THE EFFECTS OF ANXIETY ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' PERFORMANCE ON FINAL ACHIEVEMENT TEST IN ENGLISH CLASSES OF HIGH SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT
Anxiety as an affective variable has been shown to be negatively correlated with performance in learning a language as a foreign language. So many researches have been conducted about anxiety for college student. This survey, however, focuses on the high school students. This study was an attempt to study the effect of anxiety on the English learners in Andimeshk city, Iran. Subjects included 120 students from a high school in Iran. Two instruments were employed for this study: a questionnaire assessing students’ anxiety level and an Oxford Placement Test. It was a Standard English language test which was administered to check the final English achievement level of students. It was administered to determine the proficiency level of the students. The findings indicated that students experienced some degree of anxiety in English classes. From the results of the study, the sources and the amount of anxiety were as follows respectively: second language deficits, fear of negative evaluation, and perfectionism. Finally, some suggestions are offered to teachers in dealing with this phenomenon in language classes especially those conducted communicatively.

KEYWORDS: learning anxiety, English achievement

INTRODUCTION
When asked to participate in classroom activities, high school students flounder and hesitate to come up with an answer even the wrong one. They often complain that they have got the palpitations and feel embarrassed to take part in class activities. The worst thing is that teachers ignore this fact in their classes and make no attempt to deal with it. As an affective variable, Anxiety is assumed to influence second language acquisition. Much research (e.g., Bailey, 1983;
Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Young, 1991), has been carried out to find the correlation between anxiety and achievement in learning a second language. Most studies (e.g., Horwitz, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994) found that anxiety and achievement are negatively correlated. In Iran, similar survey has also been conducted with different groups of people. In this survey, the author attempted to rescue this group of learners who have been fallen into oblivion by teachers in English classes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of anxiety plays a major role in second language acquisition. Spielberger (1983, p.1) defines anxiety as the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system. Anxiety usually falls into two types: one is trait anxiety that is a more permanent predilection or to be anxious about everything (Scovel, 1978) and the other state anxiety, experienced when performing a particular task or activity in a particular situation such as giving a lecture in front of the class (Brown, 2001). Trait anxiety, because of its global and ambiguous nature has not proved to be helpful in predicting second language achievement. Accordingly, the present study on language anxiety focuses on the situational nature of state anxiety (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993).

With the shifting of research focus from teachers to learners in SLA (Second Language Acquisition), affective factors, such as attitudes and motivation, were thought to account a lot for language learning outcomes. Anxiety, as a very important affective factor, has been considered very important, and many studies have been undertaken to explore it since the 1970s.

The major concern of the earlier studies was the causes of language anxiety. As early as 1983, Bailey, through the analysis of the diaries of 11 learners, had found that competitiveness can lead to anxiety. Besides, he (1983) found that tests and learners’ perceived relationship with their teachers also contributed to learners’ anxiety. These three aspects that Bailey identified were supported in subsequent studies, especially in Young’s study. According to Young (1991), there are six potential causes of language anxiety which include personal and interpersonal, learner beliefs about language learning, instructor beliefs about language teaching, instructor-learner interactions, classroom procedures and language tests. From this list we can see that Young, in fact, identified the causes from three aspects, that is, the aspects of learners, teachers and instructional practice, to which Bailey’s findings also complied. Research findings by Horwitz and Horwitz and Cope (1986) cast some light on nature of language anxiety. Building on these studies, three causes of language anxiety have been identified. (a) communication apprehension, arising from learners’ inability to air their thoughts and feelings. (b) test anxiety due to academic evaluation, and (c) fear of negative evaluation, growing out of a learner’s need to make a positive social impression on others. Based on these three components they also designed a Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale including thirty-three items. This scale was later widely used by researchers to measure foreign language learners’ anxiety and examine the effect of anxiety on learning in different contexts.
Another important insight can be gained from the distinction between debilitative and facilitative ramification of anxiety on learning (Alpert & Haber, 1960). Most studies, to date, indicate a negative relationship between anxiety and language achievement. To put another way, anxiety is a debilitative in language learning. Krashen (1985) in his affective filter hypothesis maintains that high anxiety will prevent input that learners receive in the classroom from reaching the language acquisition device. Horwitz (1986) also states that language anxiety can cause students to postpone language study indefinitely or to change majors. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), based on a study of 97 college students that learn French, concluded that compared with more relaxed learners, those with anxiety find it more difficult to express their own views and tend to underestimate their own abilities. They also found that in the three stages of language acquisition, that is, input, processing and output, anxiety and learning achievement are negatively correlated. Moreover, there have also been some studies conducted to find the negative correlation between anxiety and four aspects of language learning, especially speaking and listening. For example, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) found that speaking is by far the main agent of anxiety-arousal, and that students with high anxiety perform worse than those with low anxiety. However, there have been some studies which found neutral and positive relationships between anxiety and second language achievement. Bailey’s (1983) investigated the relationship between competitiveness and anxiety and found that facilitative anxiety was one of the keys to success, and closely related to competitiveness. The results from a study into English learners in Taiwan (Zhang Baoyans, 1996) indicated that there was no relationship between anxiety and learning achievement. Therefore, drawing from these studies, it can be seen that the relationship between anxiety and achievement is probably not a simple linear one. It may be influenced by some other factors, such as culture and learners’ proficiency in the second language. Some researchers (Sparks, Ganschow, & Javorsky, 2000) ascribe the cause of anxiety in second or foreign language classes to deficits in the first language codes (i.e., phonological, syntactic, lexical, semantic features.) and maintain that anxiety is a product of poor performance in first language. They have attempted to prove the case by examining what they call the Linguistic Deficit Coding Hypothesis (LCDH).

