic level. In other words, the study sought to determine whether learners' level of anxiety varies as they progress in their academic studies. The result derived from the correlation analysis suggests a high, negative correlation ($r = -0.82$, P < .01) between academic level and learning anxiety. This indicates that as learners move forward in their academic studies, their anxiety level decreases. In other words, sophomores experience a higher degree of anxiety in comparison with their juniors and seniors. This can be accounted for by the experience the learners gain through their studies, which dramatically lowers their anxiety level. It can also be argued that as learners progress in their studies, they can improve their language proficiency and get better oriented with their language learning environment and hence experience less anxiety.

3. *Does academic level affect self-esteem in EFL learners?*

The third research question of the study was to explore the relationship between self-esteem and academic level. Similar to the previous research question, it sought to explain if learners' self-esteem changes as they move along in their academic life. The results of the analysis prove a high positive correlation ($r = 0.79$, P < .01) between self-esteem and academic level. It can be argued that as learners move to a higher level of education, they develop a higher degree of self-esteem. In other words, seniors experience a higher level of self-esteem compared to their juniors and sophomores. When learners progress in their academic education, they gain more knowledge and experience about the target language, and hence, feel more competent and capable of learning the language. Moreover, when they compare their previous knowledge of the language with what they know now, they see themselves more proficient and thus experience a higher degree of self-esteem.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the present study can have pedagogical implications for both language learners and teachers. The results demonstrate that affective variables, such as anxiety and self-esteem, play a vital role in language learning. Meanwhile, the negative correlation found in the present study draws our attention to the important role these factors play in the

process of language learning. Such finding can have important implications for language practitioners. In particular, they must be made aware of the important influences of such variables on language learning and thus take appropriate measures to respond effectively to learners' affective variables. One important point is that improving one's self-esteem can result in a lower degree of anxiety and better performance. It is, therefore, suggested that language teachers take measures to build up the learners' self-esteem in order to help them be more successful in their language learning. Moreover, as suggested in the literature, learning anxiety can have a harmful effect on one's performance. Teachers, therefore, need to identify the sources of learners' anxiety, try to remove such sources and create a stress-free language learning environment. This, will in turn, facilitate the students' language learning to greater heights. Horwitz *et al*. (1986) state that two choices are available to language educators with students who are anxious: "1) they can help them learn to cope with the existing anxiety-provoking situations, and 2) they can make the learning context less stressful" (p.131). The researchers further contend that teachers should first get to know that anxiety exists before they try to find a remedy. As a result, it is unfair if teachers always attribute learners' failure to lack of knowledge. Chances are high that anxiety is at work, which prevents learners from displaying their full potential. As such, teachers need to resort to techniques and strategies to alleviate learners' anxiety. Casado and Dereshiwsky (2004) suggest some useful ways:

- Teachers need to inform students that speaking fluently and having a good accent in English require years of practice.

- Teachers need to provide students with positive reinforcement and create a relaxed classroom environment.

- Teachers can conduct lots of activities in pairs or groups. When in pairs or groups, students feel more relaxed than when they are being singled out to speak in class.

- Occasional use of native language put learners at ease.

Learners, too, need to be aware of the debilitating role of anxiety in their learning and make efforts to improve their proficiency to gain more self-esteem and hence experience less degree of anxiety. This can indeed be a key factor in learning the language effectively.

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