

English Language Learning Anxiety among Iranian EFL Freshman University Learners

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to identify university freshmen's anxiety in foreign language classrooms and offer some strategies to decrease their anxiety. It explored how students felt towards learning how to listen, speak, read and write in English. Another aim was to find out whether there was a significant difference between males and females' level of anxiety. A group of 26 males and 37 female Iranian freshmen were randomly selected from which 2 males and 2 females were then selected for the open-ended structured questions. The data were collected through a Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) and open-ended structured questionnaires. The descriptive analysis indicated that these freshmen experienced the anxiety of being evaluated negatively in English classrooms. The findings also demonstrated that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of male and female learners' foreign language learning anxiety. The open-ended structured questionnaire findings demonstrated that the participants felt anxious and nervous while learning the language skills of English. This study implies a non-threatening environment significant to enhance language learning.

Key words: Learning, anxiety, EFL learners, freshmen learners, English language, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is a very important factor that influences foreign language learning particularly in EFL contexts such as Iran as it affects on learners' affective filter, the mental block that hinders learners' full use of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985). Anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry related to an arousal of the autonomic nervous system (Spielberger *et al.*, 1983). Foreign language anxiety is considered to be a situational anxiety experienced in the well-defined situation of the foreign language classrooms (Spielberger *et al.*, 1983; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991a, 1994). Horwitz *et al.* (1986) consider foreign language classroom anxiety as a separate complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours associated with classroom language learning that arise from the uniqueness of the language learning process (Horwitz and Young, 1991; Piniel, 2006). The possible causes of foreign language anxiety are communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986). Anxiety causes many potential problems for foreign language learners since, it can interfere with the retention, acquisition and production of language being learned (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991a). It affects language learning and production negatively as creates

anxiousness and worries (Bekleyen, 2004). Hence, these learners find English language learning in classrooms stressful. This affects English language learning. In the context of this study, Iran, it has been observed that majority of Iranian EFL freshman experiences that results in stuttering and fast heart-beating while sitting in English language classrooms. However, there is no empirical data to support this. It is hoped that this study will be able to identify Iranian freshman anxiety level in learning EFL. This will provide data for identifying measures to overcome the effect of anxiety in foreign language learning. Also, it aimed to find out whether there was a significant difference between male and female freshman university learners' English language learning anxiety.

English language learning and anxiety: Anxiety has been classified into trait, state and situation-specific anxiety. Scovel (1978) reported that trait anxiety refers to a more permanent predisposition to be anxious whereas state and situation-specific anxiety are experienced in relation to some particular event or situation (Brown, 2001; Zhao, 2007). Horwitz is one of the most prominent researchers who investigated foreign language classroom anxiety and a particular type of situation specific anxiety. He put forward a general theory about foreign language classroom anxiety and identified three causes of language

anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz *et al.*, 1986; Horwitz and Young, 1991; Liu, 2006; Williams and Andrade, 2008). They believe that language anxiety is illustrated when students are unable to convey complex messages in the foreign language or when they show a lack of confidence and some are even unable to speak in role-play activities. Interestingly, they also discovered that language learning anxious students studied more than their low-anxious counterparts and therefore perform better in language tests/examinations. However, this does not reflect their overall learning anxiety.

Horwitz *et al.* (1986) developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) in order to identify anxious university students and measure their anxiety. Horwitz *et al.* (1986) conducted a study on 75 English learners of Spanish in which the findings revealed that a significant foreign language anxiety was experienced by majority of students. This adversely influenced their performance in their target language. The findings indicated that students who tested high on anxiety reported a fear to speak in the target language and became stressful while speaking it. They reported that speaking was a major source of anxiety expressed by most of the students who visited their learning skill center for help. Similarly, Bailey (1983) tried to find the causes of language anxiety through the analysis of 11 learners' diaries. This study discovered that competitiveness could lead to anxiety. In addition, he found that tests and the teachers' relationship with their learners also contributed to the learners' anxiety. Another study by Zhao (2007) on 115 Chinese students in Shandong province showed that students had comparatively high anxiety in English language learning. She found out that males had higher anxiety of English learning than females. It was also discovered that high anxiety played a debilitating role in high school students' language learning particularly in speaking. The results of her study revealed that in a language class, students feel most anxious when they have to speak in front of their peers.