This study was an attempt to examine the general situation of high school students’ foreign language anxiety and the effects of anxiety on FL (Foreign Language) learning. As well, a comparison of male and female students’ language anxiety was examined.

**RESEARCH QUESTION**

The aim of the present study is to investigate the effects of anxiety on Iranian EFL Learners' performance on final Achievement Test in English classes of High schools, So the following research question is addressed:

Does anxiety has any effect on Iranian EFL Learners' performance on final Achievement Test in English classes of High schools?
METHODOLOGY

participants
The subjects in the study were 120 four-year high school students (60 males and 60 females) from Khuzestan province, Andimeshk city. Their major fields of study were mathematics, Humanities and their age was between 17 and 19 years old. They all had 7 years of learning English as second language learners in Iranian public schools.

Instruments
Two instruments were employed for this study: a questionnaire assessing students’ anxiety level and an Oxford Placement Test.

The first instrument was a questionnaire which was made up of two parts. The first was intended to collect personal information about the participants, such as their age, name, gender, etc. The other was the Persian version of FLCAS that was designed by Horwitz (1986). This questionnaire comprised of 33 statements, of which 8 items were for communication anxiety (1, 9, 14, 18, 24, 27, 29, 32), 9 items for fear of negative evaluation (3, 7, 13, 15, 20, 23, 25, 31, 33) and 5 items for test anxiety (2, 8, 10, 19, 21). As to the remaining 11 items, they were placed under the rubric which was labeled as anxiety of English classes. The participants were asked to rate each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strong disagreement”) to 5 (“strong agreement”).

The next instrument was OPT. It was a Standard English language test which was administered to check the final English achievement level of students. It was administered to determine the proficiency level of the students. The reliability of the test was calculated afterwards which happened to be 0.89. All the students were administered the proficiency test in a single testing session. The 30 items test included grammatical questions about conditional sentences.

Data Collection
The questionnaire was administered to 60 science students and 60 arts students. 120 copies were collected back and 116 replies were found statistically valid. Only the students from the science class supplied their English scores of the final exam.

Data Analysis
SPSS (Statistical Product and Service Solutions) 13.0 was employed to analyze the data. First, descriptive analysis was performed to calculate the means and standard deviations for each item and each kind of anxiety to see the general situation of high school students’ anxiety in English classrooms. Second, t-tests (t distribution tests) were employed to see whether there were any differences in language anxiety between male students and female students. Then correlational analysis and t-tests were conducted to find out the effects of anxiety on achievement in English.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The descriptive analyses of the results revealed that there were 15 items whose means were above 3.25. Amongst the statements the 11th had the highest index of 3.5671. The mean of the anxiety indices of all the participants in English classrooms, as Table 1 shows, was 2.8432 which
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indicated that high school students suffered from a feeling of anxiety in English classes. Besides, by computing the means and standard deviations of each kind of anxiety, it was revealed that students’ fear of negative evaluation, with a mean of 3.7581, was worth considering. Among the 15 items whose mean values were greater than 3.00 8 statements related to it, especially item 3, with a mean of 3.6579.