These findings were all consistent with the findings of Aida (1994)'s and Kitano (2001)'s studies which focused on the relationship between language anxiety and Japanese language learning. It was found that anxiety existed in Japanese classrooms and that foreign language anxiety was inversely associated with language performance. Aida (1994) also discovered that experience had a significant effect on anxiety. Students with experience in Japan demonstrated a significantly lower level of anxiety in the classroom. In addition, female students were found to score on the anxiety scale higher than males. Kitano (2001) concluded that students'

anxiety levels were significantly positively associated with their fear of negative evaluation and lessened perception of their own ability in the target language. As a large number of students themselves confessed to some degree of nervousness associated with the speaking skill (Bekleyen, 2004; Phillips, 1992).

Also, Price (1991) and Piniel (2006) discovered that there were some factors related to classrooms that they play a role in learners' developing FLCA. Therefore, correlational research studies have sought to establish relationships between individual learner variables and FLA (Piniel, 2006). It has been observed that according to Piniel (2006), foreign language anxiety is associated with age (Bailey *et al.*, 2000), gender (Aida, 1994; Baker and MacIntyre, 2000), certain personality traits (such as perfectionism, Gregersen and Horwitz, 2002) and negative self-perceptions (Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 1999). FLA debilitates language learning (Scovel, 1978; Horwitz and Young, 1991; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991a, b; Piniel, 2006). In the ESL context, Kleinmann (1977) discovered that ESL students with high levels of debilitating anxiety tried various types of grammatical constructions than less anxious and worried ESL students did. Horwitz *et al.* (1986) discovered that students who experienced an anxiety producing conditions tried less interpretive messages than those who experienced a relaxed situation. These studies showed that anxiety had effect on the students' communication strategies employed in language learning classrooms. This implies that the more anxious students had desire to avoid trying difficult or personal messages in the target language. Thus according to Horwitz (2001), language learning anxiety makes poor language learning in some individuals and identifying sources of language anxiety is needed.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design: A mixed methodology single-case study design (quantitative and qualitative) was employed in this study. The quantitative part of the study sought to identify the university freshman learners' foreign language classroom anxiety as well as to find out whether there was a significant difference between males and females' English language learning anxiety. The qualitative part of the study provided more in depth insights into the relevant phenomenon that is the learners' feelings towards learning EFL.

Participants: A total of 63 (n) out of 120 (N) freshman university learners majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) course at the English

Department in a University in Esfahan, Iran were randomly selected (26 males (41%) and 37 females (59%)). Based on the findings of the structured questionnaire, four of these freshmen were selected for the open-ended structured questionnaire. They were all native speakers of Farsi (Persian) and aged 18. They were freshman university learners who had 4-5 years of learning English experience at high schools and pre-universities in Esfahan, Iran. Participants were named as Participant A (female), B, C (males) and D (female).

Instrument: The instruments used in this study were structured and open-ended structured questionnaires. The structured questionnaire adapted and modified from Horwitz *et al.* (1986) and Zhao (2007). It includes 4 categories (communication anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety and anxiety of English classes). Items one to eight represented the feelings of the students when they want to converse with one another in their target language (communication anxiety), items nine to seventeen represented apprehension about others' evaluations (fear of negative evaluation), items eighteen to twenty-two represented the learners' feelings towards tests and exams (test anxiety) and items twenty three to thirty three represented the learners' feelings towards leaning an English language in classes (anxiety of English classes). The questionnaire indicated the learners' choices on a Five Point Likert-Scale, Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree and Strongly Agree. Prior to the actual data gathering, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was piloted and the reliability Cronbach's Alpha was 0.87. The second instrument used in this study was open-ended structured questionnaire. The open-ended questions focused on how the learners felt towards learning how to listen, speak, read and write in English and if they get anxious during learning these four skills explain when, why and what makes them anxious and nervous.

Data collection procedure and analysis: Data were collected (quantitatively and qualitatively) using structured open-ended questionnaire. The learners were first informed (in Persian) the purpose of the study and asked to complete the questionnaire in 30 min. Findings from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). Questionnaire were presented as descriptive statistics (Frequencies, Means and Standard deviations) to identify the learners' English language anxiety. The t-test analysis was used to see if there was any difference in English language learning anxiety between male and female learners. Then, four participants were selected based on the structured questionnaires' scores to gather

insights on their feelings towards learning how to listen, speak, read and write in English. Also, to explore why, when and what makes them anxious and nervous. The participants filled in the structured questionnaire in 25-30 min.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive analysis of the types of foreign language classroom anxiety: Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviations of the four types of anxiety. Responses to the statements of the second category (fear of negative evaluation) had the highest mean value of 3.35 and a standard deviation of 0.68 while the responses to the statements of the third category (test anxiety) had the lowest mean score of 3.15 and a standard deviation of 0.57 for both males and females. It is implied that the majority of these samples had apprehended about others' evaluations. According to Horwitz *et al.* (1986), fear of negative evaluation may happen in any social or evaluative situation such as interviewing or speaking in foreign language classrooms. This is consistent with the results of Zhao (2007)'s study on 115, 2nd year high school students which indicated that most students fear of negative evaluation.

In addition to the mean scores for the four types of anxiety in general, Table 2-5 show the mean and standard deviations of the students' foreign language classroom anxiety by items. With regard to fear of negative evaluation Table 2 demonstrates that the item I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language scored the highest average mean with the mean value of 3.70 and a standard deviation of 1.21 by 76% of the learners while the lowest mean value of 3.19 with standard deviation of 1.37 was noted for the item I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am by 48% of these learners followed by the item I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting by 54% of these learners (Mean = 3.19; SD = 1.45). This implies that these learners are afraid of being less competent than other peers or being negatively evaluated by them. This is consistent with the results of the previous studies (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986; Zhao, 2007).

Table 1: Frequencies, means and standard deviations of FLCA (by category)

FLCA	N	Mean	SD	F (%)	RO
Communication anxiety	63	3.23	0.50	55	3
Fear of negative evaluation	63	3.35	0.68	64	1
Test anxiety	63	3.15	0.57	43	4
Anxiety of English classes	63	3.31	0.46	58	2

N = Number of respondents; SD = Standard Deviation; RO = Rank Order; the percentages (%) have been rounded to the nearest tenth

Table 2: Frequencies, means and standard deviations of the fear of negative evaluation items

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA)	Mean	SD	F (%)
Fear of negative evaluation	3.35	0.68	64.0
I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class	3.32	1.31	55.0
I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am	3.19	1.37	48.0
It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class	3.37	1.27	60.3
I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting	3.19	1.45	54.0
I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class	3.21	1.50	49.0
I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do	3.52	1.41	69.0
Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind	3.37	1.42	57.0
I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language	3.70	1.21	76.0
I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance	3.30	1.44	60.0

Table 3: Frequencies, means and standard deviations of the anxiety of English classes items

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA)	Mean	SD	F (%)
Anxiety of English classes	3.31	0.46	58
It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language	3.44	1.26	63
It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes	3.16	1.38	50
During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course	3.38	1.39	61
I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes	2.98	1.36	42
In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know	3.16	1.33	54
Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it	3.24	1.39	55
I often feel like not going to my English language class	3.76	1.35	76
I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class	3.22	1.38	55
I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes	3.51	1.49	61
When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed	2.92	1.44	42
I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak a foreign language	3.67	1.28	68

Table 4: Frequencies, means and standard deviations of the communication anxiety items

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA)	Mean	SD	F (%)
Communication anxiety	3.23	0.50	55
I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class	3.30	1.44	58
I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class	3.56	1.29	68
I would be relaxed while speaking with native speakers in English	2.95	1.44	46
I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class	3.03	1.36	47
I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students	3.17	1.44	51
I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class	3.46	1.30	65
I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says	3.38	1.39	58
I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language	3.02	1.22	42

Table 5: Frequencies, means and standard deviations of the test anxiety items

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA)	Mean	SD	F (%)
Test anxiety	3.15	0.57	43
I don't worry about making mistakes in language class	3.16	1.29	49
I am usually at ease during tests in my language class	2.73	1.31	36
I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class	3.00	1.32	49
I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make	3.32	1.29	65
The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get	3.52	1.25	65

The percentages (%) have been rounded to the nearest tenth

For anxiety of English classes Table 3 reveals that the item I often feel like not going to my English language class scored as highest mean value of 3.76 and a standard deviation of 1.35 by 76% of the learners whereas the lowest mean value of 2.92 with a standard deviation of 1.44 was noted for the item When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed by 42% of the learners.

This means that these learners had the feeling of anxiety in their English classrooms. This concurs with the findings of Zhao (2007). Na in his study found that the high school students actually felt anxious while they were

in their English classrooms. Thus, it can be inferred from the findings that these learners feel anxious in English classes because according to Zhao (2007) the learners' anxiety may be due to lack of English proficiency which is not high enough to let them converse freely and response their teachers' and lecturers' questions perfectly. This is usual among EFL learners, particularly Iranian learners because English as a foreign language is taught, learned and spoken only in academic classes and for academic purposes and they particularly beginners such as freshmen do not have adequate English language competent input.