**Table 1**: General High School Students’ Anxiety in the English Classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anxiety Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication Apprehension</td>
<td>2.8865</td>
<td>.48557</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Negative Evaluation</td>
<td>3.7581</td>
<td>.76055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Anxiety</td>
<td>2.7737</td>
<td>.71570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety of English Classes</td>
<td>2.7412</td>
<td>.66185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Classroom Anxiety</td>
<td>2.9310</td>
<td>.60911</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The comparison of anxiety between males and females English classes

Table 2 shows that means of males’ were always higher than females, which signified that males may experience more anxiety than females in English classes. However, the results of t-tests indicated that there were no significant differences between males and females in most anxiety variables except that of English classes (p=0.025<0.04).

**Table 2**: Males and Females’ English Classroom Anxiety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anxiety Variables</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication Apprehension</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.1791</td>
<td>.62023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.0277</td>
<td>.67788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Negative Evaluation</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.4439</td>
<td>.84691</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.1747</td>
<td>.69737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Anxiety</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.8022</td>
<td>.70588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.5511</td>
<td>.72789</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety in English Classes</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.8734</td>
<td>.67983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.7033</td>
<td>.65544</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Classroom Anxiety</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.0117</td>
<td>.66634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.7932</td>
<td>.61445</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3**: The Comparison of Males and Females

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anxiety Variables</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>Significance (p&lt;0.03) of t-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication Apprehension</td>
<td>1.231</td>
<td>0.255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Negative Evaluation</td>
<td>0.407</td>
<td>0.675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Anxiety</td>
<td>1.930</td>
<td>0.056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety of English Classes</td>
<td>2.251</td>
<td>0.026*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Classroom Anxiety</td>
<td>1.235</td>
<td>0.216</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relationship between anxiety and English achievements

The results of the correlation analysis indicated that anxiety and English achievement were only correlated in terms of test anxiety. And they were negatively correlated (−.277, p=0.039<0.05). It
was noted that the coefficient of anxiety for English classes was -0.232 which approached the significant level of -0.25. Therefore, the students from the science class were divided into two groups according to their English scores in the final exam. A t-test was then employed to see if there were any significant differences in the anxiety of English classes between these two groups. The results of the analysis supported the hypothesis that was proposed above. It was found that anxiety of English classes indeed affects high school students’ English achievement (p=0.037<0.05).

Table 4: The Correlation of Anxiety and English Achievement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anxiety Variables</th>
<th>Correlation Coefficient</th>
<th>p-value (&lt;0.05)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication Apprehension</td>
<td>-0.103</td>
<td>0.458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Negative Evaluation</td>
<td>-0.098</td>
<td>0.566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Anxiety</td>
<td>-0.287*</td>
<td>0.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety of English Classes</td>
<td>-0.242</td>
<td>0.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Classroom Anxiety</td>
<td>-0.236</td>
<td>0.103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The present study revealed that high school students suffer considerable feeling of anxiety in their English classes that needs to be addressed by English teachers. And they experienced more fear of negative evaluation. There are two possible sources for anxiety in language classes. One can be associated to the high school students themselves. The other may emanate from some external factor. Regarding students themselves, the presence of anxiety, during language related activities, could be associated to their English proficiency, which was not adequate to enable them to participate in class activities, cooperate with their partners, or come up with the right answer to the questions posed by the teacher or classmates. Thus, high school students are more apprehended during communicative activities given their low proficiency in the second language in English classrooms. The other can be attributed to their cultural background. In a collective society like Iran peoples’ face is lost if they are criticized or scolded in front of others. So in order not to make a mistake they prefer to sit on the fence in order not to receive negative evaluations. That is why they endure greater fear of negative evaluation comparing to any other kind of anxiety. The stress of the nation-wide entrance examination and the ruthless competition among students can prevent candidates from demonstrating their true abilities and perform less satisfactory than usual. One striking finding, during careful examinations of items on the test, was that some students with greater language ability answered the easier questions wrongly. This may have its root in the fact that such students set quixotic goals and are perfectionist and are too meticulous about trivialities on the test. To put another way, they cannot see the wood for the trees.