In terms of communication anxiety Table 4 indices that the highest mean value of 3.56 with a standard deviation 1.29 was noted for the item I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class by 68% of these freshmen.

Meanwhile, the item I would be relaxed while speaking with native speakers in English scored the lowest average mean with the value of 2.95 and a standard deviation of 1.44 by 46% of these learners. It is inferred that these learners were frightened to speak in the target language (English) and were worried while speaking the English with native speakers.

Finally, in terms of test anxiety, Table 5 indicates that the item The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get scored the highest mean value of 3.52 and a standard deviation of 1.25 by 65% of these learners. While the lowest mean value of 2.73 and a standard deviation of 1.31 were noted for the item I am usually at ease during tests in my language class by 36% of these learners. This implies that these learners feel worried about making mistakes in classrooms. It also implies that these learners do not have desire to be corrected before their peers. According to Horwitz *et al.* (1986), anxious students are afraid of making mistakes in their target language learning classrooms such as English.

Descriptive analysis of the foreign language classroom anxiety by gender:

In order to discover whether there is a difference between males and females in foreign language classroom anxiety, the independent-sample t-test was conducted. Table 6 shows that there was no statistically significant difference in the mean scores for male and female learners in communication anxiety (M = 3.26, SD = 0.51; M = 3.21, SD = 0.50, t(61) = 0.39, p = 0.69); fear of negative evaluation (M = 3.28, SD = 0.68; M = 3.40, SD = 0.69, t(61) = 0.71, p = 0.48), test anxiety (M = 3.15, SD = 0.54; M = 3.14, SD = 0.604, t(61) = 0.08, p = 0.92) and anxiety of English classes (M = 3.28, SD = 0.39, M = 3.34, SD = 0.52, t(61) = -0.52, p = 0.60). Nevertheless, Table 6

Table 6: The t-test for gender differences in Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA)

Types of anxiety	G	N	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
CA	M	26	3.26	0.51	0.39	0.69
	F	37	3.21	0.50	-	-
FNE	M	26	3.28	0.68	-0.71	0.48
	F	37	3.40	0.69	-	-
TA	M	26	3.15	0.54	0.08	0.92
	F	37	3.14	0.60	-	-
AEC	M	26	3.28	0.39	-0.52	0.60
	F	37	3.34	0.52	-	-

N = Number of Subjects; CA = Communication Anxiety; FNE = Fear of Negative Evaluation; TA = Test Anxiety; AEC = Anxiety of English Classes

also reveals that males have high level of anxiety for communication and test whereas females have high level of anxiety for being evaluated negatively and getting anxious while they are in English classes. According to Zhao (2007), females score higher than males in English exams thus it is reasonable to imagine that females have more self-confidence in their abilities to learn a foreign language properly. When they have faith in their capabilities, they are more ready to approach threatening situations (Dornyei, 2001; Zhao, 2007). However, the findings of Independent-sample T-test show that there is no significant difference between males and females' English language classroom anxiety. This means that both males and females have foreign language classroom anxiety. This is consistent with the findings of previous studies such as Horwitz *et al.* (1986) and Zhao (2007).

In other words, all of the significance values were above the value of significance value of p<0.05. The magnitudes of the differences in the means were slightly small (Cohen, 1988). Cohen believes that 0.01 demonstrates small effect, 0.06 reveals moderate effect and 0.14 indicates large effect. Therefore, the eta square for these four types of foreign language classroom anxiety are as follows: communication anxiety (eta square = 0.002), fear of negative evaluation (eta square = 0.008), test anxiety (eta squared = 0.000) and anxiety of English classes (eta square = 0.004) which are very small.

Insights on anxiety: The four participants expressed their feelings towards learning to listen, speak, read and write in English. They also talked about when, why and what made them anxious and nervous. Participant A (female) reported that she felt happy because she was learning a new language, culture and custom. She made new friends whom she could talk to and communicate in another language (English). However, she stated that when she was listening to a new spoken text with a new accent that she could not understand, she was disappointed and nervous. She believed that there are reasons that made her anxious and nervous. First, she could not follow the speech rate while listening to her lecturer or a spoken text on tapes. Second, there were some unfamiliar and unknown words, expressions and idioms that avoided her from understanding the spoken text. Third, the speakers had several different accents. Participants B, C (males) and D (female) too had similar opinions. They felt that learning to listen, speak, read and write in English is great and interesting. It helps them enhance their ability and performance in international situations. However, they mentioned that they not only felt anxious but also confused because they heard different people speaking

with different accents and they could not realize some words, phrases and sentences while listening to a lecturer in a classroom or listening to a spoken text on tapes or TV programmes on Channel 4. This indicates that listening to a spoken text (either lecturer or recorded tapes) with different accents causes second/foreign language (L2/FL) learners to feel anxious and worried.

In terms of speaking, all participants reported that they are very interested in speaking in the target language (English) even though they are not good at it. They asserted that they enjoy speaking however when they face problems expressing themselves in English and cannot speak well, they feel disappointed and hopeless. For example, Participant A stated that she gets embarrassed, anxious and forgets all words. She also added that she sometimes fear of being laughed at by her classmates hence she prefers to stop speaking. This indicates that fear of negative evaluation can provoke English language learning anxiety among second/foreign language (L2/FL) learners. Thus, lecturers and instructors should provide less anxiety-provoking environment for learners. Participant B said that [he] cannot apply the words he has already learned in speaking as he does not remember them when he starts speaking particularly to his English language speaking lecturers in classrooms. Similarly, Participant D said that she gets more anxious and nervous when she notes and feels that the other students speak English better than she. Interestingly, Participant C expressed that his speaking ability depends on the time for instance in the evening, he can speak better and can apply more words in speaking. He also added that he feels more comfortable while speaking to a person who is in the same rank and level with him. This indicates that learners should be in the same level of learning in classrooms. They should work in pairs and groups to reduce their anxiety towards speaking. This also indicates that the person whom the learners speak to has very important role in the English language speaking environment. For example if the lecturer is bad tempered or impatient, his/her behaviour makes the learners become more anxious and nervous. This implies that the lecturers' behaviour in the classrooms to students should be in a way that makes them feel relaxed instead of getting anxious and nervous.

In the light of reading and writing, all participants except Participant A reported that they felt learning to read and write is less stressful and anxious because they had enough time to look up the new words in dictionaries. They had more time to interact with references/aids to help them understand the reading texts. On the other hand, Participant A said that she felt reading and writing

skills are more stressful and causes anxiousness. She said that she could not remember the meaning of the same words she has already read in other reading texts. When she started writing she could not remember the words or find suitable words to express herself through writing particularly when she was in classrooms. This indicates that forgetting words make learners anxious and nervous. This implies that learners should have some learning background and get prepared before entering the classrooms.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to find out Iranian freshman learners' foreign language learning anxiety and explore how they felt towards learning to listen, speak, read and write in English. Another aim was to find out whether there was a significant difference between males and females' English language learning anxiety and offer some strategies in order to decrease their anxiety. It focused on classroom implications and offered some strategies that contribute learners reducing anxiety. The findings showed that majority of the learners experienced anxiety in English language learning, particularly due to the fear of negative evaluation even though the learners' reactions towards anxiety could widely differ. Males were found to have more anxiety of communication and tests while females have anxiety of English classrooms and being evaluated negatively by their peers and teachers. It is also concluded that there was no significant difference between males and females in terms of English language learning anxiety. Thus, it is the teachers and lecturers' role to reduce their learners' anxiety in learning second/foreign language.

IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, it is implied that anxiety can debilitate the learners' second or foreign language learning particularly in EFL contexts such as Iran since English is only taught and learned in schools and universities. Teachers and lecturers should therefore pay more attention to these situations that anxiety is prevalent in English classrooms. Teachers and lecturers should take this affective factor into account in preparing to teach (Zhao, 2007). They have a crucial role in reducing the learners' learning anxiety. They can have a kind and friendly relationship with their students and make the learning environment friendly for learners. They can encourage learners to work more in pairs and groups so that learners feel that they are all in the same level of

learning. Teachers and lecturers should attempt to prevent negative evaluation of learners in classrooms and according to Zhao (2007) comment the learners' behaviours with more encouragement. Teachers and lecturers should be able to instill effective ways of language learning interest and motivation among learners to learn and improve their foreign languages learning. They should also create an appropriate atmosphere in their classrooms for effective foreign language learning and an attitude in their learners that reflects real interest and motivation to learn English as a foreign language and feel safe to speak and express their views and opinions freely (Young, 1991; Zhao, 2007). Teachers and lecturers should also explicitly tell learners that anxiety is inevitable in learning a foreign language and allow them to know that anxiety can be decreased through self-regulation of their thinking and study (Zhao, 2007). As the study was only conducted in one university, more research studies are needed to support the findings and to find more about anxiety in English classrooms among all university students.

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