The reasons for external anxiety can originate from the setting of English learning in Iran. Research has shown that contact with the people and culture of the target language could reduce anxiety (Tang, 2005).Iranian learners have no direct access to native speakers or especially designed English programs for the purpose of teaching English to learners of English. They also find little opportunities to test their inter language hypotheses through communication and
remove inaccuracies in their output. What is worse is that the purpose of teaching English as a foreign language in Iran is not to foster communication but to help students grow intellectually though reading and instruction on grammar points. There is no emphasis on listening and speaking. Reading and teaching grammar take up most of the class time. There are little opportunities for students to practice speaking or voice their opinions in English. Writing, like speaking, has plunged into oblivion and it is at the service of teaching grammatical structures such as transformation or expansion drills. Moreover, most Iranian teachers themselves are not proficient speakers of English thus they tend to avoid teaching speaking in their classes and emphasize grammar points. The type of exercises included in textbooks attempt to prepare students for the Nationwide College Admission Examination. Therefore, teachers make special efforts to teach to testing and familiarize students to those of tests confronted on this test by learners. Another matter that is worth consideration is that English classes in Iran are teacher-fronted. Teachers are deemed as the source of knowledge and dominate the class activities and learners dot have the right to challenge teachers and are silent during class activities. Teachers disfavor pair or group work due to the large size of classes. It is clear that Iranian learners of English, as the present study indicated, undergo substantial amount of anxiety during communicative activities and are afraid of making mistakes in front of teachers or their peers.

Generally speaking, females are better in language learning than males. Female students usually perform better than male students on achievement exams. Thus one can posits that females show greater confidence in their abilities to learn a new language. As soon as they gain faith in their capabilities, they will be more willing to “tackle with threatening situations” (Dörnyei, 2001) in English classes. In contrast, males who have repeated failures in learning a second language tend to attribute their poor performance in English classes to their low capabilities and are more anxious about English classes.

To enter college in Iran, students must take a compulsory test and reach the necessary standard. Therefore they make every effort to study English as a subject of study. Although, males are less gifted for English than females, they compensate for this by allocating more time and energy into their English. However, the gap between males and females is not very large now. In many English tests the highest scores were attained by some male students. That is the reason why no significant differences were found between them, though males’ means were a little higher than females.

Anxiety has a debilitating role in language learning.
The results from the present study showed that test anxiety and anxiety of English classes were significantly correlated with high school students’ English achievement. In terms of the other factors, although the relationship was insignificant, the coefficients were all negative. Thus, it can be said that anxiety plays somewhat a debilitating role in language learning.

Many previous studies have reported the negative role of anxiety in language classes. e.g., Horwitz (1986), Maclntyre and Gardner (1994), Tang (2005). High anxiety can be a hindrance to learners and a source of discouragement. The ramification is that they give up easily and shirk
their duty in participating in class activities. Therefore, learners with higher anxiety often fail to demonstrate their true abilities in classes.

Another striking finding in the study was the significant correlation between English achievement and test anxiety, anxiety of English classes. In Iran, high school students, compared to, college students, take more tests. For this reason, Therefore, some students with poor English achievement were anxious about and even felt disheartened by English classes and tests.

**CONCLUSION**

This study cast some light on the nature and the source of high school students’ anxiety in Iranian EFL classroom. It was found that most students experienced a feeling of trepidation and fear in classes. Above all the fear of negative evaluation. Male learners were found to have greater anxiety than females in English classes. What is more, it was revealed that anxiety is an obstacle to language learning, especially anxiety of tests and English classes.

Now that it has been recognized that anxiety is prevalent in Iranian high school English classes, teachers must pay special attention to it. Moreover, teachers should take the students’ affective factors into account during teaching and learning activities. (Zhang & Chang, 2004). For one thing, they should strive at creating a relaxed atmosphere for students to air their grievances and views freely. Secondly, teachers should eschew negative evaluation about learners in front of peers and point out positive points about them. Thirdly, teachers would be better to take a criterion-referenced approach toward testing and shun ranking students on a scale. Unfortunately, some teachers compare students based on their performance on exams and fail to realize that this can be a source of anxiety and a feeling of shyness in language classes. Teachers can free learners’ minds from the fear of getting higher scores. In short, much research indicates that judicious anxiety plays a positive role and can motivate students to maintain their efforts on learning. Therefore, the teachers’ real job is to help students keep adequate anxiety, neither too high nor too low.

*Limitsations of the study*

The story of second language acquisition is interestingly comparable to the story of the elephant which was supposed to be described by a group of people in a dark room. And they all came to different descriptions of the whole body because they just touched parts of the body. The same story still is the case for SLA. As it is the case with almost all studies done in the field of teaching English as a foreign language, this study is not free of limitations. That is to say, because of the eluding nature of anxiety which is defined differently by different people one cannot claim to provide all inclusive criteria to list the problems with which EFL teachers wish to come to a conclusion in evaluating anxiety as an approach in EFL contexts. Therefore, the authors of this paper have not intended to come to an absolute conclusion about the perceived problems with which EFL teachers might face in using anxiety measurement in their real classes. ALL in all, it is hoped that this survey be of use for all colleagues. All defects of this paper are of ours. That is, no fault is to the participants in this study.
REFERENCES


